

Deugain llais  
Deugain mlynedd

 Forty Voices  
Forty Years



# Learning through listening



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For 24/7 help, support and advice on domestic abuse, sexual violence and other forms of violence against women (for all genders) call the Live Fear Free Helpline: 0808 80 10 800.

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## Introduction

This booklet is designed to promote discussion and understanding of some of the key concerns in the specialist violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence sector in Wales and beyond. It contains stories that highlight key issues for the sector. Each story has been selected as a starting point for discussion and is followed by some prompts that may help you to think about how this is of relevance to you and your organisation. Most importantly, these stories put women's voices at the centre of the debate and are shared here to ensure that the voices of survivors and activists are at the forefront of improving provision and services. Some of the stories shared here have been anonymised.

**Forty Voices, Forty Years** sought to collect stories from women associated with the history of the Women's Aid movement to end gender-based violence in Wales. The project was run by Welsh Women's Aid in collaboration with the George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling at the University of South Wales and was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Awards for All and Hanford Cymru. On the following pages you will find abbreviated transcripts of some of the stories that were collected as part of the **Forty Voices, Forty Years** project. All the stories included here are extracts from longer texts - you can hear the full versions, alongside the other 41 stories that form part of the collection, at <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/collections/1012651>.

The **Forty Years, Forty Voices** collection includes forty-six stories from forty-eight women. The collection charts women's concerns, experiences and successes - highlighting how far we have come and what we still

have to work towards. As with all archives, this is a partial collection. There are still many more stories held by people across Wales and we encourage you to think about the stories that you and those around you might hold.

We extend our sincere thanks to all the survivors, volunteers, Welsh Women's Aid members and specialist services, current and former staff, students, activists, partners, funders, venues and leaders who have contributed their time and expert knowledge to the completion of this important project.

We would also like to thank our Project Steering Group for their guidance:

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**Tina Reece** – Head of Engagement and Project lead, Welsh Women's Aid  
**Emily Underwood-Lee** – George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling, University of South Wales  
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Finally, our warmest thanks to all the women who shared stories with us, particularly **Sue Bowyer, Mwenya Chimba, Angela Morris, Haf Owen, Katie**, and **Kate** whose stories have been reprinted here.



We hope these stories will inspire you to explore the full collection, which can be found at <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/collections/1012651>.

For more information about Forty Years, Forty Voices please visit <https://www.welshomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/40-voices-40-years/>.



# Our history: understanding where we have come from

2018 marked a proud forty years of Welsh Women’s Aid, the umbrella organisation that supports and provides national representation for independent third sector violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) specialist services in Wales. These services, many of whom have also recently celebrated their fortieth anniversaries, deliver life-saving and life-changing support and preventative work in response to violence against women, including domestic abuse and sexual violence, as part of a network of UK provision. Throughout our history, we have worked to empower and support women, often working from the grassroots up.



## Mwenya’s Story

“I joined the Women’s Sector in Wales in 2008. I had done a lot of academic work around women and how they are represented and wanted to get a real feel of how that takes place in real practice apart from of course, being a woman myself and fighting this small politics. You do all that your entire life as a woman. But then trying to look at the big piece and how do you support women, empower women, as they experience different forms of violence against women.

“The things that stand out for me are chairing the Violence Against Women Action Group when the legislative practice of the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Bill was going through the process. The Bill and the Act of 2015 is in place and we have seen how that is influencing change, and that was quite ground breaking and in a way, made me feel we were... although having been a Welsh woman, then for more than 15 years, living in Wales, it did make you feel, we are making steps. They made a lot of steps, but we are making steps now that all this pushing, all this advocacy work that has been done, that they were getting some kind of fruition, some kind of recognition.

