

Exchange of good practices on gender equality

Measures to fight
violence against women
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Discussion Paper - Ireland

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Domestic Violence Perpetrator Intervention Programmes

John Devaney
Queen's University Belfast

1. Introduction

Whilst domestic violence is not a new phenomenon the past thirty years has seen increasing public awareness and a growing political consensus that something needs to be done, even if what should be done is less clear. At both national and international levels governments in most industrialised nations have developed and ratified a range of policy initiatives and strategies designed to reduce the incidence and prevalence of domestic violence.

Domestic violence is now widely acknowledged as being a significant social, health and legal issue. At a transnational level the European Commission and the Council of Europe have devoted considerable time and money to discussing the issue of domestic violence and agreeing how it should be tackled. This has filtered down to national governments, with most countries having strategies designed to tackle domestic violence at both a societal and individual level. These strategies typically consist of three complementary strands:

- to introduce measures to prevent domestic violence occurring in the first instance or to limit its reoccurrence;
- where domestic violence does occur, to ensure that victims receive prompt and comprehensive support; and,
- to ensure that those who perpetrate domestic violence are held to account for their behaviour.

Whilst it is now recognised that domestic violence covers abuse across genders, regardless of age, ethnicity or sexuality, it is also broadly accepted that men are more likely to be perpetrators of violence, and that women tend to suffer more severe physical assaults over a longer period of time (Allen, 2011). This discussion paper focuses primarily on male perpetrated violence against women, although the points raised are likely to have wider applicability.

In May 2011 the Council of Europe adopted a Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Building upon earlier work in the form of pronouncements and strategies, this legally binding instrument created a comprehensive legal framework to combat discrimination and violence against women in the European region through prevention, protection, prosecution, and victim support. A key objective has been to reduce both the prevalence and

incidence of domestic violence through effective preventive measures, and a robust response in respect of both victims and perpetrators to reduce the frequency of recidivism.

2. Accountability

For over thirty years, the public policy response to the problem of domestic violence has been framed by some activists as the socially sanctioned dominance of women by men, a discourse reflected in the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2011):

“Recognising that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women;

Recognising the structural nature of violence against women as gender-based violence, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.”

Whilst our increasing understanding of domestic violence within same sex relationships and violence perpetrated by women against men have challenged the concept of patriarchy as an all-encompassing and explanatory framework, this view of patriarchy as the root cause of domestic violence underpins a practice and policy paradigm that has dominated the legal, regulatory and policy discourse of most western nations over this thirty year period (Dutton and Corvo, 2006).

As noted by Romito (2008, p. 40) there is a risk of presenting feminism ‘...as though it were a monolithic movement or thought’, but for the purposes of this paper I will focus on a set of collective ideas that inform our understanding of domestic violence through this lens. Feminist constructions of domestic violence are grounded on a core set of beliefs that domestic violence is common, that it is based in gender inequality and oppression of women, and that it affects women of all social standings, effectively cutting across stratifications of ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Nixon and Humphreys, 2010). It has been convincingly argued that this straightforward message, which is easily conveyed and unambiguous, has transformed domestic violence from a private concern into a significant and widely recognised public issue that has considerable resonance outside the feminist movement itself, within the spheres of public awareness, and policy and service provision (Weldon 2002).

Behind the abusive acts can lie men’s need for power and control in their intimate relationships – that is, being in charge and getting their own way. These behaviours and beliefs are underpinned by a set of ideas about how the world should operate, creating high expectations for the behaviour of one’s partner. These expectations

are decisively imposed on others, and when they are not met create extreme frustration and violence.

As Gondolf (2012, p21) notes:

“Men have plenty of reinforcement for these expectations, and aggression to enact them. They learn then from the examples of their fathers, their peers, and television and movie characters, as well as from watching or playing sports, and military experience.”

This is further reinforced by societal structures that preference men more widely in society. Therefore responding to and intervening effectively with domestic violence requires change at both an individual and societal level.

