

Why gender can't be ignored when dealing with domestic violence

March 28 2017, by Gene Feder And Lucy Potter



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Domestic violence is a violation of human rights with damaging social, economic and health consequences. It is any incident of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse. That abuse can be psychological, emotional, physical, sexual and financial.

The "domestic" element refers to abuse between people aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality. Men, women or transgender people in straight, gay or lesbian relationships can perpetrate or experience it. So does this mean [domestic violence](#) is gender neutral? Is gender irrelevant to prevention efforts and to responding to survivors' needs? We do not think so.

Globally, direct experience of being subjected to domestic violence is [greater among women than among men](#). In the UK, 27% of women and 13% of men [have experienced](#) some form of [domestic abuse](#) in their lifetime. The difference is most striking for [sexual violence](#). Women are [five times as likely](#) as men to experience sexual assault.

Women also [suffer more repeated](#) and systematic violence, severe assault, severe injuries and hospitalisations than men. In the year ending March 2015 in England and Wales, 44% of female murder victims, compared with 6% of male murder victims, died at the hands of their partner or former partner. These statistics are based on population surveys, not reported crime or people accessing support services, which are more prone to bias (men are [less likely](#) than women to report violence perpetrated against them, for example).

There is a gender difference in prevalence and impact of domestic violence. But many men do experience domestic violence and, like women, may suffer long term damage to their mental health. In [a study we carried out](#) of 1,368 men attending GP surgeries in south-west England, the 23% who had experienced domestic abuse were between two and three times more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety and depression.

But an understanding of gender in domestic violence does not rest solely on the differences in prevalence and impact. It extends to how men

perceive the abuse that they experience and their willingness to disclose that abuse and seek help.

In our study only a third of men who had experienced domestic abuse thought they had been in an abusive relationship. This is a much lower proportion than women. Understanding this type of gender difference is crucial in training health care and other professionals to enquire and respond appropriately to the domestic violence experienced by men.

Interviews with male survivors reveal recurrent disbelief and dismissive responses to the men who disclose the [abuse](#) they have been subjected to. In the male survivor advisory group that advises our research programme, we have heard chilling accounts of the joking response given by some GPs.

[REPROVIDE](#), our current domestic violence research programme, aims to improve support and referral programmes for general practices. We are now including the needs of men and children exposed to domestic violence, working with survivors to help primary care services to respond compassionately and effectively.

Survivors of both sexes

Recognition of the gendered nature of domestic violence is not a justification to ignore the needs of male survivors. Instead, it needs to inform how we design programmes to support these men (and their children), with the understanding that some of their [experiences](#) and needs may be similar to women survivors, but others may be different.

We need to challenge cultural stereotypes which still assume that the perpetrators of domestic violence are men and the victims are women. However, at the same time, we must recognise that the majority of perpetrators are men. We still live in a patriarchal society where men

have more power, more sense of entitlement, and (on average) more income than women.

Yet male survivors of domestic violence are largely invisible, as indeed female survivors were, until the feminist movement forced society to take notice. Men who experience domestic violence, whether in heterosexual or gay relationships, have until relatively recently been largely ignored. Work on improving society's response to domestic violence against women has not been matched by responses to male survivors.

The concept of gender refers to the [socially constructed differences](#) between women and men. Domestic violence in a relationship, and how we respond to it, is intrinsically related to how society views and behaves as [women](#) and men. Gender roles vary from society to society, as does the prevalence and nature of domestic violence. To ignore the impact of gender on domestic violence does a disservice to people of any gender. Instead, the aim must be to strive for [gender](#)-informed prevention and responses to domestic [violence](#).

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