“The movement and the sector started from women wanting to help other women, that’s what it was about really. With Women’s Aid, it’s an organisation that has been very dynamic, very progressive. As an African feminist, I could relate to such an organisation and wanted to part of such an organisation and look forward to being part of shaping the movement as we go forward. It’s about empowering... and if the power dynamics were balanced, then naturally, we wouldn’t be pushing for feminist principles. We wouldn’t be talking about some of these things because they would be obvious.

So, I think the fight is still on. We have achieved quite a lot in Wales, but there is still quite a lot more to do. The big question is, what about the men, where people fail to recognise that even as you talk about violence against women and girls, men are at the centre of it. It does not mean that men should not be given... or should not have access to services that they require. It’s not about that. It’s a lot more and I think there is still a lot of work to be done.

If all was okay, we wouldn’t be having to do this, but the society we live in is not like that.”



# The present: where we are right now

Welsh Women's Aid is the national charity in Wales working to end domestic abuse and all forms of violence against women. We are a federation of specialist organisations in Wales (working as part of a UK network of services) that provide lifesaving services to survivors of violence and abuse – women, men, children, families – and deliver a range of innovative, preventative services in local communities.

We have been at the forefront of shaping coordinated community responses and practice in Wales since we were established in 1978. We do this by campaigning for change and providing advice, consultancy, support and training to deliver policy and service improvements for survivors, families and communities.

We also deliver services including the Welsh Government funded Live Fear Free Helpline, a National Training Service, refuge support and advocacy services, and the national Children Matter preventative project supporting children and young people in every local authority in Wales. Our success is founded on making sure the experiences and needs of survivors are central to all we do.

## Angela and Haf's Story

“The women that come through the helpline, they never see us, they don't know who we are, they don't know our names, but usually, we're the first call in that process into escaping from violence. I have been working at the helpline for nine years and it has been a fantastic experience, not that the calls that I take are fantastic, it's just that it is just a great opportunity to help somebody in a very proactive way.

“When you answer the phone, you don't know what you're going to get. It could be someone looking for refuge, it could be a woman, or man, wanting a bit of advice, or someone to talk to. Or it could be someone having to leave immediately because their partner is in the next room, banging the door down. You don't know. We also take the crisis calls. A crisis call can be somebody phoning from a house and they could be screaming 'Help! Help! Help me!

He's killing me!' and we need to have de-escalation skills along with the crisis skills because what we need to do is to get the information, where is that caller calling from? What is the emergency? And how we can best help. We don't offer advice, we offer support and viable options for them. If we tell people 'This is what you need to do... you need to go here or there... you need to talk to so and so', we're no better really than the person they're in a relationship with, because again we're telling them what to do.

“Anybody who suspects that they're supporting somebody with domestic violence and they don't really know what to do, they can phone us and then we can help them work through that process. They've got their own processes, but they link in to us and we can help them. I think if you are concerned for people and want to see someone having fair play, that's a very good start for doing this kind of work. And you have to be realistic too, because not every situation turns out for the best. That's how life is, and you're not going to be able to help everybody everywhere.”



Have you ever had a disclosure of violence against women, domestic abuse or sexual violence? What are the skills that you need most in your professional life?



What policies and procedures do you already have in place and what might need to be developed, both within your organisation and beyond, to support survivors of gender-based violence?



