

Oral History Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Fiona Allen

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Interviewer: Joyce Clark

Time period: 1970s

Groups: Edinburgh Women's Aid

Roles: Volunteer

So Fiona, can you describe what your connection to Women's Aid was, and why you got involved with Women's Aid?

Ok, I was a volunteer for Women's Aid sometime in the ... late 70s, mostly to do with fundraising, yeah, mostly, fundraising. And the reason I got involved with Women's Aid is a long and complicated story [laughs]. Essentially, I grew up in New Zealand, and my best friend was pregnant when she was 15, married when she was 16, and it was obvious within days that the marriage was not a good idea. I didn't realise how bad until, I think her second separation from him, when I had gone to stay with her and her little daughter, who was then three, maybe four. And I woke up at two o'clock in the morning, three o'clock, something like that, to hear this little child saying, and to this day I don't know if she knew that I was listening or if she was just talking to herself, but she said, 'I hate my daddy, I hate my daddy. He hits my mummy and makes her cry'.

Oh dear...

And I swear to God, I went cold all over, and I'm sure my heart flipped. Em ... I don't think we'd ever had a really in depth discussion ... I mean, em...

You were both very young.

Yes, she was 19 and I was 22, yeah something like that, and her husband was just about ages with me, maybe, maybe a year older, but he should never have been messing around with a 15 year old girl in the first place. Em ... So, yeah, em ... I was there one day, and, just pottering around, she was in the front room, and I heard a noise, and I went through to see what was happening, and ... It was

really strange, it didn't occur to me until years afterwards just how dangerous this was ... Her about-to-be-ex-husband had turned up with some of his friends, bizarrely enough, one of whom included an ex-boyfriend of mine, and he'd caught hold of her wrist through the window, and she was terrified. She was trying to keep it together, but she was terrified. And he said to me, 'Oh, she's being really unreasonable, she won't come out and speak to me', and somehow or other, I whipped up sufficiently to say, 'Well, I think she's got a point, don't you?'. And they all scattered and went away and, as I said, it was literally years later, I thought, they could have forced their way in. Em ... I'm just so glad I was there. Em, so, I don't honestly remember in New Zealand, at the time, there being any provision for women being abused, women who were being abused because, unfortunately, in the '60s and '70s it was a massively chauvinist society.

00:04:17 *Very much.*

Oh, if he gave her a couple of slaps, she must have been asking for it, you know?

Yes.

The fact ... She came to my 21st, and she was a fabulous looking girl, a bit like, em ... a bit like a very young Angie Dickinson, blonde hair, and she had a polo neck dress, with long sleeves, and I thought, oh gosh, how odd. And the reason she had a polo neck dress with long sleeves is because it was the only thing that would cover the bruises and the scars. And, of course, being 22 and arrogant, I thought, no, no, this just isn't right. So, I came back to Britain, and promptly got involved with a [laugh] a violent psychopath myself who put me in hospital within three weeks of our marriage.

Oh dear...

So, I spent ... After I left him ... You see, then I understood what she had been saying all along, that, no, it's not a slap in the face in front of a room full of perfectly sober people, it's all sorts of things other than simply violence. I mean, sexual activities, without consent, that kind of thing. Em ... and I said to her, 'Well, you know, you've left him once, why the hell did you go back?'. And she said, and I think this was so well put, 'I had to make sure there was nothing else I could possibly do to make him stop'. So that she had no blame could attach to her, you know. She was a, just 16 year old girl with a small child, what could she have done to justify it? However, she's now remarried and extremely happy.

Still in New Zealand?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, and I worked my way from where I was living to Edinburgh and discovered that in Edinburgh it's much easier to disappear if somebody is looking for you. So I stayed in Edinburgh and once I'd found out there was such a thing as Women's Aid I thought, oh well, time to pay back some of my dues.

Good.

So I did.

00:07:30 *Good. And your first husband, is still in ... You left him in New Zealand?*

I've no idea.

You left him in New Zealand?

No, no, no, I left him in Inverness.

Oh Inverness...

Last seen in Brighton with his parents in the very early '80s. I imagine he's now drunk himself to death, em ... It took me years of therapy to be able to say, frankly, good.

