

## *Old Problem, New Solution: The Belfast Non Violent Relationship Project*

Jane Kremer Non Violent Relationship Project

**Summary** This article reports on a multi-agency approach for dealing with domestic violence in the Greater Belfast area. Drawing on the experience of earlier statutory intervention programmes in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, the project incorporates a voluntary group programme for male perpetrators with an ongoing support programme (individual and group) for partners and training events for young people. The development of a multi-agency approach is not without difficulty but early indications suggest that the effort can be rewarding and highlights the value of adopting a 'joined-up' intervention strategy.

**Keywords** Domestic violence, male perpetrator programmes, inter-agency intervention, partner support, multi-agency approach.

### **Introduction**

The launch in October 2003 of the UK Government's latest initiative addressing domestic violence in Northern Ireland demonstrated an ongoing commitment to tackling violence in the home. The consultation document entitled 'Tackling Violence at Home' indicated that much needed to be done while at the same time challenging all statutory and voluntary bodies, 'to co-ordinate their work and shape it to produce a comprehensive cross cutting strategy - a joined up approach to addressing this blight in our society' (p5). Over the last ten years each agency has sought to tackle domestic violence from within its own perspective, often developing good practice guidelines that determine the scope, direction and limitations of its individual practices. Equally many have sought to foster partnerships with other organisations, both statutory and voluntary, and these multi-agency initiatives have begun to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of intervention with families where domestic violence is prevalent.

Since 1994, the Northern Ireland Domestic Violence Forum has provided a sound platform for various agencies to share and discuss their own unique experiences of domestic violence, and to develop working practices that aim to improve the coordination and delivery of local services to women and children experiencing domestic violence. It is within this climate of inter-agency work that a genuine belief has grown that no one agency will have all the answers and solutions, along with a realisation of the complexities associated with tackling domestic violence. In Belfast the enthusiasm for inter-agency co-operation, alongside the realistic potential for future development, culminated in 2003 with the formation of the Non-Violent Relationship Project (NVRP). However in order to appreciate the uniqueness of this initiative, its aims and its functions, it may be useful to set the scene by considering the problem that it attempts to address.

### **Domestic Violence.**

Domestic violence is a crime and it is also a repeat crime. Rarely are incidents of violence one off events - a frequently cited statistic is that on average a woman is abused approximately 35 times before she seeks help. Only 10% of domestic violence involves an isolated event; nine in ten involve systematic beatings often with escalating violence (Hanmer and Stanko, 1989). Domestic violence, as with other repeat forms of victimisation including burglary and racial attacks, requires that three minimal elements are present in order for it to happen and continue - a suitable victim or target, a motivated offender and a lack of a social, or capable guardian. It is only when one element is changed that the pattern of repeat victimisation is broken (Cohen and Felson, 1979).

### **The Capable Guardian**

For the incidence of domestic violence to become less prevalent there is a need for the state and all its agents to embrace the mantle of capable guardian. It is undoubtedly true that society's response to domestic violence has changed over the last thirty years and with a major impetus to change coming from the feminist movement. Within Northern Ireland, the Family Homes and Domestic Violence (NI) Order 1998 has improved the legal protection available to victims while the response to victims of such violence is improving as a greater understanding of its manifestation and impact continues to develop. However while the issue of domestic violence is less likely to be hidden behind closed doors, changing the personal attitudes and belief systems that are instrumental in perpetuating the violence is, in the immediate future, likely to prove more difficult. Until society as a whole believes there is no excuse or justification for domestic violence to be perpetrated then individual attitudes are unlikely to change and in turn the role of capable guardians will remain under-developed.

### **The Suitable Victim**

For the last 28 years Women's Aid in Northern Ireland has been providing advice, support and refuge for women who have survived domestic violence. Through this service women are given the opportunity to explore alternatives to living with abuse and are given the opportunity to make decisions that can impact positively on their lives. These particular women are no longer 'suitable victims'. While this work has been undertaken in conjunction with many other agencies (for example the Police Service of Northern Ireland, social services, housing executive etc) its remit of working solely with women is seen as always limiting the potential to significantly reduce the problem. Women's Aid, while constantly and often effectively challenging the myths and attitudes that perpetuate domestic violence, is dedicated to providing a victim-focused service and hence is not likely to have an impact on the behaviour of the perpetrators themselves. Women will often move out of abusive relationships when they are provided with appropriate support, realistic options and a legal framework that affords them a degree of safety. Perpetrators, on the other hand, who have not been challenged can remain motivated to re-offend, and may move on to their next 'suitable victim' at the earliest opportunity.