There is an over-riding discourse that perpetrators (and in particular male perpetrators) must be held accountable for this behaviour, and that this accountability should be exercised through the criminal justice system. There is no doubt that many behaviours which fall under the definition of domestic violence are indeed criminal acts, and for too long society has chosen not to perceive them in this way. In viewing domestic violence from this perspective there is a need to ensure that a strong message is conveyed that domestic violence is socially unacceptable, and that just as there are negative consequences for victims as a result of experiencing violence and abuse, so too should there be negative consequences for perpetrators. This approach is intended to have a prophylactic benefit in discouraging some potential perpetrators from engaging in this behaviour in the first instance, but the main aim is to ensure that individuals who have acted abusively towards their current or former partner are less inclined to behave in the same way in the future.

The consequences of being violent or abusive should be both intrinsic, in the form of shame for behaving in such a way, and extrinsic, in the very public sanction of such acts. In this discourse accountability is synonymous with being held to account by the State, rather than men taking responsibility for their own behaviour. The underlying assumption is that most men will not take responsibility for their behaviour without an extrinsic motivator, and in the European context this has increasingly been one in favour of criminal justice intervention. These interventions have therefore been a combination of prosecution and rehabilitation through the use of perpetrator programmes. Whilst there is strong evidence to indicate that prosecution only occurs for a small proportion of individuals, a larger proportion of perpetrators are referred for therapeutic work by the courts, other professionals or through self-referral (Hamilton et al., in press).

In order to help protect current and potential future victims, work to tackle domestic violence needs to include a focus on addressing the violent and abusive behaviour of those who perpetrate it. There are currently very few avenues of practical support - especially for perpetrators who recognise they have a problem and would like to change their behaviour (Stanley et al., 2011), and for young people who perpetrate

violence in their relationships (Barter et al., 2009) to challenge their violent behaviour before it becomes entrenched.

In general, most perpetrators of domestic violence never, or only infrequently, come into contact with the police, let alone the courts. The police come to know of less than a quarter of the worst cases of domestic violence, and of those incidents reported, only about a quarter result in arrest. Convictions are even lower. Very few perpetrators have thus had the opportunity to be referred to a perpetrator programme, as the majority of programmes are only available for perpetrators who have been convicted of a domestic violence offence (Buzawa et al., 2012; Crown Prosecution Service, 2012).

The remainder of this paper looks at the role of perpetrator programmes in Ireland, and the international research evidence informing this method of intervention.

3. Description of the main elements of good practice

3.1. Background and general policy context of the associated country (Ireland)

In June 2007 the Irish Department of Justice and Equality established Cosc, The National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence with the key responsibility to ensure the delivery of a well co-ordinated "whole of Government" response to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The work of Cosc covers issues relating to domestic and sexual violence against women and men, including older people in the community. It is situated within the Department of Justice and Equality, but was given a remit to address domestic, sexual and gender-based violence from a cross-government perspective rather than solely from that of the justice sector. Cosc's role covers co-ordination across the justice, health, housing, education, family support and community sectors. This work includes close interaction with non-governmental organisations, including those which deliver programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence.

In March 2010 the Irish Government launched "The National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence 2010 – 2014". The overall aim of this work is to reduce the prevalence of these issues and to ensure that the system of prevention and response functions effectively in a co-ordinated manner increasing the understanding of the general public and professional services, supporting victims and ensuring the accountability of offenders. This is given expression through a strategic objective to strengthen measures to deal with those who commit acts of domestic violence by strengthening perpetrator programmes to ensure their greater effectiveness.

Since the publication of the strategy, there have been five periodic reports on the progress in relation to the detail of its implementation and a mid-term review of the strategy found that overall good progress had been made on implementation.

3.2. The goals and target groups of the good practice

Programmes for working with men who perpetrate domestic violence have been in existence in Ireland since the 1980's. Currently there are twelve domestic violence perpetrator programmes delivered through a combination of non-government organisations and the statutory Probation Service.

Domestic violence perpetrator programmes in Ireland are designed to make changes in both cognitive thinking and behaviour with the aim of:

- helping men stop being violent and abusive;
- helping them learn how to relate to their partners in a respectful and equal way;
- showing them non-abusive ways of dealing with difficulties in their relationships and cope with their anger; and,
- keeping their partner safer from further violent and abusive behaviour.

