

**AGM, April 2012**

*Royal Beach Hotel, Portsmouth*

**Speech given by Chief Executive, Shonagh Dillon**



Firstly I would like to say how exciting it is to have so many of you here celebrating our first operational year.

Like the first domestic violence shelters, Aurora New Dawn has its roots in feminist activism. We founded the organisation in direct response to the public sector cuts threatening service provision in Portsmouth and the surrounding area. From the very beginning, the victims and survivors of violence have been, and they remain, our central priority. As a team, we have strong links to the growing number of feminist activists in the region: Solent Feminist Network, Portsmouth White Ribbon Group and Portsmouth Hollaback, for example. We have also already built strong links with the national pioneers in our sector, such as Standing Together and the End Violence Against Women Coalition.

Aurora New Dawn shares the same central priority with all our partners: we are determined that victims and survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence have access to the specialist support they need not only to be safe, but to realise their full potential as individuals and as families.

Because our roots are in activism and action, our remit extends far beyond the existing norms of service provision for victims and survivors. Our aim is not just to contribute to the sector, but to actively support its evolution.

This is a tough time for a small, young organisation to think about growth. A recent study by our sisters over at the Child and Women's Abuse Studies Unit at London Metropolitan University yielded some stark and uncomfortable facts:

- 19,000 women are forced out of their homes by domestic violence while forty per cent of groups working with abuse victims have cut staff or services in past year
- More than 9,000 women took children with them as they escaped, with 190 mothers fleeing violence with five children in tow
- One in 10 suffered from an addiction, a mental-health problem or a learning disability; a third came from an ethnic minority.

- The average distance travelled by victims to find safety and support was 20 miles

The same study also showed that while the demand for our services is so high, the sector is under increasing threat:

- Funding from local authorities for domestic and sexual-abuse organisations fell by 31 per cent from £7.8m in 2010-11 to £5.4m in the last financial year – that's a loss of almost a third of local government funding in one year
- Meanwhile, an average of 230 women a day are turned away from refuges while police receive a call about domestic violence every minute

Like I say, this is a tough time for a small organisation to think about growth.

But we work with survivors. Every day, we see women and men find their wings to fly, even when all the odds are stacked against them.

These survivors are our inspiration and the source of our determination.

Because of the stark reality of funding for the VAWG sector, we feel very positive about what we've achieved over the past year and about the sustainability of our services for the year to come.

But there's more to do. There are still gaps in service provision through which hundreds of victims and survivors are still falling. These gaps must be filled in order to ensure that survivors of violence and abuse are able to access the right support at the right time.

Two of the issues that Aurora considers to be a top priority are stalking and Harmful Cultural practices. The legal situation changed for both these issues recently.

In recent months there has been intense focus on stalking: on its prevalence, and on the ineffectiveness of the current legislation. We now know that the lack of knowledge and understanding of stalking amongst professionals translates into inadequate responses to victims, low conviction rates and inappropriate sentencing.

In February 2012 the Independent Parliamentary Inquiry into Stalking Law Reform published its main findings and recommendations. The report was clear in emphasising the need for reform of the way in which stalking cases are dealt with. The subsequent draft Protection from Stalking Bill aims to implement the recommendations of the report and is expected to move through law in due course.

The British Crime Survey tells us that at least 120,000 individuals experience stalking and harassment each year. We know the majority of perpetrators are male and the victims female. In many cases, stalking occurs as part of a pattern of domestic abuse, and in many cases begins when a victim ends the relationship with the perpetrator.

We know that stalking often goes on for a long period of time; in many cases, years. It encompasses a range of behaviours, including an increasing amount of cyber-stalking through the internet or other electronic means.

We know that victims will frequently experience repeated occurrences of stalking before they report it to the police, with research estimating that there can be up to 100 incidents before a report is made.

Much criticism has been made of the existing position in relation to stalking, including that complaints are often not properly recognised by professionals and frequently not investigated thoroughly. Existing legal measures frequently go unused and where they are used, custodial sentences are rare and often short. The National Association of Probation Officers point out that perpetrators will repeatedly breach restraining orders, injunctions and exclusion zones and that these mechanisms generally fail to act as a deterrent. The system is also ill-equipped to recognise, and deal consistently with, cyber stalking, despite its increasing use over recent years.

In the experience of Aurora IDVAs, in cases where stalking is a factor, the appropriate handling of breaches of restraining orders and the 'joining up' of incidents often proves a particular problem.

Stalking is physically, psychologically and socially damaging to those who experience it. It has severe and enduring effects on both physical and emotional wellbeing. There is also evidence to suggest that perpetrators' behaviour will escalate with no criminal justice intervention or treatment, resulting in further harm (both physical and psychological), rape or murder.

The Parliamentary Inquiry's recommendations include the need to establish a victims' advocacy service, providing support to victims, both generally and when negotiating the criminal justice system and dealing with other agencies.

In our experience, dedicated advocates are a necessity in stalking cases, not least because of the amount of multi-agency work, liaison and institutional advocacy

required, but also in terms of the continued pressure that is required to ensure that the system (and the professionals within it) are responding appropriately to these cases. Even after the granting of a restraining order, we've found that breaches are often incorrectly identified or not investigated properly.

