

# Preventing Violence in Relationships: the PVR programme

**Gerry Heery** outlines a new programme in Northern Ireland that seeks to prevent domestic violence by working with men who want to change their controlling and violent behaviour.

**T**he reduction of political violence in Northern Ireland has made way for a greater awareness of the extent of domestic violence (McWilliams and McKiernan 1993). More recent research in England and Wales has also highlighted the extent of such behaviour, and the evidence indicates that the majority of perpetrators are men.

Domestic violence is a complex, fraught issue, encompassing behaviour from a low level of seriousness to life-threatening physical violence. It also involves a wide range of abusive verbal, emotional, psychological, sexual and economic behaviours. It is a matter for both civil and criminal law. It requires a multi-faceted and co-ordinated response involving consistent law enforcement (including realistic sentencing), relevant services for victims, general education and awareness-raising initiatives and interventions which allow perpetrators to address their behaviour. In Northern Ireland a government strategy has been put in place which takes domestic violence seriously and includes significant efforts to tackle it. (DHSS & NIO 1995).

The Preventing Violence in Relationships programme has been

developed specifically within this context. The programme is a response to the slowly emerging trend of some men wishing to address their use of violent behaviour. These men were experiencing the unhappiness, despair and other negative consequences that intimate family violence brings both to them and their victims. However, unless they had actually been convicted of an offence and required to undertake a programme, there were no means by which they could address their unacceptable behaviour. Significantly, similar views were also being expressed by some women who were still committed to their relationship but wanted their partner's abusive behaviour to stop.

A range of organisations such as Women's Aid, Relate, social services, various churches, politicians and community groups and the police were consulted about the development of the PVR programme. There was general agreement about the need for a preventative educational programme for men. It was recognised that such a programme should be based on the unacceptability of any violence within relationships, and the protection and safety of victims.

The first programme began in 1999. Men were offered the opportunity to participate on the following basis:

1. The acceptance of a problem with violent and controlling behaviour and commitment to address it meaningfully.
2. Agreement that his wife or partner can be contacted independently and offered information about and support from relevant services for women experiencing domestic violence.
3. A declaration that he is not currently facing any relevant criminal charges.
4. Absence of serious mental health or addiction problems.

## Programme content

The PVR programme is founded on

the processes of adult education and self-awareness in assisting people to make positive change in their lives. It encourages participants to fully explore their behaviour and the consequences for their partners and children, to identify and change the beliefs and attitudes which underpin their abusive behaviour and to develop respect and equality in their relationships.

The programme comprises three stages of 26 sessions and takes place over a period of nine to twelve months. The length of the programme reflects the view that changing long established ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour is not something that can be done quickly and easily. Real change is slow and difficult and requires commitment and motivation.

### Stage 1 "Raising Awareness"

These are eight sessions in which a range of basic knowledge is introduced. This includes a definition of domestic violence and its effect on women and children. Masculinity, power issues, emotional intelligence, and self-assessment are also included.

### Stage 2 "Working at Change"

These are 12 sessions involving a more detailed examination by participants of their actual controlling behaviours and relating it to the knowledge base covered in Stage 1. The following critical areas, which were identified in the definition of domestic violence within Northern Ireland, are covered in detail:

1. Physical violence
2. Threatening and intimidatory behaviour
3. Sexually abusive behaviour
4. Economically controlling behaviour
5. Isolating behaviour
6. Verbally and emotionally abusive behaviour.

Two sessions are spent on each of the above topics. The behaviour is explored in detail, using examples. Participants are encouraged to compare their own behaviour to the

topic under consideration and analyse their behaviour in terms of their thinking, feelings and actions, as well as effects on partners and children. The sequence finishes with identifying ways of moving to more positive behaviour.

### Stage 3 "Maintaining the Change"

The final six sessions are spread over a longer period (approximately every 3 weeks). In these sessions a range of issues are addressed: self-monitoring; relapse; communication; conflict; belief systems; lifestyle; and planning for the future.

### The way forward

There are already indications that the programme can be helpful to some men by encouraging a process of positive change. A small-scale independent evaluation has shown positive outcomes (McGirr 2000). In addition, the programme manual has now been published and this may encourage other agencies to become involved with the issue of domestic violence. The manual outlines underpinning values and the theoretical framework upon which the programme is built. It addresses risk issues and provides full contents of all 26 sessions and accompanying overheads, exercises and facilitator's notes (Heery 2000).

