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Book chapter for Claire

Domestic violence and women with learning disabilities

Michelle McCarthy

Introduction

Abuse, particularly sexual abuse, against people with learning disabilities, has been researched and discussed for a long time. However, we know relatively little about one specific form of abuse, namely domestic violence against women with learning disabilities perpetrated by the men they are in relationships with.

The aim of this chapter is to give an overview of the limited research which exists on this subject. I will present some findings and analysis from my own recent research with women with learning disabilities on this subject and conclude with some suggestions for good practice.

Background and context

Since the 1970s and 1980s, domestic violence against women has been well recognized as both very common and very damaging to individuals and wider society. There is a huge body of evidence regarding its prevalence and effects in the general population (Walby & Allen 2004).

There is also a smaller body of research on domestic violence against women with physical and sensory impairments. This is mostly from countries such as Canada and the United States, but also more recently in the United Kingdom (Thiara et al. 2012). This research suggests that women with physical and sensory impairments are more likely to experience domestic violence than non-disabled women, but less likely to be able to access appropriate support services.

The first study on domestic violence and women with learning disabilities was by Walter Brice and colleagues in 2012. This was a small qualitative study interviewing 5 women with learning disabilities. They found:

- 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 the women were left unprotected (although children were removed from their mothers)

This was followed in 2014 by another small qualitative study by Pestka and Wendt. They found:

- The women had all experienced rejection in their childhoods and sought a sense of belonging in adult intimate relationships, even if they were abusive
- Low social status increases their vulnerability. The women “settle with or accept abuse in their lives to gain social value that has often been missing throughout their life course” (p.12)

Douglas and Harpur in 2016, again with a small qualitative study, found:

- Physical violence against the women with learning disabilities was common “often to a level requiring hospitalisation”

- Financial abuse also very common, as well as perpetrator-induced social and physical isolation

Key learning points

There has not been a lot of research on domestic violence against women with learning disabilities, but we are gradually learning more about their experiences.

The evidence from this country and abroad suggests that much of the domestic violence is severe.

Recent research in the UK

The research I conducted with colleagues (McCarthy et al 2017, McCarthy 2017) was larger than all the previous studies and its intention was to give women with learning disabilities the opportunity to speak at length, so that we might better understand their experiences. We interviewed 15 women with mild and moderate learning disabilities, aged between 20-67. The majority were White British, though 3 were of Bangladeshi / Indian origin. Some of the women had been married to the perpetrators, but the majority were cohabiting. Approximately half had children, though many of the children had been removed from their mothers.

Our findings can be summed up in these two stark sentences:

Firstly, there is nothing about having a learning disability which protects women from extreme domestic violence.

Secondly, the full range of mental, physical and sexual cruelty which is inflicted on other women, is also inflicted on women with learning disabilities.

The severity of the physical violence the women experienced could be seen by the fact that many had serious, and in some cases potentially life threatening, injuries. These included a head injury from being pushed downstairs, being strangled and being stabbed with a knife. The use of weapons including knives, bottles and heavy objects was reported and the level of fear experienced by some of the women was extreme, eg *"I felt really scared of him. I thought one day I'm gonna end up in a coffin"*.

Sexual violence was common, as was physical violence during pregnancy. The perpetrators also found ways to hurt the women without any physical contact. Financial abuse, for example, was very common and in some cases could have long lasting effects, eg *"He wanted my money always, for the drugs, he's left me in a lot of debt which is what I'm still struggling with now."* Women reported that the perpetrators would take their regular income eg benefit money, as well as any savings they may have had. In one very sad instance, a woman had been awarded £10,000 from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme for sexual abuse she had experienced during childhood. Her partner took all that money and sexually abused her again.

Verbal abuse and insults were a daily occurrence for some of the women in our study:

"He called me a bitch, a bastard and a liar"

"He called me a fat bitch, ugly and a slag".

Emotional and psychological abuse also featured heavily, often with the women's learning disabilities and/or mental health problems being used against them.

Key learning points

Domestic violence takes many forms. If you are aware that a woman with learning disabilities is experiencing one kind of abuse, there may well be other kinds going on that you don't know about. Rather than waiting to be told, it is good practice to sensitively enquire about *all* aspects of her safety and wellbeing.

Emerging issues

Two forms of abuse against women with learning disabilities which have received little or no attention before now are coercive control and the particular difficulties faced by mothers with learning disabilities when they experience domestic violence. These were both apparent in my recent research.

Coercive control

Coercive and controlling behaviour can take many forms, but essentially refers to a range of acts designed to humiliate, intimidate and subordinate a person. It includes depriving them of choice and regulating their everyday behaviour.

