

Research briefing: Gendered violence and victimisation

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Introduction

The most recent data from the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey suggests that the risks of violent victimisation are highest for those living in deprived communities and that victims of repeated incidences of violence account for the majority of non-sexual physical violence reported. In response to these patterns, the Scottish Government commissioned qualitative research to better understand repeat violent victimisation. This briefing paper summarises key findings from the research relating to gendered violence, i.e., the different experiences (and gender-specific needs) of women and men.

Box 1.

Repeat Violence in Scotland: A qualitative approach

The research involved in-depth, qualitative interviews with people with lived and living experience of repeat violence (n=62), alongside shorter, semi-structured interviews with community stakeholders (n=33). To provide important contextual data on communities and services, this primary data collection was centred in distinct, geographically defined communities: Urban, Town and Rural areas characterised by high levels of deprivation and violent victimisation. Most lived-experience participants were recruited via third-sector organisations; however, we employed lived-experience research assistants to assist in recruitment and interviewing as a means of reaching individuals who were not accessing services and who might not usually participate in research. Our sample included people experiencing homelessness, people in recovery from addiction, and people with convictions, many of whom did not consider themselves to be victims (or want to be identified as such).

The interview topic guide steered the discussion towards repeated experiences of non-sexual physical violent victimisation, but these experiences were also often inextricably linked to childhood experiences of neglect and abuse, institutional violence, domestic abuse, sexual violence, the perpetration of violence, and involvement in the drug economy. Interviews also explored participants' experiences and views on reporting violence and accessing support services.

More information on the research design of the study can be found in Chapter 2 of the final report.

Gendered experiences of repeat violence

In the context of violence prevention, gendered analyses primarily focus on men's violence against women and girls. Such analyses demonstrate that women are the primary victims of violence in the home and within intimate relationships and are most likely to be sexually victimised. In terms of violence within the community and in public spaces, it is men who are most likely to be victims of other men's violence. Such violence tends not to be understood in gendered terms, meaning the links between men's violence against women and men's violence against men are left unaddressed.

Box 2.

Interpersonal repeat violent victimisation

The definition and conceptualisation of interpersonal repeat violent victimisation (RVV) is contested. Interpersonal violence refers to violence between individuals, often subdivided into community violence and violence against women and girls, including domestic abuse. These two forms of interpersonal violence are often studied separately, using divergent theoretical and methodological approaches. Mainstream research on RVV is largely quantitative in orientation, counting recurrent incidences of the same type of violent offence against the same target and identifying risk factors that make some people more prone to victimisation than others. Feminist research on men's violence against women and girls more often draws on qualitative methods to explore experiences of overlapping and intersecting forms of violence, conceptualising repeat physical violence as part of a process of coercive control located within a context of gendered inequality and norms.

Building on these insights, the repeat violence study adopted a qualitative approach to unpack patterns of RVV evident in official statistics on non-sexual violence in Scotland. Unlike survey research, which asks respondents to self-report the number of incidents they have experienced over a specified period, typically the previous 12 months, the research acknowledged the impact of repeat violence and associated trauma on memory, imposing no time limit on participants' experiences. As a result, whilst we invited participants to reflect on recent experiences of physical violence, they also often related experiences of other forms of violence, experienced across the life course.

The research confirmed gender-based patterns of repeat violence associated with gendered power relations and cultural beliefs attached to perpetrators and victims. Most of the men and women we interviewed had both perpetrated violence and been on the receiving end of violence, though men were more likely to identify themselves as perpetrators and women as victims. Men had typically engaged in more persistent and more serious forms of interpersonal physical violence and were more commonly the victims of such violence in community contexts. Women experienced more sexual violence, all of which was perpetrated by men. A minority of men and a majority of women shared experiences of physically violent victimisation within the context of intimate relationships, with physical violence perpetrated by men generally more persistent, more serious, and more often accompanied by coercive control. For example:

He'd be like, 'I'm in the flat and you're not here', like, 'You're out with some other man'. I'd be like, 'I'm sat in the flat!' Like gas-lighting and all that type of stuff [...] waiting for him to come home and batter me. [...]

It just became more and more regular and it's interesting when you think about repeated acts of violence cos you can't remember them, like they feel really blurry. [...] He held a hot iron up to my face. Or I remember when I was in the bath and he was punching me and then he put my head in the bath. It used to happen quite often in small ways, like being shoved around and hit but like, you know, there's those big ones that stick in your head.