The key priorities of the programmes are:

- a reduction in violent and controlling behaviour by men who complete the programme with their current and/or future female partners and children;
- improved safety for women and children;
- a partnership approach between women's service providers (i.e. women's refuges, domestic violence support services and rape crisis centres) and those working with men;
- improved data on outcomes; and,
- an appropriate community alternative to prison.

Under action 16 of Ireland's National Strategy, Cosc has established a Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programme Committee to support and co-ordinate the work of intervention programmes and to improve their overall performance and outcomes by working towards:

- strengthened co-operation and co-ordination between programmes and other relevant service providers including uniform protocols and procedures;

- improved data to help with understanding who the programmes help and how, as well as research into the outcomes achieved by the programmes; and,
- implementation of the lessons gained from the data collected.

The programmes offer fixed length or rolling programmes of group work with up to twelve men who have used domestic violence against a female partner or ex-partner, and participants are referred or self-refer. The most recent statistics indicate that 373 men were referred to programmes in Ireland, with 283 assessed as being ready to engage with the work. During this period 134 men commenced the work and 87 completed a programme (a 65% completion rate).

The programmes operate through the following stages:

- an initial screening of the individual and an assessment of the risk he poses to others;
- individual work between perpetrators and staff as appropriate for those who pass the initial screening to address specific issues which might impede engagement in a group based intervention; and,
- a group-based intervention programme of 30-36 weeks with up to ten one-to-one sessions if required.

The programmes work with men who have been ordered to attend as part of a court disposal (mandated), as well as men who have voluntarily decided to attend (non-mandated) although most men in this latter category attend at the insistence of children's social services or an ultimatum from their partner. Each man referred undergoes a comprehensive assessment which includes:

- his level of acceptance of responsibility for his behaviour;
- his level of motivation to change;
- his level of cognitive functioning;
- any mental health issues including any contact with mental health services in relation to debilitating depression and borderline personality disorder;
- any addiction problems that he may have and how these are currently managed;
- any other issues that may support or challenge his potential for engaging with the group;
- his family of origin, general levels of violence and his experience of violence/abuse in intimate relationships; and,
- his current level of risk for violence/abuse.

Risk assessments for re-offending by the programme participants are undertaken at the initial assessment, monitored weekly and then reviewed monthly in conjunction with the partner support service.

3.3. The legal and financial provisions to implement good practice

During the 1970s the first intervention programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence started to be developed in the US (Gondolf, 2012). In common with a range of other countries programmes subsequently began to emerge in Ireland initially in the 1980s following or using the values of a self-help approach. By the mid-1990s there was a network of such groups in Ireland and a national coordinating structure (Debbonaire, 2009). In 1997 the Irish government appointed a *Task Force on Violence against Women* and asked that they prepare a report on the current provision for responding to violence against women across Ireland. This report made various recommendations for specific sectors including those delivering perpetrator intervention programmes. The existing groups at that time responded by moving to a different approach, a formal group work programme using cognitive behavioural approaches based on the model developed in Duluth, Minnesota. The programmes are now delivered by paid facilitators and include linked paid support services for women. In the early 2000s, these programmes were extended into other parts of Ireland, increasing the availability of such services.

The Irish Government currently spends approximately €650,000 per annum funding a number of organisations to provide domestic violence perpetrator programmes across Ireland, with a variety of mandated and non-mandated programmes in existence, with the mandate for attendance coming from the courts, partners or spouses or social services. A total of thirteen programmes delivered by three different bodies are currently operating in conjunction with linked contact services for the partners of the men.

An important and core aspect of the programmes is a dedicated partner contact element. Dedicated partner contact worker(s) are contracted by the programme management to work with any partner or ex-partner of the men on the programme who wish to be involved. The most recent data indicates that 117 women were supported in this way over the year. Many of the women have never accessed victim services before. This work informs the programme facilitators of the safety of partners of the men on the programmes and allows them to challenge any man whose behaviour outside the programme is not matching his statements in the programme. The partner contact worker also provides practical support and advice to women in violent/controlling relationships, such as support services that she may wish to access.

