

The role of Cambridge Women's Aid in assisting victims of domestic violence to reassemble their lives: an evaluation of the refuge service

Cambridge Women's Aid provides an emergency place of accommodation for women escaping domestic violence to go to seek help, support, information and protection. Women with children can be accommodated.

Five interviews were conducted with women who had lived in one or more refuges. The study received ethical approval from the Psychology Research Ethics Committee of the University of Cambridge. The research participants were assured anonymity.

The researcher grouped her questions in four areas, and results from interviews are summarised:

1. What did the women feel about the refuge and what support is available to women whilst living there?

The women reported that the staff at CWA were excellent, going beyond the call of duty to help them in numerous ways. Four of the five interviewees liked the communal living and the friends they had made in the refuge. All five had children living with them while at the refuge. They thought the facilities and support for children were very good.

2. What do women regard as the psychological impact of domestic violence on them, and does the refuge effectively help with psychological trauma?

Women reported a range of psychological effects of domestic violence including 'low self esteem' and feeling 'dependent'. The length of time it takes to improve self esteem was apparent through the interviews. The refuge offers emergency accommodation and its main role is to help women escape from abuse, so the researcher found that significant improvements to self esteem might take longer than the period of residence in the refuge. The provision of a particular support worker for each woman in the refuge was seen as very helpful. So too was the feeling of physical safety in the refuge, with panic buttons in every room, for example. This assisted the women to feel less vulnerable.

3. What is the experience of women when they move out of the refuge and what support is available to them after they leave?

Three out of the five women interviewed found it difficult to adjust to living alone with their children after leaving the refuge. They spoke about feeling lonely and thinking again about the situation from which they had escaped. These three women, several years after leaving the refuge, were still in contact with Cambridge Women's Aid on a regular basis, speaking on the phone, or visiting their support worker in the refuge.

One of the five women had completed the Freedom Programme (see other Knowledge Exchange evaluation). She felt this had been very useful in enabling her to change her life. The other four women all reported problems with relationships in which they were controlled by men after their time in the refuge. They welcomed the unconditional support of CWA: for one woman this was very different to her experience of losing friends when she decided to return to her abusive partner.

4. Are there ways in which Cambridge Women's Aid can improve their services?

Interviewees could not suggest improvements. Data from the interviews suggests that the Freedom Programme is a useful complement to the refuge service.