### Conclusion

The PVR programme is still in its infancy and it is too soon to reach definitive conclusions about its effectiveness. There remains a need for ongoing, thorough and independent evaluation.

It is important not to make false promises and raise unrealistic expectations. Educational programmes can only be one small part of society's response to domestic violence, and may not be relevant in all situations.

Programmes need to be aligned to broader co-ordinated responses. Nevertheless, they can offer something constructive and challenging to those men who are prepared to address their use of abusive and controlling behaviours. Furthermore, they can promote positive messages about respectful behaviours within relationships which will spread ripples into the wider community.

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# Abuse and Older People

Awareness of the prevalence of elder abuse is growing. Rachel Pain describes new information on the risks for older people of violence and victimisation.

Perceptions about older people and crime within the criminal justice professions have recently undergone significant change. While the traditional stereotype of the older victim as very fearful but at very low risk of violence still prevails in some quarters, recent research and campaigning by pressure groups have highlighted the reality, and complexity, of the victimisation risks that older people face.

In part, this turnaround has been led by growing evidence that older people are no more likely as a group to fear crime than younger people. For example, the BCS (British Crime Survey) suggests that men aged 16-24 are twenty times more likely to be victims of violence than men aged 65 and over, and younger women are eight times more likely to be victims than older women (Mirrlees-Black et al, 1998). Older people of both sexes also worry less than younger people about most crimes. While they have been described in the past as being particularly vulnerable to the damaging effects of fear of crime, in a new question in the 1998 BCS, eight per cent of the total sample said that fear of

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crime had a great effect on their quality of life and older people were only slightly more likely to agree with this statement at ten per cent. Council and housing association tenants (14 per cent), people with disabilities (15 per cent), and those on low incomes (16 per cent) were all more likely than older people to agree.

Such evidence should not be interpreted as meaning that there are not specific risks for some older people in certain places. What the increasingly focused and careful questioning in the BCS is drawing out is that 'older people' is too general a category, masking too much social and economic diversity, to be meaningful. Frail older people living alone in high crime, low income areas have higher risks of street violence, as well as community harassment, 'a growing problem in which older people are scapegoated and victimised in community settings' (Biggs, 1996).

Most significantly, however, awareness is growing of elder abuse, which can be defined as the physical, sexual, psychological and financial abuse of older people taking place in domestic or institutional contexts

(McCreadie, 1996). One of the problems with the BCS is that it has not succeeded in highlighting much violence or abuse against older people in private space. We know that older women are less likely to report domestic violence to surveys than young women; and the method now used by the BCS for detailing experiences of sexual victimisation, stalking and illegal drug use is restricted to people aged 16-59. In pilot studies, older people were found to be less capable at entering answers on the laptop computers used for these questions. So knowledge about attacks in public space may be increasingly accurate for older as well as younger people, but knowledge about private violence is not.

Data on the prevalence of elder abuse in Britain are scarce, but international studies have suggested that it may affect as many as one in 10 people who are aged over 65 each year. A recent analysis of 1,421 calls received by Action on Elder Abuse showed that abuse was more likely in people's own homes, that women were more likely to be victims than men, and that abuse appears to increase with age (Jenkins et al, 2000). Elder

abuse therefore challenges several common assumptions about older people and violence, not least that older people do not themselves commit violent offences. Some 'elder abuse' is domestic violence with a long history between spouses who have aged (Whittaker, 1996). The patterning of elder abuse also underlines the fact that violence reflects and reinforces social inequalities of age, just as it does those of race, gender and sexual orientation.

To date elder abuse has largely been viewed and treated as a medical and social welfare issue, rather than one for the criminal justice system. Although there have been calls for adult protective legislation, including recommendations from the Law Commission in 1995, the government has recently stopped short of creating a new criminal offence specifically covering elder abuse, instead promoting multi-agency co-operation to deal more effectively with instances of abuse which are reported (Jenkins et al, 2000). Action on Elder Abuse continues to campaign for primary legislation, better training of staff within the statutory services to which older victims might turn for

help, and further research to improve knowledge about elder abuse.

It can be argued that the lateness and inadequacy of responses to elder abuse reflect both the traditional sanctity and immunity of private space and family matters from public scrutiny, and the nature of the social relations involved. Older victims of abuse still have a different status to child victims; though they may be as powerless and as dependent on their abusers, they lack the same legal protection. Equally, cases of elder abuse rarely make the headlines, except for care home scandals involving neglect. The relative attention given to this problem involving the oldest and most frail members of society is a reflection of the value in which they are held.

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