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Blog article by Chief Commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow

Home should be a safe place – for us all

It was just another headline, in danger of being lost amongst other competing stories. “Racist attacks force pregnant mother and family to flee home”. But it wasn’t just another headline as its content railed against two key values that we claim to be central in a democratic society.

Home should be a safe place and pregnant women should be protected and feel safe.

I can’t begin to imagine what must have gone through the mind of this woman, the mother of a young family, as she tried to come to terms with the event.

“What if I had been at home with my young children at the time? Why did they pick me, what did I ever do to them?”

The woman in question came here to seek a new start as a refugee from Sudan. She should have expected our world-renowned hospitality, support and a safe place to call home. Instead, forced her out of that home, she is once again searching for safety - this time not from tribalism and prejudicial attitudes in Sudan but from racism, here in Belfast.

There has been cross party condemnation of the event and that is right and proper. There has been an outpouring of compassion from the local community, and this is also right and proper. The bigger issue at stake, though, is how to stop it happening. These irrational outbreaks of hatred, attacks target the marginalised, the vulnerable, those without voices. They end up as another statistic, another headline. Attacks number three every day, and that is only the ones that are reported to the PSNI. I am sure that many others suffer in silence.

Almost half of the racist incidents reported directly involved the home. And, of course, our home should be our ultimate refuge. As Maya Angelou put it *“The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.”* It



provides a foundation for our family and community life. It is essential for our health, our well-being, and for a prosperous society; and it should be, above all, a place where we should all be able to relax and feel safe.

Unfortunately, attacks on people's homes are not new in this society. The brick through the window, hate-slogans daubed on the wall, insults and harassment, have all been features of our history of sporadic intercommunal tension. They have too often led to much more serious instances of violence and we know that they have contributed to the reality that our community is still living with too much segregation, too much distrust and fear of the other.

The problem has now widened to include anyone perceived by the attackers as being different from them. People from other countries, of a different race or colour, couples in same sex relationships, have all, on occasion, been singled out for abuse and attack in their own homes. So while it is all very well to post well-meaning messages on social media... mea culpa! ... the bigger, societal question must be – how do we challenge the mentality that fears diversity and sees difference as a threat.

In the Equality Commission we work to promote good race relations and challenge discrimination; and there is legislation dealing with hate crime which helps provide protection. But we all have a responsibility to make sure that every person who comes to live within our community, can find the safety and peace of mind of a place they can call home.



Read the Chief Commissioner's blog "*Here's the thing...*"

www.equalityni.org/blog