

Domestic violence and women with learning disabilities

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A PLACE TO INSPIRE / AN APPROACH TO CHALLENGE



Background

There is a huge body of evidence regarding the general population (e.g. Mullender et al 2002, Walby and Allen 2004) showing that it domestic violence against women is very common and very damaging to individuals and wider society

Background

Small body of research on domestic violence of women with physical and sensory impairments from countries such as Canada and the US (McNamara and Brooker 2000, Yoshida et al 2009), and more recently in the UK (Thiara et al 2011)

Domestic violence and women with physical/sensory impairments

- **US research suggests around 85% of women with disabilities experience domestic violence (Feuerstein 1997)**
- **Canadian research suggests women with disabilities had 40% greater likelihood of domestic violence than non-disabled women (Brownridge 2006)**
- **UK research suggests that women with disabilities are often seen by perpetrators as ‘easy targets’ for abuse. Also that disabled women (despite their greater need), have less access to specialist and general domestic violence services (Thiara et al 2011)**

Domestic violence and women with physical/sensory impairments

This literature has uncovered types of domestic abuse unique to women with disabilities, e.g.

- **Withholding or sabotaging needed equipment (wheelchairs, hearing aids, guide dogs, etc.)**
- **Leaving women in physically uncomfortable or embarrassing positions for a long time (e.g. leaving a woman sitting on the toilet all day)**
- **Threats that leaving the relationship will result in institutionalisation for the woman**

Ballin and Freyer 2012:1085

- **“Abusive intimate partners exploit the challenges presented by the disability, knowing that this will seriously limit a woman’s ability to take action”**

Vulnerability of women with learning disabilities

The kinds of factors perpetrators might exploit are:

- Low self esteem, lack of confidence
- Compliance
- Social isolation
- Desire for companionship and intimacy
- Lack of knowledge about how to leave, where to go, sources of support
- Chaotic /poor parenting histories
- The women's fears about losing their children

Women with learning disabilities are women

‘Diagnostic overshadowing’ is a long standing problem

Domestic violence services need to be more responsive to the issues women face because of their learning disability

Learning disability services need to be more responsive to the risks and realities people with learning disabilities face because they are women

Existing research: Walter- Brice et al 2012

Findings from small qualitative study interviewing 5 women with learning disabilities:

- the women experienced multiple forms of abuse from their partners, much of it severe, including the use of weapons;
- that abuse, harassment and threats continued after the end of the relationship
- that responses from Police and Social Services were minimal and the women were left unprotected (although children were removed from their mothers)

Existing research: Pitka and Wendt (2014)

Findings from small qualitative study interviewing 5 women with learning disabilities:

- The women had all experienced rejection in their childhoods and sought a sense of belonging in adult intimate relationships, even if they were abusive
- Low social status increases their vulnerability. The women “settle with or accept abuse in their lives to gain social value that has often been missing throughout their life course” (p.12)

Existing research: Douglas and Harpur (2016)

Findings from small qualitative study interviewing 6 women with learning disabilities:

- **Physical violence common “often to a level requiring hospitalisation”**
- **Financial abuse also very common, as well as perpetrator-induced social and physical isolation**
- **Learning disability specific issues**

McCarthy, M. et al (2016)

Domestic violence and women with learning disabilities

2012-15

Researchers:

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Funded by NIHR School for Social Care Research

Interviews - Biographical Details

15 women with mild and moderate learning disabilities

- **Age range: 20-67**
- **Ethnicity: 12 White British**
3 Bangladeshi / Indian
- **Relationship status: Married-6**
Not married- 9
- **Had children: Yes – 7,**
No- 8
- **Location: Kent and South East /East London**

Qualitative data collection and analysis

- **Semi- structured, one-to-one interviews**
- **In-depth, wide-ranging**
- **Often distressing for the women, but none of them wanted to stop and shorten the interviews**
- **Some of the women had keyworkers or other supporters with them during the interview**
- **Used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to guide the data analysis**

Findings: Themes emerging from the data

Two stark facts:

There is nothing about having a learning disability which protects women from extreme domestic violence.

The full range of mental, physical and sexual cruelty which is inflicted on other women, is also inflicted on women with learning disabilities.

Findings: Themes emerging from the data

- **Severity of the abuse**
- **Psychological impact**
- **Women's resistance strategies**
- **Perpetrator issues**
- **Seeking help**

Severity of the physical violence

- **Serious injuries:** many women reported very serious assaults and potentially life threatening injuries inc. a head injury from being pushed downstairs, being strangled and being stabbed with a knife.
- **Use of weapons including knives, bottles and heavy objects**

“ He would normally like push me against the wall, grabbed my neck, I couldn’t breathe... like last time, he’s got like a scarf and tried to put that around my neck...the worst thing was the strangling”

“He pushed me down the stairs and I was in hospital in a coma. I said to him ‘I am so fed up with you, look at the state of me now. I was perfect before, like any other normal person, but look at me now. Cos I had no hair, I had all staples in my head. I told him to bugger off’.”

