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The Intersection of Gender, Domestic Abuse, and Suicidality

Executive Summary

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Content warning: this report covers sensitive and potentially triggering topics and descriptions, including suicide, emotional abuse, coercive control, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.

Inclusivity statement: this report uses the term ‘women’ to refer to any self-identifying woman.

About Advance

Advance is a leading national women’s organisation, founded in 1998, to end violence against women and girls. Advance delivers systems change and empowers women and children who experience domestic abuse, including those in contact with the criminal justice system, to lead safe, just, and equal lives in their communities.

Credits & Acknowledgments

This report was written by Caitlin Senior with assistance from Jessica Trick, Aimée Ramiah and Phoebe Lill. This report would not have been possible without the women and girl survivors of domestic abuse and the Advance advocates who have supported them.

We would like to acknowledge and thank all the individuals, campaigners, organisations and academics who have played a role in highlighting the systemic issues facing victim/survivors of domestic abuse, especially suicidality.

Introduction

Through our 27 years, we have seen the myriad of ways in which domestic abuse impacts Women. The reason for this report, is in response to the increasing rates of suicide as a result of domestic abuse.

This paper explores the **intersections of gender, domestic abuse and suicidality, with the aim to raise awareness of the prevalence of suicidality amongst women experiencing abuse, and to advocate for early intervention and prevention work to support more women before they reach crisis point.**

Problem Statement

In England and Wales, around three quarters of suicides have been by men since the mid-1990s, which has traditionally guided the national suicide prevention strategy to focus largely on men at risk. [i] After much advocacy by sector specialists, we are now starting to see a non-gendered suicide prevention strategy enter research.

As a result, whilst there is a gap in research and understanding in relation to women and suicide generally, there is an even bigger gap in understanding and research about suicidality in women linked to domestic abuse. The reality of this is that every day 30 women will attempt suicide because of their experience of domestic abuse. [ii]

Main Findings

It is clear that poor mental health as a result of domestic abuse directly influences suicidal ideation. [iii] SafeLives has reported that 47% of survivors of non-physical abuse report suicidal thoughts, [iv] and at Advance, we support women every day who experience suicidal ideation due to domestic abuse.

Over the last three years at Advance, we have seen that domestic abuse was a factor in all cases where a woman has died by suicide, made a suicide attempt or experienced suicidal ideation. This includes women supported by Advance due to their contact with the criminal justice system, as well as those who access our services due to their experience of domestic abuse.

Further, reports suggest that since 2020, there have been at least three suicides every month where a history of domestic abuse has been present, [v] with one study showing that at least one victim dies of suicide following domestic abuse every four days in the UK. [vi]

However, women are less likely to report deteriorating mental health if it is as a result of violence and abuse. [vii] This has been noted to be due to shame, stigma and/or care for their perpetrator, [viii] and the weaponisation of mental ill health by perpetrators to make women appear unreliable [ix] or to impact their perceived ability to look after their children. This means that women are not receiving the support they need.

Moreover, it is important to highlight how intersecting factors, and structural inequalities can significantly increase the risk of suicidality. The paper goes into depth around the intersecting identities, needs, and lived experience associated with systemic adversities, and how these impact drivers of suicidal ideation. In summary, women who have experienced multiple disadvantage are at an elevated risk of suicidal ideation due to the compounded effects of trauma, emotional distress, and social isolation. Most cases of suicidality at Advance have involved an intersection of risk factors.

Recommendations

Our recommendations aim to inform more effective prevention and intervention strategies, specialised support services, and policy responses, and reflect the intersection between abuse, mental health, and systemic gaps in support. The recommendations seek to address these issues by enhancing early intervention, improving access to trauma-informed care, and fostering coordinated efforts across health, social, and legal systems. Implementing these recommendations could significantly reduce suicide risk for women who have experienced domestic abuse.

Legislation and policy:

changes are needed to legislation such as the Care Act and local suicide prevention strategies that will allow victim/survivors to access support prior to crisis point.

Funding:

sustainable funding is essential for domestic abuse services, which would allow delivery of more specialised services relating to mental health. This would enable women to get support for their needs before they experience suicidal ideation.

Training:

more extensive domestic abuse training, including the intersection of domestic abuse and suicide for statutory services, including mental health professionals, social care services, and criminal justice, needs to be developed. It should be trauma-informed and delivered by sector specialists. This would ensure that authorities can respond effectively to the women they work with and to identify opportunities to prevent suicidality.

Data and research:

data collection and research on this topic should be prioritised by authorities. This is to improve understanding of what works in suicide prevention amongst women and those experiencing domestic abuse.

Support for those around the victim:

both children of the victim, and staff supporting the victim should be able to access support to process what they have witnessed.

Conclusion

Suicidality is highly complex and is affected by a variety of risk factors, which are often different for women and men. This means that a trauma-informed and gender-specific understanding of suicidality is crucial to offer effective and bespoke support, early intervention and prevention. At present, the vast majority of research on suicidality is based on the risk factors and behaviours of men – and whilst this is important to understand, there needs to be a stronger grasp on why women experience suicidality, which is effectively communicated to, and understood by, all relevant agencies, if we are to see a decrease in suicide or suicidal ideation amongst women.

A clear and evidenced risk factor of suicide amongst women is domestic abuse. To reduce the number of women dying from suicide, women must be able to access support before they reach crisis point, through early intervention and prevention work; better identification of the signs that a woman may be feeling suicidal across all relevant agencies; specialist support when women experience domestic abuse; and holding perpetrators to account where domestic abuse was the cause of suicide.

References

This topic can be difficult. If you have been affected by this research and wish to access support, please see the following resources, training and useful contacts.

Resources:

Papyrus suicide safety planning booklet to offer a place to write down thoughts and feelings



Distraction techniques for when you feel overwhelmed or down



Explanation of the Care Act, and how mental health, self-harm and suicide is defined in the act



Training:

- Zero Suicide Alliance (ZSA) offers a free suicide awareness training covering introductory suicide awareness and prevention skills which can be found [here](#)

Organisations:

- [Samaritans](#) run a national helpline for those seeking support around suicidality
- [Mind](#) provide a helpline or support via email
- [Campaign Against Living Miserably](#) (CALM) provide a helpline or a WhatsApp chat
- [MindOut](#) offer support for and by LGBTQ people
- [Support After Suicide](#) is a partnership of organisations providing support to those who are bereaved following suicide



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