



'I'm a red-blooded male': Understanding men's experiences of domestic abuse through a feminist lens

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Abstract

The ways in which gendered expectations of women are used to maintain power and control by male perpetrators of domestic abuse are now well understood. It is also increasingly recognised that men can be victims of domestic abuse. This has led to calls to de-gender theories of violence and abuse, and arguments that the feminist theories which underpin many interventions are outdated. We draw on the experiences of 344 men using a helpline for male victim-survivors of domestic abuse to show that patriarchal constructions of relationships, femininity and masculinity, which underpin women's experiences of domestic abuse by men are also central to understanding men's experiences of domestic abuse by women. We propose that men's victimisation by women perpetrators is not incompatible with feminist understandings of domestic abuse. Rather, that the influence of patriarchal norms in men's victimisation accentuates the importance of gender in understanding and responding to domestic abuse.

Keywords

Domestic abuse, gender norms, intimate partner violence, men and masculinities, patriarchy

Introduction: The gender stalemate in domestic abuse

Domestic violence and abuse has traditionally been understood in policy and practice as a gendered problem – one that is predominantly experienced by women and perpetrated by men. However, there has long existed a stark divide within academia about to what

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extent this is the case. In 1992, Dobash and Dobash characterised these positions as the 'Family Violence' (FV) and 'Violence Against Women' (VAW) approaches. Broadly speaking, FV researchers are described by Dobash and Dobash (1992) as those that claim that intimate partner violence is symmetrical (men and women perpetrate roughly equivalent violence against each other in relationships) or even that women perpetrate a greater amount with higher severity. In contrast, VAW researchers are those who understand intimate partner violence to be asymmetrical, with men more likely to perpetrate violence against a woman partner, and of higher severity. Thirty years on, these positions are even more entrenched, and no longer confined to academia but also having 'real-world' policy and practice impacts (see also, Dobash and Dobash, 2004).

In this article, we leave the 'who uses the most violence' debate to instead focus directly on men's experiences of domestic violence and abuse, especially where women are the perpetrators. There exists a body of research that has documented the range of physical and psychological harms that are associated with men's experiences of domestic abuse (Hine and Douglas, 2023) and problems with the ways police record such incidents (Grady, 2004 [2002]; Hester, 2012). Taking as our starting point the position that 'some men do experience domestic abuse perpetrated by women' means a different type of discussion can be developed – an understanding of 'how and why' rather than 'how much'. This is not to say that the 'how much' argument is not important (since at its heart are questions about how we define, measure and record violence) – but rather to say that the 'how much' focus in FV/VAW debates has led to a gap in understanding men's experiences of domestic abuse from a feminist criminological perspective. In this article we draw on the experiences of 344 men using a domestic abuse helpline to demonstrate the ongoing importance of the role of patriarchal gender norms in understanding and responding to domestic abuse against men.

Women's use of domestic abuse against men: The gap in feminist criminology

Feminist criminologists have been accused of ignoring women's use of violence, both in terms of domestic abuse and more widely. Carrington (2013), for example, argued that the lack of feminist theories on female violence generally has been a major oversight and challenge:

A central challenge for future feminist research, then, is how to more convincingly explain the historical shifts in gendered patterns of violence, rather than simply deny, rationalise, or erase them (p. 73).

This lack of attention, Carrington argues, led to an opportunity for anti-feminist ideas to take hold in explaining violence perpetrated by women and girls. Similar calls have been made specifically in relation to domestic abuse. For example, Renzetti (1999) argued that it was time for feminists to own the problem of women's violence. We argue that over 20 years on since Renzetti's call for action this problem has still not been 'owned', and that this has led to gaps in feminist commentary when women's use of domestic abuse is in the public eye. For example, there was little feminist analysis in

relation to British television presenter and actor Caroline Flack who was reported to the police for domestic abuse against her male partner and subsequently killed herself after receiving negative media attention for this. Only a small number of feminists spoke publicly about American actor Amber Heard who was variously reported to be a victim and a perpetrator of domestic abuse. The silence from many feminists, underpinned no doubt by limited empirical and theoretical developments on women's use of violence against men, occurred alongside an anti-feminist media narrative in both cases (as described by, for example, Donegan, 2022).

