



Respect position statement: gender and domestic violence

Summary statement

Respect believes that practice experience and analysis of rigorous research demonstrates that a thorough understanding of the complex dynamics of gender is vital to responding effectively to domestic violence. Without this understanding, the nature, incidence, demographics and other factors of domestic violence cannot be explained and responses to victims, perpetrators and children will usually be inadequate and often unsafe. Effective work with perpetrators and victims of domestic violence therefore has to include an integrated understanding of the influence of gender.

1. The majority of violence in general is committed by men

Violence in general is strongly gendered: the majority of perpetrators of all forms of violence are male¹. This does not mean that all perpetrators are male or that all men are perpetrators of violence: the majority of men are not violent and some women do use violence. However, gender is a critical determining factor for whether or not someone will use any form of violence and assumptions about the right to use violence are therefore likely to be associated with gender.

2. Gender is the most significant factor for being a perpetrator or victim of domestic violence in particular

Violence in intimate relationships can and does happen to and is committed by both men and women. Respect is committed to meeting the needs of both male and female victims and to responding to male and female perpetrators. This commitment includes running a national helpline for male victims of domestic violence and an advice line for perpetrators of both genders. However, the amount of violence and the amount of fear and injury created by violence in intimate relationships is strongly related to gender.

Women experience the majority of incidents of physical violence which take place in intimate relationships². Women make up the majority of victims of sexual violence³. They are far more likely than male victims to be injured and to fear the abuser⁴. The majority of chronic long term victims are women and female victims are more likely to be abused post-separation than male victims⁵. Men are the abusers in most incidents of domestic violence against women and in many against men⁶. Gender is therefore the most significant risk factor for domestic violence.

¹ Kimmel, 2004; Powis, 2002

² Coleman et al, 2007; Walby and Allen, 2004 (both from British Crime Survey); Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000

³ Ibid (all)

⁴ Ibid (all)

⁵ Ibid (all)

⁶ Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998

3. Women's violence is frequently defensive, retaliatory or self defence or resistance

When women do use violence in intimate relationships it is often, though not always, in order to defend themselves or their children from a violent partner⁷. It is sometimes an act of resistance or anger after being abused or an attempt to prevent it. If we identify this violence as equivalent or equal to violence from primary aggressors in intimate relationships we will fail to respond appropriately to either party. This will put female and male victims at risk of further violence. Measures to safeguard children will also be affected. Respect believes that it is vital to recognise that women who use violence in intimate relationships are often doing so in these circumstances. We also believe that attempts to over-simplify women's use of violence in these circumstances do not reflect the complexities of living with domestic violence and other aspects of their lives.

4. Gender is a risk factor for domestic homicide

Domestic homicide is strongly associated with gender⁸. Without attention to gender as a significant risk indicator for continued domestic violence and for homicide, victims of domestic violence will go un- or under-protected.

Victims of domestic homicide are overwhelmingly women. Women are more likely to be killed by a partner or ex-partner than by any other category of person: about half of all female victims are so killed⁹. More than half of all male victims of domestic homicide are killed by a partner they had been abusing¹⁰. Men form the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of all forms of homicide and in particular for all forms of domestic homicide including child homicide¹¹. When women kill it is frequently in order to defend themselves or their children from a male partner who has been abusing them¹².

5. There are some female primary aggressors and male primary victims

Respect does recognise that there are women who are primary aggressors, in both heterosexual and same-sex relationships, and that there are men who are abused by male or by female partners. Our telephone service for perpetrators responds to female perpetrators. Our specific service for male victims demonstrates that we are committed to developing our understanding of the needs of male victims and to meeting these needs.

Women remain a small minority of primary aggressors of ongoing domestic violence in opposite or same-sex relationships. They also present and describe their abusive behaviour in ways that are often very different to the ways in which male perpetrators present and describe their use of abuse¹³. Similarly, male victims also present and describe their experiences and needs in ways which also differ from female victims¹⁴.

⁷ Dasgupta, 2001 and 1999; Daly and Wilson, 1990; Healey et al, 1998; DeKeseredy and Schwarz, 1998

⁸ Stark and Flitcraft, 1996

⁹ Coleman et al *ibid*.

¹⁰ Stark and Flitcraft, *ibid*.

¹¹ Stark and Flitcraft, *ibid*.

¹² Stark and Flitcraft, 1996

¹³ Debonnaire, 2008

¹⁴ Gadd et al, 2003

6. Men and women have different environmental and social limits and opportunities

Men who abuse female partners have available and deploy a range of cultural, environmental, social and physical advantages and forms of control to which they have privileged access. These include inequalities of income, access to paid work, to public space and to transport¹⁵. They also include physical inequalities and inequalities caused by different expectations of women and men in the home. Women who abuse do not have access to the same or equivalent means to justify or support that abuse. Women who are abused are restricted in their options for trying to end the relationship or support their family by the inequalities listed above.

These inequalities affect different men and women in different ways and at different times in their lives. However, the inequalities affect the choices available to men and women experiencing or using domestic violence. They limit the choices available to women experiencing domestic violence and therefore contribute to the escalation or continuation of the abuse.