“I felt really scared of him. I thought one day I’m gonna end up in a coffin” .

High frequency, long duration

“I know it was every week, but I can’t be sure if it was every day”

“How often did the abuse happen? To put it bluntly, everyday”

“Every week”

“It was 12 years of abuse”

End of relationship is not always the end of abuse

Violence, abuse and harassment often did not end when the relationship did. In fact, it often got worse:

“It got worse towards the end , because after we split it got even worser. He would say he would kill me, he would say if I can’t have you, no one else can.”

“ He would phone and text me and say ‘I will find where you live. I’ll burn your house on fire with your kids in it”

“Leaving don’t make no difference...they still come back for you”

Violence during pregnancy

ALL of the women who had been pregnant whilst with an abusive partner experienced physical assault whilst pregnant

“When I was carrying my son, he put his hands round my throat five times”

Two women miscarried babies after violent assaults

“When I was pregnant he thumped me, kicked me. I lost one of the babies – and there was two, I didn’t even realise I had twins. I went to hospital, I was bleeding”

Sexual violence

- **Common**

“He normally forced me to have sex and stuff like that and take my clothes off and I tried to put them back on again”

- **In front of children or when children present in the home**

“He raped me in front of my daughters...he threatened to cut me with a knife in my private area, he said that in front of my 7 year old.”

- **Generally harder for the women to talk about**

Financial abuse

“ He took all my money”

“He wanted my money always, for the drugs, he’s left me in a lot of debt which is what I’m still struggling with now”

“ I said to him, why don’t you pay the bills first, then whatever’s left over of it then go to the pub. Nope, got a slap right in the face.”

“ He would ask me for money and if I said no, he’d twist my arms. He took a lot, all the money I had been saving up”

Verbal abuse

“ He called me a bitch, a bastard and a liar”

“He called me a fat bitch, ugly and a slag”

“He used to call me names in front of the children and I think it’s something they do pick up on, kids, they don’t understand what the names actually mean, but they pick up on it. I thought it would grow off them, but it doesn’t, it stays with them.”

Psychological and emotional abuse

“ He gave me a wire and told me to strangle myself, he wanted me to suicide myself, he wanted me to die.”

“Because I had learning disabilities and needed support, he used to drive that in my face.”

“He used to take the piss out of me because of my learning disability. He used to show me up in front of his mates if I couldn't work something out. He'd say 'you're useless, you can't do nothing'.”

Home Office definition of coercive control

- **Controlling behaviour** is: a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.
- **Coercive behaviour** is: an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.

Common examples of coercive control

- Unreasonable and non-negotiable demands.
- Stalking – surveillance and unwanted contact.
- Cruelty.
- Destroying the partner's other relationships and isolating her/him from friends, family members, co-workers and others.
- Restricting daily activities.
- Coercion – a combination of demands, threats of negative consequences for noncompliance, and surveillance
- Manipulation through minimization, denial, lies, promises, etc.
- Threats and intimidation.
- Excuses, rationalizations and blame.
- Stifling the partner's independence.
- Controlling partner's access to information and services.
- Sexual abuse and violence; reproductive coercion.
- Economic control and exploitation.
- Identity abuse.
- Physical violence
- Deprivation of liberty, equality and personhood; treating their partner and children as objects.
- Extreme jealousy, possessiveness and ridiculous accusations of infidelity.
- Punishing the partner and children for infractions (and imaginary infractions) of their rules.
- Ignoring their partner's needs, opinions and feelings, and the harm that their behaviour does to her/him.
- Separation violence.

Coercive control

- *“When I got up first thing I had to do everything he wanted. If I didn’t, he would hurt me straightaway. I had to bring him breakfast in bed. If I didn’t, I’d get a clap round the head...I had to just leave the baby to cry ..to sort him out first”*
- *“I had to make sure I didn’t put a step wrong”*
- *“He wouldn’t let me go to work, wouldn’t let me have my friends”*
- *“He took my mobile and sold it”*
- *“I wanted do different things, take my son out on days out...he made me stop them, he....everything was always about him”*

Deliberately isolating the women from their friends and family

1) Partners stopped women from going to see their family and friends, and;

2) Used various tactics to ensure the family and friends stopped seeing the women :

- *“He was nasty to them outside [neighbours]I lost all my friendships with the neighbours...he made it so I didn't have anyone to talk to and things like that”*
- *“My oldest, kindest friends, he accused them of stealing, so they wouldn't come here again.”*

Deliberately isolating the women from their friends and family (2)

- Humiliating woman in front of her friends/family so that they stopped visiting (eg refusing to put trousers on when visitors came)

- Some women were even isolated from their own children:

“He wouldn’t even let me see my children...once I’d lost my kids [in care], he said ‘get rid of their photos, your kids are not coming back’ ”

Psychological impact on women (and their children)

Low self-esteem

“I felt hatred, towards myself”

“I was putting myself down, I couldn’t even look in the mirror.”

