

Domestic violence

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Introduction

There are long-rehearsed arguments about estimating the scale of domestic violence linked to its reporting and recording. Despite the problems associated with estimating the scale of the issue, all the evidence points to domestic violence as being widespread, with findings broadly consistent across studies. In the UK, for example:

- It is generally recognised that over 90% of domestic violence is experienced by women (Welsh, 2005)
- On average two women are killed each week in England and Wales by a partner or former partner, this constitutes nearly 40% of all female murder victims (Home Office, 2006)
- In 2012, 1.2 million women suffered domestic abuse (Home Office, 2013)
- Fewer than one in four people who suffer abuse at the hands of the partner report it to the police (Home Office, 2013)

However, domestic violence was not one of Beveridge's five giant evils and has therefore struggled to find an easy place in relation to welfare provision for its victims and survivors. This oversight, it could be argued, is because the welfare state was built on gender norms and assumptions that did not question the presence of violence in family life or see it as a cause for public concern. However, since the feminist refuge movement of the 1970s there has been a creeping recognition of the need to protect (predominantly, but not exclusively) women and children from abuse and violence in the home. Most noticeably, domestic violence has been acknowledged as a child protection issue with the new category of harm 'impairment from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another' being introduced in the

Children and Adoption Act of 2002. This is not unproblematic, not least because in practice it places an emphasis on mothering behaviour rather than the abusive partner and also does not address violence where children are not present. However, it is an example of the mainstreaming of the issue. More recently Teresa May in 2010 addressed the National Women's Aid (May, 2010: online) conference and declared that:

'Violence against women is not an aside for me; it is not an afterthought or a secondary consideration. It was a priority for me in opposition and it is a priority for me now I am in government'.

So, it could be argued that concern for survivors and victims of domestic violence has moved from the fringes of feminist action to state interest. However, policy, provision and practice remain piecemeal and fragmented across a range of organisations from across the economy.

Progress in domestic violence

Whilst in opposition Theresa May launched a Conservative Party strategy document 'Ending Violence against Women' (2008), which stressed that domestic violence was a priority for the Conservative Party, with an emphasis on tackling inequality, prevention and multi-agency working. However, the financial crisis and 'austerity' policies have produced a shift in tone that highlights the lack of resources. So that in the Home Secretary's (May, 2010: online) address to Women's Aid, there was an emphasis on efficiency, reducing the deficit and not 'throwing money at a problem'.

This is not to say that domestic violence has been ignored. The government has introduced a new definition of domestic violence that was extended to include 16 and 17 year olds and

placed greater emphasis on the patterns of coercive and controlling behaviour that characterise abusive relationships. Furthermore, in August 2014 the Home Office announced plans for writing a new domestic abuse offence into law. Within the domestic violence sector these moves were generally welcomed, but underline a criminal justice approach to domestic violence rather than acknowledging it as a wider welfare and social justice issue. In particular, these moves need to be seen alongside the impacts of the coalitions' spending review and continued cuts in welfare spending.

Cuts to domestic violence services

Given its complicated history, the terrain of domestic violence services remains difficult to navigate. Domestic Violence services are provided by a range of statutory and voluntary organisations. Statutory provision centres on child protection, safe-guarding, criminal justice, probation and some Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA) services. The voluntary sector provides a wide range of services from a national network of specialist refuges to locally provided self-help groups and confidential telephone helplines. Much of the expertise around prevention, support, crisis management and longer-term establishment of rights and resources for victims resides in the voluntary sector and much of it is provided locally from community-based groups.

Despite May's (2010) assertion that local authorities must not see this sector as an 'easy cut' when making difficult decisions, Towers and Walby (2012) found that there was a dramatic reduction in local services with a 31% cut to the funding for domestic and sexual abuse sector from local authorities in 2011 – 2012. Commissioning practices meant that the impact was greater on smaller organisations, with smaller providers of specialist services being bid out of the commissioning market by larger, general housing associations. There has also been a significant reduction in the numbers of IDVAs, with recent reports suggesting a 30% shortfall in the service as a result of local authority cuts (Community Care, 2012).

