

2016

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Wright, C. (2016) 'The Absent Voice of Male Domestic Abuse Victims: The Marginalisation of Men in a System Originally Designed for Women', Plymouth Law and Criminal Justice Review, 8, pp. 333-350. Available at: <https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/9037>  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/9037>

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The Plymouth Law & Criminal Justice Review  
University of Plymouth

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## **THE ABSENT VOICE OF MALE DOMESTIC ABUSE VICTIMS: THE MARGINALISATION OF MEN IN A SYSTEM ORIGINALLY DESIGNED FOR WOMEN**

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### **Abstract**

The problematic construction of domestic abuse as a 'gendered, heterosexual phenomenon that is predominantly physical in nature' has served to marginalise male victims of domestic abuse (Donovan and Hester, 2010:279), and impeded them from reaching victim status (Josolyne, 2011). As such, in comparison to women, men receive less recognition as victims within society, and support services are tailored towards the needs of female victims. Relatively little research has been undertaken on the experiences of male victims of domestic abuse, and thus it remains unclear how it is best to support them. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the invisibility of male victims within society, and investigate the level of service provision currently available to male victims. The findings indicate that: service provision for male victims remains inadequate, particularly in regard to refuge spaces; and, perhaps more importantly, there is a lack of awareness that men can also be victims of domestic abuse, which serves to discourage male victims from seeking help. The study concludes by suggesting directions for further research, which would improve the service provision for male victims, and increase the likelihood that they will approach support services.

**Keywords:** Domestic abuse, victims, funding, support

### **Introduction**

The emergence of domestic abuse as a public concern is relatively recent, as it was previously regarded as a private issue to be resolved within the home, which discouraged any outside involvement (Pizzey, 1975). Domestic abuse was exempt from the British Crime Survey (BCS) until 1996 (Mirrlees-Black, 1999). Prior to this, domestic abuse was perceived to be a 'family argument', which deterred the police from taking action (Wright, 1998). The Home Office definition of domestic violence was changed in 2012 to incorporate 16 and 17

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year-olds and the phrasing altered to comprise coercive control (Home Office, 2013a). The title of the definition was also adjusted to 'domestic violence and abuse' because the use of the term domestic violence excludes other types of abuse, and thus gives the impression that the abuse perpetrated within intimate relationships is solely physical in nature. The Government definition of domestic violence and abuse is:

'Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse: psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional' (Home Office, 2013a)

Domestic abuse accounts for a significant proportion of the dark figure of crime, as victims in general are wary of reporting it. This under reporting inevitably restricts the amount that can be known about the nature of domestic abuse and its victims, but arguably research to date has primarily focused on female victims. Furthermore, the public narrative surrounding domestic abuse continues to focus primarily on female victims, and the problematic construction of domestic abuse as a 'gendered, heterosexual phenomenon that is predominantly physical in nature' has been highlighted (Donovan and Hester, 2010). It is argued that this construction of domestic abuse has hampered the acceptance of men as victims of domestic abuse, as heterosexual men are perceived to be the abuser, and heterosexual women invariably as their harmless victims (Josolyne, 2011). It also serves to marginalise victims of same-sex domestic abuse, despite the fact that prevalence rates are estimated to be on a par with heterosexual domestic abuse (Elliot, 1996).

Research has demonstrated that the service needs of female victims and male victims are hugely disparate, and as such it is argued that treatment programmes for male victims should be developed, which are tailored to meet their specific needs (Josolyne, 2011). Due to the differing needs of victims between all demographic groups, academics are recommending separate services for both heterosexual and homosexual male victims (Robinson and Rowlands, 2006). Furthermore, it is also apparent that the majority of domestic abuse victims would feel more at ease to approach services if they were gender-specific (Hester et al., 2012).

