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Violence against women – evidence summary

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Disclaimer: This evidence summary includes relevant literature identified from searches on the above topic. It is not an exhaustive list, it presents key finding and not recommendations for practice.

Overview

According to Welsh Women's Aid violence against women includes:

> "…domestic abuse; rape and sexual violence; stalking; forced marriage; so-called honour based violence; female genital mutilation (FGM); trafficking and sexual exploitation including through the sex industry; and sexual harassment in work and public life."[1]

This report will look at the challenges faced by women who have experienced violence including the types of violence listed above. Some of these types of violence may be familiar, others may be less familiar to people, so definitions for each of the different types of violence are given below.

Domestic abuse is defined as:

> **"**an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threating, degrading, or violent behaviour, including sexual violence. In most cases, this is perpetrated by a partner or ex-partner, but can also be inflicted by a family member or carer."[1]

Sexual violence is defined as:

> "any form of unwanted sexual act or activity, which may be physical or non-physical, that takes place without someone's full, informed consent."[1]

Rape is one form of sexual violence, and is defined as:

> "when someone did not want to have sex, did not give their consent for sex to happen, or did not give consent for sex in the format in which it occurred."[1]

Stalking can include behaviours such as:

> "following, contacting or attempting to contact someone, monitoring social media or another communication method, loitering in a public or private place, watching or spying a person and interfering with property or possession of a person."[1]

Forced marriage is the term used when:

> "one or both people do not or cannot consent to the marriage and pressure, coercion or abuse by family members or others is used to force them into marriage."[1]

Honour based violence is defined as:

> "There is no universally agreed upon definition of 'honour'-based violence. It is generally used to refer to crimes that have been committed by perpetrators who perceive they are protecting or defending the 'honour' of a family or community. These crimes often include forms of domestic abuse and sexual violence."[1]

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is defined as:

> "a range of procedures intended to either injure or partially or entirely remove the external female genitalia for any non-medical reason."[1]

Sexual exploitation is defined as:

> "when a person is coerced, forced or manipulated into engaging in sexual activities"[1]

Trafficking can be a form of sexual exploitation, and in this report, it includes:

> "being trafficked for the purpose of performing sexual acts"[1]

Sexual harassment is defined as:

> "any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature that may cause offense, distress, will intimidate or humiliate a person."[1]

Challenges faced by women who have experienced violence

Women who are survivors of violence can face challenges. These may include:

- Limited access to safe accommodation due to a shortage of refuge spaces and affordable housing [2]
- Mental health issues [2]
- Long waits for mental health support / specialist psychological treatment [2]
- Financial issues due to economic abuse, or being dependent on abusive partners [2]
- Some women experiencing cultural and language barriers [2]

Challenges faced by women who have experienced different types of violence

Domestic abuse

Women who have experienced domestic abuse can face many challenges. These might include:

- Being at increased risk of homelessness [3]
- Lack of emergency accommodation [3]
- Blaming themselves for the abuse, for failing to leave, or for not recognising the signs [4,5]
- Being blamed by others or viewed as the “crazy ex” [4]
- High thresholds and long waits for support [5]
- Signs of abuse missed by professionals [5]
- May feel blamed or judged by professionals [5]
- Barriers to reporting / disclosing the abuse such as:
    - Fear of retaliation / further violence [6]
    - Worrying about losing custody of their children [6]
    - Fear of judgement [6]
    - Controlling behaviour such as the abuser monitoring movements, going with them to health appointments, and restricting social access [6]
    - Concerns over leaving the home / being financially independent [6]
    - Cultural or societal expectations to remain loyal [6]

    - Lack of knowledge of available resources [6]
    - Feelings of self-blame, low self-esteem, and guilt [6]

Rape and sexual violence

Women who have experienced rape and / or sexual violence can face many challenges. These might include:

- Physical health (injuries, sexually transmitted infections, or pregnancy) [7]
- Mental and emotional health issues [3,7,8]
- Ability to care for their children or even themselves affected [7]
- Ability to work / finances affected [3,7,8]
- Ability to continue to access education affected [8]
- Ability to maintain or build relationships of all kinds affected – both romantic and non-romantic [3,7,8]
- Experiencing anger due to injustice or lack of a voice [9]
- Feeling a loss of identity, becoming a victim [10]
- Having their experience minimised or even be blamed [11]
- The incident being dismissed if they are in a relationship with the person [11]
- Also experiencing other types of abuse / violence [11]
- Women who work as sex workers being more likely to experience victim blaming, stigma, and prejudice [12]
- Barriers to accessing support or reporting such as:
    - Feeling embarrassment, shame or self-blame [3,10,11,13]
    - Thinking that they will not be believed [3,13]
    - Not believing it is serious enough to report [13]
    - Negative reactions from family / friends when first disclosing [13]
    - Concerns about the impact on their children [13]
    - Concerns about losing their job [13]
    - Their case not progressing to prosecution [2,3]
    - Not being aware of support or how to access it [13]
    - Long waits for support [13]
    - Difficulties accessing support due to transport, childcare, location or opening times [13]