7. Assumptions about roles and expectations in intimate relationships are gendered and related to justifications for domestic violence

Public and private life in the UK in the 21st century is no longer dominated by tightly defined forms of masculinity and femininity which are promoted and privileged above all others. Individual men and women can and do experience different levels of power. These can also change at different stages and situations in their lives. However, gender still strongly influences the ways in which men, women, girls and boys are treated. Gender inequality is strongly evident in various key aspects of public and private life, such as the inequalities listed above and in relation to childcare and domestic responsibilities.

Whilst expectations of men and women have changed, the extent to which these changes have spread in reality is limited. The expectations remain and continue to be strongly influenced by assumptions about gendered roles and responsibilities and by men's feelings about their identity. These expectations strongly influence the choice to use violence in intimate relationships, when an expectation is not met, for example. They also strongly influence the ways in which domestic violence is explained and defended by those using and experiencing it and by others such as family members and professionals.

These expectations and explanations have to be understood and worked with in order to change the underlying belief systems and individual feelings about identity which support the use of violence in intimate relationships. Without this, perpetrators have an incomplete conscious understanding of their own motivations and actions and are therefore less likely to change these.

8. Gender understanding is therefore critical for work to prevent domestic violence

Abusive men in perpetrator programmes and children and young people taking part in prevention work in schools and youth settings bring up their own understanding of what it is to be male or female¹⁶. Assumptions about roles and entitlements frequently underlie the justifications presented in court for serious and fatal domestic violence. Gender based assumptions cannot be simply written out of the work to prevent domestic violence, even if we were to try. Gender based

¹⁵ Office of National Statistics online series "focus on gender"

¹⁶ Gondolf, 2002; Dobash and Dobash, 2000; Walton, 2007

assumptions may not predict certain specific outcomes but as long as they go unchallenged and unquestioned, many abusive men and others will continue to treat gender based assumptions as adequate justification and explanations for violence and abuse. Work with known abusers and with children and young people to prevent domestic violence therefore has to include an integrated and detailed understanding of how gender and violence are related and how gender affects expectations and roles in relationships. As practice and research develop, understanding of how gender is related to violence will also develop. In turn our policies, procedures and standards of practice will also develop.

APPENDIX: Discussion of the research

These notes are a preliminary attempt to sketch out the research terrain on this subject. This will be reviewed in more detail in 2008.

The interpretation of data to “prove” gender neutrality or irrelevance in domestic violence

There is a substantial body of research and some significant meta-analyses quoted as demonstrating that men are equally as likely as women to be victims and women as likely as men to be perpetrators¹⁷. Such research tends to rely solely or mainly on data gathered using unmodified versions of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). This device has already been critically analysed and flaws identified¹⁸. Research or writing concluding gender parity for intimate partner violence or relying on the CTS as a main source of data gathering should therefore be read with the following in mind:

- There is usually no differentiation in the CTS data collection between someone experiencing one or two incidents of violence from a partner and someone experiencing chronic long term violence.
- Context is not taken into account and therefore incidents of self or child defence are identified as incidents of primary aggression. This means that men who have experienced one incident of physical violence in self defence from an abused partner are counted as victims as much as women who have lived with ongoing violence and control for many months or years.
- The CTS in unmodified original form does not include sexual violence, a form of interpersonal violence experienced significantly more often by women than by men¹⁹;
- The CTS does not differentiate between acts of self defence and acts of primary aggression²⁰. These two factors mean that men will be counted as a primary victim of domestic violence and their partner the primary aggressor if he uses sexual violence against her or the children and she then tries to defend herself or the children, or in future situations tries to force him away.
- Often the CTS was used – as in the original study – in telephone interviews in which the interviewer asked to speak to “the head of the household”. This inevitably skews the data from families in which there is a primary aggressor, who is highly likely to present him or herself as the head of the household.
- Many studies which allegedly show gender equivalence have used the CTS with a small very unrepresentative sample, often college students. These include several quoted in the Archer meta analysis which asserts that men and women are equally likely to use intimate partner violence²¹.

Feminists are often criticised for failing to take into account evidence which contradicts the feminist standpoints. However, feminist researchers have openly identified biases in their samples when they occur and discussed how these might affect findings. It is also interesting that some of the writing which appears to conclude (or is quoted as such) that gender makes little difference to

¹⁷ Straus and Gelles, 1986; Straus et al, 1980; Dutton 1995; Archer, 2000

¹⁸ Morse, 1995

¹⁹ BCS 2008

²⁰ Dobash and Dobash 1992

²¹ Archer 2000

intimate partner violence sometimes actually demonstrates that it does. The Archer meta analysis, for example, identified that intimate partner violence in agency samples was mostly perpetrated by men and that the majority of injuries in intimate partner violence were sustained by women. Archer has gone on to gather direct evidence that ongoing intimate partner violence, where one partner is violent and the other is not, is mostly committed by men against women²².