However, due to the fundamental changes in the commissioning of services to victims in England and Wales, the probability of establishing such services for male victims is low. Since 2014, a new model has been adopted in which 'the majority of emotional and practical support services for victims of crime will be commissioned locally by Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs)' (Ministry of Justice, MoJ, 2013:5). Thus, victims' services vary

nationwide, and are dependent on the individual visions of PCCs. The long-term impact that this will have on service provision for victims of domestic abuse is as yet unknown, but there is arguably an emphasis on being cost-effective (MoJ, 2013; EHRC, 2012). Women-only domestic abuse services have been compelled by funders to provide support to both female and male victims. Justifications cited for this are 'financial' (Equality and Human Rights Commission, EHRC, 2012). According to the EHRC (2012), there appears to be an inclination from funders to assume that an achievement of equality lies in treating every victim the same, but given the diverse nature of the needs of victims of domestic abuse, this approach is not appropriate.

With this in mind, this study sought to further explore the invisibility of male victims of domestic abuse within society, and investigate the current types of help and support available to them from domestic abuse service providers. It also endeavoured to gain an understanding of the underlying factors which affect the willingness of male victims to disclose their experiences. In order to acquire this information, a qualitative approach was adopted. Qualitative empirical research was undertaken in the form of interviews with organisations providing support for male victims of domestic abuse. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic area, a high level of skill would be necessary in order to render the in-depth interviewing of male victims themselves ethically correct (Walby and Myhill, 2001). Interviews with organisations that work closely with male victims were an appropriate alternative, as they have an in-depth understanding of both the difficulties faced specifically by male victims of domestic abuse, and the effects of diminished funding on the support services are able to provide.

Initially, the sample area was to be limited to the services providing support to male victims in the Devon and Cornwall area. However, due to the difficulty of obtaining willing participants, it was expanded to include the whole of the south west region. The disadvantage of conducting face-to-face interviews is that it is not logistically possible for the researcher, due to time and money constraints, to travel to every organisation within the south west region. Thus, a series of open-ended questions were sent as an attachment via email to the organisations to which the researcher was unable to travel. Overall, a total of three interviews were conducted with members of staff from three different service providers in the Devon and Cornwall area. For part of one of the interviews, another member of staff was involved in order to discuss a specific experience with a male client. A total of four emailed responses were also obtained, thus the research sample is comprised of eight participants. Although this is a smaller sample size than originally anticipated, the data elicited from the three interviews was in-depth. As such, when combined with the emailed responses, it provided a credible insight into the complexities of providing services to male

victims of domestic abuse, and the issues specifically faced by male victims. Much remains to be uncovered about the experiences of male victims of domestic abuse, and as such this study aimed to formulate recommendations for the future, in order to contribute to the development of effective methods of intervention with male victims.

## **1 Literature review**

### **1.1 Heterosexual male victims**

Domestic abuse against men, both in heterosexual and homosexual relationships, is an area that is heavily under researched. The majority of academic literature has been focused on female victims of male perpetrated domestic abuse, and sought to estimate its prevalence and understand its complexities. Consequently, methods of support that do exist have been developed to meet the needs of female victims, as opposed to the needs of male victims.

The first academic to highlight the existence of male victims of domestic abuse was Steinmetz (1977), who examined what she termed 'battered husband syndrome'. She notes the strain on men to assert control over women, which explains their reluctance to confess their vulnerability to an outsider. Critics of this syndrome argue that it fails to recognise that women use violence in self-defence. Saunders (1986) examined the use of violence of 'battered women', and found that the majority claimed it was in self-defence. Much attention has been given to the question of whether female perpetrators of domestic abuse are acting purely in self-defence, and whether the injuries sustained by men are proportionate to those endured by women (George, 1994). It could be argued that the reason male victims have been disregarded is the fact that female victims significantly outweigh male victims (George, 1994).

