

Research Paper

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

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Executive Summary

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Background

Comparatively little research has been conducted about the motivations and risk factors associated with intimate partner violence (IPV) perpetrated by women when contrasted to that of men (Miller and Melloy, 2006; Dutton, Nicholls and Spidel, 2005; Dowd, 2008; Dobash and Dobash, 2004). Few studies have investigated the effectiveness of interventions delivered to women convicted for IPV (Dowd, 2008) and virtually nothing is known about the experiences of probation officers working in this field (Miller and Melloy, 2006). This study arose from observations I made working as a Male Safety Officer for the probation service, a role which offered support to men whose partners were convicted for offences of IPV towards them: very few probation officers made referrals and when they did, the men were frequently described as the 'real' or 'primary' perpetrator. This exploratory study investigates the reasons for this, through interviews with probation officers' about their attitudes towards women convicted of IPV and how these impacted their work; it reveals insights about how participants dealt with two issues with which they were frequently confronted: women who reported perpetrating offences within the context of experiencing violence from partners and the high number who referred to experiences of trauma and psychological disturbance.

Research Questions and Aim:

Three research questions framed the design of this study:

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

The overall aim of the study was:

To understand how the attitudes of probation officers towards women convicted for IPV influence working practices.

Methodology

I undertook semi-structured interviews with 12 probation officers who had each worked with at least one relevant service-user. Data was also retrieved from the probation assessment system, OASYS, for the past 3 years. I carried out a thematic analysis of interview transcripts, using principles of thematic analysis outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2006).

Key Findings – OASYS Data

OASYS assessments for 3 years indicated approximately 50 women per year identified as perpetrators of domestic violence; therefore only a tiny proportion of male victims were referred to the Male Safety Officer. Almost 70% of these women were also identified as victims of domestic abuse. Practically all assessments were completed by different officers, indicating that most had negligible experience of working with these service-users.

Key Findings – Thematic Analysis

- The vast majority of service-users disclosed perpetrating offences within the context of experiencing abuse from their partners. Participants conveyed strong opinions about accepting the relevance of victimisation as a relevant trigger to the perpetration of these women's offences, even where histories of abuse could not be corroborated and although service-users' accounts differed to the 'official' version of events.
- Service-users were portrayed as honest and frank about their perpetration of IPV; they were said to have taken responsibility and rarely externalised blame onto partners, despite the context of victimisation to which many referred.
- Responses suggested many participants may have been predisposed to viewing women as victims and men as perpetrators: participants resisted describing men as victims, often speculating that men's actions were at the root of women's offences and rarely referred to taking steps to promote his safety, such as referring to the probation male safety officer. When asked to make generalisations about the reasons women perpetrate IPV or their reaction to the phrase 'female domestic abuse perpetrator', most responses referred to women's victimisation. Many said they would also treat self-reports by men and women about experiencing violence from partners very differently. Although most said they were aware of the potential influence of stereotypes, more experienced practitioners took a more nuanced approach and resisted making generalisations in response to these questions.

- Every participant considered it important to take steps to promote service-users' safety when victimisation was disclosed; this was usually achieved through making referrals to other agencies. Many also expressed a lack of confidence, however, about whether they had adequate skills or knowledge to appropriately deal with women's victimisation.
- A high proportion of service-users referred to past trauma or were thought to suffer psychological disturbance; participants expressed agreement that these matters were highly pertinent to their perpetration of IPV. Emotional rather than behavioural explanations were emphasised as triggering offences.
- Service-users were often described as requiring high levels of support. However a high number of participants conveyed a lack of confidence, or a lack of time, in addressing complex support needs. They often worked hard to refer women to specialist resources or expressed frustration if these were not readily available.
- Participants frequently described a personal emotional impact as a result of this work. Many advocated attendance at 'clinical supervision' (where practitioners consult with a psychologist/psychotherapist), line management supervision or discussion with colleagues to help them to deal with emotionally difficult experiences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Participants in this study voiced strong opinions about linking women's experiences of victimisation and/or a history of trauma and psychological disturbance to their perpetration of IPV; as a result, they took steps to assist service-users to address these factors through their work. However, a number encountered challenges when delivering such work themselves. From their accounts in interviews, discussing these factors, rather than addressing other potential behavioural triggers to offences, often appeared to dominate participants' supervisory approaches; research, however, is unequivocal about the factors to be addressed. It has been suggested that an individualised approach is therefore required, based on a comprehensive assessment comprising information from a range of sources and that interviews with and interventions relating to both partners is required (Dowd, 2008; Dutton *et al.*, 2005; McMahon and Pence, 2003; Hamberger and Guse, 2002); the 'voice' of the male victims, however, was notably absent from participants' accounts.

Through a discussion of these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recommendation 1: More research is required to identify methods that are effective at reducing women's risk of perpetrating IPV. In particular, more specific practice guidelines are required about how and to what extent, women's victimisation, emotional trauma or other behavioural factors should be addressed by practitioners.

Recommendation 2: Women who have perpetrated IPV should be allocated to work with probation officers who have received additional training in this area and where possible, to officers who have gained experience in such work. Probation areas should consider allocating these service-users to officers based on offence type, rather than geographical location.

Recommendation 3: Probation 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. The co-location of such officers in women's centres where both officers and service-users can more readily access services appears to be indicated.

Recommendation 4: Women who perpetrate IPV often present with emotionally complex and high support needs. Facilitating women's access to counselling or training probation officers in therapeutic approaches may help them to feel more confident.

Recommendation 5: Probation officers who work with women convicted of IPV often require emotional support; clinical supervision, regular line management supervision and forums to consult with colleagues should be offered to these officers.

Recommendation 6: Access to a Male Safety Officer should be offered to all male victims and referrals should not be a matter of personal choice of individual officers.

Recommendation 7: Probation areas should develop policies for working with women who perpetrate IPV so that practitioners can feel more appropriately guided in their work.

ENDS