

**ABUSE OF ADULT MALES IN INTIMATE PARTNER
RELATIONSHIPS IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

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Acknowledgement

The research team wish to thank all those who willingly agreed to be interviewed for this research. It was through their willingness to share their often difficult life experiences that this research was made possible.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The study revealed that the experiences of male victims in Northern Ireland were similar to those reported in studies in other local jurisdictions. Male respondents reported a variety of abuse – from emotional to serious physical assault, including occasional serious sexual assaults by their female partner.
2. Male partner experiences were similar to those reported in cognate studies. Nearly all respondents considered that the emotional effects of abuse were the most serious.
3. What is absent from other studies is the recognition that such abuse may be continued into extra-familial domains – respondents were particularly concerned about their experience with the legal process and consequences in relation to their employment and to their accommodation.
4. Most studies fail to reveal the various devices that male respondents utilise to cope with or to manage the abuse. A variety of such strategies were noted – from physical exercise to deliberate absence from home. Such solitary coping strategies were invariably unsuccessful.
5. Unique to males is the effect of patriarchal images on the question of reporting. Traditional images of masculinity appeared to be the primary reason for the failure of the respondents to report injuries to friends, and to voluntary and statutory agencies.
6. As in other studies, a minority of men attempted to utilise the available support agencies. Experiences were mixed, although the respondents universally proffered the view that reporting to the police would produce unsupportive reactions. The male respondents also argued that a similar lack of support was found within other institutions, legal process and from the legal professions. The respondents also held the view that this was in contrast to the support that reports of female victimisation would elicit.
7. There were a limited number of respondents in same-sex relationships and consequently evidence of gay victimisation in partner relations was limited. However, the small number who did participate reported similar experiences to men in abusive heterosexual relationships.

The Research Focus

Initially the primary research question posed was

- to discover the extent of any such victimisation in Northern Ireland together with subsidiary questions regarding severity, frequency, and access to support services

However, for several reasons, the final research question was re-focussed on qualitative rather than quantitative matters. This was because

- a. The nature of the topic and its complexities does not lend itself readily to the kind of statistical analysis implicit in such an initial focus.
- b. In Northern Ireland – as compared with Scotland, England and Wales, and further afield in the United States and Canada – there is an absence of adequate secondary data sets within the preceding victim surveys in that jurisdiction. Such quantitative material does not exist in a reliable form from which to draw insights and deductions as the basis for a more substantive statistical research project on male victimisation.
- c. Preceding studies in other domains have increasingly moved away from the comparative method implicit in quantitative analysis (who suffers most, males or females) – often involving fraught comparisons between male and female abuse – to be more concerned with the severity of the impact on victims rather than perhaps invidiously setting up one form of victimisation as a competing territory with regard to potential resource allocation or political debate with the other.

Consequently, the focus of the present study was directed primarily at the qualitative experience of self-reported victims, partly because of their own importance as victims *per se*, but also because it might allow greater understanding of family abuse and conflict by the relevant support agencies

The Key Research Questions

Universally within Anglo-American societies, controversy about male victims of domestic abuse can now be located within six themes.

1. As the succeeding definition makes clear, the current abuse rubric encompasses many different forms of harm both physical and non-physical – what are the characteristics of abuse experienced by male partners?
2. Women sometimes passively and sometimes actively deal with abuse in a variety of ways – from the extremes of continuing acceptance to the other polarity of combating the abuse and seeking external support. How do male victims react to an abusive partner?
3. Abuse may have both direct and indirect effects – from physical pain to effects on lifestyle and on employment. What does the male victim evidence reveal about these different types of consequence?
4. Traditional stereotypes play a key role in the subject's expectations of 'normal' abuse and of significant reactions to it – how do men deal with preconceptions of their 'masculinity' and 'relative power' in heterosexual abuse relations?
5. Is there a measurable need for specialist services for *male* victims of domestic abuse?
6. Information from gay victims may suggest different explanation of abuse than those that emphasise male dominance. If such abuse is as common in homosexual relationships as in heterosexual ones, then traditional emphasises on male dominance may not be a sufficient explanation. Some evidence is necessary of the character of male-male partner relations.

Inevitably such a study as in this Report encounters several key tensions over gender relations, ones that are open to development and clarification in a different context. While limited comparison between male and female victimisation is inevitable in such a monograph, it is neither the aim nor the capacity of this study to explore the quantitative comparison between the two phenomena. Sequentially, while any such documentation of male victimisation may have subsequent implications – given limited statutory and voluntary agency resources – for support provision for the different types of victim, it is outside the remit of this study to explore such determinations. This is not a study which seeks to explore the relative male-female experience in combative mode.

A further problem relates to the definition of abuse. The original conception of domestic abuse has long been superseded by a recognition that inter-personal violence can assume other forms than within the artificial limits of physical violence – i.e. that which is normally potentially subject to legal penalty. Clearly in extending the definition beyond that legal straitjacket, necessarily subjective components enter the analysis – not all forms of emotional and psychological pressure are open to agreement over the character and nature. Nor are they as susceptible to empirical measurement.

Varying definitions of abuse create both research and policy problems. It was initially proposed that, for the purposes of this project, domestic violence should be defined as:

“ the use of physical or emotional force or threat within close adult relationships in a way that causes harm or distress to victims. In addition to actual or threatened physical or sexual assault and damage to property, domestic violence includes non-physical intimidation, such as persistent verbal abuse, emotional blackmail and enforced social or financial deprivation.”¹

This definition was later extended in the light of – *inter alia* - recent research on elder abuse research (Brogden and Nijhar 2000) to recognise that in the particular context of the male experience, abuse may have non-familial components – such as threats to employment and legal process which may be perceived as discriminatory. While such latter factors may also be applicable to women, they are often gendered in character. Some consequences of partner abuse may be relatively unique to male experience. It seems appropriate therefore to include notions of abuse wider than that of the familial context.