Despite the foregoing and feminist opposition to such arguments, there is a growing body of research providing evidence for female perpetrated domestic abuse that is not reciprocal or in self-defence. ONS (2014) figures show that between 2012 and 2013, roughly 7% of women and 4% of men reported that they were victims of domestic abuse. It is worth noting that these figures are likely to underestimate the true extent of domestic abuse against men, as male victims are reluctant to report domestic abuse. For example, ONS (2014) statistics also show that men were 17% less likely than women to report an incident of partner abuse to the police. Participants of one of the first studies to focus solely on male victims of domestic abuse, a study undertaken in Scotland by Gadd et al. (2002), discussed their humiliation and shame in relation to their decisions not to report the abuse to the police (Gadd et. al, 2002). The study concluded that there were fewer male victims than had previously been estimated because several men misunderstood some of the questions in the Scottish Crime Survey 2000. However, they argue that the proportion of men who had

experienced domestic abuse from current or former partners was not negligible. For example, 'domestic abuse against men can take life-threatening forms', and has the potential to have long-term consequences (Gadd et al., 2002:vii).

Lambert (2010) conducted interviews with organisations supporting male victims of domestic abuse. There was a general agreement amongst participating organisations that there was a shortage of help and support accessible to male victims. One organisation even compared the stage at which male victims of domestic abuse are to the 1970s when female victims were only just beginning to be acknowledged. For example, no refuge providing alternative accommodation exclusively for male victims had been established in England. Furthermore, all participating organisations were adamant that government responses to male victims are inadequate. One participating organisation referred to the government's response as 'lip service' because they are empathetic but never actively 'aid male victims through funding or awareness' (Lambert, 2010:25).

Participating organisations agreed that male victims were intensely unwilling to report domestic abuse, which corroborates Gadd et al.'s (2002) findings. This unwillingness was linked to 'male pride', as it would undermine their masculinity. Furthermore, the notion that women predominantly use violence in self-defence was disputed by participants, as women have claimed this before when in reality they are the 'sole perpetrator' (Lambert, 2010:28).

A qualitative survey undertaken by the Dispatches programme in 1998 was the most extensive to have been undertaken exclusively on male victims of domestic abuse in England (George and Yarwood, 2004). The survey demonstrated that women can be equally as violent as men, for example, a third of male participants were assaulted whilst asleep, a third were also 'kicked in the groin', and regularly 'deprived of sleep' (George and Yarwood, 2004:3). In general, the experiences of domestic abuse are very much alike, irrespective of gender. However, several participants expressed their discontent at the treatment they received from the police. For example, they were faced with suspicion from the police, a fear of which has already been discussed, and a quarter of male victims were even arrested themselves. As previously argued, the survey confirmed that there is extremely limited support for male victims of domestic abuse.

The Dyn Project 'provides support to Heterosexual, Gay, Bisexual and Trans men who are experiencing domestic abuse from a partner'. Robinson and Rowlands (2006) state that the majority of the project's 'referrals' are for heterosexual men and a considerable amount of time is dedicated to ascertaining whether they are 'legitimate victims', as it has been known for perpetrators to pose as victims. Interestingly, heterosexual victims were reluctant to seek

further help once initial contact had been made. An explanation for this could be that the project could have been deemed to be an 'extension of a service for women' because it was based in the Cardiff Women's Safety Unit (Robinson and Rowlands, 2006:59).

Carey (2010:6) summarises the difficulty of seeking help for male victims by stating 'when a man has been beaten, bitten, stabbed and emotionally destroyed where can he go in a society that tells him to "take it like a man"?'. Her findings corroborate those of Lambert (2010), George and Yarwood (2004) and Gadd et al. (2002) in terms of humiliation and anxiety about being greeted with incredulity. For example, her respondent expressed his fear that his employer would not hold him in the same regard if they were aware of his abuse, and how this could affect his promotional prospects. In terms of psychological abuse, he also admitted his wife reported him to the Irish police for abusing his children, resulting in them being taken away from him while he was under investigation.

