

Domestic Abuse and Gender Inequality: An overview of the current debate



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Background

Domestic abuse is a global phenomenon which adversely affects individuals who experience it and creates social and financial burdens for the societies in which it occurs. While abuse can be perpetrated by women against male partners and occurs in same sex relationships, domestic abuse is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against female partners. As a result, the United Nations has identified domestic abuse as a form of gender based violence that is predominantly experienced by women and perpetrated by men (United Nations, 1992). Domestic abuse is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. This briefing will provide an overview of a gendered analysis of domestic abuse, outline the evidence which supports this and the debate which challenges it.

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is a pattern of behaviours which are used to assert control over a partner in an intimate relationship (Scottish Government, 2009).

Since 2000, the Scottish Government has defined domestic abuse as

perpetrated by partners or ex-partners and can include physical abuse (assault and physical attack involving a range of behaviour), sexual abuse (acts which degrade and humiliate women and are perpetrated against their will, including rape) and mental and emotional abuse (such as threats, verbal abuse, racial abuse, withholding money and other types of controlling behaviour such as isolation from family and friends).

The term 'domestic abuse' was adopted by the Scottish Government to broaden the focus from physical abuse to the combination of physical and psychological dimensions of abuse and on-going manipulation of power (Scottish Executive 2000; 2003).

Domestic abuse is best described as an ongoing process, rather than individual incidents, where perpetrators may use a range of tactics including isolation, degradation, mind-games, and the micro-regulation of everyday life such as monitoring phone calls, dress, food consumption, social activity etc, as well as constant criticism of victims' actions (Stark, 2007). Physical violence is often, but not always used in this process. These actions frighten and confuse the victim, creating uncertainty and ultimately compliance with the perpetrator (Pain 2012; Williamson, 2010).

Domestic abuse has profound and far-reaching effects; compromising the health, dignity, autonomy and security of those who directly experience it, and adversely affecting their children, families and wider communities (Osofsky, 1999; Mullender, 2004; Krug, 2002), resulting in immense social and financial costs (Stanko

Key points

- A gendered analysis recognises that gender is important in understanding the causes and consequences of domestic abuse.
- Robust research and a sound theoretical framework support a gendered analysis.
- A gendered analysis provides a framework for understanding a complex issue and addressing the needs of survivors and was adopted by the Scottish Government in 2000.
- Research and data presented to challenge this gendered analysis does not adequately address the complex dynamic of domestic abuse or influential social factors.
- Approaches which do not recognise the influence of gender in everyday experiences fail both men and women. Assumptions that experiences of men and women are equivalent will not achieve equality of outcome.

et al, 1998; Walby, 2009). Domestic abuse has been estimated to cost the Scottish economy £2.3 billion a year (Scottish Government, 2009). Furthermore, research suggests that in families affected by domestic abuse, children are often also directly abused by the perpetrator (Edleson, 1999).

Domestic abuse cuts across divisions of ethnicity, class, religion, age, sexuality, culture and geographic region (Fried, 2003). Whilst each of these factors affect risk and impact of domestic abuse (Humphries, 2007), the dominant pattern is that violence and abuse are perpetrated by men against women

What is a gender-based analysis?

Gender 'refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women' (World Health Organisation). Gender is a key way in which society is ordered and refers to the relationships between men and women and the social, political and cultural environment they operate within, the code of conduct expected of them (Connell, 2002).

Gender-based violence is that directed at an individual because of their actual or presumed gender. It has been defined as 'any form of violence used to establish, enforce or perpetuate gender inequalities and keep in place gendered orders. In other words,

As this briefing makes clear, a gender-based analysis of violence against women is not only consistent with the vast body of evidence on the problem but far and away the most promising theoretical framework for moving the global response from intervention to prevention. Even as it answers critics of a gendered approach, it links women's oppression in abusive relationships to justice and full equality for women in Scotland and beyond.

