

# briefings

## Hitting home: Domestic violence and young women

Domestic violence is one of the most common violent crimes in the UK. The latest statistics indicate that one in four women will experience domestic violence during their lifetime (Greater London Authority 2001) and every week two women are killed by current or former partners (Home Office 1998). The majority of domestic violence victims are women. A recent snapshot

survey revealed that 81 per cent of domestic violence calls to the police were made by women attacked by men (Stanko 2000). There is no such thing as a typical domestic violence victim.

Research evidence suggests that any woman regardless of race, culture, nationality, religion, sexuality, disability, age, class or education level is at risk (Home Office 2000).

### What is domestic violence?

The 1993 Home Affairs Select Committee defined domestic violence as: "Any form of physical, sexual or emotional abuse which takes place within the context of a close relationship. In most cases, the relationship will be between partners (married, cohabiting or otherwise) or ex-partners."

### Behind closed doors

Domestic violence may be life threatening, systematic and long term. It can occur anywhere but most frequently it happens behind closed doors, away from the public eye and unknown to anyone outside the immediate family. Far from being a safe haven, a place of comfort and security, the home can be a place of danger, terror and injury. Research shows that women are far more at risk of violence from men in their family or with whom they have a close relationship than from male strangers. Out of around 48,000 women who contacted Rape Crisis Federation groups during 1998, 97 per cent were abused by men they knew (Rape Crisis Federation 1998).

### Young women at risk

Research suggests that young women are at significant risk of domestic violence. Twenty eight per cent of women aged 20-24 had experienced domestic assault at some time in their life and 13 per cent of women aged 16-24 said they had been assaulted by a partner within the last year (Mirrlees-Black 1998). Where domestic violence was the cause of a visit to hospital, 16-25 year olds made up nearly half of attendances (DoH 2000).





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## The causes of domestic violence

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### Gender inequality

Dobash and Dobash (1979) found that the four main sources of conflict that lead to violent acts are:

"Men's possessiveness and jealousy, men's expectations concerning women's domestic work, men's sense of the right to punish 'their' women for perceived wrongdoing, and the importance to men of maintaining or exercising their position of authority."

### Social acceptability of male violence

Historically, the law placed women under the authority of men (husbands or fathers) and legitimised the use of physical punishment to control them. These laws no longer exist but many of the underlying beliefs and attitudes about male dominance and superiority remain.

It is a shocking reality that male violence against women is still seen by many as normal and acceptable, even by young people. A major national research study into young people's attitudes to violence, sex and relationships found that one in two boys and one in three girls thought that there were some circumstances when it could be acceptable to hit a woman or to force her to have sex (Zero Tolerance Trust 1998). More recent research reiterates the high tolerance levels of young people towards violence and abuse: 19 per cent of young women and 34 per cent of young men did not think being forced to have sex is rape (Regan and Kelly 2001).

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## Why are young women at risk?

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There are a number of factors that make young women especially vulnerable to violence and abuse.

### Pregnancy and young motherhood

Pregnancy often triggers domestic violence or exacerbates a pre-existing problem (Mezey and Bewley 1997). Reported rates of physical, sexual or emotional violence by a partner during pregnancy are as high as 20.2 per cent (O'Campo et al 1994). The post natal period is also a time of high risk (Hedin 2000). Adolescent women are particularly vulnerable: two studies have found higher rates of domestic violence among pregnant teenagers than among older women (Parker et al 1993 and Gazmararian 1995). Other factors which are associated with teenage pregnancy such as low educational achievement, poor self esteem and lack of employment opportunities have also been linked to higher rates of abuse (Stewart 1993).

### Economic status

Research has demonstrated that women who work outside the home are at lower risk of violence than women who do not (Mirrlees Black 1998). Women with young children are more likely to be at home than older women whose children have reached school age. These younger women are therefore more likely to be financially dependent on their partner, accentuating the power imbalance and making it very difficult to escape a violent relationship on which they and their children depend for food and shelter.