In the absence of effective guardians and with an ongoing accessibility to 'suitable victims', the key to breaking the cycle of repeat victimisation rests with the perpetrator and the need to effectively challenge his abusive behaviour. Traditionally, society's response to domestic violence has been to focus on the woman and offer support with the hope of empowering her to make positive changes. An unintentional consequence of this strategy has been to downplay the perpetrator's responsibility for his violence while simultaneously blaming the victim for her continued status as victim, 'I've done all I can and still she refuses to leave her violent partner.'

### **The Motivated Offender**

In 1997 the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) developed a programme that specifically aimed to reduce offending by adult male domestic violence perpetrators. This programme took its lead from earlier projects, including CHANGE (1989) and Lothian Domestic Violence Probation Project (LDVPP; 1990) in Scotland, intervention projects that have been shown to have a significant and positive effect on the incidence and frequency of subsequent violence along with a range of other controlling behaviours (Dobash, Dobash, Kavanagh & Lewis, 1996).

Men Overcoming Domestic Violence (MODV) engages male perpetrators in a group work programme of 23 sessions, run over a six-month period. The focus is on the perpetrator and his abusive behaviour, using the techniques of adult learning rather than therapy. Only by exploring and accepting responsibil-

ity for his own abusive behaviour could each participant gain a clear notion that his behaviour was wrong and unacceptable, and therefore make it possible for him to change. The process of referral has been normally through the courts as part of a probation order or by other statutory agencies. However in some instances (as and when places become available) then perpetrators can attend voluntarily. Women's Aid has also supported this work. For example, an undertaking was made that as an integral part of the programme a joint Women's Aid and probation visit would be made to the partner of the perpetrator, offering information advice and support. The benefits of providing this joined-up approach to domestic violence has become evident overtime, each organisation using its area of expertise to create an environment within which women and children can be afforded greater safety and protection, alongside the important message that violence in the home is no longer acceptable.

Since the launch of this programme seven years ago, its content has remained consistent but the programme has grown significantly in stature. Demand for places on the programme has steadily increased and, as a consequence, voluntary referral places, particularly in the greater Belfast area, have become rare. The programme content has been updated twice and the programme has been extended by one week. The programme has also been approved by PBNI/NI Prison Service approval process. Research has confirmed the efficacy of this approach and has indicated, for example, that 'group work programmes for male perpetrators are more likely to be effective than individual work' (Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate January, 2000).

Enthused by the success of this approach to tackling the problem of violence in the home, the possibilities for developing related projects began to be actively explored over recent years. With the focus of PBNI in the Belfast area having to be on perpetrators who had been convicted of a crime, there was a realisation of the need to offer all perpetrators the opportunity to look at their abusive behaviour, whether or not they had been caught and convicted. By and large, as experience has shown, domestic violence remains a hidden problem with women rarely bringing charges against the men who have assaulted them. Indeed many women who experience domestic violence say that they want help rather than punishment for their partners, and an intervention that would provide help would appear to meet this need. Against this backdrop, and following lengthy discussions involving various agencies, in early 2002 a joint application for funding was made to the Belfast Regeneration Office by PBNI, Women's Aid and North and West Belfast, and South and East Belfast Social Services Trust. The funding application was eventually successful and the Non Violent Relationship Project (NVRP) was born.

### **The Non Violent Relationship Project (NVRP)**

Once funding had been secured, the partners were tasked with putting theory into practice. This involved developing ideas as to how the programme of work could be operationalised, managed and staffed. The Non Violent Relationship Project itself finally commenced in August 2003 when three workers from Women's Aid, probation and the social services trust (two women, one man) were seconded to the NVRP team for a period of 22 months. The recruitment of both male and female facilitators was seen as essential for the integrity of the programme, demonstrating to perpetrators a harmonious and equitable gender working relationship and ensuring that the risk of male collusion was minimized. The day-to-day management of the project is the responsibility of the PBNI, with overall project management remaining with the steering group. The steering group comprises representatives of all participating agencies (and the Northern Ireland Office) and meets on a bi-monthly basis throughout the duration of the project. The aim of the project is straightforward; to reduce the level of domestic violence in targeted households in the Greater Belfast area (population of approximately 500,000). Recognising that in order to tackle domestic violence effectively a multi-faceted approach is crucial, the project team developed a three-

pronged strategy that challenges perpetrators of domestic violence, supports partners of those perpetrators and also provides a preventative education programme for young people. While PBNI in Belfast continues to provide corrective group work programmes for men who have been court mandated this programme has provided a similar programme but for voluntary perpetrators. Despite being a voluntary programme great external pressure has usually been brought to bear on these men to encourage them attend. Their motivation to attend is usually related to issues regarding child protection or the fear of losing a relationship. This pressure overcomes their inherent resistance to the intervention, fuelled by shame, denial, ambivalence, and embarrassment. Men rarely hold their hands up and take responsibility for their violence nor do they agree to attend a programme unless there is a degree of overt or covert pressure. In 1992 the Probation Board invited men in an area of Belfast to come forward to join a group addressing abusive behaviour but not one person turned up.

