



Speaking at the seminar hosted by Wexford Soroptimists (from left) back - Angela Walsh, Oisín Tiernan, Sarah Newport, Geraldine Quigley, Sharon O'Halloran, Robin Jowett, Nigel Tate and Pauline Ennis; seated - Ellis Quinn, Shauna Berry, Eadaoin Lawlor, president, Barbara Harrison and Inspector Rory Sheriff.

# Seminar investigates domestic violence issue

By SIMON BOURKE

DESPITE the introduction of a new Domestic Violence Act in 2018 the majority of Irish women are still reluctant to report cases of domestic abuse to authorities.

Speaking at the 'Breaking the Silence on Domestic Violence' seminar at the Riverbank House Hotel, Sharon O'Halloran CEO of SAFE Ireland outlined the stark reality of those enduring regular abuse in their own homes in this country.

'This is a largely unreported, undocumented crime. Women are not being taken seriously. For too many women the home is a place of abusive tyranny, 79% don't report domestic abuse because we don't have the structures in place to support them, the infrastructure isn't there,' she said.

Organised by Soroptimist International Wexford, the seminar brought together a number of speakers with expertise in this area in the hope of fostering an open and frank debate on one of the issues of our time.

One of those addressing the large crowd on the night was Pauline Ennis, Manager of Wexford Women's Refuge, she detailed the lack of structures Sharon alluded to.

'We worked with over one thousand women last year, but we only have four family rooms to serve them. We turned away 248 women and 345 children in 2017 because we couldn't accommodate them. Services for domestic violence sufferers are critically under-resourced. Women and children are staying too long in refuges because they can't find any other place to stay, which prevents other women who might be in an emergency situation from accessing services,' Pauline said.

With a move to new, expanded premises in Maudlin-town taking longer than they had anticipated, Pauline said she and her staff continue to deal with distressed women on a daily basis, with resources stretched to their very limits.

'We have a dedicated training staff on duty 24/7. Women come to us traumatised, often brought to us in the middle of the night by Gardaí. There's been ten women brought into us by the Guards in the last ten days,' she said.

Inspector Rory Sheriff, whose duties include oversight of Domestic Violence policy for Wexford Garda Division, documented the difficulties he and his staff face in instances where victims choose not to press charges.

'The most harrowing murders I've investigated have been domestic violence cases involving women and children, and the majority of those murders would have followed on from domestic violence which wasn't reported,' he said.

'We want to empower women to make a statement of complaint to us, because without your co-operation



Barbara Harrison; David Power, Wexford Rotary; Eadaoin Lawlor, president, Wexford Soroptimists; and Gabrielle Willis, Wexford Lions Club.

**"The old model of domestic violence as being purely physical is outdated"**

we can't do anything. Women need to feel they can engage with us.'

Underlining the extent of this issue, the Inspector revealed that his unit had received 195 calls relating to domestic abuse so far this year, but that 152 of those calls had resulted in no complaint being made. Revealing that Gardaí are obligated to report any cases involving children directly to TUSLA, regardless of whether a formal complaint has been made, Inspector Sheriff said he and his colleagues also operate a call-back system in which they return to homes were reports have previously been recorded.

A concurrent theme throughout the night was the many different guises domestic violence now takes. Far from being solely physical or sexual, it can, according to Ms O'Halloran, be far more subtle, yet no less damaging.

'The old model of domestic violence as being purely physical is outdated, coercive control is the very

model of domestic abuse,' she said, referring to the offence included in last year's Domestic Violence Act for the first time. Deemed as 'psychological abuse in an intimate relationship that causes fear of violence, or serious alarm or distress that has a substantial adverse impact on a person's day-to-day activities,' coercive control is just one of the things those at MEND (Men Ending Domestic Abuse) Wexford are seeking to address.

Dealing with men who have previously committed domestic abuse on their partners or children, MEND runs a series of programmes designed to alter the behaviours of their clients.

'A lot of it is based around learning, male gender socialisation, the messages boys are getting as they're growing up,' explained Nigel Tate of MEND. 'Early childhood trauma feeds into it. None of those are excuses. There is no excuse for that behaviour. But it does provide understanding. It's about the men learning to be vulnerable and learning the language of emotion.'

And there are strict criteria for those enrolling in MEND's courses, a trio of commandments which all participants must adhere to.

'There must be acknowledgement of abuse, the men must accept full responsibility for behaviour, and there must be a motivation for change. They must exhibit all three of these,' said Nigel.

However, having received 55 referrals last year, one third of the men who came to MEND disengaged with the programme, another third went to other agencies and just a third remained within its system.