3.4. Institutional arrangements and procedures of implementation

The delivery of the programmes is co-ordinated by Cosc through a national Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programme Committee that is made up of the service providers and government officials. As the services are funded by central government it is possible to performance manage services through normal commissioning arrangements. The committee has made significant improvements in standardising the individual programmes, and in supporting services to start collecting and analysing data about the functioning of the programmes. This will start to inform future strategies for assessing the longer term effectiveness of the programmes.

4. Results of good practice and its impact on achieving gender equality

4.1. Improved safety for women and children

The involvement of partner contact workers has improved the ability of programmes to monitor men's compliance with the requirement to refrain from engaging in abusive behaviour. This has resulted in increasing numbers of women and children being safer whilst their partner attends the programme, as evidenced in research studies examining such partner support (Bullock et al., 2010). In addition to providing information on their partner, women are able to access support services in their own right, increasing their understanding of the cycle of abuse and the nature of power and control within abusive relationships. For many of the women this is their first contact with such support services. In accessing these services women are supported to better understand the impact of domestic violence on their children, thus increasing a mother's ability to make informed choices for her children and herself for the future (Stanley, 2011).

A pilot project in one of the programmes in Ireland saw a support group being established for the partners of men on the programme to help them work through their own behaviours and the dynamics of their personal relationships.

A reflection of the work of programmes to improve the safety of women and children is that a representative from the perpetrator programmes now sits on the National Steering Committee on Violence against Women.

4.2. Increased understanding of how programmes work

The establishment of Cosc has resulted in an improved focus on the way that programmes are delivered, and an increased standardisation of approach. Best practice has been shared between programmes that sometimes operated quite

independently of one another. This improved co-ordination has allowed Cosc to explore key issues about how individual programmes work, and how changes introduced by services impact on outcomes. Data being collected to facilitate this work include how men become referred to programmes, how participants are assessed and worked with on the programmes and the gathering of other programme data from each service that aids understanding of current outcomes and possible improved future outcomes.

4.3. Increased capacity to measure effectiveness

It is recognised internationally that the key to measuring the outcomes and effectiveness of domestic violence perpetrator programmes rests on the collection and analysis of robust data about the programme participants, their progress through the programme and subsequent follow up (Akoensi et al. in press). Cosc has implemented a process for support services to aid the gathering of data to map the participant journey through the individual programmes. This has provided a basis for individual programmes to look at issues of participant engagement, and to constructively explore how the delivery of the individual programmes can be developed. In due course these uniform systems will support cross programme comparison and outcome evaluation.

5. Assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of good practice

Internationally, the main form of intervention with perpetrators of domestic violence is group-based programmes, which have a limited evidence base of effectiveness. A systematic review by Smedslund et al. (2011) found that, at best, group-based programmes work for some male perpetrators, in some circumstances, some of the time, but for whom, how and when was still very unclear. Gondolf (2012), a proponent of group-based programmes, has argued that programmes do work, but that we need to better understand what components are likely to work for particular individuals, and for certain groups of offenders. He subscribes to the view that perpetrators of domestic violence are a heterogeneous group, and as such individuals are likely to be differentially responsive to treatment as they have both differing patterns of behaviour and motivations for their behaviour (Emery, 2011).

One of the weaknesses of group-based programmes is that they were originally developed by and have evolved through an ideological perspective on the root causes of domestic violence, rather than an empirical model of intervention development. Unlike other approaches to behavioural change involving, for example, the cessation of smoking or substance use, interventions have been derived primarily from the accounts of those who are the victims of the behaviour, rather than those who cause the behaviour. Whilst victims have a role in informing our understanding of the manifestation of domestic violence, to best understand the

factors causing and sustaining abusive behaviour requires more detailed investigation with the perpetrators of these behaviours.

A recent survey of fifty four programmes for working with perpetrators of domestic violence in nineteen countries across Europe has highlighted that there is a wide disparity in both the approaches to this work, and the robustness of the evidence informing the programme design (Hamilton et al., in press).

The programmes in Ireland have developed significantly over the past thirty years, and, in particular, over the past five years. A key development has been the co-ordination of the approach to the delivery of a range of disparate programmes by three different organisations. In particular Cosc has sought to support the organisations to gather data on a range of process issues as a prelude to starting to develop systems for tracking men's behaviour after the programme finishes to gauge outcomes and programme effectiveness in the longer term. Such approaches are part of an emerging global trend and are also being developed in other European countries such as Norway (Askelund et al., 2012).

