

Home Affairs Select Committee Inquiry into Domestic Violence

Submission by Dewar Research

September 2007

(i) Dewar Research is an independent research initiative formed in 1996 to collate information in the public domain to encourage more informed debate of particular social issues. It undertook its own survey in 2001 into the experiences of male victims of domestic violence. The key findings from this study⁽¹⁾ reinforced those of an earlier *Dispatches* survey in autumn 1998 (summary of results broadcast 7 January 1999 on Channel 4)⁽²⁾, and underlie many of our comments below. Dewar Research has also responded to various Government consultations, in particular to the proposals on domestic violence contained in *Safety and Justice* in summer 2003⁽³⁾.

(ii) A list of key publications by Dewar Research is available on its website at www.dewar4research.org.

(iii) The submission is intended to help promote a more equitable service provision for victims of domestic abuse, in particular by drawing attention to the plight of male victims who at present are given scant recognition in public policy and inferior support services.

Executive Summary

- Surveys of male victims suggest that they face particular difficulties and bias in service provision and legal processes, with a serious lack of publicly funded support services for them, and little official sympathy. Indeed, they often face scepticism by the police and social agencies, as evidenced by the significant proportions of male victims who report they are themselves arrested.
- The existence of substantial numbers of male victims, and of a corresponding substantial level of female violence in intimate relationships, is still not sufficiently recognised publicly by Government and the agencies responsible for service provision and legal processes. In consequence, many male victims suffer inadequate and often biased treatment from ill-informed attitudes and lack of specific funding.
- Based on Government detailed studies, male victims account for between one third and one half of victims of domestic violence in England and Wales, the proportion increasing with the severity of the violence.
- Despite these proportions, only about 5% of those prosecuted and convicted for domestic violence offences are female.
- Father victims and their children are particularly disadvantaged, fathers who report being vulnerable to ousting from the family home and the children being officially left in the care of a violent mother.
- The present marginalised treatment of male victims is contrary to both Sex Equality and Human Rights law. It is now deeply and widely entrenched, and can only be addressed by Government taking the lead in ensuring public recognition of the problem and by developing appropriate strategic planning initiatives to promote equality of treatment.
- Initiatives need to include more equal and effective representation of male victims in domestic violence fora at all levels and in the determination of public policy and funding.

Surveys of male victims

1 The *Dispatches* survey in autumn 1998 of 100 male victims in the UK found that angry women can be as violent as angry men. One third of male victims were attacked whilst they were sleeping, and one third were kicked in the groin. The men were often deprived of sleep. Half stayed with their violent partners for more than five years. Among the reasons the men gave for staying was that they didn't want to walk out on their children, some were frightened as they had nowhere else to go, and others still loved their partner and hoped her behaviour would change. Overall, the picture that emerged was that the plight of male victims of domestic abuse by female partners was similar to the plight of female victims of abuse by male partners.

2 However, some notable differences emerged. Many of the male victims were critical of the police. Those who had contacted the police said that their complaints were not taken seriously and in some cases the male victims were themselves treated as the aggressor. One quarter of the men had themselves been arrested instead of the violent female partner. Many of the men had not discussed their partner's violence towards them with anyone else as they feared they would be ridiculed. The survey concluded that there was minimal support for male victims of domestic violence nor sources of help for violent women who wanted to change their behaviour.

3 The results of the Dewar Research survey, some three years later, also of 100 male victims (49 in England and Wales and 51 in Ireland), generally corroborated the *Dispatches* findings.

Father victims

4 Because of the lack of publicly funded emergency accommodation for male victims, abused fathers seeking to leave home with their children generally have nowhere to go except private accommodation (if they can afford it). In doing this, they also risk possible allegations from the mother of abducting the children. Both the above surveys found that a large proportion of abused fathers reported they had been forced to leave the family home, whilst their children remained with the violent mother, and they subsequently faced considerable difficulties in maintaining contact with their children. Many abused fathers therefore continue to 'live' with the violence in order to protect their children.

Inadequacy of existing service provisions and legal processes

5 There have been few qualitative studies into the adequacy of existing service provisions and legal processes for male victims of domestic violence, although useful information is available from non-government studies of male victims (including the 1998 *Dispatches* and 2001 Dewar Research surveys) and from the several Home Office surveys of interpersonal violence carried out since the previous Select Committee enquiry of 1992. There is also a considerable body of anecdotal information available.