The harms of patriarchal gender norms

Just as there are gendered expectations about what it means to be a woman, restrictive social norms exist about what 'manhood' should look like in different contexts. Masculine gender norms shape the lives of men and boys in a range of different ways. They can be described as the implicit and informal rules of behaviour which are expected of men, based around how masculinity is defined in a specific social context (Cislaghi et al., 2018). Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity describes the most socially valued ways of being a man – it is normative in requiring all men to position themselves in relation to it and legitimises the subordination of some men as well as women within the gender order. As well as changing across cultures, it can change over time – for example, the United Kingdom has seen important shifts towards more involved fatherhood and increased lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) + rights in recent decades (Burrell et al., 2019).

There are several scales that have been developed to try and understand levels of conformity to these culturally, geographically and historically variable gender norms. One well-known example is the 'Man Box', first devised by Kivel (2007) as the 'Act Like a Man Box' and subsequently operationalised in research by the US-based civil society organisation Equipundo. They describe the 'Man Box' as a 'a set of beliefs, communicated by parents, families, the media, peers, and other members of society, that place pressure on men to be a certain way' (Heilman et al., 2017: 8). Men who are 'inside the box' are said to be those who most identify with these messages and pressures. Those 'outside the box' are more likely to reject them and embrace other ways of being and behaving as a man. Based on piloting in over 30 countries, a 17-item survey (the Man Box Scale) was developed by Equipundo. The Man Box Scale was tested with 3673 young men (aged 18–30 years) in the United States, the United Kingdom and Mexico, and a secondary analysis found the survey to have strong validity and reliability across these countries (Hill et al., 2020). The research proposes that the 'Man Box' is made up of seven thematic pillars, based around what a 'real man' should believe or how he should behave. He should: (1) be self-sufficient; (2) act tough; (3) be physically attractive; (4) stick to rigid gender roles in the home; (5) be heterosexual; (6) be hypersexual and (7) use aggression where needed and have control over women (Heilman et al., 2017).

The harms that these patriarchal gender norms have on women and girls are well known. Men who have a stronger alignment to rigid masculine norms such as those in the 'Man Box' have been shown in a number of studies to be more likely to perpetrate VAW

(e.g. Jewkes et al., 2011). However, these norms also have a range of detrimental impacts on men and boys themselves.

Men's adherence to such norms, for example, has been linked with lower levels of mental and sexual health (Barker et al., 2011). In Australia, men who were supportive of the norms within the Man Box were more likely to have thoughts of suicide, be involved in traffic accidents and have little interest or pleasure in doing things (The Men's Project and Flood, 2018). They were more likely to have perpetrated but also to have experienced physical and verbal bullying. In relation to domestic abuse, Morgan and Wells (2016) interviewed men who had experienced domestic abuse from women and found that many described feeling 'unmanly'. Similarly, Lysova et al. (2020) conducted focus groups with men in four countries and found that stereotypes around 'what it means to be a man' were linked to men feeling embarrassed about not living up to this standard when they were being abused, particularly when that abuse was perpetrated by a woman. These gender norms, and stereotypes around who 'can be' victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse, have also been found to impede men's ability to make disclosures and access support (Bates et al., 2023; Hine et al., 2022; Scott-Storey et al., 2022). Idriss (2022) reported similar findings in relation to male victim-survivors of honour-based violence and forced marriage. Although in these cases the abuse was primarily perpetrated by men (though sometimes supported by women), the male victim-survivors' experiences of violence and help-seeking was shaped by patriarchal expectations around power and control. Idriss (2022) concluded 'Patriarchal theories of violence therefore apply to male victims just as much as they do to female victims' (p. NP11918).

Research methods

The aim of this article is to describe the ways in which domestic abuse against men draws upon expectations about masculinity, using the 'Man Box' as its analytical framework. Together, the Man Box items can be seen as dominant, normalised ways of 'being a man' in the United Kingdom. We explore to what extent these norms are visible in the ways that domestic abuse is perpetrated against men, as well as in their own help-seeking behaviours, based upon men's phone calls and e-mails to the Men's Advice Line, a United Kingdom-wide helpline for male victim-survivors of domestic abuse. The helpline is run by national charity Respect, who commissioned the research. Members of the research team were given access to the Men's Advice Line's remote access system to virtually 'observe' calls to the helpline by listening to them in real time as they were made (or reading them in the case of e-mails). The data analysed here were collected as part of a wider investigation into the experiences of male victim-survivors of domestic abuse and their help-seeking during the COVID-19 pandemic (Westmarland et al., 2021).

