

19 February 2014

Sonas Domestic Violence Charity Submission to Joint Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality

Sonas provides refuge, support and housing to women and children experiencing domestic violence primarily across in nine different locations in Dublin and Wicklow.

We support hundreds of women every year to change their lives and the lives of their children. Helping to make this change happen is core to who we are and what we do.

Due to the continuum of support we offer – we are the largest provider of housing in the country specifically to women and children experiencing domestic violence – the recommendations we offer are based on that “on the ground” experience.

We have been doing this work for 21 years and are grateful to the committee for letting us share the key learnings from this work on which we base our recommendations.

Sonas and Children

We decided to make children the key focus of our submission to this committee not because we did not want to tell their mother’s stories too but we wanted to present the realities of the 300–400 children we engage with on a yearly basis; many of whom are silent witnesses to acts of unspeakable violence.

First of all the children whose mothers come to Sonas for support, tend to be young: two out of three children are under the age of 10; while the single biggest group, around one third of children, are under the age of 5. For many domestic violence is their earliest memory, when I say domestic violence, I mean the physical and psychological assault on their mother or themselves.

I do not wish to distress the committee but we have babies who have been punched because their mother was holding them at the time she was attacked; we have children who witnessed their mothers being sexually assaulted including a 2-year-old who was in the same room at the time; children who were beaten by perpetrators or their mothers forbidden to comfort them. I would like to share with you Liam’s story – he is 10 and he wants to be a super hero:

“Before moving to Sonas, I lived with my Mam and my brother. My Mam’s boyfriend was really mean to all of us. He locked me in rooms and pushed me down the stairs. He used to call my Mam bad names and hurt her. I remember sounds of crying, screaming and things breaking.

“I used to wish I was a superhero and have magic powers so I could make him disappear. I hit him once to make him stop choking my Mam. I was scared but I felt I had to protect her.”

I am very happy to report that Liam and his family are doing better, that his Mam is getting the help that she needs and he has a sports coach who thinks he is brilliant.

Liam's story tells you a lot about what children exposed to domestic violence go through: anxiety, physical and psychological violence... Domestic violence robs children of their sense of safety and wellbeing at a fundamental level: directly when the perpetrator targets the child or neglects their wellbeing and indirectly by forcing the child to be a witness to the abuse.

Recommendations

We are obviously heartened that the new Child and Family Agency Tusla now has domestic violence within its remit and we our hope is that the agency will be adequately resourced around this work.

Sonas is a member of the Safe Ireland network of domestic violence services and would echo its call for a: systemic review and reform of current Domestic Violence Legislation and court structure and proceedings.

Housing

Domestic violence is a leading cause of women, and if they are mothers, their children becoming homelessness or at risk of homelessness.

Establishing a place of safety, and a home, is crucial and the current shortage of affordable housing, particularly in Dublin, is making that an extremely difficult challenge for women and children escaping domestic violence.

Sonas would therefore offer the Committee the following recommendations in relation to housing legislation, supports, services and the delivery of these.

- "Domestic Violence" should named specifically as a reason for homelessness under Section 2 of the Housing Act 1988 to specifically include, among nine categories, a category of applicants who became homeless as a result of domestic violence.
- The application for the social housing needs should be accepted by the Local Authority from a victim of domestic violence irrespective of residency of the applicant or local connections.
- The provision should be made that if the applicant has an accommodation, but it is unsafe for occupation due to fear/risk of domestic violence, such accommodation shall not be regarded an "alternative accommodation" for the purposes of housing needs assessment
- That a duty should be placed on local authorities to provide a spectrum of safe accommodation options for victims of domestic violence including access to domestic violence refuges which specialize in safety and support

No one organisation or sector can make the difference for women and children experiencing domestic violence, it requires recognition of the extent of the problem and a whole system response at every level. At a time of review and structural change, we have an opportunity to deliver real change.

Fiona Ryan
CEO Sonas