### Dating relationships

In a recent study, four out of five young women reported having experienced at least one kind of harassment/abuse. Focusing on the more serious incidents – sexual assault, forced to have sex and physical assault by a partner – almost twice as many

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young women as young men reported these experiences (28 per cent to 15 per cent) (Regan and Kelly 2001). Young women frequently report feeling under pressure or forced to have sex and often lack the confidence and negotiating skills to resist unwanted sexual advances.

### Family violence

In addition to partner/boyfriend inflicted violence, young women may be subjected to violence and abuse from the extended family. The experience of extended family violence has been found to be particularly acute for some young married Asian women. Interviews with a number of Pakistani women who have suffered domestic violence reveal that violence from their husbands was at best ignored and at worst instigated and encouraged by their mother-in-law or sisters-in-law (Choudry 1996). Young Asian women may feel particularly trapped in violent and abusive relationships, as they risk shame and dishonour, social isolation and even deportation if they leave their husbands. Women affected by the 12 month rule are not eligible to claim state benefits which means they are excluded from refuges and unable to seek legal protection.

## The effects of domestic violence

Domestic violence has serious, long term effects on young women's health. Women who have suffered abuse are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, eating problems and sexual dysfunction. Violence may also affect their reproductive health (World Health Organisation 2000). Domestic violence in pregnancy can cause miscarriage, premature birth, low birth weight, foetal injury and foetal death. As a coping mechanism, women are more likely to abuse alcohol or drugs. As well as experiencing the painful effects of physical injury, the long term psychological damage can lead to severe mental health problems including depression, self harm and attempted suicide. As many as 50 per cent of women receiving psychiatric services have experienced sexual or physical abuse (Williams 1993).

## What can be done?

### Government initiatives

In Living Without Fear (1999), a joint Home Office and Women and Equality Unit publication, the Government states its commitment to tackling violence against women as part of its Crime Reduction Programme. Six million pounds (out of a total of £250 million) is being invested in practical projects around the country to encourage and develop best practice to prevent and reduce domestic violence, rape and sexual assault. The Government has also launched a public awareness campaign, 'Break the Chain', with leaflets and posters offering practical advice and sources of help to those experiencing domestic violence.

### Multi-agency approach

Under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, local crime audits must identify the nature and profile of domestic violence in their area and devise strategies for reducing it. Multi-agency and partnership working has been promoted by the government (Home Office 2000). A recent evaluation of the multi-agency approach found that at best this can be a creative and productive way of working but it can also become a blind alley (Hague 2000). There has not been any research to investigate whether the needs and concerns of young women are being addressed by the multi-agency approach. Recent consultation with young people in one area, led by The South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre, has resulted in a fundamental change in the local domestic violence panel, so that issues raised through school interventions or youth work can be taken on board. The YWCA believes that this approach needs to be followed in all multi-agency forums.

### Police

In recent years there have been significant improvements in police attitudes and responses to domestic violence. Most forces now have specialist domestic violence units or officers and operate a 'pro-arrest' approach. However,

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feedback from women survivors (Mullender and Hague 2000 and Women's Aid 2000) and an evaluation study (Kelly 1999) indicate that not all police regard domestic violence as a serious crime. Calling the police therefore remains something of a lottery, as identical incidents may prompt different responses from individual officers. Young women especially may not feel confident about calling the police for fear of an unsympathetic response.

#### Courts

Prosecuting the perpetrators of domestic violence has always been notoriously difficult as women victims are often understandably reluctant to give evidence in court. For young women who are pregnant or have young children, the practical difficulties of attending court compound the emotional trauma of such an ordeal.

New guidelines from the Crown Prosecution Service launched in November 2001 will enable cases to proceed without the victim having to personally appear in court. Instead, evidence collected by the police, such as witness statements from neighbours or photographs of injuries, together with the victim's statement of evidence, will be sufficient. Courts will also be expected to impose tougher sentences.

There is a possibility that in the future, specialist domestic violence courts will be introduced (such as one currently being piloted in Leeds) to provide a more sensitive and supportive environment, more conducive to the needs of young women.

