

## Violence Against Women and Girls: Frequently Asked Questions

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## How common is violence against women and girls (VAWG)?

Research shows that in the UK, 3 in 10 women will experience domestic abuse at sometime in her life, 1 in 3 will experience sexual abuse, and 2 women are killed a week by a current or ex-partner. Violence affects women regardless of age, class, race, sexuality, or disability. It is something that can be experienced by our family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. In Haringey, 70-80% of all contacts to Children and Young People Services every year involve domestic abuse. The 3 in 10 figure would mean that in Haringey over 3,000 women are currently experiencing domestic violence and over 20,000 women are living with the legacy of past domestic violence.

We know that young women experience the highest levels of sexual violence. Young women represent 30% of all women reporting to the Havens<sup>1</sup> in 2015 and 65% of victims of multiple perpetrator rape were under 19. There has been a 36% increase in reporting of all sexual offences since 2014.

Over 1/5 of women have been subject to stalking or harassment at some point in their lives. This means that for Haringey, over 5000 women will have been subjected to stalking in the past 12 months.

It is estimated that nearly 3,500 women and girls are affected by Female Genital Mutilation in Haringey and we also know that there are high, but hidden levels of forced marriage and crimes committed in the name of 'honour'

Studies provide widely different estimates of the prevalence of sexual harassment. However, research suggests that sexual harassment is likely to be widespread but also largely underreported. The Everyday Sexism campaign which was set up to catalogue the experiences of women being sexual harassed on a regular basis has received over 100,000 submissions between since its inception in April 2012. A report of a survey of 1574 by Girlguiding in 2015 found that 81% of girls have experienced sexism; 42% had seen something that trivialised violence against women and girls and 39% had demeaning comments made about them.

A 2009 study by the NSPCC and the University of Bristol which questioned 1,353 young people (aged between 13 and 17 years old) on violence in their intimate partner relationships found that 33% of girls and 16% of boys had experienced some form of sexual abuse. Young people in our schools' survey and professionals working with young people are concerned about sexual harassment and sexual violence issues, especially the increase in online abuse.

Attitudinally, a 2015 report shows that young people (aged between 16 and 19) are most likely to believe that a person should take some responsibility for sexual assault or rape if they have were drunk (34%), taking drugs (45%) or flirting with their attacker (46%).

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<sup>1</sup> The Havens is the Sexual Assault Referral Centre where people who have experienced sexual violence can go for support.

## I argue with my partner – is this domestic abuse?

It is quite common for couples to have disagreements and verbal arguments, but this is not necessarily domestic abuse. Instead, domestic abuse is a pattern of coercive or controlling behavior that can include physical, sexual, financial, emotional and psychological abuse. In an abusive relationship, one person has power and control over their partner, and repeatedly and randomly uses intimidation, threats, and/or violence to control and instill fear in their partner.

## VAWG is a private matter, it is wrong for others to get involved.

Abuse is a crime and a public matter which should not be minimised or seen as a private issue. VAWG is a violation of someone's human rights and it often thrives on silence, so it is important that society does not turn a blind eye. Professionals, residents and community members should work together in creating a coordinated community response that has a zero-tolerance approach to abuse.

## Why does VAWG happen?

VAWG is not just an issue between two people. Instead, it is a larger societal issue that is rooted in issues of power, control and inequality. Gender inequality and the unequal status of women have meant that violence against women has had a long history which was often indirectly reinforced by UK laws. For example, up until the 1970's, working women were refused mortgages in their own right and were only granted one if they could secure the signature of a male guarantor. It was only in 1991 that all rape within marriage became a criminal offence, and more recently, coercive control only became a criminal offence in 2015. These unequal laws meant that violence and control over women were normalised in society. Many of these attitudes are still prevalent today and show how a cross-society approach is needed to end violence against women and girls.

## Can alcohol and drugs cause VAWG?

No. Abusive individuals are violent when they are sober and many people who drink are never abusive towards their partner. Blaming drink or drugs is an excuse and a way of denying responsibility. Alcohol and drugs may be a trigger for a particular attack, but they can not cause someone to be abusive; instead they can bring out behavior that is already in the individual. It is important to not solely concentrate on the alcohol/drugs as the problem as this can take responsibility away from the perpetrator and not hold them to account.

