

# Gendered experiences of justice and domestic abuse

Evidence for policy and  
practice

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By Women's Aid, Hester, M.,  
Walker, S-J., and Williamson, E.



University of  
**BRISTOL**

School for Policy Studies

**women's aid**

until women & children are safe

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## Women's Aid

Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. Over the past 47 years, Women's Aid has been at the forefront of shaping and coordinating responses to domestic abuse through practice, research and policy. We empower survivors by keeping their voices at the heart of our work, working with and for women and children by listening to them and responding to their needs.

We are a federation of over 170 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country. We provide expert training, qualifications and consultancy to a range of agencies and professionals working with survivors or commissioning domestic abuse services, and award a National Quality Mark for services which meet our quality standards. We hold the largest national data set on domestic abuse, and use research and evidence to inform all of our work. Our campaigns achieve change in policy, practice and awareness, encouraging healthy relationships and helping to build a future where domestic abuse is no longer tolerated.

Our support services, which include our Live Chat Helpline, the Survivors' Forum, the No Woman Turned Away Project, the Survivor's Handbook, Love Respect (our dedicated website for young people in their first relationships), the national Domestic Abuse Directory and our advocacy projects, help thousands of women and children every year.

[www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

[www.loverespect.co.uk](http://www.loverespect.co.uk)

## Centre for Gender and Violence Research, University of Bristol

We are a centre of excellence for research on gender based violence based in the School for Policy Studies. Our aim is to tackle gender based violence in its many forms and make a positive difference to the lives of individuals and communities touched by gender based violence, including survivors and perpetrators, whether adults or children, and professionals who may work with them. Our projects are usually conducted in collaboration with survivor organisations and others working to tackle gender based violence. Our research informs understanding of gender based violence, policy, practice and action, in the UK and beyond. Find out more:

[www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/centres/genderviolence/](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/centres/genderviolence/)

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## Gendered experiences of justice and domestic abuse. Evidence for policy and practice.

### Summary

Women's Aid and the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol have been working together to add to and update the evidence base on the gendered nature of domestic abuse. We conducted research into gendering discourses and the role they play in women's experiences of domestic abuse as part of a Knowledge Exchange Fellowship (funded by an Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Award – ESRC IAA) between the University of Bristol and Women's Aid.

### Methods

Our research builds on the work done as part of the ESRC-funded *Justice, Inequality and Gender-Based Violence Project* (the Justice Project, grant number: ES/M010090/1) between 2015 and 2018. We analysed a subset of 37 transcripts of interviews with female domestic abuse survivors (all had experienced abuse from male intimate partners) conducted as part of the Justice Project. We chose the sample purposely to ensure that it reflected the diversity of the survivors interviewed in terms of social class, ethnic background, age and experiences of disability.

We used methods of critical discourse analysis to analyse the transcripts. We understand discourse as a way of conceptualising or 'making sense' of society. This is a dynamic understanding of discourse as something that both reflects and constructs social reality. We used critical discourse analysis as a way of identifying who holds the power and who is marginalised by dominant ways of conceptualising social reality.

Our main research question was:

*How do gendering discourses manifest themselves in female survivors' accounts of their experiences of domestic abuse, their own perceptions of domestic abuse and their experiences of responses to domestic abuse?*

We understand gendering discourses to be those conceptualisations and uses of language that strengthen and perpetuate inequality between men and women, and re/produce oppressive gendered norms and stereotypes. We organised our findings around three main discursive themes and labelled the gendering discourses we identified using quotes from the survivor transcripts. Our three main discursive themes were:

- Household/relationship roles
- Sexuality and intimate partner relationships
- Mental health and domestic abuse

#### *Findings: Household/relationship roles*

We identified two main gendering discourses relating to household or relationship roles:

- a. Discourse: "...it was my job to run the household, and his to basically tell me what to do."  
(Female homemaker - male head of household)
- b. Discourse: "repair the relationship somehow"  
(Importance of making the relationship work)

The households or relationships were often described by survivors in the interviews as characterised by a hierarchical division of roles (for the women, unchosen roles) along traditional, patriarchal gendered lines. There was a strong sense that the man had the role of the 'head of household';

he was the self-appointed decision-maker for the whole household, prescriber of household rules, micro-manager of household tasks that he often refused to participate in himself. Women were often characterised as ‘homemakers’; subservient to a man’s household rules, performing unchosen roles in which they were tasked with carrying out most or all of the housework and childcare, but with no authority in how this work was performed. Men’s powerful positions in the relationships were maintained by their violence and abuse, and in turn men’s abusive behaviours towards their partners were enabled by this discourse of entitlement and subservience.

An intimate partner relationship was often represented in the transcripts as something that must be protected and kept intact at all costs. Female survivors were often assigned sole responsibility for the success or failure of relationships. This weight given to the integrity and longevity of the intimate relationship can distract from the relationship potentially being a site of male power and control, and from the choices of perpetrators to be abusive and violent as being the problem. It is also a significant barrier to women leaving abusive men. The breaking up of the household, relationship or family unit often had connotations of shame and failure for female survivors, and sometimes also for their families.

### *Findings: Sexuality and intimate partner relationships*

We identified three gendering discourses on the topic of sexuality and intimate partner relationships:

- a. Discourse: “women are objects”  
(The sexual objectification of women)
- b. Discourse: “dirty” / “he’s got his freedom”  
(Female / male active sexuality)
- c. Discourse: “You let them do it.”  
(Victim-blaming)

The female survivors interviewed often described themselves, and how they perceived others saw them, in terms of sexual objects or possessions, aggressively guarded by their male partners or ‘owners’. Women were seen as existing for the pleasure of men and expected to engage in sexual activity that was controlled and defined by their abusive male intimate partners. Sexual activity was described by survivors from the perspective of what men wanted or felt entitled to demand (with women’s own feelings and wishes seeming very much inferior or irrelevant). The survivors interviewed commonly described rape, sexual harassment and coercion as routine in their intimate relationships. Sometimes survivors explicitly named this as abuse or violence. However, in many survivors’ accounts the sense that this was abusive behaviour against them was not made explicit by the language they used. Instead, sexual violence and abuse was often described in victim-blaming terms as something survivors felt they had to let happen or did not feel strong enough to resist.

The interview transcripts contained contrasting descriptions of female and male active sexuality. Female active sexuality (or imagined active sexuality) was often described in terms that negatively implied impurity or promiscuity; whereas the



male partners described in the interviews were often having sexual affairs but these were described in terms of autonomy, freedom and entitlement. Female survivors were often accused of sexual infidelity or inviting sexual harassment from other men. The survivors interviewed often talked about how feminised, sexualised insults (sometimes combined with slurs directed at a woman's ethnicity or nationality) were used by perpetrators in denigrating them and justifying their own abusive behaviours. This discourse links with the discourse of sexual objectification; women are understood as men's exclusive sexual possessions and any perceived breach of this situation is regarded as repugnant.

There was a strong discourse of victim-blaming in the transcripts that serves to justify or excuse perpetrators' abusive actions and puts up barriers to women reporting and seeking specialist support for sexual crimes. Survivors reported being accused by perpetrators of 'wanting' or 'inviting' sexual violence, including the violence perpetrators committed in intimate relationships. Survivors often reported being given advice or instructions by their male partners and by others, including family, on what measures to take to not 'invite' or 'allow' male sexual harassment, abuse and violence.

### *Findings: mental health and domestic abuse*

We identified two main gendering discourses on the topic of mental health:

- (a) Discourse: "this crazy woman"  
(Mental illness - she's the problem)
- (b) Discourse: "he was just over anxious"  
(Mental illness - he has a problem)

We also identified a prominent counter-discourse in the transcripts that undid the work of these gendering discourses, and reassessed survivors' mental illness as the consequence of trauma:

(c) Counter-discourse: "I call it oppression, not depression"  
(Mental illness as a consequence of abuse)

The transcripts give the impression that the label of mental illness had long-lasting negative implications for female survivors. The survivors themselves were seen as problematic, rather than the abuse and violence committed against them being identified as the problem. Being mentally ill, or showing mental or emotional distress, seemed to be linked into wider stereotypes of women as a group supposedly being markedly unstable or over-emotional. There seemed to be little understanding in survivors' interactions with others that being distressed or angry is an acceptable reaction to being subjected to violence and abuse. The label of 'mentally unwell' overshadowed many of female survivors' experiences of external responses to the domestic abuse, including others calling their parenting ability and their credibility into question.

In contrast, when male perpetrators were associated with mental ill health it appeared to mean that they were seen in a more sympathetic light, as men overcome by illness or problems. This focus diverts from important discussions about the harm they were causing through their perpetration of abuse and violence and excused perpetrator's abusive behaviours as being the 'understandable' consequence of their mental health problems.

We identified an important counter-discourse that reframed survivors' mental illness as a response to the trauma of domestic abuse. This was sometimes

expressed by survivors in terms of an alternative viewpoint (sometimes reached through empowering domestic abuse support work). This reframing of mental ill health as a consequence of the domestic abuse perpetrated against them was usually absent in descriptions of how other people had responded to them and to their experiences of domestic abuse.

