Womenspeak

In September 1999 Margaret Moran MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence, together with Women's Aid Federation of England and the Hansard Society conceived the idea of running a highly ambitious Internet project involving survivors of domestic violence. The aim of the project was twofold:

- To enable survivors of domestic violence to contribute evidence and information about their experiences direct to MPs via the Internet. It was hoped that the consultation would gather evidence about the needs and experiences of these women and highlight the key issues in providing effective responses. This would then inform the work of the All Party Group on Domestic Violence and raise awareness of domestic violence and its impact on women and children amongst parliamentarians and government to influence the development of public policy.
- To test the use of new information and communication technologies to see how far they can be used to invigorate the democratic process and, within this particular project, to create an internet-based consultation which was accessible, secure, comprehensible and welcoming for a vulnerable group of citizens who have been traditionally socially excluded.

Setting up the consultation was a major exercise. It was not enough to just set up a website and invite women survivors to give evidence. Many of the women did not have experience of working with new technology or access a computer or the Internet. They needed training and a safe place from which to access the discussion with a high level of security within the discussion area so that their abusers could not trace them. It was equally important to ensure that women participating in the project had access to support networks and to information about their rights and options.

The project, named Womenspeak, proved to be a groundbreaking online consultation; for the first time new interactive technology opened up the political process to citizens who would normally be excluded. Survivors of domestic violence are generally outside the reach of Parliament - communicating their experiences often relies on advocates such as Women's Aid and their knowledge and expertise is rarely heard directly. Many women participating in Womenspeak experienced a sense of empowerment through having the opportunity to tell their stories directly to MPs in their own words. The project also gave women a dedicated forum to communicate with each other and over the month served as a support and networking forum for survivors.

E-minister Patricia Hewitt MP launched the Womenspeak consultation at an event in early March and the online discussion ran throughout March 2000. A specially designed website was constructed and this was linked to the Women's Aid website which already provides online help information about local refuges and domestic violence services, as well as detailed briefings and help leaflets on all aspects of domestic violence. The Internet enabled survivors to participate in the parliamentary consultation without having to reveal their identity.

The Womenspeak consultation

The women involved in the project were asked to consider specific issues during the Internet consultation. Questions were posed around seven key areas:

- How women survivors accessed help about experiencing domestic violence.
- Women's experiences of the criminal and civil law and of gaining legal protection.
- Housing - leaving home to escape domestic violence, finding temporary safe housing and routes into a permanent place to live.
- Children - the effects of domestic violence on children, arranging contact and residency orders.
- Immigration - the impact of immigration status on women's ability to gain help in escaping domestic violence.
- Money - how women supported themselves and their children in the process of escaping domestic violence, experiences in claiming benefits.
- Recommendations - all women participating in the project were asked to name one thing that the All Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence could lobby for to improve the lives of women survivors of domestic violence.

Summary of main findings

These findings are summarised from the evidence given to MPs by women survivors of domestic violence during the consultation. A full copy of the report is available from Women's Aid.

1. What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is found in all sections of society. It includes physical, emotional, sexual, financial and/or other abuse. A woman's life can be most in danger when she tries to leave.

Women who experience domestic violence are often isolated from friends, family and other sources of
help. As previous work has demonstrated, domestic violence is not an isolated event in which a man loses his temper, but rather a repeated pattern of abuse designed to maintain power and control over 'his woman'. WomenSpeak has not only enabled MPs to further understand the realities of the impact of domestic violence on women and children, but it has provided an important safe, secure space for women to talk with each other, sometimes for the first time, about their experiences. This process empowered women and made an important contribution to overcoming their isolation.

2. Seeking Help
The hidden and complex nature of domestic violence means that it can be difficult to acknowledge and name abuse as domestic violence. Doing so is often the first step to seeking help, therefore any agency responding to a domestic violence situation must, at the very least, give a strong message that names the abuse and makes clear who is responsible. They must also offer the survivor/victim adequate support, take positive action and supply relevant information about support available in the local area. This rarely happened in the experience of women within the consultation.