Professor Evan Stark

gender based violence is a policing mechanism' (Lang, 2002). Women are more likely to experience gender-based violence than men, and this stems from an interaction of interpersonal, institutional, and structural factors underpinned by institutionalised power relations between women and men (Connell, 2002; Lang, 2002; UN, 1992). Gender-based violence is therefore both a cause and a consequence of gender inequalities. Whatever form it takes, gender-based violence is a recurring theme of abusive and controlling behaviour through which the abuser seeks power and coercive control over their victim'.

The United Nations locates domestic abuse alongside other forms of gender based violence (GBV) such as rape and sexual assault, child sexual abuse and harm through prostitution (United Nations, 1992). As such, domestic abuse is set within a theoretical framework which acknowledges the influence of gender on men and women's lives: the decisions they may make, the freedoms accorded them and the relationship between them.

The Scottish Government supports this approach stating:

Domestic abuse is associated with broader gender inequality and should be understood in its historical context, whereby societies have given greater status, wealth, influence, control and power to men. It is part of a range of behaviours constituting male abuse of power, and is linked to other forms of male violence. (Scottish Government, 2000)

The expectations of men and women vary within and across cultures. In the vast majority of countries worldwide men have been given higher status than women. The consequences of this are evident in Scotland today, for example, women are severely under-represented in decision making posts, holding only 21% of "top jobs" in public and voluntary sectors and making up only 31% of ministers in the Scottish Parliament (EHRC, 2008) and women are more likely to experience poverty than men (Scottish Government, 2002). Domestic abuse is also a consequence of this inequality.

Framing violence as gender-based highlights the need to situate it within the context of women's (and girl's) status in society, taking into account norms, social structures and gender roles, which greatly influence their vulnerability to violence (Kelly, 1987; Fried, 2003). Gender impacts on all aspects of women's lives including women's experience of violence; research consistently suggests that men and women experience violence and abuse differently. With regard to domestic abuse, men are less likely than women to be repeatedly victimised, less likely to be seriously injured and less likely to feel fear of their partner and consequently, trapped in the relationship (Dobash & Dobash, 2004).

The gender symmetry debate

There is ongoing discussion in the research literature as to whether domestic abuse is perpetrated predominantly by men. Debate

continues as to the exact nature of who is doing what to whom and what exactly research surveys reveal about the perpetration of domestic abuse. This has been called 'the gender symmetry debate' (Dobash & Dobash, 2004).

Research which argues that women are as likely to abuse male partners as vice versa tends to count discrete acts of physical violence that have occurred between a couple. Statistics gained in this way suggest women use acts of violence as frequently as men. For example, according to the Scottish Crime & Justice Survey (SCJS) 2010/11, the risk of experiencing partner abuse in the last 12 months was the same for women and men (3% each).

However, measuring individual acts of violence or aggression fails to consider important contextual factors that create significant differences in the experience of victims, specifically who initiated the violence, if the violence was used with an aim to control the victim, if this incident was a repeat of previous incidents and whether the violence was used alongside other abusive and controlling actions (Kimmel, 2002). This narrow, short-term, approach does not build a true picture of domestic abuse or its impact. Instead, a description of abuse which considers impact, motivation and context is required to understand the phenomenon (Dobash & Dobash, 2004).

When research considers the range and impact of abuse rather than simply counting incidents, differences in the experiences of men and women consistently emerge. Research evidence suggests that men perpetrate abuse more often and more severe in nature than women and that the negative impact of experience abuse is greater for abused women than abused men.

- Women experience more forms of partner abuse on average than men (Scottish Government, 2010)
- Women are more likely to report psychological abuse and to suffer a greater range of psychological abuse (Scottish Government, 2010)
- Women who experience domestic abuse are more likely to be severely victimised, experience ill health and be less financially independent than men who experience abuse (Gadd et al, 2002)
- Women who experience abuse are more likely to experience fear than abused men (Hester, 2009; Gadd et al, 2002)
- Compared to women, men perpetrate abuse of greater intensity and severity (Hester, 2009)
- Men are more likely to be repeat perpetrators of domestic abuse (Hester, 2009)
- Sexual violence can be used to assert authority, humiliate women and intimidate children (Humphreys, 2008) and there is a clear gender division between perpetrators (men) and victims (women) which supports the gendered analysis of domestic abuse. The direct impact of abuse compounded by social factors mean that women are likely to have fewer options and resources to exit an abusive situation (Johnson, 2008).