6. Main questions and issues for debate at the meeting

6.1. Social Marketing

There is emerging evidence that some men, with the right prompts, may be encouraged to self-refer to programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence (Stanley et al. 2012). The motivation to change amongst this group may be markedly different to those who are referred by the courts, or coerced by social services or partners. There is a need to reduce any perceived stigma associated for these men seeking help, and to ensure that there are services available which can respond to individuals taking personal responsibility for their behaviour change. A key issue for governments is whether resources should be directed towards supporting those men who can be helped to take personal responsibility for their behaviour, compared to holding to account, through the criminal justice system, those who are not prepared to acknowledge the pain and suffering caused by their actions. At present the international evidence indicates that the resource which goes into holding men to account through the criminal justice system is not very effective given the small number of criminal convictions (Carswell, 2006). Only some of this is attributable to the criminal justice process, as many victims state that they want the violence to stop, rather than their relationship to end or their partner prosecuted. These imperatives are often met through the use of orders of the civil courts which attract a lower burden of proof and which do not criminalise the respondent in the eyes of their children etc. Could some of the funding within the criminal justice sector be redirected towards treatment services for men who are self-referring in a genuine effort to change their behaviour?

6.2. Specialisation of Programmes

Programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence have typically been generic, in that they tend to take all individuals referred for assessment with only minor exceptions (such as acute substance misuse or mental illness). Various researchers have developed typologies that group perpetrators by the different types of violent and abusive behaviours, and the intrinsic psychological factors which sustain these behaviours (Emery, 2011). Consideration needs to be given to how these varying presentations may be differentially responsive to current interventions. A key issue for governments is whether this specialisation can be achieved within the existing pool of resources, and whether in the longer term it is a more effective use of services. (Gondolf, 2012).

6.3. Supporting Partners

It is now generally accepted in the literature that in working with perpetrators there should be an associated package of support for the current or former partner of programme participants. The challenge will be in ensuring that the balance is maintained between the funding required to work directly with men, and that available to provide the very important and necessary support to women. If the overall goal is a reduction in the prevalence of domestic violence then both aspects need to be seen as mutually interdependent. Therefore, supporting victims is designed to help women to make more informed choices for both themselves and their children resulting in greater numbers of women taking action to protect themselves. Working with perpetrators similarly reduces the likelihood that some men will commit further acts of abuse towards their existing or future partners. The challenge for governments in the current economic climate is to increase the services to both victims and perpetrators jointly, rather than separately. If services feel that they are in competition for funding then it is less likely that they will develop the type of collaborative working arrangements that have been shown to improve the safety and wellbeing of women and children in the longer term (Devaney, 2008), and reduce rates of recidivism (Buzawa et al, 2012).

6.4. Measuring Outcomes

As noted earlier programmes for perpetrators have a weak evidence base for effectiveness (Smedslund et al., 2011). As stated by various authors and governmental agencies there is a need to agree what outcome should be measured – women's feelings of safety; a reduction in the frequency and/or severity of men's abusive behaviour; or a complete cessation of all violence and abuse. Once agreed there is a need to determine what systems and data are required to provide information about the progress of individuals.

Outcomes can be seen at two levels. On a societal level it is a perfectly appropriate expectation that all forms of domestic violence and abuse are wrong, and that civil

society should strive to bring an end to violence against women and children. However, at an individual level it may be unreasonable to expect that all perpetrators of domestic violence will immediately cease their abusive behaviour as a result of intervention. It may be more realistic to focus on the experience of their partner or ex-partner in relation to whether they feel safer, and whether the abusive behaviour is decreasing in both frequency and severity as a stepping stone to complete cessation. The group nature of the programmes provides a setting where a critical mass can be reached in the group whereby the changes to societal acceptance of domestic violence are passed to the individuals attending even if their initial beliefs supported their use of violence.

If we are to better understand whether and how interventions make a difference this will only be achievable through data being gathered and analysed in a consistent manner within programmes, between services and across countries, which in turn will inform the design and implementation of future, more effective programmes.

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