(30-year-old woman, West Urban)

Though we did not ask participants directly, more than half of our lived experience sample recounted witnessing violence within their childhood home, usually domestic abuse perpetrated by fathers or stepfathers against mothers or siblings.

Box 3. Experiences of repeat violence: A typology

Most participants experienced a range of different forms of violence across the life course. These were described as overlapping and co-constituted, emphasising an understanding of repeat violence as a dynamic process, wherein diverse forms of violence inform, transform and amplify one another.

We distinguished between three groups or 'clusters' of lived experience:

Unsettled lives: Comprising men and women aged 25 to 59 years, many of these participants were currently homeless or living in supported accommodation and in recovery from addiction, experiencing deep poverty. They reported the most persistent patterns of repeat violence across the life course, often beginning with childhood experiences of abuse, with men reporting more physical violence and women reporting more sexual violence. Their most recent experiences of repeat violence were usually related to the drug economy, though domestic violence was also frequently discussed.

Mutual violence: Mostly men, aged 16 to 44 years, living in social housing, this cluster of participants was predominantly involved in violence between young people in the community, tit-for-tat neighbour disputes, or violence in or around the night-time economy. Such violence was described as 'recreational', fuelled by excessive amounts of alcohol, or as an informal form of dispute resolution. Despite receiving serious injuries this group were resistant to thinking of themselves as victims, often presenting their violence as 'mutual combat'.

Intermittent victimisation: Aged 25 to 44 years, this group of participants was disproportionately female. Most repeat violence experienced was either (a) domestic or sexual abuse confined to one relationship or (b) multiple, unrelated incidents of sexual and/or physical violence usually starting in their teens and mostly perpetrated by peers, acquaintances, or strangers. Victims of intermittent violence reported alcohol and drug problems or recreational substance use, commonly presented as a means of coping with victimisation.

Gendered understandings of repeat violence

Somebody was in the street, and he hit his girlfriend and my girlfriend went to ask if she was alright and he started shouting at my girlfriend and that was it. And that's just simply cos he called my girlfriend a name and I didn't like it. But the way I see it, if somebody calls my girlfriend a name and I don't deal with it and people find out, they'll start treating my girlfriend like [rubbish], so I had to go down and deal with it. He went home with a sore face.

(20-year-old man, East Urban)

The impact of gender was also evident in participants' understandings of repeat violence. Across our participant groups, both stakeholders and people with lived experience, men and women, were most likely to associate 'repeat violent victimisation' with men's violence against women and children, which was widely condemned. Men's violence against other men, however, tended to be minimised, normalised through reference to gendered cultural beliefs.

The prevailing models of masculinity associated with the communities in which participants grew up included the expectation to be 'tough' and 'strong', appear in control, take risks, and not seek help. There was a general sense that, for men, violence was a culturally sanctioned practice, justifiable in certain situations, and even necessary. Participants often referred to notions of respect, reputation and in/justice, the need to stand up for yourself and protect vulnerable others – and having been taught this explicitly by their parents as they were growing up. Living up to these expectations was an ongoing battle, especially for young men, creating chronic stress and involving them in dangerous situations, thereby increasing their likelihood of violent victimisation.

Gendered experiences of accessing support

It's very difficult to break down the walls, because of that male pride that 'I don't ask for support' [...] The woman sometimes is really strong and wanting to fight the criminal justice system and get an answer, get an outcome. And that takes out so much energy which then impacts on health. Whereas the male becomes really withdrawn.

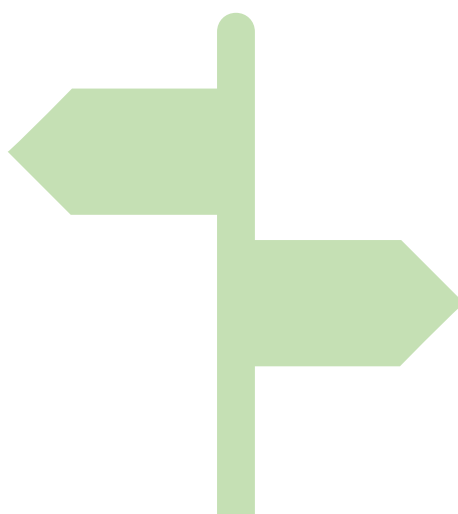
(Victim support worker, West Urban)

Masculine gender norms also acted as barriers to men accessing victim support. Because men in our sample were typically socialised to be autonomous and avoid the display of vulnerable emotions, they were often reluctant to identify themselves as victims or seek victim support. That said, where participants were able to distance themselves from vulnerability, for example, because they were now in a 'safe space' having 'moved on' from the circumstances being recounted, there was more willingness to frame their experiences in terms of victimisation, sometimes drawing on knowledge about 'adverse childhood experiences' and 'trauma' to make sense of difficult family backgrounds and experiences growing up. Many of those who perpetrated violence attributed their own violent behaviour to experiences of childhood physical and sexual abuse and the need to project an image of 'hardness' or invulnerability to protect themselves from further victimisation.