## Aren't women just as abusive as men?

Both men and women can be perpetrators or victims of abuse. However, according to Respect, the national perpetrator charity, a disparity is seen where the vast majority of perpetrators are male and victims are female, when the following factors are considered:

- Homicide
- Sexual violence
- Levels of injury
- 4 or more incidents of abuse

CPS data has consistently shown that, despite an increase in female perpetrators, that 93% of VAWG defendants were men. From those with recorded gender,<sup>2</sup> the proportion of women victims was 84%. Furthermore, Marianne Hester's research<sup>3</sup> has also shown that in cases where the offender was female, only 5% were in heterosexual relationships. This

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<sup>2</sup> In 2014-2015, the CPS recorded 84% of gender.

<sup>3</sup> Op. Cit., Hester (2009), footnote 7.

means that the vast majority of incidents of female perpetrated domestic violence were within the context of lesbian relationships. The same research also found that, despite myths around underreporting by men, women are arrested to a disproportionate degree given the fewer incidents where they were perpetrators. During a six year study period men were arrested one in every ten incidents, women were arrested one in every three incidents.

### Are disabled women more likely to be affected by VAWG than non-disabled women?

Yes, disabled women are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Research has shown that disabled women experience abuse at least twice as often as non-disabled women.<sup>4</sup> Abusers - including personal assistants and carers - may exploit a woman's particular condition or impairment. There are also additional barriers that a disabled woman must overcome when she seeks help.

### Why do victims choose to stay in an abusive relationship? If it was me, I would just walk away.

It can be extremely difficult to leave an abusive partner. Someone being abused may fear what their partner will do if they leave, particularly if threats to kill have been made to the victims and their children. Victims may believe that staying with the perpetrator is better for the children. There are also practical considerations to take into account. The victim may not have access to money, or anywhere to go. They may not know where to turn for help, particularly if English is not their first language. If the victim is emotionally and financially dependent on their partner, they may be very isolated.

Someone who has been, or is being abused, may have had their self-esteem steadily worn now. They may not believe they can manage on their own, or that they have any other options. They may feel ashamed of what has happened and believe the abuse is their own fault. They may hope that their partner will change. Or they may remember the good times at the start of the relationship and hopes they will return.

### Does forced marriage only happen in South Asian communities?

No, and to discuss is as such denies a voice to those from other communities who have experienced it. Forced marriage is practiced in many different communities in the UK, including, but not limited to African, Middle Eastern, White British, Mediterranean, Asian and Roma Gypsy. A forced marriage can include 'shot gun' weddings; women bought, sold and trafficked for the purpose of marriage and any marriage where the full consent of both parties is not acquired.

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<sup>4</sup> Khalifeh, H., Howard, LM., Osborn, D., Moran, P., Johnson, S. (2013) 'Violence against People with Disability in England and Wales: Findings from a National Cross-Sectional Survey', *PLoS ONE* 8(2); Chang, J., Martin, S., Moracco, K., Dulli, L., Scandlin, D., Loucks-Sorrel, M., Turner, T., Starsoneck, L., Neal Dorian, P. and Bou-Saada, I., (2003) 'Helping Women with Disabilities and Domestic Violence: Strategies, Limitations, and Challenges of Domestic Violence Programs and Services' *Journal of Women's Health*, 12(7), pp. 699-708; Hague, G., Thiara, R., Magowan, P. and Mullender, A. (2008) *Making the Links: Disabled Women and Domestic Violence*, Bristol: Women's Aid; Thiara, R., Hague, G., Bashall, R., Ellis, B. and Mullender, A. (2012) *Disabled Women and Domestic Violence: Responding to the Experience of Survivors*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers; Coker, A., Smith, P. and Fadden, M. (2005) 'Intimate Partner Violence and Disabilities among Women attending Family Practice Clinics', *Journal of Women's Health*, 14(9), pp.829 -838; Mays, J. (2006) 'Feminist disability theory: domestic violence against women with a disability', *Disability and Society*, 21(2), pp147-158 and Mirrlees-Black, C. (1999), *Op. Cit.*, footnote 7, pages 32-33.

### **Is a child born in an abusive household more likely to grow up to be an abuser?**

Growing up in a violent home is a risk factor and some children who experience abuse do go on to be abusive in their relationships, but the majority do not. Instead they are repelled by violence because they have seen the damage it causes. Abusers learn to be violent from the society they grow up in. Inequality between the sexes means that men have more power than women – inevitably some of them abuse or exploit that power. People who blame violence on their childhood experiences are avoiding taking responsibility for their actions. Violence is a choice an abuser makes.

