

Finding the Costs of Freedom



How women and children rebuild
their lives after domestic violence

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“ I realised in that moment that he no longer had control over me and that I was in control of my life and that was the strongest I had felt and I continue to feel that way. I felt like I had come back – that I was fierce! (68, W4).



The artwork for the cover was designed by Jules. She was also one of the women who volunteered to be part of the study.

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Truly a team effort!

About CWASU

The Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) is located within London Metropolitan University and has a national and international reputation for its research, training and consultancy. Established in 1987, we have completed over 100 research/evaluation projects covering the spectrum of violence against women and children (for a full list go to www.cwasu.org).

One of the unique features of CWASU is that we integrate research and thinking on abuse of adult women with that of children. We have a long track record in research on domestic violence, particularly under-explored aspects of women's lived experiences and innovative support responses.

Over 25 years CWASU has, often in partnership with specialist services and/or other academic institutions, completed studies on children and domestic violence, evaluations of perpetrator programmes, Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) schemes, Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs) and is currently researching the contribution of perpetrator programmes to co-ordinated community responses to domestic violence. Our ambition is create 'useful knowledge', that is relevant to policymakers, practitioners, funders and survivors.

CWASU is led by Professor Liz Kelly, Roddick Chair on Violence Against Women, who is also Co-chair of the End Violence Against Women Coalition.

About Solace Women's Aid

Solace Women's Aid works with over 7,000 women and children affected by domestic and sexual violence each year. The organisation provides vital services to support individuals and families at a point of crisis and along the journey of rebuilding their lives.

Despite an increasingly challenging funding environment, Solace has expanded its provision over recent years to include:

- Eleven refuges across London
- Advice services across 18 boroughs
- Advocacy and support services in five boroughs
- A legal service based in North and South London
- North London Rape Crisis
- Individual and group counselling across 13 boroughs
- Services for children and young people, including therapeutic and prevention programmes
- The IRIS project for GPs and health centres in two London boroughs

Together these services provide holistic wrap around support for women and children that seek to be sensitive and responsive to their ongoing needs.

The organisation plays a pivotal role in the communities it serves, responding to local need and ensuring the voice of women and children is heard by policy makers locally, London-wide and nationally.

Solace works in partnership with many statutory and community organisations, including formal partnerships with; the London VAWG Consortium; the Traveller Movement; Shpresa Programme and; the Domestic Violence Intervention Project; to raise awareness of VAWG issues and ensure a multi-agency response across the capital.

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Executive Summary

Whilst crisis interventions for women and children experiencing domestic violence are well developed, little is known about the process of rebuilding lives, including what longer term support needs might be. Women's organisations have lacked the resources to follow up service users. The Research Grants Programme run by the Big Lottery provided an exciting opportunity to do just that.

Working in partnership with the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) at London Metropolitan University, Solace Women's Aid successfully applied for funds that enabled us to track 100 women and their children over a three year period (2011-2014). Women were recruited into the study after exiting a range of domestic violence services provided by Solace and, through four waves of interviews, we followed their onward journeys.

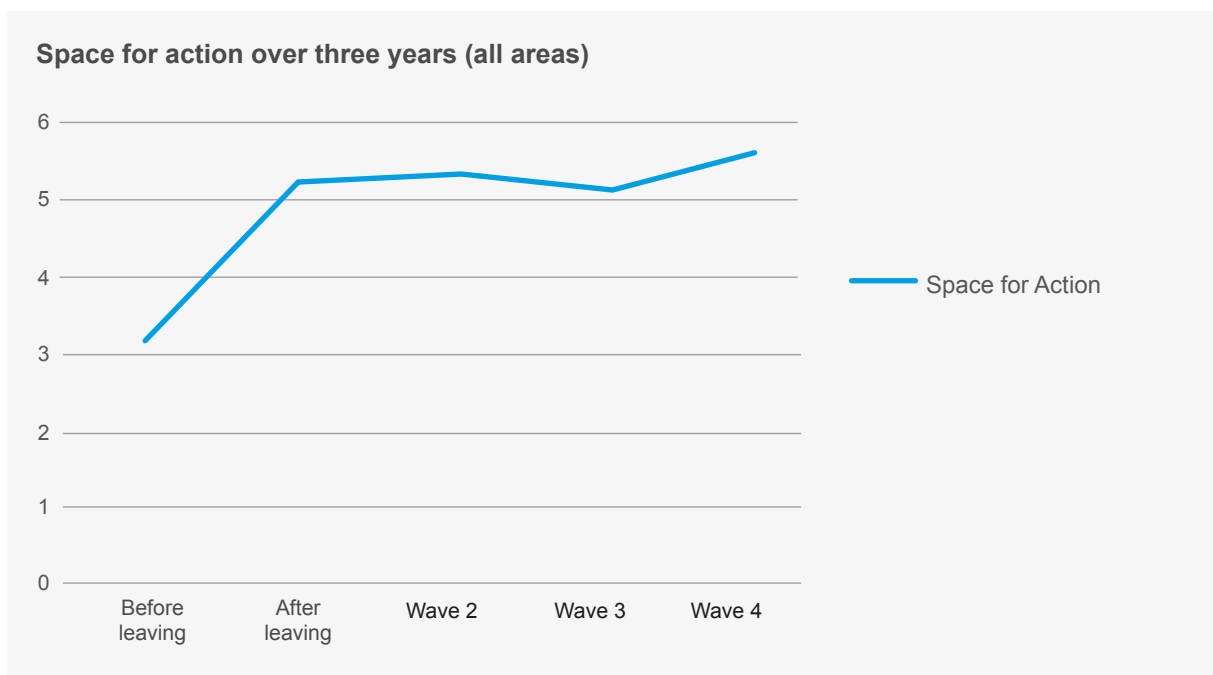
The overarching aims of the project were to identify:

- What factors support long term settlement, how do they interrelate and at what points in the process are they particularly important?
- When do obstacles to resettlement occur and how can they be overcome?
- How can community resources best be developed and integrated for long term support of survivor resettlement and independence?

Through a multi-layered research methodology we explored how women and children are able to grow their 'space for action' (Kelly, 2003) after physically removing themselves from the 'coercive control' (Stark, 2007) exerted by the perpetrator over their everyday lives. We also measured post-separation abuse in Wave Three, experience of services and the legal system, changes in housing situation and how their informal networks facilitated or interfered with efforts to create safety and freedom.

Challenges

There was no singular, shared story for women and children as they laid the foundation stones required to 'move on' from the abuse they had experienced. However we did identify common themes within their experiences with respect to challenges, enablers and barriers. After seeing an immediate expansion in their space for action after leaving the perpetrator or ending the abuse, change slowed over the next two years as they faced a series of practical hurdles, before a new period of expansion began at the end of the project (see figure opposite).



Removing themselves from the immediate control of an abusive man was, for many women and children, only the first step. Over 90 per cent experienced post-separation abuse, which interfered with both being and feeling safe. The limited effectiveness of criminal and civil law enforcement required women to undertake a huge amount of ‘safety work’. This involved managing out those family members and friends who were disruptive and untrustworthy whilst investing in a smaller number of safe, supportive relationships. The prevalence of perpetrator manipulation of statutory agencies post-separation also revealed the importance of factoring ongoing support needs into responses to domestic violence.

Barriers

Women did not report statutory agency responses as supportive, even at the point of separation. Instead, considerable time and energy was spent battling ‘the system’, and over the course of the study, women began to comment that their lives were now constrained by structural barriers. With the exception of some thoughtful, aware and sympathetic individuals, what women reported was poor practice characterised by victim blame, delay and misinformation. Being under the scrutiny of social services was an additional burden to some, especially given the inconsistency in the recognition and understanding accorded to the impacts of domestic violence. This became a glaring contradiction for those who were pressured to leave to protect their children, yet offered no support in doing so.

Barriers to accessing the resources women needed to rebuild their lives – protection from further abuse, housing, financial resources, employment, divorce and safe child contact – were exacerbated by changes to the legal and policy context that was not anticipated at the start of the study. Over the three years the rights established for women and children fleeing domestic violence over the past four decades were eroded, making establishing safety and freedom a harder won project for this group of women and children. The rationing of Legal Aid resulted in some women giving up rights that previously might have been enforced by the courts, raising the costs of safety and freedom considerably.

A lack of move on accommodation for women who were in refuge, decreased availability of social housing and barriers to accessing private rented accommodation in London meant that many women had to wait several years to settle safely, create a home and establish a routine. Many did all they could to minimise

the disruption, felt by them and their children, as they coped with multiple interim temporary moves. Being settled was necessary before women could even think about growing supportive networks, addressing health concerns and taking steps to (re)enter education and the workplace: some were still waiting for settled housing at the final interview. Women felt, not unreasonably, that they were being penalised for trying to end violence in their lives. Moreover, as these changes take deeper root and those advising on options discuss the possible costs of leaving we are left asking how many more women will choose not to give up their current housing, despite abuse, in the future who would not have done previously? The entrapment if there is no alternative is graphically illustrated by the photos from one of the art workshops which took place towards the end of the research, and what being able to create a new, safe, home enables.

Credit: Janetka Platun (image from workshop – 88, W4)



“ I had a house and the fact it was suspended was the manipulation; the puppet strings – the element of control and the element of fear. The drawing pins represented there was nowhere to go.

The hands were the safety net for the house – the hands represented the safety that I had when the house did fall. I didn't fall on the spikes, I actually fell into safety, and I fell into a place of love and security. And then the hearts on the outside of the frame, they represent all the wonderful things that we're creating in our lives (89, W4).

Financial insecurity was also evidenced throughout the study as a consequence of austerity measures. Women and children were caught in the intersecting nets of shrinking affordable housing and welfare reform through the benefit cap, 'bedroom tax', income support and disability allowance. Accessible childcare was vital as a single parent in moving on. However, the cost was prohibitive for many women leading them to undertake complex calculations between demands from the Job Centre to enter into employment, raising their children and ensuring they did not fall into a benefit trap. The erosion of women's rights meant that community resources became even more important. With community care grants and crisis loans being cut, women were reliant on provision via food banks and the good will of their social networks and charities signifying a return to 'make do and mend' – an approach which the first refugees had to contend with in the early 1970s.

Where women had the support of an advocate, usually via Solace, responses from other agencies improved, but our findings suggest that there may be complacency about the extent of change in agency responses. A key theme to emerge here was lack of understanding about either domestic violence or the process of rebuilding lives in the aftermath. Across all agencies domestic violence was still being reduced to incidents of physical assault, which led not only to an exclusion of some women from services and support when their abuse was more characterised by coercive control, but also a minimising of post-separation abuse. This misunderstanding also meant that many professionals underestimated the toll living with abuse had on women and children, expecting that separation, in and of itself, would not just create safety but also lift all the other burdens. Women may have moved on but the shadow of domestic violence had not been rubbed out. The current policy focus on short term risk reduction contributed to this misunderstanding, and failure to recognise women's current and persisting support needs.

Enablers

In contrast women linked the dramatic expansion of their space for action immediately following separation to being in an empowering environment, supported by committed individuals who understood domestic violence. The holistic model of service provision provided by Solace Women's Aid meant that each woman could dip in and out of support as required, creating their own 'basket of resources' fitted to their particular needs and circumstances. As well as the advice and advocacy of key workers, floating support, legal services and IDVAs to resolve practical matters, workshops addressing confidence, understanding domestic violence and self-help groups emerged as long term enablers. In particular, counsellors who understood domestic violence and its many legacies were very important to women: several noted this had literally saved their lives, it also has the potential to reduce costs to the NHS, where delays in accessing counselling and inappropriate interventions led to lengthy dependence on medication.

This is very different to what is often considered within the 'core' domestic violence response model. With commissioners increasingly focused on short term risk reduction and time-limited interventions fewer resources are invested in interventions that address the longer term needs which this project has highlighted. Holistic provision enabled women: to begin to 'feel' safe; to have support in complex negotiations with other agencies; and to deal with the legacies of abuse for themselves and their children. Solace's services continued to be used, and advice was sought throughout across a range of issues over the three year research period. Supportive friends and family were also pivotal. This combination enabled women to remake their selves, grow in confidence and reclaim relationships with their children and others they had become estranged from.

Since there was no single, shared story there is no set formula for rebuilding lives. Yet within this diversity we identified the foundation stones that help facilitate the building of a new life. These were:

- having opportunities to explore domestic violence and its legacies through counselling, but also with trusted family and friends;
- being and feeling safe;
- becoming settled and able to make a new home;
- Improved health/ability to manage health conditions;
- children in new schools and less anxious, able to make and see friends;
- (re)entering employment and/or education and training;
- a tight, but trusted, network of family and friends; and
- financial security.

Rebuilding lives and remaking selves are lengthy processes in which women and their children face a number of obstacles and challenges. Not everyone was able to put all of these foundation stones in place by the end of three years and the changed legal and policy context not only made this more difficult but increased the costs to women and their children.

Recommendations

Our findings provide an evidence base that can be used to improve support for women and their children in the process of rebuilding their lives and which will also be used to influence local and national policy and practice.

It would be possible to make a lengthy list of recommendations, linked to the research findings and the international obligations national and local governments have to protect women from violence. Instead we have chosen to highlight five key themes and some, but by no means all, of the actions and implications that flow from them. Ultimately, the question we face is whether it is just and equitable that so many women and children are left to pay the costs of safety and freedom, especially when so many of the perpetrators are not held to account.

1. This study shows that ending domestic violence, dealing with its legacies and rebuilding lives takes time; some women and children were still facing post separation abuse three years on, and many faced complex legal and practical challenges across the study. The holistic wrap around provision Solace created, through a variety of funding sources, has not been sufficiently recognised, since we have neglected to pay attention to the process of rebuilding lives.

We recommend therefore that all women and children who have experienced domestic violence are in a position to access support for a minimum of two years after separation, and this should include:

- refuge and floating support;
- legal advice and advocacy;
- short courses on understanding domestic violence;
- specialist counselling and group work for women and for children;
- skills and confidence building workshops; and
- workshops and individual support orientated to (re)entering employment.

2. Understanding of domestic violence, pre and post separation, in statutory agencies is poor, meaning that too often they hinder, rather than support, the progress of women and children rebuilding their lives. Some of this could be addressed through basic training which focuses on coercive control, rather than incidents of physical assault; and which alerts them to the reality that leaving does not necessarily end abuse.

In addition, given the repeated evidence of failure to implement existing policy and guidance, and the shift to localism, a system of monitoring the delivery of sensitive and responsive services to domestic violence survivors needs to be developed. A key component would be regularly convened (at least twice a year) panels of survivors whose recent experiences of service use – good and bad – is considered as evidence.

3. Having a safe home was crucial to the rebuilding process, since it was the reason for separation in the first place. The housing situation in London has led to a critical situation for those fleeing domestic abuse. Women cannot find refuge spaces and those in refuges are forced to stay for unnecessarily long periods due to the lack of move on accommodation. We concur with the findings of Janet Bowstead (2013) that refuges should be considered a national resource, given the needs of many women to move away to be safe, but delivered locally. Similarly many women ended up in inappropriate, and sometimes unsafe, temporary accommodation and private rentals for lengthy periods.

- Refuge provision, at the level commended by the Istanbul Convention, should be guaranteed and funded through a national refuge fund with a move on pathway.
- All women in social housing in Greater London who flee domestic violence should be guaranteed a move to equivalent social housing within Greater London, unless they wish to move out of the city.
- Women and children made homeless through domestic violence should be recognised as a unique group fleeing crimes that take place in the home. This needs to be recognised through special measures including the offer of a social housing tenancy.

4. Many women suffered financial abuse within the relationship, and for some this continued and even intensified when they separated. This will be exacerbated by proposed Universal Credit regulations where one partner will receive payment for the whole family. The ending of crisis loans and community care grants makes the rebuilding process even more complex, and other benefit reforms created serious hardship.

- Universal credit payments should be made to the woman where there are children involved.
- A specific fund for families having to relocate due to domestic violence should be created by central government.
- Women should not have their housing benefit reduced for an empty bedroom for at least two years following the perpetrator leaving the family home and then the situation reviewed.

5. Community resources hold the potential to be enablers or barriers to women re-building their lives. Whilst friends and families were the most significant sources of support, neighbours, work colleagues, faith communities and community organisations also featured. However, many women also encountered being discouraged from ending the relationship, and when they chose this course of action they were too frequently met with blame and judgment. What they sought was recognition of abuse and its harms, respect for their decisions and safety needs, and a sense of belonging to strong networks. National and local awareness raising work needs to expand understanding of what domestic violence is, including post-separation abuse, alongside clear messages about listening to and respecting survivors and offering support when needed.

1. Introduction and key concepts

Whilst crisis interventions for women and children experiencing domestic violence are well developed, little is known about the process of rebuilding lives after ending the relationship/abuse, including what the long-term support needs might be of women and children. Women's organisations have lacked the resources to follow up service users and most research is a onetime snapshot. Exceptions here include two studies which followed women up after leaving refuges in the 1980s (Binney et al. 1981; Pahl, 1985) but were carried out over short time scales and in very different policy contexts. More recently longitudinal research has been undertaken by the Victoria Department of Human Services (2004) in Australia, Hilary Abrahams (2010) in the UK and an ongoing study headed by Jane Ursel in Canada. Despite interviewing 121 women only eight in the Australian study were interviewed twice over a 15 month period. Similarly, although the Abrahams (2010) study took place over a longer time frame (between five and seven years after leaving) with women interviewed between two and three times, only 12 were interviewed in person and all had lived in refuge accommodation.

This study sought to fill a knowledge gap by following 100 women and their children who had used a range of domestic violence services over a three year period (2011-2014), interviewing them four times. The overarching aims of the project were to identify:

- What factors support long term settlement, how do they interrelate and at what points in the process are they particularly important?
- When do obstacles to resettlement occur and how can they be overcome?
- How can community resources best be developed and integrated for long term support of survivor resettlement and independence?

The findings provide an evidence base that can be used to improve support for women and their children in the process of rebuilding their lives.

New commissioning processes and the move towards generic rather than women-specific services meant that the violence against women and girls sector was already facing a funding crisis. However what was not envisioned at the outset of the research was that it would track women and their children during a period of economic austerity in which resources in both voluntary and statutory agencies would become further depleted (Women's Aid, 2014) and the possibilities for women and children further limited by welfare reform, shrinking social housing provision and cuts to Legal Aid. Rights established over four decades were eroded, making establishing safety and freedom a harder won project for this group of women and children.

Unsurprisingly the impacts of these changes became an increasing reference point for women and the key workers at Solace Women's Aid. This context made the research aim of understanding the role played by community resources in supporting survivor resettlement and independence even more significant.

¹This is a six year study involving over 600 women within the three Prairie Provinces and who are interviewed twice a year over 4 years for a total of 7 waves of interviews. This is due to be completed in 2015.

Context

It is estimated that around 3 million women experience at least one incident of domestic violence each year. For those women who experience repeated violence, the availability of specialised support services is essential for their access to safety and justice and being able to move on with their lives (Coy et al., 2007).

Innovative forms of specialised support for women experiencing domestic violence originate in, and have been developed by, the women's sector for forty years and are now considered essential responses (Coy et al. 2007) that are mandated for under Article 20 of the Istanbul Convention on Violence Against Women (Council of Europe, 2011). Refuges, helplines, self-help groups and advocacy all grew out of grass roots responses, rooted in the principles of providing spaces where women feel safe to talk about what has happened to them, are believed and respected and through this able to explore their options. Access to such support is available free at the time of need and is not dependent on involvement in the criminal justice system.

Yet reports such as Map of Gaps (Coy et al. 2007; Coy et al. 2009) and A Growing Crisis of Unmet Need (Women's Aid, 2014) show that services are under considerable pressure to cope with demand: helplines are often engaged; refuges are full; counselling sessions oversubscribed; and Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVA) have to ration their support to individuals designated at high risk. Given that it remains an ongoing challenge for the women's sector to access the funding required to meet demand at the point of crisis it is, perhaps, no surprise that the longer-term support has never been a priority for funders. This is despite the fact that we know domestic violence has long term consequences, including: physical injury and disabilities; long-term mental health issues including self-harm and suicide; constrained socio-economic opportunities; and social exclusion (see, for example, Walby and Allen, 2004; Kelly and Lovett, 2005; Scott et al, 2013). Since perpetrators are males who are known and trusted, domestic violence also damages social relations – undermining the ability to trust others and the fabric of connections linking neighbourhoods, families and friendship groups (Coy et al, 2007).

These persisting challenges in women's lives are not a current priority for national or local governments, where there is an increasing focus on time limited, high-risk targeted support. Commissioning practices are also driven by cost resulting in contracts being awarded to generic providers at the expense of dedicated specialist projects such as Solace Women's Aid (Women's Aid, 2014). This focus on risk rather than needs-led support results in 'fire-fighting' high risk cases and neglects the efforts to increase women's safety and autonomy over the longer term, both of which sit at the heart of this study.

Key concepts

This research project was designed to explore how women who have experienced repeated violence are able to rebuild their lives. The concept of coercive control (Stark, 2007) recognises that it is the everydayness of living with unpredictability which saps women's energy, depletes their sense of self and isolates them from others: it decreases their 'space for action' (Kelly, 2003). One aim of this project, therefore, was to trace whether physically removing themselves from the perpetrator and accessing support services would enhance women's space for action, key resources in the process of rebuilding lives.

What is coercive control?

For the women who seek support from Solace Women's Aid, intimate partner violence is rarely a single incident but a pattern of behaviour that extends beyond physical force, beyond the home and beyond the duration of a relationship. In the academic literature, this understanding has been variously articulated through the concepts of power and control (Pence and Paymar, 1986), coercive control (Stark, 2007) and intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2009).

The concept of ‘coercive control’ (Stark, 2007) is particularly insightful since he argues that physical and sexual abuse is interwoven with three equally important tactics: control, intimidation and isolation. It is their toxic combination which entraps leading him to argue that domestic violence is not a simple crime of assault but a ‘liberty crime’ which creates conditions of un-freedom.

For Stark (2007) **control** is comprised of structural forms of deprivation (such as money, food and other survival resources), dictating choices and micro-regulating everyday behaviour through limiting options and sources of support. This control is rarely confined to specific times or places; rather it extends through behavioural regulation into all the spaces women enter, for example, employment, school and places of worship.

Intimidation instils fear, secrecy, dependence, compliance, loyalty and shame and is exerted through threats, surveillance and degradation. Surveillance falls on a continuum of tactics ensuring the victim knows she is being watched or that information about her whereabouts is being monitored in other ways such as tracking her use of time. Degradation is exercised through repeated acts and statements of disrespect which induce shame and self-blame. **Isolation** enhances control, instils dependence and limits access to help or support. Not only does this undermine women’s identity but the abuser becomes the primary source of information and validation.

Coercive control is distinctive in that it draws on personalised knowledge of women’s movements, habits, resources and vulnerabilities. As well as being situationally specific, it articulates within larger discriminatory structures. Stark (2007) argues it is gendered since many of the strategies rely upon women’s vulnerability vis-a-vis men’s privileged access to material and social resources and punishment is meted out if women fail to perform their roles as partners and mothers in the ways that men deem appropriate. Eva Lundgren (1998) calls this ‘gender constitution’ – that particular forms of masculinity are achieved and femininity enforced, through domestic violence.

What is space for action?

Stark (2007) argues that coercive control undermines the victim’s physical and psychological integrity. Since it is ongoing rather than episodic, its unrelenting nature means that women have little volitional space between abusive incidents to exercise autonomy. Many have a sense that the abuser is omnipresent and come to believe the perpetrator’s negative evaluation of them and their capacities. It is in this narrowing of life and options that women’s ‘space for action’ is diminished. Whilst some women constantly accommodate to this changing ‘abusive household gender regime’ (Morris, 2010) through giving up employment or education, limiting their time with friends and family, others continue to resist whether overtly or covertly (Madhok et al. 2013). Stark (2007) calls the moments of autonomy found in the struggle between agency and victimisation ‘Safety Zones’. These can consist of physical spaces where support can be garnered and/or maintaining other relationships. Alternatively they can be more ephemeral such as an object that has a special meaning only to the woman. Since Safety Zones offer women an alternative to subordination they rarely go unchallenged as perpetrators seek to find and destroy them.

The importance of expanding women’s space for action has been implicitly recognised in government policy: one of the potential advantages of Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs) posited in the Home Office documentation for the pilots was that they would offer ‘thinking time’ in which alternatives to living with violence can be contemplated (Kelly et al, 2013). Survivors interviewed as part of the evaluations confirmed the importance of having space for reflection and action (Kelly et al., 2013).

The report

The report is presented in twelve chapters. **Chapter Two** outlines how the research was done and the multiple layers of data collected and analysed. In **Chapter Three** we introduce the women in the research sample, present the forms and extent of coercive control they experienced and then explore their journeys through tracking how their space for action changed over the three year research period. This chapter also includes case studies which illustrate how there is no singular shared story. However, we do identify common themes within their experiences as well as challenges which we explore in detail within the chapters that follow. **Chapter Four** looks at the first step of journeys towards safety and freedom – seeking help and the role of Solace Women’s Aid. **Chapter Five** explores the extent to which safety resulted from leaving men and the difference between ‘being’ and ‘feeling safe’. Detailed data on post-separation abuse is presented alongside the extensive ‘safety work’ women had to undertake after the relationship had ended. In **Chapter Six** we examine the experience of women who had to leave their homes and go into refuge or some other form of emergency or temporary housing. The concepts of home and community are also explored in this chapter. The role of relational and social networks in rebuilding lives forms the basis of **Chapter Seven**. Following efforts to be safe and establish their home and support systems, women’s attention turns to their own health and well-being and this is the subject of **Chapter Eight**. Next we explore the experience of women who have children and how they parent through and after domestic violence. **Chapter Nine** outlines their involvement with a range of statutory agencies (schools, social services and the family court system) and how they manage formal and informal child contact arrangements with ex-partners. **Chapter Ten** then considers issues around employment, education and financial stability. We explore how (in)access to economic resources shapes women’s experiences. The impact of austerity measures and changes to the benefit system are reported on here although their presence is felt throughout the report. In **Chapter Eleven** we look at the status of women’s relationships, experiences of divorce and new intimate relationships. **Chapter Twelve** considers what we have learnt about the process of rebuilding lives; both the barriers to and the facilitators of change, returning to the original research questions. We highlight what women need to rebuild their lives and ‘get free’ from violence, what the obstacles are, and how community and governmental resources can support this process. Throughout we make extensive use of women’s own words.

2. How the study was done

This study was longitudinal by design and adopted multi-method strategies. These included: scales and questionnaires; in depth interviews; mapping exercises; life history calendars; focus groups; and artwork and photographs. Interviews and focus groups were also undertaken with a smaller number of children. All of the young people and survivors were given vouchers to thank them for taking part. Two sets of interviews were also undertaken with key workers at Solace Women's Aid. Ethical approval for the study was granted by London Metropolitan University Research Ethics Review Panel.

Research sample

One hundred women and seven children were recruited at the start of the project. By the end of the project almost two-thirds of the women were still engaged (n=65), having been interviewed four times (see Table 2:1). For a longitudinal study, this represented a good retention rate, especially given that many of the women had moved home and/or changed their mobile phone and other contact details over this time.


 *I thought we might lose contact somewhere down the way...and I'm notorious for changing my phone number (42, W4).*


Table 2:1 Retention of the sample over the four waves

| Wave | Research period | Number of women in sample |
|------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | January 2011 – December 2011 | 100 |
| 2 | January 2012 – December 2012 | 83 |
| 3 | December 2012 – July 2013 | 72 |
| 4 | September 2013 – March 2014 | 65 |

Where we present charts calculated over time the analysis is based on those remaining in the sample at each wave of interviews. Where women's words are used this is followed by a number and W1, W2, W3 or W4 to indicate which interview wave the quote comes from. Because each woman had a different starting point in her journey (some women seeking help before leaving, some seeking help at crisis point and some seeking help some years later) the W1, 2, 3 & 4 labels should not be read as 'stages' in moving on.

Time and resources were dedicated to retaining women within the sample. Solace Women's Aid employed a part-time research project coordinator to set up the interviews and maintain contact. A maximum of ten attempts at contact were made via phone/text/email. If there was no response, then women were sent a letter in the post to ask if they wanted to continue participating. If there was still no response the contact was assumed to be lost and another letter was sent saying there would be no further contact. At every interview women were also asked to provide the details of a trusted relative or friend who could be contacted if we were unable to make contact. Sometimes woman were unable to respond since they did not have the credit to text or call back.