Donovan and Hester (2010:279) argue that discourses within society depict domestic abuse as a 'gendered, heterosexual phenomenon that is predominantly physical in nature'. A report from the Home Office (2013b:3) also highlights a general lack of understanding about the 'power and control aspects' of domestic abuse. Similarly, Josolyne (2011) notes the impact of the construction of domestic abuse as a 'gendered social problem' on male victims, whereby heterosexual males are presumed to be the perpetrators and women as their innocent victims. Dutton and White (2013) refer to these prejudices as the 'gender paradigm' under which services are aimed at meeting the needs of female victims, as heterosexual male victims are impeded from reaching victim status (Josolyne, 2011). Dutton and White (2013:8) provide an alternative explanation for the reluctance of male victims to seek help by arguing that men are socialised to suppress pain 'under a private veil'. Similarly, the respondents of both Brogden and Nijhar's (2004) and Josolyne's (2011) study appeared to struggle to embody a victim, as this would undermine their masculine identity. Josolyne (2011:77) recommends that further research should 'develop and evaluate new treatment programmes' exclusively tailored for male victims of domestic abuse, as their needs are contrasting to those of female victims.

### **1.1 Homosexual victims**

Domestic abuse among gay men is not a new occurrence, but one that has been recently acknowledged (Dececco, Letellier & Island, 1991). Dececco, Letellier and Island's (1991) book was the first to explore the experiences of gay victims of domestic abuse. The authors were hoping to illuminate the issue of domestic abuse in gay relationships and serve as the catalyst for further research. Lehman (1997) explains the lack of support available to gay victims of domestic abuse in terms of the rejection of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and

Transgender) community from existing domestic abuse services; the disregard for gay and lesbian relationships and a failure to recognise the abuse within these relationships; and, the impact of 'heterosexism' on domestic abuse policies, initiatives and funding (Lehman, 1997:2).

The Dyn Project, discussed earlier, notes the willingness of gay victims to accept the services available to them in comparison to heterosexual male victims. Therefore, they conclude that gay victims of domestic abuse are 'much more similar to female victims of domestic abuse than they are to heterosexual men' (Robinson and Rowlands, 2006:59). Due to the differences identified in service use between gay and heterosexual male victims, providing the 'same type of intervention' does not appear to be suitable. Therefore, the authors argue for the development of 'separate services' for gay and heterosexual male victims.

Despite the fact that same-sex domestic abuse receives significantly less attention, Elliott (1996) suggests that prevalence rates are virtually equal. Thus, she concludes that domestic abuse is not a 'gender issue, but a power issue' (Elliott, 1996:3). According to researchers, victims of same-sex domestic abuse endure the same forms of abuse as heterosexual women (Merrill and Wolfe, 2000; Rowlands, 2006; McClennen, Summers & Vaughan, 2008; Elliott, 1996). However, a unique form of domestic abuse identified by both Elliott (1996) and Donovan et al (2006) that can only be applied to same-sex relationships is the threat to disclose the victim's sexuality to their social network. Frequently highlighted in the literature is the difficulty of the decision to seek help for same-sex victims because it includes disclosing their sexuality (Elliott, 1996, Kuehnle & Sullivan, 2003). Furthermore, it is argued that same-sex victims face secondary victimisation by the state, which compounds their fear to leave the relationship (Rowlands, 2006). Merrill and Wolfe (2000) stress the need for the allocation of funding to generate awareness of victims of domestic abuse within the LGBT community. McClennen, Summers and Vaughan (2008) also recommend 'empowerment-focused, multi-level interventions' for gay victims of domestic abuse that are independent from those developed for lesbian or heterosexual victims.

Research conducted for the Home Office in 2012 shows that progress has been made towards supporting male victims of domestic abuse. The government has helped to fund various national helplines, such as Men's Advice Line, or Broken Rainbow, which target male and LGBT victims of domestic abuse (Hester et al., 2012). Despite this, there is limited access to services specifically tailored for male victims (HM Government, 2007). Furthermore, there is a lack of existing services which focus exclusively on male and LGBT



victims of domestic abuse, which are necessary because evidence suggests these groups do not benefit from generic services, and services that do exist struggle to maintain adequate funding (Hester et al., 2012).

Overall, the weight of evidence suggests that male victims, both heterosexual and gay, have been marginalised in a system originally designed for women. Stereotypes and preconceptions within society have served to construct the ideal, deserving victim of domestic abuse as female, for which many academics have argued the government is partly responsible. Despite the feminist argument that men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of domestic abuse, and women endure much more severe abuse from their male partners, it cannot be denied that domestic abuse against men remains a significant problem. Male victims of domestic abuse are no less deserving of support than female victims. Although there are services who provide support to male victims of domestic abuse, evidence has revealed that these are rarely exclusively oriented towards the needs of heterosexual or homosexual males. Furthermore, those that do exist are geographically sparse, which creates difficulties of access for victims.