### **Are some communities more violent than others?**

Violence against women occurs in all communities, cultures and religious groups. In the UK, 1 in 4 women will experience domestic abuse, 1 in 3 will experience sexual abuse, and 2 women a week are killed by their current or previous partner. This is regardless of race, class, age, or sexual orientation. It is important to note that negative stereotypes about some groups can affect how we define perpetrators and victims. For example, child sexual exploitation cases in Rochdale were highlighted as race related, but incidents where middle class white men sexually exploit children in the Far East, for example, are not. The universal nature of violence against women and girls must be recognised to ensure all perpetrators are held to account and that all victims/survivors are supported.

### **Do women only ‘cry rape’ because they regret having sex the morning after?**

No, evidence suggests that false allegations about rape are no higher than false allegations about any other crime. False allegations of rape are very rare. Instead, the opposite is true, where the vast majority of rape survivors do not report to the police. One significant reason for this is the fear of not being believed or even being blamed for the abuse. To encourage survivors to come forward and get support, it is important that victims are trusted and not blamed for the abuse.

### **Is Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) justified by some religions?**

FGM has been reported to be practiced by followers of many different religions: Muslims, Catholics, Jews, Animists and Christian Coptics. It is important to stress that there is no basis in any of the various religious texts for FGM, and FGM predates most modern religions - including Christianity and Islam. The association between FGM and religious obligation is assumed to be the result of incorrect interpretation and teaching of religious texts.

### **Is rape a result of overwhelming sexual desire?**

No. Rape is an act of violence and control, not sexual gratification. This myth is particularly dangerous as it places the onus of rape prevention on women. Women are told not to dress a ‘particular’ way or not go to certain place for their own safety. By shifting the responsibility away from the rapist, we are not holding them to account. Rather than tell women not to get raped, society needs to tell men not to rape.

### **Does VAWG happen more in lower income households?**

No. Anyone can be abused, no matter where they live or how much money they have. Abused women come from all walks of life. You only have to think of the celebrities we hear about in the papers to realise that money cannot protect you from domestic violence. Men who abuse women are as likely to be lawyers, accountants and judges as they are to be from lower income professions.

### Is rape usually committed by a stranger?

Only around 10% of rapes are committed by 'strangers'. Around 90% of rapes are committed by known men, and often by someone who the survivor has previously trusted or even loved. People are raped in their homes, their workplaces and other settings where they have previously felt safe. Rapists can be friends, colleagues, clients, neighbours, family members, partners or exes. Risk of rape shouldn't be used as an excuse to control women's movements and restrict their rights and freedom.

### Do perpetrators of VAWG just have poor impulse control; a problem in anger management?

Many people feel angry but do not assault another person. Anger is a healthy feeling; violence is a criminal behaviour. Most people who assault their partners do so in the privacy of their own home, not outside in public view, suggesting that they are not assaulting because of their current emotion or poor impulse control. The abuse is often directed to parts of the body that will not be visible if bruised. Most perpetrators would not attack their boss, bank manager or a stranger when frustrated. The assault is often 'in cold blood' with no sign of 'loss of temper'. The assault may stop immediately if there is an interruption such as a phone call, or a ring at the door.

### What is the meaning of crimes committed in the name of 'honour?'

'Honour' based violence (HBV) is a form of VAWG which is perpetrated in the name of so called 'honour'. The honour code which it refers to is often set by male relatives and women who do not abide by the 'rules' are then punished for bringing shame on the family. 'Dishonour' can mean anything from a woman having a boyfriend; rejecting a forced marriage; pregnancy outside of marriage; interfaith relationships; seeking divorce, homosexuality, inappropriate dress or make-up and even kissing in a public place. Honour is a universal concept, and HBV is committed by a range of communities and culture groups.

### Should mediation or couples counselling be recommended for those experiencing VAWG?

It is important that mediation or couples counselling is not recommended for those experiencing VAWG. This is because mediation or couples counselling:

- Places the responsibility for change on both partners, but abuse is the sole responsibility of the perpetrator
- Doesn't account for the controlling and manipulative behavior of the perpetrator. Therapists can easily be charmed by perpetrators and collude in the abuse by not holding the perpetrator to account. This can reinforce the abusers power and control over the victims
- Works best when both people are able to be truthful. Perpetrators often deny, minimise the abuse, or blame the victim
- Is effective when both partners feel safe to share. A victim may not feel safe with their abuser present and might not fully participate or speak honestly through fear of the consequences
- Is about resolving relationship problems by talking about them. A perpetrator's abuse is not a couple's problem, but their own. A perpetrator needs to work on it in a specialised program for abusers not in couples' counselling.

