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Domestic abuse and sexual violence against men – 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

This report will look at the challenges faced by men who have experienced domestic abuse and different forms of sexual violence including rape, stalking, forced marriage, honour based violence, genital mutilation, trafficking and sexual exploitation, and sexual harassment. It then looks at challenges faced by specific groups of men including older men, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+. For some of these areas the evidence about men's experiences is limited, reflecting the origins of research and policy attention on domestic abuse as a largely hidden issue affecting women. 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]

Male genital mutilation (MGM) is defined as:

> "when a boy or man's genital organs are cut, altered, or injured for non-medical reasons, without free and informed consent."[2]

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]

The report focuses on research and reports based mainly on Wales or the UK. Research from elsewhere is only included when relevant.

Challenges faced by men who have experienced violence or abuse

Men who have experienced violence or abuse can face many challenges. These might include:

- Taking a long time to recognise their experiences as abuse [3]
- A lack of awareness that men could experience these types of violence and abuse [3]
- Stereotypes and ideas about masculinity not seeing men as victims [3]
- Agencies not responding to their reports of violence and abuse [3]
- Feelings of shame [3]
- Bringing shame on the family, so being forced to stay with the perpetrator [3]
- Difficulties accessing support, including long waits [3]
- Not knowing where to go for support [3]
- Fear that they will not be believed [3]
- Strategies and support are female focused [3]

Challenges faced by men who have experienced different types of violence

Domestic abuse

Although reported domestic abuse is significantly higher for women, men do also experience domestic abuse, and family abuse (committed by a family member rather than a partner) is at a similar level for both men and women.[4] Men who have experienced domestic abuse can face many challenges. These might include:

- Being less likely to report abuse while still living with the person [5]
- Experiencing abuse for a long period (average 6 years) before reporting [5,6]
- Abuse continuing after separation [5,7]
- Taking longer to recognise and label their experience as abuse [5,6,8,9]
- Being more likely to have to relocate and leave work to access a refuge space [5]
- Experiencing gender stereotypes / misconceptions [5,6,8,10–12]
- Having difficulties accessing / lack of support services [5,6,9,11–14]
- Shortages in refuge spaces for men [5]
- Policies, services and refuges tend to be female focused [6–9]
- Men with children getting threats to take them away from them or even losing contact with their children [6,8]
- Their children often staying in abusive households for longer [8]
- Their children witnessing the abuse [8]
- Having to leave their children behind, worrying about their safety [15]
- Threats of or actually making false allegations against them [7,8]
- Physical impacts including sleep deprivation, weight changes, increased substance use, and stress reactions [6,8,12]
- Psychological impacts including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide ideation and attempts [6,8,12]
- Missing work or even losing their job [12]
- Feelings of guilt, shame, self-blame, and sexual dysfunction [8,10,11,13]
- Being assumed they should be able to protect themselves from abuse [12,13]
- Experiencing emasculating and homophobic comments [12]
- Professionals not taking them seriously, being dismissive, or lacking the ability to provide effective support [7,9,14,15]
- Reaching crisis point before seeking support [16]

Men who have experienced domestic abuse can face barriers to being recognised as a victim or disclosing that they are a victim. These might include:

- Fear of not being believed [5,7–9,11,13–16]
- Not being believed due to men not being seen as victims [9,10,12,14,16]
- Not being taken seriously / injuries dismissed [5–9,12]
- Being afraid they will be assumed to be the perpetrator [5–7,9,12,15,16]
- Fear of losing contact with / custody of their children [5,6,11,16]
- Wanting to protect their children from the abuser [5,15]
- Limited provisions allowing them to leave with their children [5]
- Not recognising that they are a victim [6,7,9,11,13,16]
- Threats from or fear of their abuser [7,11,13,16]
- Not wanting to leave because they feel commitment to and care for the perpetrator [6,16]
- Pressure from family or friends to stay and not report [11,13,14]
- Being emotionally or financially dependent on their abuser [13]
- Negative experiences with police and the criminal justice system [7,8,11]
- Feeling embarrassed or impact on their masculinity / feeling less of a man [6,7,16]
- Lack of awareness of services, lack of support, or poor / inappropriate support [7,16]
- Practical implications such as having nowhere to go, financial or professional impacts [6,16]

