

Welsh Women's Aid Briefing: Rurality and VAWDASV

Introduction

Despite an increasing understanding of the additional barriers to support that exist for some cohorts of survivors, the needs and barriers facing survivors living in rural communities is still, sometimes, overlooked. All survivors face barriers to help seeking for violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, but the challenges of living in small, close-knit communities, limited public transport and distance to services can make it even harder. Unsurprisingly then, a report from the National Rural Crime Network has found that reporting rates for domestic abuse are lower in rural areas¹ than more urban areas. Therefore, models of service based on demand will not necessarily meet need in rural areas.

*'Barriers to action in rural areas appears to be far more complicated and inhibiting. Access to support is the principle way the differences are manifested: in rural areas it seems likely victims do not know where to go to for the type of support required; it is harder to coordinate or access and the fear of any approaches becoming known is higher.'*²

This briefing from Welsh Women's Aid will explore the themes and barriers for women and children in rural areas living with violence and abuse and our recommendations to address them.

Rurality Needs and Barriers

Perpetrator's will use a myriad of tools at their disposal to gain and maintain power and control, in rural settings, the isolation of the countryside itself can work to the perpetrator's advantage, where communities are smaller, public transport less frequent and services further away. In addition, perpetrator's in traditional rural, farming communities are more likely to have access to weapons which can be used to intimidate and threaten. It is no surprise then, that abuse in rural areas is reported to last 25% longer than in more urban areas³.

Close knit communities can also pose a risk as survivor's may be concerned about approaching professionals who know the family or about the community finding out, as one survivor said;

*'The local paper had reported my story from court. I was devastated. They did it without me knowing which had ramifications for work. My boss called me in to speak to me. Our names and addresses was in there and everyone who knew me knew it was me'*⁴

¹ Captive and Controlled, Domestic Abuse in Rural Areas - <https://www.ruralabuse.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Domestic-Abuse-in-Rural-Areas-National-Rural-Crime-Network.pdf> page 17

² Ibid, page 20

³ Ibid, page 28

⁴ Welsh Women's Aid, Are you Listening, Am I being Heard? https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Are_you_listening_and_am_I_being_heard_FINAL_July_2016.pdf, page 29

Survivors have talked about the choice of compromising their anonymity in a crisis in order to seek support, such as approaching their GP or local police officer, who is also a family friend. In our report 'Are you Listening, Am I being Heard'⁵, survivors noted the difficulty of help seeking because they didn't trust local professionals to keep the information confidential. Especially if the abuser was also known locally or was indeed a police officer or GP.

Traditional patriarchal structures exist across society, but can manifest themselves in more profound ways amongst traditional, rural communities, where men are seen as the breadwinner and head of the household and women are expected to adhere to that. This can be compounded by small communities, who may inadvertently (or not) create a culture of surveillance of women, resulting in women feeling unable to approach outside agencies for help. Scottish Women's Aid found the combination of negative attitudes, fear of exposure and lack of anonymity made women feel entrapped and hemmed in rather than free to challenge abuse (personal or otherwise) or be visible/active in their local communities⁶.

The National Rural Crime Network found that women in rural areas face bigger upheavals if they decide to leave their community because of VAWDASV. Often having to move to more urban areas to seek safety and support. However, women who stayed in their community but spoke out about the abuse, reported a sense of social stigma, alienation and isolation, coupled with the stress and danger of continually bumping into the perpetrator and their supporters⁷.

Broadband and mobile coverage can be very limited in some areas of Wales so finding out about sources of help and support can be almost impossible. In 'Are you listening, am I being heard?' survivors spoke of being increasingly isolated and vulnerable without access to a phone line or mobile service so that they can get help in an emergency.

'I've moved here after several other moves to get away, there's no landline or mobile connection, I was terrified he might turn up and kill me, and there was nothing I could do. I had no internet, no mobile signal for a month'.⁸

Many of the challenges facing rural communities in Wales will be the same as other parts of the UK, however there are some specific challenges for Wales; survivors from traditional, Welsh speaking communities may face barriers accessing support in their chosen language. For the specialist sector, resources are not always available to ensure there is a Welsh speaking member of the team available at all times and for survivors who move away they may find themselves in areas of Wales where Welsh is not spoken as much potentially leading to feelings of isolation.

⁵ Ibid, page 29

⁶ Scottish Women's Aid, Participating in Equally Safe <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Participating-in-Equally-Safe-in-the-Highlands-and-Islands-Consulting-Women-Digital.pdf> page 9

⁷ Ibid, page 12

⁸ Are you listening, am I being heard?, Op Cit, page 29

The loss of traditional industry in many parts of Wales has impacted rural areas, with many people struggling to find work, this has impacted women, who are more likely to be out of work. For women living with VAWDASV, their lack of access to resources can act as a barrier to help seeking and leaving.

As stated earlier in this briefing, the isolation of the countryside can be used by perpetrators to further their control. In popular tourist areas of Wales, rural towns and villages can become ghost towns during the winter months, with neighbouring properties used as holiday homes empty, there may be no one around to report concerns or call the police on behalf of a survivor.

Service Response

In rural settings, survivors may have to travel further to see a health professional or meet with a specialist VAWDASV service. This poses a barrier if they are also subject to economic abuse and do not have access to funds to pay for petrol or public transport is limited. Evidence seems to suggest access to public transport in rural settings is getting worse, making it very difficult to travel in rural areas without a car. The added cost of transport in rural settings is further exacerbated by the cost of or lack of access to childcare to enable women to access community support. Services should be resourced to cover this cost for women.