6 From this, it is fairly clear that existing service provisions and legal processes are largely aimed at female victims. This institutionalised bias has evolved from three decades of polarisation of the issue. Even today, attitudes and policies from the Government down are still dominated by the perception that domestic violence is generally male-on-female.

7 The bias continues, despite mounting authoritative evidence, including from successive Home Office victimisation surveys, that a substantial number of men are abused by female partners in intimate relationships. In consequence, there is minimal public funding specifically to provide effective support services for male victims, nor are their needs and particular plight given any serious consideration in policies and debate. Indeed,

additional Government funding to local authorities to help safeguard victims of domestic violence is provided specifically for female victims. In effect, male victims are treated as undeserving second-class citizens. Coupled with this is a widespread lack of understanding of the nature and extent of female violence, reflected by the rarity of publicly funded treatment programmes for violent women.

Prevalence of male victims of domestic violence

8 There is now persuasive evidence from victimisation surveys and academic studies that a substantial proportion of adults suffering domestic abuse or violence in intimate relationships are male.

Detailed victimisation studies of interpersonal violence

9 The Home Office has published the results of four such surveys undertaken in the past ten years as supplements to routine British Crime Surveys (BCSs) for England and Wales. Each has shown substantial proportions of male victims of violence by female partners in intimate relationships. These authoritative studies show consistently that men account for between one third and one half of all victims of violence in intimate partner relationships, the proportion increasing with the severity of the abuse suffered by them.

10 The results of the latest survey, for year 2005/06 ⁽⁴⁾, revealed that for the 12-month period preceding the survey, 5.7% of women and 4.0% of men reported suffering non-sexual partner abuse (any abuse, threat or force from a partner or ex-partner), a proportion of male victims of 41%. Of these, 3.0% of women and 1.8% of men reported suffering actual force, a proportion of male victims of 37.5%, which was designated as 'severe' in the case of 1.8% of women and 1.3% of men, a proportion of male victims of 42%.

11 In the longer term, since age 16, the survey found that 28.1% of women and 17.5% of men reported suffering non-sexual partner abuse, a proportion of male victims of 38%. Of these, 19.1% of women and 10.4% of men reported suffering actual force, a proportion of male victims of 35%, which was designated 'severe' in the case of 13.7% of women and 8.7% of men, a proportion of male victims of 39%.

12 Men also suffer from repeated assaults, although less so than women⁽⁵⁾.

Academic studies

13 The results of over 200 academic studies published world-wide, mostly in English speaking western democracies⁽⁶⁾, show consistently a substantial level of female violence in intimate relationships. The studies suggest that, by their own admission, women initiate violence against male partners in over half of all domestic conflicts. In about a quarter of cases, the violence is by the woman only, in another quarter the man only, and in 50% of cases the violence is by both parties. A greater prevalence of women suffer injury. However, as the severity of the injury rises, so does the prevalence of male victims. Overall, about one third of those injured are men.

Under-reporting by male victims

14 It is generally accepted that male victims chronically under-report violence against them in all situations but especially in intimate relationships, and on a larger scale than female victims. Routine crime surveys, in which people are asked whether they have suffered a 'crime' of any sort, and police statistics which generally record only those who report, thus tend not to give a full picture of domestic violence.

15 Men, especially younger men, under-report for a variety of reasons including macho attitudes, but also because the system, whilst it is dominated by the perception of male-

on-female violence, is not really designed for male victims. Nor is it designed for the most common form of intimate partner conflict in violent households, mutual violence, when both sexes are both victims and assailants. Men do not see the system as male-victim friendly. Male victims perceive that they will be disbelieved or ridiculed. Most reporting thus is not to the police or social agencies, but to less formal but more sympathetic listeners.

16 Although police force policies on domestic violence are in gender-neutral terms, there is indeed anecdotal evidence that the police are often not entirely impartial in dealing with domestic conflicts, giving priority to perceived women victims, and tending to believe the woman in preference to the man (sometimes even when he has obvious injuries). Studies of male victims (eg. *Dispatches*, 1998; Dewar Research, 2001) suggest that it is the female assailant who calls the police in about half of incidents, claiming falsely to be the victim. The same studies found that over one in five male victims were themselves arrested rather than the female assailant, ostensibly to prevent a breach of the peace, but arguably a perverse use of police powers. Zero-tolerance policies requiring overt police action to resolve a domestic conflict have a tendency to worsen the situation for male victims, especially if children are present, since it is assumed that the mother has to continue to look after them, even if she is the assailant.