### *Conclusion*

It is impossible to disentangle women's experiences of domestic abuse from their experiences of structural inequalities and the violence, abuse and harassment they are subjected to in other areas of their lives; for example, their experiences of everyday sexism (see *Everyday Sexism* project – founded by Laura Bates). Gendering discourses play a significant role in women's experiences of domestic abuse. They set the scene for men's abusive and controlling behaviours in intimate relationships and construct barriers to female survivors being believed and supported to leave abusive men. Our research adds to a wide body of literature on the harmful impact of gendered stereotypes and oppressive social norms about masculinity and femininity, and how these form the foundations of and serve to perpetuate male violence against women.

It is important that the long-term, recovery work delivered by specialist domestic abuse services, led by women for women, is sufficiently resourced. This includes sustainable funding for those vital services that are led by and for women from marginalised groups, such as services by and for Black and minoritised survivors, disabled survivors and LGBT+ survivors. This empowering support work with survivors helps undo the work of damaging and disempowering gendering discourses and addresses the damage caused by victim-blaming and female sexual objectification. It is also important for the specialist domestic

abuse sector to continue to challenge those discourses that perpetuate damaging gender norms and stereotypes and to offer counter-discourses through public awareness, training and educational work.

Until it is consistently recognised in policy and legislation that domestic abuse is a form of violence against women and that addressing oppressive gender norms and stereotypes is vital, we cannot effectively tackle domestic abuse.

# Gendered experiences of justice and domestic abuse. Evidence for policy and practice.

## Introduction

### *Background to the project*

At Women's Aid, we know from our work supporting and campaigning with survivors, and through the work of local services in our federation, that sexism and misogyny underpin women's experiences of domestic abuse. Women's Aid wanted to conduct some research with the University of Bristol to add to and update the evidence base on the gendered nature of domestic abuse and to produce findings that would form the basis of recommendations for domestic abuse policy and practice. We decided to revisit the rich, survivor-centred data produced by the *Justice, Inequality and Gender-Based Violence Project* (see below) to explore how sexism and misogyny impact women's experiences of domestic abuse and justice. Our research was conducted as part of a Knowledge Exchange Fellowship (funded by an Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Award – ESRC IAA) between the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol and the research and evaluation team at Women's Aid Federation of England.

Domestic abuse is most commonly perpetrated by men against women and is part of the wider societal issue of male violence against women and girls (Women's Aid, 2020). Men can be victims of domestic abuse and all victims should be taken seriously and be able to access appropriate support. However, we know that women are disproportionately impacted by domestic abuse and there are important differences between typical male and female experiences. Women are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse (ONS, 2020B), experience higher rates of repeated victimisation (Walby & Towers, 2018), and

are much more likely to be seriously harmed (Walby & Allen, 2004) or killed (ONS, 2020A). Women also typically experience higher levels of fear (Dobash & Dobash, 2004) and are more likely to be subjected to coercive and controlling behaviours (Myhill, 2015; ONS, 2020C).

Importantly, women differ from men in that they experience domestic abuse as part of embedded, structural inequalities against their sex (often intersected by other structural inequalities, such as racism, ageism, disability discrimination and LGBT+ discrimination). Put simply, the prominence of sexism and misogyny in our society creates a culture and context that enables and entitles men to demean, objectify, abuse and control women.

### *Justice, Inequality and Gender-Based Violence Project*

Our research builds on the work done by the ESRC-funded *Justice, Inequality and Gender-Based Violence Project* (the Justice Project). We analysed transcripts of interviews with female domestic abuse survivors conducted as part of this project.

The Justice Project was a 30 month project, from 2015 to 2018, conducted by the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol in partnership with Women's Aid Federation of England and Welsh Women's Aid, the University of Cardiff and the University of the West of England, Bristol.<sup>1</sup> This large piece of research explored how survivors understand, experience and perceive 'justice' in its widest sense. The project looked across gender-based violence and victimisation, including analysis of police records on domestic abuse and rape, interviews with victim-survivors and professionals, and a

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<sup>1</sup> Grant number: ES/M010090/1; PI: Professor Marianne Hester.

See <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/projects/justice-inequality-and-gender-based-violence>

systematic review of the literature on 'justice'. For a discussion of the methods used in this project, see Williamson et al, 2021.

As part of the Justice Project, interviews<sup>2</sup> were conducted with 251 victims-survivors of gender-based violence (including domestic and sexual violence and abuse, and so-called 'honour-based' violence). Survivors were asked about their perceptions and experiences of criminal, civil, and family court; restorative justice; mediation and arbitration; informal justice, including family and community processes, revenge, political activism and volunteering etc. This report draws on a sub-set of these interviews.

## Methods

### *Sample selection*

For our current study we used a sample composed of interviews with 33 female survivors (interviewed for the Justice Project) who had experienced abuse from male intimate partners (and sometimes additional abuse from family members and others) plus four transcripts analysed in a pilot of this study; see the table below for details of the final sample. The sample was chosen purposely, ensuring that the women had all experienced domestic abuse. The sample was also chosen to reflect the diversity of the survivors interviewed and to reflect diverse experiences of domestic abuse. In this study we have focussed on the impacts of sexism and misogyny on survivors of domestic abuse. We have included examples of interactions of sexism/misogyny with other forms of structural inequality in this report, but we acknowledge that further in-depth

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<sup>2</sup> This included a small number of group interviews or focus groups.

research is needed to explore the impact of intersecting inequalities on experiences of abuse.

Our main categories for choosing transcripts (see table below) were organised around ethnicity, age at the time of abuse, individual income at the time of the interview<sup>3</sup> and highest level of education (the latter two categories were employed as proxies for social class). Three participants were selected randomly from each category (but then checked to ensure that they had had experience of domestic abuse and to avoid duplication in other categories). We also ensured that our sample included survivor experiences of disability.

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<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge that many survivors experience financial hardship as a result of abuse, including post-separation. See Fahmy & Williamson, 2018; Women's Aid, 2019A.



Final sample: 37 participants Gendered experiences of justice and domestic abuse	
Variable	Number of participants
<b>Ethnicity*</b>	
<b>Black and minoritised</b> Including: Asian/Asian British (Indian) Asian/Asian British (Pakistani) Black/Black British (African)	5
<b>White British</b>	29
<b>White (non-British)</b> Including: White (Eastern European) White (Any other White background)	3
<b>Age at time of abuse*</b>	
≤25 years	9
26-49 years	6
≥50 years	2
Notes: For 10 participants the age at time of abuse spanned multiple age groups and for an additional 10 participants the age at time of abuse was unknown	
<b>Individual income*</b>	
≤£15K p.a.	16
£15-30K p.a.	11
≥£30K p.a.	7
Notes: Three participants did not state their income	
<b>Highest level education*</b>	
University degree	21
GCSE; A-level; NVQ equivalent	11
Notes: Four participants had no qualifications; one participant did not state her highest qualification	
<b>Disability</b>	
Any declared physical disability	11
Any declared mental health or learning need	22

\* Our sampling framework for the main sample (n=33) ensured a minimum of 3 transcripts were selected for each of these 12 variables (for age, this included a participant whose age at time of abuse spanned multiple age groups). The sample was then checked to ensure it included a variety of experiences of disability. In addition there were four transcripts analysed in the pilot. All participants were female. None of the participants reported to us that they identified as trans.

### *Critical discourse analysis*

Our method of analysis was piloted and refined on four transcripts of survivor interviews. In order to look closely at the ways domestic abuse survivors are construed and construe themselves in gendered terms, we used methods of critical discourse analysis (Jaeger & Maier, 2009; Fairclough, 2010; Wodak & Meyer, 2015) in our examination of these 37 survivor transcripts. This enabled us to identify gendering discourses, namely those conceptualisations and uses of language that strengthen and perpetuate inequality between men and women, and re/produce oppressive gendered norms and stereotypes (Lakeoff, 1975). We used a dynamic understanding of discourse as contingent and shifting. We understand discourse as both reflecting and constructing social reality. Therefore, the critical analysis of discourse is a useful way of understanding social injustice and identifying who is made powerful and who is marginalised. It is a site for potential social change by demystifying discourses as constructed and highlighting oppressive impacts, and also through the development of counter-discourses (Cameron, 1998).

We used the interview transcripts to examine female survivors' own use of language about domestic abuse and their reported conversations with other key actors, such as perpetrators, family, friends and professionals from statutory agencies and support services. We used NVIVO software to organise our analysis. We investigated how gendering discourses manifest themselves in female survivors' accounts of their experiences of domestic abuse, their own perceptions of domestic abuse and their experiences of responses to domestic abuse. Our critical, feminist examination focussed on how different discourses impact on how survivors make sense of their experiences of abuse alongside social constructions of what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman. We were keen to highlight the impact of these discourses on survivors' experiences

of domestic abuse, including accessing support and seeking justice. We used an intersectional lens in that we were keen to discover how other discriminatory and oppressive discourses (such as racist discourses) intersect with gendering discourses. In this report we have used quotes from the survivor transcripts as labels for the gendering discourses we have identified.

