

Men and their children as victims of domestic abuse

Brian Dempsey of the Scottish Legal Action Group and Outright Scotland (Scotland's democratic lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered rights organisation), presents the text of his presentation at December's Legal Interventions meeting which, unfortunately, had to be cancelled at the last moment.

Myths about recognising male victims

- 1) That the campaign is about saying that violence against men is the same as violence against women in prevalence or effect. Men and women experience abuse in various ways – and differently depending on their ethnic and cultural background, economic resources, family support networks and other factors. For our purposes arguments about prevalence and relative impact are irrelevant.
- 2) That it is about taking away scarce resources from Women's Aid and other services for women. Quite the opposite – services for women victims are underfunded and underappreciated. Recognising female victims does not undermine the campaign for recognition of male victims, recognising male victims does not undermine the campaign for recognition of female victims.
- 3) That it is about providing refuges for men. I know of no groups calling for such a thing.

What recognising male victims *is* about is providing recognition and support for male victims, gay bisexual or straight, of abuse. It is also about providing support for the children affected by that abuse.

Incidence of abuse of men

So, does the problem exist at all?

The one sure fact we have is that about 3000 men a year report to the police that they are victims of domestic abuse. In 2001 the overall figures were 92% women and 8% men - that's about 32,000 women and 3,200 men. This breaks down to 90.5% M-F; 8.5% F-M; 0.4% F-F and 0.6 M-M reporting to police.

The survey work on incidence of domestic violence gives very unreliable figures. For what its worth, the 2000 Scottish Crime Survey found that 6% of women and 3% of men reported being a victim of domestic abuse in the previous year.

While 42% of women victims reported to the police only 8% of male victims did.

The majority of the male victims thought the violence they suffered was "just something that happens".

41% of women victims were clear domestic abuse was a crime but only 4% of male victims thought so.

So, if the 2000 Crime Survey tells us anything it is that male victims are 10 times less likely than female victims to report the incidents to the police. But returning to the one concrete fact – 3,255 men reported being victims in 2001

Examples of hostility

The most obvious example of hostility to male victims is the publicity on domestic violence. It is all about what men do to women. So if you are a male victim you may be made to doubt whether what you are experiencing is abuse (as the figures just quoted show), or you may just take the message that you are an aberration and should keep quiet. If you are a child in a household where your dad is being abused – God knows what message you take from the bill boards and posters.

The biggest organisation in domestic violence – Scottish Women's Aid – defines you out of existence. They assert publicly on their website that "Domestic abuse is the physical, mental and/or sexual abuse of a woman by someone with whom she is or has been in a relationship." Now it is fine for Women's Aid to refuse to work with male victims and their children – all voluntary organisations have the right to limit their services and Women's Aid are overstretched and underfunded as it is - but seeking to make male victims and their children invisible is going a bit far. They are telling kids that where mummy is attacking daddy that's not domestic abuse and they better not turn to women's services for support.

The so-called national domestic abuse helpline financed by the Executive is managed by North Ayrshire Women's Aid – a group which chooses not to work with male victims or associated children. Again – what they chose to do is their business but this is supposed to be a service for all victims – funded by all of us through our government.

The last example of hostility to male victims and their children I want to highlight is this – A CRU document called Domestic Abuse Against Men in Scotland. We might want to discuss this later.

Why the hostility?

In preparing this presentation it has struck me that this is a question of limited value other than to academics. People might want to discuss it tonight, and I do have some views on the question, but in the end the most important thing is providing recognition and services for male victims and the children associated with them.

Positive Change

One of the biggest obstacles to equality was the activity of Jackie Baillie, formerly Social Justice Minister. Fortunately she is no longer in charge. The Executive, under pressure, has moved to more sex-neutral terms though still presenting the issue as one of male violence against women. Malcolm Chisholm recently managed to say that domestic violence was unacceptable whoever was the victim "women, children and, eh, other victims". One day he will speak out in support of male victims and their children. The Executive's "Domestic Abuse – there's no excuse" website even mentions that men might be victims of abuse – followed, of course, by but ...

Conclusion

We have 3000 men taking the somewhat extreme step of reporting to the police that they are victims of domestic abuse every year – the vast majority in mixed-sex relationships. There are likely to be in the region of 2000 to 3000 children affected by that abuse in the home though there are no concrete figures so far as I am aware. They are not receiving proper support and there is constant campaigning to ensure that these abused men, and their children, remain invisible.

So the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament, along with voluntary groups, are going to have to change their tune. ■

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