17 In emotional and psychological terms, the experiences of male and female victims have much in common. Many victims of both sexes later report that the emotional distress was worse than any physical abuse. It is true that men generally may have a physical advantage in any domestic conflict, but women can make up for this by resorting to any handy object which can be used as a weapon, and/or attacking the man when he is asleep or otherwise helpless. The greater fear of domestic violence expressed by women reflects their greater fear generally of all violent crime, irrespective of actual victimisation.

Prosecutions and convictions for domestic violence

18 Official statistics show that only about 5% of those prosecuted and convicted for domestic violence offences in England and Wales are female. In 2006⁽⁷⁾, there were 56,402 prosecutions for domestic violence in all courts, 2,050 of them female, or 5.2% of the total. Convictions totalled 35,813, of which 1,776 were female, a proportion of 5.0%. Such small proportions contrast startlingly with the much larger proportions of male victims revealed by the detailed studies referred to above. This suggests either that most male victims, even those suffering severe assault, do not report to the police, or that, if they do, the police or prosecution service take a more lenient view of female violence in intimate relationships, even in cases of repeated assaults, than they do of male violence.

Support services for male victims

19 There are over 450 publicly funded refuges in England and Wales for abused women and their children. There are none specifically for abused men and their children. Nor do male victims feature as a priority in the allocation of local authority emergency accommodation. National charities helping women victims receive substantial public funding each year, the few small charities helping male victims virtually nothing.

20 Local authorities receive about £60 million each year in government funding specifically to support female victims of domestic violence, but nothing to support male victims. Authorities are thus not encouraged to provide comparable support for male victims and their children.

21 Male victims of domestic violence find it generally more difficult than female victims to access legal processes, including obtaining ex-parte non-molestation or other injunctions against violent female partners, especially when contact is needed in relation to children.

Sex Equality and Human Rights law

22 The persisting lack of Government funding for male victims of domestic violence and their consequent marginalisation in service provisions and legal protection, despite its own research evidence, is in conflict with the new Gender Equality Duty and also with Article 5 of the Human Rights Act 1998 (security of person). Despite this, strategies on domestic violence produced by Government (eg. in annual National Delivery Plans), continue to be still aimed primarily at female victims and male perpetrators.

Responsibility for equitable system for both male and female victims

23 Domestic violence affects both sexes, albeit to different extents. Ignoring the plight of male victims is not only inequitable, but is unlikely to solve the problem of conflict in intimate relationships. It also ignores the plight of children of violent mothers, a form of child abuse. The present unlawful bias against male victims is now widely and deeply entrenched in public policies. It therefore has to be addressed at highest Government level so that a lead can be given at all lower levels.

24 Government urgently needs to recognise publicly the existence and plight of male victims of domestic conflict, and the prevalence of female violence. It needs then to implement a nation-wide system of equitable service provision and legal protection for male and female victims and to provide adequate funding for this. Such system must include more equal and effective representation of male victims in domestic violence fora at all levels, from the Inter-Ministerial Group down.

David Yarwood

Dewar Research, 'Constables', Windsor Road, Ascot SL5 7LF
Tel: 01344 621167

References

(1) MALE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS SURVEY 2001, Main Findings. MJ George and DJ Yarwood. Dewar Research, October 2004

(2) Details of the *Dispatches* survey, including a summary of the findings, and a commentary by Professor Kevin Browne, adviser to the Home Office, are available on the Dewar Research website

(3) *Safety and Justice*. The Government's Proposals on Domestic Violence. Home Office Cm 5847, June 2003. Submission by Dewar Research, August 2003

(4) 'Homicides, Firearm Offences and Intimate Violence 2005/06: Supplementary Volume 1 to Crime in England and Wales 2005/06, by Kathryn Coleman et al. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 02/07, 25 January 2007.

(5) Domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey 2001, by Sylvia Walby and Jonathan Allen. Home Office Research Study 276, March 2004. Table 2.5 gives for victims of severe force in the preceding 12 months a mean number of 18 incidents per victim for women and of 6 incidents for men.

(6) See full list and bibliography by Martin Fiebert under 'Academic Studies' on Dewar Research website.

(7) Source: CPS communication to Adam Afriye MP, 7 June 2007.