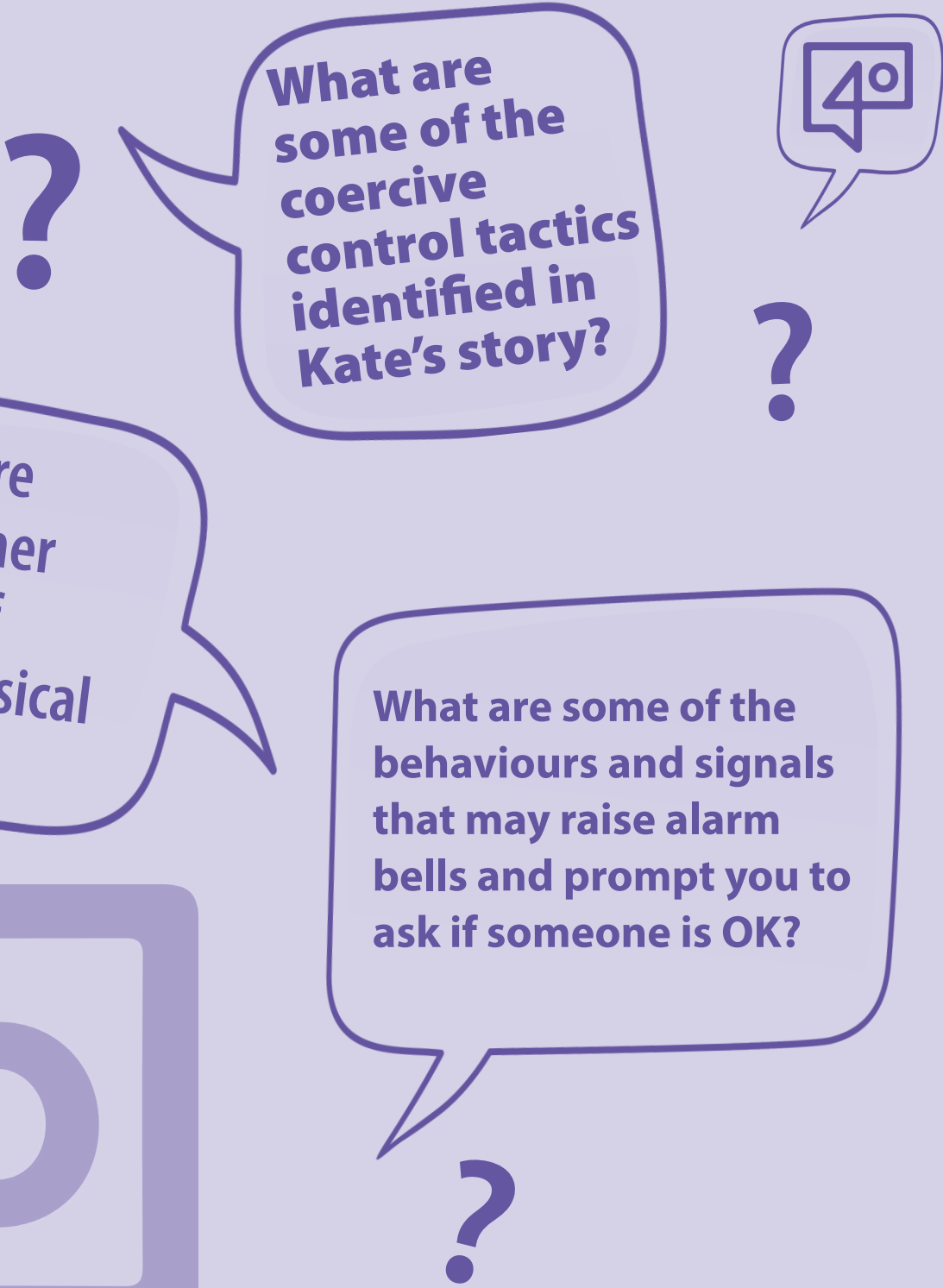
Anyone can call the Live Fear Free Helpline on 0808 80 10 800 for support for themselves or for advice on how to support someone.

What other support does your organisation offer to survivors?



# Focus on: Coercive Control

Coercive control is when someone you are personally connected with repeatedly behaves in a way that makes you feel controlled, isolated or scared. This could include isolating you from friends and family, controlling your finances, monitoring what you do and where you go, putting you down and making you feel worthless or threatening to harm you, your child or your property. There is not a definitive list of behaviours, as the abuser will use various means to establish controlling or coercive behaviour. Coercive control is a criminal offence in England and Wales. Coercive control is the most prevalent form of abuse reported by survivors and is a key area of concern. We are working to ensure that no-one is subjected to controlling behaviour.



