

Justice Committee

Stage 1 Scrutiny of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill

Note of meeting with Shakti Women's Aid

Tuesday 16 May 2017

Present: Rona Mackay MSP (Chair), Oliver Mundell MSP, Stewart Stevenson MSP, Mairi Evans MSP, 'Y' and 'S', both victims of domestic abuse, and Anila Mirza, Shakti Women's Aid

Y described her personal background and the experience of being a refugee child after the invasion of her country in 1959. She described her experience of domestic abuse as similar to that of her refugee experience – the same pain and feelings, but worse because she felt personal responsibility. She described her abuse as being like poison – feeling physically sick, unable to think straight or logically, frightened. Home is supposed to provide security but becomes the worst place to be. When she approached the police they were unable to do anything because she had no physical signs of abuse.

She described her relationship as caring and loving for the first five years but said that as soon as they married her husband changed “like a switch”. She said that looking back now she feels that this was his plan all along, but that she was unable to see the warning signs at the time, or didn't want to believe them. This included him not talking about previous partners and comments made in public towards him by a previous partner.

Y said that the first time she approached the police there was little understanding and she was presented with a series of forms to fill out when what she really needed was a listening ear during this cry for help. The second time she went to the police they were much more helpful but there was still nothing they could do based on current law and the lack of physical signs of abuse. Y said that she feels education and attitude of individual police officers is key to ensuring women receive right help and support and that women in this situation need a human to listen, not forms to fill in. She mentioned that VSS were helpful in crisis but she only received the long-term support she needed from Shakti. She had also approached Women's Aid but her personal experience was that they did not provide the support she needed because they are not always understanding of the issues facing women from ethnic minorities. The weekly group she attended with Shakti gave a break from the mental exhaustion of abuse.

S described her upbringing in a Muslim family in India, with females treated like slaves expected to do housework and not attend school. Her brothers were favoured and provided with opportunities she was denied. A sponsor from the UK paid for S to attend school and eventually study at University in India, which then led to her attending University in Edinburgh. Her lack of experience and curiosity towards men led to her marrying a Punjabi man and she initially kept this a secret from her family – she said that she was worried about her father's reaction if he knew. Similar to Y, S stated that she was happy in the beginning of the relationship and felt loved and cared for by her husband. She also described the slow transition into becoming a victim, only realising what was happening afterwards, and she too felt that she only

had herself to blame. Her husband did not tell his family about their marriage and when she was pregnant she was told to abort the baby.

S encountered immigration issues during her time of abuse. Her husband wasn't working and she took on the role of supporting the family. He began drinking and didn't leave the house. S described feeling suicidal, and, like Y, that she was being poisoned. She couldn't ask for help because of her immigration issues. Her husband then committed fraud in her name, leading to her being questioned by the police and eventually losing her job. Her sister informed her about Shakti but they couldn't provide her with the support she needed because of her visa issues. She felt trapped & unable to leave her husband. She is now in temporary accommodation but feels her life and her daughter's life are not safe. Her family blame her for her problems. She said that if she had been beaten it would have been easier to deal with because the scars would disappear but the impact of psychological abuse is much greater and longer lasting. She questions why someone who is meant to love you can treat you this way. Culturally, the influence of her husband's mother was an issue because she had a strong hold over his life and continually undermined S.

Key issues

Both S and Y agreed that the inclusion of psychological, emotional and power control issues along with physical damage in domestic abuse is essential in understanding what domestic abuse really is and a fundamental building block for law enforcement agencies to be equipped adequately to offer appropriate support at the point of reporting and to prevent further abuse of the victims by not only the perpetrator but also by the state for not recognising the damage it does to victims by omitting its inclusion. Without this inclusion the police and the legal system cannot support victims adequately to protect them from further abuse.

Both felt that the police don't always understand emotional abuse from a cultural perspective and that this type of abuse is hard to evidence. S highlighted the lack of support for women being refused visas/without papers. They are unable to escape their abusive situation – the suffering is twice as bad when dealing with immigration issues and abuse. Support and being listened to, the ability to feel hope, is crucial. The correct police response to women who report abuse is vital and consistency of approach is needed.