The use of observational methods was requested by Respect as the research funder. We had previously conducted research on two helplines they run using interviews with helpline users (Burrell and Westmarland, 2019; Westmarland and Burrell, 2019), and these studies had been hampered by relatively small sample sizes with self-selecting participants unlikely to be representative of the wider population of callers. While the interview method required helpline callers who agreed to take part to give the researchers additional time (to be called back for an interview) at a difficult time in their lives, the

observations allowed helpline callers to participate in the research without any additional demands on their time. The observational method, therefore, resulted in a larger sample size. Another benefit of this method was that it was based upon people's 'real', 'observable' experiences while contacting a helpline, rather than efforts to recount them to a researcher. The main limitation to the method was that since the research team was only able to listen, it was not possible to ask questions linked to the research questions, use prompts, follow-ups, or clarify information. There were also additional ethical issues to consider (see below).

Data collection

The data consist of observational fieldnotes from service user contacts to the Men's Advice Line. It details the experiences of 344 men, of whom 221 contacted the Advice Line by phone and 113 by e-mail. The data collection took place Monday–Friday between the start of June and the end of September 2020.

No identifiable information was recorded in research observation notes and data were anonymised from the outset. Researchers would listen to the whole call wherever possible – they would only listen to calls from the beginning (rather than picking up midway through). They would hang up on calls which were not relevant; that is, if it was not a male victim–survivor calling to discuss their experiences (e.g. if it was a professional calling for advice, a friend or family member calling on behalf of someone else, or a man calling about something other than being a victim of abuse). E-mail chains to the helpline from during this period, redacted to preserve anonymity, were also shared with the research team.

Participants

Due to the data being observational and over telephone or e-mail, we did not have participant demographics for all 344 men in the sample. Where age was known (for 160 participants), they were aged between 19 and 85 years old, with the 31–40 and 41–50 age categories making up the highest proportion of callers (29% and 28% respectively). Where recorded (for 151 participants), 58% were White British, 18% were Asian/British Asian and 12% were of African/British African heritage. Of 340 participants, 90% said the perpetrator was female (and in a further 5% of cases there was both a female and a male perpetrator recorded). Of 137 participants recorded, 93% described their sexuality as heterosexual. Where the relationship to the perpetrator was known (in 340 cases), most were calling about a current spouse or partner (54%) or ex-spouse or ex-partner (36%). It is important to note that in the United Kingdom there is another helpline run by Galop for LGBTQ+ victim–survivors of domestic abuse, so this may be one reason why our sample was predominantly heterosexual.

Ethics

Throughout the duration of the research, a statement was added to the automated message heard by callers upon ringing the helpline, explaining that the research was being

conducted and what it involved. In this message, callers were informed that they should tell the helpline advisor if they did not wish for their call to be observed by the researchers or included in the research, and a small minority of callers did take this option up. They were also encouraged to ask the helpline advisor if they had any questions about the research, and the same system applied to e-mails to the helpline. Detailed information about the study was made publicly available on the Men's Advice Line website, and callers were pointed to this if they wanted to find out more. Researchers ensured that they only listened to calls from the beginning to ensure that they heard in case the caller had 'opted out' of the research, and helpline advisors also immediately gave this information to the research team to make sure the call was not listened to if the caller expressed this preference. Only one or a maximum of two researchers were observing calls at any one time, and given the busyness of the helpline, this meant we only heard a minority of calls made to it during the research period.

We recognise that observational methods such as these may feel obtrusive, and we treated our observations and team discussions in a respectful way with regard to both the callers and the staff members. Less than 10 men asked not to participate – suggesting that there was a high level of participation but also that our opt-out mechanism was working. In fact, the staff reported that several men explicitly asked for the researchers to listen to their call as they wanted to be part of the study (it was unfortunately not possible to facilitate this) – highlighting the empowerment potential of hearing victim-survivor voices through research (Downes et al., 2014). Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Durham University Department of Sociology Research Ethics Committee.