## Kate's Story

“The decision making and process involved in leaving my abusive relationship was tough. So tough. I spent months and months thinking, discussing, reflecting and debating. Was there another way? Could I change anything? Was this my fault? Might things be different if he just did this or that? I was fed up with walking on eggshells, sitting on the drive outside my house after work dreading the mood I might be walking in on. I had had enough of not being able to be myself in my own home. Home should have been my safe place. A space to relax and to enjoy my young children's company without fear of reaction to my voice, my concerns, my wishes. I lost count of the number of times this overgrown toddler threatened to leave us somewhere miles from home while we were on family days out, if he didn't get his own way, enough attention, or like my response to something. There were the false promises of improvement in behaviour, interspersed with threats of suicide, which I had to try and handle while my children played downstairs. So, after three attempts to end the relationship, I finally got the message through to him that I had had enough. He was out. He left the house a month later, after securing himself a new victim and I thought that was it. I, and we, were free. I had no idea that the worst was yet to come. I had unknowingly unleashed a monster intent on revenge and destroying me for daring to see what he was and choosing better for myself. Only now, I was fighting him and his girlfriend who had fallen for all his charm and lies like so many before. From then on, he began his smear campaign. So typical, I now know, of a narcissist. I have since discovered that they have all read the same handbook and follow it to the letter. Sadly, the

professionals involved don't seem to have read the same book and aren't aware of, or aren't able to do anything about, his tactics.

“Not long after we split, I had to change the locks and stop him collecting the girls from the house as he caused so much distress to me, and therefore to them, the very thing I was trying to protect them from. The pattern is now clear. Say or do anything that questions him or shows his true colours and he will retaliate to the nth degree. After being through three years, so far, of dealings with solicitors, the police, family court, social services, child protection groups, I have learned that I have still not really escaped. The ongoing contact deemed necessary between us because of the children means that he still has access to me and continued control over parts of my life. Every email still brings the sick feeling to my stomach. What am I being accused of this time? What have I or haven't I done right now? What messages are my children going to go home with that are carefully designed to get to me? Nothing he does is deemed quite bad enough to warrant intervention or consequence, and so it continues. False accusations, intimidation, mind games, control, lies, manipulation, filling my poor children's heads with nonsense. But it's okay, because he's their father and he has rights. When will we be finally free? How bad must it get for someone to step in and protect us? What did I do to deserve this level of continuing torture? I have come a long way from where I was, but still have such a long way left to travel, and I'm not giving up on reaching that place of peace.”





# Focus on: supporting children and families

Children and young people can have their safety and well-being severely undermined as a result of living with domestic abuse. All children witnessing domestic abuse are being emotionally abused. Some children may be directly physically or sexually abused by the perpetrator. Young people may also be experiencing or perpetrating abuse in their own relationships.

We aim to make sure that all children and young people understand domestic abuse and the help available, and that those affected by domestic abuse are identified, supported and protected, have access to high-quality specialist services in every area, and are supported to recover from the abuse to develop to their full potential. We are also working to ensure that the family courts understand the needs of women and children who have experienced abuse.

What are the conflicting pressures at play for: a mother? A child? An advocacy service?

Do you have any stories of interactions with the family courts?

How can we better hear women and children's voices?

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## Katie's Story

“A professional asked my small child if he could have any present, what would it be. His eyes lit up as he answered, I want a gate, a squeaky gate! One that squeaks long and loud, and shuts tight. Then I will know when my dad is there and I can run and hide. Six years on, we have that squeaky gate. It is rusty. It is beautiful. It is solid wrought iron, a great defence, bringing loud forewarning, giving time to run. My child still checks at every squeak so please don't oil his gate.