What women want:
- For all agencies to recognise domestic violence and ensure that appropriate support and information is provided for “victims”.
- Recognition that the support provided by refuge services is invaluable to enable abused women to find the strength to rebuild their lives. Without this support many would still be living in fear.
- More support outside of the refuge for women experiencing domestic violence and women rebuilding their lives after domestic violence.
- Outreach services and other resources need to be provided and resourced to facilitate informal support networks.
- Equal support for women from minority groups who face further barriers to accessing help.
- Publicity and information about domestic violence services to be made widely available to prevent isolation.
- Improved funding for refuge services to prevent the constant threat to the existence and development of essential local services.

3. Law
Over 90% of women who have had contact with the Criminal Justice System said that they did not receive an adequate response. The main criticisms were: the police do not perceive domestic violence as a 'serious' crime and the courts do not offer adequate protection. Within the civil law, court orders and injunctions, whilst seen as important, were still rarely effective unless there was a power of arrest attached, and even then were rarely sufficiently enforced by the courts and police. Restrictions on Legal Aid can exclude women from the protection under the civil law.

What women want:
- Recognition by all members of the criminal justice system that domestic violence is a serious crime.
- Mandatory training of legal professionals on domestic violence by experienced experts and survivors.
- Court professionals to be held accountable for how they implement the law.
- The safety of the ‘survivor’ to always be the priority.
- Law enforcement agencies to ensure that the survivor is always kept well informed of any developments in the legal case.
- Perpetrator programmes to prioritise the safety of women and children.
- New ways of ensuring safety such as electronic tagging of perpetrators to be researched.

4. Children
Domestic violence can have a negative impact on children whatever their age. Many children are affected by domestic violence even if they are not the targets of the abuse as they often witness or hear the violence and can often feel fearful at home. Over 90% of contributions that referred to child contact said that either the children or mother suffered as a result of continued domestic violence after leaving the violent man. Most women felt that the courts did not take domestic violence or the experiences of the child into account.

What women want:
- The presumption that child contact is in the best interests of the child needs to be reviewed in domestic violence situations.
- Women and children who have experience of living with domestic violence need appropriate support. Refuge provision was seen as a valuable source of support for many children along with outreach work, informal support groups and formal therapy sessions.
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5. Housing
90% of women who contributed on this issue said that it is not easy to access alternative affordable secure accommodation. Swapping council accommodation, temporary bed and breakfast accommodation and rehousing in unsafe areas are not appropriate options for women escaping domestic violence.

Women are often angry that they and their children have to leave the family home: realistic and safe options should be created to enable women to stay. However, for some women this is clearly not an option as the risks will always be too great.

When women do move out they are often forced to leave all their possessions behind and find it difficult to rehouse pets.

What women want:
- A flexible approach to housing which focuses on the needs and safety of the women and children.
- Protection under the law to be improved to ensure women have the choice to remain safely in their own home.
- Help from local authorities to protect possessions and pets.

6. Immigration
Over 80% of the contributors agreed that women with uncertain immigration status who are experiencing domestic violence face many more barriers preventing them from accessing help. Lack of information on the rights of women with uncertain immigration status can make women fearful of approaching agencies for help. They also have difficulty in accessing public funds (such as income support and housing benefit). Local refuge providers find it difficult to offer space to women with uncertain immigration status because refuges rely on rent income from housing benefit to run the safe houses.

What women want:
- All agencies to recognise that domestic violence is a crime and all "victims" of the crime deserve the same amount of help and resources.

7. Money
Over 70% of those women who claimed benefits felt that they had not received a good service from the benefits agency and its staff. The main reasons for this were seen as a presumption that every claimant is a potential fraudster and lack of understanding about domestic violence. Local refuge services were seen as a vital source of support when dealing with benefit bureaucracy.

What women want:
- A fast tracking system for people with exceptional circumstances such as women escaping domestic violence.
- Closer liaison of benefits offices with essential domestic violence services such as refuges to ensure suitable benefits provision.
- An increase in Social Fund Payments as they are too low for women and children starting with nothing.
- Storage for existing possessions to prevent the need to replace everything.
- Training opportunities for women to break the benefits trap.