

Guide 5

The impact on children



Iùl 5

A' Bhuaidh air Clann

Introduction

Children and young people are directly affected by Violence Against Women. It is important to recognise that the biggest risk factor to experiencing any of the forms of Violence Against Women is being born female. Girls are particularly at risk from directly experiencing a number of forms of abuse from birth. Whilst both girls and boys can experience child sexual abuse, some girls are also at risk from Female Genital Mutilation, and at a significantly increased risk, compared with boys, from forced and child marriages, sexual harassment, prostitution and pornography and, as they grow older, rape and sexual abuse from their peers.

Impact of VAW on children

The realities are that some women who have been raped become pregnant as a result; pregnancy is a recognised 'trigger' for domestic abuse; and many children are sexually abused by men known to them, including their fathers, step-fathers, uncles,

brothers or grandfathers.

It is also important to recognise the impact that having a mum, other close family member or family friend who has experienced gender based violence can have on a child or young person. Whatever form of violence against women they hear, witness or are involved in, they too can experience a range of impacts. Their experiences may include:

- Being aware of the abuse – seeing it or hearing it;
- Trying to keep other children safe during incidents of violence;
- Intervening to protect the abused person;
- Being told they are the cause of the abuse or that they wanted it to happen/asked for it;
- Being directly physically, sexually and/or verbally abused;
- Have toys or pets destroyed;
- Being told that the abuse is a secret and being silenced;
- Being forced to watch the abuse/confirm the abuse is justified;

- Being forced to watch child or adult pornography;
- Abuser may force them to hit/beat/spit/kick the abused person;
- Abuser may give rewards (affection, outings, etc) for abuse of the woman;
- Being told they will be taken away;
- Being told that their mother/other family member will be killed or seriously hurt if they tell about the abuse.

Domestic abuse and children and young people

It is, nevertheless, not necessary for children and young people to be involved in, directly witness, or be subject to abuse to be adversely affected by it. Violence Against Women can profoundly disrupt a child's stability and nurturing environment and affect their well-being. Most children are very sensitive to the reactions and feelings of the adults around them. Young children, due to their stage of development, have very

concrete ways of understanding the world, believing that everything that happens is a result of what they have done. This can have a profound impact on their sense of self if they feel they are to blame for bad things happening at home. They can often resolve to try and fix the situation or stop the abuse from happening.

Children can develop a profound self of shame, belief that they are bad or unlovable. This can sometimes result in a change in their behaviour with children either becoming angry or aggressive or withdrawn and unconfident.

Children and young people in Highland have told us about their worries resulting from living with domestic abuse. These include:

- If he comes back who will protect us?
- Being judged by everyone in the village.
- Getting into trouble.
- Not being able to do my exams.
- Having a heart attack due to all the panic attacks.

- Being by myself.
- Having to see Dad, I'm scared of him.
- Having to move, again.

Domestic abuse also affects unborn children. Impacts may include broken bones of the foetus, miscarriages, and still births. A lot of research has gone into domestic abuse in pregnancy. Below are some of the findings:

- Almost a third of abuse begins in pregnancy
- Existing abuse often intensifies during pregnancy
- One in five midwives knows at least one of her expectant mothers is experiencing domestic abuse
- Domestic abuse during pregnancy is more common than pre-eclampsia, gestational diabetes and twin pregnancies
- Men perpetrating domestic abuse against their partner is the biggest killer of unborn babies
- Women experiencing domestic abuse

have 50% higher incidence of miscarriage and still birth than women not experiencing abuse.

Source: Royal College of Midwives (2009) Position Statement - Domestic Abuse.

Effects of VAW on children and young people

The vast majority of children and young people affected by abuse recover from their experiences. Some, however, will have difficulties and may require more intensive and specialist support over longer periods of time. It is important that the needs of children and young people are correctly identified so they can be met. Workers should be aware of the range of supports, interventions and services in Highland, specifically designed to help children recover from abuse and trauma. It is also important to remember that young children often cannot verbally tell us how they are feeling and what they need, but often do so by their behaviour or play.

Children often hide abuse in the family for a number of reasons. Often they do not

realise that it is not normal or they do not wish to get either parent into trouble. Children often have a strong sense of loyalty to their parents and struggle with mixed feelings of not wanting the abuse to recur but being frightened of being removed from their family. Children frequently come to the attention of professionals at a point where the severity and length of exposure to abuse has compromised the non-abusing parent's ability to nurture and care for them.

Early identification and support is the best way to protect the adult and child, nevertheless, it is understandable that those affected are reticent to come forward, e.g. reprisals from the perpetrator, fear of not being believed, and concern that children may be removed. We know that all forms of Violence Against Women are under-reported to the police. The best way to keep both children and the non-abusive parent safe is to focus on the early identification, assessment and intervention through skilled and attentive staff in universal services.

VAW and child protection

All staff should be aware of welfare and protection issues for children affected by Violence Against Women. Where it is apparent that a child is being affected by Violence Against Women a child concern form should be submitted to the child's 'Named Person', in accordance with the Highland Practice Model. Where the child has sustained harm or is at significant risk of harm, child protection procedures must be followed.

Child Concern forms, 'Highland Practice Model' and 'Inter-agency Guidelines to Protect Children and Young People in Highland' can all be located at:

www.forthighlandschildren.org

If in doubt, consult your Child Protection Advisor.

Protective and risk factors

The harmful effects that violence against women has on children should be taken seriously. However, it should be noted that some children living with violence against women are 'doing as well' as children who are not. Why some children cope better than others is often explained by the concept of 'resilience'.

Resilience is the idea that children have different capacities that allow someone to overcome the negative effects of an adversity. 'Protective factors' can help build children's resilience, while 'risk factors' can reduce it.

The severity of abuse and length of time that children are exposed to it are important risk factors for children's resilience

Mothers play an important role in children's resilience. Hughes et al found that children's resilience may be linked to the mental health of their mothers.

Other factors that have been found to support children's resilience include support provided by their family, friends and community and by having a supportive relationship with an adult family member.

Children and young people in Highland have told us what responses from service providers helps. This includes:

- Having someone they can speak to about what has happened and them being believed.
- Being treated as an individual – understanding that their experience may be different from siblings.
- Getting support from staff who understand the dynamics of domestic abuse.