Data analysis

An inductive approach was taken to thematic analysis in the wider study (Westmarland et al., 2021) to draw patterns and connections across the data. During this analysis we noticed overlaps with how the men spoke in relation to critical men and masculinities theories. For the analysis presented here, we used a deductive approach to code data in relation to each of the seven pillars of the Man Box outlined earlier. Overall, therefore, our thematic analysis can best be described as a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Findings

The Man Box describes the key pressures around what it means to be a 'real man', making it a useful framework for exploring men's experiences of domestic abuse. Overall, we found that the duality of (1) experiencing domestic abuse and (2) needing support, meant that many felt they were failing to meet the expectations of being a 'real man'. In the words of one participant:

You don't feel like you're a man because of it (Luke).

In what follows, this feeling of not living up to hegemonic masculinity, and women's patriarchal expectations of what a 'real man' should be, are broken down into the seven pillars that make up the Man Box, noting that there is overlap between the pillars.

Self-sufficiency: Men should be independent and self-reliant

This pillar relates to men feeling strong pressure from wider society that they should be independent and without need of help from others. Below, Simon seems to identify strongly with this ideal, self-describing himself as a ‘red-blooded male’ and an ‘alpha male’, resulting in him finding it very difficult to simultaneously understand himself as being a victim of domestic abuse:

I am a victim of abuse my solicitor said. But I don't know what was happening – I'm a red-blooded male and don't want to think of it like that. I'm a bit embarrassed about it . . . I am an alpha male (Simon).

In this sense, the ‘self-sufficiency’ pillar represents a strong clash with popular beliefs around ‘victimhood’ – such as that victims are weak and reliant on others. This feeling of needing to be self-reliant, which Jay associated with ‘being a man’, led to some of the participants finding it highly difficult to talk to other people in their lives about what they were going through – a theme that overlaps with some of the other pillars discussed later in this section:

You know how it is being a man – I'll just concentrate on something practical. I've been stuffing it down for so long, it's all come out. You can't really talk to your parents about this (Jay).

Even in cases where men had attempted to seek help from others – be it friends or statutory services as in the examples below – they found it to be a highly challenging experience, and often didn't feel their experiences were taken seriously, or worried that this might be the case.

I am awaiting counselling, but I was hoping from some guidance from yourselves as I struggle to speak to male friends about it, often feeling like they don't believe me or despite having seen it first-hand will judge me for it. (Larry)

I have been trying to raise this with the police for a while, however, I feel being a male they are just laughing at me (Hector).

Indeed, this was also observed in the discomfort many of the men appeared to feel in making contact with the Men's Advice Line and speaking to the advisor. The ‘self-sufficiency’ pillar of the Man Box, therefore, has implications as to whether and how men think of themselves as victims, which clashes with expectations around ‘victimhood’ and provides a major obstacle to disclosing such experiences, but also has implications in terms of how they feel and are responded to when they do manage to ask for support.

Acting tough – being willing to use physical force to defend their reputation and appearing strong while hiding any vulnerable emotions

The ‘acting tough and being invulnerable’ pillar, and the idea that men should be able to ‘take it’ in Kivel's (2007) original work on the Man Box, has overlaps with the previous pillar in terms of barriers to help-seeking. As well as feelings of not being taken seriously

or not being believed if they asked for help, some participants feared their own vulnerable emotions and the possibility of them surfacing as part of that help-seeking. Jake found it easier to e-mail the Advice Line rather than to phone and get more immediate, 'real time' advice because of this fear:

I do want to call but I think I will just break down and cry and I need to be strong (Jake).

The Man Box often promotes the use of violence in retaliation if men are faced with physical or reputational threats from other men. This was sometimes the case in our research in terms of men experiencing same-sex domestic abuse, or threats from their partner's wider family members. But more often, for around 9 in 10 calls, the caller was seeking help about abuse perpetrated by a woman. While it was not universally the case and some men were 'fighting back', most of those who called said they were not responding with physical force. This was often linked to the competing social norm that 'men should not hit women', as expressed below by Lloyd:

I really felt the hard beating on my back and neck area, it was very painful. However, I have to control and manage myself because I was never, never brought up to hit a woman or retaliate or talk back (Lloyd).