Options for safety may also be limited, one worker in a rural setting explained that sanctuary schemes are not always appropriate because the police response is longer due to the distance they have to travel to the property.

Rural survivors are half as likely as urban victims to report their abuse, despite incident rates being roughly the same⁹. This under-reporting means much less is known about the needs of survivors in rural areas, of what good interventions are, or how to effectively work to eradicate VAWDASV in rural settings.

Specialist services face particular challenges in rural areas, such as their workers being easily identifiable when working in the community. Women then face the risk of being 'outed' by neighbours who see them with an outreach worker. In a report from Scottish Women's Aid about abuse in rural settings, survivors participating in a focus group had never met one another before, but several knew personal details about one another such as addresses and partner's workplace¹⁰.

The cost of running services can also be higher in rural settings, a particular challenge for the specialist sector, who desperately need secure and sustainable funding across the board. Utility bills can be higher in rural areas as well as travel, as workers may need to travel across greater distances to meet with survivors. In addition, refuges in rural areas may experience more room voids, if survivors from urban settings are reluctant to move to a rural setting. Survivors may also stay longer in refuge due to lack of move on options locally. Welsh Government and Commissioners need to consider how policies and plans for VAWDASV work impact on services in rural areas, to ensure costings are not based purely on models which work for urban services, thus potentially short changing rural based services.

⁹ Captive and Controlled, Domestic Abuse in Rural Areas, Op Cit, page 18

¹⁰ Women's Aid Scotland, Participating in Equally Safe, Op Cit, page 10

Case Study – Montgomeryshire Family Crisis Centre

Montgomeryshire Family Crisis Centre (MFCC) covers a large area of North Powys, 45% of the survivors it supports live in rural areas of the county. MFCC workers sometimes have to travel up to an hour to meet with a service user, in fact 19,000 miles were covered by its workers in the past year traveling to meet survivors, yet there is no additional funding for this. Finding safe spaces to meet with survivors can also be a challenge, particularly in small villages, or rural farming communities, of which there are a lot in North Powys, where survivors risk being 'outed' by neighbours asking about the visitor they had earlier that day. MFCC works collaboratively to overcome this, by making strong links with the communities it serves and other agencies; for example, it uses unstaffed fire stations, Women's Institute centres or churches to meet with clients. Of course, this is not always appropriate if the survivor or perpetrator is known to these agencies or groups and there is still a cost implication for MFCC.

The option of a hub which survivors travel to is not possible in a rural setting, where the bus service is limited. MFCC feel too often the model of a service is based on an urban one, where one worker can meet with three or four survivors at a central hub in one day, workers for MFCC may only be able to see one survivor a day due to travel time and ensuring they meet at a time which suits and is safe for the survivor. Because of the time it takes to travel, arguably rural services need more workers, despite, potentially, supporting less survivors.

The seasons can impact so much more in a rural setting as well, many country roads have no street lighting and can become impassable during the worst of the winter weather. This further impacts on workers ability to meet with survivors safely.

When commissioning services, MFCC feels consideration needs to be given to the need for extra staff in rural settings to mitigate the impact of the extra time it can take to travel to see survivors, the cost and time implications of that as well as the cost implications of having to hire spaces to meet.

Recommendations

Welsh Women's Aid makes the following recommendations to better protect survivors and services in rural communities across Wales;

- **Welsh Government to apply rural proofing to VAWDASV policies.** Rural proofing is concerned with how policies impact rural areas. In terms of VAWDASV services, consideration should be given to the higher cost of running services in rural areas. Government needs to ensure rurality is specifically considered when developing policy and legislation regarding VAWDASV, and service providers and commissioners locally and nationally proactively consider the hidden demand and hidden risk of VAWDASV in rural areas before delivering a service.
- **Funding which reflects the needs of rural support services.** Commissioners should specifically consider rurality in their service specifications and ensure delivery of services better reflects the needs of rural survivors. Consideration should be given to the time it takes to travel between appointments for support workers in a rural setting. Geographical area covered and number of survivors supported in a funding agreement must be realistic to ensure a good service is delivered.
- **Redress the urban bias.** Given less survivors in rural settings disclose, service must be based on need rather than demand. This requires a deliberate strategy to ensure research, data and analysis is not skewed towards urban demands and is fully inclusive of rural communities.
- **Police service provision in rural areas to be assessed and improved.** Training of officers in rural areas is needed and consideration given to the nuanced needs of rural survivors and whether or not the officer is known to the survivor and alleged perpetrator. As many survivors are not coming forward, or indeed see themselves as victims, the police need to consider a more pro-active, intelligence-led approach, rather than relying on responding to reports. Importantly, much more needs to be done to ensure that police officers understand the rural context of abuse, such as the impact of physical isolation, the rural characteristics of coercive control, the potential role of the community in abuse, and the patriarchal power structure.
- **Funding to made available for Sky Guard Alarms** – which work regardless of the phone signal to enable survivors in rural areas to call for help
- **Change That Lasts from Welsh Women's Aid to be further rolled out across Wales.** Welsh Government to guarantee onward funding for the model which works with communities and professionals to recognise the signs of VAWDASV and sign-post appropriately. This could be especially effective in close-knit communities where peers may be aware of abuse but are unsure how to support effectively, potentially leading to unsafe interventions.