



## **Domestic abuse** **Information for churches**

### **Domestic abuse is unfortunately not a rare occurrence – and that includes families connected to churches. How should churches respond?**

In the UK, research shows that in the year ending March 2019, an estimated 2.4 million adults aged 16 to 74 years experienced domestic abuse in the previous 12 months (1.6 million women and 786,000 men)<sup>i</sup>. Two women a week are killed by a current or former partner in England and Wales alone<sup>ii</sup> and this figure has remained unchanged for many years. Domestic abuse has an enormous effect on children and we know that 130,000 children live in homes where there is high-risk domestic abuse<sup>iii</sup>.

### **What is domestic abuse?**

Domestic abuse is all about one person having power and control over another. The UK government defines domestic abuse as, 'Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged sixteen or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass, but is not limited to psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional abuse.'

Sadly, the evidence shows that church families are not immune to this, and it can be happening in 'nice Christian' families too, with no outward signs to make it obvious to others.

Since 2015, coercive or controlling behaviour has been illegal in the UK. The Serious Crime Act 2015 defines controlling behaviour as 'a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.' It defines coercive behaviour as 'an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.'

### **Examples of abusive behaviour**

#### **Psychological abuse**

Gaslighting (manipulation to the point of the victim questioning their sanity)  
Convincing the victim that their memory is poor  
Creating fear  
Telling lies about others  
Guilt-tripping

#### **Physical abuse**

Punching  
Hitting  
Slapping

Biting  
Burning  
Choking  
Shoving  
Pushing  
Kicking  
Holding you down

#### Sexual abuse

Unwanted sexual demands  
Unwanted sexual touching  
Pressure to have unsafe sex  
Pressure to have sex  
Being intentionally physically hurt during sex  
Rape

#### Financial abuse

Using debit or credit cards without consent  
Putting debt into a partner's name  
Gambling with family assets  
Withholding money  
Demanding receipts for every purchase  
Withholding access to a bank account  
Taking benefits or income that are in a partner's name (without their knowledge/consent)  
Using child maintenance to control a partner

#### Emotional abuse

Blaming  
Criticising  
Isolation  
Invading privacy due to jealousy  
Ignoring  
Shaming  
Belittling  
Putting down  
Name-calling

### **What if someone discloses that they are experiencing domestic abuse?**

What to do:

- Find a safe place and have someone else with you if the person is willing
- Listen to what they are saying and believe them
- Prioritise their immediate safety
- Do not promise confidentiality if children are involved
- Give relevant information and signposting
- Reassure them that this is not their fault

What not to do:

- Do not react emotionally or with any judgement
- Do not minimise the impact of what they are experiencing
- Do not try to immediately fix the issue by recommending a specific course of action such as couples' counselling
- Do not approach the abusive partner
- Do not ignore safeguarding concerns

## **Understanding the barriers**

It's important to recognise that not everyone will want or feel able to leave an abusive relationship. There are many barriers to leaving for those experiencing domestic abuse. These include:

### Lack of support and isolation

Isolation often plays a big role in domestic abuse. Relationships with family and friends may have broken down and visits to professionals, such as a GP, might always be accompanied. As well as that, individuals may not know where to find help or what their options are.

### Danger and fear

Victims of domestic abuse live in constant fear and with very limited freedom. Leaving an abusive relationship can be very dangerous. In fact, of the 888 women killed by partners or former partners between 2009 and 2018, at least 378 (43%) were known to have separated, or taken steps to separate, from the perpetrator<sup>iv</sup>.

### Practical reasons

As previously stated, domestic abuse is all about power and control. Due to this, someone in an abusive relationship whose finances, for example, are being controlled may not be able to support themselves or their children if they were to leave. A job or financial independence may seem like a complete impossibility. They may also fear Children's Services or Immigration involvement.

### Shame

Victims of domestic abuse may have been made to feel that the abuse is their fault and that it is somehow deserved. This may cause them to make excuses for the abuse or try to cover it up. Additionally, their partner may present as likeable and charming in public, making it difficult for others to recognise the abuse that is taking place.

By understanding the barriers that stand in the way of someone leaving an abusive relationship, the Church can support and empower them to make the best decision for them and their children (if relevant).

## **The legal system**

Those experiencing domestic abuse may face legal processes, both criminal and civil. While these exist to protect and support those experiencing domestic abuse, the processes themselves can be highly traumatising. The idea of going to court to obtain an injunction to force the abuser to leave the house, to stop the abuser contacting them or to attend hearings to deal with child arrangements can be terrifying, but necessary. Many victims of domestic abuse will have been threatened or told untrue things by their abusive partners such as:

- No one will believe you
- This is your fault and the judge will see that
- You can't take the children with you
- You'll lose your rights to the house if you leave

Excellent legal advice and representation is therefore vital for victims of domestic abuse who are seeking to separate or divorce. While legal aid is no longer automatically provided to everyone, it is still available to those who are able to evidence that they are victims of domestic abuse.

## **How the church can help**

- Educate and train leaders and teams about domestic abuse and its impact.

- Make your church a safe place for victims of domestic abuse to be believed and supported. You can do this by ensuring that all safeguarding procedures are up to date, providing relevant training for staff and volunteers, and tackling difficult questions around the subject.
- Bring domestic abuse and other relevant vocabulary into the language used in church, helping to tackle the taboo and shame that can surround it (it is never the victim's fault).
- Set up links with your local police service and third-sector organisations that support victims of domestic abuse.
- Raise awareness about domestic abuse and help combat the stigma, for example by holding events to mark Domestic Violence Awareness Month (October) and bake sales in support of domestic violence charities such as Refuge.
- Look at ways to provide practical support for those who need it. Ideas could include food or clothing vouchers for those that have fled their home, support to set up a new home, clothing and toys for children or monetary grants.

For more support and guidance please contact Restored UK, an organisation which aims to speak up about the realities of violence against women and girls, equip the Church to stand against domestic abuse, and support survivors.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesoverview/november2019>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.refuge.org.uk/our-work/forms-of-violence-and-abuse/domestic-violence/domestic-violence-the-facts/>

<sup>iii</sup> SafeLives (2015), Getting it right first time: policy report. Bristol: SafeLives.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.femicidecensus.org/reports/>

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