Locations for interviews were negotiated, whilst most took place either in Solace offices or women's homes, others took place coffee shops and parks. Timing was also flexible with interviews taking place in the evening when women were working during the day and the researcher going back on more than one occasion to complete an interview when necessary.

 *Yeah, as I said – coming to my home has been easy for me (10, W4).*

The Solace research coordinator also regularly checked in with the women between interviews and acted as a point of contact for them during the research period. At times this resulted in an overlap between administering the research project and providing support to the women. When women provided a reason for dropping out of the study this was recorded. Reasons for not continuing included: moving away and wanting to have a fresh start; ill health; and life events such as bereavement. We describe each layer of data collection below in more detail.

Interviews with women

Women were interviewed four times in total across the three years. Questions consistently covered changes in the following areas: family; housing; financial situation; health and well-being; education and employment; immigration status; contact with the perpetrator; children's contact with the perpetrator; and new intimate relationships. Additional issues based on learning from the previous Waves were also explored in more detail. Various other measures and data collection tools were embedded within the interviews at different points.

Scales

A key element in this project was to understand and measure whether and how women's space for action expanded if coercive control was removed. Although an inverse relationship between coercive control and space for action is intuitively plausible, there was little, if any, empirical evidence to show this. Two new scales were created to explore this relationship.

Coercive control UK (CCUK) scale

There have been several previous measures of coercive control (see Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Dutton, Goodman & Schmidt, 2006), but all within a US context. Items from these scales were adapted to the UK, and additional items developed and tested. The final scale included 20 items – 15 of which were forms of controlling behaviour and five addressed jealous surveillance. Since coercive control is a personalised strategy, participants were also given the opportunity to add additional behaviours and 41 of the 100 women chose to do so. The response format was a five-point Likert scale measuring the frequency of each item (from 'always' to 'never' with an option to state 'not applicable' for example, if it involved children and the woman did not have any). This scale was only administered at the Wave One interview. High scores indicated that women experienced high levels of coercive control (see appendices).

Space for action (SFA) scale

The space for action scale was developed for this project as nothing similar could be found. We consulted Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale, the Index of Psychological Abuse (Sullivan, Parisian & Davidson 1991), the Patient Reported Outcomes (PROMS) for violence against women services (based on the Supporting People and Every Child Matters high-level outcomes: DoH, 2011), and a scale measuring general functioning and service utilisation, which Jane Ursel used for a similar longitudinal study in Canada (Tutty et al., 2009). The SFA scale comprised of a series of statements across eight domains:

- Parenting
- Sense of self
- Community
- Friends and family
- Help-seeking
- Competence
- Well-being and safety
- Financial situation

Participants could respond to each statement using a seven-point Likert scale that ranged from 'strongly agree' (7) to 'strongly disagree' (1). Participants could also indicate if a statement was 'not applicable' (0).

The SFA scale was administered twice during the Wave One interview: first with respect to when they were living with domestic violence and second from where they were at the time of the interview. At this stage an additional question was included under the support and relationships section asking about women's feelings with regards to intimate relationships. This scale was repeated across the next three Waves of data collection.

In the final Wave Four interview, women were given the opportunity to reflect on their scores over time. The values they assigned to each statement across all the interviews (including Wave Four) were plotted on a bar chart: a visual tool that enabled them to see whether their space for action had expanded, decreased or remained the same over time (see appendices).

Mapping social and relational networks

The importance of isolation within domestic violence, and the relevance of social and relational networks in rebuilding lives, was addressed both in interview questions and through mapping. Here, women were asked to identify important/supportive family members, friends and groups/organisations at every interview as well as negative or disruptive social networks. We asked for a postcode for each significant person, how often they were in contact, what forms of communication they used and how long they had been in contact. GIS mapping software was used to plot the spatiality of relationships for 95 women in Wave One. The networks of the remaining women who undertook this exercise in Wave Four (n=60) were then analysed to see how they had changed over time.

Emotional maps

During the Wave One interviews, women were also asked to think about how emotionally close they felt to family, friends and organisations. They were then encouraged to draw themselves in the middle of a piece of A4 paper and to depict who was close to them. Women chose to indicate who was closer to them emotionally in a number of different ways including by placing people close to them or far away, by the strength or colour of lines drawn between them and other people or through indicating the quality of relationships by the number of hearts placed next to a person.

In Wave Four the women were asked if they could recall these emotional maps and who might have been in them. They were then shown the maps and encouraged to share their reaction to them. Women who indicated that their maps were now very different were given the opportunity to draw them again and explain the differences.

Post-separation abuse questionnaire

In the Wave Three interviews a post separation abuse questionnaire was administered to all women who had separated from the perpetrator. It covered 39 possible forms of abuse across six broad categories, including a frequency measurement (see appendices).

- Physical, sexual, verbal abuse
- Stalking/harassment
- Using children
- Through social networks
- Using criminal/civil law
- Controlling financial assets.

Focus groups

The focus groups drew on themes which had arisen in the interviews: in Wave One experiences of statutory services; in Wave Three the concept of home; and in Wave Four the focus group women's sense of self. Where quotes from focus groups are used they are followed in brackets by FG followed by W1, W2, W3 or W4 indicating which focus group Wave the quote comes from.

Art workshops

Running alongside the research interviews were a series of art workshops in which women explored their feelings about 'home'. Art creation has been drawn on in social research to explore women in the

sex industry and refugees (O'Neill, 2001; Coy, 2012); it is considered a route to reaching aspects of life experience that cannot be elicited by conversation alone.

London Metropolitan University and Solace Women's Aid employed an art consultant to run the workshops and women were invited to attend and create models of what home meant to them when they were living with abuse and what it meant to them after leaving. The first art workshop took place across three days in Wave One. Unfortunately none of the women in the sample were able to make the art workshops that were scheduled to take place in Wave Three due to the ongoing challenges they were experiencing. However three women took part in the final series of workshops that took place in Wave Four. Researchers attended the workshops and wrote field notes on what was explored.

Interviews and focus groups with children

Children were interviewed twice – once at the beginning of the project and once at the end. All involved initially were children of the women taking part in the project. Basic details were collected in relation to gender, age and ethnicity as well as siblings and living arrangements. Show cards were used to frame discussion about what children remembered about life when they were living with the abuser, the impacts on their mum and how this made them feel. For example, children could choose pictures of faces showing different emotions or select words to complete sentences provided by the researcher. The support needs of young people were explored, alongside their hopes for the future.

Only three of the original seven were willing or able to be interviewed at the end of the project, so a focus group made up of five children in refuge was conducted to supplement their input. The second interviews were structured around what had changed in relation to living arrangements, school and family as well as what had helped them over the three years or made things harder. All of the young people also had the opportunity to discuss children's needs in the aftermath of domestic violence.

Interviews with keyworkers

Key workers across a range of services provided by Solace Women's Aid were interviewed at the beginning of the project (n=12) and again at the end of the project. The first interviews were used to gauge their perspectives on resettlement and what assistance women and children might require in the process of rebuilding their lives.

At the end of the project six of the keyworkers were still employed by Solace², although not all in the same positions. Some had been promoted and others had moved areas of service provision. The second interview explored some of the emerging themes and changes to services over time.

Analysis

A total of 348 interviews and 4 focus groups were conducted, the vast majority of which were audio recorded (a few did not consent to this and hand notes were written in these instances) and then transcribed verbatim. The recording and notes for one of the interviews in Wave Two and one of the interviews in Wave Three were missing when it came to do the analysis meaning that 346 transcripts and all focus groups were analysed using Nvivo. The quantitative data including basic demographics (age, marital status, ethnicity, employment status, citizenship, housing tenure, number of children), coercive control scale, space for action scale, post-separation abuse questionnaire were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

All of these sources of data are drawn on in the chapters that follow.

² Some of the staff had been TUPE'd to a new provider who had taken over one of Solace's main contracts

3. The women in the study and their journeys



“ I was walking down the road wearing only these flip-flops; it was cold and it was raining, but I didn't go back to him. I could have gone back and said 'I need some money for shoes or give me my shoes' because I ran away with nothing. I got these from a charity shop - my first real shoes. It was the first step towards independence. And now I just wear them winter time, they're like an old friend that you see once a year (50, W4).

All of the women in the research sample had used a service provided by Solace Women's Aid, some combination of: refuge accommodation, floating support, family support, independent domestic violence advocacy, counselling; legal services and workshops. For almost all (n=96) this was in relation to abuse by a husband/male partner, although for four the perpetrator was another family member (two from fathers and two from brothers). They were aged between 19 and 61 when the research began, with the majority (n=74) aged between 25 and 49. Almost all (n=95) defined themselves as heterosexual, three as bisexual, one as lesbian and one did not give her sexual orientation. Most (n=84) had children, with 176 children between them. Eighty-three of the children were female and 93 were male. Their ages ranged from 1 month to 38 years old.

Women were diverse in terms of origins and ethnicity: 42 were White (30 White British; 9 White Other; 3 White Irish); 39 were Black (15 Black African; 10 Caribbean; 5 Black British; 5 South Asian; 2 Asian British; 2 Asian Other); and 17 were of mixed ethnicity (n=6) or described themselves as 'other' (n=11). The race/ethnicity of one woman was unclear and one chose not to define herself. Almost three quarters (n=74) were British citizens, 13 described themselves as 'other', 10 had leave to remain in the UK, two were permanent residents and one had been granted temporary admission to the UK. Almost two-thirds (n=65) defined themselves as religious (27 Christian; 19 Catholic; 14 Muslim; 3 other; 1 Buddhist; 1 Sikh).

In this chapter we explore the extent to which women experienced coercive control within their relationships and how this impacted on their space for action when they were living with the abuser. We then look at how women's space for action changed over the course of the project.

Experiences of abuse

The length of time that women were in a relationship with the abuser was between 3 months and 48 years. The average length of time was just under ten years (mean = 9.7). Abuse within the relationship lasted between 1 month and 36 years. The average length of abuse experienced within the relationship was just over seven years (mean=7.2).

More than a third (n=37) of the women reported experiencing all forms of abuse (physical, sexual, psychological and financial) within the relationship; all of the sample, bar two had experienced physical abuse and one other, with two reporting only psychological abuse.

A third (n=33) had experienced domestic violence before.

●● *I suffered domestic violence when I was younger, I was only 18, from my daughter's father but I wasn't aware of these services then (64, W1).*

Although we did not ask specifically about abuse in childhood, almost a quarter (n=23) volunteered this information. Eleven disclosed child abuse and nine had witnessed their father abuse their mother. One woman talked about both child abuse and childhood domestic violence and a further two women referred to 'violence' when they were growing up. This echoes research on re-victimisation (Messman-Moore & Long, 2000) and meant that many of the women also required support to deal with childhood legacies.

●● *I witnessed a lot of domestic violence within the relationship [between] my mum and dad...I was on my own a lot and there was a lot of alcohol abuse...and then because they had their own stuff I was open to sexual abuse from other people that came in (69, W1).*

Coercive control

In the first interview women were asked to complete the coercive control scale; 95 of them reported experiencing coercive control (including in two of the family violence cases). For each item in the scale they were asked to rate this on a scale of one (low) to five (high). The responses varied considerably; however the mean value was 3.2 with a standard deviation of 1.0.

The insidious, and to some extent invisible, nature of coercive control was very apparent: very few, for example, gave examples of being explicitly told 'No – you can't do that'.

●● *Everyone was complimenting me 'Look at you, really nice – that top really suits you' and he just said to me, 'That top's not your colour' and I never wore it ever, ever again (42, W1).*

This made it complex to decide whether and how often they had experienced different forms of coercive control.

“ R: Did the abuser control who was allowed to stay at/visit your home?

W: No, but then again I would often not invite people over on the basis that it would become awkward or difficult. So in fact I'd never been told people can't come but I would just impose that. So what I'm saying is that I never felt completely free to have anybody over, I'd have to think about it. So 'sometimes' feels like the right response' (89, W1).

Women were invited to share other forms of coercive control not covered in the scale: here there was evidence of perpetrators manipulating any particular vulnerability, with race and immigration status, personal histories and/or faith used to demean and/or create a climate of fear.

“ He would be always 'Dirty mixed breed, half breed' you know, every day, throughout the day (36, W1).

“ So my husband used that against me to say you can't go anywhere without me you don't have any papers in this country (86, W1).

“ The constant nagging and put downs of me as a person and of being totally honest with him about my upbringing and he'd use that against me (71, W1).

“ He always put it down to the bad spirit that he was physically abusive...he asked me to pray for him every time before I go to bed for this spirit to go away from him (100, W1).

Following this the space for action scale (see research methods) was introduced, to be completed in the first interview in relation to being with the perpetrator and now, and then repeated across the next three Waves of interviews. There were no significant differences in space for action between the group of women with a male partner, those who were married and those who experienced abuse from a family member. There were also no significant differences in space for action for women whose children had contact with the abuser and women whose children did not have contact.

The relationship between coercive control and space for action

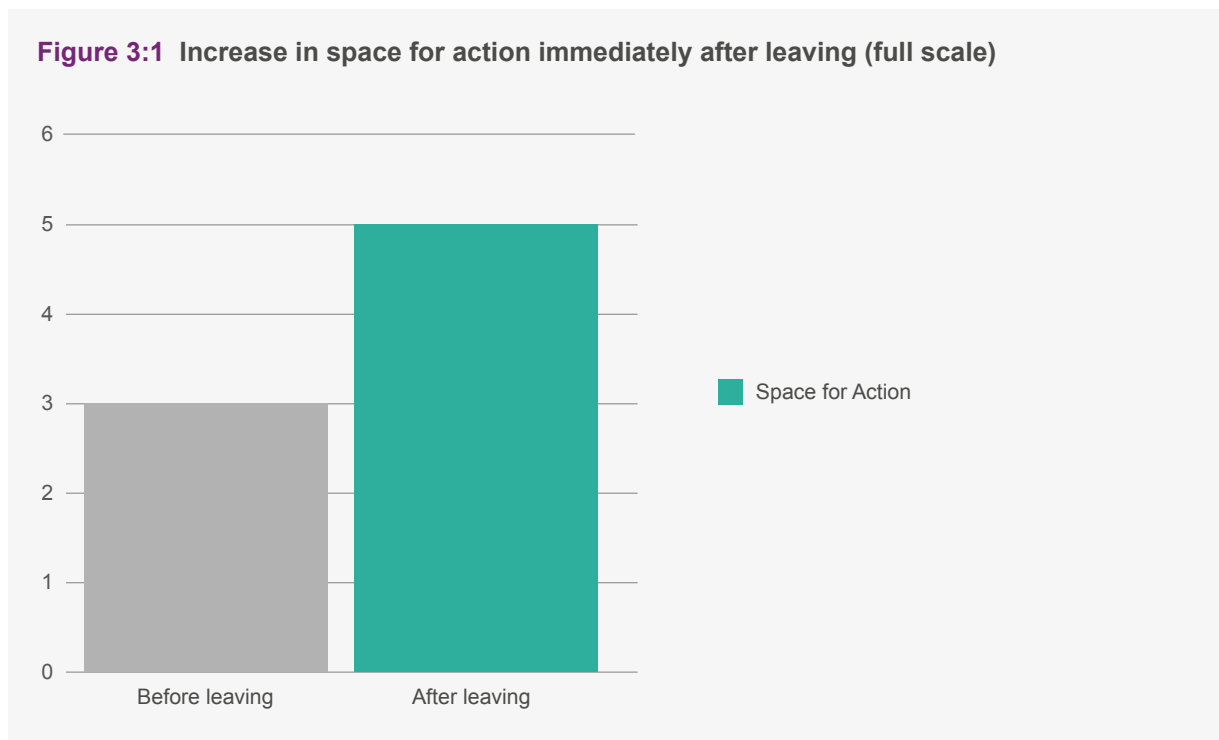
The relationship between coercive control and space for action was explored in two ways: by correlating coercive control scores with space for action scores before leaving and comparing differences in space for action before and after leaving. Based on Stark (2007) and Kelly (2003) we expected that the impact of coercive control on space for action would be strongest while women have a relationship with an abusive male, particularly if they are living with him in an abusive gender household/regime.

The scores whilst living with the perpetrator correlated significantly with some aspects of space for action but not all of them, suggesting that coercive control affects areas of life differently. The strongest relationships were with respect to well-being and safety – space for action was lower when coercive control was high. Similarly, coercive control impacted negatively on women's ability to see friends and family, and distinct effects were evident on ability to manage finances and engage in the community.

There was less of a correlation between coercive control and women's sense of self, help-seeking and competence. Last but not least, an unexpected finding was that coercive control was linked to high levels of space for action in relation to parenting. Perhaps this is the site in which women are ceded most control. Alternatively, it may be that women over-estimated their capacity to parent when living with domestic violence, or that they consistently put their children's needs before their own and did everything in their power to protect them.

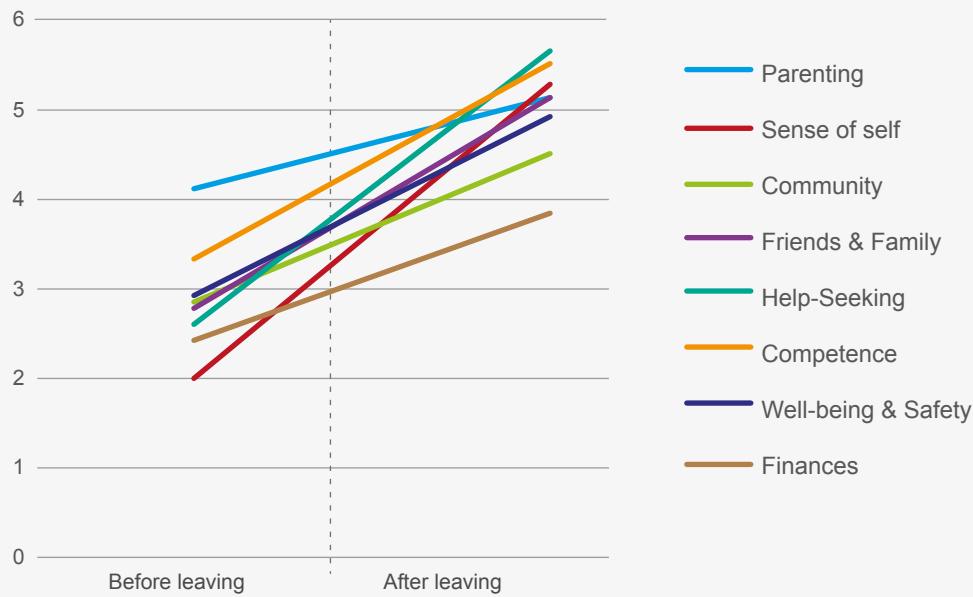
The impact after ending violent relationships

After leaving, space for action increased significantly across all areas (see Figure 3:1) as women experienced freedom from everyday micromanagement and control.



Scores for the sub-scales reveal greater changes in relation to sense of self, help-seeking, and competence (see Figure 3:2), even though there appeared to be no statistically significant relationship between these three areas and coercive control. Here actual freedom from the abusive household regime clearly made a difference, suggesting these areas may be difficult to put into words and map onto survey questions about coercive control.

Figure 3:2 Increase in space for action immediately after leaving (all domains)



Not a linear process

While space for action increased considerably after leaving the abusive relationship (Wave One, 2011), it changed little over the following two years (Waves Two and Three: January 2012 - September 2013). By Wave Four (September 2013 – March 2014) however, women’s space for action had increased again across all areas. This shows clearly that dealing with violence and its legacies is not a linear journey, but rather a more complex process (see figures 3:3, 3:4). The qualitative interview data at the heart of the chapters which follow provide insight into the many twists and turns which interfered with the processes of rebuilding lives that all of these women were involved in.

Figure 3:3 Changes in space for action over three years: community, friends and family, help-seeking

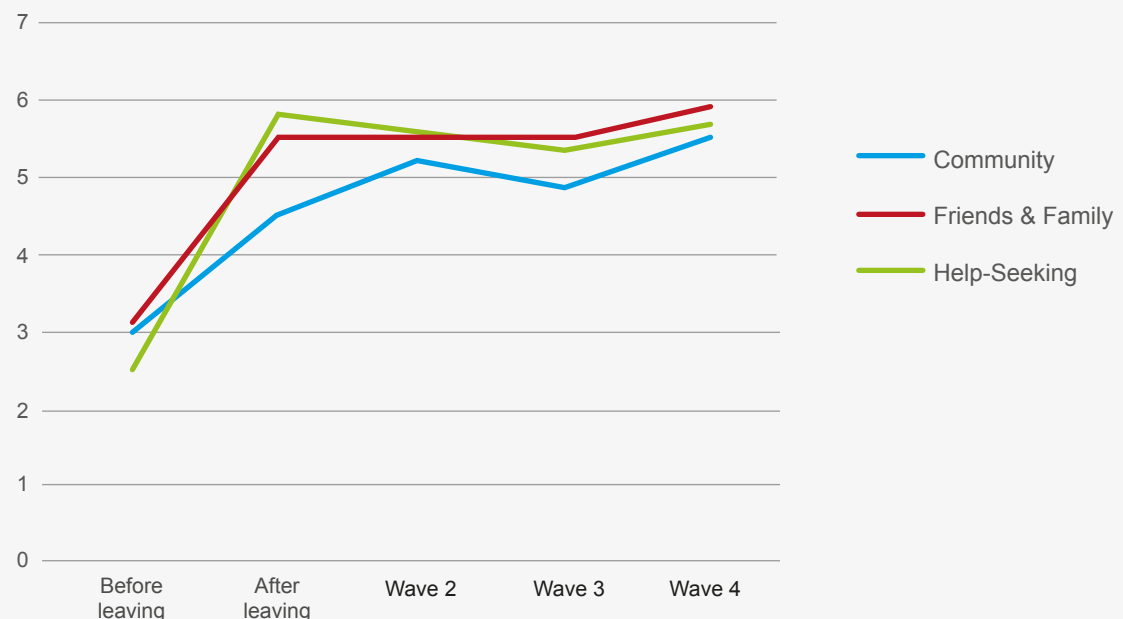
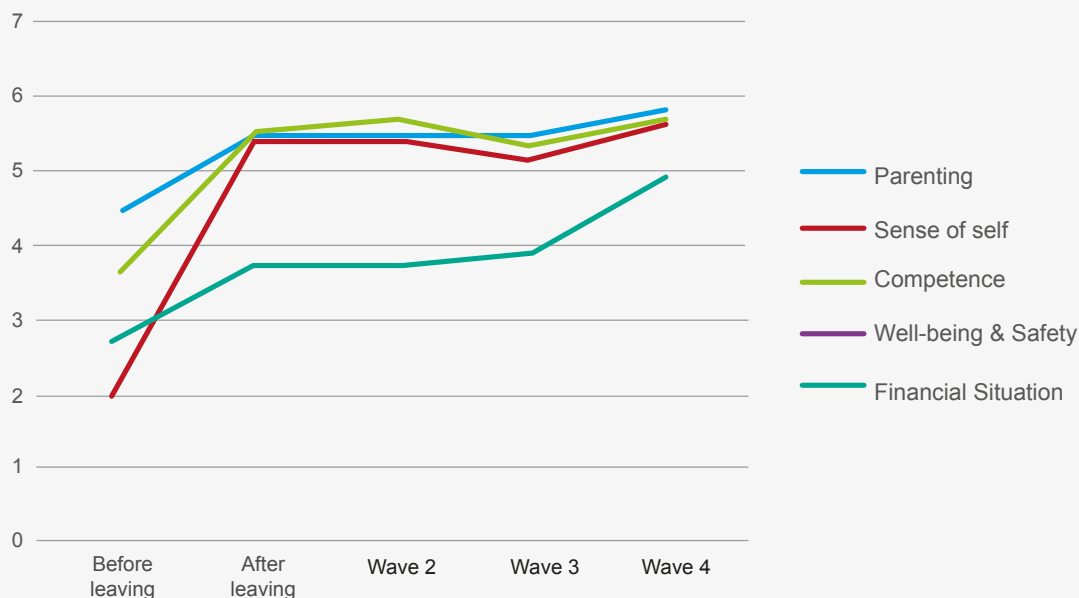
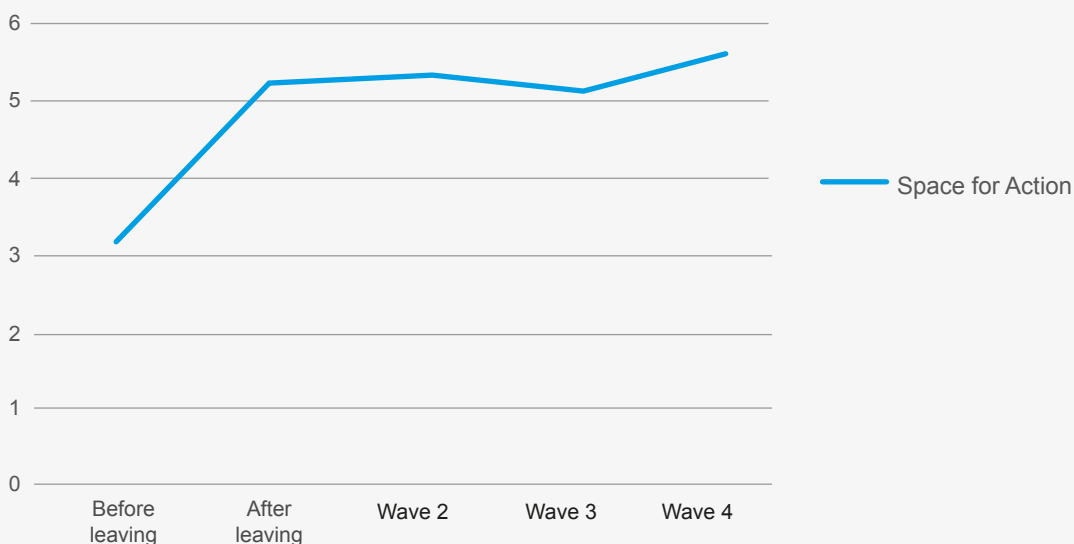


Figure 3:4 Changes in space for action over three years: parenting, sense of self, competence, well-being and safety, financial situation



Combining all the measures over the three years (see Figure 3.5) shows that after an initial and rather dramatic expansion of Space for action, change leveled off whilst women were addressing various challenges (Waves Two and Three: January 2012 - September 2013) before a new period of expansion.

Figure 3:5 Space for action over three years (all areas)



There is no basic norm for space for action for women who had not experienced coercive control as the scale used was developed as part of this project. It is not possible, therefore to compare to a normative 'high' or 'low'. We can, however, see how participants were distributed over the scale and how this changed over time. Taking the mid-point of the scale as a score of 4 before leaving, average scores were clustered below this whereas scores afterwards clustered above it.

