

# NIHR SSCR Workshop Insights from Research on Adult Safeguarding 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2014

Dr Michelle McCarthy  
Tizard Centre  
University of Kent

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# Domestic violence and women with learning disabilities

# Research Team

Principle Investigator:

Dr Michelle McCarthy

Researchers:

Siobhan Hunt and Karen Milne-Skillman,

Professor Glynis Murphy

All based at Tizard Centre, University of  
Kent, Canterbury

# Rationale

- We know domestic violence against women is a common social phenomenon.
- We know it has profound implications for the individuals concerned, as well as wider social consequences.
- BUT....little or nothing is known about the experiences of women with learning disabilities in relation to domestic violence (unlike other forms of abuse).

# Background

- There is a huge body of evidence regarding domestic violence in the general population (e.g. Mullender et al 2002, Walby and Allen 2004).
- Domestic violence of women with physical and sensory impairments is also relatively well researched in countries such as Canada and the US (McNamara and Brooker 2000, Yoshida et al 2009), but less so in the UK. The recent research by Thiara et al 2011 is a very welcome addition to that body of literature. They specifically researched the domestic violence experiences of women with disabilities in the UK. However, they did not include women with learning disabilities.

# **Domestic violence and women with physical/sensory impairments**

- US research suggests around 85% of women with disabilities experience domestic violence (Feuerstein 1997)
- Canadian research suggests women with disabilities had 40% greater likelihood of domestic violence than non-disabled women (Brownridge 2006)

# Domestic violence and women with physical/sensory impairments

This literature has uncovered types of domestic abuse unique to women with disabilities, e.g.

- Withholding or sabotaging needed equipment (wheelchairs, hearing aids, guide dogs, etc.)
- Leaving women in physically uncomfortable or embarrassing positions for a long time (e.g. leaving a woman sitting on the toilet all day)
- Threats that leaving the relationship will result in institutionalisation for the woman

“Abusive intimate partners exploit the challenges presented by the disability, knowing that this will seriously limit a woman’s ability to take action” (Ballin and Freyer 2012:1085).

# Extrapolating from this...

Is this also true for women with learning disabilities ?  
The kinds of factors perpetrators might exploit are:

- Low self esteem, lack of confidence
- Compliance
- Social isolation
- Lack of knowledge about how to leave, where to go, sources of support
- Chaotic /poor parenting histories
- **The women's fears about losing their children**



# Current knowledge base

The specific experiences and needs of women with learning disabilities when they experience domestic violence remain wholly under-researched in the UK (and beyond).

Walter- Brice et al 2012

Small qualitative study interviewing 5 women with learning disabilities.

Findings show that:

- the women experienced multiple forms of abuse from their partners, much of it severe, including the use of weapons;
- that abuse, harassment and threats continued after the end of the relationship
- that responses from Police and Social Services were minimal and poor and the women were left unprotected (although children were removed from their mothers)

# Current knowledge base (cont.)

In the UK, we do not know very much at all about the attitudes and practices of those whose role it is to support women in such circumstances e.g. the police, those who work in women's refuges, those who work to safeguard children and vulnerable adults

# Methods

- Set up some focus/advisory groups of women with learning disabilities to help us shape the research questions and interpret findings. This will run in parallel to a professional steering group for the project.
- Interview approx. 20 women with learning disabilities who have experienced domestic violence
- Survey professionals (police, domestic violence workers, adult safeguarding specialists, advocates, etc.) Follow up with interviews of key professionals where we can.

# Timescale

Year 1: Ethics approval ✓

Recruitment of research workers ✓

Identify user/professional groups ✓

Recruitment of participants for interviews ✓

Data collection – interviews ✓

Preliminary data analysis (to inform design of survey) ✓

Year 2: Data collection – surveys and professional interviews – **Current Stage**

Data analysis

Writing up, feedback and dissemination (As well as usual academic/professional journals and conferences, we are committed to producing accessible materials for women with learning disabilities (including a video and website), and targeted briefings for different professionals.

# Emerging research issues

## Practical Issues

### Ethical Approval

- We had difficulty getting ethical approval and ultimately did not get ethical approval to include women with learning disabilities who were still in violent relationships, only those who had already left.

### Research Governance Approval

- Difficulties with, and extremely time consuming nature of, seeking Research Governance approval for every Local Authority, Health Authority and Police Force.

# Emerging research issues

## Themes emerging from interview data

- Severity of the domestic violence (high frequency, long duration, use of weapons)
- In a number of cases, there has been an extreme and sadistic nature to the abuse. Also, an unrelenting, almost obsessive quality to it.
- In the early stages of the relationships, the women are 'softened up' for later violence through 'play-fighting'.
- Troubled family histories of the women (including domestic violence between their parents, abuse between adult siblings, estranged relationships and/or lack of support from parents to the women as adults)

## Emerging research issues (cont.)

- Tight-knit / enmeshed nature of family and community relationships (violent partner known to family, has had relationships with and/or abused other close family members, violent partner and woman continue to live in close proximity after end of relationship)
- Difficult / chaotic personal lives now
- Use of mobile phones as an instrument of control
- Being locked in the house
- Missing discourse of love!

# Emerging research issues (cont.)

## Perpetrator issues

The violent partners generally did not have learning disabilities themselves but did tend to :

- have mental health problems
- and/ or drug and alcohol dependency
- have a history of abusing previous partners/children,
- be cruel to animals
- make threats of self-harm/suicide/ threats to murder (inc. of children)
- have criminal records /be known to Police already



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