Our research is limited in that we only examine transcripts of interviews with female survivors, and the language used by people other than survivors to conceptualise gender and domestic abuse can only be ascertained through reported speech. However, this approach is advantageous in that it counteracts the marginalisation female survivors often experience by centring and prioritising their voices and experiences in our research.

In this report we have organised our findings around three main discursive themes:

- Household/relationship roles
- Sexuality and intimate partner relationships
- Mental health and domestic abuse

We also identified other discourses that have been discussed elsewhere in detail and we have not explored them here to make better use of the limited space in this report. These are discourses around ‘sisterly responsibility’ (female survivors wanting to help, warn and campaign for other women on the subject of domestic abuse – this has been addressed in The ‘Measuring Justice’ Toolkit<sup>4</sup>) and on ‘fathers with rights’ (on abusive fathers asserting their right to contact

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<sup>4</sup> (Walker and Hester, 2019) The toolkit lists ‘Encouraging or facilitating activism / participation opportunities (volunteering / socials for survivors)’ as an enabler for justice for survivors of domestic abuse.

with children – this has been explored in Women’s Aid Child First campaign and related materials<sup>5</sup>).

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<sup>5</sup> *Child First. Safe Child Contact Saves Lives.* [Child First: Safe Child Contact Saves Lives - Womens Aid](#)  
(See Women’s Aid, 2016; Birchall & Choudhry, 2018.)

## Findings

### Section One. Household /relationship roles

The households or relationships as described by survivors in the transcripts were characterised by a hierarchical division of roles (for the women, unchosen roles) along traditional, patriarchal gendered lines. The gendering discourses on household/relationship roles are intertwined with dominant discourses on women as sexual objects or possessions which are discussed in Section Two of the report. There was a prominent sense in the transcripts that the man has the role of the 'head of the household' (decision-maker, prescriber of household rules) and the woman as the 'homemaker' (tasked with carrying out housework and childcare, subservient to his household rules). Men's abusive behaviours towards their partners were enabled by this discourse of entitlement and subservience. An intimate partner relationship was often represented in the transcripts as something that must be kept together at all costs and the breaking up of the household or family unit often had connotations of shame and failure for women.

We identified two main gendering discourses relating to household or relationship roles:

- a) Discourse: "...it was my job to run the household, and his to basically tell me what to do." (Female homemaker - male head of household)
- b) Discourse: "repair the relationship somehow"  
(Importance of making the relationship work)

We will explore these discourses further in this section.

(a) Discourse: "...it was my job to run the household, and his to basically tell me what to do."

(Female homemaker - male head of household)

Households or relationships were often described in the survivor transcripts as microcosms of traditional gendered inequality and stereotypical gendered roles. The maintenance of the symbolism of the man as 'head of the household/relationship' was dependent on his symbolic relationship with the woman as the object he has control over. Much has been written about traditional gendered roles within (heterosexual) families and society (Schechter, 1982; Pierson & Castles, 2000; Delphy, 1984; Walby, 1989; Malos, 1995). This includes observations about the types of activities women are expected to perform in intimate relationships, including the reproduction and maintenance of family members (Firestone, 1970), sexual access for intimate partners (Brownmiller, 1975; Stark, 2007), and sacrificing their own needs when family economics require it (Goode et al, 1998).

The language employed in the transcripts we examined to describe male partners often represented their situations of power in the household or relationship ("...household leader...", "...basically he was a very dominant male...", "...kind of everything revolved around him..."). Whereas the women were typically described in terms of 'homemakers', tasked with household chores or running the home efficiently without having authority over how this work was performed. Male authority in the household or relationship was both underpinned and reinforced by male violence/abuse. One survivor summed up this oppressive hierarchy at the heart of the household in the following way:

“It really became apparent to me in ... we moved in together ... and it was very much ... it was my job to run the household, and his to basically tell me what to do.”

### *Dominant decision-maker*

Several female survivors described how their male partners unilaterally resolved that they (the men) would be the ones to make the decisions about their household. These decisions formed the basis of their abusive and controlling behaviours; examples included:

- dictating detailed rules on how housework should be carried out by the woman and micro-managing this work;
- not permitting anyone else in the household to adjust the household heating;
- dictating how the woman should prepare and cook food;
- moving the family/household (sometimes repeatedly) because of his job or his wishes.

Some survivors also described their male partners displaying extreme behaviours (to the detriment or discomfort of other household members) that seemed to be demonstrations of their autonomy and power. Examples of this included playing extremely loud music, driving excessively fast (“...he used to drive at stupid speeds and it was really scary and I’d ask him to slow down all the time and he never did.”) or extreme spending. One survivor contrasted how she was obliged to ask her male partner’s permission to write a cheque but then he decided to buy a car without telling her.

This discourse of the male head of household/female homemaker seemed so normalised for some women interviewed, what Schechter (1982) refers to as “sex role socialization”, that controlling behaviours were often not highlighted by

them as examples of abuse. Rather these behaviours were minimised and justified as men being ill-tempered (“snappy and cross”) or just very meticulous in what they liked (“...he was really fussy...”, “...he’d make a fuss...”). Evan Stark (2007) argues that housework such as cooking and cleaning is so normalised as ‘women’s work’ that the coercion and degradation of women by men through housework can be difficult to recognise. Moreover, he argues that it is easier for men to coerce women in this way (rather than vice versa) because these are household roles that women are already socially expected to perform.

### *Homemaker*

Female survivors often described their (unchosen) role in the household as being submissive to their male partners, and being solely responsible for completing household tasks, including childcare. This was portrayed as an inferior role they had no choice in performing (“Just to be subservient and just do everything that he said and not to have a voice or an opinion,...”; “And all I had to do was cook and serve him.”). As previously noted, women were often infantilised in that they were not allowed to make decisions themselves about how this work was conducted. There are links here with discourses discussed later (in Section Two) about the (sexual) objectification of women in that the women were used as ‘tools’ in the household, rather than seen as whole, autonomous people.

Survivors often described men’s lack of contributions to completing household tasks (“...he wouldn’t do any of the housework.”; “So he came home and that was the end of his day, there was nothing else that he’d do.”), which is evident in wider literature focused on gendered roles within relationships and families (Schechter, 1982; Stark, 2007; Dermott, 2019). It was clear that men’s non-participation and absence from work at the heart of the household or family can in itself be abusive (Thiara & Humphreys, 2017; Mella, 2019). However, men



often determined exacting and detailed rules of how household tasks (that they themselves refused to participate in) were to be carried out by women (“I had to do the skirting board first or the floor first, and then he’d alternate it round.”; “... [he] didn’t lift a finger round the house but expected me to do it. I’d be called to account if things weren’t done.”). Men were often very critical of how women were performing in the role they had assigned to them as ‘homemakers’ (“I was never Hoovering right either,...”, “...by his non participation, it sort of made everything my fault.”; “And he just started commenting you know on the meat being dry and ... that sort of behaviour you know – very critical I think, that’s how it all ... like the control started.”). Schechter argued in her 1982 book that the notion of male supremacy is so deep-seated in society that men “...are socialized to feel uncomfortable when not in control...” and so they employ violence and other means of coercion against female partners to maintain this dominant status (Schechter, 1982). Stark’s theory of coercive control presents similar accounts of how the micro-management of women’s gendered household roles constitute the site of many aspects of controlling and therefore abusive behaviours (Stark, 2007).

### *A wider context of male power*

Some survivors referred to their own parents’ relationships, or relationships they’d seen in their close communities growing up, as being marked by the power of their father/a man over their mother/a woman. This backdrop to their childhoods seemed to have normalised domestic abuse in presenting male supremacy and female subservience as the acceptable household structure and order.

"And looking back, my dad was controlling – he controlled everything about her. She couldn't even watch anything on TV without him allowing it or ... and I suppose I grew up thinking that's how it is, and it's not."

"...my dad kind of ... I guess was quite traditional and just like – wife does all the cooking and cleaning and stuff like that."

"My dad has always been the powerful one in the relationship....it is always his decisions....so she just does what he would demand or is told."

"..I will only talk about the Pakistani community because obviously I am one and I grew up as a Pakistani woman....I could...you know....you just knew that generally men had the upper hand and women could be slapped for answering back...you know you just heard the stories you knew."

Some survivors spoke of men's position in wider society as being that of holding the power and this was then reflected or replicated in their own relationships or households. This imbalance of power between men and women was often described by survivors in terms that depicted it as normal and commonplace, albeit recognised as an unjust status quo ("...unfortunately it shouldn't be, but I think that's part of being a woman is."). Some referenced a wider range of violence against women (including street harassment and being subjected to indecent exposure) as bolstering and normalising male power, and objectifying women.

"I kind of thought it was normal at the time, you know – a man tells you what to do, and you do whatever he says."

"...but the end of the day the men still rule out there no matter what..."

