

Anti-Poverty Spotlight: Equality for Women

As part of our anti-poverty campaign, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) will be focusing on a different part of social work practice and the impact of poverty.

1. Background

Your gender should not impact your finances compared to people of other genders or identities, but we know that this is not always the case.

Despite equal pay legislation, there is still a gender pay gap. These socio-economic barriers that women face make it more difficult for women to flee abusive relationships. These abusive relationships are caused by gender inequality. This creates a cycle where poverty can force women into staying in abusive relationships, and women will struggle to escape poverty because they can't escape an abusive relationship.

Domestic abuse can occur in any income bracket of society but people in low income families are particularly vulnerable since poverty can exacerbate issues, but more importantly, lack of money restricts the ability of victims of domestic violence to leave the abuser. Abuse can occur from female to male, and within LGBTQ relationships, [but is predominantly perpetrated by men towards women](#). Women and girls in disadvantaged groups are disproportionately affected and face additional barriers to achieving safety.

As well as poverty impacting women on an individual level, austerity has eroded services that should be available to the victims of domestic violence: support services, helplines, advocacy and space in refuges.

2. What legislation does gender equality and domestic abuse operate under?

UK-wide:

- Human Rights Act 1998, which includes fundamental rights that impact directly on service provision in the health and social care sector
- Equality Act 2010 which guides anti-discriminatory practice which is fundamental to the ethical basis of care provision
- Equal Pay Act 1970

In England and Wales

- Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015, which
- The Family Law Act 1996 which includes occupation orders and non-molestation orders
- The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 which creates a statutory definition of domestic abuse, including emphasising that domestic abuse is not just physical violence but can be emotional, coercive, controlling and economic abuse.

In Scotland:

- Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill, which expands the definition of what domestic abuse is, and makes non-physical abuse a criminal offence

In Northern Ireland:

- Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, which creates a course of conduct offence and a sentencing aggravation concerning domestic abuse.

3. How do social workers work under this legislation on this issue?

Social workers have worked with victims of domestic violence for years - in the courts, social services, accident and emergency, and in refuges.

Making sure any children and the victim are safe are key tasks for the social worker, and social workers need to understand the impact of domestic violence on the mother's mental health and her parenting skills.

But domestic abuse is not a simple issue and responding effectively requires a truly holistic approach. That's why co-ordinated support from a whole range of agencies is crucial. Social workers can build strong links with other agencies and encourage better access to services for vulnerable families.

It's vital that social workers understand what an effective response to domestic abuse is. To offer the skills and knowledge needed to effectively help families, social workers need to keep up-to-date with domestic violence and abuse case law, learn from relevant serious case reviews and attend training. [Safe Lives, 2015]

4. How does poverty affect this issue?

Economic inequality is facilitating violence perpetrated by men against women. Gender norms, inadequate public services, the gender pay gap and downright discrimination all contribute to women's disadvantaged position in the economy. Women are more likely to have career breaks for childcare, [tend to do more unpaid household work and have more caring responsibilities](#). This means they earn less, own less and are more likely to be poor.

Women are therefore more likely to be financially dependent on someone else or on the state. The erosion of the state's welfare safety net and increasingly stringent access rules have a disproportionate impact on women. Women are placed in a precarious economic position that has a knock-on effect on their safety [Child Poverty Action Group, 2019]

- Women in households with low incomes are 3.5 times more likely to experience domestic violence than women in better off households
- 97% of domestic abuse victims have their finances controlled by their abuser [CPAG, 2019]

Even when a woman does leave an abusive relationship, her economic situation is still dire and often gets worse as she may need to leave her job or move.

Disabled women can experience more difficulties due to potentially having fewer resources due to lower rates of employment and wider gender pay gap. Disabled women will also face additional barriers such as inaccessible services, transport, and housing.

Women who have 'no resource to public funds' will also find it more difficult as they cannot use social security to escape abusive relationships and many services would not be available to them. This leaves them vulnerable to domestic abuse and poverty.

To protect survivors of domestic abuse, there must be a full and accessible financial safety net for women to use if they need to escape an abusive relationship. If there is no provision, many women may risk their lives staying in a relationship due to not being able to afford to flee.

5. Further reading

Women's Budget Group – Making Social Security Work for Survivors of Violence and Abuse - <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/benefits-or-barriers-making-social-security-work-for-survivors-of-violence-and-abuse-across-the-uks-four-nations/>

Child Poverty Action Group - <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/domestic-abuse-economic-issue-%E2%80%93-its-victims-and-society>

British Association of Social Workers - <https://www.basw.co.uk/media/news/2021/apr/basw-england-releases-new-domestic-abuse-guidance-social-workers>

Women's Aid - <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/the-impact-of-domestic-abuse/>

Safe Lives - https://safelives.org.uk/practice_blog/role-social-workers-responding-effectively-domestic-abuse