This led to men feeling unsure about how they could or should act when faced with physical violence. For Paul, showing vulnerable emotion in response was met with ridicule and more abuse, and his comments demonstrate how perpetrators used this patriarchal norm to further emphasise the apparent distance from being a 'real man': 'she pissed herself laughing when I told her [I was scared]'. Alan and Oliver felt ashamed and panicked when faced with their female partner's violence:

I feel shameful talking about this as I am bit of a macho guy, but she would slap me round the face (Alan).

She self-harms and punches herself in the face. It makes me ill and it brings on a panic attack, and she says how can I be having a panic attack when I am a man? (Oliver).

However, in reaching the point where they were starting to talk about the violence they were experiencing, some had stepped outside of the 'Man Box' and into a place where showing vulnerable emotions was necessary even if, in Zack's words, it made him 'less of a man':

I am scared of her, and I don't care if this makes me less of a man. I have decided to speak up as I am now worried about my daughter and need help (Zack).

Physical attractiveness – men should dress well and look good but without 'trying too hard'

Some of the men were experiencing verbal and emotional abuse based on their physical appearance. In several cases women used men's weight gain as a way of belittling them for not living up to gendered expectations about physical attractiveness:

The things she has said about me not being a real man are true – as I have lost my hair and have put on weight which I have apologised for. I am no longer attractive (Alexander).

Just last night she was laughing at me ‘cos of the weight I’ve put on during lockdown and was telling me no other woman would be with a fat mess like me and how I’m so lucky to have her cos she could do much better which makes me feel like shit, she always talks about what other men look like too in order to further hit my confidence (Brandon).

Sometimes the abuse was controlling in nature, including in relation to their appearance, akin to the regulation described by Stark (2007), where women are held by men to patriarchal norms about femininity. For example, Edward’s partner controlled what clothing he should wear:

In our first week of marriage she took all my clothes from the wardrobe. She said ‘I took all of your clothes to the charity shop and I want to get you other clothes’. It has been very controlling (Edward).

Similarly, Bob felt that he was ‘living a life by permission’, and Chad said ‘she berates me for looking good going to work’, explaining that his physical appearance was controlled to the extent that his female partner even told him how he should shave.

Rigid masculine gender roles: Men as financial providers and women as responsible for housework and childcare

Our data more heavily connected to the expectation that men should be the financial provider than to expectations on women in terms of childcare and housework. In many cases, the men described receiving abuse along the lines that they were failing to live up to this ‘breadwinner’ role successfully, and thus failing to be a ‘real man’. Some of this overlapped with how some men were less able to fulfil this role because of COVID-19 lockdowns. This was the case for Deepah, who was not earning as much money as he was before the pandemic. He remarked that his wife told him ‘you are useless, you are worthless’ because of this.

Far from being the provider and the one in charge of the finances, many of the men felt that they had no control, and therefore, that they were unable to live up to this masculine norm. Danny had felt forced to let someone from work know what was happening at home when his partner used his corporate credit card without his consent. He situated his lack of control over the family finances (i.e. his lack of adherence to this aspect of masculine norms) alongside his ‘man as provider’ role (illustrating that he was still attempting to adhere in part to the Man Box):

I’ve just lost control completely; it’s only been a few days and she’s already gone and spent the majority of my salary (Danny).

... I’m the only person that is providing for our family (Danny).

Hence in this case, Danny still felt a responsibility to be the financial provider, but also that this was being controlled by his female partner within the context of domestic

abuse. This was also the case for David, who did not have access to the resources that he was bringing in as the ‘provider’:

She controlled all my money and she held all my cards as well banking app passwords. She won't give me the banking password (David).

Many of the men discussed one of the worst aspects of the abuse being the impacts on their children, and their relationships with them. Several talked about being actively involved in childcare, but this being impeded – or a key reason why they stayed in the relationship. Patriarchal norms which associate childcare with femininity may therefore have been used in some cases as part of the abuse, to obstruct the men's closeness with their children. Abhoy, for example, said ‘She controls me about everything and says that I love my children too much’. A few men also discussed undertaking the majority of housework, with Cole remarking, ‘I used to do everything in the house, cook, clean, sort out the children, as well as work and run a football team’. Participants did not necessarily suggest that this engagement in childcare and housework was mocked, but that it was not seen as their ‘domain’. Martin also highlighted his partner holding patriarchal views about children:

She has an odd view of gender roles. For example, she said that producing a son is worth two of a girl. Her view is medieval in my view where she sees children as a possession there to look after you as you get older.