Outline of Sections

The monograph follows an appropriate pattern in order to detail and clarify the above issues. Section Two seeks to clarify in accessible form ‘what we already know’ about male victimisation in partner relationships. It summarises the state of knowledge about male partner victimisation in Anglo-American societies. It notes that different methodologies have produced different results on male-female domestic violence.

¹ Tackling Domestic Violence – A Policy for Northern Ireland, DHSS 1995 p.2

Section Three delineates the particular, *ethnographic*, qualitative methodology utilised in the study and the characteristics of the respondents. It argues that a qualitative approach to understanding the problems is the only realistic way to proceed

Section Four deals sequentially with the evidence from the fifty two male respondents - *Components of Abuse; Effects of Abuse; Management of Abuse; Contribution of Masculine Stereotypes* and *Agency Reactions*. Section Four concludes with details from a limited number of gay victims.

Finally, Section Five details the resultant recommendations. It concentrates on the question of the development of support services for male victims.

SECTION TWO

THE STATE OF KNOWLEDGE ON MALE

VICTIMISATION

Key Points

- ❑ Most evidence of male partners victimisation until recently was anecdotal rather than substantive.
- ❑ Studies from a feminist perspective were the first serious attempt to document spouse abuse. To a varying extent, they predominantly argued that the main source of spousal abuse lay in traditional masculine notions of power in gender relationships.
- ❑ Contrarily, more recent Family Violence studies have suggested that spousal abuse may often be derived from more complex factors of family relations.
- ❑ What is clear is that different quantitative research methods on spousal abuse often produce quite different results about the contributions of males and females to that abuse – community crime surveys tend to emphasise the disproportionate violence against women, victim and family violence surveys tend to suggest much more parity in relatively minor male-female violence.
- ❑ Qualitative ethnographic studies of both female and male victims for the most part avoid the question of blame and concentrate on the degree of harm and victimisation.

Early Information on Male Victimization

Until the late 1960s, most knowledge of partner victimisation in the household drew upon literary and historical accounts. Such textual details clearly emphasised the role of women as the predominant victims in household abuse and violence. More recently, several writers have noted literary illustrations of women being publicly rebuked for acting as the aggressive party in intimate relationships. There are historical references (for example, in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*) to medieval and rural chastisements of such women under the rubric of the 'hen-pecked' husband. Allusions are made to the *scold* – the iron horse on which a woman was forced to ride around the village to signify community disapproval of her alleged abuse of her husband. Similarly, devices such as the *bridle* to stop the 'nagging' wife were relatively common. Unworthy males, who failed to curtail their partner's aggression, in the 18th and 19th century, might be forced to wear women's clothing and "a battered husband" was made to wear an outlandish outfit and ride backwards around the village on a donkey" (Steinmetz and Lucca 1988). (The quality of such work is typified by one study that claims the 'discovery' that Abraham Lincoln's wife was violent, propelled him towards to the Presidency as an escape from home!)

In the present day, cartoon strips (the Andy Capp syndrome - presumably drawn from popular folklore) may dwell on female household violence. For example, Saenger's early study (1963) of newspaper comic violence, noted that three-quarters of the perpetrators were women. Husbands were the victims of aggression in 63% of conflict situations, while wives were victims in 39% of situations. In 10% of situations, husbands and wives were equally aggressive and in only 17% of situations were husbands more violent than wives. Jokes are common about hen-pecked husbands (Wilkinson 1981).

However much of this data is little more than anecdotal, reflecting popular prejudices as much as hard empirical evidence. Such material, while demonstrating a consistent trajectory in popular images of women historically, proves nothing. The scold and the bridle for example, like the ducking stool for the presumed witch, may have been nothing more than an attempt to maintain patriarchy against women who did not readily accept a lower status. Similarly, caricatures may reflect the prejudices of their masculine authors rather than representing a valid account of household relations – there remain few popular female cartoonists.

- Posters sent to all accident and emergency departments throughout the North.
- Posters sent to all domestic violence police officers for display in reception areas of police stations.
- Dissemination of information through conferences, organisational databases, and organisational newsletters.
- By far the most successful approach was through features in local newspapers and radio stations.

The interviewees (52 respondents making this the largest such study to date) were given the opportunity to be interviewed at home, in a neutral venue of their choice, or at the research base, if preferred. Each interview lasted approximately two hours but on many occasions the interview extended beyond that time-scale. Each interview was taped with the permission of the interviewee and later transcribed and anonymised. Due to the sensitive nature of this research each interviewee was informed of the confidential nature of their information i.e. that no names or identifying factors would be included in the final Report. No financial incentive was offered for participation in the report. Names used in the report are substitutions for actual names.

The key parameters of the schedule included.

- Immediate biographical details – employment, family, relationships, socio-economic class, age etc.
- Detailing of the abuse – features and perceived causes – reciprocity in relations.
- Detailing the short and long-term effects and consequences of abuse – for example for emotional, mental and physical health, and on relationships, employment, finance etc.
- How the victim responded to the abuse – coping mechanisms.
- Disclosure to friends and family and to the voluntary and statutory services – investigation of the men's experience of the attitudes and responses of those from whom they sought assistance.
- The role of the other parties in reporting or ignoring the abuse.
- Reactions of the social audience – attitudes towards the issue of domestic abuse of male victims.
- Victims' evaluation of third party support from voluntary and statutory services, including legal reactions.
- Victims' needs and recommendations.