Good. So Women's Aid ... What were the different ideas about Women's Aid? What attracted you to that? That idea that you weren't alone? That someone could help you?

Actually, I never used Women's Aid as a client.

Is that because you didn't know about them or you just didn't feel you could?

I honestly did not know about them. Em...

So when it was happening to you, did you feel alone?

Oh heavens yes. Em...

Quite an isolating thing then isn't it?

Yeah, em ... I did speak to a couple that we knew, and [laugh] oh dear, dear, dear, he was in the army, and he said, now you're going to have to pardon me using this, 'Oh that's fucking disgraceful, I would never lift my hand to a woman', and I said, 'Oh wow, does that mean when you and **[name anonymised]** have an argument you just yell at each other and then go for a walk?', and he said, 'Oh no, I've given her a slap a few times'. So, 'I would never lift my hand to a woman', and 'I've given her a slap a few times', are apparently completely different things.

Do you think that was an idea that was prevalent at the time?

Yes, yes I really do. Em ... I would hate to say it's particularly Scottish or Celtic, or particularly somebody who's in the army, but, it's not ... an opinion I'm unfamiliar with.

Interesting. And so how did you hear about Women's Aid in the first place then?

I honestly have no memory.

00:10:12 *Ok, that's fine. So what did you ... When you volunteered what did you actually do? How was your volunteering time spent? Was it a couple of hours a week?*

Mostly, mostly I made fudge. Because Women's Aid used to take a stall at the Edinburgh Charities' Hypermarket, which was in the Assembly Rooms.

Oh yes, there is still something similar there now I think isn't there, or some sort of charities' thing?

Yes, except now it's kind of more craftsman, artisan, food orientated. This was very much, well it was exclusively charities. So I made industrial quantities of food, fudge I should say. Em ... and when ... we were running, they were running a newsletter, and so I sort of helped out on the newsletter, and put it together, cut and pasted things of interest. I didn't, at my own request, didn't get involved with clients. Because it was still too new, too raw, and, em...

I can understand that.

Everyone has different circumstances, em ... and it would have been so wrong of me to be able to say, 'Oh for heaven's sake, just get up, do what I did, pick up your handbag and your leather jacket and walk out the door'. I mean, I literally owe my life to a guy from Falkirk, **[name anonymised]**,

who had a green Marina, who picked me up on the road between Ardersier and Forres one Friday night because I was hitchhiking over to my godmother's place. And that was the last time I went back, or at least that was the last time there.

Did you ever talk about your experiences with the other volunteers?

No.

Did any of the volunteers, when you were all together, did they have experiences, did they experience it themselves or not?

At the time, a number of the women I knew were very, em, golly ... I don't quite know how to express this. They ... were women who wanted to make a difference to other women, but I'm not sure that I would ever have been confident enough to raise the subject with them. And since none of them volunteered the information, it just went unspoken. A lot of them were extremely upper middle class. I mean, a lot of women from Merchiston and Morningside.

Really?

Yes.

But they wanted to make a difference?

Yes.

For whatever reason they had, it was there?

Yes, absolutely.

00:13:54 *Good. Em ... so as a volunteer, were there any other organisations trying to help Women's Aid at that time?*

I honestly don't know. It was before the Zero Tolerance campaign, so I would tend to think the answer would be no.

They were working in quite a vacuum, do you think?

I think so. I'm sure social work were doing what they could. But, as with anything that's council funded, em ... Abused women are not any particularly, were not a particularly quote unquote sympathetic cause. I mean, oh God, one day I was at the Assembly Rooms, and a couple of women walked past our stall, and one of them actually said to the other within my hearing and one of my fellow volunteers, 'Oh these women are just so stupid, they must like it, otherwise they wouldn't keep going back'. And I was ... I took a step forward to, kind of, reach over the stall and say, 'Excuse me, madam', and one of my fellow volunteers, older and wiser than I, stood very firmly on my foot, to make sure that I couldn't ... which I think was fantastically prudent of her.

Do you think Women's Aid have had to work quite hard?

Oh yes.

Good.