Mental health problems, inc. self-harm and suicidal thoughts

“I was very, very low, I was on anti-depressants and it got highered and highered”

“I wasn’t getting any help...I took an overdose, a small one”,

“I tend to want to take my life...and I have got a very bad habit of trying to do that”

Psychological impact on women (and their children)(2)

Impact on children

“I moved 10 times [with 2 young children]”

“There was screaming matches and he used to make my son [aged 9] believe it was my fault...but my son never liked to see me upset, so he always used to be on my side”

“He was dragging me and hitting me and my daughter [aged 4] was slapping him, saying ‘Let mummy go’. He turned around and said to her ‘Shut up before you get the same’”

Women's resistance strategies

- Verbally resisting/standing up to him
- Sometimes hitting back
- Rejecting his apologies

“He'd come back later, all nice and I would say ‘You know those flowers? Stick them full up your backside, because I don't want anything from you now’”

“Sorry is not good enough, a liar will never change, a leopard will never change its spots”

- Using contraception secretly
- Not covering up for him
- Multiple attempts to leave

Perpetrator issues

The violent partners generally did not have learning disabilities themselves but did tend to:

- **have mental health problems, and/ or drug and alcohol dependency (minority had serious physical health problems too)**
- **be jealous and manipulative**
- **make threats of self-harm/suicide/ murder (inc. of children)**
- **have a history of abusing previous partners/children,**
- **be cruel to animals**
- **have criminal records /be known to Police already**

Seeking help

General points

- A lot of professionals were aware of the abuse the women were experiencing, especially health care workers.
- Lack of accessible information

If the women did report:

Minority reported good experiences

- *“My social worker brought me to a safe place where people could look after me and take care of me”*
- *“The Police were really helpful, really good”*

Seeking Help (2)

Majority experienced problems in seeking help

- **Lack of support re. children** – *“when we ask for help, there’s no one to help us. They seem to take your children away instead of helping you [sobbing] [5 children removed]”*
- *“when I phoned Social Services to say that my Ex had our daughter living with him, even though the Court said he couldn’t have her, they said ‘we can’t do nothing about that now, she’s not on the computer no more’.*
- *“after my kids were taken away, I wasn’t sure if I still had a social worker or what...I phoned up and they said I was on a duty team.”*

Discussion - Conceptualising domestic violence as it effects women with learning disabilities

- **As an individual problem (instead of the widespread social problem that it is, historically and cross culturally)**
- **As a problem to be solved largely by the woman herself, usually by leaving her home**
- **Failure to make links with other, similar, crimes against people with learning disabilities**
- **What is the role of the State?**

Two stark facts

- **There is nothing about having a learning disability which protects women from extreme domestic violence.**
- **The full range of mental, physical and sexual cruelty which is inflicted on other women, is also inflicted on women with learning disabilities.**

What can health and social care professionals do?

Recommendations

- Follow the NICE guidelines 2014:
“Health and social care service managers and professionals should ensure *front-line staff in all services* are trained to recognise the indicators of domestic violence and abuse”

This research suggests the 'red flags' are:

Women with learning disabilities in relationships with men

- **with no learning disabilities,**
- **with mental health problems,**
- **drug/alcohol problems,**
- **who do not work,**
- **who move in with the women very early into the relationship**
- **Plus...**

Red flags (2)

- **When woman becomes more isolated (less contact with family, friends, professionals, her children (if in care))**
- **When the woman seems to have less money than before she meet him**
- **Signs of physical injury (likelihood of multiple forms of abuse)**

Recommendations cont.

- **Health and social care professionals need a greater remit to work with those with a mild and moderate learning disability.**
- **Health and social care professionals need a far greater awareness of domestic violence, its dynamics and especially of coercive control**

Recommendations cont.

- **Health and social care professionals should make women aware of relevant laws and how to invoke them e.g. “Clare’s Law”**
- **Health and social care professionals should seek to improve the lives of women with mild and moderate learning disabilities in a broad sense eg. social networks, jobs, interests and activities**
- **Advocacy, self-advocacy, women’s groups**
- **Accessible information**

Joined up thinking and working –H&SC, Police, domestic violence services

In England, we have:

- **Adult Social Care system is in crisis and ADASS has warned that the cuts are making the system "unsustainable"**
- **Cuts to the police service, which will inevitably hinder, not help, their response to women who report domestic violence**
- **Huge cuts to funding of domestic violence services and refuges are closing all the time**

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