

Peephole on a private nightmare

Thirty years of helping the victims of domestic violence has not dulled Sandra Horley's campaigning zeal for prevention and education on the issue, finds Lynda Waltho

For nearly 30 years, Sandra Horley has been working to help women and children whose lives have been torn apart by domestic violence. Her first role was running the Haven Project in Wolverhampton and since 1983, she has been chief executive of the charity Refuge (formerly Chiswick Women's Aid). Under her leadership, Refuge grew from just one refuge in London to the UK's largest single provider of emergency accommodation and community-based support for women and children. Refuge is also the leading voice in the campaign to end domestic violence.



"It's amazing to look back and see that squalid house in Chiswick as what it really was – the world's first refuge for women and children fleeing domestic violence," Horley recalls. "And every day we celebrate hundreds of achievements – the women who are able to leave a violent man and, with Refuge's help, rebuild their lives."

Although the first domestic violence legislation – the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act – was passed in 1976, Horley remembers a time where "a decade later men still weren't being arrested, and women were being beaten black and blue on a daily basis with no option but to stay". In response, Refuge launched its first major awareness campaign in 1985, calling for greater police action to tackle the horrific crimes going on behind closed doors. It led to the Metropolitan Police Service's Force Order, requiring police forces to take the crime of domestic violence seriously, and to the first domestic violence unit.

The Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act of 2004 was the first piece of domestic violence legislation for nearly 30 years. Horley points out: "This was a major achievement for Refuge and also for every organisation campaigning for change since the Chiswick refuge opened and even long before it. The new legislation gave a clear and strong message to perpetrators and society at large that domestic violence is both unacceptable and criminal."

Horley highlights the government's introduction of specialist domestic violence courts, independent advocates and multi-agency risk-assessment conferences as significant developments. But she remains concerned that initiatives to date largely focus on the criminal justice response to domestic violence. "The government must get the balance right. The legal system is only part of the equation. We know that too many domestic violence incidents still go unreported to the police. Of those that are reported, only a small percentage make it through to a successful conviction."

Horley advocates a three-pronged approach of protection, provision – and prevention. "The law must protect women and children by holding violent men accountable for their crimes. Alongside this, we need more services and support for women and children who are fleeing for their lives and training for professionals, particularly those working in health, education and the criminal justice system. The government must recognise the vital role of prevention and education," she says.

“Without education, how can young people learn that domestic violence is wrong, if those around them tolerate it? We have to reach out to the next generation and deliver a message that violence against women – like drink driving – is unacceptable, and punishable by law.”

Horley wants to see a fully funded national government strategy on domestic violence. “I always give credit where credit is due and the current government has done more than most. But domestic violence is a serious issue that needs an integrated national strategy with appropriate funding to match. Only then will the new legislation have maximum impact.”

And yet among the greatest achievements Refuge has had, Horley lists “keeping our doors open”. The organisation needs to raise £10,000 a day to operate and has faced the prospect of closure on a number of occasions since it was established.

“Lack of funding continues to be a major issue,” she explains. “The reality for Refuge is that we are running the equivalent of a 999 service on a shoestring budget. There are still not enough refuges or community support, despite the need for emergency accommodation being as great as ever. And services for children, who are all too often witnessing domestic violence, are still being overlooked.”

But there is an increasing problem facing Refuge and its finances as it tries to help all women at risk from domestic violence. The new ‘no recourse to public funds’ requirement has meant that women who have come to the UK and have not yet been given leave to remain have no access to housing, welfare benefits, or publicly funded services such as refuges. Often, this means women are dependent upon their husband or his family both financially and for support for their ‘leave to remain’ applications. At the moment, Refuge, a charity, is absorbing costs of £150,000 to help women in this situation and this cost is rising every day.

So what can a backbench MP do to raise awareness of the issue of domestic violence? For Horley, the answer is simple: “Read the MP’s Guide to Domestic Violence. Bring the issue of domestic violence before ministers. Help us in our efforts to get the government to treat it seriously and allocate sufficient funding. Listen to your constituents and engage with local groups and services. Ask the right questions: what is being done to arrest and charge more domestic violence perpetrators? Are government initiatives working? Ask for updates on progress – track the money and ask for evidence of where the money is going.” So with all these challenges facing the charity, what does Horley consider to be the future for Refuge?

“One of the things that makes Refuge so special is that we are able to adapt to change,” she says. “We listen to and give a voice to the women and children we support through our services every day. We never give up, whatever the obstacles in the way. We are not going away. We are here to stay.”

“Who knows what the future holds, but I know that we will continue to punch above our weight. We will continue to push for change. And we will continue to demand that the government does everything in its power to protect the thousands of women and children living in terror in their own homes.”

“Refuge is no longer my personal passion,” Horley adds. “After all these years, I remain passionate about what we do but I also know that everyone at Refuge is committed to working towards a future free from domestic violence.”

Lynda Waltho is the Labour MP for Stourbridge