



**A shocking 30% of domestic violence begins during pregnancy.**

## Pregnancy - a time of risk

Pregnancy can be the happiest time of a woman's life. For some women, however, it may be an especially vulnerable and difficult time for them and for their baby. A shocking 30% of domestic violence<sup>1</sup> begins during pregnancy; and a violent relationship can also become more abusive at this time.

### **Effects of domestic violence on pregnant women**

For pregnant women the effects of domestic violence include increased rates of miscarriage; low birth weight; premature birth; foetal injury and foetal death

In Northern Ireland, 60% of 127 women resident in women's refuges experienced violence during pregnancy. Of those women, 13% lost their babies as a result of violence<sup>2</sup>.

Domestic violence has a significant impact and effect on the general health and wellbeing of its victims. Violent physical assaults cause injuries requiring medical and hospital treatment. The emotional and psychological effects include depression, anxiety and panic attacks and there is an increased risk of self-harm and suicide. Most shocking of all is that every year domestic violence causes the deaths of women.

### **Routine enquiry**

Routine enquiry is recognised as essential in identifying pregnant women at risk of domestic violence. The Royal College of Midwives recommends that every midwife has a role in the detection and management of domestic abuse<sup>3</sup>. Attending maternity services is an ideal opportunity to access information including cards for the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline.

Last year, Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland and Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid worked with staff at the Royal Jubilee Maternity Service in Belfast to develop their policy and procedure on routine enquiry. Taking place as it did in the largest maternity service in Northern Ireland, this development was welcomed and supported by Women's Aid.

Other hospitals are also developing and implementing their own, or similar policies working in partnership with their local Women's Aid group. Working alongside healthcare professional, Women's Aid is able to provide a local, accessible support service to women. A shared aim is to increase women's options for information, safety and support.

This year, Women's Aid Federation plans to continue to work with healthcare professionals including health visitors as they develop their role in identifying and responding to domestic violence.

1. *Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths (CEMD) (RCOG, 2001)*

2. Mezey, G C. 'Domestic violence in pregnancy', IN Bewley, S et al. *Violence Against Women*. London: RCOG, 1997. Ch 21 p 121.

3. McWilliams, M. and McKiernan, J. *Bringing It All Out Into The Open: Domestic Violence in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: HMSO, 1993

**women's aid**

Federation Northern Ireland