"...so injustice would be someone is being oppressed who's being ... yeah someone who's being oppressed by ... whether that's like a government, by like different hierarchies or it's a patriarchy, or racism..."

"I think part of it is just sort of like ... we're brought up within like a society which teaches us like ... particularly men being told like 'This is what you're able to do, you're able to get away with a lot more' ... like boys, saying 'Boys will be boys' they're allowed to do more stuff."

"It was quite normal for blokes to flash young girls ... this is where I grew up,..."

"...you have the odd wolf whistle don't you and people turning on the charm. I think it all depends how you perceive that, I just used to ignore it you know."

This perception of male supremacy as normal makes it more difficult to recognise controlling behaviours within an intimate relationship as abusive. Those writing more broadly about gendered roles within the family highlight the ways in which the unequal distribution of familial resources, whether relating to economic resource or caring responsibilities, impact on the wider roles and opportunities available to women (Dermott, 2019). In relation to women in abusive relationships, the wider impact of this inequality is important. It is recognised that for those experiencing abuse, the space outside the home, where more positive aspects of self are reinforced (Williamson, 2010), helps to combat the impact which abuse has on autonomy or liberty (Stark, 2007). Put simply, survivors of domestic abuse do not inhabit that identity all of the time which allows for alternative social interactions (Glass, 1995). If women are prevented from participating in these types of alternative interactions outside the intimate relationship (because of the burden of work put upon her in the home or they are directly prevented by perpetrators of abuse) then her opportunities for empowerment/liberty/autonomy are curtailed.

Survivors also reported that male perpetrators sometimes drew upon religious doctrine, traditions or culture (or their interpretation of such) to underpin their

position as controllers in the relationship or household as normal and acceptable (Aghtaie et al, 2020).

"...[he] said don't question my authority that is not allowed in our religion."

"...so he would talk women who don't cover their head and are from religious point of view what sin they are doing and how much God would punish them and what the punishment would be for this and that and naturally I started thinking Oh my God I need to do this..."

"And as far as the women's concerned of course we want that power, but as far as Islam's concerned in that sense that is why the man is accountable for women, he is the guardian of the women that is why you have a father a son or a brother or a husband who is in charge of you and look out for you."

"Being from the Jewish community, whilst I'm not religious, I'm traditional and I was happy for my ex to take the role of being the household leader, if you like."

### (b) Discourse: "repair the relationship somehow"

#### (Importance of making the relationship work)

The intimate relationship or marriage was often described in the transcripts (by survivors or in their reported speech of others) as something to be revered, protected, and something that needed to be worked at maintaining. This weight given to the integrity and longevity of the relationship can distract from the relationship potentially being a site of male power and control, and it is also a significant barrier to women leaving abusive men (Glass, 1995).

"I was still hoping that we would maintain ... that we'd you know repair the relationship somehow, ...."

"...keep our marriage together..."

"I had to strive to make sure that the relationship was working."

### *Female peacemakers*

Schechter, writing in 1982, argued that hierarchical sex roles in families relegate women to domestic and nurturing duties and lead to women being assigned sole responsibility for the success or failure of a relationship (Schechter, 1982). Over 35 years later, the survivors we interviewed also often reported that that they felt a responsibility had been placed on them to act as peacemaker in their intimate relationships. Women reported being encouraged to ensure "...the relationship was working", to find a way to cope with his violence and abuse ("...just stay out of his way and just deal with it"), and not 'break' the relationship by leaving. This is not surprising given the contradictory ways in which women are blamed for breaking up families if they leave due to abuse, whilst also being blamed for staying (Bograd, 1990).

"Oh, it's the whole attitude towards women, that a woman should make her marriage work and if a man's hitting her, you know, like pray more, for example. He will change."

"It's still ... like my mum's real old school, she'd be like the 'What did you do to upset him?' frame of mind."

"His mother challenged me about you know getting him to move out – told me in no uncertain terms that it was my responsibility to be his wife and have him here."

"Yes, there were a few comments that made me feel like I had to strive to make sure that the relationship was working. I had to strive to make sure that I was keeping him interested and stuff in the beginning."

"He [abusive male partner] was like 'the children need us together' and all this."

The emphasis was placed on the survivor's actions and choices in keeping the relationship intact. A focus on the man's choices to be abusive and violent as

being the cause of relationship breaking down was often absent, and the consequences were victim-blaming.

Examples are:

- A survivor was told that she "...had to strive to make sure that the relationship was working";
- A survivor was told "... don't call the [police]... Because he had a good job"
- A survivor was asked "'What did you do to upset him?'"

### *The shame and failure of ending a relationship*

Survivors also spoke about a sense of shame and failure in ending a relationship and some were conscious of how this would also impact negatively on their families. Partly because women usually carry the emotional labour of families and women are often socially defined in terms of their relationship status, their sense of failure and shame when relationships end, even where there is domestic abuse committed against them, is consistent in the wider literature (Glass, 1995). Women can both internalise this expectation and as a result understand it in their interactions with others.

"Yes, one of the priests there...he said to me that if I leave him I'll be in a bad place and I'm going to lose the children. My dad's going to die of a heart attack or something. It's going to be all on my head."

"I was forced to stay in my marriage because it would bring shame, yes. I'm not a good enough daughter, yes."

## Section Two. Sexuality and intimate partner relationships

In our analysis of the survivor transcripts we identified three (sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradictory) gendering discourses on the topic of sexuality and intimate partner relationships.

- a. Discourse: “women are objects”  
(The sexual objectification of women)
- b. Discourse: “dirty” / “he’s got his freedom”  
(Female / male active sexuality)
- c. Discourse: “You let them do it.”  
(Victim-blaming)

The women interviewed often described themselves, and how they perceived others saw them, in terms of sexual objects. They were seen as existing for the pleasure of men and expected to engage in sexual activity that was controlled and defined by their male intimate partners. Women were often described in terms of sexual objects that were possessions, aggressively guarded by their male partners or ‘owners’. In contrast, men’s sexuality was described in the survivor transcripts in terms of freedom and choice, with men making their own sexual decisions. The transcripts gave the impression that women’s expression of active sexuality (or perceived expression) easily led to their reputation or status being tainted by accusations of sexual impurity, unfaithfulness or promiscuity. Women also talked about being blamed (and sometimes blamed themselves) for ‘inviting’ or ‘letting happen’ sexual harassment, abuse and violence. These discourses were used by abusive male intimate partners and others to excuse and justify domestic abuse.

We know that sexual abuse and violence is a frequent part of women’s experiences of domestic abuse and it is the prominence of sexual abuse that is a

key difference between women's and men's typical experiences of intimate partner abuse (Hester and Walker, 2018). Estimates calculated from responses to the Crime Survey of England and Wales showed that 128 men compared to 1,356 women had experienced any sexual assault (including attempts) by a partner in their lifetime (since the age of 16) (ONS, 2020D; Table 2). 27.2% of female service users in refuges and 18.6% of women using community-based domestic abuse services in the year ending March 2020 had reported experiencing sexual abuse (Women's Aid, 2021A).<sup>6</sup> However it is likely that the actual numbers are higher as women may be reluctant to report sexual abuse, with those experiencing multiple inequalities facing additional barriers or what Thiara and Roy (2020) refer to as 'multiple silencing strategies' which:

"...enable and inhibit women's voice and agency with regard to sexual violence including societal culture, the strategies used by perpetrator(s), the reactions of significant others and specific taboos at family, peer or community level, as well as the responses from help providers across the sectors." (Thiara and Roy, 2020; 5).

**(a) Discourse: "women are objects"**  
**(The sexual objectification of women)**

Sexual intimacy was often described in the transcripts as something done by men to women, rather than part of a loving relationship or a relationship between equals. Sexual activity was described by survivors from the perspective of what men wanted or felt entitled to demand ("...he started claiming sex..."). The women's own feelings and wishes seemed very much inferior (or irrelevant)

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<sup>6</sup> From sub-sample of 18,832 community-based and refuge service users, national data from On Track (the Women's Aid case management and outcomes monitoring system) for whom an abuse profile on current abuse is available.



to the men's wishes to engage in sexual activity with her ("I had to engage in sexual things with him that I wasn't happy with, you know.").

One survivor spoke directly about this discourse:

"And I think just sort of like the society that we live in at the moment it very much pushes that idea of sort of like ... women are objects and they're very much sexualised and you can just like ... like yeah, they're there for men, like yeah there for the use of ... which is ... yeah that's really bad."

#### *Duty to be sexually available*

This discourse of sexual objectification is present in survivors' descriptions of a strong sense of obligation to be sexually available to their male partners ("...I felt this huge responsibility of making sure that he was happy as a man."). The men were the 'sexual actors' in the relationship and the women the 'sexual objects', to be used by men in their sexual gratification and to be jealously guarded as objects that belonged exclusively to them. This sense of sexual duty was enforced by men through coercion and harassment.

"I was guilty..."

"...constant persuasion from my partner..."

"...he would talk me into it..."

"He would harass me the whole day,..."

"...I was pressurised to say yes."