The distribution over the Waves also shows a progressive movement 'up' the scale over time (see Figure 3:6)

Figure 3:6 Space for action Wave 1 Before leaving

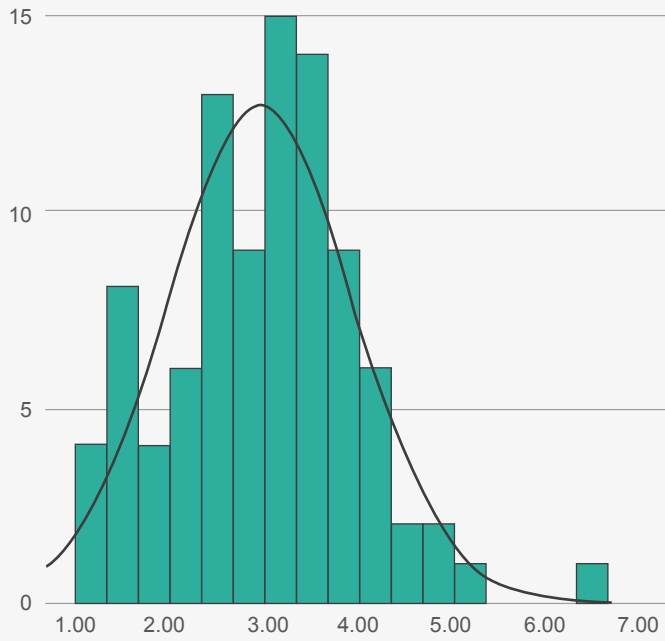
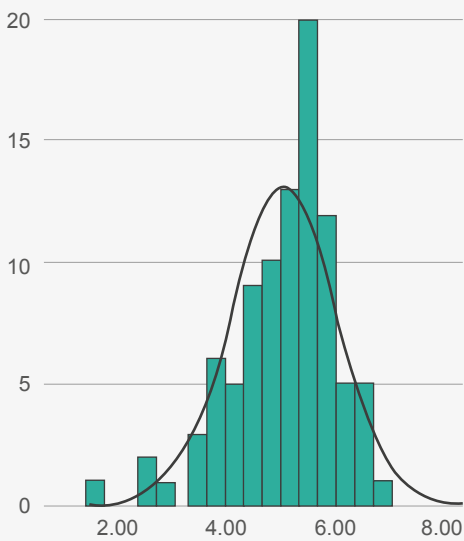


Figure 3:6

Space for action Wave 1 After leaving



Space for action Wave 2

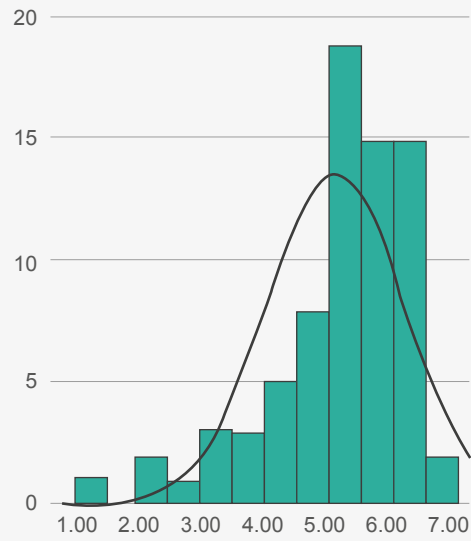
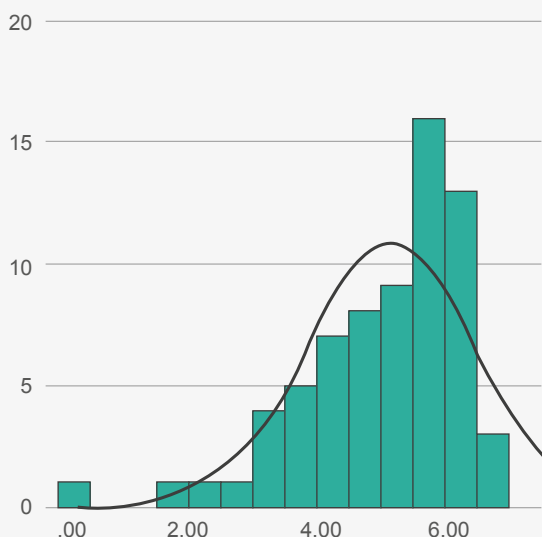
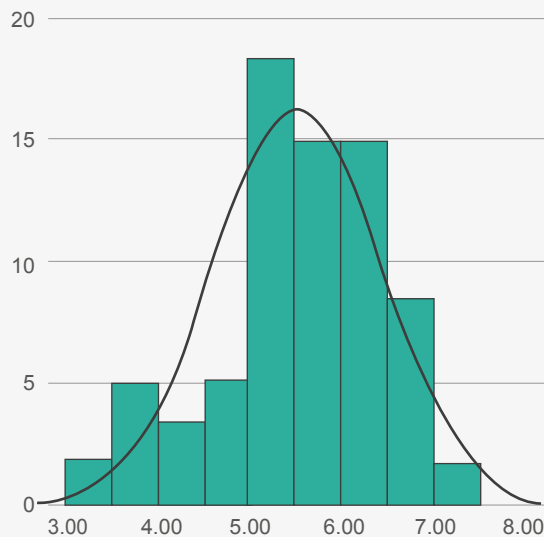


Figure 3:6

Space for action Wave 3



Space for action Wave 4



It is also possible to explore the proportion of participants locating themselves within the scale over the research period. Table 3:1 compares the lowest 25 per cent, the middle 50 per cent, and the highest 25 per cent before leaving, after leaving, and at Waves Two, Three and Four. Before leaving, the 25 per cent of respondents with the lowest scores were in a range of 1 to 2.34, whereas after leaving, the 25 per cent lowest scores were in a range from 1.49 to 4.54. This table shows that over time there are shifts at all layers of the sample.

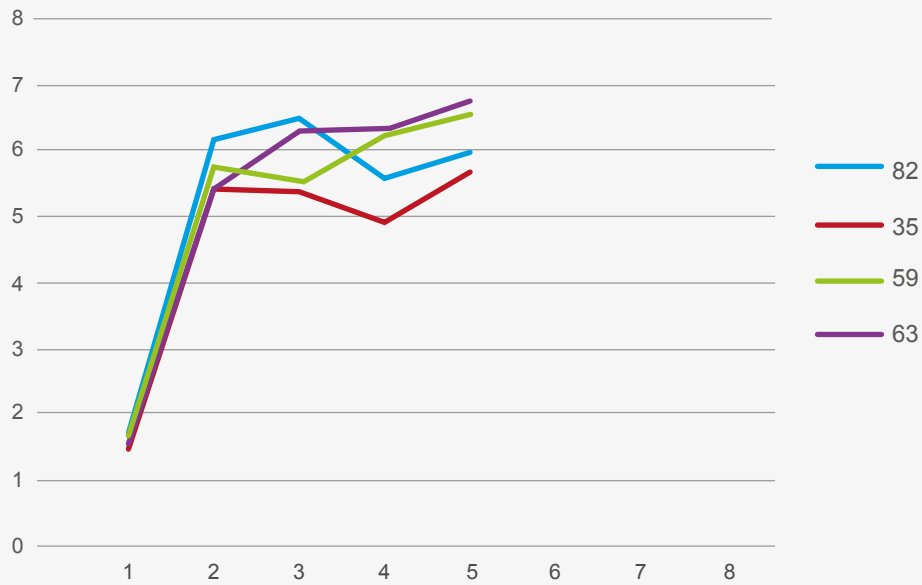
Table 3:1 Expanded Space for action across time and layers of the sample

| | 25% at low end of scale | 50% at center of scale | 25% at high end of scale |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Before leaving | 1.00 to 2.34 | 2.37 to 3.49 | 3.60 to 6.51 |
| After leaving | 1.49 to 4.54 | 4.56 to 5.66 | 5.69 to 6.69 |
| Wave 2 | 1.46 to 4.57 | 4.66 to 5.89 | 5.97 to 6.80 |
| Wave 3 | 1.83 to 4.26 | 4.29 to 5.96 | 5.97 to 6.54 |
| Wave 4 | 3.31 to 5.00 | 5.26 to 6.09 | 6.26 to 7.00 |

Individual journeys

The previous section shows that women began and ended up in different places. We explore this more here through figures showing these differences for three groups of four women. The plotlines represent an individual: four women who, before leaving, had very low levels of space for action (Figure 3:7); four women who had higher space for action before leaving (Figure 3:8); and four women with different trajectories (Figure 3:9). In Figure 3:7 we see a group of women who were so controlled that they were unable to exercise agency and choice in the relationship; the spike on leaving of a five point increase is the greatest in the dataset.

Figure 3:7 Four cases with low starting values



Space for action before (1), after (2), W2 (3), W3 (4), W4 (5)

In Figure 3:8 we see a group for whom coercive control was not so effective in diminishing their actions, so the changes are not dramatic. The patterns in Figure 3:9 suggest that the processes of change were very different, with interference in the mid or later points, possibly due to: post-separation violence; other life events such as bereavement; or being stuck in a period of waiting before resettlement in a permanent home is possible (see later chapters for exploration of these issues).

Figure 3:8 Four cases with low starting values

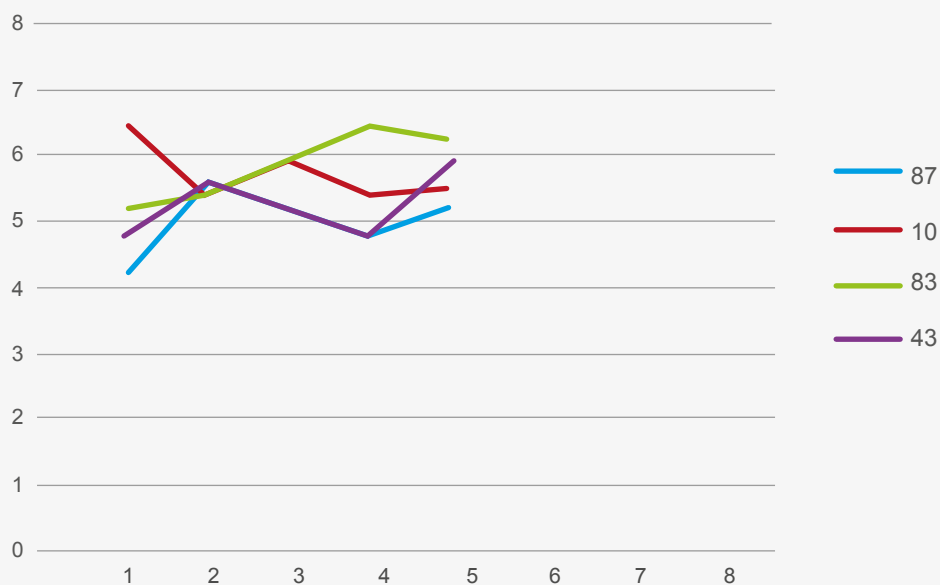
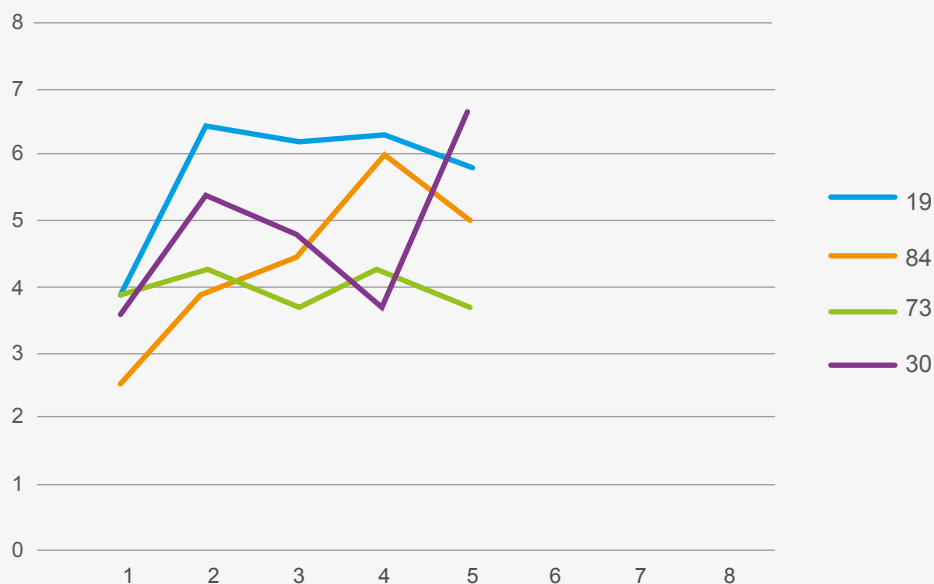


Figure 3:9 Four cases with different trajectories

Space for action before (1), after (2), W2 (3), W3 (4), W4 (5)

Case Studies

The data presented so far in this chapter is for the sample as a whole or specific ways of looking at individual women's journeys. Below are seven case studies which illustrate the diversity of women in the study, their particular circumstances and how change happened over the four interview waves. They have been chosen to highlight the complexity of rebuilding lives after separating from a violent man.

1. Moving forward

Background: Nora is White British and was in her late thirties when we started the project. She separated from her partner of two years after physical and psychological abuse. Two reports to the police before this only resulted in cautions. Nora did not go into refuge because she did not want to be separated from her pets, so moved into private rented accommodation. She started to drink after separation as a coping strategy, pondering on her last chance to settle and have a family. She had counselling at Solace for four months.

W1: When we met Nora she was working full time and had just started a relationship with a former boyfriend (not the abuser).

W2: She and her new partner were saving for their own place. They were planning to have children. Her confidence was growing – she was writing and doing other creative activities.

W3: Nora was expecting a baby. She still needed to talk about the abuse but found people resisted/denied what had happened. She and her partner were experiencing some financial difficulties after he became unemployed.

W4: The child had been born and Nora was not in employment. Her partner had got a new job that came with accommodation so they had moved. She is intending to change career. Her relationship with her family had improved and she felt happier.

2. Additional challenges

Background: Affa was born in mainland Europe and settled in the UK when she got married. Her family is from West Africa. She was nearly 40 when we met her. She had two children under ten. She recalls psychological abuse from early on in the relationship, financial abuse and she was prevented from going to work. Physical abuse began when Affa was pregnant with their first child. His family was aware of his behaviour and condoned it. She called the police on a number of occasions and they referred her to Solace Women's Aid where she accessed floating support and counselling for a year. She pressed charges for Actual Bodily Harm (ABH). Her husband was convicted and was in prison for three months. On his release he breached an injunction by coming to the house. She reported this to the police but continued to feel unsafe.

W1: When we met Affa she was in social housing and wanted to move. She was also studying for an NVQ. There was no contact between her ex-husband and the children.

W2: Affa was diagnosed with cancer and so went to stay with family. Her ex-husband had reported her to the police for child abduction. On her return the children began having contact with him but he was not paying any child maintenance and she was struggling financially. She wanted a divorce but he would not give it to her.

W3: The children were still seeing their father but Affa had met someone new.

W4: Affa had to go to court because her husband wanted shared custody of the children. She thought this was because he wanted a bigger flat. She had broken up with her boyfriend, partly engineered by her ex-husband who had discredited her to him.

3. A half freedom

Background: Sally is White British and was in her mid-fifties when we met her. She had grown up children, one of whom was living at home with her own child. She had been married for over 30 years and her husband was abusive throughout the marriage. She experienced psychological, sexual, physical and financial abuse, including threats to kill Sally. He had forged her signature to re-mortgage the house and she ended up losing it and had to move. She accessed floating support, counselling and legal support from Solace over two years.

W1: When we met her she was not working due to health conditions and was depressed.

W2: Sally was on a higher dosage of medication and seeing a psychiatrist because she had nearly had a nervous breakdown. Her ex-husband had moved across the road and was living with another woman. She saw him when she went out and he was watching what she did. As a consequence she had left to visit her sister.

W3: Sally was still on medication and having problems sleeping. She was also still seeing the psychiatrist. Her ex-husband continued to live across the road.

W4: Sally's ex-husband had moved away and had recently been sentenced to a term in prison for breaching an injunction taken out by his new partner. Her grown up children were getting calls from his family asking them to visit which was unsettling. Her adult child and grandchild had just moved out of the house and she was now having to pay bedroom tax. As a consequence she was struggling financially. In addition to this she had just been assessed as fit to work and was appealing this due to her health conditions.

4. Overcoming Injuries

Background: Faye moved to the UK from the Caribbean as a child. She was in her early fifties at the outset of the project with adult children from a previous relationship. She was abused by a new partner of two years but they did not live together. Nine months into the relationship he began to sexually and physically abuse Faye, stalk and call constantly. When Faye tried to end the relationship he tried to kill her, causing her to jump from an upstairs bedroom window, breaking both legs. She was too scared to disclose what had happened at first but told a counsellor at the hospital and they referred her to Solace. She did not want to report to the police. She had support from Solace for 18 months via floating support and counselling.

W1: When we met her Faye had mobility problems due to her injuries and was in constant pain. She was renting a property through a housing association so he did not know where she was. She had taken NVQs at college and wanted to get back into paid work.

W2: Faye was unemployed and struggling financially due to a mistake in her benefit payments. She was doing voluntary work, however, and was involved with her housing association. She was exercising a lot to strengthen her leg muscles.

W3: Faye had a part-time office job. She was also seeing a consultant for pain management and had a referral for counselling. She felt socially isolated but had begun building bridges with her family.

W4: Faye's health was much improved and she was able to walk longer distances. Her counselling referral on the NHS had never come to anything due to a series of administrative errors. She had been promoted at work and her employer was funding a professional qualification. She has started to get phone calls from her ex-husband which she was ignoring and looking to block. She had a male friend which she thought might turn into something but she was taking things slowly.

5. Single parenthood

Background: Emily is White British and was in her early twenties when we met her. She had a small child and had moved home twice in order to be safe from her ex-boyfriend of 3.5 years – the father of her child. He was psychologically, physically and financially abusive. Emily left him when she was pregnant and then went back. When his behaviour did not change she left again and was referred to Solace via Victim Support after reporting him to the police for assault. The case did not proceed due to lack of evidence and she found the police unhelpful. She used IDVA, legal and counselling services at Solace for about six months.

W1: When we met Emily she was in private rented accommodation. She had just been contacted by a solicitor because her ex-partner was seeking child contact. She was happy for this to take place as long as it was supervised. He had left her in debt so she wanted to sort out her financial situation, go back to college and get a job.

W2: Emily was considering moving out of London because she did not feel safe. At the same time she was trying to access social housing and had the help of a solicitor. She had a new boyfriend. Her parents were getting divorced and her relationship with her father had broken down. She was depressed and not taking her medication. Her ex had dropped the child contact case and his new girlfriend was pregnant. She was struggling with her child's behavioural problems.

W3: Emily had secured social housing but was moved to a hostel for five months before this. When she moved in the property it was in a state of disrepair and she had limited funds. She had no furniture and there was a problem with housing benefit. She was back in college and doing an NVQ. Her child's behaviour had improved.

W4: Emily was unhappy in her new home as her ex-boyfriend was hanging around the area and she was not getting on with her family. She had been stalked and sexually assaulted in the street. Her new partner had moved in. Her child was in school and continued to have no contact. Her new partner was helping with childcare as she was studying and also volunteering full time. They continued to struggle financially due to the housing benefit mistake and as a consequence were in arrears with the rent.

6. No recourse to public funds

Background: Suba came to the UK from Africa on a marital visa. She was in her early thirties when we first met and had two small children. Her husband was physically and psychologically abusive. After separation he had abducted one of the children and it had taken her several weeks for them to be reunited. She had insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds.

W1: When we met Suba she was in a refuge run by Solace. She was waiting for counselling and was keen to sort out her immigration status and go to college.

W2: Suba had obtained Indefinite Leave to Remain and wanted to get a divorce. She had moved out of the refuge and had been living in temporary accommodation. She had just received permanent accommodation but it needed doing up so was staying with her in-laws in the interim. She had also started college.

W3: One of Suba's in-laws had died and her ex-husband's family had stolen money from her. She was very keen to sort out her property so she could move in, and away from them. She was still at college and wanted to go to Africa to visit her family.

W4: Suba was living in her new home; she still had work to do on it but she was getting there. Her children were doing well and seeing their father every other weekend. He had tried to rekindle their relationship but she was not interested. She was still at college and hoping to undertake some professional training.

7. Pressure to take him back

Background: Satinder is from South Asia and came to the UK nearly 30 years ago. She was in her early fifties when we met her and had three teenage children. She had moved four times to escape from her husband who was physically, psychologically and financially abusive. She could speak very little English and regularly suffered from migraines. She had recently been assigned a floating support worker from Solace and was also using the counselling and legal services.

W1: When we met Satinder she had started to learn English and had just passed her driving test. She was working for a charity and living in temporary accommodation, whilst bidding for social housing properties. She felt judged by her community and this limited her social interactions. She wanted to expand her networks but found it hard to trust people. She wanted her children to go to university.

W2: Satinder's husband made himself homeless and she was put under considerable pressure by her in-laws and children to take him back. She relented, but then had to call the police several weeks after he moved in because his abuse continued and on one occasion he tried to kill her. She made him leave, cut ties with her in-laws and was pursuing a divorce. Satinder was having asthma attacks due to anxiety.

W3: Satinder was facing eviction as the landlord wanted to increase the rent. One of her children is disabled and she was worried that she might have to move out of the area and lose the care package she had fought to have put in place. She had the support of her local MP who was helping her get permanent housing. She was coming under pressure to look for suitable husbands for her daughter. Her oldest child was working and contributing towards the household expenses and this was helping.

W4: Satinder had still not been re-housed and since several of her children were now at university she could only bid for smaller properties. She was being hassled by her landlord and she wanted the local authority to deal with him. She was also experiencing ongoing post-separation abuse with her husband constantly coming to the house but had given up calling the police as they seemed to take no action. Her daughter was engaged to be married and she was struggling financially with the cost of the wedding. Her daughter was also expressing fears that her new husband would be abusive like her father. She was finding work a welcome distraction and had just accessed more counselling via her GP. She had also recently gone back to Asia to explore the possibility of moving back there.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have presented overview data on the process of rebuilding lives in three different ways: by looking at changes over time for the whole sample of women; exploring individual lives through the quantitative data and then presenting seven cases studies which illuminate the diversity in women's lives and journeys. What they tell us is that coercive control affects many areas of women and children's lives, but there is a marked expansion in women's space for action in the period following separation. In the two years afterwards this change is less evident, but by the final interviews, movement forward had resumed for most women, albeit that they were not yet where they had hoped to be. Rebuilding lives and remaking selves are, therefore, lengthy processes in which women and their children face a number of hurdles. The chapters which follow explore the facilitators and barriers to establishing safety and freedom, and document the costs of these journeys.

4. Help-seeking and women's use and assessment of solace service

Image: Emotional map (26, W4).



- “ Solace has helped me process where I've come from to where I am now and to help me – and the children – to process our thoughts and feelings; support us in becoming stronger. So although my heart is quite strong because I'm in a good place now, Solace is encouraging me to be stronger still and giving me the independence to go forward with my life (33, W1).

Help-seeking

Women were asked to respond to statements related to help seeking within the space for action scale. Before ending the relationship within which they were experiencing abuse only 18 reported that they were able to ask for help when they needed it. What discouraged them from taking what they termed 'that first step' included: being told by the abuser that nobody would believe them; not having the 'space' to report due to continuous surveillance; and threats being made about the consequences of reporting. Some women also noted that isolation meant that they had no-one and no-where to go to:

- “ So you find it really hard to take that step, because you know there's nobody behind you to catch you. The only person that's going to catch you is the one who's going to slap you. You know? (FG, W1).

Unsurprisingly, the familiar pattern of not recognising their experience as domestic and/or sexual violence and being unaware of domestic and sexual violence services emerged.

“ I started contacting them [the National Domestic Violence Helpline] and had quite a shock when they said it was domestic violence, because I didn't think it was, cos it was more psychological and financial than anything (FG, W3).

Some talked of wanting to disclose abuse but not being asked. There was also a concern about who to seek help from and being cast as a victim.

“ But I still struggle sometimes to talk about things because I've learnt that if you show emotion to people, people think you're weak, they'll think you're vulnerable, they take advantage (13, W4).

Several women saw themselves as helpers so when it came to them needing help they waited until things reached crisis point. 'Shame' was also a strong theme in exploring barriers to reaching out.

“ What this [experience] has done for me is not to not feel the shame and keep it quiet but to knock on the services' door which I'm still doing and say 'please help me, it's your job to help me' (1, W1).

“ I've seen through this process that I'm a human being, and you know there are times when I do need a bit of help and there's no shame in that (71, W4).

“ Right at the beginning I saw how important it was to break down the shame you know of living in a domestic violence environment and stuff, and I think that really helped to be able to go 'this is what I need' and to be able to communicate (36, W4).

Confidence about seeking help grew over time, usually after recognising that what had happened was not their fault and that help was available. This marked the beginning of women's journeys. However, as more time passed it became harder to ask for help as there was an expectation that they should no longer be in need of support. This suggests we underestimate the complexities in help-seeking.

“ But there is always that feeling that you don't want to keep asking...I should have made more progress than this (3, W4).

“ What has been the hardest thing? The fact that I haven't been able to do everything myself and that I've really had to swallow my pride and ask for help on many, many different levels (39, W4).

Referral to Solace

Women came to Solace Women's Aid through a variety of different routes: 85 were referred by another agency (social services, the police, hospital, GP, mental health crisis centre, local authorities, housing, careers advisors, Citizen's Advice, Family Intervention Projects and Camden Safety Net); nine were told by a friend; one had had previous contact; and five came under the category of 'other' including word of mouth, internet search engines and directory enquiries. Other routes involved the National Domestic Violence Helpline, Women's Aid services in different parts of the country and the former Sojourner Project as well as other NGOs such as Victim Support, Latin American Women's Rights Service, the Gaia Centre, Compass alcohol service, and the Which Direction counselling service.

Contrary to popular perception, Solace was not always accessed at the point of separation. Some made initial contact before this and others sometime afterwards. The length of time women had been in contact with Solace Women Aid ranged from 1 month to 8 years. On average, women had spent 1.2 years using services, an indication of the length of time it takes to resolve the challenges of ending violence and dealing with its legacies.

The numbers using different Solace services at Wave One were:

- 47 floating support
- 42 counselling
- 39 refuge
- 35 legal advice
- 24 family support
- 23 IDVA support
- 5 domestic violence workshops
- 1 the drug/alcohol service.

The importance of the holistic model is evidenced here with only a quarter (n=28) using a single service.

The importance of specialised services

What mattered to women was that Solace understood domestic violence, and through this women were listened to, offered support and afforded the respect that was so lacking in their relationships.

“ “ *You know, because I don't feel I was supported by any of the services apart from Solace (32, W2).*

“ “ *The only ones that actually understood were Solace Women's Aid (87, W3).*

“ “ *I think there should be more Solaces and there should be a wider network and there should be more training for the external world out there (7, W4).*

This represented a safe space, one aspect of which was the women-only setting. Women talked about being believed and not judged. They felt validated and understood, receiving recognition for coping and surviving abuse.

“ “ *It was nice just to be able to talk to somebody about it and have them believe me; you know or not judge me (5, W1).*

“ “ *Even though obviously they didn't know me, personally, they showed, you know, sisterly care, whatever you want to call it really. Is it because they either have gone through it or they know someone who has, that's made them want to work for Solace? Whatever it is, it is empathy that they have (8, W1).*

“ “ *I don't really know what I would have done without them [Solace] to be honest they were really helpful they were so good, never judged, never made you feel bad or anything like that - just supported (6, W3).*

Coming from a context where they doubted their own perspectives and where other agencies had failed to take them seriously, validation also came through meeting other women from different cultures and backgrounds and sharing common experiences, whether that was through refuge accommodation or group activities.

“ “ *They gave me a tremendous amount of hope and validation (89, W1).*

“ “ *Sometimes when I can't sleep, I go on the Women's Aid forum which is fantastic. You know, a group of women and they're like 'Oh my god, this is happening or the police have done this or – you know – and we really support each other. You know, and it's all anonymous. I've been on there for about a year. And so everybody knows what you're going through - it's a fantastic site (FG, W1).*

““ *When I moved to the refuge it was like a fresh air, cos there was other people that's gone through the same, you could talk in the evening, you could sit at the table, you could discuss it. If it wasn't for the refuge I don't know, you know (50, W3).*

““ *Because I remember when we did sessions here I look at them and compare their story and my story and if they did it I can do it too. So that also did impact me and it helped me also to know that I'm not on my own there's women out there also went through what I went through and they're changing their life so if they change their life I can change mine too (82, W3).*

It is easy to underestimate the harm, and setbacks, that misunderstandings and ignorance about domestic violence can do, whether by family and friends or other agencies.

““ *I think the overriding thing I've learned is that actually it set me back by almost two years by expecting family, friends and my networks to help in some measurable way... if I had effectively been put in touch or made myself get in touch with Solace at a very early stage I think I would have been two years into recovery as opposed to almost being set back (89, W1).*

Having provided a safe space in which violence and abuse can be named and recognised, Solace created the possibility to think about options. Importantly, this included time to process what had happened, make sense of it and address emotional issues which many women needed before turning to challenging practical issues. Solace was, for many, the first step in taking back control over their life and future.

““ *When I was overwhelmed and emotional and all over the place, she helped me get focused on the practical things I had to do, like getting a court order against him, those sorts of things (8, W1).*

““ *It's given me the time and space to re-evaluate myself; to work out what my strengths are and from now I'm moving forward (30, W1).*

““ *It would absolutely be impossible to have done it without Solace you know, to do it without the support. It's one thing going to a solicitor and going 'do you know what, I want a divorce, I want this, I want that' and it's another thing absolutely emotionally having the strength to do it... so it was Solace who held my hand... and sort of the patience and the drip feeding of support and nurturing and pushed me when I needed to help me, you know, catch me when I fell (36, W4).*

Again and again women referred to the holistic approach taken by Solace – a range of services, most in house, but some through linked partnerships. These addressed the emotional and practical needs of themselves and their children and they could move into and out of them depending on their needs.

