

Summary

Gendered experiences of justice and domestic abuse

Evidence for policy and
practice

By Women's Aid, Hester, M.,
Walker, S-J., and Williamson, E.



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Summary

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With thanks to the survivors of domestic abuse interviewed for the *Justice, Inequality and Gender-based Violence Project* and the staff at Women's Aid.

This is a summary of our findings. Please see the main report for more detail:

Women's Aid, Hester, M., Walker, S-J., and Williamson, E. (2021) *Gendered experiences of justice and domestic abuse. Evidence for policy and practice*. Bristol: Women's Aid

<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/evidence-hub/research-and-publications/>

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Women's Aid and the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol have been working together to add to and update the evidence base on the gendered nature of domestic abuse. We conducted research into gendering discourses and the role they play in women's experiences of domestic abuse as part of a Knowledge Exchange Fellowship (funded by an Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Award – ESRC IAA) between the University of Bristol and Women's Aid.

Methods

Our research builds on the work done as part of the ESRC-funded *Justice, Inequality and Gender-Based Violence Project* (the Justice Project, grant number: ES/M010090/1) between 2015 and 2018. We analysed a subset of 37 transcripts of interviews with female domestic abuse survivors (all had experienced abuse from male intimate partners) conducted as part of the Justice Project. We chose the sample purposely to ensure that it reflected the diversity of the survivors interviewed in terms of social class, ethnic background, age and experiences of disability.

We used methods of critical discourse analysis to analyse the transcripts. We understand discourse as a way of conceptualising or 'making sense' of society. This is a dynamic understanding of discourse as something that both reflects and constructs social reality. We used critical discourse analysis as a way of identifying who holds the power and who is marginalised by dominant ways of conceptualising social reality.

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Our main research question was:

How do gendering discourses manifest themselves in female survivors' accounts of their experiences of domestic abuse, their own perceptions of domestic abuse and their experiences of responses to domestic abuse?

We understand gendering discourses to be those conceptualisations and uses of language that strengthen and perpetuate inequality between men and women, and re/produce oppressive gendered norms and stereotypes. We organised our findings around three main discursive themes and labelled the gendering discourses we identified using quotes from the survivor transcripts. Our three main discursive themes were:

- Household/relationship roles
- Sexuality and intimate partner relationships
- Mental health and domestic abuse

Findings: Household/relationship roles

We identified two main gendering discourses relating to household or relationship roles:

- a. Discourse: "...it was my job to run the household, and his to basically tell me what to do."
(Female homemaker - male head of household)
- b. Discourse: "repair the relationship somehow"
(Importance of making the relationship work)

The households or relationships were often described by survivors in the interviews as characterised by a hierarchical division of roles (for the women, unchosen roles) along traditional, patriarchal gendered lines. There was a strong sense that the man had the role of the 'head of household';

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he was the self-appointed decision-maker for the whole household, prescriber of household rules, micro-manager of household tasks that he often refused to participate in himself. Women were often characterised as 'homemakers'; subservient to a man's household rules, performing unchosen roles in which they were tasked with carrying out most or all of the housework and childcare, but with no authority in how this work was performed. Men's powerful positions in the relationships were maintained by their violence and abuse, and in turn men's abusive behaviours towards their partners were enabled by this discourse of entitlement and subservience.

An intimate partner relationship was often represented in the transcripts as something that must be protected and kept intact at all costs. Female survivors were often assigned sole responsibility for the success or failure of relationships. This weight given to the integrity and longevity of the intimate relationship can distract from the relationship potentially being a site of male power and control, and from the choices of perpetrators to be abusive and violent as being the problem. It is also a significant barrier to women leaving abusive men. The breaking up of the household, relationship or family unit often had connotations of shame and failure for female survivors, and sometimes also for their families.

*Summary**Findings: Sexuality and intimate partner relationships*

We identified three gendering discourses on the topic of sexuality and intimate partner relationships:

- a. Discourse: “women are objects”
(The sexual objectification of women)
- b. Discourse: “dirty” / “he’s got his freedom”
(Female / male active sexuality)
- c. Discourse: “You let them do it.”
(Victim-blaming)

The female survivors interviewed often described themselves, and how they perceived others saw them, in terms of sexual objects or possessions, aggressively guarded by their male partners or ‘owners’. Women were seen as existing for the pleasure of men and expected to engage in sexual activity that was controlled and defined by their abusive male intimate partners. Sexual activity was described by survivors from the perspective of what men wanted or felt entitled to demand (with women’s own feelings and wishes seeming very much inferior or irrelevant). The survivors interviewed commonly described rape, sexual harassment and coercion as routine in their intimate relationships. Sometimes survivors explicitly named this as abuse or violence. However, in many survivors’ accounts the sense that this was abusive behaviour against them was not made explicit by the language they used. Instead, sexual violence and abuse was often described in victim-blaming terms as something survivors felt they had to let happen or did not feel strong enough to resist.