In terms of practice, the shift from feminist theorising about power and control has been replaced by a more managerial approach (Robbins et al., 2014). Central to this new approach is the concept of managing and reducing risk. This move, alongside the reduction in finances has led to the concentration of activity on those cases designated as high risk. Despite evidence that domestic violence is a common experience, services are limited to the few. This is unfortunate in its own right. However, research by Walby (2009) suggests that the cost of domestic violence to the public purse decreases with the amount invested in public services as injury and harm reduce, economic input can increase.

Cuts to related welfare services

However, the complex nature of domestic violence means that it is not just cuts to the sector itself that are problematic for provision. For example, the restrictions on legal aid, imposed by the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (2012) have tightened regulations and access to legal aid, with strict evidential eligibility requirements. With the current emphasis on criminal justice remedies, this has serious implications for women who would require support to provide the evidence. There has also been an £819 million reduction in budgets and services from children's services impacting on the prevention and referral work in Youth Services, Early Years and Children's Centres (Higgs, 2011). The NSPCC has since disbanded many of its local intervention projects (Gadd, 2012).

The endemic levels of domestic violence prompt the conclusion that 'domestic violence is no respecter of class, creed or colour,' (Hague et al., 2003: 9) and there is an emphasis in the literature on the universal nature of domestic violence. Some commentators, however, contest this view, pointing to evidence that domestic violence is suffered disproportionately by certain groups, and that some women are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence, or less able to escape it, because of restricted access to resources and assistance. Increased poverty, therefore, could lead to worse outcomes for women living with violence. Increased taxation and benefit reductions associated with 'austerity' are predicted

to impact more harshly on women (Women's Budget Group, 2010). This, alongside persistent gender inequality in income, will lead to more impoverished families. Therefore, it could be argued that if current trends persist, more abused women and their children will be forced to stay with their abusers as benefits, subsidised childcare and employment opportunities diminish (Gadd, 2012).

Conclusions and alternatives

This review has highlighted particular issues for those in need of welfare and support owing to the violence they are experiencing or have experienced in their homes within the current climate of 'austerity' and financial constraint. Key concerns include:

- Domestic violence, whilst a stated government priority, has not received additional funding and remains vulnerable to welfare cuts. However, government has made steps in securing domestic abuse as a criminal justice issue. If the law is going to be central to state approaches to domestic violence, attention needs to be paid to recent cuts and constraints on access to legal aid.
- Provision of welfare services within the domestic violence sector has relied heavily on voluntary sector expertise built up over a number of years by activists and professionals. However, there has been a significant shift in the balance of power between statutory and activist, front-line services, with commissioning practices placing an emphasis on outcomes, individualist approaches and unit costs. This has had severe ramifications for locally organised services and the national network of provision by the voluntary sector.
- Despite endemic levels of violence the cuts have forced a hierarchy of risk within statutory services, with resources being focussed on 'high risk' cases meaning that 'low-level' bullying and isolation are unlikely to meet thresholds for services. Not only will this impact on the quality of life for families living with violence, it means that expertise in prevention and support is being lost to crisis

management and in the long term will become more costly.

- All of the above is exacerbated by the unequal burden of welfare cuts on women who will have less opportunity to disclose their circumstances to welfare professionals and fewer resources to secure living arrangements.

However, there are other ways of constructing domestic violence. Currently, the key area for progress by the government has been in securing domestic abuse within a legal framework. Whilst this is helpful, the criminal justice system is not necessarily the only or the best way to confront the issues that abusive relationships have for wider society. Given the scale of the problem and the small number of convictions, it could be argued that it would be better to divert funds back into locally based voluntary sector activity, where domestic violence is seen primarily as a social justice and welfare issue and where there is expertise and experience of supporting women and families to make a range of choices to secure their futures.

References

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