““ *It's a holistic service – it's not just that you need accommodation; you need a lot more than that. And they put me on a domestic violence course and then a confidence building course (1, W1).*

““ *They offer me legal, they offer me support – floating support... the children are doing therapy through them and I mean, it's an entire world – Solace is there (36, W1).*

““ *We're lucky at Solace because we've got some floating support services [in this borough], and some of the IDVA services, counselling and legal - we've got loads. You can also refer, so she gets much more of a comprehensive package from one organisation. But in some other boroughs, that's not the case (KW8, W1).*

““ *I was having difficulty with the children, Solace Women's Aid was able to refer me to drama therapy and stuff like that for the girls, so I was able to empower them, rather than worry about them all the time (87, W3).*

Women observed that, unlike statutory agency workers, their key workers at Solace were available when they faced troubling times, and that they were not 'told' what they had to do but were offered knowledge and information through which they could make their own decisions.

“ “ *It was a relief when I first came here, you know, I was such a mess, and the women here were just really strong women, but not so much that you’ve become dependent on them, so they’ve supported you in becoming – your independence, who you are (16, W1).*

“ “ *I think it was, their guidance was very good, you didn’t tell me to do things, but you guided me to – make decisions, in one way or another, and I think that’s what I needed, I needed someone to sort of say ‘This is what – your predicament you’re in, and this is what you can do’ (20, W1).*

Having an advocate who could support women in their engagements with statutory services was also highly valued.

“ “ *It’s got me more able to get in contact with the housing and get them to actually listen to me. So before, I literally would call them, call them, call them, call them, left messages - nothing and then as soon Solace Women got involved that was it (72, W1).*

“ “ *At one stage I felt like everybody was ganging up on me and they’re [Solace] the only ones that listened to me and said ‘no, this is the way it should be we’re gonna get onto these people and help’ you know I had the social workers, I had the school, I had police, I had the courts, him – I had them all on me and I was like ‘what do I do?’ (48, W3).*

These contributions can be seen in the ways women described Solace as both life-saving and life changing; including preventing women from ending their own lives.

“ “ *I just hope that the government is still pumping more money into you guys and support you guys for the good work you are doing seriously because you save lives – you saved my own life, seriously (75, W3).*

“ “ *Because Solace is the only reason why I’m alive today, they’re the only reason why I didn’t end up killing myself (99, W3).*

The support provided by Solace was so valued that the key workers observed and many women talked about how they wanted to ‘give something back’, including wanting to volunteer for Solace, speak publicly about domestic violence or do other things to support the organisation.

Moving on from crisis interventions

Women reported mixed experiences about moving on from interventions designed to support them during crisis. This was particularly the case for women who were moving on from refuge accommodation. Some talked about receiving floating support for around 12 weeks after leaving refuge and moving into their own properties.

“ “ *When you have your house, for three months they support you (FG, W3).*

Others talked about getting regular phone calls to see how they were doing and the importance of this to them, even during the third and final year of the project.

“ “ *She would phone me once a week, even after the case and my ex was at prison, she would phone me once a week to see how I was. And, do you know, I think that made the difference (83, W1).*

“ “ *I do still have phone calls, regular phone calls. She rings me every 4-6 weeks to see how the move is going and if there’s anything else that she can do, if I need any more counselling or support for the children – I think they’re good (87, W2).*

“ I mean [key worker] said if ever need anything; even if I only need one session, don't hesitate to call her (13, W4).

Some women, however, thought that the shift had been too abrupt. Indeed the floating support service provided by Solace Women's Aid was reduced during the research period, helping to explain the variation in women's experiences of moving on from refuge.

“ There's so much help and suddenly it goes and I think that [there] should be more of a following up thing (20, W1).

This was a plea for support to be phased out gradually, and an assertion that an occasional phone call or text message would make a difference. Key workers also recognised this, and one reflected regretfully on how most of her work had become too short term, which was not in line with what Solace had long understood about the process of rebuilding lives after domestic violence.

“ When a woman left the service that was because they were happy and they were in the right place, they were moving forwards. Whereas now, if a woman leaves the service, she's leaving just because the crisis point is over, - but she's still not there yet. She's still not recovered. She's just maybe over the critical part (KW11, W1).

The impact of austerity measures was also evident in the reduction of possibilities in other agencies to refer women onto.

“ It's getting harder and harder to get anything in place for women. And, we feel it, where we can't offer a long term service and we're constantly under pressure to close cases and refer on. But it's kind of getting to the point of refer to where? (KW11, W4).

The overall impact of austerity measures included uncertainty for Solace staff, not being able to develop projects over the long term, more women and children being supported by less staff, being less able to build up trusting relationships with women due to having to do telephone work and working with women over shorter time frames. The outcome was that the holistic service developed by Solace and so valued by women was under threat.

For some, support around CV writing as well as long term career advice would have helped them around entering into employment. For employed women who had accessed floating support, there was also a sense of needing more for women not on benefits.

“ Solace is very much geared towards people that are on a low income... but I think, the sort of middle class where we're not really able to access benefits, but in fact are dealing with quite a lot of issues, you know domestically... I mean it's been a humbling experience for me to have absolutely no support, no money and no options (89, W3).

Access and cost was an issue for women who had moved some distance away from Solace's offices, making it difficult to get to workshops and other sessions, and others sought more provision in the evenings or at weekends.

“ I've received texts and information by post about events and workshops and stuff they're putting on but I've never really gotten involved because it's all the other side of London mostly so I tend not to attend (22, W3).

“ I mean I did ask about confidence building classes but the problem I have is because I work a lot of them are during the day and so I kind of miss out a little bit (6, W3).

“ I've found that the group stuff has been inaccessible to me because I work (10, W4).

Empowerment through knowledge

During the course of the interviews nearly all of the women referred to how they were using knowledge and strategies, learned through their interactions with Solace, on a day-to-day basis.

““ *That group was valuable because whenever I'm in a bit of a pickle, I just relate back to them, how people coped with their different scenarios. And actually, you do think 'Oh, I remember so and so saying that' you just reflect back and that's what I do (35, W4).*

The main areas where learning was drawn on were in relation to managing ongoing interaction with the perpetrator (including around child contact and post separation abuse), assessing new intimate relationships and supporting family and friends experiencing abuse. These issues are all explored in greater detail within the relevant sections of the report.

Not just in a crisis

As noted above, some women wanted support from Solace to continue, and even those who were coping would appreciate an occasional check in. The numbers of women accessing services fluctuated over time.

By Wave Two, 32 women (39 per cent) were still accessing services: refuge (12); floating support (9); counselling (3); legal (7); family support (2); and workshops (2 women). This decreased substantially by Wave Three to 10 (14 per cent) with most using legal or workshops, meaning all of the women who were in refuge accommodation in the first two Waves had moved on.

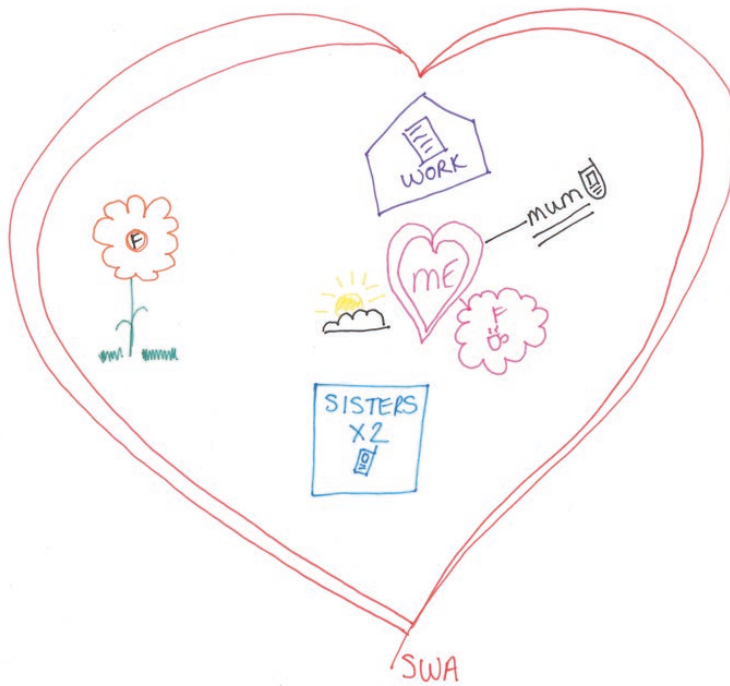
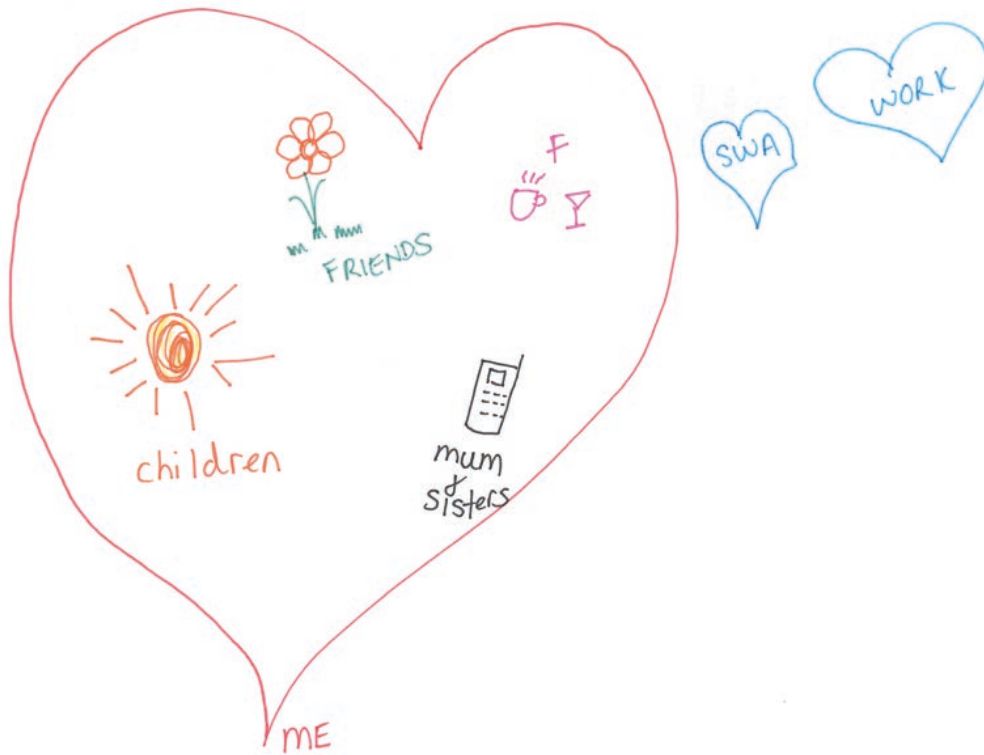
By Wave Four however the number almost doubled to 19 (a third of the sample at this point) with 15 of them seeking advice. As the rest of the report demonstrates the process of rebuilding lives is not linear, and support needs can continue for years.

Solace 'being there' to fall back on if needed was a common theme, evident in many still having it on their list of supportive organisations at the end of the research process.

““ *No, I won't ever take them [Solace] off – I'll always leave them because that's a continuous link (30, W4).*

Similarly the majority of women who included Solace Women's Aid on their 'emotional maps' in Wave One interviews wanted to keep them in their Wave Four maps even though the nature of the relationship had changed.

““ *I want to stick with the heart theme, but the heart is not now SWA, it's me, because I'm now completely comfortable with who I am whereas before I had SWA protecting me and holding me there so now I've branched out to be independent. And then I've put SWA on the outside because they're the resources I can pull on...that were there for me whenever I needed them. And I truthfully know that if I needed that support again, I could go and ask for it (15, W4).*



Some women who lived close by to Solace's offices mentioned seeing their keyworkers out and about in the area (something that a key worker also referred to) and this gave a sense of maintaining a link with the organisation. As did workers who went 'over and above' their work roles, who were seen to care about what happened to women after exit.

- “ “ *I still have an amazing rapport with [key worker] and with Solace. You know that's sort of unwavering. And you know, she's coming to the court case even though I'm not her client as it were, she's still coming along (36, W3).*
- “ “ *I still see her now sometimes when I'm doing the school run (42, W3).*
- “ “ *One of my support workers... her daughter goes to my son's school, so I see her every single day... even this morning I saw her and we always hug each other (52, W4).*
- “ “ *Well, guess who came down yesterday...I sent an email and I said, I told her what was happening and I said well, if you have the time, try to get the time off to say that you are coming to measure the distance that I have travelled. And she was down like a shot! It was so good to see her... we've kept in touch all the way along. We still do. We don't talk to each other very often, we'll exchange an email, whatever – she wasn't going to miss that yesterday (30, W4).*

Challenging times

This research project took place over the period of the first round of austerity measures and a new regime of commissioning violence against women and girls services. This had an impact on Solace services which did not go unnoticed amongst the sample, with some noting that key workers were often spread too thinly, and re-organisations meaning an established relationship had to be changed.

- “ “ *Well then, you build a relationship and trust with someone and then you have to start the whole procedure over again and you just lose confidence (22, W1).*

Interviews with the key workers indicated that cuts to Solace services were also being felt by staff. In addition to redundancies they mentioned difficulties in accessing interpreters, less face-to-face time with women and increased pressure to close women's cases. These changes reflected the ways commissioning changed during the course of the project.

- “ “ *My workload's increased in terms of administration. So it's become more bureaucratic. And you have less face to face time with the women (KW2, W4).*

The changes in law and policy over the three years also meant that what had been a right at the beginning of the project was no longer one at the end, with the increasing shortage of social housing (see later section) meaning women were spending far more time in refuges and temporary accommodation. Research indicates that on average, six months in refuge is most conducive to building resilience for independent living and to support women moving on from abuse (Bowstead, 2013.)

- “ “ *Women really for the most part won't need our services after six months. But they can stay here for as long as two years. I mean, years ago you could say well, within three to six months. Six months was long. You know? So, now it's really, really difficult (KW2, W1).*
- “ “ *I think, I lived there a bit too long and I think that women shouldn't be in refuges for as long. You know, it's not good, it's not healthy. I think six months should be kind of a maximum but it's very hard with the housing and stuff (92, W1).*

One woman, who had chosen to stay with her husband, wanted more flexibility in approach.

“ In my case I am quite unique in that I am still with my partner. I mean he has done a tremendous amount of work on himself... I feel safe but there needs to be some flexibility in the model that allows couples that have not endured extreme violence (89, W1).

Research as an intervention

The research process itself was valued, and seen by some as a way of maintaining contact with Solace.

“ I appreciate this ongoing relationship with you guys, it does help keep me a little bit grounded, knowing you're out there (68, W3).

“ And also purely selfish reasons, that it gives me a chance to kind of just talk about things where I've not had that ... you know just to keep a hand in at Solace (85, W4).

The role of the Solace research coordinator was vital here, since she was able to pick up on any difficulties (such as child contact, divorce, a need for more counselling) and take them back into the organisation.

“ I: What other support services would you say have been effective?
 P: I ended up getting two lots of counselling directly due to [research coordinator]
 I: Because in the second interview you talked about the sexual abuse
 P: Yeah
 I: Which I know you were also struggling with in the first interview
 P: It was phenomenal
 I: It was really nice to read that and see that it had made a difference (26, W3).

Highlighting available support at the end of the interview was required by our ethical protocol and took on additional resonance when a woman seemed vulnerable or disclosed things that she had previously not spoken about. There were, therefore, several unique features of the research methodology: the ongoing contact with women; the presence of a staff member from Solace who could pick up new needs and challenges; and feedback to Solace from women on an ongoing basis.

Conclusions

What women valued, and said made a difference about the services of Solace Women's Aid was an affirmation of the model of support that has been built up over the last four decades. This model still has refuges at the centre, safe houses which women and children can escape to when their lives are at risk. But radiating out from this central hub are many other support options which can be accessed by women who are attempting to resolve their situations from other locations – legal advice, floating support and independent advocacy. All women can access courses on understanding domestic violence, support groups, one to one counselling and workshops on a range of practical matters from confidence building to writing a CV. This enables women to craft a 'basket of resources' suited to their situation and needs (Sen, 1999).

Whilst a few women noted that the services were not provided in ways that maximised their options and access, be this because they chose to stay with a partner or that they maintained employment, the pleas for 'more' came primarily from women for whom the crisis was over. They had moved on, but the shadow of domestic violence had not been rubbed out. The holistic model should be able to adapt to these ongoing needs, but reductions in funding and commissioning of services being overly focused on safety and current risk leaves limited room for the longer term needs which this project has highlighted.

5. Being safe and feeling safe

Creating safety has been at the core of responses to domestic violence since the first refuges opened in the early 1970s. Legal and policy changes over four decades have sought to build protection through civil orders and bail conditions and to hold perpetrators to account, remove impunity, through improved responses by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). One hoped for outcome was that less women would have to leave their homes and everything familiar in order to find safety. The fact that refuges continue to be full and many more women escape into other forms of temporary accommodation shows that safety is hard won. For most, but not all of this sample they were not able to secure it in their own home. That they left is considered by many politicians and professionals to be ‘the right thing to do’, and that this will create a secure future. The data in this chapter on post separation violence questions this presumption and we explore the differences between being and feeling safe - with ‘being’ linked to less violence occurring and ‘feeling’ to the fact that it has not stopped altogether and may happen again in the future. Thus whilst reducing the risk of violence is a mantra for many agencies, it does not necessarily translate into women and children feeling safer, nor does it prevent violence and unsafety being a theme that threads through their lives long after separation. The data in this chapter needs to be read in relation to those which follow, exploring the extent to which women were able to access basic needs for long term security – protection, housing, finance.

Were perpetrators held to account?

Women were not asked specific questions about the criminal justice system. However questions related to safety and, in particular, post-separation abuse as well as supportive/unsupportive organisations led to women talking about criminal justice agencies.

A quarter had found the police helpful whilst involved with the perpetrator because they arrived quickly, took her seriously, made her feel safe and provided details of support organisations.

●● *He deny everything and the policeman look at him and say ‘don’t lie to me because the evidence is everywhere’ and he talk to him hard and that made me feel more courage to call again if I want to (10, W1).*

●● *He’s got an injunction, so he’s not allowed to – even though he did breach it, the injunction... I phoned the police and, you know, he’s gonna go to court for that (79, W1).*

It was more common for women to talk about barriers to involving the police, in particular not wanting to criminalise the abuser (especially if he was the father of their child). In addition, there were doubts about the police response given previous experiences of: the police being manipulated by the perpetrator into thinking that nothing happened and leaving the home without seeing or speaking to the woman; taking the side of, or accepting the story of, the perpetrator; attending but not taking any further action; being unsupportive in cases where women did not want to press charges; pressurising women into making statements; discouraging women from pressing charges; arresting women when the perpetrator made a counter claim; making no contact with women after arrest and charge; encouraging women to forgive the abuser; and displaying archaic attitudes about domestic violence.

●● *They wanted me to press charges and I was afraid to and it was like they were almost cross with me but I said to them ‘I’ve got to live here – I can’t for fear of reprisal and I can’t take the chance because I have children here’ and they weren’t willing to move me (6, W1).*

●● *There was one incident when I got punched in the face and I actually had a ring print on my face and there was a witness and the police phoned up and said ‘oh well it’s not going to go very far is it, so let’s drop the case’ (33, W1).*

“ He was bailed on the condition not to try and contact me in any way, shape or form and not to come near me and stuff like that. And he came out of the courthouse and went to the nearest phone box and got straight on the phone to me and started threatening me. I phoned them [the police] straight away and they did absolutely nothing (38, W1).

“ I could hear this officer in the front room talking to my ex-husband and his friend and saying ‘Right, yes, don’t worry mate – I’ve been there, got the t-shirt. I’ve been married; I’m on my second wife’ (90, W1).

Several of the interviewed children felt especially let down by the police. One boy thought he had not been listened to, and he and his mother were abandoned by the police. His position now was that he would not call them ‘even if he was in trouble’. One girl reported that it had taken the police six hours to turn up and the perception of the entire family was that they were considered liars. These encounters confirm the findings of a recent inquiry into the police response (HMIC, 2014) and show that despite policy changes many officers are yet to comply with guidance. The outcomes are damaging messages not only to women, but also to children.

A smaller number had the experience of a police report being referred to the CPS for prosecution; here a sense of disbelief was evident when the case was dropped.

“ They’ve got the floating support worker, they’ve got the 999 calls, my therapist came forward to do statements...the kids have given video tape evidence – he threw me down the stairs, broke my arm - how much more do they need? (FG, W1).

“ So let’s get it into court and let’s out it before the jury. Because at least then you’ve got your day in court... but not to even get to court, that really is my problem about it all (FG, W1).

Even where cases got to court, there were examples of special measures not being offered or being agreed to and then not put in place.

“ They were supposed to sort out all sorts of things for me – special measures...you were supposed to go in the back of the court, but he [policeman] led me up the front of the place. All his family were standing outside there – he marched me straight through and I had to walk past them all (38, W1).

Prosecutors in cases that went to court seemed under prepared, and hardly any women reported they had been kept up to date with the progress of their case – a key safety issue, since they would not know if the perpetrator was in custody or free.

“ It’s just paperwork and cases. It’s not humans; it’s not people (5, W1).

“ They never got back to me, I always had to chase everything, and I never knew anything (10, W3).

One woman echoed the point made in a number of research studies that the criminal and family justice systems need to be more integrated (Hester et al. 2008) raising the question of whether special measures should also be available in family courts.

“ He is on bail – four counts of rape, ABH and GBH and stuff but I still have to go to the family court and I really can’t – I can’t face him, it’s just too much (36, W1).

Pending prosecutions in Waves Two and Three were still an issue for a couple of the women leading to comments about the slowness of the criminal justice system. This led them to consider dropping charges in order to start the process of rebuilding their lives.

Worryingly, one woman had been given inaccurate advice not to seek professional help, such as counselling, in the interim as this could jeopardise the case. Similarly she was told not to talk to family or friends who might be called to give evidence.

“ I wanted to talk to my family about it – I couldn’t because she was going to be a witness. You know, so my sort of support network had gone, which was really difficult (36, W3).

Finally, both women and IDVAs expressed disappointment in the outcomes of prosecutions.

“ It’s been happening over and over and over again. There were so many police call outs. He’d got prior convictions and yet he’ll still get a community sentence (KW11, W1).

“ Why was he treated so lightly? I mean he was on a tag when he assaulted [new partner]; he wasn’t allowed out of his house between certain hours. He was on a tag for assaulting me and had come out of prison on a tag if he behaved himself. He came into the house, and he got another three months (10, W3).

The consequence of this virtual impunity can be seen in the fact that: fourteen per cent of women mentioned during their interviews that their partners had been abusive to previous partners; and that another ten per cent reported knowing that a partner after them had suffered abuse at the hands of their ex (these are not the same men).

“ I had lunch with his ex - it sounded like she was still frankly traumatised by it and had probably never spoken about it because perhaps no one would believe her (23, W1).

“ Over the past year, he’s done jail at least three times for beating up his new girlfriend (87, W1).

“ He’s beaten his latest girlfriend to the pulp – I think she had to be hospitalised – her face was black and blue. You know so as a perpetrator that continues (7, W4).

It is hard to imagine how women and children could feel safe when the response of criminal justice agencies is so unreliable and we still lack a systematic way of holding men who use violence to account.

Post-separation abuse (PSA)

For many women, intimate partner violence continues post-separation (Kelly, 1996; Humphreys & Thiara, 2003; Stark, 2007) sometimes changing form to harassment and occasionally becoming more dangerous, since separation is consistently found to be a risk factor for homicide (Aldridge et al., 2003; Dobash et al., 2004; Regan et al., 2007). Women continued to report needing police support across Waves Two (22 per cent), Three (ten per cent) and Four (30 per cent).

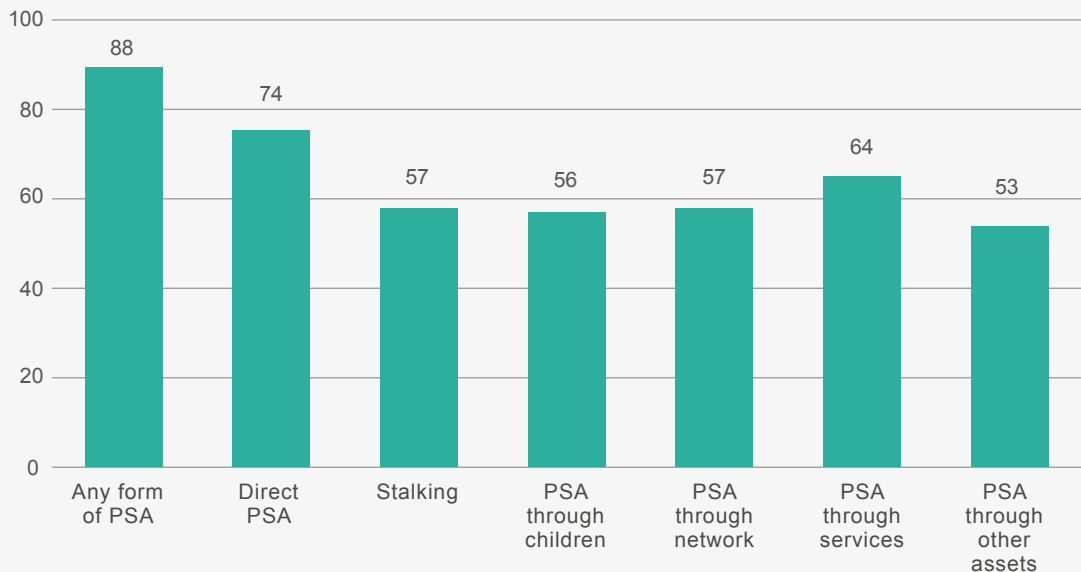
“ So I’d say for the first six, seven months it was ok and I started sorting myself out and then it kicked in; I think he saw he didn’t have any control anymore and I wasn’t going to take him back and then that’s when he was abusive and that’s when it got really intense (92, W1).

A post separation abuse questionnaire was administered in Wave Three, with the remaining 72 women answering a series of questions across six areas.

- Physical, sexual, verbal abuse
- Stalking/harassment
- Using children
- Through social networks
- Using criminal/civil law
- Controlling financial assets.

Figure 5:1 shows that the vast majority of women, almost 90 per cent, experienced some form of PSA. Direct PSA was particularly common, followed by abuse through services: over half experienced more than one of the six areas of PSA.

Figure 5:1 Post separation abuse.
Percentage of women who experienced one or more forms of PSA (n=72)



We explore each of the categories in more detail.

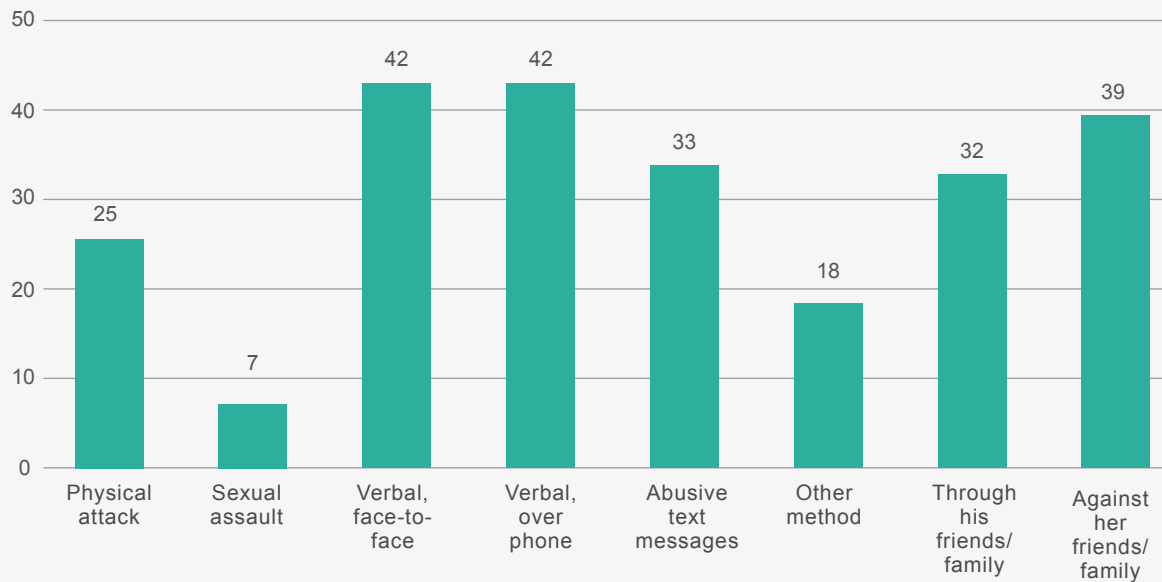
Physical, sexual, verbal abuse

Physical, sexual and verbal abuse (including threats) was reported by all of those experiencing PSA; a quarter had been physically attacked. It is also noteworthy that for a third this extended beyond the two parties, with his 'allies' abusing her, or her friends/family being targeted by the perpetrator, perhaps because so many women in this sample went to refuges and were thus unavailable. Figure 5.1 shows the types of abusive practices and how common they were.