In some cases then, the men were able to bring in an income but unable to exercise autonomy over these resources; in other cases, the fact that they were unable to provide sufficient income was a key factor used against them in the abuse, tied in with notions that they were failing at ‘being a man’. Patriarchal norms which place responsibility for childcare primarily on women also sometimes appeared to be used to disparage or hamper men's parenting, as if this was not something ‘manly’ to be involved in.

Heterosexuality and homophobia: A gay man is not a ‘real man’

We did not find this pillar represented heavily in our data. This is not to suggest that it is not a strongly held norm – rather that in a sample made up of a majority of heterosexual men experiencing domestic abuse from women, this was not a major theme. There was one example of how a man experiencing same-sex domestic abuse felt his family were ashamed of him because of his sexuality – and that experiencing domestic abuse compounded his feelings of shame. If we had had more gay or bisexual men calling the helpline then we may have seen more threats of being ‘outed’ as a form of domestic abuse, or shamed about their sexuality (as already mentioned, we suspect this was not the case because a separate helpline exists for domestic abuse in LGBTQ+ relationships).

The only example we had of women using homophobic hate as a form of domestic abuse was Carter's partner. Carter described his female partner as domineering and controlling. He reported that he had experienced verbal, emotional and psychological abuse over several years, but that he felt it was getting worse and that was finding it

increasingly difficult to cope with the situation. Some of the abuse he described was linked to this pillar as he was 'accused' of being gay, of being a male sex worker, of having sex with men in public toilets, and of having sexually transmitted diseases such as venereal disease and syphilis. He explained that she would do this publicly: 'We'll be in a restaurant, and I'll go to the toilet, and she'll say "Oh have you been showing your bum again?"'. Carter described this as making him feel 'filthy' and 'degraded'. There are also connections here with the ways in which many of the men talked about being described as 'pathetic' and 'weak'. While this language was not explicitly homophobic, there at times appeared to be an insinuation that they were not *sufficiently* heterosexual and virile, and that because they were not a 'real man', they must therefore be gay. This relates to the findings of the next theme.

Hypersexuality: Being unambiguously heterosexual and always ready for sex

While sexual violence was not a recurring issue discussed by men calling the helpline, there were examples given of being ridiculed and abused for not being 'man enough' because they were not always 'ready for sex', or were unwilling to engage in particular sexual practices, and some talked about this resulting in physical violence when they said no.

Eddie, for example, was told that he was not 'manly enough' by his partner because their sex life was not as active as she wanted it to be. Cameron also faced emotional abuse from his partner if he did not consent to sex:

. . . if she doesn't get it the words that come out of her mouth are just vile (Cameron).

Similarly, Mickey described being made to feel guilty if he did not want to have sex, and Trevor experienced sexualised emotional abuse from his partner if he was not always ready for sex, telling the advisor:

She says things like 'you're not a man, grow a pair, you can't get it up' (Trevor).

Alexander felt belittled by his wife who was openly having affairs, describing to the advisor how she would openly flirt with other men in front of him and that he had lost his self-confidence and felt 'really stupid':

She says I am not a real man, and I accept that (Alexander).

For two men, refusing sex resulted in them being physically attacked. Sebastian was physically attacked because he was unwilling to have a threesome with his partner and his friend, in line with the assumption that 'real men' would never turn down such an opportunity. Rob was out with his partner celebrating his birthday when he was asked for sex at the end of the night. He described how his partner was drunk and their baby was present when he said no to sex and that this had resulted in her trying to strangle him and her being arrested for this.

There was one case where a man experienced sexual assault as part of the domestic abuse. Anthony described what happened and how it had affected him:

She sexually assaulted me. On the day of the sexual assault I had seen my sister. I went to sleep on the floor as I was getting a migraine and had to be at work the next day and she came and assaulted me [. . .] The case is going to court. I have been left with a sexual assault and I can't deal with it. I can't trust anyone. I don't want to be here anymore – I feel like I am in the check-out lounge. I can't get over it (Anthony).