These testimonies reflect wider evidence from research which explores sexual coercion (Williamson, 2014), which has reported alarmingly high rates of women being coerced or pressured into their first, and subsequent, sexual experiences

(Evans, 2000). Women in the current study described how their male partners made them feel emotionally obligated to engage in sexual activity, through invoking feelings of guilt or through relentless pressure. Their male partners sometimes employed 'truths' about intimate relationships in their coercion, linking engaging with sexual activity with being a 'good' partner and showing that you love someone.

"He would just make me feel really, really bad if I didn't want to have sex with him."

"So every time I said that I didn't want to have sex he would say things like 'You're looking for someone else, you don't love me'. He would harass me the whole day, he would come to work and ask me if I would run home and I would have sex with him. Every time I was pressurised to say yes."

"...it was sort of I suppose tapping into my emotional sort of wellbeing and that kind of 'I love you' and 'Why don't you want sex with me?' and all of that kind of thing."

"He would he would not force, but then it would be the same thing ... he would say 'well if I can't come to you where else I'm a gonna go you are my wife' and then maybe I am really tired and if I would say I am not...I not feeling... but then he would talk me into it...a lot of times it was very much because he wanted it and I didn't want it."

"He would tell me that when you're in a relationship basically you have sex even if the other person doesn't really want to. And he went well I don't always want to have sex when you do, but I do it anyway because that's what you want."

"But he kept sort of persuading me and asking me and asking me and asking me ... and then eventually I sort of gave in. And then sort of the sexual relationship then going forward, it was always kind of ... I never really ... there were occasions when I did want to have sex, but generally it was him sort of asking me, and me sort of giving in on a number of occasions."

Some survivors described how their male partner would make them feel they had to engage in sex in order to attempt to pacify him, stop his other abusive behaviours against her or children, or stop other problematic behaviours (such as his excessive drinking). The onus is victim-blaming, placing an emphasis on her actions in stopping his abuse and positioning his abuse as the consequence of her actions. One survivor explained how physical violence had “set the scene well and truly, you know”, and that after he had physically assaulted her the (unspoken) ground rules of the relationships were set that she must “...engage in sexual things with him that I wasn’t happy with...”

“I was guilted into doing lots of these things, so if I didn’t do what he wanted he would drink, so I would always ... I would have sex with him because it meant that he wouldn’t have an argument with me, so then he wouldn’t go and buy alcohol and drink.”

“I spent all my time ... protecting them [the children] ... protecting them and also trying my best to protect ... I used to have sex with him in order just ... so he’d leave the kids alone, you know.”

“I think I might have even had obligatory sex with him just to keep him sweet to be fair.”

“He’d force things like oral sex and contact and stuff like that and raped me quite regularly, but ... not sort of a violent way, more of a coercive way. So if he didn’t get his own way he’d sulk, he’d smash the flat up, or he wouldn’t talk to me, or something like that. So it was just easier to let him do it.”

“And I did try to say no and obviously keep my ground, he would start breaking things. So at first he started with furniture, the TV, and then he would start threatening me...”

### *Rape and sexual abuse as routine*

Women commonly described rape and sexual coercion as routine in their intimate relationships (“raped me quite regularly”, “...a lot of

times it was very much because he wanted it and I didn't want it."), and this has been reported in the wider literature (Williamson, 2014), including the involvement of coercion to have sex with a third party as reported from data from the Justice Project (Matolcsi, 2020). Sexual activity was often described in terms of a context of power and control exerted by men over women and a way of establishing or reinforcing who was in charge in the relationship ("...that's him being in control, because he is a control freak."). Evan Stark describes sexual assault within intimate partner relationships as "...part of the broader pattern of humiliation and dominance it punctuates" (Stark, 2007; 243), and in the present study it was this most intimate part of a relationship that men used to cement their domination over women.

Sometimes survivors explicitly named this behaviour as abuse, coercion or violence ("Sex, to him, was a means of controlling..."). In many survivors' accounts, however, the sense that this was abusive behaviour against them was not made overt by the language they employed. This mirrors wider literature which has documented the language women use to describe how they negotiate decision about sexual activity. Evans reported that of those who reported coercion [n=589], 41% [n=241] had had sex to "please" their partners, alongside those who were more overtly forced, threatened, or raped (Evans, 2000; 152). Sexual activity against the woman's wishes was often not specifically named in the transcripts by the women themselves as being rape or sexual assault or sometimes the survivors even emphasised that they did not regard these behaviours as abuse/violence.

"It was constant persuasion from my partner at the time. So I wouldn't really class it as assault but it was sort of um ... I suppose it was emotional as well,..."

"He would he would not force, but then..."

Sexual violence/abuse was instead typically described by survivors as something women had to let happen, or felt they were not strong enough to resist and this became the norm they were resigned to in their relationship

"And so if before I was kind of strong enough to say no when he said he wanted to have sex, now I wasn't..."

"...eventually I sort of gave in..."

"I just put myself through it"

"...like might say no a few times and then just resign it."

This type of sexual coercion illustrates the powerful contradictory expectations placed on women to both succumb to pressure to engage in sexual activity with their intimate male partner, whilst simultaneously responsible for regulating sexuality. These contradictions are more clearly evident in societies where women's purity is enshrined in legal frameworks (Aghtaie, 2011; 2017), but are equally prevalent in societies where women seemingly have equal legal rights (Thiara and Roy, 2020). The impact of these structural forms of cultural violence (Galtung, 1990; Aghtaie, 2017) are that women struggle to take responsibility for these contradictory expectations. It is not surprising therefore that women blame themselves both for the violence they experience, and for the abuse they experience when trying to avoid that violence. This victim-blaming/self-blaming emphasis on a sense of duty to be sexually available to a partner is likely to be a significant barrier to women reporting sexual abuse and violence to the police and to seeking support.

#### *Wider context of sexual harassment and violence*

Women also often referred to a wider context of sexual harassment and assault in their lives beyond the particular intimate relationship they were talking about.

They talked about how they had been sexually objectified in a number of settings and sometimes how this appeared to be the norm for them, as women. These included experiences of sexual assault, rape and harassment in their childhoods and in previous intimate relationships. Repeat and serial experiences of gendered abuse, whilst often addressed as separate incidents within criminal justice and health contexts, form a broader social context where messages about the role and culpability of victims are defined, and the severity of experiences minimised. Writing in 1987, Liz Kelly outlined the concept of a 'continuum of sexual violence' which identifies how seemingly insignificant social encounters set the stage on which we, both individually and collectively, subsequently interpret more serious forms of violence and abuse. Both the *Everyday Sexism* project (founded by Laura Bates), and a recent study by Taylor and Shrive (2021) demonstrate the impact of these experiences on many aspects of women's lives. It is not surprising therefore that women's experiences of sexual harassment and coercion within relationships is informed by these broader ideas of what is and isn't acceptable, and who is and isn't to blame.

One survivor in our present study noted a shift in her understanding of sexual violence and harassment against her:

"I didn't ever consider that I had been sexually abused at all. But um ... with reflection in hindsight I think just going on and on and on at people until they have sex with you... Or just thinking that it's okay to grab you as you walk past – that kind of thing. But at the time I certainly didn't consider myself to have been sexually abused."

Some survivors described how men had used this wider context of harassment and violence in women's lives to assert their position of power in the relationship and to demand sexual activity when they wanted.

"...my ex knew everything [about childhood abuse by a religious leader], that I was abused and what sort of life I had. I don't know if he used that against me because he forced sex, saying, you know, 'That's what you like. You're a slag. You're this.' Yes, so I was beaten up by him regularly."

"... through all our relationship he used that as a weapon....Yes, yes, and as I say, the worst thing I ever did was to tell [that a group of men had raped her] my – well, he was my boyfriend then. He used that for the whole of the [time] that we were together. 'You let them do it so you can let me do it,' you know, that kind of..."

We know from recent research (Stanley et al, 2018) that sexual harassment and coercion is part of a wider cultural context which defines experiences of sexual activity and our understandings of it. It is unsurprising therefore to see those same broader discourses infiltrating the ways in which women experience sexual violence and coercion within intimate partnerships.

### *Women as sexual possessions*

The eroticisation of male supremacy and female subjugation (that male power over women is defined as 'sexy') has been written about extensively in feminist literature (Hester, 1992), and the descriptions in the transcripts we examined gave a strong impression of heterosexual intimate relationships as characterised by the possession of women by men; women were the sexual objects owned by men through intimate relationships. Women as sexual possessions/objects were often aggressively guarded by their male partners. There were frequent mentions of male partners making accusations of affairs and aggressive jealousy.

"If I said hello to someone, I would be saying it in the wrong way, a flirtatious way."

"...he had it in his head that I was sleeping with somebody that worked in the shop."

"He became obsessed that I was having an affair with his best friend, even though I was never on my own with his best friend."

"He was saying that I was like having a sexual relationship with my dad and my brother and my nephew..."

"I was accused of having an affair for years, but I didn't even know this. He just kept on saying, 'You know what you've done. You know what you've done.' and wouldn't speak to me."