The absence of safety, despite women's best efforts, is shown in that: some physical assaults took place in women's own homes; sexual violence included a number of rapes; death threats were not uncommon, including towards their children. Verbal abuse took place on the street in front of the neighbours. Some reported a regime of harassment through constant phone calls (including silent calls), texts and e-mails.

- “ That was one of the things he went to court for, oral rape they put it down as (36, W3).
- “ Well for one thing I had to move because where I lived was right round the corner from some members of his family who took the whole thing very badly and I got attacked in the street, verbally abused all over the place and threatened, and all the rest of it, not to turn up to court (38, W3).
- “ He just went up there and was like you know 'Where is she? Where is she? I know you know where she is.' And she was like 'Yeah I do, but I'm never going to tell you.' And he was like 'I'm going to burn the house down' and I'm going to do this (42, W3).
- “ All I know is my Mum got some quite horrible texts about him getting someone to shoot her (C1, W4).

Figure 5:2 Percentage of women who experienced physical, sexual, verbal abuse



The frequency measure shows that those taking place more than 15 times were: verbal face to face and over the phone; abusive text messages; and abuse of friends and family.

Stalking/harassment

Over 40 per cent of women were stalked or harassed post-separation. Physical forms of stalking, including stalking the children, were much more common than cyber-stalking (see Figure 5:3). Stalking took place most commonly around women's homes, neighbourhoods and workplaces. Women reported their ex-partners hiding behind plants and trees in gardens, sitting in cars outside of the house, approaching them in the street and seeking to gain entry to their place of work. These data alone provide insight into why for many women safety becomes associated with their ex-partner not knowing their home or workplace addresses.

Figure 5:3 Percentage who experienced PSA stalking



Men also turned up at places they knew that women would be, such as the local park or church as well as at the children's school. For a fifth of this group their ex-partner deliberately moved close to where they lived, making monitoring their daily activities more possible, recalling the micro-management they had been subjected to.

“ He was intimidating me and I got the injunction... then his sister purposely rented a house nine doors away from me and he was coming down the road on the quiet... I didn't leave my house for three months. I was imprisoned in my house because of this (74, W1).

“ He'd obviously seen me and got off the bus and he stood at the bus stop ahead of me. And I was pushing [child] in a buggy, and I couldn't move quickly enough. I was just trying to go. And he just wouldn't leave me alone (83, W3).

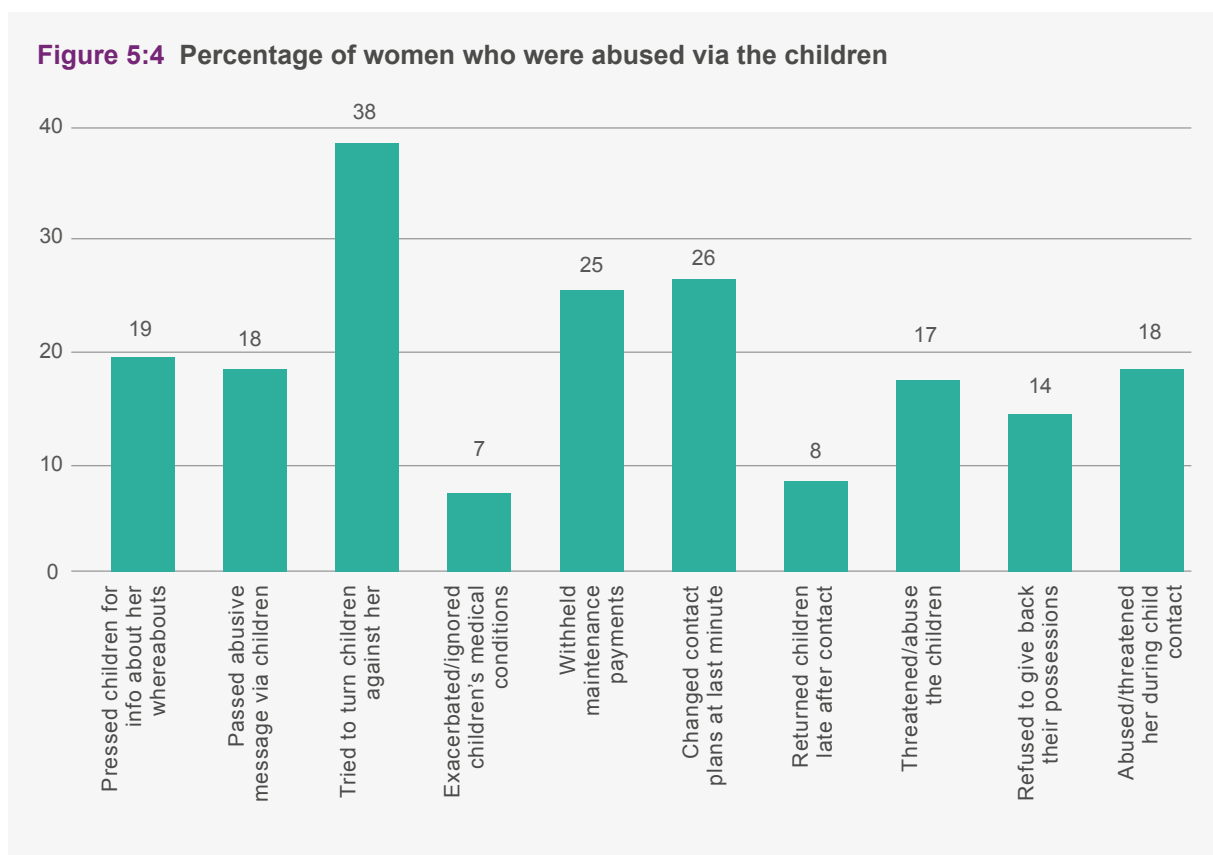
Another method of surveillance was undertaken via cyber-stalking and hacking into email accounts.

“ He hacked into all my accounts and changed all my passwords and things (10, W3).

Stalking was by definition repetitious, with a quarter saying that it had happened over 20 times.

Using children

Figure 5:4 shows the diversity of ways in which children were used directly and indirectly to continue domestic violence. Close to half reported abuse via children, with the most common (38 per cent) form being the abuser trying to turn their children against them, sabotaging efforts to rebuild their lives. This was also achieved through failure to adhere to agreements about maintenance payments or contact plans. Just over 15 per cent of women reported direct abuse of children or her children witnessing abuse against her during contact. This puts women at risk of being held responsible for the safety of the children (Hester, 2011).



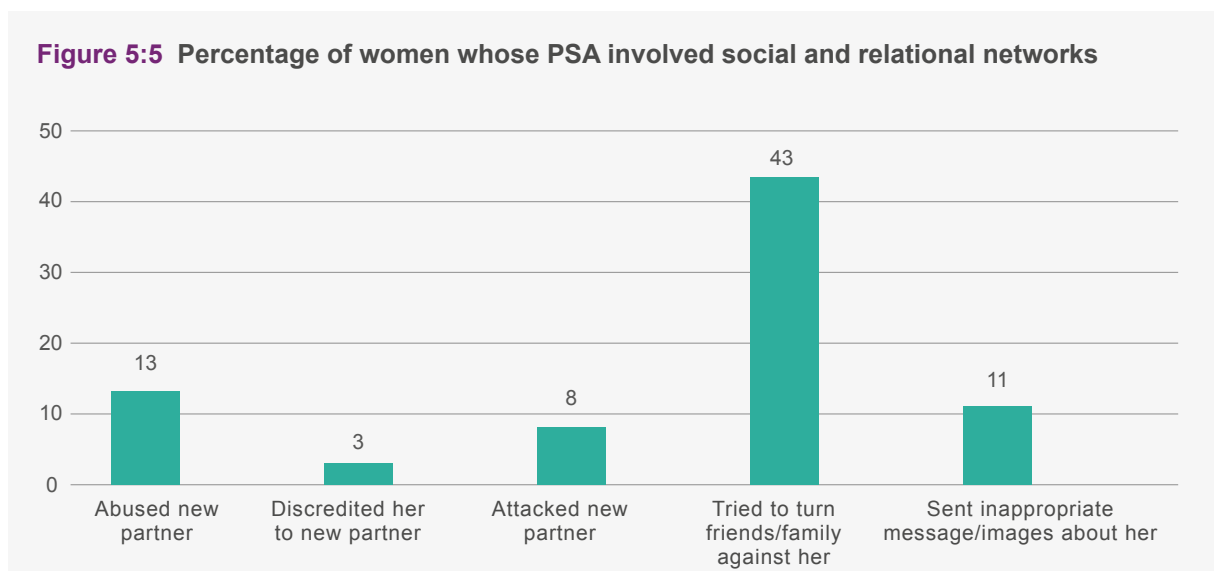
Child contact as a context for post-separation abuse was also noted by most of the key workers in their interviews (see also Coy et al, 2012). Women reported being physically and verbally abused during unsupervised contact visits and in buildings ahead of/during contact hearings. Children were also used to pass abusive messages back to their mothers.

- *We've had horrific cases where the contact - we could clearly see, and everyone can clearly see, it's used in order to subject the woman to further abuse - or it's a controlling way of knowing what's exactly going on in the woman's life. It's not genuine (KW9, W1).*
- *I've got a Prohibitive Step Order because he told me that he's going to take the children, he's going to kill them (36, W1).*
- *I went to court last year. He tried to attack me in the courtroom – in front of my son as well and then he tried to – and I was in a separate waiting room, and he tried to walk in there and attack me: I had to call the police and I reported it (47, W1).*
- *When my child came back from seeing him he was like 'My daddy said that you are bad' (11, W3).*

These strategies were also repeated often, especially trying to turn children against their mothers, inconsistent maintenance payments, changing child contact arrangements at the last minute and quizzing children about their address.

Using social networks

Figure 5.5 shows that by far the most common form of post separation abuse via social networks (40 per cent) was for the perpetrator to try and turn family and friends against the women. This represents a particularly insidious tactic since friends and family are a significant source of support.

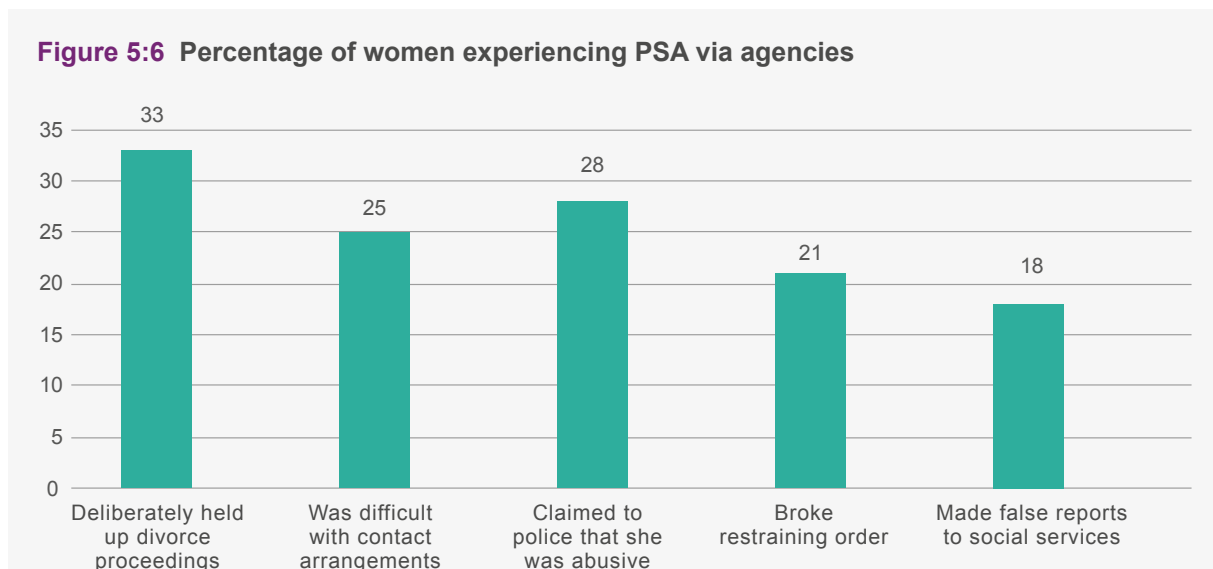


To a lesser extent women reported their ex-partner assaulting and abusing new partners as well as saying things to discredit them. These figures need to be placed in the context of the numbers who were in new relationships.

- *He actually found out where I moved to, I don't know how that happened I really don't know how that happened. But he knocked on my door one day and I wasn't expecting it to be anything bad I opened the door and it was him, he burst in and he assaulted my new partner (49, W2).*

Using agencies, including civil/criminal law mechanisms

A not inconsiderable number of men, over a third (see Figure 5:6), sought to sabotage women's attempts to seek support and extricate themselves from the relationship through agencies, including civil and criminal mechanisms.



Holding up divorce proceedings was the most common action, affecting a third of the Wave Three sample. This can be seen as a refusal to accept women's decision to end the relationship as well as seeking to continue being a disruptive influence in her life. The strategies used here included: claims that the marriage certificate was lost; refusal to disclose an address for the divorce papers to be sent to; ignoring divorce papers; pretending not to have received the divorce papers; not answering solicitors' letters; not turning up at court; and refusing to sign divorce papers. It is worth noting how many women recognised that this was a strategy that limited their freedom, recalling Stark's (2007) definition of coercive control as a liberty crime.

- “ He's still trying not to let me have my freedom... to let me get on my own way and do my thing and trying to still tie me down and trying to control me again (43, W1).
- “ He didn't sign the divorce papers and the court sent them again. Then he said that he didn't receive the papers and they sent them again and then he said maybe you have the wrong address. My solicitor said the court would send them by special delivery but when they arrived he said 'He's not here' (11, W3).
- “ It's like punishment – punishing somebody, getting back at somebody, it's more like you're really crucifying that person a second time, because you don't let the person have the freedom (43, W4).

Between a quarter and a fifth also had to deal with their ex-partner making false accusations against them to the police and social services; all of which were the subject of formal investigations. In a proportion these were repeated, meaning women were on a frightening merry go round of being under regular scrutiny by authorities.

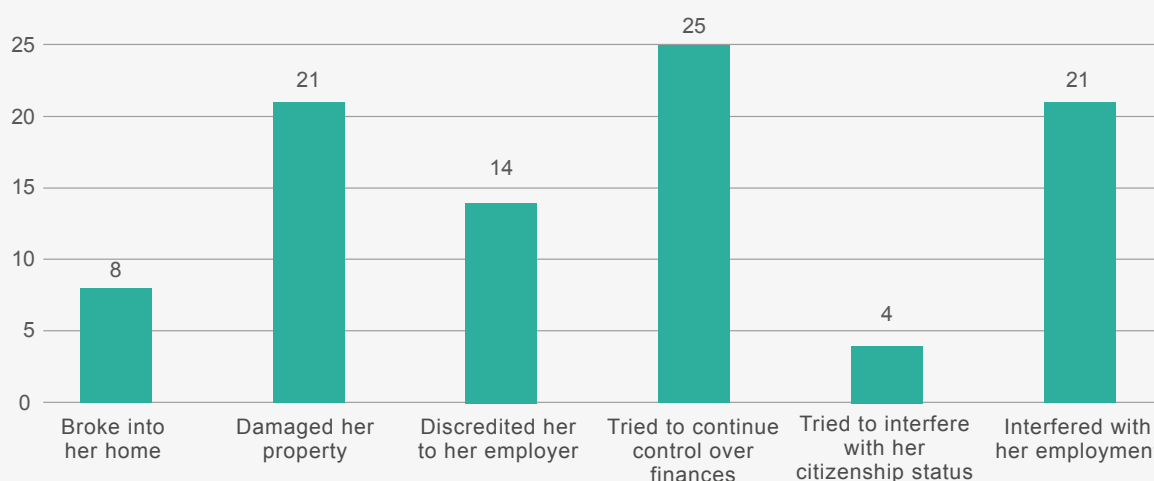
- “ I spent New Year's Eve in a prison cell. I was arrested for common assault, apparently because he made an allegation (17, W2).
- “ Social services were involved because he played them to make them believe that [her son] was being abused in my care (48, W3).

Control of financial assets and status

Seeking to control and limit women's financial assets (see Figure 5:7) was another direct interference into women's efforts to rebuild their lives, and in some cases was a continuance of the financial abuse they had experienced in the relationship: for one in five women this involved interference in their employment or damage to property (see also Sharp, 2008)

- “ And all this time my husband's been getting money for my children's benefits (50, W1).
- “ The things he did after the divorce was 100 times worse, he was gradually extending his range of his abuse by taking my credit card, stuff like that (71, W3).

Figure 5:7 Percentage of women where PSA involved assets and status



Damage to property included cars (smashing windscreens and keying paintwork) and homes (kicking in doors and breaking windows).

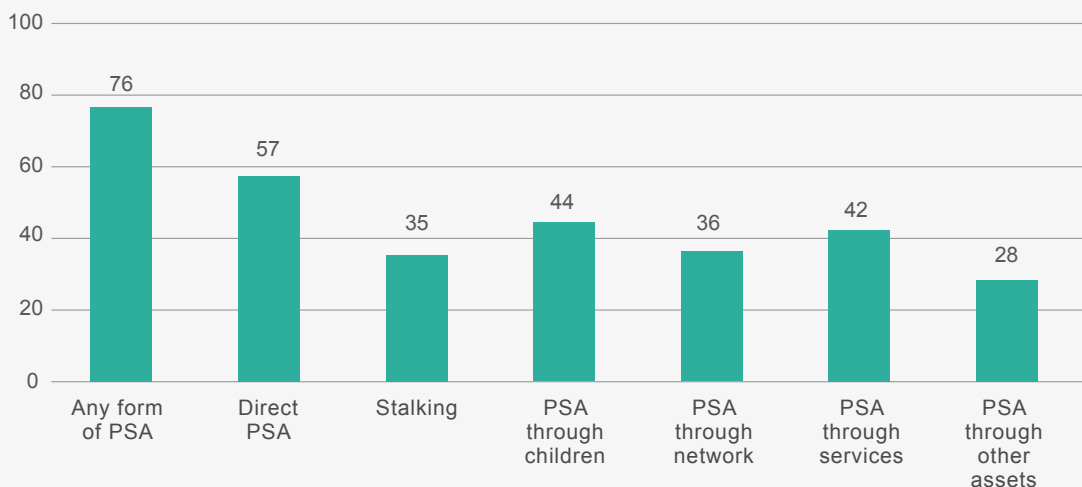
- “ Basically he turns up every three or four months, smashes a couple of windows and disappears...I heard glass breaking and I had my phone under my pillow and the sad thing is before I went to bed I used to dial the 999 so I would only have to press the dial button, before I used to go to sleep (87, W1).

- “ I've had my car keyed I've had the wing mirrors taken out of my car (58, W2).

Such actions led to women incurring additional financial costs and led to a couple giving up work, shrinking their economic resources even further.

Leaving and unsafety

Figure 5:8 below shows that three-quarters experienced at least one form of PSA many times (not just once or a few times). This means that these were not, in the main, occasional incidents but rather repeated efforts to continue abuse and coercive control. Importantly PSA was more unpredictable since women were often unaware of their ex-partner's location or moods, both of which they had monitored – and even attempted to manage – in the past. It is also important to recognize the deliberateness and intentionality of these abusive practices, and how much they had the potential to interfere with women's efforts to move on. They also offer a window on the limits of a policy focus on reducing risk and on the support needs of women who have left violent men and are presumed by many to be safe.

Figure 5:8 Percentage of women who experienced any form of PSA many times

Impact of post separation abuse on space for action

The detailed post-separation abuse data collected in this study reveals that, in many different ways, abusive men attempt to sabotage women's efforts to rebuild their lives, and that this, in one form or another, affects nearly all women. Since abusers seek to target the people and agencies that women go to for support, if they are not aware of this potential, this may make her and her children more vulnerable, at least in the short term.

We explored whether there were connections between post-separation and space for action, with the greatest effects seen in relation to participation in the wider community. Women talked about how their fear of seeing the abuser limited their use of public space.

“ I am an active member of my community’ [statement on space for action scale] - not anymore. I’m gonna put disagree. I did used to do PTA, summer fetes, you know, all that but it’s all a big risk, a big safety risk. You know, everything you want to do, you’ve got to do a risk assessment (87, W4).

A number of women and some of the children interviewed talked about how they did not like leaving the safety of their homes.

“ I can go days sometimes, and my partner says, do you realise you haven’t been out of the house for three days? (FG, W3).

“ I was afraid to go out at times, you know, just because there had been threats from his family while we were still living there, and then we moved and so only the people that we wanted to know knew where we were (C2, W1).

Indeed some women referred to high levels of anxiety and panic attacks related to going out. Other women expressed this fear as being connected to ‘not knowing’ where the abuser was.

“ I’m free in the sense I have no one telling me what to do, but I’m always conscious of the fact that I may bump into that person because it’s not like they live in another country or they live far away (22, W1).

“ He’s out there you know. I don’t know where he is. I always look over my shoulder (100, W1).

“ I feel safe all the time [statement on space for action scale] – I’m going to put neither agree nor disagree because although most of the time I do feel safe, I know that he’s always there somewhere waiting for his opportunity (28, W4).

Safe at home?

Although women generally reported feeling safer at home, some still felt vulnerable being at home on their own regardless of whether the abuser knew where they lived or not.

“ I just don't feel safe. I sit here every day and it was in this flat, just in that hallway is where he held the knife to my throat. My problem is my home. I don't have a home (72, W1).

“ Even after we moved here – he knew where we were – I still didn't like being in the house on my own... I didn't want him turning up when I was on my own, and if I was here on my own, I would call someone and say, 'Oh, you wanna come round?' And if I'm here on my own, I've got to have the chain on the door (83, W1).

“ I'm still living at the same place. He can pop up at any time, so I would not agree that yes I feel safe. Do you understand what I mean? So inside I feel secure, but like I'm still not secure (52, W4).

The data on PSA shows that women were not safe from interference, so it is unsurprising this led to many not feeling safe. Interventions are insufficient to affect the behavior of their ex partners, making the potential for further abuse an everyday anxiety. This was exacerbated for some when agencies, such as solicitors and courts, disclosed new addresses or child contact arrangements took away the control they had been trying to build.

“ I've only been able to start rebuilding – I had the place where I live, I could rebuild that, I could build my career, but all that had a hole in it because you know the foundation was built on a house of cards because the children weren't safe. It's only since the court case, the family hearing because he still had power over the children, in the sense that you know he was still recognised as somebody that could potentially have access to them (36, W4).

Climate change?

The impact of post separation abuse, women's ongoing concern about seeing the perpetrator, him finding them or harming children resulted in women continuing to live in climates of fear. Whilst these were not as all-consuming as when they had been living with the perpetrator, they were not yet free from the threat and reality of domestic violence. Throughout the three years women discussed how difficult it was to move on from threats that the abuser had made to them and their children; to feel safe.

“ You know they put all that emotional stuff into your head, you know, 'I'm gonna find you, I'm gonna get you, I'm gonna do this'. And yeah that lasted with me for quite a few years actually (35, W3).

“ I'm still nervy, but I think a lot of that is around the threats that he made about taking [child]. I still go in her room about a million times a night and check on her and I was really, really worried to take her to nursery as well (83, W4).

Sadly, two children were murdered by the ex-partner of one of the women who had used Solace's services during the first Wave of the interviews. Since some of the women being interviewed had been her friends (she was not part of the sample) this served as a reminder that threats can be carried out.

“ I really struggled yesterday with how to deal with my children because it made the front pages and the headlines (15, W1).

One woman's children had been subject to death threats, so when their friends were murdered they had to go back to counselling.

“ The whole school thought it was my children – they just knew two children had been murdered by their father... they assumed it was us. So as we approached the school the following Monday, not

knowing nothing, most of the parents ran up crying and kissing and cuddling my girls; which was lovely but then it [the fear] was put back in the girls' heads (87, W1).

Awareness of this potentiality meant women were acutely attuned to news reports of women being killed in the context of domestic violence, and this served to amplify their own fears.

““ *There was another case this morning when some bloke just killed his wife and it's.... people don't think people are gonna do it, do they? And they say, especially family, oh you know, you're exaggerating (20, W3).*

““ *In the paper in the New Year they had this many women were killed by domestic violence over the last year; had them all pictured...and you think, oh God... it's much closer to your heart like when you hear these things (10, W4).*

This sense of unsafety was exacerbated for five women who were assaulted by other men during the research and for a greater number who were living in areas that they thought were unsafe.

Safety work

The women in this study undertook considerable 'safety work' (Kelly, 2012) in relation to themselves and their children. Some women relied on criminal and civil law measures such as bail conditions, restraining orders, non-molestation orders and injunctions.

““ *Somewhat agree [to feeling safe all the time] because at the moment he's got an injunction (79, W1).*

Keeping records of abusive texts, voicemails and messages as evidence of breaches and harassment which they then reported to the police was a strategy used by some. However, only a few reported a positive police response to post-separation abuse.

Some made use of sanctuary schemes. Measures included the reinforcing of doors, grills at windows and the installation of panic buttons. Unfortunately several women mentioned being promised additional security for their properties but waited such a long time that they ended up having to pay to make the changes themselves. These measures did not always deliver the hoped for sense of security.

““ *We've got four bolts. We've got the double lock, we've got the Chubb lock and we've got the Yale lock. And we've got the spiral and we've got an outdoor speaker. So we're very careful about who is it – double check, switch the light on, make sure you recognise the face...which is sad, it's almost a prison (89, W4).*

Other strategies for keeping safe at home included moving house and keeping their new address secret.

““ *The first time I felt safe was the day I went to refuge – I felt completely safe, because even - I lived with my parents for some time after we split up but he was calling and threatening all the time ... and I feel safe now (12, W4).*

““ *We're safe here because our dads can't find us here. Because we've got a password, we've got a password on our door (CFG, W4).*

A couple of women who moved home talked about changing the car they drove so that it would not be seen outside of their new address. One woman talked about staying away from the windows; another of refusing to open the front door unless she was expecting a visitor.

““ *Unless I know you're coming to my front door I will sit right there in the corner under the duvet. You can ring the doorbell a thousand times. I'm just going to go underneath it. I will mute the TV and I sit in here in complete darkness (41, W4).*

During the research period some women even moved out of London in an attempt to both be and feel safe and others expressed a wish to do so, although women in social housing had to depend on exchanges.

“ I feel like going outside London where I might have that bit of peace... I love my flat, and I'll be very sad to leave it but I just know that in the long run, it's not possible to stay there because he will get it into his head one day to find out where I am and appear. So I can't take the risk (FG, W3).

“ Like I told you I'm going to leave London, then maybe then my heart will be more settled. Because then we can't bump into each other (75, W4).

In those cases where children had contact with the perpetrator, women would avoid disclosing a new address, arranging instead for a meeting point at which they would hand the children over. They also talked about discouraging children from talking about or answering questions related to their new home and surrounding area.

Women whose male children had grown up since the separation also reported that they felt safer since the boys had grown into young men.

“ It's horrible that a 17 year old child has to protect their mother from their father... obviously I'm proud that he wants to look after me and stuff do you know what I mean but I just feel for them because it's a horrible predicament for teenage boys to be (89, W2).

With respect to public space, women would risk assess their movements. This included avoiding either going to or travelling through particular geographical locations either completely or at certain times of the day.

“ I avoid certain places that I know he's going to be (1, W1).

“ If I want to go to X, I will go at the crack of dawn on a Saturday because I know that's the least likely time he'll be there, because he won't be there on a Saturday morning after a Friday night out (10, W1).

Other precautionary strategies included always locking the car door, making sure that they had their mobile phones with them and in a couple of cases, taking the dog with them.

“ I lock my car all the time; I keep my phone in my hand, in my pocket. Lots of things that I never used to do – there are lots of things that I do almost naturally now (10, W4).

“ I feel safe moving around my neighbourhood [statement on space for action scale] again somewhat agree, because I usually take the dog (83, W4).

Another strategy was to change their routines.