As a result, today Aurora pledges to begin a Stalking pilot in the third quarter of this year and have asked Laura Richards, CEO for Protection Against Stalking and advisor for ACPO to endorse the pilot. It will include a small, in-house evaluation on IDVA's working with any stalking case regardless of whether it takes place in an intimate partner or familial relationship.

The second priority for us this year is Harmful Cultural Practices or HCP for short. This includes honour based violence, forced marriage, and Female genital mutilation or cutting. In addition, many of the clients coming forward will have no recourse to public funds.

On 1 April 2012, the Home Office introduced a concession allowing victims of domestic violence on spousal visas with no recourse to public funds (NRPFs) to access benefits and public housing while they apply for settlement under the 'domestic violence rule'.

The Campaign to Abolish No Recourse to Public Funds, which involves over 27 leading women's and human rights groups, welcomes this concession. It represents a major victory for the Campaign, and for the rights of women at risk of gender based violence and exploitation.

But many other vulnerable victims remain without a safety net.

These include:

- women in the UK on other visas,
- overstayers,
- overseas domestic workers, who may experience gender based violence or abuse and exploitation by their employers.
- And women who have been trafficked into the country

All these women are forced to make a stark choice between staying in an abusive relationship, risking their lives, and that of their children, and leaving, facing destitution, and, in many cases, deportation. As if that were not bad enough, under

new government proposals, they will not be entitled to legal aid to make an application to stay in the country or to appeal against refusal.

Research undertaken by the Campaign finds that a shocking 65% of women were ineligible for help from the Sojourner Project, and were either dependant on limited support elsewhere or destitute.

Similarly, honour crimes are now recognised as having slipped through the system.

In 2004, the Metropolitan Police re-opened 114 murder cases from the previous decade, which they now think may be honour killings<sup>1</sup>.

And finally, forced marriage is increasingly recognised as having been inadequately addressed in policy and service provision. It is defined by the CPS as “*a marriage conducted without the valid consent of one or both parties where duress is a factor.*”

The Forced Marriage Unit in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office deals with approximately 250 forced marriage cases each year. Approximately 85% of these are female<sup>2</sup>. Reunite International estimates that 1,000 British Asian girls are forced into marriage each year<sup>3</sup>.

In response to the growing recognition that the needs of a large amount of victims and survivors is not being addressed, Aurora New Dawn recently submitted a funding bid for a Harmful Cultural Practices IDVA for Hampshire.

The bid is endorsed by Hampshire constabulary, Southampton IDVA service, Victim Support North Hants IDVA service, and Rights of Women. The Naval police have already expressed their wish to utilise this service when it becomes available in the county.

We believe a specialist HCP IDVA is necessary because the needs of these victims and survivors are not being met.

Working on these cases takes up a great deal of time in operational terms; more so than cases where No Recourse or HCP are not compounding factors. Clients may require an interpreter for telephone and face-to face contact, which can lengthen not only the duration of the contact but the time taken to arrange it. Extra work is

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<sup>1</sup> Metropolitan Police (2004)

<sup>2</sup> Forced Marriage Unit, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

<sup>3</sup> National Union of Teachers (2005) *Silence is not Golden*

needed to obtain the right legal advice and to locate appropriate services, which can be geographically hard to source depending on the location of the client and their particular situation.

In HCP cases, the risk of harm is generally very high, requiring detailed risk assessment (possibly including family mapping). Honour-based violence frequently involves multiple perpetrators and developing an appropriate safety plan can be time consuming.

Significant amounts of time and resources must be invested into these cases in order to make sure that the best possible support is provided. Alongside their full caseloads, IDVA services can find HCP cases difficult to manage, and such cases can have a massive impact on the overall service capacity.

The HCP IDVA will offer floating support, shared between agencies and providing extra capacity and specialist knowledge. Involvement will be flexible – ranging from a full case-holding service, to a support and guidance service and providing a much-needed resource for training, skills development and improved service provision across the county.

The Aurora New Dawn team are excited and hopeful about our planned developments around Stalking and Harmful Cultural Practices over the next year.

If you want to stay updated on these projects and the rest of our work, you'll be pleased to hear we have just gone digital. You can now connect with Aurora New Dawn through our website, on Facebook and even on Twitter.

The launch of our website is an exciting development for us and something we are very proud of. We've been very lucky to work with Lilian Tula from Bonzo Creative here in Southsea, who has demonstrated an amazing level of understanding of us as an organisation, and we highly recommend her.

Our Facebook page recently received over 120 likes in the first 48 hours of going live, and is proving a fantastic way of connecting us with others.

There's so much more I could tell you about our first year and about our plans for the future, but my time is almost up.

In closing, I want to offer my heartfelt thanks to the Aurora team and the trustees. Your commitment to our vision is overwhelming and your hard work makes a

profound difference to the lives of the women, men and children living with or escaping from violence, every day.

This has been simultaneously the most challenging and the most rewarding year of my career to date. I cannot overstate how privileged I feel to work alongside survivors of abuse; I am humbled by the trust they place in us, and always overwhelmed and inspired by their bravery.

I would like to end with a quote from one of my favourite feminists Maya Angelou that I believe captures the essence of survivors, and which was perhaps written with a nod to the Aurora logo:

"We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty."

Thank you for all for sharing today with us. I have no doubt we will see you all in ten years time on the international stage - Now let's eat cake!

**END**