

Refuges:

Michael McDowell made an announcement recently regarding a novel way to deal with the problem of street crime, hooliganism, and anti-social behaviour. Very simply, the plan is to build what are called 'street refuges' in areas where there is a high incidence of street crime. These street refuges will be small kiosks that can hold up to four people to which victims of street crime can flee for protection. These will be built every half-mile along dangerous streets and roads around the country. He has heralded this new method as a dramatic new approach to violent crime.

The essence of this approach is that *"if we get the victims off of the streets then there will inevitably be fewer crimes. The responsibility now"*, says the Minister for Justice, *"is with the victims to protect themselves. Therefore if you are walking the streets and you are being harassed by street criminals or thugs you must flee to the nearest street refuge"*. Gardai will be peripherally involved in this new approach by dispersing leaflets to pedestrians reminding them where the nearest street refuges are and how to get there. Pedestrians walking these areas are encouraged to wear soft shoes in order to make a hasty get-away.

"We have been putting too much emphasis on the perpetrators of crime, it is time now for the victims to take some of the burden of responsibility from the Gardai and the perpetrators themselves. We must get the victims off the street", he emphasized. *"If we have fewer victims then we have fewer crimes!"*

"This is not just a criminal justice issue", he went on to say, *"it is an issue of health. If a victim of crime is assaulted, hurt, injured, bullied or traumatized by an assault then the health of the victim is what is being assaulted and it should be the Department of Health that carries the responsibility for dealing with this issue and not the Department of Justice"*, he reiterated.

He also emphasized that while some funding will be coming from the Department of Health, the running of these street refuges will be left to volunteers because he believes that solving street crime must be shared by all of us. *"The Gardai have enough to do as it is"* he went on to say. Therefore the funding provided for these street refuges will be supplied by the Department of Health and various first aid treatments will be available in these street kiosks. When victims has been treated and recovered enough they are encouraged to get back out onto the street and make their way home. If they are confronted a second time they are encouraged to return to the kiosk until the danger has passed or else make a run for it to the next available refuge.

Does all of this sound crazy? Well, it should. The Minister, as you will have deduced, did not say these things but he might as well have. This would be comedic farce if it were not, in fact, the model adopted by the State for dealing with the crime of domestic violence and abuse. The predominant model for dealing with repeated domestic assault is exactly this - to see it as an issue of health and to leave the responsibility for safety with the victim of the assaults. We easily accept the conclusion that the way to deal with sadistic violence in the home is to build refuges for victims, to which they can escape. Government departments and constituents applaud their existence and local TD's smile for cameras as they cut the ribbon to open one more refuge for fleeing women. *"This is a great day for our community"* they

say. “*Women and children can now flee for their safety.*” The existence of refuges is actually an appalling indictment on our society and how domestic terrorism is downgraded in a fashion identical to the one I have outlined in this article. And what is a refuge only a place for refugees.

The recent controversy involving the Minister for Justice and the closing of the National Domestic Violence Intervention Agency (courageously covered by The Examiner) highlighted once again how inadequate is our institutional response to violence, sadism, and terrorism in the home. Thankfully, at the threat of closure of the NDVIA – which is devoted to upgrading the Judicial Systems response to domestic violence - a host of women’s organizations appeared on a common platform to speak out in solidarity on how our state deals with this endemic issue.

Our institutional model for dealing with domestic terrorism and violence, which frequently results in death, is identical to the one I outlined above. To build refuges as an acceptable social solution is to imply that domestic violence should be a problem solved by victims and left to voluntary non-governmental organizations. We see how ludicrous this approach is when we apply it to street crime, yet we readily accept it when applied to domestic crime. None of us must tolerate letting our institutions get away with this hand-wringing refuge-model of dealing with this most disturbing of issues.

It is time we all reconsidered what it means to suffer repeated abuse, sadism, control, and terror in the home. It is not that it is *almost* as bad as street crime, it is *worse*. To know the utter helplessness experienced by women who are imprisoned and emotionally tortured by the one person expected to care for them is the most demoralizing, terrifying, and humiliating of fates.

Domestic abuse is grim. A woman told me recently how her husband grabbed her by the hair and forced her to kneel in the corner of the kitchen while he and their children ate their dinner in silence. It is these rarely seen acts of humiliation that are the character of domestic violence. It is a violence not just to the woman but also to the broken spirits of her children. It was never a health problem, though violence against women is seen by our State as such with the handling of this problem designated to Mary Harney’s Department. It an appalling crime when any person has their human rights, dignity, safety and person violated not just once, but repeatedly by the same person.