"When I got up first thing I had to do everything he wanted. If I didn't, he would hurt me straightaway. I had to bring him breakfast in bed. If I didn't, I'd get a clap round the head...I had to just leave the baby to cry ...to sort him out first"

"He wouldn't let me go to work, wouldn't let me have my friends".

Coercive control frequently involves isolating vulnerable people from their family, friends and other sources of support.

"He was nasty to them outside [neighbours]I lost all my friendships with the neighbours...he made it so I didn't have anyone to talk to and things like that"

"My oldest, kindest friends, he accused them of stealing, so they wouldn't come here again."

The particular difficulties faced by mothers with learning disabilities during domestic violence

As noted above, domestic violence during pregnancy was common for this group of women with learning disabilities and indeed it is noted in the general literature that pregnancy is often a time for domestic violence to begin or escalate (Johnson et al 2003).

Once the children were born, the women were faced with the enormous challenge of enduring physical, sexual and verbal assaults, having their lives and finances restricted by a controlling partner whilst also trying to nurture and protect young children. In addition, the perpetrators would actively seek to sabotage the mother-child bond as part of their violent and controlling strategies. The women in our study gave examples of how their partners would undermine their authority over their children, attack them in front of their children (which sends a message to the children that their mother is weak and not in control) and single out one child and make an ally of them: *"He used to say he would take my eldest boy and go and leave me with the rest, which is wrong"*.

Some women, whose children had been taken into LA care, found that their partners would try to sabotage what little contact the women had with them:

“He wouldn’t even let me see my children ...when I had contact visits with K. he kept cancelling it and telling me ‘you don’t want to see him’.

“In the court proceedings it was set out that I had phone contact on Tuesdays and Thursdays. He took my phone off me, cos he didn’t like me doing that...I was screaming and shouting to get to back, cos if I didn’t have my phone, I couldn’t contact my son.”

Key learning points

Domestic violence may take many forms and some are subtle, hard to detect and hard even for the women themselves to understand. Very few women will reveal all of the details of what is happening to them at the outset of your discussions with them. A trusting relationship will need to be built over time.

Be aware that mothers with learning disabilities are particularly vulnerable when it comes to domestic violence and they are likely to keep many, most or all of the details to themselves. They will fear that their children will be taken away from them if they alert the authorities to what is happening.

Women’s resistance

Despite the danger they were in, many of the women in our recent study did try to resist their partner’s controlling and violent strategies. Some described how they verbally resisted and tried to stand up for themselves and occasionally they would hit back. Some were adamant that they would not accept the perpetrators’ apologies:

“He’d come back later, all nice and I would say ‘You know those flowers? Stick them full up your backside, because I don’t want anything from you now’.

“Sorry is not good enough, a liar will never change, a leopard will never change its spots”

Others described how they used contraception secretly or refused to cover up for their partner if he had committed a crime outside the home.

Of course, the ultimate resistance is to leave permanently leave the relationship, which all of the women in our study eventually did, some after multiple attempts.

Key learning points

Do not assume that any woman in a violent relationship is choosing to stay because she is happy with the way things are. Many will have been threatened with murder, and the murder of their children, if they leave (*“When I said I was leaving, he said ‘I will find where you live. I’ll burn your house on fire with your kids in it’”*). In the face of such threats many women take a calculated risk to stay and they need help and support, rather than judgment, for this.

Help from professionals

Just like many other women in violent relationships, many women with learning disabilities find it hard to leave. This is not only because they are afraid to (see above), but also because compared to

other women, they lack vital information such as knowing how to leave safely, where they could go or whether there is anyone to help. Many women with learning disabilities will not have heard of women's refuges or any other domestic violence support agencies. This is where health and social care professionals can be very helpful ie by providing accessible information to women with learning disabilities. Examples of accessible information are found at the end of the chapter, but you can also make your own, local versions.

Health and social care professionals also need to make sure that they are up to date with training on domestic violence issues, so that they can develop a good awareness of domestic violence, its dynamics, especially relating to coercive control. It may be necessary to put pressure on managers to provide this and it may help to remind them that since 2014, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has had guidelines which state:

“Health and social care service managers and professionals should ensure front-line staff in all services are trained to recognise the indicators of domestic violence and abuse”.

Health and social care professionals also have a responsibility to make women with learning disabilities aware that domestic violence is a crime. They may also need to help women understand some key laws and how to invoke them e.g. the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme or “Clare’s Law”, which allows women (or indeed anybody) to make formal enquires to the Police regarding a partner’s previous history of violence or domestic abuse.

Health and social care professionals and managers of services need to be aware that one result of the tightening eligibility criteria for support services is that those women who are most at risk of domestic violence are precisely those who are now having to manage unsupported ie those with a mild learning disability who are living independently.