“Ears pricking, child's voice reassuring, it's only the... milkman, Nan, my friend. Such a relief to have forewarning, even if it's only a familiar face. Because it didn't end when we fled. We had toys smashing, pictures crashing, contact orders landing. No stopping. Where's my child's voice? No guard of safety, my voice stolen. They could be biased, family court pronouncing. Contact, in spite, no stopping, doors slamming, toes squashing, wheels whirring, tyres squealing, arm jamming, car moving, doors wedging, stalking at every corner. Tyre stabbing. Where's my child's voice? Hands forcing doors. Child screaming, who hears him? Children hiding. Harm's coming. My voice holds no power, my children thus have no advocate. Does family court hear them? Contact order remaining, gate still squeaking. His car is big, it comes at me. Sirens coming, him hiding, child telling, him angry, harm is coming. Where's my child's voice? Who sings for him? Only the gate. Harm is coming, no safeguarding, we are meant to be free. We don't live with him. Harm is coming. My five year old's running. She's on the pavement, he has his car. She is screaming, please hear her. He is angry, she told the sirens, she is running, he is driving at her and on to the pavement, she is screaming. Where's her voice? Mine is biased. Contact order remaining. Stop. Stop. My voice holds no power. Where are my children's voices? Where are all the children's voices? Lost when mothers have theirs removed. Contact for harm continues. We still listen to the squeaky gate. Oh it's only Nan. Everyone hears my gate, and no one hears my children.”





# The future: where we want to be

During Welsh Women's Aid's 40th anniversary year in 2018, we asked the public to tell us about their priorities for ending violence against women and girls in the next 40 years.

We had an overwhelming response to our campaign from hundreds of people across Wales who told us their priorities were:

- 1. Healthy relationships education
- 2. Addressing inequality and harmful social attitudes
- 3. Informed and committed leaders and champions
- 4. Early intervention and prevention
- 5. Stay survivor centred
- 6. Accessible, trauma informed services
- 7. Sustainable specialist services
- 8. Safe perpetrator interventions
- 9. Reform in the criminal justice system

Many of these areas of work have been consistent priorities throughout our 40 year history.

What are three small things you could do today towards a future with equality for all, free from violence and abuse?

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What are your priorities for the next five, ten or forty years towards ending violence against women and girls?

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What are the key issues for women and survivors of gender-based violence that need addressing today?

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## Sue's Story

“I started work 1985 in August. There were all kinds of external forces at play then, in the middle of Thatcherism and they really decided to get to grips with the welfare state and demolish it basically, and that's a process that's still going on as we know. The decision was made at Welsh Women's Aid that we really needed to focus on that as a campaigning issue, as a policy issue. It was huge. You can't have women going into refuges if they can't claim anything. You might as well not have refuges. It needed challenging, so my job evolved into a Welfare Rights Coordinator. We had no emails then, a lot of my time was spent writing to every single MP in Wales of every party. We had no devolution then. It's really quite difficult to convey, especially to younger women or younger people, what a different kind of atmosphere there was then, just mentioning the word refuge - that was seen as subversive and outside respectable society. The battles were fought in the 1970s and 80s and 90s by really brave women who stood up and said "you have to do

this" and just did not go away. We are where we are now because of those women and I pay tribute to them. They're so underappreciated. They just slogged and slogged about things like paying two rents for example. If someone leaves home, she can't give up her tenancy, and why should she anyway, so she'd go into a refuge and she'd claim housing benefit for the refuge, but there's still a housing benefit claim for the house that's been left. The Local Authority say "hang on a minute, why should we pay two lots of rent". Again, we had to fight to get something included in the guidance which is issued to Local Authorities about how they implement the housing benefit rules. They are so very specific to Women's Aid and to domestic abuse issues, nobody, no civil servant in Whitehall who has been given a brief to cut the budget, unless they're told, they would never understand that. They would never realise how crucial something like being able to claim housing benefit would be. I'm really proud of the work my colleagues and I at Welsh Women's Aid did. There's so much shared history and you can't dismiss that. I think it's really important. It makes you who you are.”





