

The importance of a tested community response to domestic abuse and the impact of the Covid- 19 pandemic

Introduction

Women's Aid know that most often the first time survivors speak about domestic abuse it is to friends, family or someone in the community.

To support local communities in responding to this, Women's Aid Federation of England and Welsh Women's Aid have developed, piloted and evaluated a new approach to community response called 'Ask Me'.

To ensure survivors get the right response the first time they speak about abuse, Ask Me trains people to become Community Ambassadors who:

- Raise awareness of domestic abuse and challenge cultural acceptance, victim-blaming stereotypes and myths around domestic abuse.
- Listen, believe and validate survivors' experiences.
- Share information and signpost survivors to access support.

Community Ambassadors are self-selecting members of their communities, who have a broad network of influence and are uniquely placed to make observations about how communities and survivors are experiencing Covid-19 restrictions.

There are currently **1,164**¹ trained Community Ambassadors across 13 geographical sites across England, covering parts of the North East, North West, Midlands, South, South East and London.

¹ This data reflects Community Ambassadors trained from the beginning of the scheme up until December 2019, in England only.

Methodology

To find out the impact Community Ambassadors are seeing of government lockdown on survivors of domestic abuse and how the pandemic is affecting their activities, Community Ambassadors fed back to us through a short survey. The survey consisted of ten questions and was shared via an email newsletter and social media. Thirty-two Community Ambassadors responded to the survey in April 2020. They were spread across thirteen geographical areas which were representative of the vast majority of areas in which the scheme has been delivered². Below are the findings from this survey.

What are Community Ambassadors seeing?

When asked what impact Community Ambassadors are seeing on survivors of domestic abuse since the government lockdown, Community Ambassadors told us that:

- they felt domestic abuse was getting worse;
- survivors are needing to talk more because of feeling more isolated;
- survivors are more worried about coming forward
- survivors are prioritising keeping themselves/children safe from Covid-19 over leaving their abusive relationship.

Community Ambassadors' contact and conversations with survivors, sharing information and signposting to services

Community Ambassadors also told us that survivors are finding it harder to access even informal support, and conversations with survivors had decreased for 44% of respondents. This is likely to be because "women experiencing domestic abuse are feeling trapped within their homes. It is harder to access informal support from family, friends or work colleagues"³.

Although it is even harder for survivors to access support, two thirds (66%) of Community Ambassadors responding to this survey have shared information and/or signposted survivors to get support since the government lockdown.

² We did not look at demographics of respondents in this survey. We will be looking at demographics of Community Ambassadors in the wider dataset of Ask Me.

³ Women's Aid, 2020: findings from an initial survey of survivors. <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications/evidence-briefings-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-survivors-and-services/>

Awareness-raising activities and supporting survivors

Despite the government lockdown, self-isolation and social distancing, Community Ambassadors have adapted the ways they are raising awareness and supporting survivors. For example, Community Ambassadors have been:

- using social media more to share information about local and national support services;
- becoming more knowledgeable by reading and learning more about Domestic Abuse. One Community Ambassador said that they are *"more aware of restrictions on survivor's lives"*;
- making sure people in their workplaces are aware of domestic abuse services support services;
- wearing an Ask Me badge when they go for walks; and
- waiting for survivors to call them as this is better for a survivor's safety.

As a result, most Ambassadors (63%) have found they are having more conversations since the government lockdown, across society and in communities, about domestic abuse.

This shows that people taking part in the Ask Me scheme are well situated:

- to continue raising awareness and challenging commonly held myths and stereotypes of women experiencing domestic abuse, and as a result creating long term safety for survivors;
- to have access with survivors as a trusted point of contact; and
- to open up conversations with survivors who may be experiencing abuse, share information and/or signpost women to access support from a service.

From December 2018 to December 2019, Community Ambassadors reported that for over a third (38%) of survivors that had disclosed abuse, it was their first time talking about it⁴. As a result, the Ask Me scheme is also well situated to ensure that survivors receive the right response when seeking help, the first time they disclose domestic abuse.

