

A few recollections and memories of setting up and maintaining the first
Women's Aid Refuge in Wales in ~~1994~~ 1974

It is really hard to believe that Cardiff Women's Aid has been in existence and going strong for over twenty years. It is also a sad reflection on our society that domestic violence is still so common and that Women's Aid Refuges are still in such demand.

Firstly, may I say 'Well Done' to all the women who have shown such commitment and courage through these twenty years. Although we all had vision in ~~1994~~¹⁹⁷⁴, I do not think that vision extended to imagine just how the organisation could have developed. I am sure that is due to women's indomitable spirit and hard work. Many congratulations to all women who have been involved in Women's Aid over those twenty years.

When I think of Women's Aid, I get somewhat mixed emotions, i.e. the sadness that men abuse women, and the feeling of gratitude and warmth in the manner that the organisation helped me not only to understand the wider issues of domestic violence but the recollection of how, by being involved, I was able to develop and understand myself.

Before coming to Cardiff in 1972, I was a somewhat conventional, high-heeled, made-up Hotel Receptionist; however, after a change of direction I arrived in Cardiff to work with recovering alcoholics and, being new to the area, I joined a group called 'Women's Action Group'. To be absolutely honest, I had never heard of the Women's Movement and felt quite threatened by the *clever* intellectual women I met there. Like another friend of mine who confided in me that she thought *stereo-typing* was something to do with records and disc-jockeys, I also found the language of academics somewhat daunting, but at the same time I was excited by this new view of the world.

Gradually, I gained confidence and in 1974, I started a social work course and came face to face with the fact that some men hit and abuse women. As a student I was out on placement with Barry Social Services and, even though I only had four families to visit, one of these women was being physically abused by her husband. So, when discussion started in Women's Action Group about the need for a Refuge, I didn't need any convincing.

Gradually, from Women's Action Group's discussions, a sub-group splintered off and, although we were small, we were determined to get both the Welsh Office and the local authority to listen to our demands for a Refuge. When the Housing Department agreed to rent us a small terraced house at a peppercorn rent of £100.00 per annum, Social Services agreed to pay this. This was an energising time for me as I had had no previous experience of negotiating with bureaucrats or knowledge of the political processes. Luckily, Jane Hutt was in the group and we relied on her knowledge when applying for Urban Aid Funding. (One of

my many memories of Jane is seeing her efficiently fill in the cumbersome Urban Aid Application Forms!) Her knowledge was crucial in obtaining funding. However, whilst we received a little economic support, it was several years later that funding became available for paid workers. Fortunately, in the group was Sue Ski (then Sue Harding) and Sue was prepared to give up a secure social work job to run the Refuge. (She did this without pay for 18 months - 2 years). Sue's enthusiasm was vital and she worked all hours imaginable. I do remember using some of my holidays to cover for her so that she could have a holiday. We were constantly fund-raising; Barry Ladies Circle paid for a coin telephone box to be installed and, after an article in the local paper, two old-age pensioners offered cots for the babies. The Students' Union organised a disco and made £150.00, which seemed a fortune to us. Vincent Kane compered a show at the Electricity Club in Pontcanna and there was a lot of support and goodwill around.

I can also remember opposition. In the 1970's, there was still a certain amount of optimism and idealism around and a few social workers set up a group called "Case Con." which was supposed to be of interest to radical social workers. I recall going to one of these meetings at a pub in Splott where a well-known sociologist was speaking. Even in my naivety, I was horrified to hear her state:

'I, personally, find violence quite attractive and we must define exactly what we mean by violence before we support the need for a Refuge'. I couldn't believe my ears as it seemed common sense to me to offer immediate shelter to women who were scared at home, and to talk of definitions of violence was clap-trap. I often wonder if she reconstructed her thoughts but, sadly, I believe she still opposes women-only organisations. Actually, at the time we weren't women-only as two men were in the group, being friends of group members. Initially, we failed to see the conflict, which probably sounds ludicrous to women now (which shows how we, as women, have developed!) However, both men were sufficiently sensitive to withdraw when it became clear that this was going to be a women's organisation, for women and run by women.

We joined the National Federation and gained experience of conference procedures and met other interesting women around England and Wales. The need for refuges was overwhelming and, as you probably know, Chiswick was the first to be set up by Erin Pizzey. I visited it and was shocked to see the conditions that the women and children were living in. This house had been given by Plessey, (I think) as an irate husband had burned down the first dwelling. Sadly, there were terrible splits in the Chiswick Group and it was found that women were being set to spy on Refuges in case the workers were lesbian or Marxist. A political climate of 'reds under the beds' was orchestrated and, apparently, letters were sent to local authorities warning them to be careful as to whom they supported in the setting up of Refuges. (I don't think that we in Wales were affected).

