Domestic violence against women with learning disabilities by non-disabled partners. Is this grooming?

Dr Michelle McCarthy
Reader in Learning Disabilities
Tizard Centre
Overview

- Domestic violence against women with learning disabilities is an under-researched topic, but we are gradually learning more about the forms of abuse they face from ‘partners’.

- A recent study indicated that there are strong parallels between domestic violence, disability hate crime and so-called ‘mate’ crime. This presentation will explore the similarities.
What are we talking about?

- Disability hate crime: “Any incident, which is perceived to be based upon prejudice towards or hatred of the victim because of their disability or so perceived by the victim or any other person”. (CPS 2007)

- ‘Mate crime’ refers to the befriending and grooming of people with learning disabilities, who are perceived by perpetrators to be vulnerable, for the purposes of taking advantage of, exploiting and/or abusing them.
Vulnerability of women with learning disabilities

The kinds of factors perpetrators might exploit are:

- Low self esteem, lack of confidence
- Compliance
- Social isolation
- Desire for companionship and intimacy
- Lack of knowledge about how to leave, where to go, sources of support
- Chaotic /poor parenting histories
- The women’s fears about losing their children
Interviews - Biographical Details

15 women with mild and moderate learning disabilities

- Age range: 20-67
- Ethnicity: 12 White British
  3 Bangladeshi / Indian
- Relationship status: Married-6
  Not married- 9
- Had children: Yes – 7,
  No- 8
- Location: Kent and South East /East London
Summary of main findings

- The violence was severe, frequent and lasted for long periods. Physical violence during pregnancy was common.
- Abuse was physical, emotional, psychological, verbal, sexual and financial.
- High levels of coercive control was common to all but one of our sample. The deliberate isolation of the women from their family, friends and support was universal.
- Abuse often continued after the end of the relationship
Perpetrator issues

The violent partners generally did not have learning disabilities themselves but did tend to:

- have mental health problems, and/ or drug and alcohol dependency ( minority had serious physical health problems too)
- be jealous and manipulative
- make threats of self-harm/suicide/ murder (inc. of children)
- have a history of abusing previous partners/children,
- be cruel to animals
- have criminal records /be known to Police already
Common pattern of relationship formation

The men would move into the women’s flats at a very early stage in the relationship. Why?

- **Circumstance** “I was going to leave him, then I found out I was pregnant. I thought ‘I can’t now’. None of my family could help me, so I had to stay…and he was thrilled when he found out I was pregnant. I thought I was too young [aged 15].”

- **Manipulation** “After I started seeing him, he moved in right away, because he was homeless...he kept trying to get me to put his name on the tenancy.”

- **Being easily led** “I let people walk all over me”
  “Like the idiot I am, he gets his foot in the door”

- **Naivety** “He organised the wedding behind my back. I couldn’t say no as he had booked the registry office.”
Why think of this as ‘grooming’ and not just Domestic Violence?

Common features of grooming:

- Perpetrators deliberately establish the relationship for their sole benefit, to the detriment of the victim
- Clear intent to exploit a vulnerable adult
- Complete indifference to their suffering
- In mate crime the ‘ruse’ is friendship
- In domestic violence the ‘ruse’ is love/intimate relationship
Why are women with learning disabilities vulnerable to grooming?

- The learning disability itself
- They have material resources that the perpetrators want (benefit money and somewhere to live)
- They are likely to be socially isolated already
- Their desire for a relationship with a non-disabled person
- The perpetrator may already know something about their difficult family background, their history of abuse
- Some of the women are single parents
Vulnerability of the children of women with learning disabilities to abuse by partners

- All the children were victims themselves by virtue of witnessing domestic violence against their mothers


- Domestic violence makes the removal of children from their mothers with learning disabilities even more likely than it already is
Do labels matter?

- Generally, adult women in violent relationships are expected to exert their autonomy and make decisions to reduce risks to themselves and their children.
- But we understand that vulnerable adults who have been groomed are often unable to exert autonomy.
- Therefore, agents of the State (police, health and social care professionals) need to be more proactive in trying to protect them.
Publications

- McCarthy, M., Hunt, S. and Milne-Skillman, K. (2017) "‘I know it was every week, but I can’t be sure if it was every day’: domestic violence and women with learning disabilities." *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 30,2, 269–282.


Contact details

Dr Michelle McCarthy
M.McCarthy@kent.ac.uk
01227 829779

This presentation presents independent research commissioned/funded by the NIHR School for Social Care Research. The views expressed in it are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR School for Social Care Research or the Department of Health, NIHR or NHS.