“ So I've changed as many things that were sort of easy to change, you know? The kids don't play for the same football team; I've changed my gym (10, W3).

“ I've left the children in the same school so they've got something familiar left. But when we come home we take a different route every day (28, W3).

“ I literally can't go to see music, bands etc. that he knows I like. It runs right through everything (26, W1).

If women did bump into their ex-partners when they were in public spaces, they reported immediately fleeing the area and seeking out safety zones.

“ I was on the phone to my friend. And I thought I saw him, and I just said to my friend 'Oh my God'. And she just said 'Get out the shop'. I literally, put my basket down, turned around and left the shop. So there was that one incident. And that's always my worry (10, W4).

As the chapter on social networks shows, safety work also involved considerable management of social networks.

The extent of safety work women engaged in reveals the time energy and resources they expended not just to assess risk but also limit the opportunities for men to abuse them. An interesting example here is the many ways in which mobile phones were used as security measures:

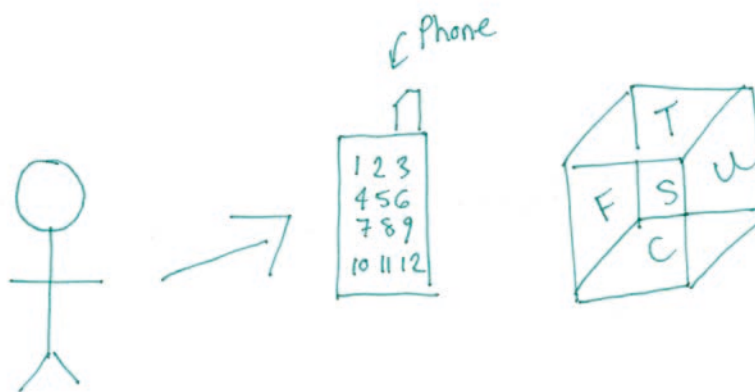
- Always having them when out and about;
- Changing the number so that the perpetrator did not have a means of contacting them;
- Having a phone just for contact with the perpetrator which they could ignore or turn off;
- Having a ring tone that alerted them it was him who was ringing;
- Turning off particular functions.

“ He can't text me because I've stopped taking texts, which is in some way very difficult because I haven't kept in contact with a lot of people through texts, but for me it's a release. I'm sick of having that ruining my day (32, W2).

“ The phone was a way of hiding. I didn't have to answer at all (19, W4).

“ So he has a different ring tone on my phone than anybody else; so if it's him I don't have to answer. I don't have to look at it [phone]. And then I can just press a button and I don't have to look at it (19, W3).

Image: Emotional map (42, W1)



Some of these strategies had to be extended to other social media, which meant losing a freedom of connection with others.

A half freedom?

The climates of fear created through post separation abuse, alongside the anticipation of it, limited many women and children's lives, leading some to reflect on these constraints with frustration.

“ And I sort of think, my God, I'm living this prison sentence and he's getting these really light sentences (10, W3).

“ You can be safe like practically and be so bound on the inside, and you’re still living like a prisoner, you know you’ve just got certain boxes ticked so that he’s not going to kill you hopefully, but you’re still a bound prisoner (FG, W4).

Living with fear and anxiety had an impact on well-being, from physical reactions such as their stomachs turning, feeling sick and shaking through to difficulties in sleeping, nightmares and flashbacks.

“ There was one occasion on the bus, I was on the bus and there was someone who looked really similar to him. I was with my friend and I nearly had a heart attack. I know it sounds really silly but... (C1, W4).

“ I mean I went out to lunch with my daughter one afternoon and my friend, we went to go and have a pub lunch, and I went to go to the loo and I saw him there, well everything just went, I just collapsed on the floor (38, W4).

Whilst PSA has been documented previously, the data collected here on both its extent and the safety work women undertake to manage it shows clearly that interventions need to focus less on levels of risk and more on being and feeling safe and having the freedom to rebuild lives. The fact that safety changed over time, and some were still facing PSA three years down the line also shows the necessity of access to support based on need.

“ And then a few months ago, out of the blue he just turned up on the door and I hadn’t seen him for about two years. I buzzed my door, and I’m quite funny with my buzzer anyway – I think that’s because of him. I answered it, and it was him (9, W3).

“ He was waiting for him [child] outside school. He hasn’t seen him for like three years, he hasn’t seen him. He came out of nowhere. What sort of frightened me was that he might be thinking in his head to kidnap him, because he had tried to before (5, W4).

“ I now know that he’s back. He’s not in prison any longer. I could just bump into him at any time... he’s been locked up for the last two years (49, W4).

Conclusions

Seeking support about domestic violence is, at heart, a desire to create safety and be free from control. Very few perpetrators were held to account by the criminal justice system, and even where they were the outcomes were not seen as enhancing safety. This was especially the case where women were reporting post-separation abuse. The detailed data collected in Wave Three revealed that the vast majority, 90 per cent, had experienced some form of post-separation abuse: for three-quarters this was physical, sexual or verbal abuse; two thirds reported harassment and abuse through the perpetrator manipulating other agencies; over half had been stalked. Separation and seeking support had not protected women from abuse, albeit it was not the same as living with domestic violence, and many did not yet feel safe. As a consequence women had to undertake a huge amount of safety work with respect to themselves and their children. These data suggest that the focus over the last ten years on short term risk reduction has led to an under- recognition of ongoing and longer term needs.

6. Housing, home and community

Credit: Janetka Platun (image from workshop – W1)

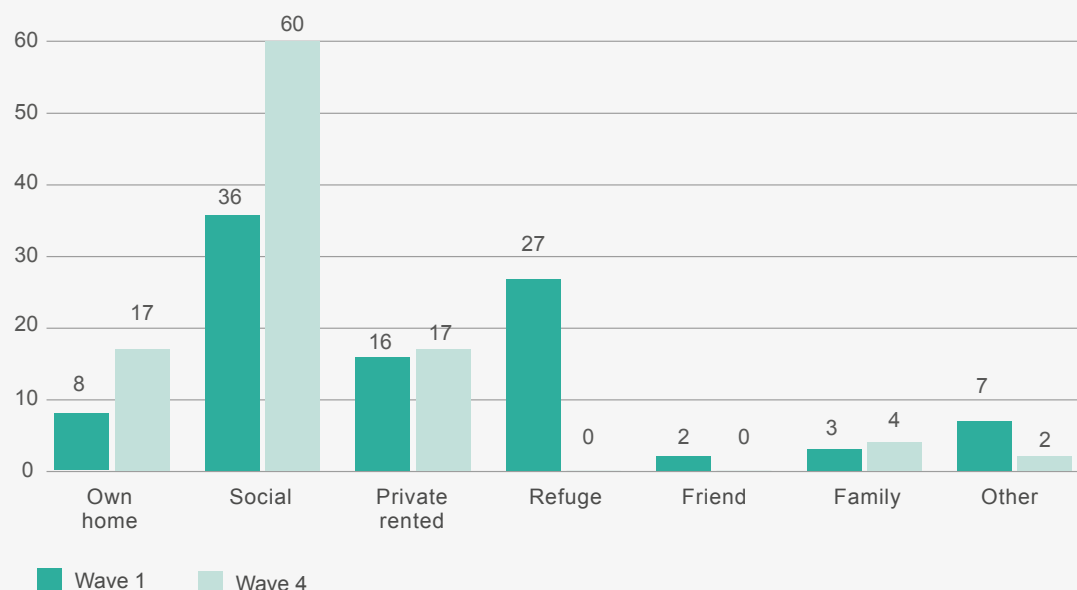


For women and children their home and rootedness (or not) in local communities, was critical to their (un)safety and freedom. By its very nature domestic violence disrupts the image and reality of home as a place of safety and for many they have to leave and find refuge elsewhere. Over four decades women's organisations have advocated not only for rights to rehousing, but also policy and interventions which might enable women and children to stay 'at home' safely (Hague and Malos, 2005). As this chapter demonstrates some of these rights have been eroded, prolonging and complicating the process of rebuilding lives.

A house of cards

Not only was housing a practical need but, and as the previous chapter illustrates, it was integral to women feeling safe and moving forward with their lives. Living arrangements had changed markedly by the end of the project with no women living in refuge accommodation and sixty per cent of women living in social housing. The proportion living in private rented accommodation remained the same, and twice as many owned their own housing.

Figure 6:1 Where women were living at the beginning and end of the study



Negotiating the system

Women's experiences were, almost without exception, shaped by the chronic shortage of social housing in London.

“ Getting people rehoused is an absolute nightmare. There's just no housing stock (KW2, W1).

“ I've spoken to the Housing Officer and she explained to me that basically there isn't any housing in [borough] for a family. They are really short, so I'll have to stay where I am (52, W4).

Women presenting as homeless to local authority housing departments reported that housing officers were unsympathetic and seemed 'uninterested' in their domestic violence histories or alternatively did not understand and/or assumed that women lie.

“ They went through the motions, did the paperwork. And you could see by her face she had no interest at all in the DV story (FG, W1).

“ I think the problem with housing is that they just base the idea - somebody asking for housing is just lying. And it's just - you know what, I've got no reason to lie to you. Why would I sit in a refuge with twelve other women all the time? Why? (FG, W1).

Keyworkers framed the scepticism shown by housing officers in terms of the pressures that they were under.

“ I don't know how you could justify being that cruel to some of the people who walk into your office unless you're under so much pressure that you're de-humanising them completely (KW11, W4).

With the exception of one key worker who reported an improved response, the vast majority thought that accessing housing was becoming more and more difficult due to lack of stock and changes to the benefit system.

“ With housing now because of the cuts and the changes to housing benefits – they were always difficult but you could get somewhere with them. But now you can actually see how they are actually struggling themselves; they always used to try to put barriers before, but now those barriers are up a little longer and they're stronger as well (KW11, W4).

These increased barriers were confirmed by women's accounts; some reported being asked for a crime reference number even though this is not required by law or policy.

“ When you go to the housing, as much as they write up in their blurb about recognising it, if you don't have a police number or a police record, it doesn't count (FG, W1).

Those who had experienced coercive control but no physical assault had a particularly difficult time, with some reporting the housing officer told them to go back home.

“ Housing was saying you could still go back to him; he's not going to hit you (15, W1).

“ It's disrupted them enough, that you ripped them [children] out of their home and you end up in a refuge, with none of their belongings. And then you get housing saying you're not a DV victim, and go back to him, and you just think, what is the point of this? (FG, W1).

A legal challenge to Hounslow Council established case law which clarified that the definition of domestic violence should be interpreted as including emotional abuse (Yemshaw vs. Hounslow Borough Council, 2011) meaning that at least one woman was able to appeal on this basis.

“ That was my only get-out clause – because that woman in Hounslow fought. They based my decision on her (15, W1).

Other examples of poor practice included: seeking to interview the perpetrator; denying responsibility for women; and sending them to different Boroughs.

““ *They are generally really obstructive. Give misinformation. Mislead my clients. Send women home, who have no home to go to. Turn people away. It's just staggering (KW11, W1). Several women were told that social services could house their children but not them.*

Several women were told that social services could house their children but not them.

““ *The council wouldn't help me, so I went to social services, and explained the whole situation, and they decided if you haven't got anywhere to go we can house the children, but you're not a priority (42, W1).*

Maintaining tenancies

This changed context makes maintaining tenancies even more important. Women who are joint tenants in social housing have a right to the property they have fled, however in practice local authorities and housing associations are reluctant to remove the perpetrator – a condition which would enable women and their children to either move back in or be transferred to another property. Women whose names are not on the tenancy are especially vulnerable. One reported that her partner was named on the tenancy but it was she who was paying the rent and the bills. Since there was nothing the local authority could do, she was advised to return to her partner as this was the best way of ensuring that she and her children had a roof over their heads.

““ *And then when I built up the courage to finally leave, all the housing kept saying to me was 'go home, you've got a house that's suitable for you and your family'. And I was like well take him out. And they were saying we can't do that, it's his tenancy, go home. And I spent a year and a half fighting them (FG, W1).*

Awareness of the social housing shortage meant women were very hesitant to give up tenancies and this led some women to prioritise housing over their safety.

““ *A lot of women I work with have a secure tenancy. They really don't want to leave the secure tenancy. But then often they might not have a lot of choice. And some women will prefer to - like to sit it out, and take massive risks, in secure tenancy than leave that (KW11, W1).*

Those women who did give notice on their tenancy reported being left with too few points to bid for new properties or else were given tenancies for properties that were smaller than those they had left.

““ *I lost my home, I would have had to downgrade because of what he did and I thought no way, why should my children be without a garden because of him, you know because of what he did to us? (6, W4).*

Many with children expressed disbelief that new gender and age rules meant that they would have to wait until their children reached certain ages before they qualified for properties where they could have their own rooms, resulting in yet another move. As a consequence children were currently sharing bedrooms either with their mother or siblings.

““ *I was shocked with the lady I spoke to at the counter she said my daughter should be sleeping in the living room and I should be thankful that they give me a house (75, W2).*

Re-housing

A common response was advising women to go down the private rented route. Hard fought for legislation that linked homelessness, social housing and priority for particular groups (including women who have experienced domestic violence) has changed, meaning that women (if accepted) will now have to go into bed and breakfast, hostels or private rented accommodation as homeless and apply separately for social housing under locally determined priorities which can include residence in the Borough for five years and working, volunteering or studying. That said some women preferred the private rented option due to the conditions of the local authority properties that they were offered.

“ I had to lose a bedroom and I had to lose a bathroom but it's a decent property and it's somewhere I am happy for my children to grow up and I know they're safe. If I hadn't sorted myself out they would've done nothing... one of the properties they offered me was awful, there were needles on the floor outside and all that (6, W1).

Others reported it was increasingly difficult to find private landlords who were prepared to rent properties to women on housing benefit.

“ Well, they were absolutely hopeless. No help whatsoever. They just tried to push me into private housing. They basically tried to put me into private housing but no landlord would accept me because I was on benefits (FG, W1).

“ It's just a real nightmare to try and move and get housing benefit on any private tenancy even as somebody who's been a homeowner and got references, you know, I can't get anyone to touch me (26, W2).

On the other hand, carelessness in designating properties to women who had experienced domestic violence created problems and unsafety.

Although a few women reported being helped with the deposit for privately rented properties in those cases where the local authority was also paying the landlord housing benefit directly, some landlords were reportedly chasing women for the rent in cases where the local authority had not paid. We learned that landlords are increasing rents after the first six months of tenancies in line with market rates. Since local housing allowance rates define the maximum rent housing benefit will pay for, women have to move or pay the difference, this either meant another move or choosing between paying rent or buying food.

The absence of tailored responses to survivors of domestic violence and their children surprised women. Families were placed in hostels with men and in accommodation where there were problems with drugs and violence.

“ And the temporary accommodation hostels are not safe places for survivors or for children. We shouldn't be with men, in hostels. Some of those hostels are terrible (FG, W1).

“ You're away from the perpetrator – he doesn't know where you are. But you're then putting another set of problems onto it, you know – drugs, violence. And you don't want that. I just wanted peace (FG, W1).

Even where women were allocated actual properties, carelessness here could also create unsafety.

“ Before me, one lady, she was living there and she had a problem with boyfriend. And the boyfriend, he thought still she lived there. I was there, and one day he climbed [through the window] into my house (51, W4).

“ She [neighbour] was saying 'Do you see the marks on your door? – they are all knife marks about the arguments that was going on' (88, W4).

For women relocating in the aftermath of domestic violence, the ‘right’ place to live was important if they and their children were to begin to feel safe. But when these concerns were voiced, housing officers were likely to minimise these considerations.

““ *They were like well if you’re desperate, you’ll take it. And I said ‘no, it doesn’t quite work like that’. Because we’re talking about long term, we’re talking about – the safety of my family (FG, W1).*

Bidding for new properties

The process for rehousing in many boroughs, at the time of the study, involved an online bidding process; for many women this required going to the houses of family members and friends or Solace offices. These systems also included inviting eligible bidders to view a property at the same time, which women found disconcerting. Several had turned properties down when they were higher up the list, not just because they were uncertain but because they perceived someone else to be more in need.

““ *And it turns out that the lady who was number four has been waiting nine years to be housed and they offered her and she was jumping for joy and I thought you know what, I don’t begrudge you it, you’ve waited your time, I don’t begrudge you it. And I just walked away and all I thought was ‘It wasn’t meant to be’ (15, W4).*

Advocacy

Where women were unable to make progress themselves finding an advocate, from Solace or elsewhere, sometimes made a difference, as this key worker explains.

““ *If a woman goes alone and says I’m experiencing domestic violence, they will not help you. You need to show up with a support worker, all your casework intact, and someone who knows about the system. Otherwise you can forget about it (KW2, W1).*

This raises a question the study cannot answer, which is how do women without the support of Solace fare?

One possible lever was for cases to be referred to the local Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) since housing attended, and were therefore accountable to it. Yet even this route did not guarantee success; one woman talked about how housing turned her away despite a letter from MARAC reinforcing the feelings of worthlessness that the perpetrator had instilled in her.

Some treatment was so poor that women made complaints as well as representations to the Head of Housing and local Councillors. A fifth of women reported seeking help from their Member of Parliament (MP) some of whom were and were not helpful.

““ *I told her about my case and that I’d got damp in my flat and I don’t feel very happy there and safe she wrote me a letter to the council to do repairs and also one to be re-housed (9, W3).*

““ *I went to see my MP and he’s supposed to be in the Department for Housing but he took ages to reply and then he was going around in circles (62, W1).*

All too often it appeared that it was only sympathetic housing officers that made a difference.

““ *He [housing officer] was my absolute saving grace; he was mortified by everything that had happened and I said ‘Well thank goodness for somebody like yourself who’s got a conscience because those other people sit behind their desks ticking boxes and it annoys me they say they’re listening to your story but they’re not.’ There are posters up everywhere saying they support DV but they couldn’t give a stuff (15, W3).*

The impacts of housing benefit reforms

The changes to housing benefit made during the research period meant that women who relied on it reported being fearful that they would be forced to move again once the benefit cap was imposed, since they would not be able to afford paying any top-up required.

“ I have got bit of problem at the moment with the new system now... I have to pay some money to top up. I have to go where it's cheaper, where you can pay – it's a disaster (43, W2).

For women on housing benefit with empty rooms i.e. where children had grown up and left home, the bedroom tax was also an issue.

“ My older daughter moved out about a month ago and we went down to the housing benefits to sort out the rent and it's worked out that I'm gonna have to pay thirty-nine pounds, sixteen pence a week because of the spare room (20, W4).

Not only was this a financial strain but an emotional one too. As acknowledged elsewhere, a number of women had sadly lost children and other relatives. For one the onerous and intrusive process of applying for compassionate exemption from the bedroom tax for a three month period was just too much.

Housing benefit more generally was a source of inconvenience and worse; some were having to pay back over-payments; others were in rent arrears because of delayed payments; and for some it was bureaucratic mismanagement.

“ My housing association has messed up my rent account and put me in arrears and I'm still fighting that, because I know that isn't our fault and they had put money in that they shouldn't have and then took more money out than they should have... they won't give us statements, they won't give us nothing (72, W4).

Private housing

For those women in private housing, a different set of issues emerged, including economic abuse; some had lost their homes as a consequence of the abuse. In one case the perpetrator forged the woman's signature and mortgaged her property. Another woman was unable to get her ex-partner to leave the house and had to move out herself resulting in considerable financial costs.

“ So, I was still paying the mortgage on that flat – I was then paying legal fees to evict him, and rent for where I was. So you know – he kept that up for like six months to try and financially bankrupt me (FG, W3)

This inequity was compounded when having owned a property penalised women in the process of rehousing, with some pondering on what the point of leaving had been.

“ I tried to explain my situation [about being asked to pay council tax on two properties], the fact that I was working but I had three children... and I was so upset... I remember when I spoke to them on the phone I was just in tears, because I thought why did I bother leaving... I might as well have just stayed there (6, W1).

“ I left a home to come here and we were owners. I'd run away from home, and I had absolutely nothing and social services refused me the community grant so when I moved in, I had nothing, I didn't have a bed, I didn't have a chair... I had to ask for some money to move, I actually had to contact my husband (30, W2).

Several were still living in properties on which the perpetrator paid the mortgage, whilst they retained some familiarity for children, they worried that their ex-partner might stop paying the mortgage, and they would not know until it was too late. Conversely, the elongation of divorce settlements resulted in some women giving up claims to properties.

“ I agreed to the sale of the house in the previous hearing because I’d had enough – I mean I was on my knees. I’m not strong enough to continue with all this (90, W2).

The outcome of financial settlements usually meant that women still living in a family home had to sell it and move to a smaller property or cheaper area.

“ I’m probably going to be in rented accommodation for the rest of my life when I’ve made millions of sacrifices from the age of fifteen to buy my own home and been paying the mortgage on my own since I was nineteen, it is just, just horrendous (FG, W3).

“ Unfortunately you know I’m the loser because my ex-husband wouldn’t work and he didn’t put a penny into my property. I’ve worked all my life for this property, but unfortunately on the day that I went to the court, the judge decided that regardless that he never paid anything, because of the simple fact that we were married... she felt that he was entitled to a proportion of my property (71, W4).

Where women were not living in the family home, men delayed the sale as long as possible, keeping her and the children in state of limbo, having to continue in rented accommodation and not knowing when they could resolve their housing situation.

Becoming settled

The vast majority (87 of 100) had moved house to end the abuse: of this group 38 had moved once (44 per cent), 27 had moved twice (31 per cent), 12 had moved three times (14 per cent), five had moved four times (six per cent), five had moved five or more times (five per cent). The quarter who had to move three times or more should surely be considered as experiencing unreasonable disruptions to their efforts to rebuild their lives. The emergency and temporary nature of some of these moves was unsettling, especially when the goal was to become settled.

“ It’s been really up and down, because you think, oh, finally I’m in a refuge, things will get better, and then it’s just no, you have to move from the refuge, and then you’re still trying to get housed (49, W4).

Children who had been in refuge accommodation, for example, reported being sad that they had to leave, a feeling very much linked to their sense of safety whilst living there with other children who had similar experiences.

“ I: Why do you not want to leave here [refuge]?
R: Everything is so fun. It’s so fun.
I: Is that because you’ve got lots of friends here?
R: Yeah. But I just don’t want to leave (CFG, W4).

“ She’ll mention the refuge sometimes and, like the kids that she used to play with in there and she’ll say ‘Mummy, I miss [friend] and [friend]’ they’re the two that she really used to like in there (64, W2).

The closeness of new housing to children's schools was an understandable consideration, since women endeavored to limit disruptions to their children's stability and education. For a few of the women whose children had physical and learning difficulties, being rehoused in the same borough was also crucial to maintain the support package currently in place.

Women talked about not feeling able to settle in temporary properties, so would put off decorating and creating a home. Many talked about home being a foundation stone so that it was difficult to move on in other areas of their lives until this was sorted. Those who had managed to secure permanent housing by the end of the research reported a noticeable difference in their children's well-being which they linked to knowing they were now settled.

“ I think that's all he needed; a little bit of security and stability, you know. Just to know that we're not going nowhere again (42, W2).

“ Since we've been in this place it's made such a big difference to both my children (64, W2).

Setting up a new home

Considerable costs were incurred by women who had fled domestic violence without anything and who had to set up a new home from scratch. Some simply did not have time to collect their belongings; others could not afford to pay for storage until new housing was sorted out. One woman described how her ex-partner stole all her furniture. Costs related to setting up home were not confined to furniture and utensils. A number of women in local authority housing also had to undertake repairs.

“ Obviously you don't mind moving in doing painting putting your stamp on the place and that but it really was like a squat and I'm in a lot of debt now through having to do things to this place I don't think I should have had to do (49, W3).

A couple of women reported being able to save some money by using skills they had gained at Solace Women's Aid.

The unavailability of community grants, which had until recently enabled women to equip new homes, was noted by key workers as affecting all women who have to re-locate for their safety.

“ And what do you do with families that are destitute? We have families coming here with no clothes, I think this government have penalised the poor (KW2, W4).

Women were resourceful in finding other sources of support through social loans, charities, and trusts attached to utility companies, many saved money through Free Cycle and scouring charity shops. Family and friends also came to the rescue by donating items, as did staff members from Solace Women's Aid.

“ I've also got a grant from Thames Water who provided us with a bunk bed, God bless them; then we also got a freezer from British Gas (44, W2).

“ Last year when I moved to my new house I needed money for flooring and stuff like that so I sold all my jewellery (48, W3).

Closely linked to having settled housing and the cost of starting again was the creation of 'home', which was a powerful theme in Wave One interviews.

“ I haven't moved into my home yet, I'm just sort of living in a house at the moment. We didn't have an opportunity to make it into a home because of what's happened so I consider the next place we move into will be somewhere that I can make a home for the children and myself (88, W1).

Over time, as more women had settled home was discussed differently.

“ Having your home is the best thing, the best feeling, I mean we redecorated, I actually painted the bathroom, you know, just those little, little things that transform a space into a home (44, W2).

“ I'm happy you know - home is home...I've got what I need in here, the basic needs, you know the sofa, telly and all that stuff. So yeah it's getting there (42, W4).

An exercise in one of art workshops asked women to use words associated with 'home' before and after ending the abuse, leaving no doubt about the significance of secure, safe and settled housing.

Figure 6:2 Words describing home before leaving (W3 focus group)

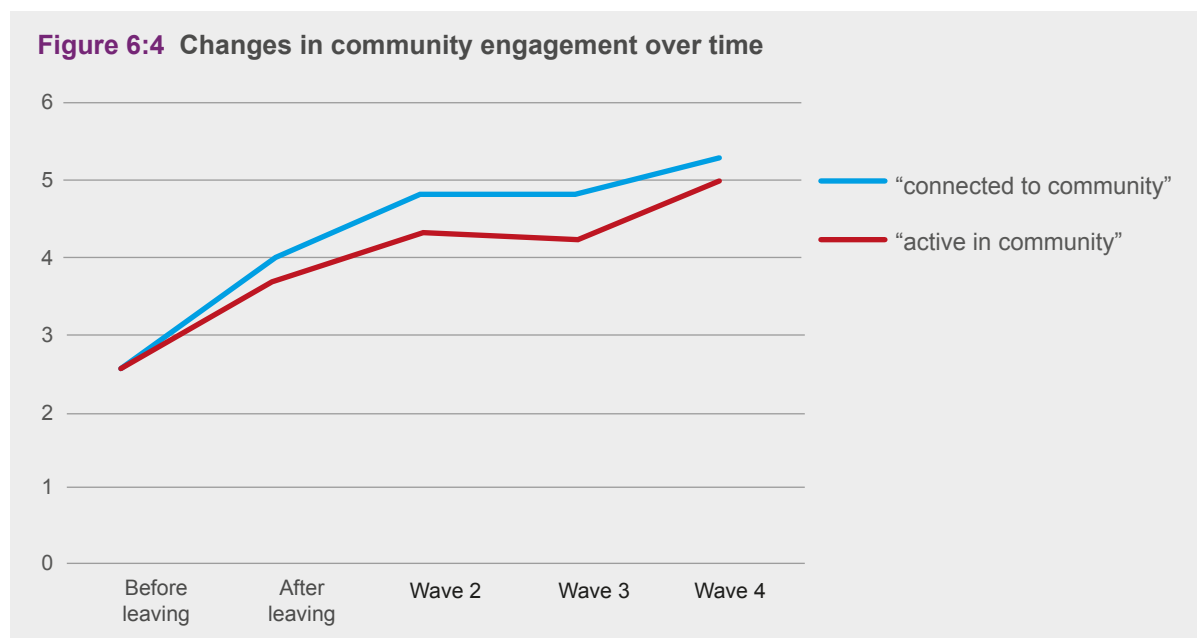


Figure 6:2 Words describing home after leaving (W3 focus group)



Settling in

Being settled also enabled women to connect to wider communities: feeling connected to the community and being an active member both increased over time, with a notable increase just after leaving and in the final time period by which time more had begun to establish home.



The engagements ranged being active in schools, residents’ association, working in charity shops and undertaking community mediation.

“ I’m proud of the fact that for all the help that I’ve been given I’m giving something back to my community you know I volunteered across the road, I’ve become the secretary for [child’s] sports club (71, W2).

“ I am very community-minded. I think because of what I’ve experienced I just don’t like situations where there is anybody bullying other people, or taking advantage of other people (29, W2).

Other women regretted the dearth of opportunities in the areas they moved into.

“ There’s no community activity...things like that the housing association could promote you know, getting together and you know organising activities so you could get to know each other (22, W1).