Academics are endorsing separate services for all groups of victims, as generic services are not deemed appropriate, and thus, ineffective. However, as previously mentioned, there has been a significant adjustment to the commissioning of services for victims. The MoJ (2013) previously controlled the allocation of funding to victims' services; however, it has now delegated this power to PCCs. PCCs are arguably political entities with their own agendas, and their priority is likely to be in ensuring that their decisions are perceived to be cost-effective. Thus, under the current political climate involving cuts to public expenditure, the future of establishing such services in terms of securing and retaining funding is bleak (EHRC, 2012).

## **2 Findings and Analysis**

The data obtained from both interviews and emailed responses showed that, although it is increasingly accepted that men can be victims of domestic abuse, they remain significantly disadvantaged in comparison with female victims in terms of service provision, especially male refuge spaces, and public recognition. In this respect, some participants argued that male victims are decades behind their female counterparts, for example, one of the participants stated:

*If you look at it on a timescale for recognition and support and agencies and acknowledgement, men are probably back in the same space that women were in maybe in the late 70s, early 80s (P3).*

A participant of Lambert's (2010) study also compared the level of recognition for male victims to that of female victims in the 1970s, as the establishment of the first women's refuge in 1971 marked the beginning of the feminist movements that ultimately gained women the recognition as victims that they have today.

## **2.1 Service provision**

A major theme that emerged was the fact that awareness campaigns, and the public rhetoric in general on domestic abuse, continues to focus primarily on female victims. This was also highlighted by the organisations who participated in Lambert's (2010) study. However, the vast majority of participants did acknowledge that, in an ideological sense, progress has been made. For example, one participant stated that 7 years ago, *there were no male services in Devon and Cornwall at all* (P4). Services in the south west region generally now offer support to both male and female victims, and are described by most of the participants as having a 'gender-neutral approach'. The majority of participants described the support they provide as having been tailored to meet the needs of the individual, and staff are *trained to bear in mind the extra pressures on someone* (P4) because of their gender, age, ethnicity or sexuality.

Nonetheless, a concern remains that domestic abuse services, which provide support to both male and female victims, are geared towards the needs of female victims, for example, one respondent described service delivery for male victims as *pink services painted blue* (P6). Furthermore, the majority of participants highlighted the existence of services that still only support women, although these are now the minority. However, one participant did argue that in the future:

*the agencies that work with both male and female are more likely to get the money than the agencies that just work with women because the government are on quite a push at the moment for recognising that men experience it [domestic abuse], and they want men to receive all the services that women receive* (P3).

However, it could be argued that the government's driving force is not a desire to recognise male victims, but rather a preoccupation with being cost-effective. Thus, given that there are a comparatively smaller proportion of male victims, it would be more expensive to allocate funding for separate services for male victims (EHRC, 2012).

There was a general consensus amongst participants that refuge provision in particular is lacking for male victims in the south west region, and *most refuges are still just for women and children* (P4). However, participants did acknowledge that, in comparison to women, a much smaller proportion of men are considered high risk. Nonetheless, one participant

argued that if men are in need of refuge *then they're a lot worse off for service provision than women are* (P4). Thus, it would appear that there is a central conflict here, as many domestic abuse services are now expected to provide adequate support to both female and male victims, who arguably have hugely contrasting needs, with extremely limited funding (EHRC, 2012).

## **2.2 Lack of awareness within society that anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse**

There was a general consensus amongst the participants that there is still a lack of understanding within society about domestic abuse, in that the coercive control element of perpetrator behaviour is not appreciated, and thus it is difficult to comprehend how a man could be a victim of domestic abuse. For example, one participant stated that the *general population still don't understand what domestic abuse is, they still think it hasn't happened if you haven't been punched* (P4). The undue emphasis on the physical harm inflicted by domestic abuse perpetrators is also discussed by Donovan and Hester (2010), which serves to underestimate the influence of the 'coercive control' present within an abusive relationship (Home Office, 2013b; Stark, 2007).