The interview transcripts contained contrasting descriptions of female and male active sexuality. Female active sexuality (or imagined active sexuality) was often described in terms that negatively implied impurity or promiscuity; whereas the

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male partners described in the interviews were often having sexual affairs but these were described in terms of autonomy, freedom and entitlement. Female survivors were often accused of sexual infidelity or inviting sexual harassment from other men. The survivors interviewed often talked about how feminised, sexualised insults (sometimes combined with slurs directed at a woman's ethnicity or nationality) were used by perpetrators in denigrating them and justifying their own abusive behaviours. This discourse links with the discourse of sexual objectification; women are understood as men's exclusive sexual possessions and any perceived breach of this situation is regarded as repugnant.

There was a strong discourse of victim-blaming in the transcripts that serves to justify or excuse perpetrators' abusive actions and puts up barriers to women reporting and seeking specialist support for sexual crimes. Survivors reported being accused by perpetrators of 'wanting' or 'inviting' sexual violence, including the violence perpetrators committed in intimate relationships. Survivors often reported being given advice or instructions by their male partners and by others, including family, on what measures to take to not 'invite' or 'allow' male sexual harassment, abuse and violence.

Findings: mental health and domestic abuse

We identified two main gendering discourses on the topic of mental health:

- (a) Discourse: "this crazy woman"
(Mental illness - she's the problem)

- (b) Discourse: "he was just over anxious"
(Mental illness - he has a problem)

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We also identified a prominent counter-discourse in the transcripts that undid the work of these gendering discourses, and reassessed survivors' mental illness as the consequence of trauma:

(c) Counter-discourse: "I call it oppression, not depression"
(Mental illness as a consequence of abuse)

The transcripts give the impression that the label of mental illness had long-lasting negative implications for female survivors. The survivors themselves were seen as problematic, rather than the abuse and violence committed against them being identified as the problem. Being mentally ill, or showing mental or emotional distress, seemed to be linked into wider stereotypes of women as a group supposedly being markedly unstable or over-emotional. There seemed to be little understanding in survivors' interactions with others that being distressed or angry is an acceptable reaction to being subjected to violence and abuse. The label of 'mentally unwell' overshadowed many of female survivors' experiences of external responses to the domestic abuse, including others calling their parenting ability and their credibility into question.

In contrast, when male perpetrators were associated with mental ill health it appeared to mean that they were seen in a more sympathetic light, as men overcome by illness or problems. This focus diverts from important discussions about the harm they were causing through their perpetration of abuse and violence and excused perpetrator's abusive behaviours as being the 'understandable' consequence of their mental health problems.

We identified an important counter-discourse that reframed survivors' mental illness as a response to the trauma of domestic abuse. This was sometimes

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expressed by survivors in terms of an alternative viewpoint (sometimes reached through empowering domestic abuse support work). This reframing of mental ill health as a consequence of the domestic abuse perpetrated against them was usually absent in descriptions of how other people had responded to them and to their experiences of domestic abuse.

Conclusion

It is impossible to disentangle women's experiences of domestic abuse from their experiences of structural inequalities and the violence, abuse and harassment they are subjected to in other areas of their lives; for example, their experiences of everyday sexism (see *Everyday Sexism* project – founded by Laura Bates). Gendering discourses play a significant role in women's experiences of domestic abuse. They set the scene for men's abusive and controlling behaviours in intimate relationships and construct barriers to female survivors being believed and supported to leave abusive men. Our research adds to a wide body of literature on the harmful impact of gendered stereotypes and oppressive social norms about masculinity and femininity, and how these form the foundations of and serve to perpetuate male violence against women.

It is important that the long-term, recovery work delivered by specialist domestic abuse services, led by women for women, is sufficiently resourced. This includes sustainable funding for those vital services that are led by and for women from marginalised groups, such as services by and for Black and minoritised survivors, disabled survivors and LGBT+ survivors. This empowering support work with survivors helps undo the work of damaging and disempowering gendering discourses and addresses the damage caused by victim-blaming and female sexual objectification. It is also important for the specialist domestic

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abuse sector to continue to challenge those discourses that perpetuate damaging gender norms and stereotypes and to offer counter-discourses through public awareness, training and educational work.

Until it is consistently recognised in policy and legislation that domestic abuse is a form of violence against women and that addressing oppressive gender norms and stereotypes is vital, we cannot effectively tackle domestic abuse.

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It's time to
#FlipTheSexistScript

Let's build a world where **harmful gender stereotypes** and **domestic abuse** are **no longer tolerated**

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Women's Aid Federation of England and the University of Bristol

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