

Lancashire-Wide Consultation with Women Survivors of Domestic Violence

Nina George,
Lancashire Domestic Violence
Strategy Co-ordinator

For Julie

“I said have I got to be dead before you take me seriously?”

“I realise that it is happening to other women and it happens to women from all walks of life”

“my self worth was so low, you know I was considering suicide and stuff like that and then I come into a place like this (local domestic violence support service)”

One of the participants in the focus groups of women survivors of domestic violence who later committed suicide, & who reminds us all of the urgency of getting it right & working together to help prevent further tragedies

Beginnings...

- *I had a forced marriage. I didn't even choose that person, I didn't want to be with that person,*
- *He never, ever, once said “you are stupid” at the beginning, it was never “you are stupid” or whatever, it was always “you are so wonderful”.*
- *the isolation thing, it's like, once you don't have anyone else to go to it can really be taken advantage of*

Beginnings...& effects

- *his control over me was isolation. He got rid of my sisters, he got rid of my friends, everybody.*
- *there is a whole range of tactics they use and the physical part of it, I'm not totally sure it is always the most damaging.*
- *I had to become quite resourceful, and I was quite amazed at how resourceful you have to be in order to survive*
- *its basically taken 30 years to come out of the other side of it*

Effects...

- *I did everything he wanted. I was like a slave really, mentally, emotionally, in every way.*
- *I went on the streets for five weeks. Left my children. I thought...he'd convinced me the children would be better off without me as well.*
- *I'm usually one of the most strong-minded people. The thing is I'm well educated, and now I'm a wreck.*

Speaking out...

- *I never approached anybody...I was frightened.*
- *He maybe would do worse to me if I call the Police*
- *I did toy with the idea and I was looking at these phones thinking “They are not going to want to know about me” but having done it, it felt like such a big step, it was like a giant weight*
- *I was always threatened by my husband for deportation, you go to the Police - they'll deport you.*

Speaking out...

- *you have to think at all the time how are you going to protect yourself, not just at that point in time, but in the future.*
- *I said please don't let him out, please don't let him out, he'll kill me you know for calling the police*

And on & on...

- *I had a problem. He just wouldn't leave the house*
- *he still tries to do the control thing, even though he's outside the relationship, because he has two children*
- *it's a trigger every time isn't it - just looking at him.*
- *the predators are going on, carrying on doing it, they'll find other victims*

Children

- *when I got the Council flat he actually spotted us in Asda and tried strangling me & tried to snatch my son off me*
- *I was once told in front of daughter, she's seven, that I deserved a kicking and she was so upset.*
- *My kids stick up for him. If you have an argument then they say "You got my dad under arrest." "My dad wouldn't be under arrest if it wasn't for you." "My daddy's gone to prison cos of you." They think it's all my fault as well because of what he's told them*

The Good..

- *I think I'd be dead now if it hadn't been for the refuge.*
- *I've called the Police in the past and they were really helpful. They made him do what he should be doing.*

The Bad...

- *The next day I went to the doctor, he came with me, and he told the doctor, while I'm sitting, that he was worried in case that he thought I was going to be physically violent with him*
- *He gave me tablets, painkillers, whatever and just said "You know what you need to do, you need to get yourself a new bloke, and get on with life, pull yourself together."*
- *[she] could have said "I need to examine you on your own, do you mind just stepping outside" and she would have been able to get the reaction she needed.*

The Bad...

- *They start off usually pretty good and then they do dwindle off. They need to be more consistent.*
- *when you are in that situation, you should know when they are being released from prison because you are the target*
- *It all comes down to the woman because the woman is the one who's got to pick up the pieces with the children, the house, everything, all the responsibility is on you.*

& the ugly...

- *I didn't get no help from anywhere and that's when I took the overdose and ended up waking up 4 or 5 days later*
- *It's really difficult to go and ask for help as well...to go and ask for help and then not even get it.*
- *He should have been sent to prison, but he didn't, they let him off.*
- *they turned round and said you had your chance and you screwed it up, we can't help you any more*

Starting points....

- *I think it's good that people do get together and contribute to each other...there's other people out there, and it's not just you, because you always feel like you've done something wrong*
- *you always feel like you're the only one*

THE Challenge...

“This has been good for lots of people to sort of like get stuff out into the open & feel like other people are in the same position & that’s been helpful & to speak about what’s going on. But I think for me it is that it should be heard by somebody who’s in a position to make changes & actually be accountable.”

Focus Groups – Main Issues

- Most women had been abused by male partners or husbands, a few by family members (some as well as by partners) & one woman by her female partner.
- Women reported very similar tactics used against them by their male (ex)partners. Always a mix of psychological, physical, financial & sexual violence/abuse & always a pattern of coercive &/or manipulative behaviour designed to control them.
- Women experienced difficulties after leaving the relationship: specifically: post separation violence (abuser continues abuse after relationship ends); poverty; & lack of support.

- There is still much stigma & shame around the label of being a “victim” of domestic violence. Women felt guilty for the abuse perpetrated against them & often blamed themselves.
- Women do not always identify their experiences as domestic violence or themselves as experiencing this. Professionals need to develop sensitive & supportive ways of asking, information needs to be everywhere that actually explains the behaviours.
- Women expressed that they need a sensitive & professional approach sometimes over some time to build up trust. There are still problems with women not being believed by agencies when they disclose, also women are still being blamed or judged for the abuse perpetrated on them.

- Women were very complementary about the support from the specific domestic violence services, citing them as the only services that consistently meet their needs. Most of the specialist domestic violence projects (e.g. refuges, community-based services), are based in the voluntary sector. Many women stated they would not have been alive, safe, supported or kept informed without these services.
- Generally, women did not feel adequately protected by the statutory agencies & feel that these particular systems fail them in this regard. Services were acknowledged as generally better “these days” but a consistent professional response is still experienced as hit & miss.

- The women stressed the devastating impact of psychological abuse & the difficulty in getting help to address this. Therapeutic help was greatly valued, especially quick referral to counselling.
- Long term recovery needs to be addressed, especially with regard to post traumatic stress disorder & impacts on mental health, e.g. panic attacks; women also reported feeling like a different person, underlining the effects on their whole selves.
- There are specific problems around: lack of help & support for children; being kept safe, informed & supported throughout the Criminal Justice response; being offered appropriate help by generalist agencies; lack of sign-posting to appropriate support agencies & lack of availability of housing (especially emergency accommodation).

- For black & minority ethnic women there are further problems with: no recourse to public funds, therefore to refuge space & benefits; length of time taken to sort out legal status; lack of availability of interpreting & information.
- There was some evidence of unsuitable interventions from some services, e.g. coercion for women to leave a relationship. Sometimes agencies were operating at odds with each other in that interventions contradicted each other, e.g. ordered child contact undermining efforts to escape abuse.

- There are few or no interventions aimed at abusers/perpetrators, and at making them accountable for their actions.
- Women reported varying responses from family & friends; some found informal help life-saving or invaluable; some received limited understanding & support; others experienced outright hostility. Some women (especially rural & black & minority ethnic women) faced disapproval or difficulties on a wider community basis.