A major theme that emerged from the data was the impact of gender stereotypes and social stigmas that exist within society, which construct men as invincible and, as such, it is accepted that men can defend themselves. This is summarised by the quote from one participant that as a society we tend to *just look at a man, and it doesn't even matter his size, and it will be 'you can defend yourself, because you're a man'* (P3). Another participant also illustrated the effects of gender stereotypes by explaining that *people don't understand how a man could be abused because he's big enough and ugly enough to look after himself, so they don't understand the complexities of it* (P4). Gender stereotypes enable women to be *more aggressive to men, because it's more acceptable for a woman to hit a man, than it is for a man to hit a woman* (P3). Therefore, male victims are prevented from attaining victim status, a finding which reflects the work of both Josolyne (2011) and Dutton and White (2013).

Due to this lack of understanding and gender stereotypes, it is assumed that if men are in domestic abuse relationships, then they are not in as much danger as female victims. However, the majority of participants argued that this is not the case, which corroborates the qualitative survey undertaken by George and Yarwood (2004:9), whereby more than half of male victims 'had been threatened with a weapon and a significant proportion reported serious forms of injury'.

### **2.3 Reluctance of male victims to seek help**

Arguably, there is a lot of apprehension for all victims of domestic abuse around disclosing their experiences to any outside parties, but all participants agreed that male victims in particular are reluctant to seek help. For example, one participant explained:

*gender stereotypes within society do mean that sometimes male victims can be slower to recognise what's going on... more reluctant even than female domestic abuse victims, who in themselves are very reluctant to seek help (P4).*

This is clearly demonstrated in the literature, as male victims do not feel that they can approach the police or domestic abuse agencies, and expect to be treated fairly (Gadd et al., 2002, George and Yarwood, 2004; Lambert, 2010; Carey, 2010). Participants of this research emphasised the strength of social pressures that compound the difficulty for male victims to admit they are a victim of domestic abuse, even to themselves. This is illustrated by the quote *self-identification may be a key reason- i.e. men not realising that they are victims of abuse (P7)*, which was given as a factor that might contribute to the reluctance of male victims to seek help.

A significant proportion of participants drew attention to masculinity in their explanations for the reluctance of male victims to seek help. Men appear to struggle to accept that they are a victim of domestic abuse, as it undermines their sense of what being a man means (P8). Masculinity has also been discussed by academics in relation to the reluctance of male victims to report their experiences of domestic abuse, as they struggled to manage their own victim status (Brogden and Nijhar, 2004; Robinson and Rowlands, 2006; Josolyne, 2011; Dutton and White, 2013).

A number of participants also expressed concern that male victims might not be aware of the services that will support them, and that they would possibly assume that domestic abuse agencies are for women only. Thus, there are obstacles that male victims have to overcome if they are to seek help, which are created by the construction of domestic abuse as a gender-specific crime.

There was a general consensus amongst participants that male victims are extremely anxious of not being believed if they were to seek help.

*It's bad enough for a woman to be believed, it's so much more difficult for a man to be believed... and to say it out loud (P4).*

Academics have also argued that male victims commonly fear receiving a negative reaction as a consequence of disclosing their experiences (George and Yarwood, 2004; Carey,

2010). The majority of participants stressed that female perpetrators are very aware that they are more likely to be perceived as the victim by service providers, and frequently use that to their advantage. For example, one participant described their experience with a male victim in which his female partner would *frighten him to the point that she would say 'I know the system, I know what they want me to say'... knowing that the agencies around her are more likely to accept that she's a victim because of statistics showing that it's that high* (P2).

A major theme that emerged from the data was that gay victims within a domestic abuse relationship are often controlled through the use of their sexual preference. Elliot (1996) and Donovan et al. (2006) also note that perpetrators will intimidate their partner by threatening to "out" them. A number of participants noted the isolation experienced by a gay victim if they have not felt able to tell anyone that they're in a same-sex relationship.