- Women are more likely than men to be killed by a partner ex-partner. Scottish homicide statistics for the past ten years suggest women are twice as likely as men to be killed in this way (Scottish Government, 2012), though due to recording purposes it is not possible to state that all these deaths were part of a pattern of abusive behaviour. Furthermore, research suggests that where women who are killed by their partners have usually experienced on-going abuse, men who are killed by their partners often have a history of perpetration of abuse (Walker, 1989; Stark, 2007). This pattern is borne out by research currently being undertaken in Scotland (McPherson, 2014).

Sociologist Michael Johnson has been concerned with the gender symmetry debate for many years and presents a theory which is helpful when considering evidence presented in this debate. Through research which utilised both incident based measures and more detailed descriptions of abuse (Johnson, 1995; 2005; 2008), he concluded that there are, in fact, three different kinds of violence occurring. All were being called 'domestic abuse' or 'domestic violence' but they were fundamentally different in origin, nature and consequence.

The first type of violence Johnson identified is called intimate terrorism. This is a pattern of controlling behaviour using a range of tools, including physical violence, isolation, degradation and threats. Johnson argues this is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women in heterosexual relationships. Intimate terrorism is not an expression of frustration but is used with the intent to control the partner. This is what is called 'domestic abuse' in Scotland and is the focus of this discussion paper. It is this form of violence that is revealed when context and impact of abuse are considered.

The second type of violence Johnson identified is violent resistance which is overwhelmingly perpetrated by women experiencing intimate terrorism against their perpetrator. This is when a woman uses violence in self-defence, child-defence or retaliation. It is possible, in this way, to see that someone who is primarily experiencing domestic abuse could be labeled as a perpetrator based on one incident of violence and that someone who is primarily a perpetrator may be labeled a victim. The potential for defensive violence to be recorded in the same way as offensive violence is a major limitation of incident based measures and may in part explain why men who report domestic abuse are frequently not afraid of abusive partners.

Finally there is situational couple violence. This, Johnson argues, is perpetrated in equal numbers by men and women in heterosexual

relationships. It is where disagreement arises and conflict, verbal and/or physical ensues. The violence may be extreme but it is not part of a pattern of other controlling behaviours by one partner to maintain dominance over the other. This use of violence represents an expression (however unacceptable) of frustration and tension. We might call this violence 'fights'. It is this type of violence that is frequently identified by incident focussed measures.

Research has found that men who report abuse have often experienced situational couple violence or violent resistance from partners. One evaluation of a project developed specifically for men who experienced domestic abuse found that 46% of men accessing the service were known to be perpetrators of abuse (Robinson & Rowlands, 2006). Although a smaller sample, research carried out in Scotland also found 42% of those who reported being abused by a partner had also perpetrated abuse (Gadd et al, 2002).

Gendered analysis and practice

A gendered analysis recognises differences in men's and women's experiences of violence and abuse. This is useful because it indicates actions which can guide development of services to respond to the consequences of abuse and importantly, actions which ultimately reduce the likelihood of domestic abuse occurring.

Understanding gender as the central factor in domestic abuse enables us to develop services which are sensitive to the differing needs of individuals affected by domestic abuse. It highlights that as men and women have differing needs they require different services and service approaches. The intersection of gender with issues such as ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability also require consideration. For example, a study found that gay men engaged with available supports more frequently than heterosexual men (Robinson & Rowlands, 2006).

Approaches which do not recognise the influence of gender in everyday experiences fail both men and women. Assumptions that experiences of men and women are equivalent will not achieve equality of outcome. Failure to acknowledge the influence of gender in perpetration of abuse, as well as the experience of abuse, presents a barrier to eliminating or reducing domestic abuse in our society.

The wealth of evidence generated over the past 40 years on this global issue continues to support the gendered analysis of domestic abuse and provides clear direction for action to prevent abuse, protect those at risk of or exposed to abuse and provide appropriate supports for all survivors.

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