

Towards Gender Equality: Executive Summary

Overview

This exploratory research project examined male victims of domestic violence and abuse in Northern Ireland, for the Men's Advisory Project (MAP) and funded by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, as part of the Regional Strategic Group for the Tackling Violence at Home Strategy. The study looked at the experiences and needs of male victims and examined awareness of and attitudes towards these men in the general population. It also examined service provision for male victims, highlighted a number of gaps in services and made a set of recommendations for change.

Background

1. This research was formulated as part of the Men's Advisory Project's five year Strategic Plan in 2006, as part of a recognised need for an evidence base on the needs of male victims in Northern Ireland.
2. MAP exists to provide confidential counselling, information and referral services to men experiencing domestic abuse and relationship breakdown in Northern Ireland. It also provides counselling for men and women who identify problems managing anger.
3. The study is one of the first pieces of research on male victims of domestic violence and abuse in Northern Ireland and is thus of an exploratory nature.
4. The project is in line with the 2005 and 2007 Tackling Violence at Home action plans to support male victims, regardless of sexual orientation.

Aims

1. Gain a detailed understanding of the experience of male victims of domestic violence and abuse in Northern Ireland.
2. Examine the societal context by looking at public awareness and attitudes.
3. Review the current state of services to highlight gaps and recommend improvements.

Literature on male victims

1. Research shows females represent the majority of victims of domestic violence and abuse, however male victims are often not included in research and thus are under researched. Some research has shown that the number of male victims is higher than was previously recognised.
2. The most recent figures from Northern Ireland show that 25% of domestic crimes the Police Service Northern Ireland dealt with in 2008-2009 were male victims (PSNI 2010), while the Northern Ireland Crime Survey found that 8% of their sample reported being a victim of domestic violence and abuse.
3. Estimating prevalence accurately is complicated by contrasting definitions of domestic abuse and a tendency for males to underreport due to a lack of awareness about the issue as well as stigma and embarrassment.
4. A small amount of in depth research on male victims exists which highlights that men may experience less physical violence than women, but experience a range of other forms of abuse which has serious negative effects.
5. Research also shows that men are less likely to recognise abuse behaviour as domestic abuse, are less likely to seek help and often live up to stereotypes of masculinity in not talking about the issues.
6. There is also a lack of research on specific groups of male victims such as older, disabled, ethnic minority and gay victims of domestic violence and abuse.

7. Research has highlighted that social norms and attitudes play an important role in domestic violence abuse and attitudes prevail that violence against men is less serious than violence against women.

Current Study Methodology

1. The study used in depth semi-structured qualitative interviews to examine the experience of male victims of domestic violence and abuse and used a self-recruiting method to access participants. Advertising of the study was spread through Northern Ireland using posters, information leaflets, local radio and a press release.
2. Attitudes and awareness of male victims were examined with a quantitative questionnaire spread through agencies in the region and using a convenience sample.
3. Service provision was reviewed using a discursive approach which reviewed policy documents and involved interviews of key service agencies, as well as the input of male victims on their experience of services in case study interviews.

Key findings

1. The final sample of case study participants was 13 men, while 477 participants completed the attitudes questionnaire and 13 agencies were interviewed as part of the service review.
2. The case studies found that domestic abuse was precipitated by a range of factors including financial difficulties, alcohol and drugs, mental health problems, a history of trauma and abuse, and affairs. Often the victim did not know at the time why the abuse was occurring.
3. Male victims lacked awareness of domestic abuse issues and did not identify themselves as victims at the time, and this finding was supported by results from the

attitudes questionnaire which found that men showed less awareness of the types of abusive behaviours and related issues.

4. Attitudes questionnaire participants did not generally view domestic abuse against men as an issue which was unimportant, however domestic abuse against women was viewed as more serious than against men by some participants while most thought that female perpetrators were less likely to be arrested than male perpetrators.
5. Case study participants did not report experiencing fear of their personal safety despite being in threatening situations.
6. Case study participants reported responding to domestic abuse by avoiding situations, trying to problem solve and appease their partners, while most of the participants did not hit back (although three did).
7. Case study participants tended to hide domestic abuse incidents and those who did tell family and friends were strongly influenced by their positive or negative responses. Five participants reported to the police while others reported to solicitors and general practitioners
8. The attitudes questionnaire found that men were less likely than women to say they would report abuse to a range of agencies a higher percentage of men said they would not to seek help at all if a victim, while gay men were even less likely to say they would report the abuse.
9. Men reported a number of barriers to reporting abuse including a lack of recognition, embarrassment and stigma, a lack of awareness of services and a perceived lack of support, as well as concern over losing contact with their children. A higher percentage of men in the attitudes questionnaire also reported most of these issues as more of a barrier than women.
10. Men reported a range of responses from services – some found police attitudes positive and others found them negative, while the advice of solicitors was often not to pursue legal orders and men often found it very difficult to get action taken.
11. Gaps in services were highlighted including a lack of practical advocacy and support, a lack of regional access to what services do exist, no specialist refuge for male



victims, no specialist floating support, lack of use of the domestic violence helpline and a lack of tailored services for older, disabled, minority ethnic and gay victims.

Discussion

1. The study shows that males can experience a range of types of domestic abuse regardless of their background and that this can include very serious physical incidents.
2. The lack of perception of risk to personal safety suggests service providers cannot apply the same forms of risk assessment to male victims as they do with female victims.
3. Men felt that services were tailored towards females and that family law and courts would not rule in their favour even where they had evidence that they were the victim.
4. Attitudes and perceptions seem to be very important to experience of domestic abuse given the influence they had on male victims' response. Although most people will not directly experience domestic abuse, they are more likely to know someone who does and so their attitudes and subsequent response is of importance.
5. Males showed a lack of awareness of domestic abuse, a lack of awareness of services and there was a general perception that they would not be supported to the same degree as female victims. Agencies also reported this lack of awareness as an issue and while awareness remains low amongst men it will be difficult to reach out to victims or to accurately estimate the prevalence of the problem.
6. More work is required on male victims in general and particularly on older, disabled, ethnic minority and gay male victims of domestic violence and abuse.

Conclusions

1. This research presents important evidence of the experience of male victims and the work that needs to be done to improve our response to these men.

2. The study is small and exploratory and research momentum is required to improve our knowledge of these issues.
3. The research is not an attempt to undermine female victims or draw resources for them, rather to improve access and response for men who suffer domestic violence and abuse.

Recommendations

1. Awareness raising is needed to educate men about the issues and to improve agency response.
2. Training needs to be improved and available on an ongoing basis for those agencies who are required to identify and support these men.
3. Male victims required practical support and advocacy including floating support and regional access to support.
4. The police should monitor and ensure consistency of response to male victims and work to improve confidence in men that they will be supportive of them if they report domestic abuse, while more detailed recording of incidents should be put in place.
5. The Domestic Violence Helpline should conduct outreach to male victims using advertising and terminology which is aimed specifically at men.
6. Older victims of domestic abuse require an ongoing service such as the Elder Abuse campaign offered by AGE NI which is tailored to their needs.
7. More work is required to improve identification of abuse against disabled victims and their access to services.
8. Services should also be accessible to ethnic minority victims which should use minority ethnic agencies to advise them on the appropriateness of advertising and services.
9. Training and awareness for victims of same sex domestic abuse should be improved and agencies should reach out more effectively to gay and bisexual men in terms of the terminology y use and presenting their service as safe and secure for these men to use.
10. Further research is necessary to answer the questions raised in the study and to increase progress on the issue.