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Email only

Draft UCU Wales Response - Violence Against Women and Domestic Abuse National Strategy

The University and College Union (UCU Wales) represents almost 7,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians, and postgraduates in universities, colleges, adult education and training organisations across Wales. UCU Wales is a politically autonomous but integral part of UCU, the largest post-school union in the world. We welcome this opportunity to respond to the Violence Against Women and Domestic Abuse National Strategy Refresh.

Introduction

Sharp rises in the projected costs of living means that many more women are likely to feel **trapped** in abusive relationships. Similarly, **evidence** suggests how the Pandemic has exacerbated both the level and occurrence of domestic abuse. However, as the medical emergency recedes, there is a continuing need to align strategies with different patterns of working.

In our submission, UCU argues for an approach which recognises the transformative role that education can play; both in moulding positive attitudes, disarming stigma and providing survivors with an opportunity to rebuild.

UCU broadly supports the plan as it is published but feels that it can be strengthened in several crucial areas;

- 1: An urgent need to address the gap in relationship education in further education
- 2: A clear message that women can be enabled to rebuild their lives supported by an education guarantee and an enhanced right to flexible working and compassionate leave within Welsh Government Competencies.
- 3: Positive action around mainstreaming awareness and using existing and future legislation to support survivors in the workplace
- 4: A more grounded approach to Welsh Government objectives which ensures that stable funding is in place for partner NGO's

Positive Education

Educational settings have been acknowledged by [research](#) as an important environment where positive attitudes towards gender equality and healthy, respectful relationships can be fostered through a rights-based approach.

Adopting a whole education approach that includes preventative education within and through all parts of school and college life, and which also involves the wider community has also been identified as significant. Research has shown the significance of this approach in relation to teaching bullying prevention messages and in relation to child sexual abuse prevention.

Advances in pre-16 relationship education will be both consolidated and further expanded by the new curriculum. In contrast, there is currently no joined-up approach in further education and little evidence of recent initiatives.

Welsh Government's 2015 [Whole Education Approach to Domestic Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse & Sexual Violence in Wales good practise guide](#) urges FEI's to ;

- *Build local partnerships, for example with your local specialist domestic abuse or sexual violence organisations;*
- *Sign up to a school/FEI Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence policy (including linked Young Persons' strategy where appropriate) and workplace policy;*
- *Build messages into your teaching (which are safe, relevant and interesting for your audience) to ensure understanding, awareness and resilience of learners/students; and Submit data where required*

However, whereas policies are in place in some institutions, a conversation with Welsh Women's Aid and Colegau Cymru suggests that there has been limited progress in building rights-based domestic abuse awareness into FE educational courses.

UCU believes that any effective strategy must be supported through education and awareness. Not only does this carry the benefit of prevention and establishing healthy norms but can also contribute to reducing the stigma which often prevents women from confiding or taking action to end the abuse.

Reflecting the Well-being of Future Generations Act ways of working, UCU Wales recommends that the revised plan restate the need for FEI's to work with experienced partners to develop and deliver educational materials across a coherent program. With respect to funding, social partners might consider the pools which sit within the wellbeing allocation.

Finally, as far as possible, any effective intersectional approach should take account of the other equality action plans (LGBTQ+, Race Equality and Disability Task Force).

Light at the end of the Tunnel

During a recent roundtable discussion with trade union equality staff and survivors, participants identified a broad process experienced by many women emerging from abusive relationships.

“Everything **will** change” (the panic experienced by a woman when considering whether to take action/seek help. She is possibly exhausted, fearful, in debt/fear of her job, worried about her children with confidence and self-esteem at rock bottom).

“Everything **must** change” (the crucial point when a woman decides to end the relationship)

“Everything **can** change” (recognition that there is a safe platform, support, the real prospect of a better future and opportunity to rebuild/de-lever debt).

As the discussion progressed, we agreed that whilst the plan worked well at the point of crisis (stage 2) there was a missing emphasis on support for recovery. Frequently, the prospect of ‘starting from zero’ in reduced financial circumstance might be too much when one’s self-esteem is already at rock-bottom. Women need to know that they can rebuild their lives - particularly where there is debt emerging from financial abuse or duress.