Stalking

Women who have experienced stalking can face many challenges. These might include:

- Feeling a loss of control [14]
- Mental health issues [15]
- Fear and anxiety [14,15]
- Agitation or aggressive thoughts [15]
- Struggling to trust people [14,15]
- Breakdown of other relationships [14]
- Feeling they can never relax, on high alert [14,15]
- Impacts on physical health (sleep, appetite, stomach issues, headaches) [15]
- Changing their lives / activities, for example avoiding going out [15]
- Changing work, school, or career [15]
- Moving home / area [15]

Forced marriage

Women who are in a forced marriage can face many challenges. These might include:

- Being subjected to honour based violence [16]
- Being subjected to other abuse including physical abuse, financial control, stalking, kidnapping, separation from children, severe domestic labour exploitation and imprisonment in their homes [16]
- Being subjected to emotional brainwashing, controlling and coercive behaviours, and blackmail [16]
- Having been married under age [16]
- Being isolated from their community, including not being allowed out alone [16]
- Not recognising that they are victims [16]

Women who have left their forced marriage can then face further challenges. These might include:

- Experiencing self-blame (letting down their families, questioning their decision to leave their marriage) [16]
- Mental health issues [16]
- Being isolated, having to change their identities [16]

- Experiencing stigma for being a single parent [16]
- Loss of financial support / income [16]
- Being encouraged to return by friends and family [16]
- Experiencing barriers to accessing support including:
    - Language barriers [16]
    - Fear of reprisals [16]
    - Distrust of services / authority [16]

Honour based violence

Women who have experienced honour based violence can face many challenges. These might include:

- Language barriers making it hard to locate and contact services, and to communicate with professionals [17]
- Not recognising the violence as a crime [17]
- Mental health issues [17]
- Mental health being a taboo topic [17]
- Insecure immigration status preventing them seeking help [17]
- Being financially dependent on the offender [17]
- Isolation / no support network [17]

Genital mutilation

Genital mutilation is a form of honour based violence, so the issues related to honour based violence will also apply here, however, women who have experienced genital mutilation may face additional challenges. These might include:

- Short-term complications including severe pain, swelling, haemorrhage, infections, fever, urinary problems, shock and even death [18,19]
- Long-term complications including pelvic pain, painful menstruation, and urinary tract infections [18,19]
- Scar tissue leading to complications requiring medical attention [18,19]
- Increased risk of complications during and after childbirth [18,19]
- Mental health issues [18,19]
- Feelings of isolation, guilt, shame, and hopelessness [18]
- Sexual complications, including decreased pleasure, pain, fear, and difficulties maintaining intimate relationships [18]

- Avoiding medical care such as smear tests, maternity and gynaecological care due to trauma [18]
- Having to travel long distances for specialist medical treatment [18]
- Reconstructive surgery not being available in the UK [18]
- Claims being disregarded, dismissed, or not believed [20]
- Being shocked to discover it is not customary here in the UK [20]
- Additional barriers added if they are an immigrant [20]
- Health care professionals lacking training, knowledge, and understanding of genital mutilation, which can impact the care received [21]

Trafficking and sexual exploitation

Women who have experienced trafficking and sexual exploitation can face many challenges. These might include:

- Mental health issues with long waits for treatment [22]
- Having insecure immigration status, making it harder to get support [22]
- Lack of suitable accommodation [22]
- Being vulnerable to further exploitation in asylum accommodation [22]
- Facing being returned to the country they were trafficked from [23]
- Being at risk of being re-trafficked [23]
- Having faced traumas prior to being trafficked [23]
- Facing barriers to reintegration such as:
    - Low incomes / poverty [23]
    - Rejection by family [23]
    - Social stigma and judgement [23]

Although having a baby can be a positive experience and offer hope to some women[24], some who have experienced trafficking and sexual exploitation and are pregnant or have a baby can face additional challenges. These might include:

- Questions about the father may be distressing if the paternity of their child is unknown [24]
- Repeated and intrusive questioning by healthcare professionals [24]
- Medical procedures causing re-traumatisation [24,25]
- Having complications with the pregnancy / baby [24]
- Feeling isolated / lack of support during labour and with the baby [24,25]
- Language barriers when accessing healthcare [25]

- Not having items needed for their baby [25]
- Exacerbated challenges if they are seeking asylum [25]

Sexual harassment

It is important to note that sexual harassment does not just take place in person. Women can also experience harassment online, including through social media platforms.