*The fear of telling people that you're gay, that they're gonna disown you and not want anything to do with you, let alone the fact that you're in an abusive relationship* (P3).

It was also explained that *their own self-worth or their own acceptance about their own sexuality* will affect the likelihood of a LGBT victim disclosing their experience of abuse. This finding is also reflected in the work of Elliot (1996), Donovan et al. (2006) and Kuehnle and Sullivan (2003).

#### **2.4 Attitudes of professionals**

A major theme that emerged from this research is the underlying issue of providing services to male victims when perpetrators regularly pose as victims. Thus, there has to be what one participant termed *a level of necessary caution from services* (P4). Inevitably, this compounds the difficulty of ensuring male victims feel like they're being believed when they have had the courage to speak out about their experiences. An evaluation report of The Dyn Project also highlighted the difficulty of determining 'legitimate' male victims, and stressed the need for a multi-agency approach in which 'a heterosexual men's project... is linked to a service for women' (Robinson and Rowlands, 2006:59).

Nonetheless, a significant proportion of participants noted the existence of professionals who are overly sceptical of what were referred to as 'genuine male victims'. For example, one participant expressed their frustration at the attitudes of other professionals towards a client that they knew to be a genuine male victim. In this case, the female perpetrator was able to convince other professionals that she was the victim, despite the fact that *she'd had two relationships in the past that had resulted in injunctions against her to stay away from him* (P2).

## 2.5 Male victims' service needs

Most participants agreed that men's service needs differ to women in that they *want a service they can dip in and out of* (P6), and *often want practical support* (P2). The male victims that the participating organisations have had experience with do not want the 'long-term emotional support' that female victims usually want. For example, a participant explained that, in their experience, once the *initial incident that brought them to our service... has been ironed out, or any other issues that they came with male victims are quite happy to go and get on with it* (P1).

## 2.6 Recommendations for the future

There was a general consensus amongst participants that if men gained recognition as victims of domestic abuse, then they would be more likely to seek help. In order to generate such awareness, the majority of participants stressed the importance of publicising the complexities of domestic abuse, and the fact that anyone can be a victim. This is illustrated by two quotes:

*We do need to create a more open environment to support male victims reporting* (P7)

*It's not so much about the services that are available, the agencies, I suppose... it's about the work that could be done to encourage them to disclose* (P2).

Several participants suggested that a course should be developed that is *specifically tailored to the needs of men in order for them to understand the patterns and cycles of abuse* (P6), which is also a recommendation of Josolyne (2011). As it stands, participants claimed they are unable to do this due to both lack of funding, and a lack of knowledge surrounding what methods of intervention are effective with male victims.

It was suggested by one participant that a particular focus of efforts to generate awareness should be young people, as *the youth are the future, and to change the future, you have to look at them and their perception on things* (P3). Thus, they recommended that young people in schools, colleges and universities should be educated about healthy relationships. For example, they should be taught about what is, and is not, acceptable behaviour from a partner, and how to communicate effectively without becoming aggressive or submissive.

All participants highlighted the significant impact that funding has on the support that service providers are able to offer male victims. In the future, it was argued that *we need to provide enough budgets for women and men to be supported, instead of voluntary and charitable agencies all fighting for the same limited pots of money* (P7).

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study reflect the literature on the topic of male victims of domestic abuse. The weight of evidence suggests that the support available to male victims of domestic abuse remains inadequate, despite the progress that has been achieved over the past decade. Society is beginning to accept that men can also be victims of domestic abuse; however, there is still a lack of understanding of domestic abuse amongst the general public. Arguably, the root cause of the underlying disregard for male victims stems from the fact that domestic abuse was originally perceived to be a crime experienced by women alone. Furthermore, it is only relatively recently that the definition of domestic abuse has been expanded in order to ensure that the physical violence committed within abusive relationships is not understood separately from the power and control context (Home Office, 2013a). However, it would appear that this initial emphasis on physical violence, combined with deep-seated gender stereotypes, has had a lasting impact on the ability of men to gain recognition as victims of domestic abuse (Josolyne, 2011; Dutton and White, 2013).