Em ... I don't, I don't have any memory of anybody being particularly ... particularly aware that domestic violence isn't quote unquote just the women, it affects the whole family. I mean, when children are hearing things like my friend's little girl was clearly hearing, em, you can't dismiss that as just one of these childhood things. And ... how do you predict what damage that does? I know the theory that says an abused person grows up or goes on to abuse and the cycle continues. I have no way of knowing how true that is.

I suspect it might not be.

Oh yes, that was quite odd ... One of the people on the management committee at the time was an American woman called **[name anonymised]**, who I think is now a professor, and she was doing some research at Stirling University with Russell and Rebecca Dobash, who were among the early researchers in the field, at least in Scotland, so she recorded an interview with me, about my history. And she came back to me a couple of weeks, a few weeks later, because she'd taken her tape of various interviews with various women to Lothian & Borders Police. And, in a way this was quite funny, but it's also in a way very, very much not funny ... One of them had heard this voice and said, 'Oh no, that can't be right, she doesn't sound like a Women's Aid client at all'. So, you know, it can't happen to women who sound like me.

00:18:23 *So, pigeon-holed who it could happen to. Do you think that affected the police, the attitude of the police to domestic violence, if they were called out to different...*

Yes, yes I do. I mean, there was still this dreadful perception, in some quarters, not thankfully universal, but, oh it's a working class problem, it happens in Muirhouse, it happens in Pilton, oh heavens it doesn't happen in the New Town at all. Well, I know for absolutely damned certain sure, yes it did. Because I knew the wife of ... an extremely well known and well regarded professional man, who lived in the heart of the New Town, who used to have to take refuge with her neighbours, who were my then boyfriend's parents. Because when this man had a drink in him, sometimes when he didn't have a drink in him, he would beat her mercilessly.

Good heavens.

But, the perception was that it's a lower class thing.

So, that was the prevalent idea the police had at this time. What about ... Do you think politicians, the media something like that, what do you think, similar?

Pretty much, yes. Em ... there was a woman in Edinburgh called June Greig. Unfortunately, from Wester Hailes, so that very much reflected on the coverage this got. She stabbed her husband multiple times and got a very hefty sentence, and among the comments were, 'Oh, but he hadn't actually hit her when she stabbed him', so the fact that there was a long and documented history of his inflicting various and multiple injuries upon her had nothing to do with the fact that one day she snapped and killed him. But that was completely unprovoked because he hadn't laid a finger on her that day. And this ... em ... oh golly ... it enraged me, actually, because she was just sacrificed on the altar of popular opinion. Then, in England, sometime later, Sarah Thornton killed her husband in almost identical circumstances, but because she – ok, I'm imputing motives which may not in fact exist – because she was young and small and slim and slight and pretty, she still got a sentence, but there were not the same things said about Sarah Thornton as were said about June Greig.

And roughly the timespan, when was this? Were they both about the same time?

Oh no, June Greig would have been, she would have been late '70s. Sarah Thornton ... very early '80s.

00:22:40 *And do you think there was a start to change in perceptions then?*

Slight, yes, because in the interim, of course, Erin Pizzey had come roaring out of nowhere and founded her refuge and, against phenomenal odds, actually got people interested and talking and helping and taking it seriously as, as a crime and not just as a domestic incident which was largely how it had been perceived, oh well what goes on behind a couple's front door is their business and no-one else's. No, it's not, it's a crime.

It's a crime, yes.

Just because it doesn't happen in the middle of Sainsbury's on a Saturday afternoon with 500 witnesses doesn't mean it's not a crime. Sorry, I'll stop talking now.

No, no, that's great. We've talked about life, children, media stories ... So we were talking about the timeframe then. You say you saw Erin Pizzey as a significant turning point in attitudes?

I don't know, I think she'd been doing it all along, but I think it, kind of, slowly became more obvious that this was happening, and it wasn't just one thing that happened in a depressed Edinburgh estate and that was it, but it was actually a national problem.

Do you think women changed their attitudes to talking about it? You said you were reluctant to talk about it, and perhaps the other volunteers had experiences, but were reluctant to talk about it. Do you think that attitudes changed which meant women could talk about it?