Practice with perpetrators in programmes has demonstrated how abusive men deny and minimise their use of violence and often admit to past offences only after weeks or months in programmes. Single interviews with perpetrators identify only a limited account of violence used. Interviews with victims and with third party data are a far more reliable method of counting the incidence of domestic violence²³.

“Random” samples vs “biased” samples

Many research reports from the medical disciplines tend to assume that so called “random samples” will produce objective unbiased data about domestic violence. This demonstrates lack of understanding of the nature of domestic violence, of the effects it will have on participation in research and on the ways in which men and women describe their experiences. Johnson²⁴ describes how Dutton²⁵ bases his arguments about gender on samples which Dutton identifies as random and therefore potentially representative but Johnson identifies as biased. The biases occur because of the nature of domestic violence and its effects on victims: long term chronic victims of intimate partner violence are unlikely for all sorts of reasons to be accurately represented in the numbers of random samples, particularly those gathered by telephone interviews to random phone numbers²⁶.

Individual incidents or ongoing chronic control and abuse

The British Crime Survey has also been used as evidence that women are as violent as men, as the raw numbers often appear to show that equal number of men and women experience domestic violence. However, this interpretation of the research is flawed in the following significant ways:

- Roughly equal numbers of men and women experience 1 or more incidents of violence at some point in their adult life from an intimate partner, but this data does not differentiate incidents from a primary aggressor from incidents of self defence against violent partners. Looking at the data for 4 or more incidents, the majority of victims are women (around 80%), the majority of female victims experience fear and the majority of those victims who are injured are women.²⁷
- Again, these figures exclude victims of sexual assault, which is mostly experienced by women. The presentation of the data in recent British Crime Surveys has made it impossible to obtain a true figure for the numbers of men and women experiencing all forms of inter-personal violence from an intimate partner.

²² Graham-Kevan and Archer, 2003

²³ Gondolf, 2002

²⁴ Johnson, 2005

²⁵ Dutton, 2005

²⁶ Johnson, 2005

²⁷ All recent BCS, for example Coleman et al 2007; Walby and Allen, 2004

Homicide

Homicide statistics are perhaps the most clear cut forms of evidence of the relationship between gender and domestic violence.

Stark and Flitcraft²⁸ make the case convincingly that homicide is in general strongly gendered and that domestic homicide is strongly connected to intimate partner violence. They identify that women are the most at risk of intimate partner homicide and that where men are the victims, it is often as a result of their own use of abuse resulting in a deadly act of self defence.

UK homicide statistics confirm every year that the risk of being killed is strongly affected by gender and relationship status: women are much more likely to be killed by a partner or ex-partner than by anyone else; domestic homicides are overwhelmingly committed by men against women and children; women are more at risk after the relationship has ended than whilst they are still living with the violent partner. Coleman et al, 2007 and other research reports present relevant findings from the British Crime Survey and homicide statistics.

Gender roles and socialisation

There is considerable evidence that whilst gender roles are no longer as strictly bounded as they have been in the past that gender strongly influences individual sense of identity from a very early age. Kimmel²⁹ reviews this evidence thoroughly, including an analysis of the relationship between violence and gender. He asserts that this is not, as often suggested, because of biological imperatives but as both a consequence of and a support for gender inequality. The majority of interpersonal and institutional violence is carried out by men and often explicitly in the name of asserting masculinity or dominance over women. It would be surprising to say the least if this was reversed in the domestic sphere.

Stark states that the ways in which coercive control is used by abusive men are specifically in order to maintain dominance over their female partners. He identifies this as part of a gendered pattern according to expectations of men and women³⁰.

It is also possible that men identify as abusive their partner's failure to meet specific expectations – some recent anecdotal evidence suggests, for example, that men identify as being victims of sexual control if their partner does not agree to have sex with them.

Further research needs

There is an urgent need for an national prevalence study of inter personal violence providing incident based data with an understanding of context. Further research is needed on specific aspects of intimate partner violence in particular, for example, violence in gay and lesbian relationships, violence against men by female partners. Research is also needed on interventions to stop individual perpetrators from using intimate partner violence and other forms of violence.

²⁸ Stark and Flitcraft, 1996

²⁹ Kimmel 2004

³⁰ Stark, 2006

Respect and research

Respect holds regular research roundtable events bringing together researchers, policy makers and practitioners to consider current and recent research and future research needs in a constructive and critical way. Respect staff liaise regularly with researchers from a range of disciplines and with a variety of approaches and from a variety of disciplines.

Respect staff read, analyse and disseminate findings from a wide range and variety of research subjects. These include, for example, research on inter personal violence, on intimate partner violence, on other aspects of gender based violence and on masculinities. Respect staff monitor research from a range of disciplines including criminology, psychology, sociology and health. Respect uses the lessons from rigorous research as well as practice in order to inform the development of our services.

Three members of Respect staff group are specifically employed with a research focus to their posts. These members of staff and others provide information for our members on research findings and their implications.

Respect will continue to support the development of rigorous relevant research on these subjects.

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