It is still very early days for the project, but already it is apparent that tremendous progress has been made. Publicising the project was a priority for several months in order to raise awareness of the project's aim, objectives and remit among both statutory and voluntary organisations. Two group-work programmes for men have now started, with referrals to date coming mainly through either the social services or probation offices. The first group completed its 24 week programme in May 04. This group started initially with eleven participants but eventually comprised a core of six with an average attendance rate of over 90%. The second programme commenced in February 04; nine men were assessed for the group and a total of seven started. (Of the two men that did not start, one failed to turn up for the first session and appeared to lack any motivation to attend. The second man's referral was withdrawn in consultation with the referring agency due to an ongoing court case and the availability of subsequent information that suggested the programme was inappropriate at such time). Assessment procedures use interview techniques to consider risk, attitudes, extent of minimalisation and denial, mental health issues and alcohol / drug related concerns. Those who are not deemed appropriate for the programme at this stage of their lives are screened out.

### **Partner Participation in NVRP**

The partners of all the men who are assessed as suitable for the programme are offered support. This can be one-to-one in her own home or once a fortnight when a partner support group is held. The safety of women and children remains of paramount importance throughout the programme; it is only by listening to, consulting, supporting and providing women with appropriate information about the perpetrator programme that the overall success of the project can be evaluated. What women tell us about how safe they were at the start of the programme, and how safe they feel following the intervention, must be the most salient measure of success, and without doubt the value of the programme will ultimately hinge on what these women tell the project about their lives.

It is the engagement of partner participation as an integral element of the project that singles out the NVRP as a truly 'joined up' approach. Engaging the partners of perpetrators in existing programmes has remained an elusive goal. For example, take up of support services offered through Women's Aid has been limited, and yet all agencies involved clearly see how crucial their participation is. When instigating change in one element of a family dynamic (i.e. the perpetrator) there will inevitably be an impact on other family members and children. This change it is hoped will be for the better but experience has shown this might not always be the case. Working closely as a team the NVRP discuss and challenge all decisions regarding referral suitability, progress on programme, risk assessment, child protection and overall evaluation. The Women's Aid representative in the team takes responsibility for incorporating the woman's feelings and perspectives at all stages of the project, and for feeding back to the women any con-

cerns. In this way women may make informed decisions regarding their future and safety.

With regard to the success of this approach so far the partners of all the perpetrators starting the programme have been contacted initially by letter, all but one partner has been visited in her own home on at least one occasion and ongoing regular support continues to be provided individually and during meetings of the partner support group. Consequently the sharing of information between all players remains a key feature of the NVRP and is probably its greatest asset. In turn any future evaluation of the project will be qualitative and quantitatively rich - all concerned, whether perpetrators, partners, facilitators of the programme, partner support workers or referrers provide the information and feedback required for a joined-up and genuinely integrated approach to tackling domestic violence.

What remains to make the picture complete is the challenge of prevention. The experience of workers when listening to young people discussing relationships demonstrates that some continue to believe that violence towards a partner is acceptable in some situations. Challenging and changing these attitudes among the young and not-so-young alike is important when aiming to prevent violence. Not enough is known about how to change attitudes but education is important in helping to mould the attitudes of young people. Working with young people in schools and youth clubs, looking at the issues of healthy and unhealthy relationships, is one of the aims of the NVRP and this work is now moving from the planning stage to implementation as members of the team embark on a series of training events with young people across Greater Belfast.

In conclusion the NVRP remains in its infancy but so far it has demonstrated that collaborative working can provide a platform for open, honest and reflective discussion from the steering group itself to the workers on the ground. Early indications suggest that this joined-up approach translates into effective and responsive intervention strategies that work and that in future may well be held up as a model of good practice. It also connects the motivated perpetrator, the 'suitable victim' and the social guardian in a symbiotic relationship that may historically be judged as an effective way forward in the battle to rid society of the blight of domestic violence. We continue to travel hopefully.

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