Supportive neighbours created not just a sense of connection but safety as well.

“ So they just really stepped in and really they were just so supportive and things like taking me shopping and offering to watch the kids so I could go for a walk and I had to take my son to the hospital and one came and sat with me all night and just that sort of stuff. And even now they check up on me and they’ve just been amazing (88, W1).

Unfortunately, however, the reverse could be the case, with neighbours holding women responsible for harassment by their ex-partners or being aggressive themselves.

“ Every now and then there will be a period of harassment where she’s like shouting stuff through the wall and throwing stuff at the wall and there’s been a couple of incidents of her kicking the door so it’s been quite disruptive (40, W1).

““ *There's been a huge amount of stuff going on with the neighbour which is really stressful; she's been really aggressive and abusive and it's been going for a few months (3, W4).*

Undertaking activities locally for pleasure, and in order to meet others and build a sense of belonging, spanned sport, art, language, music, dance, acting and environment related activities.

““ *They're a really nice non-threatening crowd [salsa class] I'd missed a few sessions and yesterday when I went, everyone was pleased to see me (1, W1).*

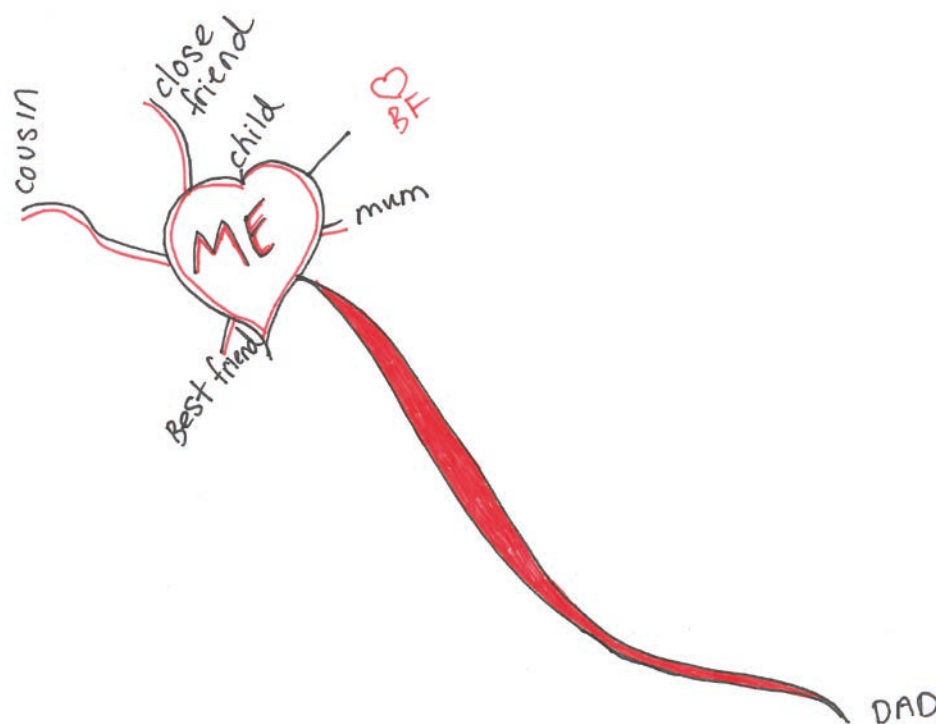
““ *It's surprisingly quite uplifting because you get to chat with them and kind of get things off your chest without having to sort of commit to anyone it's just nice to chat to them and I find that very therapeutic when we're walking our dogs (5, W3).*

Conclusions

It is with respect to housing that the impact of legal and policy changes on women's attempts to rebuild their lives is most evident. Whilst none of the changes are directed at those escaping domestic violence, women and children have been caught in the intersecting nets of welfare reform and shrinking affordable housing. As a consequence they wait far longer to be settled, with some having to cope with multiple interim temporary moves. Apart from those who own homes permanency is no longer guaranteed. The removal of community grants has returned women to the 'made do and mend' position that was the case when the first refuges opened in the 1970s. The unfairness of this was not lost on many women who felt, not unreasonably, that they were being penalised for trying to end violence in their lives. As these changes take deeper root, and those advising on options discuss the possible costs of leaving, we are left asking how many more women will be forced to trade secure housing for safety in the future who would not have done previously.

7. Social and relational networks

Image: Emotional map (72, W1)



“ It has to be the right friends and the right family. That’s the thing. It’s not just the general word ‘family’ or the general word ‘friends’. Because if you haven’t got the right ones there, then it’s no good at all. But having the right people there is everything; it saves your life (36, W3).

Most research, in focusing on crisis interventions emphasises the role of agencies in supporting women to end violence. Given our focus was longer term and on rebuilding lives, the role of women’s social networks becomes more relevant. There is relatively little research on this (Kelly, 1999; Wilcox, 2000; Klein, 2012), despite the fact that we know that they are often the first to know about abuse, and that they can act as gate openers or gate closers in terms of help seeking. In this chapter, however, we are exploring an even less studied topic, what women’s networks look like, how they change over time and what part they play in the process of rebuilding lives. Women were asked about family members and friends who played supportive or disruptive roles, our new contribution here are findings on the amount of energy women expend ‘managing’ their social networks.

Who knew, reaching out, closing in

Network members are part of the social or relational context in which abuse occurs (Klein, 2012). Over three-quarters (n=78) of women named people who (to a greater or lesser extent) had been ‘involved in or were aware of the violence/abuse’ including: children; other family members; friends; neighbours; co-workers; and members of faith communities.

Some acted ‘for her’ through listening, offering advice and/or practical and financial resources, others ‘against her’ by failing to provide support, being involved in abuse or siding with the abuser. Some responses were more complex and contradictory in that network members had divided loyalties, changed their responses over time or were manipulated by the abuser. Revealingly, no examples were recounted of members confronting or challenging perpetrators.

The potential for asking for and receiving support were often limited by the control strategies of abusive men (Stark, 2007): this could be clear and explicit but more often women chose to withdraw to protect their network members from embarrassment or worse.

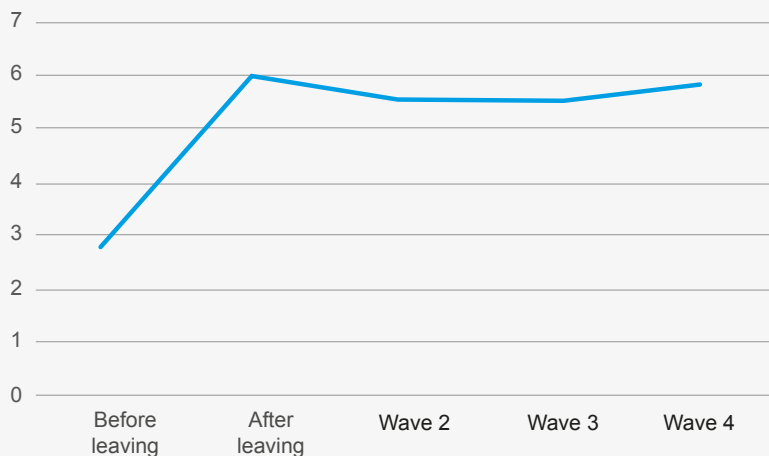
- “ He would make people that came to visit me very uncomfortable so that they never came back and I ended up isolated because I wouldn't bring people back, I wouldn't invite people, so I ended up totally isolated (30, W1).
- “ I was lonely, he controlled me seeing my family; he turned my family against me. I found out that he had phoned my brother when we were together and told my brother that I'd said I didn't want nothing to do with him; that he wasn't my family anymore and that all I needed was him (64, W1).
- “ And when I finally left him I was left with nobody. Apart from my sisters, I was in my own little bubble (FG, W3).

Fleeing abuse also caused disruption to women and children's social networks, a reason why many delayed taking this action.

Re-establishing networks

Only 24 per cent of women had been able to see friends and family when they wanted to when involved with their ex-partner; this increased dramatically on separation, but remained constant after that (see Figure 7:1).

Figure 7:1 Changes in freedom to see family friends over time
“see friends and family when I like”



Over half (n=52) at the outset expressed a desire for a wider social network.

- “ I'm trying to build all those relationships I lost a lot of years ago (29, W1).
- “ I think what counselling has taught me is that it's not wrong to want to have the support around you and actually you need the support because you can't go through something like that by yourself, it's impossible. I tried it – it doesn't work (85, W1).
- “ When you're in an abusive relationship you become so self-reliant, at managing, coping, and you cut people out (36, W3).

Family and kin

Whilst some women reported no changes in their relationships with family as a consequence of the abuse, for others reconnecting was important, despite the challenges.

“ “ *I’ve just started to meet my family again, sort of try and build bridges (35, W3).*

This was a dynamic process as whether an individual was supportive or not changed over time. The mapping of supportive and disruptive family members over time identified wide-ranging relationships, including in-laws which for some were new relationships established after separation. Mothers and sisters were most often mentioned as supportive across the project, followed by fathers and brothers and female cousins. Just over ten per cent of women mentioned new partners in the final Wave as supportive.

Many observed that they would not have been able to rebuild their lives if it had not been for the support of, and motivation from, family members.

“ “ *My brothers lifted and shifted furniture round for me and painted houses and cleared out gardens for me, and my sister’s done things like buy clothes for the kids (28, W1).*

“ “ *I had a bit of a meltdown the other week and my Dad was like ‘Do you know I am so proud of you, you’ve got through so much and you’ve done it by yourself’ (35, W2).*

“ “ *I talked with my sister the other day and she said ‘You seem very different as a person now. I admire you because you can live alone and do your stuff’ (11, W4).*

The quality of relationships with family members improved where it was possible to discuss abuse.

“ “ *I think I have better relationships with my family now because I talk openly about domestic abuse and spiritual abuse; now they challenge where authority is wrong which is phenomenal. They’ve changed (88, W4).*

Some worried they might be leaning on their families too much, especially if they were aware of other issues that their families were dealing with, such as bereavement and illness.

“ “ *I feel bad because I know I’m relying on them [parents] a lot. And obviously Dad’s got cancer, it feels wrong. It should be me looking after them, not them looking after me (74, W3).*

Where families pretended that the abuse had not happened, this removed hope for spaces of recognition. As with many aspects of this study, there was no single or simple story here.

“ “ *You need people to talk to; at one point I didn’t have anybody to talk to, and I was just dying silently inside (75, W2).*

“ “ *I’d say it’s been slightly difficult for me; my parents in particular, they don’t ever talk about that period... whenever I make a reference or something, or if it comes up in a conversation... I’m slightly resentful, that they’re not acknowledging that that is part of my past (85, W3).*

As the children grew up, women increasingly identified them as a source of emotional and practical support although this was often tinged with sadness that this should not be their role.

“ “ *I’d have to put [child’s name] in there. There have been things I would not have got through without him; he really does help – he taught the girls how to tie their laces and little things that brothers shouldn’t have to do really (87, W3).*

A couple of women who had experienced family bereavements during the research period continued drawing strength from these relationships, choosing to leave these family members on their emotional maps.

“ R: And you’ve had your mum there, I know she’s deceased...
W: We’ll leave her on (38, W4).

“ I think I’ll put my dad up here, like this really loving kind of overall guidance. Because he’s not in a coffin, he’s totally alive, because he’s alive in all of us (7, W4).

Even where it was possible to discuss abuse many women filtered how much and what they revealed for a range of reasons: pride; shame; fearing others might take actions which would make things worse; and not wanting to be told what they should do. Many reported experiencing judgment for having left, this exchange in one of the focus groups revealed that this happened across social groups.

“ R: But I also think a lot of white women here get told that too. Because if your family has an investment in your status as a married woman – you’re married to somebody who’s successful, you’ve got a nice house...
W: Your kids are doing at school, don’t uproot everyone, it’s a failure
R: The words might be slightly different, but the message is the same (FG, W4).

Some family members not only blamed women but in the process excused the perpetrator.

“ I think that people try and give you a lot of advice but the implication is always that there’s something wrong with you. It compounded that sense of being felt to be responsible (89, W1).

“ I mean my family are not sympathetic. Anything that goes wrong in my life it’s my fault and even now it’s like well, you haven’t been angry enough with him (23, W1).

Family members struggled to make sense of why women had not left sooner or why they were upset at a separation if the man had been violent.

“ They just think you’re gonna wake up the next day and say it’s all alright now. But it wasn’t like that. Although I knew I did the right thing it was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. I felt like I was dealing with a death – grieving – even though I didn’t want him anymore (6, W1).

“ I now realise that the time that you are in a refuge is a time that you are emotionally trying to survive, and, the grieving process for all that you’ve lost comes afterwards, when you are in your own place and the grieving still comes in waves (30, W2).

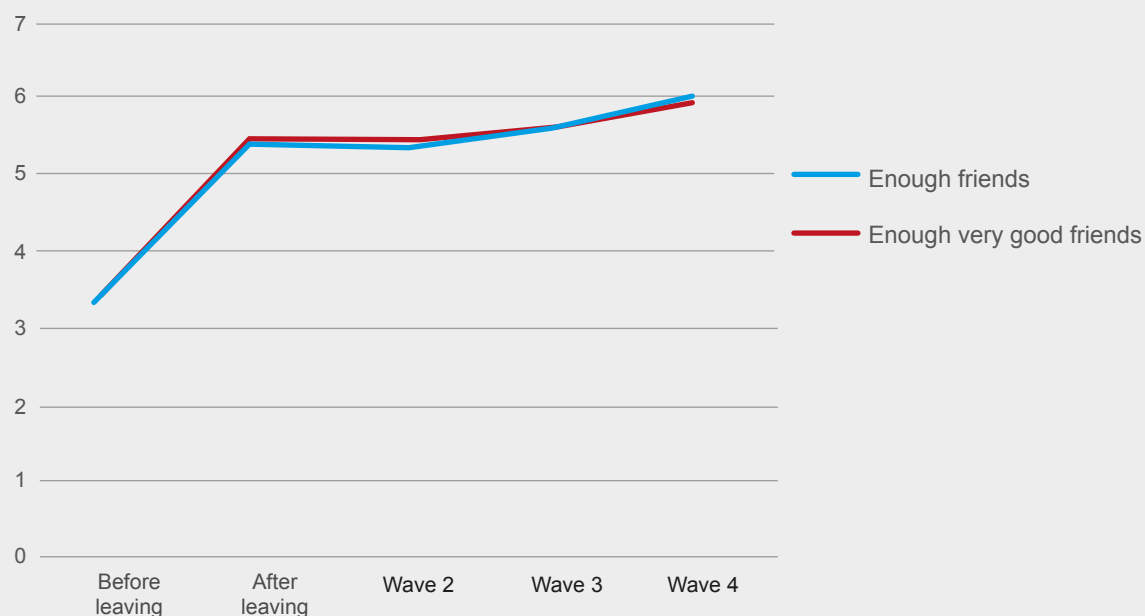
All of these responses were experienced as unsupportive and unhelpful. Most women were acutely sensitive to being held responsible; rather than assisting them to re-make their sense of self these interventions, however unintentional, reinforced some of the ways their ex-partner had blamed them for abuse.

Friendships

At the outset of the research only 26 women reported having enough friends and only 25 per cent reported having enough very close friends. Over the research period women reported an increase in both, in particular after leaving.

“ Now he’s gone it’s easier to talk to people and laugh with people (32, W1).

Figure 7:2 Changes in having enough friends and very close friends over time



Friendships were hugely important helping women cope with the abuse whilst it was happening and then in rebuilding their lives in the aftermath.

“When it goes on for years, you just kind of think they’ve had enough. I mean I’ve had enough, so I don’t know how they must’ve felt. But they were still supportive, they didn’t say anything against me, obviously against him because of what he’s done, but they were just supportive, they were there if I wanted them there, they were there (83, W1).”

“You really find out who your friends are when you’ve got a crisis situation and they’ve all been great and they just – they helped my confidence and everything (8, W1).”

Women who became single mothers found emotional and practical support invaluable, often establishing reciprocal relationships with other single parents, and friendships made in refuges often endured.

“I don’t know what I would do without them [friends]. I don’t think I would be able to do what I’m doing – simple as that; if I didn’t have my friend to pick up my son, I don’t think I would be able to carry on at college (55, W4).”

“She went through it, she experienced it so she knew what I was going through and she’s very supportive (100, W1).”

Some who had attended support groups expressed sadness that friendships had ended and suggested that contacts should be exchanged.

For women who did not have family in the UK or whose family relationships had broken down, friends were crucial.

“Because I don’t have my own blood family around me – I’m not close to my blood family, and so I’ve kind of made my own family, and it’s nice to have that sort of support network now and know that, if I am having a bad day, I do have someone to call (64, W2).”

“I have no family here so to be in a strange land and being able to make progress ... it’s like a miracle (63, W4).”

Making new friends was a process and for some counselling had helped them 'offload emotional baggage' which they did not want to impose on others although new friends still had to 'prove' themselves.

“ I mean you come with all this baggage and it puts people off and so it's only recently that I've started to make a couple of new friends. I'd still say that these people are still on the level of acquaintance. I don't turn people into friends until after they're been around, and I've done things for them, or they're done things for me (68, W3).

“ I'm a bit of a loner at the moment, but it [social network] will expand as I go through college and things. I have found people through college, but I can't let them close because things aren't quite normal yet, you can't sort of bring people close until you can trust them (32, W3).

A number made the decision not to tell new friends because although domestic violence might have shaped them, they did not want it to define how others saw and responded to them.

Barriers to making new friends included financial resources and health conditions. Those in temporary accommodation did not want friends to see their housing situation and those in refuges were unable to disclose the location.

“ I was living in the refuge and the rules are not to have friends around, I was unable to make friends. They always asked 'Where do you live?' It was a secret place. But after that I found it very easy to have friends (72, W4).

New found freedoms with existing and new friends included: enjoying meals; going to the park; or having a weekend away.

“ I've got a better social life than I ever had before. It's not as strange as it was before. There was no scope for a social life, but now I can implement my own social life and I'm in control of it and I don't need anybody else to say so to make that happen (15, W2).

“ It's so good to have your friends back, nice to go out (50, W2).

“ Like you're not allowed to go out, or you're not allowed to have a good time, you're not allowed to talk to non-Asian people or you know non-Muslim people – none of those barriers exist now (55, W4).

Surviving domestic violence had made some more open-minded and better equipped to support other women in similar situations.

“ I've learnt to be a lot more accepting of other people let's just say. I don't judge people. You know, it's very easy to judge but I don't judge anymore. And I think I learned that from living in a refuge for a year and a half with 12 other families. You do learn not to judge and to accept people for who they are (15, W2).

Where friendships were disruptive, victim blaming was at the root. Women talked about how shocked and hurt they had felt when friends questioned what they had done to make their ex-partners behave in the way they had.

“ It's so unfair to my friends but I don't think any of them really got it (3, W1).

The unpredictability of friends, their lack of awareness about domestic violence, meant many women in the first Wave of the study placed Solace at the centre of support around them.

Managing networks and shaping interactions

An unexpected finding was how much work women put into managing relationships with the people around them, making very deliberate choices about who they interacted with and who they did not.

This was embedded in their own safety work, since they sought to limit information about their new lives and routines being passed onto the abuser. Thus domestic violence continued to shape women's social networks, even after separation.

“ I completely cut myself off from all the people that have anything to do with him. He was always trying to find out things from other people, so the best thing was for me was to just cut them all off completely (64, W2).

The betrayal of trust which is so central to domestic violence also shaped women's interactions with new people or those they did not know well.

“ I'm very careful who I'm friends with, I'm very careful who I have around me, and I don't trust people. I don't trust anyone really unless I know them. I think maybe I'm a little bit too much distrusting of people, but then I think, well because of what me and my family have been through, I think that's quite normal (6, W1).

“ That's part of the domestic violence I think, part of it is that I'm very scared to trust people, I mean always expecting the worst from people (31, W1).

“ It just broke my faith in people, because everybody that I sort of trusted, everybody that I had in my life ... basically when me and my kids were in the gutter no one was there (6, W4).

The combination of these two factors resulted in women deliberately keeping their networks small, minimising potential overlap in friendship groups of the abuser and placing priority on trustworthiness.

“ It's more about quality rather than quantity isn't it? (6, W2).

“ I like to keep very close friends. Like I know if something went wrong we'd do anything to help each other, so a mutual thing. As opposed to just have like 110 flaky friends (10, W1).

The process of rebuilding their lives and, in many cases being a single-parent, meant that women simply did not have space to pursue and manage more extensive or demanding networks.

“ I've realised that relationships are really, really precious and that you don't have to put up with the rubbish, so it's really made me think well hang on, the people that I want to know I will know and the people I don't want to know I'm just going to drop. I've learned to kind of distance myself from people that are not having a positive impact on my life (85, W1).

“ I know it sounds selfish but it's like well I've got my own problems I don't really wanna listen to yours (84, W3).

“ The more people the more trouble there is... I like just my little network of people, I know who I've got and who I haven't and that's the way I like it (134, W1).

Compact and safe friendship networks were both a powerful need and conscious choice as women established homes and re-made their selves.

“ There is room for more [friends] but I am happy for now just doing my own thing. I feel once I get myself back up there I will sort of sort myself out (9, W3).

Closeness is not a matter of geography

We mapped women's networks of supportive and disruptive social network members (see Chapter Two). What women described when living with abuse were geographies of fear and shame, in which connections were limited by the presence of abuse. The mapping in Wave One (n=95) identified six

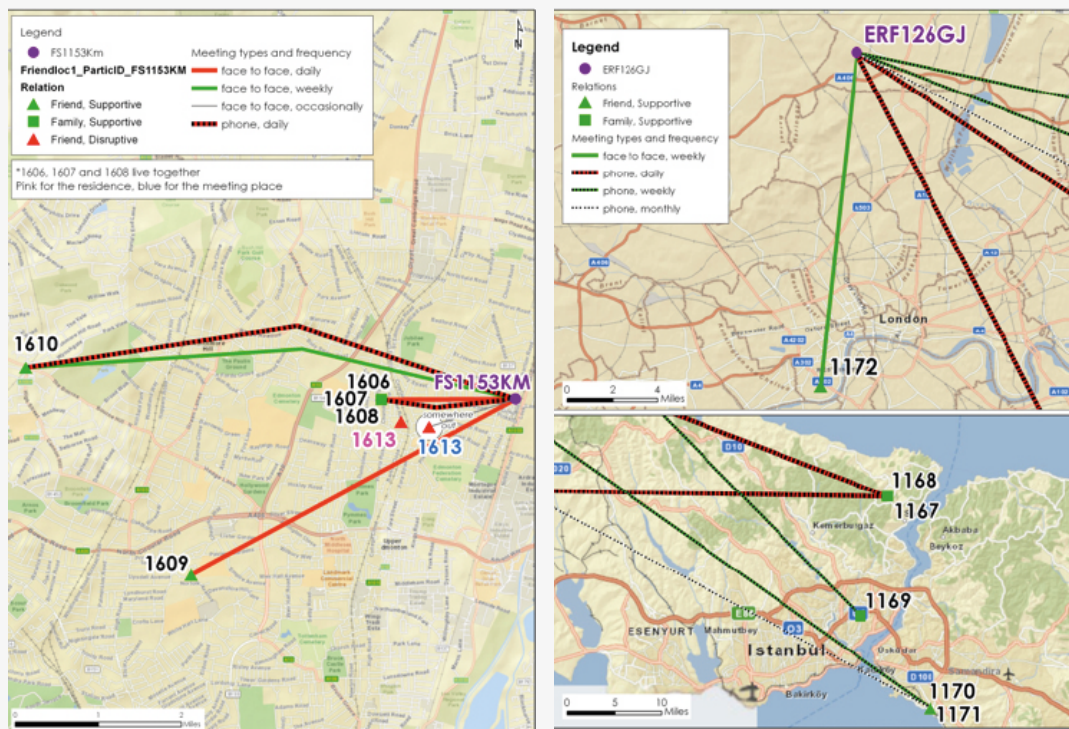
different patterns ranging from micro-local where more than half of network members lived within two kilometres to the international where more than half lived outside the UK (see Table 7:1).

Table 7:1 Social network distribution

| Typology | Description |
|---------------|---|
| Micro local | More than 50% family and friends live within 2 km of the woman |
| Local | More than 50% family and friends live within 5km of the woman |
| Across UK | More than 50% family and friends live in micro-local, local and other parts of the UK |
| Non-local | More than 50% family and friends live outside of local and micro-local but within UK |
| International | More than 50% family and friends live outside the UK |
| Scattered | None of the above |

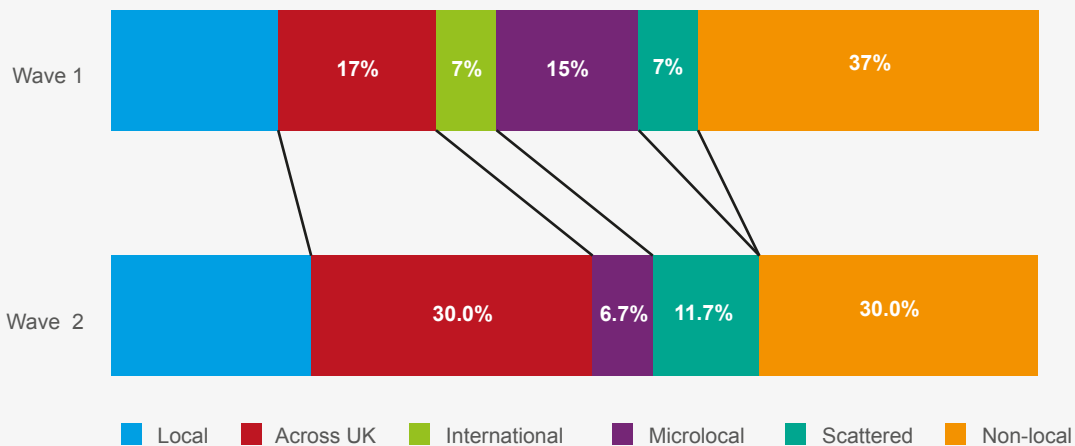
Figure 7.3 shows how networks were literally mapped using GIS software.

Figure 7:3 A micro-local map and an international map of social networks



We re-examined the distribution at Wave Four (see Figure 7:4) and the 'scattered' category had disappeared. The local and across UK grew, international stayed constant and the micro-local and non-local shrunk.

Figure 7:4 Distribution of social network typologies from Wave One to Wave Four



The relationship work outlined above shows that women spent time and energy managing their relationships, which may explain why the ‘scattered’ category ceased to exist since women increasingly organised their social networks.

“ This one [first emotional map in Wave One] is a bit scattered... I still wasn’t sure where people were in my life. Maybe that’s a bit more to do with how I felt about myself. I wasn’t too sure who to kind of trust, who was close, who was not. You know finding ‘me’ a little bit and deciding what kind of relationship I had with all these people and what role they play in my life or where they belong or not – that’s what’s different. [Referring to new map] It’s a lot more organised - I know what the relationship is with them and they know what it is with me (92, W4).

The small changes to the ‘local’ and ‘micro-local’ categories suggests that women kept social networks that were close to home under tight control. They talked about having ‘acquaintances’ rather than supportive friends locally who they did not disclose their experience to and kept at arms-length until they knew they could be trusted. The capacity to develop new friendships locally was also constrained by the practical issues they were still working to sort out and the demands of college, work and child care which left them with little time to socialise.

We expected women with international networks to develop more supportive relationships locally across the duration of the project. This did not always happen, perhaps for the same reasons why the ‘local’ and ‘micro-local’ categories remained constant. An additional factor here, however, was how rapidly changing and low-cost technologies such as Skype, social networking sites, e-mail and WhatsApp enabled women to maintain relationships with family and friends who lived far away.

“ Apart from sister as a family member here, I have cousins and another sister back in [home country] and then all my cousins in [country] and sisters in [country], [country] and [country]. They send me messages on Facebook to make sure I’m ok so I’m connected even if they’re not here (75, W3).

““ *WhatsApp has totally changed my life, because I’m constantly in contact with everybody now – it’s fantastic (39, W4).*

““ *R: You’ve also talked about contact with your aunt in [African country] who is supportive.
W: Yeah WhatsApp every day. They phone like once a month (50, W4).*

This would have looked very different before technology enabled re-building these links, women with international networks talked about a number of barriers to visiting family and friends, including the cost of travel and visa restrictions. There was also consideration of the risks involved with visiting family and friends who were part of the same community as the abuser and, in particular, around taking children with dual or non-British nationality to countries where women do not enjoy the same parental rights as in the UK. Some women also wanted to protect against the potential ‘shame’ they might bring to their families if the local community discovered they were a divorced woman.