The stakeholders we interviewed expressed similar reservations about the use of word 'victim' to refer to the men they worked with, despite acknowledging the injuries many men had experienced. Stakeholders involved in providing support to men with experiences of criminal justice involvement, homelessness, and drug use tended to be more attuned to the emotional and practical victim support needs of men, but again the emphasis was on

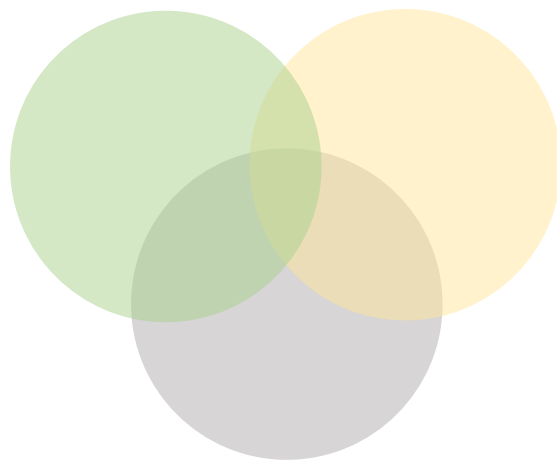
childhood trauma rather than ongoing adult victimisation (which tended to be normalised). These stakeholders felt ill-equipped to deal with men's victimisation and identified a lack of onward referral services tailored to men's needs.

Men that we spoke to generally said that they would prefer to deal with issues themselves rather than report to the police. Women, especially victims of violence domestic abuse and sexual violence, were more likely to consider reporting their experiences to the criminal justice system, however, their experiences of doing so were overwhelmingly negative. In most of the examples described to us, women said that they felt that were not believed or taken seriously, and this had an impact on their propensity to report further victimisation. These participants often felt let down by the outcome or the process, and this was sometimes linked to a sense that their identity and/or actions had been discredited, resulting in secondary victimisation. Women who were victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence also often faced long delays in accessing specialist support – and were sometimes excluded from services due to their homeless status or substance use.



Gender and intersecting inequalities

Across the sample, there was a strong sense that participants were reluctant to approach victim services, or regretted reporting, because they felt that they were not entirely 'innocent victims' or 'not enough of a victim', a feeling linked to stigma and internalised disadvantage. This points to the significance of intersecting inequalities and identities on men's and women's experiences of repeat violence. The majority of our participants lived in communities characterised by high levels of deprivation. Faced with limited resources, physical violence offered a culturally sanctioned means to achieve masculinity. Within these communities, it was the most marginalised men and women who were most likely to be victims of violence, including disabled people, people who use drugs or alcohol and people in emergency or precarious accommodation (including asylum seekers and refugees). Marginalised women and girls faced additional forms of violence, notably sexual violence and exploitation. They also faced additional barriers to escaping violence and exploitation, for example, financial disadvantages related to economic abuse by the perpetrator.



Gendered connections between different forms of violence

It's mainly women who are victims of domestic abuse. There seems to be this history of trauma, even from childhood. There's been maybe domestic violence in the family, there's been possibly sexual abuse, childhood abuse. Then they get into relationships, one after the other, that's a person who's not looking after them as they should. They move from one bad relationship to the next.

(Victim support worker, West Urban)

The research supported a feminist understanding of repeat violence as a dynamic process, in which different forms and contexts of violence interact and reinforce one another, in so doing highlighting the links between men's violence against women and men's violence towards other men. Early experiences of violence in the home were described as having a profound and long-lasting impact on participants' sense of self and relationships with others. This violence was highly gendered and thus appeared to play a pivotal role in participants' understandings of what it means to be a man or a woman, as well as influencing their expectations and experiences of intimate relationships as an adult. These understandings and experiences were reinforced by dominant norms and gender relations within their communities – evident in descriptions of violence between young people, violence in the night-time economy, and neighbour disputes – as well as institutional responses to men's and women's experiences of victimisation. This suggests we cannot prevent community violence without also understanding and addressing violence against women and girls, including domestic abuse and sexual violence. It also requires we approach men's violence towards other men as a gendered phenomenon, acknowledging that gender inequality also harms men and boys.