I really can't remember when Welsh Women's Aid was set up, but I do remember the first Welsh Conference held at the beautiful old market place (now an Arts Centre) at Builth Wells, and I recall the first video we made, using Helen Reddy's song 'I am Woman, I am strong' as the theme. I felt strong then and I'd love to see the video which, although amateurish, gave a clear strong message that Women's Aid was here to stay. Later, we had a tape-slide show, which Jane Hutt and I used in 1979 when we visited several Refuges in New England, USA. It was received with interest although Jane had a difficult time in Pennsylvania where the Welsh immigrants couldn't accept that some Welsh men abuse their wives. At one open meeting a member of the audience threw us a bit with the question: *How do you deal with conflict resolution?*

We really didn't offer the children in Refuges much support in those early days but I do remember two men, whose sweet-shop was closing down, giving us loads of sweets and chocolates for the children. Unfortunately, I had a small red Mini that was forever getting stolen, and it was stolen with all the sweets and chocolates in the boot. This happened in the long hot summer of 1976 and subsequently, when I finally got my car back, the boot was a mess of melted sweets and chocolates.

In 1975, a Select Committee had been set up to look into domestic violence which was chaired by Willie Hamilton, M.P. Both Sue Ski and I gave evidence and I came across the Select Committee's Report recently (which I gave to Lincoln Women's Aid, where I am now living, as does Willie Hamilton). Its recommendations were: That one family place be made available in a Refuge for every 10,000 of the population. This became our theme tune when campaigning and negotiating on behalf of Cardiff Women's Aid.

Cardiff Women's Aid used to offer talks to churches and organisations such as the National Housewives Register. The residents were encouraged to take the lead and I recall one inspiring evening with Margaret (an ex-resident) really bringing the evening to life with her special sense of humour and comments such as: *Well, I expect you have an Access card, I have an Access book!* (She kept a little book with details of access problems with her sons and ex-husband). In fact, I still recommend it to friends who are going through difficult divorces and it has been invaluable.

The first resident in Cardiff was a wonderful woman called Maureen (from Llanrumney). I hope she and other early residents will contribute to this Booklet. She had been subjected to terrible violence for 17 years; like many women, even after the divorce, she spent a good hour each night preparing the house in case her ex. broke in (which he did on several occasions). She took light bulbs out and tied string around the furniture to trip him up, so that she would have time to get to the phone for help. Another early resident, also called Margaret, was black and blue one day and, of course, we all thought she had been battered but

she had fallen off the roof whilst hiding there in fear in the middle of the night. In the early days it was possible to have close relationships with many women even when they had left, but I imagine now the organisation is too big for this. I am sure that to those of you still in Women's Aid all of these stories are day-to-day occurrences. We had an American in the support group and I remember we did a joint follow-up visit and suddenly the electric meter needed 10p. The American woman had never come across meters before and was stunned when the lights went out.

Initially, our aims were functional and this meant that we channelled all our energies into keeping the Refuge funded, advising on domestic law, housing and social security benefits. However, I have always been interested in women's inner worlds and every Sunday night we held an 'airing' meeting for struggles that were taking place in the day-to-day lives of women and children living in a cramped small terraced house in Moira Street, Adamsdown. There was a tiny kitchen and often six women with umpteen children sharing it; inevitably, this led to tensions but they somehow managed to be open and honest without resorting to violence. I never saw any signs of violence from woman to woman. Often, the neighbours would wait for my car to tell me if any husbands had troubled the women. Whilst I realise it is easy to idealise the past, I really don't remember any serious complaints from the community. Adamsdown seemed to me (remember, I was new to the area) a very supportive community. I can't imagine Cyn Coed offering such support.

There were problems, and one of the problems that arose was the fact that for some women this new-found freedom meant disco-ing and drinking, which led to babysitting problems. The Top Rank "Grab a Granny" night was a great attraction and I remember we all went there one Christmas. I had agreed to drive a fully tanked up woman (another Margaret) back to the Refuge, but found my little Mini had been stolen yet again!

Some of those Sunday night meetings went beyond the day-to-day problems and one Somali resident used one Sunday night to share how she had been given a clitorrectomy without anaesthetic. We all wept with her.

As Women's Aid became more established, it was clear that counselling skills were needed and these were gradually developed. Later, at Conference, workshops on counselling were on offer and I had the honour of running the first-ever workshop in Wales on Sexual Abuse. This was at a youth hostel in the Rhonda Valley and it had a profound effect on me; instead of the usual feedback session at the plenary, the group played out a scenario around the issue of sexual abuse. Later, women commented to me how it had moved them and one said 'I don't know why I pay to go to the theatre with all this talent here in Women's Aid'. *And I believe* talent and creativity has always been the strength of Women's Aid, not its bureaucratic procedures but the internal processes that go on inside women that are so beautiful and magical.

*And I believe
feel sure because of this inner
spirit women's Aid will continue
to grow in strength.*