Women who have experienced sexual harassment can face many challenges. These might include:

- Many women being unlikely to report harassment due to fear of not being believed, concerns about retaliation, and doubts about institutional effectiveness [26]
- Action not being taken when it is reported [26]
- Mental health issues [26–28]
- Anxiety, fear and feeling unsafe [3,26–28]
- Avoiding specific areas or places [26]
- Some younger girls believing harassing behaviours are normal [3,26]
- Personal relationships being affected [26]
- Impact on work including productivity, withdrawing from professional opportunities or changing careers [26]
- Withdrawal from social activities [26]
- Feelings of shame, self-blame, resentment, and loss of confidence [26]
- Experiencing body shaming and dissatisfaction with their own body [27,28]

Challenges faced by specific groups of women who have experienced violence

Ethnic minorities

Women from ethnic minorities who experience violence may face specific challenges. These might include:

- Being more likely to experience honour based violence [29]
- Language and communication barriers [31,37]
- Not recognising abuse or normalising behaviours due to cultural, societal or religious norms [37–39]
- Having their immigration status used to exert control over them [31,37]
- Mistrust of police and other agencies [31,39]
- Agencies lacking understanding of abuse in different cultures [39]
- Being more likely to be socially isolated [31,39]
- Fearing bringing shame on their family or damaging reputations [13,38,39]
- Cultural taboos around talking about sexual violence [13]
- Experiencing shame, blame, or the misuse of religious beliefs [38,39]
- Patriarchal attitudes being accepted / abuse being tolerated [38]
- Fear of family rejection, social exclusion, and financial hardship [38,39]
- Being pressurised to stay by family / friends when they disclose to them [38,39]

Disabled women

Disable women who have experienced violence can face specific challenges. These might include:

- Being more likely to be victims of domestic abuse [29]
- Being likely to suffer more severe and frequent domestic abuse over longer periods of time [29]
- Barriers to accessing support such as:
    - Being told they are too complex for support services [13]
    - Disbelief and lack of understanding from professionals [13]
    - Communication barriers [13]
    - Physical barriers (no lift, doors not wide enough, noisy, or inaccessible information) [13]

LGBTQ+

Women who are LGBTQ+ and have experienced violence can face specific challenges. These might include:

- Being a trans women may increase the risk of experiencing violence [29,30]
- Being less likely to report violence and / or seek support [29,31]
- Being more likely to experience sexual harassment differently including invasive questions about their sex lives [32]
- Experiencing homophobia and / or homophobic violence [32]
- Changing their behaviour / avoiding public displays of affection [32]
- Barriers to accessing support / services such as:
    - Distrust of services due to previous experiences of homophobia and transphobia [9,31]
    - Fear of police [30]
    - Feeling services aren't inclusive [9,30]
    - Fear that by disclosing they may be outed [13,30]
    - Fear of the social repercussions [30]
    - Services not understanding their experiences / identities [9]
    - Perceptions by authorities that domestic abuse is mutual [33]
    - Experiences may be downplayed or dismissed [9,33]
    - Fear their sexual identity will be revealed for those who are not openly LGBTQ+ [33]

Older women

Older women who have experienced violence may face specific challenges. These might include:

- Being more likely that the violence is hidden [29,34]
- Abuse being exacerbated due to aging (cognitive decline, health, disability) [31]
- Increased risk of violence due to aging (cognitive decline, health, disability) [34,35]
- Experiencing / tolerating abuse for longer than younger people [31,34–36]
- Being more isolated [36]
- Having dementia increasing the risk of experiencing violence [31,35]
- Having nowhere to go / limited access to accessible housing [31,36]
- Leaving violence for another environment that doesn't offer them fulfilment [36]

- Not recognising the actions as abuse / violence [35]
- Lack of understanding and awareness from professionals [34]
- Being labelled as elder abuse, which may result in a softer response [34]
- Adopting coping strategies rather than addressing the violence [36]
- Barriers to accessing support such as:
    - Lack of awareness of support [31,34]
    - Perception that support is not for older people [31]
    - Financial barriers [31]
    - Shame or embarrassment [31,35]
    - Fear of the consequences of reporting [31]
    - Being reliant on their abuser financially or as their carer [31,34]
    - Living in a rural location [31]
    - Ageist beliefs and attitudes [13]

Search strategy

Basic searches of Gov.wales, Senedd Research, Welsh Women's Aid, Reducing the Risk, What Works Centre for crime reduction, VAWDASV Research Network Wales, Older People's Commissioner for Wales, and Google were completed for violence against women and / or each of the types of violence against women. A detailed search of Scopus was also completed.

Scopus

women* OR woman OR female* OR girl* (abstract)
AND
"sexual violence" OR "domestic abuse" OR "domestic violence" OR "rape" OR "sexual assault" OR "stalking" OR "forced marriage*" OR "honour-based" OR "genital mutilation" OR traffick* OR "sexual exploitation" OR "sexual harassment" (abstract)
AND
need* OR requirement* OR demand* OR support* OR assistance OR help OR barrier* OR challenge* OR obstacle* OR issue* OR problem* OR difficult* OR concern* OR risk* (abstract)
AND
england OR scotland OR wales OR "united kingdom" OR UK OR Britain (affiliation country)
Limit: 2021-2026

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