

# Male Victims of Domestic Violence

David Gadd, Stephen Farrall, Damian Dallimore and Nancy Lombard report findings of a recent research study into the experience of male victims of domestic violence.

The Home Office (2003) has invited views on how it should respond to the 'unmet needs' of male victims of domestic violence – a population it has identified through successive British Crime Surveys. On the basis of research conducted in Scotland, this article warns against a response dictated by prevalence statistics elicited from crime surveys and/or the assumption of comparability between male and female victims.

The Scottish Crime Survey (SCS) 2000 reported that 19 per cent of women and 8 per cent of men had experienced either 'threats' or 'force' from their partners or ex-partners at some point in their lives (MVA, 2000). Towards the end of 2001 the Scottish Executive commissioned us to explore the nature of the 'abuse' these men had experienced and the context in which it had occurred (Gadd *et al* 2002). Forty-four of the ninety men who had disclosed experiences of force or threat by (ex)partners in the SCS 2000 agreed to answer further questions for the benefit of our research project.

## Victimisation experienced

The Scottish Executive's own analysis of the SCS data had already uncovered some sex differences amongst the population of 'victims of domestic abuse'. Relative to female victims of domestic abuse, those men identified as 'victims' were less likely to have been repeatedly victimised or seriously injured. Only about a third of abused men said that they considered themselves to be 'victims of domestic violence' compared to nearly four-fifths of abused women.

Our analysis of the SCS dataset revealed that considering oneself a victim was closely related to whether or not one had been injured. It also showed that male victims were generally financially better off than female victims, more likely to be in full-time employment, and less likely to be living in rented accommodation. In Scotland, women who had been abused were more likely than both men who had been abused and non-abused women to report ill health. Conversely, men who reported being abused by (ex)partners reported similar levels of health to non-abused men. Of those who had been abused, only two per cent of men, compared to 15 per cent of women indicated that they felt fearful in their own homes. In short, the 'typical' female victim was more severely victimised, more fearful, unhealthier, and less financially independent than both the 'typical' male victim and other non-victimised women.

## Getting behind the data

Our subsequent follow-up interviews with the population of men the SCS identified as 'male victims' suggested this label was not always appropriate. Thirteen of the 44 men who took part in our research claimed to have never experienced threats or force from their partners or ex-partners. In fact, two of these 13 said they had never had partners. The other 11 explained that they had misconstrued the focus of the original self-

completion questionnaire, reporting incidents that were violent but not domestic, (e.g. fights with other men in the street) or 'domestic', in the broader sense, but not ostensibly violent (e.g. vandalism or theft).

Of those 31 men who confirmed (by telephone or post) that they had actually been abused, 22 engaged in face-to-face interviews with us. Over half of these 22 men described being subject to potentially physically serious (i.e. injurious or life-threatening) assaults. However, only three of these men had required hospital treatment, and only a couple indicated that these incidents were part of a continuum of controlling or fear-inducing behaviours that had, at some point, been a regular feature of their relationships. In short, most of the abuse described to us by these 22 men did not entail the infliction of serious physical harm, the incitement of fear, or the men's subjection to relationships characterised by control and intimidation. In fact, two of the men counted as victims in the SCS described nothing more than 'heated arguments'. Thirteen admitted having abused their partners whilst being abused themselves.

## Perpetrators and victims

Although only one of the men who we re-interviewed admitted to being the 'primary perpetrator' of abuse in his relationship, four others claimed that the abuse they suffered was no worse than that which they had perpetrated against their partners. In three of these four cases, however, the men described committing violent acts against their partners that appeared to us to be more severe than the violence perpetrated against them. Eight others admitted retaliating abusively against partners who had abused them. Some of these 'retaliators' considered the force and threats they had endured to be relatively trivial. For example, one man recalled his ex-wife threatening to kill him, but explained that "it was all talk" and he was "never really frightened of her". Another retaliator described being hit "now and again" but said he was never "battered".

Some of those men who retaliated had, nevertheless, endured physically and psychologically damaging forms of abuse; being struck, cut, or (more rarely) stabbed with household items or knives, punched in the face, and being subject to malicious allegations. Coincidentally, the only man in our sample to be subjected to a continuum of physical, emotional and sexual abuse was also the only openly gay man we interviewed. This man's retaliation took the form of "fighting" back. Other retaliators had engaged in fist-fights, dragged their wives down the stairs, or pinned their partners against the wall.

Only nine of the men we re-interviewed said they had never threatened their partners or used force against them. Three of these 'non-retaliatory victims' described relatively isolated, but serious, acts of violence in otherwise peaceful or brief relationships. One described a relationship with a partner who wanted to leave him shortly after they married, and another's ex-wife had encouraged him – unsuccessfully – to strike her.



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possibly to generate grounds for a divorce. Five of the nine 'non-retaliatory victims' described abuse of a more prolonged nature. These five included: a former tax inspector whose wife's violent temper made him terrified for himself and his children; an ex-soldier, who described a troubled relationship which culminated in his partner running at him with a knife, emptying their joint account, and aborting their unborn child; and a sales manager who described an ex-partner who would "go mental...two or three times a day" hitting him in the face and body during the final six months of their relationship. They also included a 26 year-old unemployed man who claimed to have lived with three partners who had abused him physically and emotionally. Yet, in what was one of our lengthiest interviews, this man offered little detail to substantiate his victimisation claims and provided several stories that hinted at an extensive denial of his own abusiveness.

To summarise, some of our respondents had endured genuinely harrowing experiences whilst others had experienced troubling incidents, but not prolonged forms of domestic abuse. Some had not experienced domestic abuse at all. Consequently, we concluded that rates of domestic abuse against men in Scotland were much lower than the standard analyses of the SCS suggested, and that it was misleading to attribute 'victim status' to those men who explicitly indicated that they did not see themselves as 'victims of domestic violence'.

### Meeting the needs of male victims

Assuming that there are similar complications underlying the findings of the British Crime Survey, then the Home Office probably confronts a population of 'male victims' that comprise a small number of men who have been repeatedly abused by partners, have never or hardly ever retaliated, and have lived in fear for themselves or their children. This small population coexists alongside a larger population of men who have felt

forced, threatened, or frightened by partners at some point in their lives, but do not perceive themselves as 'victims of domestic violence' and have not lived in fear. Some members of this population will be more terrifying than terrified. Others will be much more afraid of being provoked, losing their relationships, or feeling humiliated than they are of being 'battered'. Still others will have experienced relatively isolated and/or trivial incidents of abuse, which they rapidly forgot about.

If it wishes to address the 'unmet needs' of this diverse population, the government must equip practitioners with a framework that enables them to work with men whose status as 'victims' and 'perpetrators' cannot be easily assessed and sometimes only becomes apparent in the course of intervening. Models of intervention that provide men with similar service provision to that currently available to women, or otherwise distribute resources on the basis of general sex differences in victimisation rates are unlikely to live up to this challenge. ■

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### References

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