The female survivors' descriptions gave the impression that the men lived by different sexual rules. Men were often sexually unfaithful to their partners themselves, but outraged at the idea of their female partners (the 'sexual objects' that they felt they exclusively 'owned') being unfaithful to them (see Centre for Women's Justice et al, 2020, for a discussion on the 'ownership' of women's bodies and patriarchal attitudes about rape in the criminal justice system). This double-standard underpinned the domestic abuse. Accusations of cheating were used as the justification for the men's violence against their female partners ("... every weekend he would beat me up because he used to think I'm talking to a guy...") and for men's coercive and controlling behaviour that aimed to restrict their female partner's personal freedom ("...he didn't like me speaking to male friends,..."). The oppressive rules placed on women by their male partners described in the transcripts were often rationalised as necessary to keep women as men's exclusive sexual possessions and to stop women from 'inviting' attention from other men (the onus being on women's actions, not the



actions of other men). These justifications were reported as being made by male perpetrators, but also sometimes reinforced by the survivor's family members.

"...he didn't like me speaking to male friends there were people that I'd slept with before I met him and he forbade me from talking to any of them"

"I wasn't allowed to watch TV cos if I did watch TV he would start shouting at me saying that I was fantasising about other men and stuff."

"He took all my books away from me because he said that through books I'd be able to fantasise about men so I couldn't read anymore."

"My dad said to me 'Don't go to the gym. No wonder he [male partner] gets worked up. There's guys at the gym. They might be looking at you.' You know 'Why do you wear so much makeup? Why?'"

Perpetrators also use survivors' disabilities (both physical and intellectual disabilities) and long-term illnesses as tools to reinforce these oppressive rules and cement control (Hague et al, 2011; Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights, 2014; McCarthy et al, 2017; McCarthy, 2017, 2018). One survivor described how her partner's controlling behaviour started when he was her full-time 'carer' and she was economically dependent on him as she was unable to be in paid employment:

"But I required like 24 hour care, cos I was really ... really like unwell ... so I was like fully dependent on him ... And that's when I look back when it started to be ... when it started. He'd withhold medicine and he's like choose who was allowed to come up to the house or not, because he was obviously paying for the house cos I couldn't work at that time."

**(b) Discourse: "dirty" / "he's got his freedom"**  
**(Female / male active sexuality)**

The language used to describe men and women as sexual beings in the transcripts was strikingly different. Female active sexuality (or imagined active sexuality) was often described in terms that negatively implied impurity or

promiscuity, whereas male active sexuality was explained by the survivors in terms of freedom and autonomy. This gendering discourse of the female “slag”/“nympho” and the male free actor was used to excuse and justify domestic abuse, blame female victims and silence them. This discourse links with the discourse of sexual objectification; women are understood as men’s exclusive sexual possessions and any perceived breach of this situation is regarded as repugnant.

### *Women as dirty*

The transcripts included many offensive sexualised terms for women (“dirty bitch”, “slag”, “slut”, “nympho”) that were never applied to men. These words were reported by survivors as being used by perpetrators, but also sometimes by survivors’ family members. The women who were labelled with these terms told us they were not being sexually promiscuous or unfaithful to their partners, but they were frequently accused of this by their abusive male partners.

These feminised, sexualised insults (sometimes combined with slurs directed at a woman’s ethnicity or nationality) were employed as a weapon by perpetrators in denigrating survivors and justifying their own abusive behaviours. These labels were also cited a source of shame for survivors’ families who then put the onus of expectation on the woman or girl to guard against others attaching these labels to her and the subsequent dishonour for the family (the emphasis again putting the blame on the victim, failing to blame or challenge perpetrators). This discourse of female active sexuality as a source of shame and dirtiness for women is likely to be a barrier to women reporting sexual abuse/violence or seeking support (Carabine, 1992).

"Then my brother used to come home crying sometimes, 'All my friends are saying that my sister's a slag. She slept with him,' this and that. No-one believed me that nothing happened, but my mum was on my brother's side so I got a lot of neglect from the family."

"...don't let a man touch you because you will get pregnant...just imagine the shame your brothers and your family and we can't show our face."

One survivor spoke about Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and how it was linked in her social community to controlling active female sexuality. If girls did not endure FGM, they were shamed and labelled as 'inviting' male sexual attention. She said, "So to me I was fighting that stigma, that social complex that someone has to go through when you don't do FGM. Basically you will find boys looking at you like you are a very loose, someone who can't control your sexual desire..." The way in which women's sexuality is utilised within the broader discourse of blaming women for the abuse they experience was discussed above. FGM is an extreme example of how the control of women's sexuality is normalised in different ways within different communities (Gangoli et al, 2018).

### *Free men*

Although the men talked about in the transcripts were often described as being unfaithful to their partners, they were never labelled (or reported as being labelled) with the offensive and degrading sexualised terms used for women. In contrast their sexual affairs were explained by the survivors in terms of free actions and autonomy. The personal freedom and agency of the male perpetrators was often emphasised in the language used, in relation to sexual activity or these men's lives generally. This discourse of the male active sexuality as marked by freedom and entitlement sets the scene for male coercive and controlling behaviour against women (Stark, 2007). The emphasis on male agency (and the injustice of this) was sometimes created by the contrast to the survivors' situations of living in a context of being

encumbered by responsibilities (duties around the home and childcare) and his control (trying to follow his rules and pacify him). Writing about coercive control, Stark (2007) firmly locates the experience of domestic violence as a consequence of gender inequality, operationalised through gendered roles and expectations, in which the autonomy/liberty of women is curtailed. Gender inequality in relation to domestic abuse, as outlined by Stark and Hester (2019), also forms the basis of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (also known as the Istanbul Convention).

"My husband was running around in [cars]... He was going out with women"

"...he was just prancing around... while he was still making me suffer at the same time and while I was kind of trapped..."

"I think I've been deprived from my freedom for so long, and he hasn't – he's got his freedom."

"... men think that Ok it is allowed to have multiple wives, but then they are not really giving the rights to all the wives equally they are not even asking the first wife if they are allowed to have a second marriage..."

"But he used to keep carrying on with other women all the time."

"He was having affairs and I had no one to turn to."

"Because he could come and go as he wished and he knew that I had no one."

(c) Discourse: "You let them do it."  
(Victim-blaming)

As discussed previously, there is a contradiction between discourses used to describe women and sexuality – they are labelled as sexual objects or possessions, stripped of free will, and expected to be sexually available for their

male partners, yet simultaneously depicted as having the agency to 'invite' or 'provoke' or 'let happen' sexual attention or sexual violence from men. As explored in our discussion of the discourse of sexual objectification, survivors reported perpetrators using accusations of sexual infidelity as the 'justification' for the perpetration of abuse. Survivors also reported being accused by perpetrators of 'wanting' or 'inviting' the sexual violence he committed in the intimate relationship. This discourse of victim-blaming dangerously blurs the positions of perpetrator and victim and serves to justify or excuse perpetrators' abusive actions.

Women reported being described by their abusive male partners as 'wanting' or 'liking' sexual abuse and violence. Male partners had sometimes referred to past sexual abuse and violence that had been inflicted on the women as supposedly confirming this and 'justifying' the further abuse and violence they committed. Past sexual abuse and violence as choices taken by men against women and girls become hidden in the language used, and these crimes are instead described in terms of 'confirming' her status as "slag" or "nymphomaniac". For example, women were told "'You let them do it'"; instead of stating this was something done to them or against them.

"...he used to like touch me inappropriately, 'Oh, you know, this is what you like, you slag. You like somebody else doing it to you,' and just stuff like that."

"And I've been like interviewed by my perpetrator [in court] about ... and then he went for the line of questioning of 'Well you're a nymphomaniac and you liked it and you set it all up'."

This notion of sexual harassment, abuse and violence being the result of women's and girls' actions (or inaction) was reinforced by

the language reported in the transcripts as being used by survivors' family members and others. This included people in authority positions, such as at work or at school. Survivors reported being given advice or instructions by their male partners and by others, including family, on what measures to take to not 'invite' or 'allow' male sexual harassment, abuse and violence (for example, don't go to the gym where there are men, don't wear too much make-up, don't drink alcohol on a night out, don't talk to men in shops or on a night out, don't say anything in a way that could be seen as flirtatious). Alternatively, women were blamed for not taking these measures.

"... the investigating manager [at the survivor's and perpetrator's place of work] in her investigation report told me that I put myself at risk because I was drinking. So I was reading and I was like 'I need to stop you here', ... well ... and I told her 'What are you saying? Do you know that you're blaming a victim for what happened to me?' – this has actually got a pop culture term which is called 'slut shaming'. And I think she got really offended when I mentioned the word, and completely did not acknowledge that she just blamed a victim for you know ... even if I drink on a night out, that's not my choice to get assaulted."

"Every weekend, every weekend he would beat me up because he used to think I'm talking to a guy."