Yes, maybe not to everybody ... I mean, one would still be very careful about who heard what you were saying, but yes, it became easier.

Do you think that women still have a feeling of shame?

Yes, absolutely.

And that attitude has changed a bit, do you think?

A little bit, but we all still, as far as I can tell, we all still somehow blame ourselves because ... oh ... because we do. I mean, it's like the conversation about women who get raped, you know, 'Oh she goes out wearing a vest and short skirt, no wonder she got raped'. Well, you know, strictly speaking, as a therapist said to me, 'A woman should be able to walk into a bar, stark naked, at 2 o'clock in the

morning, and be perfectly safe'. It's the same with domestic violence, as it is with rape, we somehow hold ourselves responsible. I have no idea how that's going to change.

00:26:26 *No, because it hasn't really changed. What about changes in politics, the whole attitude of politicians, has that changed? Will women in politics have helped?*

A little. Not enough women are in politics ... and, frankly, at the moment, I pretty much despise all politicians when you look at the mess they've left us in. Em ... I daresay in another month or two I will give a more rational and objective answer, but ... yeah, em ... A few weeks ago, one of the organisations that I sometimes attend, em, Protest in Harmony, we were singing at the Scottish Parliament who were marking 40 years of Scottish Women's Aid, so that takes it back to 1976. And, the First Minister came and spoke. Now ok, a woman First Minister, trained as a lawyer, coming to speak at the Scottish Parliament on the subject of Women's Aid. Ten years ago, 20 years ago, 40 years ago, that would have been completely unthinkable. Twenty years ago ... dubious, 10 years ago, possibly, but it was wonderful. I mean, just that she was there and she understood, and ... got a great reception. Although, I did say to one of my former colleagues, you know, the thing about us is that we are all hoping that one day there will never be any need for any organisation called Women's Aid or not in that format but ... when that happens, I do not know.

But the fact that there has been campaigns like Zero Tolerance is bringing it to the fore isn't it?

Yes, I was so proud of Edinburgh launching it. I mean, we had the Zero Tolerance campaign first, I was so proud of that. And it was so beautifully done. I mean, there was nothing, nothing fancy about it, there was nothing, em ... ambiguous about it. It was literally a black and white issue. It was beautifully done, and, em ... Oh I just thought that was marvellous.

00:29:35 *Do you think from when you started with Women's Aid to where we are today now there is now a lot of organisations working together?*

Yes, Yes.

Which is good. I work for a charity that helps people who have been homeless, and we help women that have been in that situation that have got nothing, they're homeless, they come to Edinburgh, get a flat and we help them. All these organisations coming together.

That is the other perception isn't it? All these women run away from their marriages, and the first thing they know they've got a brand new council house with four bedrooms, two bathrooms and a Jacuzzi in the garden. Oh God, if only that were true. Again, back in the '70s, a woman leaving a violent partner was generally deemed to have made herself intentionally homeless, so it was not uncommon, in fact it was desperately anything other than normal for a woman to stay with her kids, with her violent partner because where else was there?

There was nowhere to go.

Nowhere to go, literally nowhere to go.

Horrific isn't it? Truly terrifying, to live with violence and know there's nowhere to go, that's terrifying.

Which, you know, going back to my own situation, is why I didn't really volunteer my story to the other volunteers, because, good grief, I was 24, em, and childless, and I had had enough, and I had an aunt who lived 20 odd miles away, so I picked up my coat and my handbag and I hitched a lift. I had nothing else to worry about. If I'd had children, God knows.

Did you just leave everything else behind?

Yip ... This was priceless [laughs], I was talking about it many years later with a friend who is, oh God, she's a delightful woman, but somebody has tampered with her reality switch a couple of times. And I said, 'No, literally I picked up my coat, picked up my handbag and left', and she said, 'Oh, oh, but you didn't have a house and, and you didn't have furniture', and I started laughing, and said, 'No, that's right, we lived in a cave, and ate off leaves'. And what she meant was, I didn't live where she lived, I didn't have her kind of domestic circumstances, I didn't have expensive furniture, I didn't have a Wedgewood dinner service, I didn't have blah, blah, blah, I didn't have any of these things. So it was easy for me, because I just could leave them behind. I thought, you know, you really haven't quite, as far as I can tell, got to grips with the concept that if I hadn't left, he would one day have killed me.