In terms of being able to plan a life outside an abusive relationship UCU Wales recommends that the plan emphasises;

- A well-advertised cross cutting strategy and greater collaboration across services such as housing, economy, education and health. The general message should be that where a woman decides to leave an abusive relationship, she will be supported in rebuilding her life as well as any children/dependants.
- The financial impact of leaving an abusive relationship can be felt over many years and across generations. To support recovery, Welsh Government should consider providing free access to academic or vocational qualifications up to level 6. If government were to adopt a means tested model, UCU Wales would expect that assessments would be carried out sympathetically with trained staff and that debt accrued as a consequence of abuse, be considered. In all, the model should be informed by the principle of restitution with the aim of supporting a survivor towards the position that she would have been in had the abuse not occurred.
- Focus on the [special challenges](#) confronted by women during maternity as well as pregnancy and their subsequent potential impact upon attachment and life-long outcomes.

In the Workplace

[Evidence](#) suggests that the Pandemic has exacerbated the level and occurrence of domestic abuse. However, as the medical emergency recedes, the plan now needs to engage with different patterns of working. For instance, women might confront an intensification in controlling behaviours when they prepare to return to

the workplace having previously worked from home. As Welsh Women's Aid point out, perpetrators can be at their most dangerous when they feel that they are losing control.

Employers must operate on the basis of mitigation and no detriment. Consequently, where abuse or harassment impacts upon performance, this needs to be carefully considered in policy – particularly where it emerges as a part of a disciplinary or capability process. As mentioned, most colleges and universities have policy in place. Additionally, UCU Wales has concluded a national agreement in FE (see annex).

The key features of the agreement deal with institutional awareness, support for survivors, treatment of perpetrators and compassionate leave/reasonable adjustments. Believing that any solution begins with all of us, UCU Wales recommends that the plan;

- Acknowledges that whilst [toolkits](#) and strategic staff training is to be welcomed, change will be best supported by developing whole institution awareness. Women will be far more likely to take the risk in stigma free environments where positive actions are embedded and mainstreamed. As suggested previously, thought should be given to linking education and messaging to existing wellbeing work.
- In the workplace, relationship abuse can become apparent following a member's decision to confide in a rep. The Facilities agreement should be structured to allow reps reasonable time to support colleagues, Similarly, agreements and processes should be developed to assist sensitive, collaborative working between employer and trade union.
- Addresses professional denial which is still a factor in some trades. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some managers still take the view that "a firefighter/teacher/health professional would never do such a thing!". It is the responsibility of institutions and professional organisations not only to enforce clear standards of conduct but also encourage members to seek help where necessary.
- Recognise that the effects of abuse do not necessarily stop when the relationship ends. As well as staff counselling, consideration should be given to the very special challenges confronted by women as they rebuild their lives. For instance, [evidence](#) demonstrates that children are likely to suffer enduring detriments such as psychological trauma and disrupted learning as a consequence of an abusive relationship. Furthermore, these difficulties might be felt more keenly where an abusive partner has made a child complicit (a form of abuse in its own right). If women are to be supported in rebuilding their lives, then they must be given the flexibility to heal their families as well as themselves. To that end, UCU Wales recommends that Welsh Government consider a dedicated entitlement to flexible working and compassionate leave within its own competency. It must also

consider the ease of access to the provision of counselling for children.

- In terms of developing a national agreement template, consideration should be given to building on the Shadow Social Partnership Board's existing work through the forthcoming Social Partnership and Procurement Act. There is also scope to work with the Future Generations Commissioner to make the Preventative Duty more explicit in this area. Finally, the plan might consider the role of procurement in ensuring that HR departments embed good practise. In the past, UCU Wales has proposed a simple system of social licencing (as practised by Preston and Ayrshire Council in addition to Cleaveland USA and Montreal).

Outcomes & Evidence

The current refresh represents the latest in a series of similar exercises. Following on from a roundtable discussion (referred to earlier), it was broadly felt that more effort should be invested in measuring current outcomes prior to moving on to the next set of targets. Additionally, the point was made that assessment needs to be linked in with what is going on the ground. This point becomes more pressing when considering how the evidence to back aspects of the plan is not always obvious.