Rape and sexual violence

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

- Being less likely to report than women [17]
- Waiting many years before disclosing the assault [18]
- Lack of awareness and education on sexual violence among men [17]
- Experiencing or fear of stigma, including homophobia [17]
- Not recognising that they are a victim [13]
- Threats from their abuser [13]
- Pressure from family or friends to stay and not report [13]
- Being emotionally or financially dependent on their abuser [13]
- Feelings of guilt and shame [13]

- Incident being dismissed or minimised, assuming they initiated or should have wanted it [13,17]
- Being assumed they should be able to protect themselves from abuse [13,17]
- Having difficulties accessing / lack of support services [11,13,19]
- Gender stereotypes such as men as perpetrators, ‘real men’ can’t be raped, only gay men can be raped, men can’t be raped [11,17,19,20]
- Male rape being invisible / not talked about [19]
- It being assumed it will not have a significant impact on them [17]
- Being mocked by their perpetrators for being “not manly enough” [11]
- Being more likely to conform to masculine norms, and increased anger [21]
- Poor physical health [18]
- Poor mental health including depression, PTSD, anxiety, significant distress, poor self-esteem, self-harm, and suicidal ideation and attempts [18]
- Experiencing problems relating to sexuality and gender identity [18]

Men who have experienced rape or sexual violence may face barriers to reporting or disclosing the rape / assault. These might include:

- Masculinity and perceptions of what it means to be a man [18,20]
- Fears over not being believed [20]
- Fears other women / future partners may see them as less of a man [20]
- Fears they will be judged, minimised, or not taken seriously [18,20]
- Feelings of shame and self-blame [20]
- Not recognising themselves as victims [20]
- If the perpetrator was a woman not recognising, denying, or minimising the experience [18]
- Concerns over false counter allegations [20]
- Men who have children with the perpetrator worrying about the effect on their relationship with their children [20]
- Lack of support available for men [20]

Men who have experienced male on male rape and / or sexual violence can face some more specific issues. These might include:

- Having their sexuality questioned or stereotyped [13]
- Self-blame, questioning their behaviours and character [19]
- Impacting on their feelings of masculinity [19]

Stalking

Limited research was identified from the various searches looking at men's experiences of stalking, so it is difficult to identify the challenges they may face.

However, the following challenges were identified from the limited research. These include:

- Having difficulties accessing / lack of support services [13]
- Men who have experienced honour based violence being more vulnerable to stalking [22]

Honour based violence

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

- A lack of awareness or recognition of men as victims [23]
- Having difficulties accessing / lack of support services [13,23]
- Lack of refuges for men to stay [23]
- Experiencing additional violence and abuse [24]
- Being thought of as bringing shame on their family [24]
- Being a victim due to being accused of homosexuality or being homosexual [24]
- Being a victim due to being accused of promiscuity [24]
- Being more likely to receive threats of violence and stalking [22]
- Societal expectations and maintaining their families honour may act as barriers to disclosing abuse [22,23]
- Ideas around masculinity preventing the disclosure of abuse [23]
- Not being reported when the perpetrator is a woman due to fear of ridicule or shame [23]

Forced marriage

Forced marriage is a form of honour based violence, so the issues related to honour based violence will also apply here, however, no research on male victims was identified from the various searches.

Male genital mutilation

Male genital mutilation is a form of honour based violence, so the issues related to honour based violence will also apply here, however, no research on male victims was identified from the various searches.

Trafficking and sexual exploitation

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

- Having difficulties accessing / lack of support services [13]
- Mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [25,26]
- Having difficulties coming forward and accessing mental health support [25]
- Being more reluctant to see themselves as victims [26]
- Delaying seeking help and support [26]
- Experiencing difficulties accessing support due to their legal status or lack of documentation [26]
- Cultural and / or language barriers [26]
- Experiencing discrimination, stigma, or judgement [26]
- Support not being in place long enough to help them recover [26]
- Being worried about how they will support themselves and their family [26]
- Being more likely to have externalising behaviours such as anger or substance misuse [26,27]
- Being vulnerable to homelessness, poverty, and social isolation [27]
- Cultural values and norms around masculinity preventing men disclosing sexual exploitation [27]

Sexual harassment

It is important to note that sexual harassment does not just take place in person. Men can also experience harassment online, including through social media platforms. However, limited research was identified from the various searches looking at the experiences of men, so it is difficult to identify the challenges they may face.