Therefore, when men did not conform to this pillar of the Man Box and the expectations that society places on them to 'never say no to sex', they faced verbal and emotional abuse which furthered feelings of shame. In a small number of cases, refusing sex led to physical or sexual assaults. While the put-downs were sexualised and gendered in nature, demonstrating the mostly female perpetrators' expectations around men being 'always ready for sex' (e.g. 'you can't get it up'), in some cases the men themselves felt shame for perceiving themselves as failing to live up to this Man Box norm (such as Alexander's acceptance that he was not a 'real man').

Aggression and control: Holding control over household decisions and women's movements while using physical violence where necessary

Most of the men in our research did not report using aggression and control. However, some of their accounts of experiencing domestic abuse – particularly physical violence – left them feeling like they were stuck between a rock and a hard place – that they had learnt to be prepared to use physical violence to protect themselves or to respond to violence, but simultaneously knew that VAW was unacceptable. This is evident in the following two accounts, who would otherwise be seen as men who would not 'accept' violence if it was from another man:

I've been abused via a narcissistic sociopath who's unaware. Yesterday I was in pieces. But I'm a strapping man – no one gives me any trouble (Ellis).

In all honesty I'm not scared of no man, but I can't defend myself against a woman and she knows that so is using it to manipulate when she hits me or turns up kicking off (Jenson).

In these cases, the men found it difficult to respond in line with clashing expectations of what it means to 'be a man' – not to hit a woman, but not to 'accept' violence. For Alvin, his 'acceptance' of physical violence and his not being able to 'deal' with the problem meant that he gave himself the label of not being a 'real man':

She is a bully, a narcissistic woman, she is doing all this 'cause I've walked away from her. I've been physically hit by her in my home and in public and had things thrown at me – sharp objects – because I'm not man enough to deal with her issues (Alvin).

This led to a vicious circle – that often the justification for the abuse was that the victim-survivors were failing to live up to masculine expectations, then being subjected to this abuse and not responding to it compounded the sense that they were not 'real

men'. In some cases, the men may have also felt confused and unable to deal with the fact that emotional abuse they were receiving felt more hurtful and damaging than any physical violence they had experienced, given that the Man Box often encourages men to conceal and bury their emotions and deny their existence. Some of the men struggled with how to deal with abuse based around control over their lives (as opposed to physical force), and how it engendered anxiety and a sense of 'walking on eggshells'. Alex said that:

I get called names, I get called pathetic, she's asked me if I'm scared of her before and I said yes; then she said that's pathetic.

This is an inversion of the control which patriarchal gender norms expect men should possess over both their own lives and those of others.

Discussion

Our findings show how patriarchal norms shape men's experiences of abuse and their help-seeking. Multiple examples were found across each of the 'Man Box' pillars, which resulted in a range of negative impacts. Many of the participants talked explicitly about not feeling like a 'real man' because they were being subjected to domestic abuse, particularly when it was perpetrated by a woman. The act of telling people about this, sharing their experiences, and asking for support felt incongruent with the expectations placed on them as men, such as the notion that men should be self-sufficient. Shame and embarrassment about not meeting these norms was central to the men's accounts, such as being made to feel 'unmanly' for not meeting the gendered expectation of 'always being up for sex'.

Of course, women are embedded in patriarchal society too, and also internalise its norms and expectations. At a structural level, these serve to keep in place men's dominance over women. However, individuals navigate and relate to them in a wide range of different ways, and they can manifest in interpersonal relationships in complex forms, including the potential for women to exert power and control over men. Our findings indicate that far from subverting wider gender inequalities, women's perpetration of domestic abuse actually reproduces patriarchal norms. This can be observed in the many ways in which masculine expectations were being enforced and used as a tactic in women's abuse of their partners.

Previous research has detailed how individual women can gain some degree of power from going along with and reproducing patriarchal norms (McCann, 2022). This includes having power over some men, especially those deemed unable to live up to the standards of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Of course, using violence and abuse deviates from dominant feminine norms. However, there are numerous examples of women engaging in masculinised practices to achieve some level of power and status, such as by participating in 'boys' clubs' in the workplace. Indeed, regarding hierarchies of femininity, in Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) theorising of the gender order the most culturally valued form of femininity, 'emphasised femininity', is based around compliance with patriarchy. Paechter (2018) meanwhile argues that women who have power over others, including some men, exercise 'hegemonic femininity',

which does not necessarily entail stereotypically feminine practices and can involve being strong and powerful – while still legitimising male dominance more broadly. Ironically then, far from uprooting patriarchal structures of power, women's use of domestic abuse against men often appears to reinforce them.

