

Probation officers' accounts of practice with women convicted of intimate partner violence (IPV) towards men

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to understand how the attitudes of probation officers influence their working practices towards women convicted of IPV against male partners.

The study is based on semi structured interviews with twelve officers each of whom had at least one relevant service-user case. The interviews focussed on three key areas:

- What factors do officers assess to be linked to the perpetration of IPV by women towards men?
- What are the attitudes of officers towards such women and specifically, disclosures that offences are linked to victimisation from partners?
- What work are officers able to complete with such women?

Findings

- The vast majority of women disclosed that their offences had been committed in the context of abuse from partners. Practitioners accepted self-reports about this, even where abuse could not be corroborated and/or the accounts differed to the 'official' version of events.
- Women were portrayed as honest about their perpetration of IPV, they were said to have taken responsibility and rarely externalised blame onto partners.
- Responses suggested that practitioners may have been predisposed to viewing women as victims and men as perpetrators. When asked to make generalisations, the majority thought women perpetrate IPV due to being victims themselves.
- Although it was considered important to address support and safety issues when women disclosed being victims, many practitioners lacked the confidence in their skills or knowledge to deal with this themselves.
- Many practitioners were unaware of the existence of the Male Safety Officer (an officer who can provide advice and assistance to men who have been victims of domestic violence).
- Many women referred to past trauma or were thought to suffer psychological disturbance. Practitioners agreed that these matters were highly pertinent.. Emotional rather than behavioural explanations were emphasised as triggering offences.
- Practitioners often referred to the personal emotional impact of this work. Many advocated attendance at 'clinical supervision' with a psychologist or psychotherapist, line management supervision or discussion with colleagues.

Recommendations

Research is required to identify methods that are effective at reducing women's risk of perpetrating IPV. Specific practice guidelines are required about how women's victimisation, emotional trauma or other behavioural factors should be addressed by practitioners.

- Women who have perpetrated IPV should be allocated to work with officers who have received additional training in this area and where possible, to those who have gained experience in such work. Probation areas should consider allocation based on offence type, rather than location.
- Officers working with women who perpetrate IPV require training in working with domestic violence victims; alternatively, a forum for them to consult with specialist victims' workers is required.
- Women who perpetrate IPV often present with emotionally complex and high support needs. Facilitating women's access to counselling or training officers in therapeutic approaches should be considered.
- Officers who work with women convicted of IPV often require emotional support. Clinical supervision, regular line management supervision and/or forums to consult with colleagues should be available.
- Access to a Male Safety Officer should be offered to all male victims.
- Probation areas should develop policies for working with women who perpetrate IPV.