00:33:28 *Do you believe that?*

Oh I absolutely ... Good God, he did that within three weeks of marriage [shows a scar on her arm], oh yeah.

Did he hit you before you got married?

Yes, but that was a very ... Oh, I wish this evening had never happened because it made me very, very cynical about people. A whole group of us had been out, and ... we were taking a short cut that we shouldn't have been taking. And, something happened, I can't remember what it was, and he punched me, and I screamed, and wanted to call the police, and the people I was with said, 'Oh no, he was just trying to stroke your hair', and he said, 'Oh, my hand just slipped off the collar of your coat' and every single person there except me said it was an accident.

But you knew it wasn't?

No, I didn't. I thought, 'Oh, if I'm the only one that thinks this is deliberate, maybe it really was an accident'.

But your feelings were different?

Yeah, so that kind of set up the situation where I wasn't sure whether to trust my own judgement about anything.

So, that sort of undermines your confidence.

Oh, it completely does.

So, well done for leaving him, it takes a lot of courage. What would you like to see in the future? That organisations don't exist [but] how do you think we could get there?

Golly ... The trouble is about teaching anything like what happens in a domestic violence situation in schools is that you have no idea what's happening to the kids, and it could well be – what is the current buzz phrase? – a 'trigger' for some of them. ChildLine, social work, em ... I honestly don't know, em ... How do you tackle? ... Good Lord, em ... Counter provision of hundreds more safe houses, removal of the stigma that still exists, em ... better...

00:36:43 *How do you think we get rid of the stigma, that's quite difficult isn't it?*

Do you remember the movie Goodwill Hunting?

Yes.

Robin Williams. When Matt Damon is talking to Robin Williams about his abusive childhood, and Robin Williams takes him by the arm and says, 'It's not your fault' oh, how about a campaign that says, 'It's not your fault, it's never your fault, it's not her fault'.

Yes.

Put the responsibility where it actually belongs. I mean, I was out with a friend one night ... Oh, oh, this girl would be so easy to hate if I didn't really like her. She looks like a blonde Cindy Crawford and she's got an Honours Law Degree. And she got involved with a guy who turned out to be violent. Now, I knew that something was wrong because she was getting more and more tense. Every time I saw her she would get two or three calls on her mobile and she would say, 'No, no I'm still here'. So this night, I'm ashamed to say, I actually persisted in questioning, and made her break down in tears. And I said, 'Oh God, we're not talking about domestic violence are we?', at which point she said, 'Oh are we not?', and the whole hideous story came out. He'd cracked her ribs, he'd broken her tooth, he'd thrown boiling water over her, em...

Poor girl...

And, she had internalised it. The interesting ... Oh, I thought this was really weird. I woke up one night, Friday night, early hours of Saturday morning because I thought I heard the doorbell ring. Because this night, once we'd talked it out and she'd calmed down, I said, 'Look, you've got my number, you've got my mobile number, you've got my e-mail, you've got my address, when it happens for the last time, get a taxi, if you don't have any money, I'll pay for it. Let me know that you're coming, turn up at the door, I've got a toothbrush, I've got ... Whatever, turn up here'. So she said ok. So this night it was about two or three in the morning, I went out to the door and there was nobody there. I went back to bed, and I thought, huh. So I phoned her on the Monday, and she said, 'I've left him, on the Friday night'. I swear I just about had an incident. I thought, oh my Lord. I had evidently tuned in more than I thought, but...

00:40:09 *So it's good, you obviously have a ... Because you've experienced it, and you've experienced it with your friend, you've got a feeling...*

Yeah.

...for things that are there.

It's not comfortable, let me tell you.

No, no, I can imagine...

And it's so ... I actually really didn't think that he would hit her. I knew he was terrifically controlling, hence the three phone calls, four phone calls, whatever. I knew he was very, very controlling, and I thought oh, it's clearly jealousy, because, as I say, this girl was absolutely gorgeous. But, you know, how did he know she was out with me? She could have been lying to him, yeah yeah, she could, but she wasn't. Em ... Oh but if she'd passed the phone over to me, I would just have lied for her anyway.