This putting the onus on the victim has clear negative implications for reporting and seeking support for sexual crimes, which women and girls would be reluctant to do if they are being told that they had caused the abuse against them. One survivor described how when she (as a girl) told a school counsellor that a boy had raped her, she was told that she "...was too young to have that kind of relationship with boys..." The impact of this was that "...I completely shut down all sort of opportunities to get help or to seek justice because basically I was told that it was my fault."

### Section Three. Mental health and domestic abuse

The topic of mental ill health and domestic abuse was often talked about by the female survivors interviewed, both in relation to themselves as survivors of abuse and to the male perpetrators (in female survivors' own words, or in their reported speech of others). We acknowledge that there is significant social stigma attached to mental illness in general that impacts women, men and children and hinders help-seeking (Mind, 2017; *Time To Change* website). Our discussion here focusses on mental ill health in the context of intimate partner abuse (by men against women) rather than an exploration of the dominant discourses about mental ill health in general.

The transcripts give the strong impression that discourses on mental ill health had greater negative consequences for the female survivors than for male perpetrators. There is a long history of comment on the way in which mental health is perceived within the medical profession, and society more broadly, particularly in relation to perceptions of women, who are often perceived in relation to men and/or a male norm (Cloward and Piven, 1979; Oakley, 1993; Dan, 1994; Candib, 1994; Riessman, 1983). In the transcripts we examined, "crazy" and "mental" became enduring negative labels on survivors that hindered their efforts to be heard and to escape the abuse. These labels were also used by perpetrators as part of their abuse and humiliation of their female partners. The survivors interviewed described mental ill health when linked to a male perpetrator to be much less of a permanent tag on him and to cast him in a more sympathetic light, as a problem or medical issue he was enduring and an excuse for his violence and abuse.

We identified two main gendering discourses on the topic of mental health:

- (a) Discourse: “this crazy woman”  
(Mental illness - she’s the problem)
- (b) Discourse: “he was just over anxious”  
(Mental illness - he has a problem)

We also identified a prominent counter-discourse which we have called:

- (c) Counter-discourse: “I call it oppression, not depression”  
(Mental illness as a consequence of abuse)

This counter-discourse undid the work of these gendering discourses, and reassessed survivors’ mental illness as the consequence of trauma.

- (a) Discourse: “this crazy woman”  
(Mental illness - she’s the problem)

The transcripts give the impression of the label of mental illness as having long-lasting negative implications for female survivors. The label of ‘mentally unwell’ cast doubt on their ‘wholeness’ as people, and relegated them to the position of “broken” or “psychologically so damaged”. This discourse designates female survivors as problematic (rather than the abuse and violence committed against them being the problem) and serves to minimise or obscure the perpetration of abuse.

### *The label of “crazy”*

The female survivors interviewed often described being mentally ill as a negative label stuck on them by professionals (such as at schools, in the courts, in police forces), by the perpetrator and by their own families (“...they’re painting me as this crazy woman...”, “...I’m stuck with a label at the moment which is ‘bipolar’”). Survivors spoke of the way the description of being “crazy” overshadowed many of their experiences of external responses to the domestic abuse. Examples



included casting doubt on her as a capable mother in a school or in the family court, as a credible person in court, as a plausible witness in police interactions, and as someone to be believed by family members.

The language reported by survivors as describing their mental health (other than sometimes by the survivor in self-description) showed very little and usually no understanding of mental illness as the result of trauma and a consequence of the perpetration of domestic abuse. Early literature in this field explicitly recognised the negative ways in which relegating domestic abuse to a secondary diagnosis (at best) has the consequence of obscuring the causes of the mental distress victims present (Bograd, 1982; Klingbeil, 1986; Stark and Flitcraft, 1982). In these cases practitioners applied quasi-psychiatric labels to women, rather than understanding the context in which victims were presenting in certain ways (Klingbeil and Boyd, 1994).

"...later he [professional in school] called me in and he said 'I've just been contacted by social services and they've sent me your medical history, and now I know that you've got mental health problems, and you should have told me that. And it's not a wonder your children are messed up with a mother like you who's so mental and crazy. And I don't even believe anyone's done anything to you, and you're just trying to get attention.'"

"And then he [the perpetrator] just said you know 'It's official, she's mental, she's mental'."

"'Oh it's mum you know being crazy and having one of her hissy fits'" [reported speech by perpetrator talking about the survivor]

"And she [the survivor's barrister] said to me well if you're psychologically so damaged that you can't look after your children, well then that other person [the perpetrator of abuse] is better placed."

"And all this time I just thought I was going crazy and everyone was just brushing it off ... like everyone. My mum brushed it off, my support worker from the Freedom programme, the police – everyone just brushed it off and told me I was losing it."

### *A tool for abuse*

It was also clear in the survivors' accounts that this label of being "crazy" was an effective tool used by perpetrators to silence survivors, discredit stories of abuse and bolster their position as the person in control. Broader social discourses of domestic violence, sometimes perpetuated by some professionals responding to survivors of domestic abuse, can serve to condone perpetrators' behaviour and compound stereotypes about the causes of abuse. Both Glass (1995) and Dobash and Dobash (1992) highlight the ways in which perceptions of 'ideal' victims of abuse subsequently require those victims to be 'passive', 'sick', and 'powerless'. Where victims appear anxious or hypervigilant (Herman, 1992), which is a normal response to an abusive context, they are often then perceived as unreliable victims. It is not surprising therefore that alongside some practitioners, perpetrators and victims themselves then draw on these powerful discourses.

Survivors in the current research talked about perpetrators broadcasting (or threatening to broadcast) this label of "crazy" to turn groups of people against them, showing the power of this discourse of mental illness as pejorative. This included threats to tell people at their workplace, in their families and in their spiritual communities. As previously noted in this report, the verbal abuse and offensive terms survivors reported being used by perpetrators against them sometimes had a layer of racism, linking offensive words about mental health with a survivor's ethnic background or nationality.

"‘... I’m [the perpetrator of abuse] going to tell everyone in [place of work] what a fucked up psycho bitch you are’ ... and I was really scared. I love my job, I was really scared that I was going to lose my job, cos he started blackmailing me that he’s going to speak to HR..."

"He’s [perpetrator of abuse] said things ... like he’s said things in the community [shared spiritual community] that I’m crazy, that I’m mentally ill you know ... and all these things. And when I’m not with him, which I’m not, they all think that I’m not well at the moment you know."

"We had a business going.... He has tainted them against me and told them that I am a complete and utter lunatic and a maniac and a twit. They don’t even talk to me and it’s my business as well."

"Because people like my ex who’s going round even now in the community saying I’m crazy, you know."

"...my ex said that he was going to take my kids off me because I was on antidepressants and he’d get me sectioned and end up in a mental institute."

### *Unstable woman-rational man*

Perpetrators often seemed to benefit from feeding into wider stereotypes of women as a group being markedly unstable or over-emotional (Glass, 1995). One survivor interviewed spoke of her father being convinced by the perpetrator that she was just one of these women "...that you know like I overreact." Others spoke of the rules (unspoken and sometimes spoken in advice given by others) to not appear emotional because of the negative stereotypes this would be reflecting. One survivor spoke of the need for a woman to suppress her emotions in a court of law or with social services or she would be negatively labelled as "crazy". Another survivor spoke of how she had been advised by her barrister to downplay her emotions for appearance’s sake. This illustrates how many institutions, and the discourses which they perpetuate through their

policies and procedures, have gendered expectations inherent within them (Housekamp and Foy, 1991; Birchall & Choudhry, 2018).

The language used by some survivors seemed to stress the importance of a sense of contrast between men and women in maintaining these stereotypes in the criminal and family justice systems. For example, for men to be upheld as rational, calm, charming and therefore believable, women must in contrast be painted as emotional, unstable, crazy and therefore not to be taken seriously. These labels were influential in disempowering women, in infantilising them and not recognising them as whole people. They also exclude reactions to experiencing abuse of showing anger and distress from being considered as rational and acceptable emotional responses.

"The courts are extremely sexist places, and there is still very much a thing about an angry loud woman is crazy, you know, and abusive men are charming ... and charming with professionals."

"And throughout this process... I've been told [by barrister] that you know I cannot be seen to be too aggressive, I cannot be seen to be you know annoying or irritating."

"[in the family court]...because he's very calm and plausible. But by the time you get there you're upset, so you can't get out what you need to ... and there's no sort of leeway for people like me."

"Do you know what, looking at ... because I had to get the police report as part of court proceedings that we've had recently ... I think the police saw it as ... well I know the police saw it as I was inebriated and hysterical, and he was sober and calm."

"...so my family thought oh my God....so our daughter or our sister has always been so childish and silly all her life she made big mistakes and now the biggest mistake... the biggest mistake would be her taking a divorce."

(b) Discourse: “he was just over anxious”

(Mental illness - he has a problem)

Mental illness was described in relation to male perpetrators much more in terms of an illness, something happening to them and this discourse of mental illness as a problem had the impact of excusing and justifying abusive behaviour. Labels of mental illness seemed to have negative consequences for female survivors (they were seen as less believable, as problematic people); whereas for male perpetrators being associated with mental ill health appeared to mean that they were seen in a more sympathetic light, as men overcome by illness or problems who could not therefore be held responsible for their abusive actions.