As with men's domestic abuse against women, women's violence towards male partners also appears to be based upon entrenching a patriarchally shaped 'dominator' model of a monogamous intimate relationship (hooks, 2004), where one person has more power than the other, is 'in charge', makes most decisions, and is the active agent (while the other is in a more passive, supportive role). In patriarchal societies this is usually based upon men having power over women. However, given the complexities of individual personalities, positionalities, life-courses and relationships, it does not always follow this dynamic (Hester, 2009).

It is therefore important to recognise the unique ways in which men experience domestic abuse. The concept of coercive control is increasingly being applied in 'gender-neutral' ways in policy and practice (Barlow et al., 2020). However, Stark's (2007) theorisation is based on the many and diverse ways in which women are policed, *as women*, by male perpetrators. Women's behaviours are micro-regulated with the aim of entrapping them in everyday life, through gendered expectations about what it means to be a woman normalised in wider society. For men, however, it is the shame and embarrassment of failing to meet patriarchal norms that appears to be the key factor. This affects how the abuse is perpetrated, experienced, and whether, how and what support is sought. Rather than fear for their lives (although this was the case for some), the anxiety of others finding out what they had been experiencing 'as a man' was often the primary fear.

Stark discusses how coercive control is rooted in, and bolstered by, gender inequalities in wider society. These can compound women's experiences of abuse (e.g. leaving them with fewer economic resources from which to seek independence) in ways which do not apply for men. However, norms and expectations about 'being a man' can also create unique obstacles and forms of abuse for male victim-survivors. This has implications for the design and promotion of support services. Training for those supporting men should emphasise the role of masculine norms in men's lives, how these can vary in different communities, and the shame involved in not adhering to them. The research also reaffirms the importance of educational conversations on healthy, egalitarian, mutualistic relationships from a young age, and unpacking how these can be obstructed by gender norms.

Conclusions

Our research highlights the centrality of shame and humiliation around what it means to 'be a man' for male victim-survivors of domestic violence. This impacted how the men experienced the abuse and how they felt about seeking support. But it also appeared to shape how the abuse was perpetrated. Women perpetrators knew what would hurt and cause emotional pain, since they are also shaped by patriarchal ideas and expectations, and they often made use of norms about being a 'real man' as a key tactic of abuse. For instance, for men who viewed VAW as unacceptable (and who were thus already to some

extent ‘outside’ of the Man Box), their partner knowing this and pushing them on this gender norm caused them to feel ‘stuck’ about what to do, with there seemingly being no paths available to retaining their masculine identities.

When talking about male victim–survivors of domestic abuse then, it is clear that gender matters. If we are going to be able to understand men’s victimisation, their experiences and needs, taking gender into account is vital. Adopting a ‘gender-neutral’ approach in law, policy or practice which dismisses gendered dynamics is therefore unhelpful, not least for male victim–survivors themselves. This follows and adds weight to what others have argued, for example, Barlow et al. (2020) in relation to the gender neutrality of coercive control legislation and Hine et al. on the need to recognise the gender-specific needs of men in relation to practice. Far from challenging or invalidating feminist theorisations of domestic abuse, our research shows that the role of gender has great relevance to understanding and explaining men’s experiences and women’s use of violence, as this violence is strongly rooted in patriarchal norms surrounding relationships. There is a need for further feminist theorising and research in this area, to continue to expand our understanding of the complex and varied ways in which patriarchal structures and cultures impact on individuals, including male victim–survivors.

Studies about men’s help-seeking behaviours and their experiences of utilising support services are vital to understand how to best to help male victim–survivors. However, research in this area to date has largely side-stepped trying to explain why this abuse happens in the first place. This theoretical impasse in relation to men’s experiences of domestic abuse has serious implications when it comes to policy and practice, leading to confusion and mixed messaging in terms of how best to respond to this problem. We hope that this study advances these discussions by demonstrating the significance of gender norms and feminist theory to understanding domestic abuse against men.

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