New powers announced in November 2001 are to be granted to the police, social workers and some voluntary agencies to seek restraining orders to ban men from contacting victims or entering family homes. This move should offer more protection to young women with children, enabling them to remain in the family home.

#### Voluntary sector

The voluntary sector has been at the forefront of raising awareness of the issue, influencing public policy and providing practical support and protection for women experiencing domestic violence. The women's movement in the early seventies established a whole range of support services for women and their children, including a national network of refuges, rape crisis centres, helplines, outreach and advocacy services, educational programmes, perpetrator programmes and so on.

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### Best practice initiatives for young women

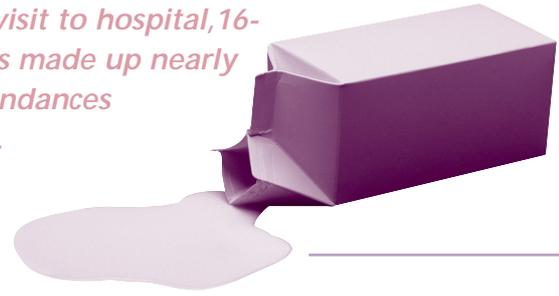
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Research has shown that young women are often unaware of support services and may lack confidence in reporting or disclosing violence (Regan and Kelly 2001). When asked, girls and young women say they want the opportunity to discuss issues such as why does violence happen and how can they stop it happening to them?, what to do if they say no, and the boy doesn't listen?, etc (South Essex Rape and Crisis Centre 2000). A number of organisations have taken these points on board and developed specific services, projects or resources to meet the needs and concerns of young people. For example:

- Thames Valley Partnership's Education Programme, 'Breaking the Cycle' includes an interactive theatre workshop and resources handbook for teachers
- Save the Children has produced a training manual and video 'But That's Not Love', for use with young people
- Newham Action Against Domestic Violence runs an awareness programme on relationship abuse in local secondary schools, as part of the Personal Social and Health Education

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curriculum and offers a resources and advice service that runs concurrently with the programme

- The South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre has used the Zero Tolerance Trust's 'Respect' materials to run programmes in local schools, aimed at challenging attitudes and giving young people a space to talk about relationships and develop self esteem
- Newham Asian Women's Project runs a specific group for teenage women
- YWCA Centres offer a range of services to girls and young women and particularly young mothers, including counselling for survivors of violence and abuse and opportunities for personal development, confidence building and raising self esteem

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## More to do

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While there have been many positive changes in society's approach to domestic violence, there is still a long way to go before young women can live life free from fear and violence in their homes and relationships.

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## The YWCA is calling on the Government to:

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- Promote zero tolerance towards domestic abuse and universal recognition that it is a serious crime
- Ensure that domestic violence issues are discussed in schools as part of the curriculum
- Guarantee funding within the 'Supporting People' framework for specialist, independent services for women experiencing violence, including outreach services

- Provide funding for training materials and publicity aimed at young women to encourage them to access helplines and services
- Provide sustained funding and support for community-based services for young women that focus on raising self confidence and self esteem, to enable them to deal effectively with relationship and peer pressures, family problems and aggressive and violent behaviour
- Provide comprehensive training for public sector workers who come into contact with young women such as midwives, health visitors and housing workers, to ensure that they fully understand domestic violence issues and so are better able to give appropriate support to young women who are pregnant and young mothers
- Dedicate funding to projects that work with young women from ethnic minority communities to address their specific cultural needs and issues
- Provide funding and support for targeted projects delivered in schools, colleges and youth groups which challenge aggressive behaviour in young men
- Incorporate perpetrator programmes into the criminal justice system so that they are part of the sentencing for those who have used violence against women

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**// Research evidence suggests that any woman regardless of race, culture, nationality, religion, sexuality, disability, age, class or education level is at risk**

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#### Sources of further information

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[www.homeoffice.gov.uk/violenceagainstwomen](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/violenceagainstwomen)



*The YWCA is a force for change for women who are facing discrimination and inequalities of all kinds.*

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