"This is not just about COVID-19"

Community Ambassadors have a wide reach with survivors where the abuse was experienced in the past. For example, from December 2018 to December 2019, of those survivors that disclosed abuse to a Community Ambassador, 62% of survivors disclosed that the abuse happened in the past and 38% disclosed the abuse was happening now.

⁴ WAFE Ask Me Dataset

In the section above, 'what are Community Ambassadors seeing', they told us survivors are needing to talk more because of feeling more isolated due to the government lockdown, social-isolation and social distancing measures. This could also include women who are not currently living with a perpetrator but living with the impacts of the abuse or continued abuse, and a result still hold a significant need for support.

Community Ambassadors also told us that survivors are finding it harder to access support as there is no childcare available. This similarly could be for women who are not currently experiencing abuse but wanting to access support services such as counselling.

Some Community Ambassadors highlighted that *"this is not just about COVID-19."* Prevalence of domestic abuse has always been high, women experience domestic abuse in different ways and are in need of support whilst experiencing it and after.

When asked 'what one thing could the government do to help survivors of domestic abuse during COVID-19?' Community Ambassadors said:

- Provide proper funding to specialist domestic abuse services.
A significant number of Ambassadors responding to this survey believe there is a need to fund specialist domestic abuse services properly, to provide proper support to survivors. Community Ambassadors said,

"Fund support services properly".

"...put money towards women's refuges".

"More funding to Women's Aid local offices [i.e. Womens Aid's member services] too as they are more in contact with each community of survivors!"

- Raise awareness of support services.

"Making survivors out there aware that help is available".

"Ensure they advertise well..."

- Break the silence of domestic abuse in communities.

"Provide more funding and open up a conversation. There always seems to be a silence in society when it comes to domestic abuse. We need those at the top to help break these silences".

"Make sure it's made a top priority".

What Womens Aid has done to support, and adapt its way of supporting Community Ambassadors during COVID-19

To support Community Ambassadors whilst they are having more conversations about Domestic Abuse and in signposting survivors, Women's Aid have:

- Increased its newsletters to be a monthly newsletter
- Engaged more with Community Ambassadors via social media
- Shared more self-care resources and tips on how to respond to survivors during Covid-19
- Designed a power and control wheel on how perpetrators may operate during lockdown
- Held national virtual Community Ambassador meet ups
- Supported member organisation coordinators on how to run local virtual Community Ambassador meet up
- Established a coordinator network via online meetings

Conclusion

Change that Lasts, developed by Women's Aid Federation of England and Welsh Women's Aid, is a plan for a future where all survivors get the right response to domestic abuse the very first time. This includes getting the right response in the community, and the Ask Me scheme trains Community Ambassadors to raise awareness about domestic abuse in their communities, have safe conversations with survivors and signpost them to support.

Our survey with Community Ambassadors shows us that:

- The experiences of domestic abuse are worsening due to Covid-19, for women who are experiencing it now, in varying ways, and women who have experienced it in the past.
- Accessing support services as well as informal support has also become more difficult. However trained Community Ambassadors continue to challenge cultural acceptance in communities, share information and/or signpost survivors of abuse to specialist domestic abuse support services.
- Additionally, some Community Ambassadors have adapted their activities to the government lockdown, social-isolation and social distancing measures.
- This established network of Community Ambassadors has shown that they are currently providing the right response to domestic abuse, often the first time a woman speaks about it.

Community Ambassadors felt to help survivors of domestic abuse the government needs to provide proper funding to specialist domestic abuse services, raise awareness of support services and break the silence of domestic abuse in communities. The

findings support the critical need for greater awareness and sustainable funding for the vital work provided by specialist domestic abuse services. Furthermore, the Ask Me scheme shows the power of training community members to understand domestic abuse, and to listen and believe survivors. The survey highlights the importance of ensuring that this type of training is rolled out in any community response to ensure survivors get the right response the first time.

We would like to thank all the Community Ambassadors who took their time to respond to this survey and shared so generously, allowing us to work together in ensuring we provide the best possible support to survivors.

To become a Community Ambassador you can register your interest [here](#).