Do you think there's something that can be done for men, some help?

How do you unwind Scottish machismo?

It's not just Scottish men is it?

No, no, how do you unwind machismo?

Is that possible?

I don't know.

Is it their confidence, their self-esteem, their need to control, their need to have power?

I've seen some quite encouraging things from ... the States. Paradoxically enough, along the lines of 'real men don't rape women', em ... Unfortunately, the flip side of that is yes they do and they lie about it. Like the Stanford case. Em ... I don't know, I would just love the thought that, you know, a real man, a real man doesn't hit a woman. A real man understands that no thank you means no thank you. Em ... A friend of mine, a former colleague I should say, went out with a guy, not for all that long, who was very, very controlling to the point that, em ... They were having an early dinner at

his house before they went out somewhere else, so she'd eaten her main course, and said, 'Oh that was great, lovely, all I need now is a cup of coffee', and he said, 'Oh, but I've made...', I think it was fruit salad and ice-cream. 'No, no, I don't want a pudding', 'Oh, but I've...', 'No really, I'm trying to lose a bit of weight'. And he ended up slamming the plate down on the table so hard that he broke the plate, spilt the fruit salad and the ice cream. 'Really, I don't want a pudding'. And they just had the most enormous row because she didn't want a pudding, but he wanted her to have one. Now, that's not just about control, that's freakishly ... domineering behaviour. I don't know how you get that out of someone, I really truly don't. I, oh, so wish I did.

00:44:23 *The potential might be there for violence over a period of time?*

I think so.

We've done quite well, that's an hour. Is there anything else? It's been very interesting, it really has. How long in total did you volunteer with Women's Aid, over a number of years?

Oh it was just about two years, maybe three.

At a point in your life when you needed it?

Yeah, yeah.

Do you think that was quite therapeutic for you as well?

In an odd kind of way, yes. Em, I think ... Yeah ... I think that had followed, em ... My father died in the late '70s, last day of March 1979 to be exact, and following that I had the most appalling nightmares. This went on for weeks to the point where I was actually getting frightened to fall asleep because I knew that the nightmares were coming. And my GP at the time, God bless her, sent me to see a psychiatrist at the Western, and I gave him my history, and at the end of it [laughs], typical psychiatrist, he said, 'Well, with your history, really, what do you expect, of course you're having nightmares. Nightmares, dreams, are the way that your brain processes things that you cannot deal with during the day'. And he said, 'I can promise you are not turning into an axe murdering psychopath'. But, oh, oh, I would not wish these nightmares on anyone.

Do you think that was just...?

Yeah, yeah

Coupled with your father's death...

Yeah, absolutely, it was just...

And Women's Aid helped that as well...

Yeah.

Yes, I can see that in lots of ways. You might not have been a client, you might have been a volunteer, but in your own way they have helped that as well?

Oh yes.

And also you might have been helping other women at the same time, but you might never know?

Maybe...

Very interesting, that's very interesting...

Actually I did rescue one girl, she lived round the corner from me, em ... She and her little girl went back to her parents.

00:47:59 *You know what you're looking for...*

Kind of...

Well, I think we'll call it a day there, because that's been an hour. Is there anything else you want to add? It's been very interesting, thank you so much.

You're welcome. No, I cannot think of anything, anything I know that I haven't told you ... Maybe following this real man line, as I was. Em ... I'd kind of be reluctant to be quoted on this, because it's not necessarily my story so much as someone else's story, but ... If men are going to be educated that real men don't hit women, and real men don't rape women, I would also love real men don't force women to do sexual things that she really doesn't want to do. It doesn't matter what form it takes, if it's something she doesn't want to do, it's rape, whether or not there's any quote unquote penetration involved or not. If it's against her consent, it's abuse.

Yes, sexual abuse ... which is every bit as bad as violent abuse...

Oh yes, and very much closer together, than an awful lot of people think.

Because it's that idea of degradation and control and power...

Yes, absolutely.

Every bit as much as actually hitting ... Yes, I agree.

End interview