Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Cafcass Cymru

Gender & Abuse

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Contents

Gender & Abuse

Domestic abuse can affect anyone in intimate or familial relationships, and Cafcass Cymru recognises that people of all gender identities can experience or perpetrate abuse. All disclosures of abuse must be taken seriously and handled sensitively. Research shows that women and girls are disproportionately affected, with 1 in 3 women[1] globally experiencing physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. In Wales, the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse, and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 specifically recognises the gendered nature of abuse and focuses on preventing male violence against women and girls through education and collaboration.

The Office for National Statistics' Crime Survey[2] helps estimate prevalence but does not capture the full context or power dynamics of abuse.

Evan Stark's research on coercive control highlights how structural gender inequalities and traditional gender roles make women more vulnerable. His work builds on key feminist scholars such as Lenore E. Walker (1979), Betsy Warrior (1970s), Del Martin (1976), Sheila Rowbotham (1980s), Susan Schechter (1983), Patricia Evans (1996), and Jacqueline Campbell (1990s), who laid the foundation for understanding coercive control.

> "Coercive control is a pattern of behaviour that seeks to take away the victim's liberty or freedom, to strip away their sense of self. It is rooted in gendered power dynamics, historically and socially constructed, making it a crime that disproportionately affects women."
>
> (Stark, 2007)[3]

Recognising the gendered nature of domestic abuse does not negate the experiences of male victim-survivors. It ensures assessments are tailored, inclusive, and responsive to individual needs, considering gender-specific experiences and barriers.

1 Devastatingly pervasive: 1 in 3 women globally experience violence (who.int)
2 Why data matters when talking about domestic abuse – Women's Aid (womensaid.org.uk)
3 "Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life (Interpersonal Violence)" – Evan Stark

Male Victim-Survivors

The charity Respect provides extensive resources on perpetrators of all identities and male victim-survivors. In families we encounter, many children will be boys who are also victim-survivors of abuse.

Male victim-survivors may be less likely to recognise or disclose abuse due to stigma.[4&5] Social norms suggest that men and boys should suppress feelings of pain, fear or distress (whether physical or emotional) in the pursuit of masculinity. There are also reports that men believe that by disclosing abuse perpetrated against them, they may be perceived as the abuser by professionals. These barriers can prevent men from seeking support and impact professional responses.[6&7]

Rigid social norms relating to gender are harmful to women, but equally harmful to men. Research by Westmarland and Burrell (2023)[8] found that men who considered themselves within a 'Man Box' (i.e. identifying with very stereotypical ideas of what it means to be a 'real man', or how they should behave) were more likely to experience low levels of mental and sexual health, have thoughts of suicide, be involved in traffic accidents, have little interest or pleasure in doing things and more likely to have perpetrated physical and verbal bullying. These findings also reinforce the idea that men may feel pressured to hide their experiences of abuse due to societal expectations of masculinity.

For more information and guidance, please review Respect's toolkit linked below. The toolkit also explains Respect's matrix, which helps them to determine when they are presented with victim-survivors of intimate partner violence or perpetrators of violence:

Respect Male Victims Toolkit

Respect Men's Advice Line

For victim-survivors who identify as male to seek advice and specialist support.

Domestic Abuse Helpline for Men (Men's Advice Line UK)

4 Help Seeking Experiences of Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence in Canada: the Role of Gender, Violence Severity, and Social Belonging | Journal of Family Violence
5 "No one would ever believe me": An exploration of the impact of intimate partner violence victimization on men.
6 What About the Men? A Critical Review of Men's Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence – Kelly Scott-Storey, Sue O'Donnell, Marilyn Ford-Gilboe, Colleen Varcoe, Nadine Wathen, Jeannie Malcolm, Charlene Vincent, 2023 (sagepub.com)
7 Help-seeking by male victims of domestic violence and abuse (DVA): a systematic review and qualitative evidence synthesis | BMJ Open
8 'I'm a red-blooded male': Understanding men's experiences of domestic abuse through a feminist lens – Nicole Westmarland, Stephen R Burrell, 2023 (sagepub.com)

LGBTQ+ Victim-Survivors

LGBTQ+ people can and do experience similar types of domestic violence as heterosexual/ cisgender people, including coercive control.

LGBTQ+ individuals can face multiple intersecting challenges and vulnerabilities, including discrimination, which can heighten the risk factors in their cases.[9]

We will meet some families with same sex, non-binary or transgender parents and/or children; therefore, it is essential that we are sensitive to the additional challenges they may face.

Galop

Galop is a UK based charity that provides support to LGBTQ+ people who have experienced abuse and violence. This includes a helpline that is also open to professionals for further advice.

9 Galop_domestic abuse.indd

Safe & Together™ Model & Gender

Cafcass Cymru has committed to following the Safe & Together™ model of practice with families who come to family court.

Social norms research (Schmidt, E. *et al,* 2022)[10] and extensive reports from family court users (Harm Report, 2020)[11] find that mothers are systematically held to a higher standard of parenting and accountability than fathers when it comes to the child(ren)'s wellbeing, safety, and health.

Oxford University's (2024) report, based on research in six European countries, examines the experiences of victim-survivors in family courts and the resulting family justice responses. The findings highlight the unequal expectations placed on mothers compared to fathers in providing care. Many survivors felt further dismissed in their child protection concerns, and that blame was directed towards them because of these higher expectations.[12] Safe & Together™ practice focuses on balancing this expectation so that both parents are held to high standards of parenting.

David Mandel, CEO of the Safe & Together™ Institute discusses the issue of gender and double standards in the blog post linked below. The Safe & Together™ Model encourages Cafcass Cymru practitioners to "raise the bar for perpetrators dramatically"; stopping violence and abuse is the minimum, whereas taking accountability for the harm caused should be the goal for sustained change.

The approach:

- Calls out gendered parenting double standards
- Sees both trauma and ongoing coercive control
- Challenges the relevance of "parental alienation"
- Challenges statements made by domestic abuse perpetrators against survivors
- Maps how abuse impacts every aspect of children's development
- Celebrates the everyday protective efforts of survivors
- Demands real accountability and change from perpetrators
- Aligns with protective parents to keep children safe and thriving

Rethinking Children's Best Interests: Moving Beyond Trauma and Tackling Gender Double Standards (Safe & Together Insitute)

10 What makes a good mother? Two decades of research reflecting social norms of motherhood – Schmidt – 2023 – Journal of Family Theory & Review – Wiley Online Library
11 Assessing Risk of Harm to Children and Parents in Private Law Children Cases (publishing.service.gov.uk)
12 Family_Justice_Response_Domestic_Abuse_Portrait_A4_English-Digital (2).pdf