Challenges faced by specific groups of men who have experienced violence

Ethnic minorities

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

- Values associated with their religious, cultural, or ethnic identity being used to manipulate them [10]
- Not disclosing due to not wanting to let their family down and / or trying to protect them from any blame and shame [28]
- Fear of being marginalised from their community [28]
- More likely to report being a victim of domestic abuse [11]
- Migrant men may be at increased risk of domestic abuse [11]
- Their immigration status may stop them reporting abuse [11]
- Not recognising they are a victim of abuse, particularly older men [29]
- More likely to believe myths around male rape [30]

GBTQ+

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

- Being less likely to report domestic abuse [5]
- Not seeing themselves as a victim or fitting the gendered idea of what a victim looks like [31,32]
- Struggling to see themselves as a victim if they haven't experienced physical violence, or did not perceive the violence to be severe enough [31]
- Victims often being portrayed as women, and perpetrators as men, making male victims feel invisible [31,32]
- Threats to reveal or fear that their sexual orientation or HIV status being revealed preventing them reporting [11–13,32]
- Gay and bisexual men being at increased risk of domestic abuse [11,12]
- Gay and bisexual men being at increased risk of sexual violence [12]
- Being at increased risk of family abuse, targeted at their gender / sexuality [33]
- Limited access to GBTQ+ specific support services [33,34]
- Lack of emergency accommodation / housing for GBTQ+ victims [34]

- Being unclear which support services are GBTQ+ friendly [11,16,33]
- Lack of understanding / negative responses from professionals [16,32,33]
- Experiencing structural, cultural, individual, and interpersonal barriers when accessing services [11]
- Finding being labelled a victim as disempowering, stigmatising, and even emasculating [31,32]
- Experiencing stigma, homophobia and / or transphobia [12,32]
- Being more vulnerable to the deliberate transmission of HIV [12]
- Not recognising they are a victim of abuse, particularly older men [29]

Older men

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

- A lack of recognition of abuse [35,36]
- Not realising they are experiencing abuse [29]
- A lack of awareness of abuse of older men [36]
- A lack of services appropriate for older men [35]
- Being less likely to access support [36]
- Being at increased risk of domestic abuse as they get older [36]
- Being less likely to report abuse [29]
- Experiencing stigma, shame, and embarrassment [29]
- Not disclosing abuse due to fear of splitting families, getting the person in trouble, or not seeing their children [29]
- Depending on the perpetrator for care [29]
- Not having access to a phone or internet to report abuse [29]
- Fear of not being believed [29]
- Support for male victims not being visible [29]
- Fear of losing financial security [29]
- Being more vulnerable to abuse if they have a mental or physical illness, a disability, or if they are socially isolated [29]
- Not wanting to be a burden [29]

Disabled men

Disabled men who have experienced violence can face specific challenges. These might include:

- Being less likely to report domestic abuse [5]
- Being at increased risk of domestic abuse and sexual assault [11]
- Being less likely to understand boundaries, recognise abuse, know their rights, and know how to report it [10]

Search strategy

Basic searches of Gov.wales, Senedd Research, ManKind, Older People's Commissioner for Wales, Male Survivors Partnership, Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys Research Network, and Google were completed for domestic abuse against men and / or each of the types of violence against men. A detailed search of Scopus was also completed.

Scopus

men* OR man OR male* OR boy* (title)
AND
"sexual violence" OR "domestic abuse" OR "domestic violence" OR "intimate partner 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

A second search using Scopus was completed to widen the search for some of the lesser researched topics.

men* OR man OR male* OR boy* (abstract)
AND
"forced marriage*" OR "honour-based" OR "male genital mutilation" (abstract)
AND
england OR scotland OR wales OR "united kingdom" OR UK OR Britain (affiliation country)
Limit: 2021-2026

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