Domestic violence is characterised by an imbalance of power so any intervention that encourages mediation or seeks to deny the abuser's responsibility for their violence will result in further attempts to manipulate, dominate and threaten the woman experiencing

domestic violence. Women will inevitably not be able to participate or speak freely and may be subject to very subtle signals (such as a particular look or gesture) that serve as a threat, which often go unnoticed by a third party. There is a very real danger that perpetrators might use these processes to maintain power and control over their victims, divert themselves from criminal justice sanctions and avoid taking responsibility for their own actions.

There is also a concern that even if the mediation session itself is safe, security will not be in place before and after the session when the abuser will know exactly where the victim is. This is extremely dangerous.

### What is the impact of sexist jokes? Is it just banter?

Sexist jokes can be dismissed by some as harmless banter, but it is important to explore their impact and relationship with VAWG. Research<sup>5\*</sup> has found that exposure to sexist humour can lead to an acceptance of sexual harassment and bully and discrimination against women. Like racist and homophobic jokes, it is important to recognise that sexist jokes reinforce negative stereotypes. Even if offense is not meant, sexist comments contribute to a culture where VAWG is normalised.

### I'm worried that someone I know is being abused, what can I do to help?

If you know or suspect that a family member, friend or work colleague is being abused, it may be difficult to know what to do. You may want to protect your friend or family member but intervening can be dangerous for both you and her. Of course, this does not mean you should ignore it. There are things you can do to help make them and any children safer. If you should witness an assault, you can call the police on 999. For other support options, you can refer to the Haringey VAWG Strategy which has details of local and national support numbers and services.

### Why are men and boys not explicitly included in the violence against women and girls strategy?

Any victim of violence and abuse deserves to access support and help: the VAWG partnership will support anyone presenting regardless of gender – we recognise that men also experience domestic violence and this is explicit in all the work of the team. However, the VAWG strategy reflects that gender based violence is predominately a pattern of behaviour perpetrated by men against women.

The oft-cited statistic for women and men experiencing abuse is that one in four women and one in six men will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime<sup>6</sup>. This figure has led to some organisations positing that domestic violence affects nearly as many men as women. However, new analysis of the data from the Crime Survey<sup>7</sup> has shown that once the cap on repeat incidences<sup>8</sup> is removed, an increase in violent crime is shown, with domestic abuse crimes increasing by 70%, with women being disproportionately affected.

<sup>5</sup> Western Carolina University, (2007) 'Sexist Humor no Laughing Matter, Psychologist says', available at: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/11/071106083038.htm> (last accessed 29.07.16)

<sup>6</sup> This figure is based on the Crime Survey for England and Wales figures. The current figures show an increase to 30% of women but are static for men at 16% (1 in 6). ONS (2014) 'Chapter 4: Intimate Partner Violence and Partner Abuse', in *Crime in England and Wales, Year Ending September 2014*, available at: [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776\\_352362.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_352362.pdf) (last accessed 18.08.15)

<sup>7</sup> Walby, S., Towers, J. and Francis, B. (2014) 'Is the rate of domestic violence decreasing or increasing? Analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales', *Violence and Society*, November 2014, available at: [http://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/72272/4/Violence\\_Society\\_Research\\_briefing\\_1.pdf](http://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/72272/4/Violence_Society_Research_briefing_1.pdf), (last accessed 18.08.2015)

<sup>8</sup> Repeat incidences of violent crime are capped at a maximum of 5 within the survey.

On average two women a week are killed as a result of domestic violence and many more commit suicide as a result of abuse. Women are more likely murdered due to domestic violence than any other form of murder: around 120 women and 30 men are killed annually as a result of domestic violence. Female victims are more likely than male victims to have been acquainted with the principal suspect (75% and 49% respectively). Female victims are far more likely than male victims to be killed by a partner or ex-partner (45% and 4% respectively) and less likely to be killed by a stranger (11% compared with 35%).<sup>9</sup> The same study found that all but one of the female partner/ex-partner homicide victims were killed by a male suspect, whereas among men, around a third of partner/ex-partner homicide were killed by a male suspect. Among other adult homicides, 96% of male and 87% of female victims aged 16 or over were killed by a male suspect.

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<sup>9</sup> ONS, *Op. Cit.*, Footnote 1, Chapter 2: Homicide