

## Foreword

The setting up of Amen in December 1997 was the first step in lifting the veil of secrecy on another of society's social taboos i.e. the abuse of men in their homes by their spouses. After having letters published in the national newspapers and speaking on the Gay Byrne radio show I was inundated with phone calls from abused men, their friends and members of their families. Thousands of people from all parts of Ireland contacted Amen to tell of the abuse suffered by men at the hands of their wives or partners. The stories I have heard over the years have detailed all imaginable, and some unimaginable, forms of abuse and yet there have been common threads running through all these stories. The desire to control, using bullying tactics, is the predominant factor in abusive relationships. Most of the men spoke of their isolation and lack of supports available to them. We have now produced this book containing a selection of stories based on letters received from abused men, their families and friends. In order to protect their identities personal details have been changed. This book will give a better insight into the complex nature of domestic abuse and further break down resistance to the idea that women can abuse men in the home.

Raising awareness of the issue, which has been achieved mainly through newspaper articles, radio and television interviews and leaflet distribution, has ended the isolation of many men and empowered them to speak out and seek assistance. While most people now accept that domestic violence is more complex than the simplistic 'battered wife' caricature and that men and women are both capable of abusing their partners, there are still many, in positions of power and influence who seek to deny the emerging truth. They still try to portray the problem as if it were very simple: a case of evil men attacking innocent women and children. This model is flawed and outdated.

There is now irrefutable evidence that women and men can be both perpetrators and victims of domestic violence. The only three gender neutral studies of domestic violence in the Republic of Ireland, carried out for Marriage and Relationship Counselling Service (MRCS 2001), ACCORD (2003) and the Department of Health (2003), have found that men and women abuse each other in roughly equal numbers. These findings concur with results from all other two-sex studies and surveys carried out in the UK, Canada and the USA. Studies that portray men as predominantly perpetrators are not independent, neutral, balanced two-sex studies. They are predicated on the assumption that men are the aggressors and women the victims; are based on interviews with women only; do not make any attempt to establish the views or experiences of men or are carried out by or for people or organisations with a feminist ethos. It is hardly surprising therefore, that such studies wrongly portray men as the aggressors in the vast majority of cases.

There are other examples of the phenomenon of male victims emerging independently of the work of Amen. A study of men's health in the North Eastern Health Board entitled 'Men Talking' identified six groups with specific needs viz. 1) male travellers 2) gay men 3) male victims of domestic violence 4) male farmers 5) rural bachelors and 6) disabled men. The report included the following comment on male victims of domestic violence:

*Little is known about the needs of men who are victims of domestic violence. These groups of men, in the main, suffer in silence, ostracised by a society that still refuses to accept that women too can be perpetrators of violence. In the course of this study, men spoke openly about their lives as victims, recalling painful periods of personal hurt and humiliation that must be considered in future policy development.*

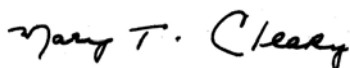
*In addition to removing the female bias, which, according to this group of men, is still endemic in institutions like the healthcare system, the social welfare system and the legal profession, these men also felt that they have practical needs that currently are not being addressed. In particular, they highlighted the need for male refuges. For many, being denied access to their own homes means taking refuge in cars, outhouses and their mother's house. While these men are vulnerable, in need of help, support and a safe place their stories go unheard. In addition to male refuges, they also suggested that initiatives such as Amen, the national support group for male victims of domestic violence, be supported so that they can reach a wider cohort of men than is currently the case.*

(Men Talking, North Eastern Health Board, 2001)

Essentially domestic violence is another form of bullying involving power and control. According to the Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre, Trinity College, Dublin, bullying is not about size or gender. It happens in the schoolyard, in the workplace and in the home. Bullies can be either male or female. In the circumstances it is difficult to understand why some people have such a problem accepting that women can also be bullies in the home.

Responsible and effective domestic violence interventions should be *positive* and *inclusive*, not *negative* and *exclusive*. It is regrettable that those who have been allowed to dominate the discourse, and influence public policy, on domestic violence seek to exclude the experiences of male victims. Promoting their own ideology appears to be more important to them than supporting all victims or finding real solutions. When policy defers to such ideology, the interests of all family members are not being considered. Emerging evidence of women's violence in the home would suggest that society must open itself to the fact that domestic violence affects every member of the family, including men. Otherwise, one sub-group in particular, the children of men who are abused in the home, runs the risk of being totally excluded. Domestic violence is not just a "*women's issue*". It is a social issue affecting men, women and children and needs to be examined in this context, otherwise it will continue to do damage to family systems and create even bigger division within families. As we begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century all domestic abuse victims, regardless of age or gender, deserve our sympathy, compassion and equal access to services.

I would like to thank all who assisted in the preparation of this book and especially those who allowed their stories to be published.



Mary T. Cleary  
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