Key learning points

Be proactive in identifying, and offering help to, women with learning disabilities who could be in a violent relationship. Always make an effort to see the woman without her partner at least on some occasions. If this is not possible, then it is reasonable to see this as a possible ‘red flag’ for abuse.

Do not be afraid to enquire whether everything is OK in a relationship and make it known that you are concerned for her welfare and that she can talk to you. Do not necessarily accept initial assurances of ‘everything’s fine’ as reflecting the actual situation- sometimes it can take a long time before women will confide in you. Just let it be known that you want to help and that support is available.

Do not promise what you may not be able to deliver. For example, despite really wanting to, you may not be able to whisk a woman with learning disabilities off to a women’s refuge – refuges are few and far between and often full. For details of the only specialist refuge for women with learning disabilities, see below.

Reflection Points

Can you identify some of the more obvious ‘red flags’ for domestic violence against women with learning disabilities? Try it, ask your colleagues to do the same and compare your lists. Share the most common red flags widely throughout your organisation.

Have you gathered together in one place all local information about domestic violence support services? If so, have you and your colleagues put this into an accessible format for women with learning disabilities?

Have you set up and supported a women's group for women with learning disabilities to meet together and discuss issues which are important to them? This does not have to focus on domestic violence, but a good, ongoing discussion group should be a forum where women can talk about difficult experiences and get, and give, peer support.

Case study 1

Julie had a typically violent and controlling partner. "He was a friend of my brother and my brother said he would look after me. He was nice at first, but then he brought all his clothes round to my flat and moved in. I didn't really want him to... he got aggressive. He kept telling me what to do. I wasn't allowed to wear things that I wanted, he used to tell me what I can and can't wear. All the time he was telling me that I was fat and ugly. He would shout in my face. He used to lock me in the flat. He broke my fingers by bending them back and standing on them. He wouldn't let me see my mum, he wouldn't let me see my family".

The effects on Julie's self-esteem were marked: "He'd say to me 'you've put on so much weight so you should only eat salads now, you got to, otherwise you're going to get fatter and fatter and nobody will like you, you're ugly as it is'. "He's threatening me, calling me names all the time, I was putting myself down, I couldn't even look in the mirror... I took an overdose".

Julie found it very hard to leave. The perpetrator tried to use her learning disability against her, telling her she wouldn't be able to live independently. But eventually and with help, she did leave and her life improved immeasurably: "I got myself out and that was the best thing I ever done. I feel like I can look in mirror now and I feel like a different person, I get my hair done, I keep my flat clean, I've got friends now, I can go out. I go to college."

Case study 2

Barbara's partner was extremely controlling and would tell her what she could and couldn't do, constantly calling her mobile phone to see where she was and who she was with. He isolated her from her parents by being abusive, shouting at and insulting them, until they would no longer come to see their daughter. He would also humiliate Barbara by refusing to put any trousers on when people came round to see her, so that she felt she couldn't invite anyone round. She was also locked in: "I couldn't get out, he locked everything so I couldn't, there was no way of me getting me out of that flat, no way". As her mental health deteriorated in the face of such treatment, he tried to take advantage of her depression and would goad her to kill herself: "He told me to strangle myself with a wire, he wanted me to suicide myself, he wanted me to die". Barbara made multiple attempts to leave. Once, when he found her packed bags hidden under the bed, " he burnt my fingers on the stove, which hurt". As in the case of Julie, once Barbara did escape, her life improved: " I feel much calmer now. I can have an opinion now, doesn't matter if it's good or bad. I can do whatever I want now. I want to be an example to my kids, a good example, not a bad example. I'm very happy on my own, I love it."

Resources from the author

A video for women with learning disabilities can be viewed here <https://vimeo.com/116967832>

Hard copies of the DVD are available from Michelle McCarthy M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk

An accessible leaflet https://www.kent.ac.uk/tizard/research/research_projects/new_research_pages/domviolence.html?tab=accessible-resources click on the bottom of page, where it says accessible leaflet.

This link <https://soundcloud.com/domestic-abuse-podcast/holistic-support-for-people-with-learning-disabilities-experiencing-domestic-abuse> will take you to a podcast.

Other resources

Beverley Lewis House is the only specialist refuge in the UK for women with learning disabilities. More information is available here <http://www.east-thames.co.uk/blh>

Examples of easy read booklets on abuse for adults with learning disabilities:

http://www.easyhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/domestic_abuse_what_is_it_1.pdf

<http://www.easyhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/null/Self%20Help%20Booklet%20for%20people%20who%20have%20gone%20through%20sexual%20violence%20or%20sexual%20abuse.pdf>

http://www.kent.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0014/13514/Adult-Abuse-easy-read-leaflet.pdf

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