In common with WTUC, UCU Wales feels that there is a need to expand the role of Welsh Women's Aid – in terms of project work, training and assisting and helping to compile a useful evidence base. To better facilitate this expansion, consideration should be given across departments around the sort of work and projects for which bids might be tendered. Similarly, if results and change are going to embed, government must take a long, strategic view which gives regard to the currently precarious staffing models of many partner NGO's. Rather than moving from project to project, a way must be found to stabilise funding streams so that expertise can remain within organisations such as Women's Aid.

Finally, as previously stated, Welsh Government's commitment to an intersectional approach determines that the plan must give greater consideration to equality action plans in the areas of Race, LGBTQ+ and disability. For example, a Welsh Women's Aid survey (2014) found that 95% of women suffered adverse effects on their mental health as a result of the abuse; 6.9% of women in refuge had a physical impairment; 1.9% had a sensory impairment; and 3.2% had a learning impairment. In uncertain economic circumstances, it makes little sense to siloize work.

Annex – Brief Response

Question 1

We have set out our main priorities in the Objectives. Do you think these are the right priorities?

- Objectives do not appear to have moved nor has progress around previous objectives been assessed. There might be a need to link in with what is going on the ground
- Relationship education in the new curriculum do not apply in FE & HE. We can use Future Generations & Wellbeing to tackle abusive behaviour throughout PCET

Question 2

Do you think the overall approach we will be taking, as set out in the sections on the Blueprint, is the right one to stop violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence?

- In all aspects of abuse (but particularly financial/financially coercive), the ability to rebuild one's life is crucial to escape. Women need to be able to imagine and plan a life outside the abusive relationship and long-term support to help them get their lives back together. This emphasis on visioning and recovery would strengthen the plan.
- With respect to employment relationships and training, we need separate policies and agreements covering those experiencing abuse. Consideration should be given to developing template national agreements and building on existing work through the Social Partnership Board (in forthcoming Act).
- Procurement policy (again, in the new Social Partnership & Procurement Act) can be used to ensure good practise in the private sector, ie. proofing HR policy, etc.
- The Plan needs to respond to different patterns of working. For example, women might confront an intensification in controlling behaviours when they prepare to return to the workplace having previously worked from home. Perpetrators are at their worse when they feel that they are losing their control.
- Institutions need to confront 'professional denial', i.e. "A solicitor/fire fighter/teacher would never engage in abusive behaviour". Anecdotal evidence suggests that these views might still be widespread.
- Free access to education up to level 6 for women who are trying to rebuild.
- There needs to be a better understanding of the abuse that can occur during maternity as well as pregnancy

Question 3

We have set out the principles which underpin the draft National Strategy. Do you agree with these?

- Where is the evidence to inform the principles?
- Intersectionality: the plan should draw together with REAP, LGBTQ+ and Disability Task Force plans
- Services need to be linked up so that lives can be pulled back together

Question 4

Do you agree with our immediate priorities?

Broadly agree.

Question 5

What do you think is the most important thing we can do to stop violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence?

- Recognising that it starts with all of us
- Embed healthy norms in FE courses as recommended in 2015
- Mainstreaming institutional awareness
- Enhanced employment rights for women who are seeking to rebuild their lives (within Welsh Government Competencies)
- With respect to trade unions, reps need to recognise the signs, know where to signpost and help women keep their jobs. Reps thus need training – specific modules on domestic abuse.
- Reps need sufficient & guaranteed facility time to deal with this work
- Stabilize funding for strategic NGO's and social partners

Question 6

Do you think there is anything we should be doing as part of this Strategy that can have a positive effect on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language?

Question 7

Are there any other things you think we should be doing to stop violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, or do you have any other comments?

- Increased funding for training and skills for survivors
- Training must be meaningful – Tracy talked about small but crucial elements such as having the conversation in a safe space. Frequently, relationships will need to be built over time.

Question 8

How should we measure progress and success in delivering the things outlined in this Strategy?

- Measure progress on previous objectives and involve organisations with expertise in co-creating an evidence model.