*Mental illness as excuse*

The categorisation of being mentally ill did not seem as problematising or all-embracing when applied to male perpetrators (in contrast with the discourse on female survivors’ mental ill health), for example it did not seem to bring into question their credibility or their ability to parent (Mella, 2019). There were contrasting attitudes and language of professionals towards female survivors and male perpetrators on the subject of mental ill health, with the stance taken regarding male perpetrators typically seeming more sympathetic. Survivors themselves also talked about their own sympathy for the men who had committed abuse against them in light of the perpetrators’ mental health issues. This has the impact of excusing male perpetrators’ abusive behaviours as being the consequence of their current problems, such as anxiety, depression or addiction, and diverting attention away from discussion of the abuse they are committing and the harm they are causing. It also distracts from any examination of power and control. In one case a survivor was told the police could not take action against the perpetrator both because he had mental

health problems and was elderly; his health status and older age both seeming to exempt him from being held accountable for his actions.

"And they [the court] never reprimanded him, they [the court] actually made an excuse to say that he was just over anxious because he doesn't have any contact with the child"

"I think because that layer of mental illness again ... maybe I gave him [the perpetrator of abuse] too many graces or whatever. Because yeah I thought yeah he's unwell, so therefore it's not justified, it's more understandable."

"So he was getting quite stressed, so a lot then as he was getting quite angry I was putting down to the fact there was a lot of stress that was going on. And to be honest I felt quite sorry for him,..."

"So when I told my counsellor about it and that he'd been sexual with like things he'd said to women online she said it sounds like sort of sex addiction."

### (c) Counter-discourse: "I call it oppression, not depression"

#### (Mental illness as a consequence of abuse)

Some survivors interviewed highlighted that they understood their mental ill health as a consequence of the domestic abuse perpetrated against them (this type of understanding was usually absent in the reported speech of others). They described mental illness as an impact of the abuse or a reaction to the abuse; the emphasis being that the survivor is not problematic, it is the abuse that is the problem (Williamson, 2000).

This discourse is not gendering. It runs counter to the other main discourses, in that it positions mental illness as the harm caused by domestic abuse and does not problematise the female survivors themselves. Re-framing the way that women's mental health is perceived also recognises the wide range of emotional

responses women experience as victims of abuse, including anger and resentment (Williamson, 2010). Where women are required to present in limited ways as 'ideal' victims these legitimate emotional responses are rendered unacceptable. This can increase the longer term negative mental health impacts of abuse (Herman, 1992), and can limit survivors' strategies of resistance to abuse (Williamson, 2010).

"...to do with stress, all these horrible things are happening to me."

"...generally use the term 'survivor' and I like it, but there has been times where I'm like 'No, I am a victim' and 'survivor' is a little bit fluffy sometimes. So I get the whole point that it's empowering and you say I'm not broken, I'm not this, I'm not that ... but then there is times where I'm like literally feeling filthy, or so many things can be a trigger of a reminder, and then I'm trying to say 'No he's broken me, he's broken me'..."

"...being depressed because of the situation [of abuse]..."

"...so he [perpetrator] came with me to the doctor's during the marriage and told them I had postnatal depression when I had depression because of the abuse."

This different emphasis on mental illness as a response to trauma was sometimes expressed by survivors in terms of an alternative viewpoint (sometimes reached through empowering domestic abuse support work). Survivors chose language here to emphasise going against the dominant understanding of domestic abuse and mental ill health and even sometimes against their own past understanding of what they were feeling. This shows the importance of empowerment work in survivors' recovery from domestic abuse, from specialists who understand the gendered dynamics in domestic abuse (see Williamson and Abrahams, 2014), and that disempowerment is fundamental to domestic abuse.

"Like what describes me is being bullied to death, you know ... and reacting to being bullied. What label is that, you know? So I've had mental health issues as regards to being depressed because of the situation ... oppression ... I call it oppression, not depression – I have a different description."

"You think you're going crazy yourself, you know, there are times I think well maybe I am then you know. But even though deep inside yourself you know you're not – you know it's the situation, it's circumstances, it's the situation."

"And I thought that all that depression wasn't happening because of the abuse, I thought that I had changed because of depression."

"...well I now know that the reason that I was depressed was because kind of everything revolved around him and everything like ... that's just how it kind of gradually happened."



## Conclusion and implications for policy and practice

Gendering discourses play a significant role in women's experiences of domestic abuse. They set the scene for male abusive partners' coercive and controlling behaviours. They serve to excuse abusive behaviour by men in intimate relationships with women. They put up barriers to female survivors being believed and supported to leave abusive men.

It is impossible to disentangle women's experiences of domestic abuse from their experiences of structural inequalities and the violence, abuse and harassment they are subjected to in other areas of their lives. Feminist writers and activists have been highlighting the harmful impact of gendered stereotypes and oppressive social norms about masculinity and femininity since around the time Women's Aid began in the 1970s and earlier. Although there have been significant changes in policy, practice and public awareness since then (including the criminalisation of coercive and controlling behaviour in 2015 and the recent Domestic Abuse Act 2021), harmful gendering discourses persist.

The specialist domestic abuse support sector has an important role to play in providing counter-discourses in the empowering recovery work they do with female survivors. It can also offer important counter-discourses in public awareness, training and education work.

### *Recommendations for policy*

- It is important to recognise domestic abuse as a form of male violence against women in policy and legislation and to acknowledge that until we address oppressive gender norms and stereotypes we cannot effectively tackle domestic abuse. We are very concerned that the government is proposing to fragment domestic abuse from the violence against women and girls (VAWG) strategy. We strongly believe that domestic abuse must be part of single comprehensive, holistic and integrated framework to tackle VAWG as required by the Istanbul Convention.
- We recommend further research to inform policy on how gendering discourses intersect with dominant discourses that perpetuate other structural inequalities (such as continuing to add to the evidence base about racism, disability discrimination, ageism and discrimination against

people who identify as LGBT+) and the impact these intersecting discourses have on survivors' experiences of domestic abuse.

- Our research further highlights the importance of sufficiently resourcing long-term, empowering recovery work delivered by specialist domestic abuse services, led by women for women to create safe spaces. In 2019, Women's Aid calculated that the funding needed for adequate refuge provision across England is £173.8 million annually and the funding needed for adequate community-based service provision across England is £219.4 million annually (Women's Aid, 2019B). This investment would be a small fraction of the estimated £66 billion annual cost to society (Oliver et al, 2019). These specialist services help undo the work of damaging and disempowering gendering discourses and address the damage caused by victim-blaming and female sexual objectification. This includes sustainable funding for those vital services that are led by and for women from marginalised groups, such as services by and for Black and minoritised survivors, disabled survivors and LGBT+ survivors.

#### *Recommendations for practice*

- It is important for the specialist domestic abuse sector to continue to challenge those discourses that perpetuate damaging gender norms and stereotypes, silence survivors' voices and excuse perpetrators' abusive behaviours. This includes challenging gendering discourses in support work with survivors and offering counter-discourses through public awareness, training and educational work. For example, the *Expect Respect Healthy Relationships Toolkit* includes session plans for activities with children and young people on challenging assumptions about gender, power and equality, and changing beliefs and attitudes about men and women (Women's Aid, 2021B).

Important counter-discourses include:

- Talking about how women's safety and freedom are more important than maintaining an intimate relationship.
  - Challenging myths that rape and sexual abuse does not happen or is rare in intimate relationships.
  - Emphasising that all sexual activity should be consensual, including sex within an intimate relationship.
  - Challenging the perpetrators of abusive behaviours – it should not be up to women to manage or cope with male violence and abuse.
  - Women are not sexual objects, and not owned by men in relationships.
  - Women are never inviting or provoking sexual harassment, violence or abuse.
  - Mental ill health can be the consequence of the trauma caused by domestic abuse.
  - Mental illness is not an excuse for committing violence and abuse.
- It is important that specialist training for professionals responding to and working with survivors of domestic abuse includes:
    - understanding how perpetrators use sexism in their abuse to underpin their power and control;
    - how to safely and sensitively ask questions about sexual violence and coercion within intimate partnerships, with the recognition that for some women rape is routine in their relationships and some women may not readily recognise sexual abuse as abuse;
    - recognising mental ill health as the consequence of the trauma of domestic abuse and that showing mental distress and expressing emotion are rational reactions to being subjected to violence and abuse;
    - asking survivors about their daily routine (not to solely focus on the most recent incident) to uncover coercive and controlling behaviours being perpetrated against them in the relationships.

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# It's time to **#FlipTheSexistScript**

Let's build a world where **harmful  
gender stereotypes** and  
**domestic abuse** are  
**no longer tolerated**

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***Gendered experiences of justice and  
domestic abuse.***

***Evidence for policy and practice.***

Women's Aid Federation of England and the  
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