



Not just in a crisis

Women's use of statutory and voluntary agencies when moving on from domestic violence

Briefing paper, September 2014

Understanding of coercive control as key to domestic violence is poor in statutory agencies, as is recognition that high numbers of women suffer post separation abuse. Holistic service provision rather than short term risk reduction is what victims need.

Background

This briefing paper draws on the findings of a three year longitudinal study which followed one hundred women and their children as they rebuilt their lives after domestic violence (Kelly, Sharp and Klein, 2014). It provides an overview of how women engage with statutory and voluntary agencies post-crisis and makes recommendations for how policy makers and commissioners of domestic violence services can best support women and their children in this vital, but lengthy process.

Key messages

- Understanding of domestic violence pre and post separation in statutory agencies is poor, meaning that too often women and children are hindered rather than supported in the process of rebuilding their lives.
- Ending domestic violence, dealing with its legacies and rebuilding lives takes time; almost 90 per cent of women in this study experienced post-separation abuse: leaving should not be equated with being or feeling safe.
- The focus on short term risk reduction has led to under-recognition of the need for ongoing and longer term support which enables women and children to undo harms, be and feel safe, resettle and rebuild their relationships with each other and wider networks.

Accessing support

Women's use of agencies when in crisis is well documented. This study was unique in that it tracked women's engagement with services post-crisis. Just 18 per cent of women reported being able to ask for help before ending their relationship with the abuser: in contrast, 78 per cent reported being able to ask for help once the relationship had ended. Yet, as time passed, some women reported that it was harder to ask for help as there was an expectation that they should no longer be in need of support. A key theme here was a lack of understanding about domestic violence and the process of rebuilding lives in the aftermath. Across all statutory agencies, women reported that domestic violence was reduced to incidents of physical assault. Not only did this lead to women being excluded from services and support when their abuse was more characterised by coercive control (now included in the government definition), but also a minimising of post-separation abuse (PSA).

Experience of post-separation abuse (PSA)

The vast majority of women in the sample (almost 90 per cent) had experienced some form of PSA, with almost three-quarters (74 per cent) experiencing direct physical, sexual or verbal abuse. In addition, two-thirds reported that abusive men sought to sabotage their attempts to seek support and extricate themselves from the relationship. It is significant that the same statutory agencies that women were reaching out to for support were, at the same time, being manipulated by their ex-partners. For example, between a quarter and a fifth of women had to deal with their ex-partner making false accusations against

them to the police and social services; all of which were the subject of formal investigations. The fact that safety changed overtime and some women were still facing PSA three years down the line shows the necessity of access to support based on need. Separation had not protected women from abuse. Indeed, they continued to need support from agencies, including the police, health, housing, social services and specialist domestic violence services across the research period.

Women's use of statutory agencies from crisis to post crisis

Regrettably, with the exception of some thoughtful, aware and sympathetic individuals, women reported professional responses from statutory agencies that were characterised by victim blame, delay and misinformation. Overall, the research findings suggested that there may be complacency about the extent of change there has been in agency responses to domestic violence. The vast majority of women provided evidence of the repeated failure of statutory agencies to implement existing policy and guidance. This was accentuated by many professionals underestimating the toll of living with abuse had on women and children, expecting separation not only to create safety but to lift other burdens. It is the everydayness of control and fear which undermines confidence and sense of self, and forms the context in which children are growing up. There needs to be wider understanding of domestic violence as it is lived.

Women's use of Solace Women's Aid (SWA)

Contrary to popular perception, the research findings revealed that Solace was not always accessed at the point of separation. Some women made initial contact before this and others sometime afterwards. The length of time women had been in contact with Solace Women's Aid ranged from 1 month to 8 years and, on average, women spent 1.2 years using services. The importance of having SWA to 'fall back on' was a common theme. Whilst just over a third of women (39 per cent) were still accessing support one year into the study, this decreased to 14 per cent in the second year but then doubled in the third and final year, linked to difficulties in securing permanent housing, extended family court cases and/or reaching a point where they needed to address lasting impacts through counselling. Moving on from domestic violence and rebuilding lives is not a linear process, as this group of women's experiences graphically illustrate. There was a consensus among them that support should be phased out gradually and for regular 'check-ins'. Unfortunately however, funding pressures and contract commitments meant that some of Solace's work had become more short term, precluding the very model which women commended as having enabled them to move on. There is increasing recognition among commissioners of the importance of holistic provision; this study shows the necessity of including in this package support for resettlement and rebuilding lives.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are directed to policy makers and commissioners and set out how women and their children can best be supported in accessing the services that they require post crisis.

- All women and children who have experienced domestic violence should be able to access holistic support from specialist agencies such as Solace Women's Aid for a minimum of two years after separation. This should include access to legal advice and advocacy since, in cases where women had the support of an advocate, the responses of statutory agencies improved.
- Professionals in statutory agencies need basic training on domestic violence which focuses on coercive control rather than just incidents of physical assault and alerts them to the reality that leaving does not necessarily end abuse.
- A system of monitoring the delivery of sensitive and responsive services to domestic violence survivors needs to be developed, a key component of which would be regularly convened panels of survivors whose recent experiences of service use – good and bad – are considered as evidence.

Kelly, L., Sharp, N. and Klein, R. (2014) Finding the Costs of Freedom: How women rebuild their lives after domestic violence can be found at: <http://www.cwasu.org> and <http://www.solacewomensaid.org>