The public rhetoric is misrepresenting the true nature of domestic abuse, and gives the impression that it is not possible for men to be victims because they should be able to defend themselves. However, domestic abuse is not a 'gender issue', it is not about physical strength; it is about power (Elliot, 1996). The findings from this study, and other literature, clearly illustrate that female perpetrators are quite capable of controlling their victims, and inflicting harm upon them, despite the fact that they might not be as physically strong as them (George and Yarwood, 2004; Brogden and Nijhar, 2004).

Despite the fact that ONS (2014) statistics show significantly more women and girls are victims of domestic abuse, it remains unclear how many men are affected by domestic abuse, as evidence from this research, and other academic literature, clearly illustrates that men are extremely reluctant to report their experiences and seek help. Thus, the current statistics on the prevalence of domestic abuse against men are likely to be inaccurate. Until society actively demonstrates an acceptance that anyone, irrespective of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class or disability, can be a victim of domestic abuse, male victims will continue to underreport their experiences.

Male victims are deserving of the same level of support that female victims receive, both in terms of service provision and advocacy. The Government response to male victims is seriously lacking in the case of the latter, as it has never actively acknowledged male victims through, for example, awareness campaigns, and policy is still oriented towards female victims. The absence of official recognition for male victims impedes the eradication of

society's stereotypes and preconceptions, which have portrayed heterosexual men as the sole perpetrators of domestic abuse, and heterosexual women as the innocent party (Josolyne, 2011). Thus, masculinity continues to play a role in the reluctance of male victims to report domestic abuse, approach support services, or to voice that they are a victim to anyone (Brogden and Nijhar, 2004), because of the shame they believe they will endure, and the scorn to which they are afraid they will be subjected. It is apparent from this study that the concerns of this nature are not groundless, as participants had experienced unfair treatment towards male victims from other professionals.

The participants of this study demonstrated a willingness to expand their services to better meet the needs of male victims of domestic abuse, but they were all ultimately constrained by a lack of funding. The allocation of resources for all victims of domestic abuse is not sufficient; women's services are also under-resourced. Given that there are a comparatively smaller proportion of male victims, it is not cost-effective to provide separate services for men (EHRC, 2012). Domestic abuse support services are now expected to meet the needs of both female and male victims with no additional funding (EHRC, 2012). Both this study and other research illustrates that, although there are similarities in experiences of domestic abuse between all victim groups, their service needs are decidedly different (Robinson and Rowlands, 2006). Therefore, generic services have been deemed ineffective (Hester et al., 2012), and academics are stressing the need for the development of separate services for gay and heterosexual male victims that reflect their specific service needs (Robinson and Rowlands, 2006; McClennen, Summers and Vaughan, 2008). The immediate focus should arguably be on undertaking further research to gain a better understanding of what methods of intervention are most effective with male victims, as the research base on this topic remains limited (Hester et al., 2012). Improving the effectiveness of interventions would enable the most advantageous use of scarce agency resources.

In conclusion, this research study is a valid contribution to the existing literature on male experiences of domestic abuse. It has illuminated the complexities of providing services that adequately meet the needs of all victims of domestic abuse in a time of austerity and cuts to public expenditure, which restricts the allocation of funding to service providers. Victims' services are now locally commissioned by PCCs, who are under pressure to make decisions in the interests of 'value for money' for short-term benefit, at the expense of the fulfilment of victims' needs (EHRC, 2012). Thus, although it has been demonstrated that heterosexual and gay victims require 'specifically targeted service provision', the likelihood of gaining additional funding to achieve this is reduced (Hester et al., 2012; EHRC, 2012). If generic service provision is to continue, then it is essential that awareness is generated on behalf of



all victim groups, and appropriate training provided to staff. This will advance progress towards the cultivation of an environment in which any individual is able to recognise, and disclose to others, that they are a victim of domestic abuse. Male victims will then no longer feel a sense of unease in approaching support services, and the marginalisation of men in a system originally designed for heterosexual women will be prevented.

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