The category which expanded the most over time was ‘across UK’. Women’s safety planning may again be part of the explanation here, with women feeling that friends and family who are based further away are safer since they are less likely to have contact with or be targeted by the abuser, and thus may not need to be so tightly managed.

Rather than geographies of fear, what emerges over time are geographies of safety, with tight social networks organised to minimise information being available to ex-partners and the potential for victim blame.

Conclusions

Although the limits that abuse placed around women seeing family and friends lifted, they chose to impose their own boundaries through detailed safety and relationship work. Trusted family and friends played important roles as women picked up the pieces of their lives. The mapping of their relational and social networks shows that these networks are not defined by physical geography, but rather over time geographies of fear and shame were transformed into geographies of safety. Women managed out those who were disruptive and untrustworthy, whilst investing in a smaller number of safe, supportive and positive relationships. It is easy to underestimate the ongoing safety and relationship work involved. If women are to be relieved of some of this burden we need more awareness raising on domestic violence directed at those it touches, rather than simply those it directly affects.

8. Health and well-being



Image (43, W4)

“ Well I’m having counselling because of the depression, which I go every week ... and that helps. I don’t want to take antidepressants because I want to deal with what upsets me, I don’t just want to mask it (16, W4).

Domestic violence and the impact on health

Women’s experiences of domestic violence and other forms of abuse are linked to physical and sexual health problems as well as mental illness, including anxiety and panic attacks, depression, post-traumatic stress, self-harm and suicide (Scott et al, 2013). Abuse can also lead to problematic substance use and eating disorders. Research suggests that women who experience domestic violence have twice the level of usage of general medical services and between three to eight times the levels of usage of mental health services (WNC, 2010). Health professionals are therefore an important resource and women reported accessing their services throughout the project (Wave Two: 36 per cent; Wave Three: 30 per cent; and Wave Four: 52 per cent). In this chapter we explore not only the immediate impacts, but those which were longer lasting, persisting across the three years or arising after more immediate safety and housing issues were less pressing.

Disclosure and support

Health professionals were a route into help to leave violent men: whilst a couple mentioned health visitors, for far more GPs were the ones women turned to. They were rated highly if they listened and believed, a response much preferred to being given pills.

“ They have very good doctors who aren't the type who just throw pills down your neck whenever you go or the type that just give out anti-depressants for any problem, they actually deal with stuff (23, W1).

In addition to providing emotional support and referrals to counselling, women valued practical support, such as being given information about domestic violence and numbers of specialist agencies. One woman reported that her doctor had helped gather documents and evidence against the perpetrator so that she could report him to the police.

There were unfortunately also accounts of poor responses in the Wave One interviews. The quotes below illustrate how GPs missed opportunities to ask what was going on or failed to respond positively to a disclosure.

“ I was there when they opened up in the morning... he'd gone to work and I'd gone and sat outside. I was so scared. And I said to them 'I must be somewhere else tonight, I cannot go back' ... I had bruises. I had broken ribs. They didn't do anything (26, W1).

“ The doctor that I saw didn't even ask what the problems were... I know they've only got 10 minutes with each patient, but he didn't even ask what the problems were. I said I can't sleep, I'm depressed, slightly suicidal, not seriously but thinking about things like maybe I shouldn't be and he didn't ask why, he didn't question it (85, W1).

One woman disclosed being sexually assaulted by her GP.

A potential tension was when the woman and the perpetrator had the same GP. In some cases this was dealt with well and the perpetrator was asked to see a different doctor.

“ We had the same GP and I had to go to the GP and explain to him what was going on. So, they wrote to him and said you can stay at the practice but you can't come to me. Of course he went mad at that (20, W3).

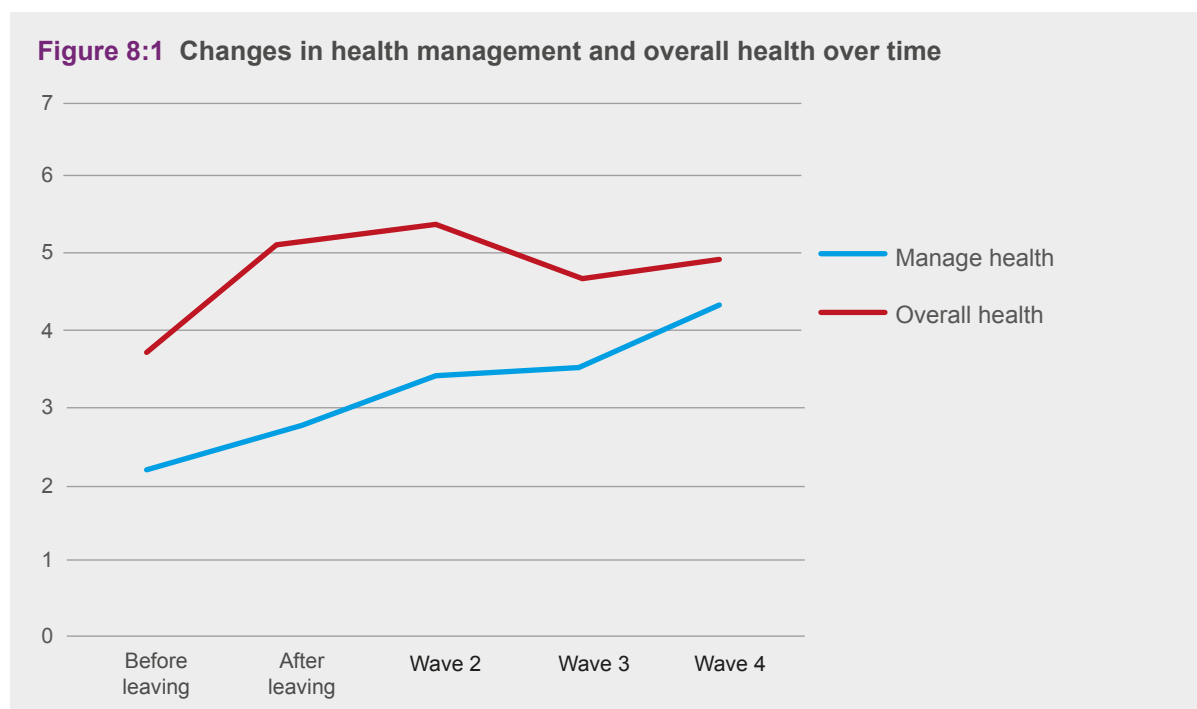
However one woman talked about her ex-husband manipulating the family doctor so that when she requested her medical records in support of her housing application the doctor told her that what he had would 'not be helpful' to her.

Focus shifted to changing GPs in Waves Two and Three since many women had moved to a new address, others chose to change doctors as part of their safety planning or simply decided they were not happy with their current doctor.

“ I am going to change GP though. You know, I was speaking to my friend about the whole depression thing, and they were like, if you're not happy with your GP, change them (92, W2).

Physical health

Over half of the women reported a current health condition at the outset of the research. A much smaller proportion (17) said they had been able to manage their health when involved with the abuser and, at the beginning of the project; only a quarter were positive about their overall health. Women felt better about their health after leaving, but over time other health events related to illness or injury began to take a toll, although women's capacity to manage their health increased over the project (see Figure 8.1).



Some of women's coping strategies whilst living with violence had the potential for health issues: smoking; drinking alcohol; self-medicating through recreational drugs and prescribed medication; and self-harm.

Even before leaving most women reported good control over their substance use, but this improved over time to the point where, in Wave Four, no woman said she had little control over her substance use and 95 per cent said they had good control.

Serious injuries which had long term consequences were not uncommon.

- “ “ When I had to jump from the third floor window that's when I broke both my legs and I ended up in hospital for a few weeks because he locked me in the room (22, W1).
- “ “ I have to wear a hearing aid now because of the wallops that I used to get round the ears it's made me deaf in one ear (4, W3).
- “ “ I mean I have backache, and that's from [ex-partner] throwing me down the stairs (87, W4).
- “ “ He cracked my ribs and I'm still having problems with them even now (83, W4).

Abuse, and its many aftermaths, also exacerbated existing health conditions.

- “ “ I've had the medical condition since birth, but they think that the pregnancy combined with the stress of everything I've been through and am going through has made my physical situation deteriorate rapidly (FG, W3).
- “ “ Anything that can make you a bit anxious doesn't help; I've got Crohn's disease and anxiety can make that worse (FG, W3).

“ I suffer from name [of condition] and I had a crisis last year, around the social services time funnily enough (88, W4).

“ It’s damp and cold here which I’m sorting out with the council but it’s affected my asthma dreadfully (28, W3).

Several women believed that medical professionals had failed to investigate health conditions which arose after they left, suggesting they has been perceived as neurotic because of their experience of domestic violence. Ten per cent of the sample had major operations and hospital stays during the course of the research and several were diagnosed with life-changing and life-threatening conditions such as cystic fibrosis, cancer and brain tumours.

“ I wasn’t able to do anything, my life was really in standby. I had four months of chemotherapy, and it was really, really hard, because I was tired. This was four months where I wasn’t living really (79, W4).

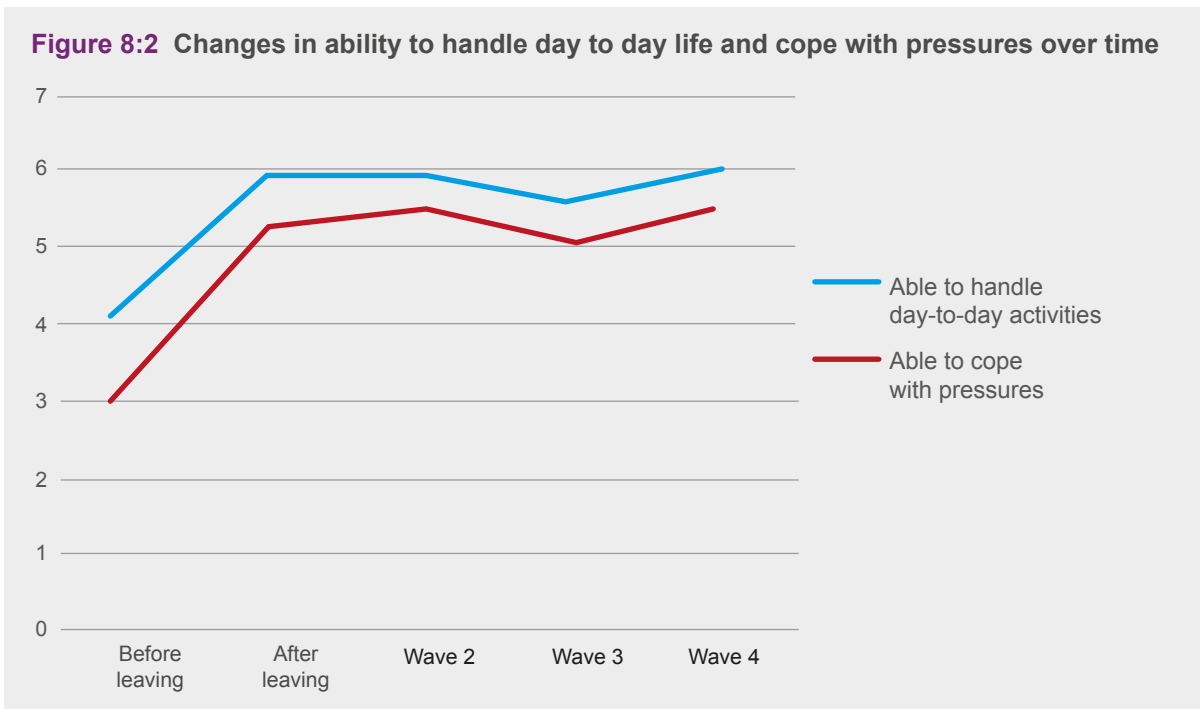
Ongoing health consequences of domestic violence and recently diagnosed conditions interfered with efforts to rebuild lives.

Psychological health

There was a continuum of impacts on psychological health ranging from sadness, not sleeping and anxiety through to depression, panic attacks, flash-backs and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

“ I feel like I’ve wasted all my life with him and like I’m stuck in this rut and I think it’s contributed to the depression. And then I think oh God, we moved to this house and I’ve been stuck here – what if we never get out? And I start getting panicky and thinking all these kind of things, and I don’t feel too positive about the future (62, W3).

The space for action scale sought to gauge women’s emotional health across the project. The percentages of those who reported not being able to handle day-to-day activities decreased, particularly after leaving but also further over time. Similarly there was an increase in the percentage of women who felt able to cope well with day-to-day pressures (see Figure 8.2).



Traumatic life events (such as bereavement, witnessing violent crime) compounded emotional difficulties, stalling progress in dealing with the past.

“ I’ve had the odd bumps along the road. The main thing that I would say bothers me would be my depression. I do have really bad days sometimes and I find it very hard to cope sometimes. But I think that’s also due to things that have happened within my family [bereavement]. There have been setbacks (64, W2).

Bereavements not dealt with in the past and experiences of childhood abuse were reactivated by the loss/grief about this relationship. As well as variable responses by health professionals, medicalised responses (anti-depressants and sleeping tablets) were criticised, and created different layers of anxiety.

“ I don’t agree with this sort of just medicating women like this. I think it is bad (32, W4).

“ I’m backwards and forwards still but I’m trying not to depend on them, because I don’t like doing it, even though I’ve been told and encouraged to do it, it was just like when I get to that point then okay I do, but then once I feel like I’ve, I’m strong enough again I do come off of them (72, W4).

Wanting to end it all

Just under a quarter (n=23) of the sample talked about suicide either when they were experiencing the abuse or after leaving. Here reaching breaking point was precipitated by issues related to children, ongoing pain from injuries, being unable to access housing and financial instability (see also Scott et al, 2013).

“ I tried to kill myself at least twice. But I’m not suicidal now (68, W1).

“ I’ve tried committing suicide over 20 times (99, W1).

“ It’s been a horrendous year. I reached the point many times where I was suicidal I just couldn’t take any more you know (5, W3).

“ Sometimes I feel that you know the best place to be is just to be dead (70, W3).

What stopped most was the thought of their children.

“ There was a time I tried to kill myself because I thought life was not worth it but there’s one thing - if I didn’t have my son I’d probably be dead by now (86, W1).

For several women Solace Women’s Aid had literally saved their lives.

“ I was really stupid and overdosed in November... Solace is the only reason why I’m alive today they’re the only reason why I didn’t end up dying and killing myself (99, W3).

“ So if it wasn’t for the refuge I would most probably have tried to commit suicide (50, W3).

Two of the young people interviewed also talked about attempting suicide and accounts of children feeling suicidal were told by some mothers. For the young people the suicide attempts were articulated through helplessness.

“ When I first heard my Mum and Dad broke up, I went crazy. I went upstairs, grabbed a shaver and slit my wrists, because I could not handle it (C3, W1).

“ Can you put me in a foster home please Mum? I am going to hang myself, one of these days you will come and see me hanging on the light ceiling with a belt (43, W2).

“ Yesterday there was a child referred to me, aged 8. In the school toilets he was found trying to kill himself (KW12, W1).

Finding ways to cope

The mental health dimensions in women and children's lives shows how essential longer term support is for many and the necessity that health commissioners recognise the contribution of specialised services; as several women in our study noted they literally save lives. Women's good sense and inventiveness meant that they marshalled an array of coping strategies, which fell into seven broad categories:

- Seeking support from organisations such as Solace or other counselling.
- Health enhancing activities - deep breathing, yoga, relaxation classes, meditation, massage, going to the gym, running, swimming, hypnotherapy and seeing spiritual healers.
- Seeking and finding purpose – watching inspirational programmes, prayer (faith), finding things that gave hope, self-help books, and life coaches.
- Positive distractions – employment, volunteering, getting day to day tasks done, gardening, cooking, studying, playing music, singing and drawing.
- Taking a break – friends and family taking children for respite, going on holiday, and walking.
- Finding comfort – from children, family and friends, animals and fortune tellers.
- Writing – diaries, books, and poetry.

Kelly (2012) calls the energy and efforts survivors have to expend to deal with the legacies of abuse 'violence work'; this is different and additional to safety work.

Counselling

A valued resource was counselling. Interviews with the key workers suggested that many women are referred to the Solace counselling service: analysis of the Wave One interviews alone showed that just under half (n=46) made specific reference to the value of it.

Access was prompt compared to long waiting lists for NHS provision: where women had to wait this prolonged the use of anti-depressants and other medication, and some linked this to deterioration in their well-being. The value of holistic provision that Solace offers extending over the longer term could address some of these issues.

“ Since the last interview I got a referral from the GP to the NHS counselling service but I didn't follow that up because I didn't want to have to wait for six months and I couldn't afford to pay for it (3, W2).

“ I've been on this waiting list for CBT for six months now. I went and told him that I was having panic attacks and I felt like this. They were trying me on different [medication] and my body just didn't agree with it; it was horrible (92, W3).

The vast majority of women who accessed counselling provided by Solace Women's Aid rated this very highly, because the counsellors understood the dynamics of domestic violence and its impacts. One even included her counsellor on her emotional map.

“ That's my counsellor... she really, really helped me... so I am doing her close to me and I'm doing her round – I suppose I see her as quite a complete thing – like an orb (69, W1).

When professionals understood domestic violence it was possible to say things they had never spoken about before whilst receiving reassurance.

“ They made me feel – because I was beating myself up so much about what I should’ve done and didn’t do and the all the rest of it – they made me feel... gave me my dignity that yes, all this had happened but it wasn’t a reflection on me (13, W1).

Women who had experienced historic abuse also talked about how the counselling enabled them to address issues they had not previously dealt with.

“ I honestly do not think I would be as happy as I am now because although I’d had counselling before years ago to do with child abuse it hadn’t been dealt with properly (8, W3).

The only criticism about the counselling provided by Solace was that a number of the women thought they would have benefitted from more, over a longer period of time.

“ I was devastated when my counselling with Solace ended because it was it was a way of getting to know what actually was going on inside me, so many things were revealed to me when I was going to counselling (70, W2).

“ I would have liked to have continued that for a bit longer. I mean I know it’s only limited but... I would have liked to have been able to go to some of the drop in sessions cos every now and again it all comes back (85, W4).

“ I think where all the services have been cut quite a lot they’re having to be much stricter about how long they can work with people. It’s really difficult because everyone needs longer (74, W4).

The counselling they did get on the NHS was not always suitable since it did not address domestic violence specifically and was time-bound.

“ I’ve been trying to get help for four years, I’m really angry that I can’t get anything but six lessons in CBT in which they won’t talk to me about sexual abuse or domestic violence (26, W1).

Where women did value input such as CBT this was when it was an ‘add on’ to domestic violence specific counselling. One woman also mentioned liking the group aspect of some CBT courses since it made her realise other people were also having a challenging time.

“ I went to see the CBT therapist. She gave me some techniques which I sort of adapted a bit. But they’re just like interrupting negative thought patterns, and doing positive enforcement. It seems to work (3, W4).

Services which women did rate highly were provided by violence against women specialists and those provided by charities such as Mind. A few women found post-traumatic stress clinics very helpful.

Several of the women with mental health problems had had their children taken from them. Similarly another woman who lost custody of her children to the abuser was told her concerns about the children’s safety were linked to her being mentally ill and delusional.

Women who went on to experience traumatic life events after domestic violence also talked about how they would appreciate more counselling. Similarly women who were ready to enter a new intimate relationship thought this might be helpful. One of the key workers talked about the value of access as women’s situations and needs changed.

“ Some of them come back after a while which is a good sign, by the way. Because the idea is that they can learn to use the space. So normally what happens during the counselling process is that... after the [first] steps they have made towards change they will then find other issues and they will know how to use the space to reflect and to get organised again (KW4, W4).

Holidays

Being able to take a holiday - a break to get away from everything - was a respite in a safe space where women were not constantly managing their safety. Just over a quarter (n=26) were able to do this over the research period.

“ They really love it; they love it [going on holiday]. It's the only time that my girls truly one hundred per cent relax I think. You know, no-one's gonna be banging on the door (87, W4).

For many women managing on reduced finances limited the possibility of taking holidays, but special holiday funds for children and help from charities enabled some to do this. If women were unable to go away they would organise day trips instead.

“ At the moment I can't afford to go anywhere, so the only holidays we'll just probably do is in UK, just go maybe to the beach (86, W4).

Other navigated financial constraints by staying with friends and family so that they only had to pay travel costs. One single woman managed her inability to access housing and her health problems by spending six months of the year abroad, using the six months back home to raise the funds in order to be able to go again.

A further limitation for women who were not born in the UK was accessing travel documents, be these visas or passports. When subject to child contact arrangements they also had to ask their ex-partner for permission to take their children out of the country.

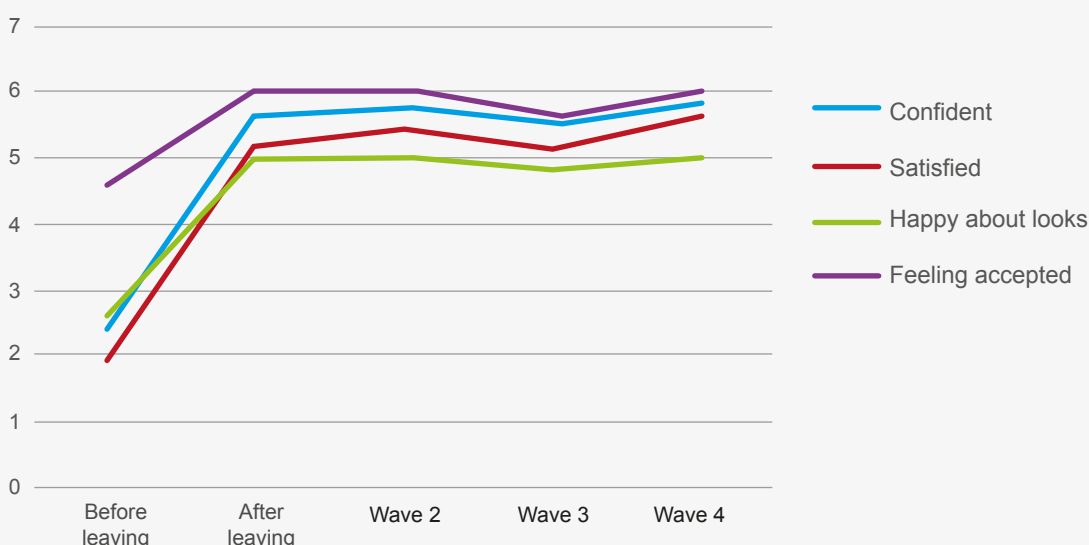
Self-concept

A strong theme in relation to women's well-being was their self-concept being undermined within the abuse.

“ I've got a bit of confidence now, but not what I should have. I still need a lot more confidence to actually go out and meet people, which at the moment I can't (4, W1).

There was a dramatic change after leaving. The percentage of women with low confidence dropped from three-quarters to less than 10 per cent. The percentage of women with high confidence soared from a low of six percent to two-thirds. There was also a ten-fold increase in how satisfied women felt with themselves, moving from four to nearly 50 per cent of women feeling highly satisfied by the end of study.

Figure 8:3 Changes in women's self-concept over time



Changes in relation to ‘feeling accepted’ by the people that women interacted with were not as extreme but were still noticeable. Before leaving, over a quarter of women did not feel accepted, after leaving this dropped to less than five percent. The percentage of women who felt accepted rose after leaving from just under half to almost three-quarters and continued to rise over the three years.

Keyworkers noted that bolstering self-confidence was an important part of their job and involved supporting women to be independent in every area of their lives. This aspect of Solace’s work was recognised by many women, including learning strategies that helped put in place boundaries in relationships with others and having the knowledge and confidence to advocate for themselves.

- ““ *I came to the confidence group run at Solace and for me that was a very big awakening; it gave control back to me (32, W1).*
- ““ *The time spent at Solace definitely helped me re-build my confidence. And from then on I think I felt enough wherewithal if I wanted to do something then I would explore it and say well, why not? (30, W4).*
- ““ *I made a complaint to the Housing Benefit people. The complaints guy rang up and tried to bully me. I was so proud of myself because I made a really, really good job dealing with it, extracted a full apology and I was so proud, I felt like a different person (23, W1).*

Women set their own challenges like learning to swim and drive. Those with limited English skills talked about the difference being better able to understand and speak the language had made.

- ““ *The more I understand this country now, the more I have idea. My English is – I’m not saying my English perfect, but much better (59, W1).*

Linked to self-confidence were feelings of self-worth. Given the sense of worthlessness many recalled when they were experiencing domestic violence they had begun to prioritise themselves.

- ““ *I enjoy, doing things that make me feel good about myself, being around people that are emotionally healthy as well, doing things for myself. I go to the gym when I can. I buy myself clothes when I can, make time for myself and I don’t always put everybody else first now (6, W1).*
- ““ *My ex-husband used to on about my weight all the time but now I have to be happy the way I am (86, W2).*
- ““ *When I came to live in this house I was doing so many things on my own – laying the floor down, putting furniture up, assembling things, everything. And I started to realise there was more to me than I knew there was. I had all these resources (30, W3).*
- ““ *I really don’t have to spend my life, people-pleasing and I need to concentrate more on me and how I’m feeling and how I fit into all of this, because I had totally lost that (87, W3).*

For many this was a work-in-progress, re-making the self after being so diminished is a lengthy process.

- ““ *But when I left I got my confidence from nowhere, it just came back. But gradually... not overnight... with time it just came (75, W4).*
- ““ *My self-confidence was on the floor for a long, long, long time, but I’m getting there, I feel better about myself (38, W4).*

Conclusions

Over the three years, women addressed safety and practical challenges before focusing on themselves. What emerged powerfully was the importance of counsellors who understood domestic violence and its many legacies, but this is often not considered a core part of domestic violence services, which are increasingly focused on short term risk reduction. Women's narratives revealed that counselling integrated into services like Solace not only saved their lives but also costs to the NHS, where delays and inappropriate interventions led to dependence on medication, in some cases worsening mental health. Becoming physically and emotionally well, or being in control of managing their health was another fundamental building block in rebuilding lives, a foundation from which it was possible to return to work, complete or enter education and, for some, to enter a new intimate relationship.

9. Children and parenting

Emotional map (24, W4)



The impacts of living with domestic violence on children are now widely recognised; slightly less understood is how this context interferes with mothering (Radford and Hester, 2007). Much of the research to date, however, focuses on either living with domestic violence, interventions that support children in the aftermath or the issue of child contact. Here we combine all of these themes, within a discussion of rebuilding lives.

Four out of five (84 per cent) women in the sample had children, with a total of 176 children at the outset: 83 were female and 93 were male. Their ages ranged from 1 month to 38 years old. Five children were born over the course of the project (one girl and four boys) and one child was fostered. Women who were stepmothers were deeply affected by leaving children that they loved: in one case this was clearly reciprocated so the woman and child were meeting secretly.

As well as the interviews with women who were mothers, we draw on the interviews and focus groups undertaken with children and young people in this chapter.

Abuse and children

Over a quarter (n=25) of mothers reported that they had been pregnant when the abuse started. Many of this group saw the abuser's motivation to have children as being another form of control.

“ After I was pregnant, instead of being two times violent to me per year it was like kind every two months and then he got a 100 times worse. When my daughter was born he thought ‘Oh she’s not going to go anywhere I can do whatever I want’ (70, W1).

“ He was over the moon when I got pregnant, absolutely over the moon. And I now understand why because he saw it as the first hook. She’s not gonna get away now (FG, W3).

Children's 'awareness' of what was happening included: witnessing the abuse; seeing the aftermath; trying to intervene; and being used by the perpetrator as part of his efforts to exert coercive control (see also Mullender et al. 2002)

- ““ *His daughter would also be forced not to look at me and not speak to me (1, W1).*
- ““ *He was sort of running towards me and he was screaming 'daddy, daddy, don't kill mummy, don't kill mummy' (5, W1).*
- ““ *He was also told, don't respect your Mum, and your Mum's this and, he used to get him to wee on me and all sorts of stuff like that (36, W3).*
- ““ *I remember one time my Mum got really frightened because he was threatening her with a knife and I was there and I was trying to calm things down...I remember my Mum tried to pick up the phone and he just like ripped it out her hand and smashed it. It was really scary (C1, W4).*
- ““ *There was more than one occasion when I'd come back to find my mum black and blue (C2, W1).*

There were also examples of children being directly abused by the perpetrator, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

- ““ *My daddy said he was going to kill me and throw me out the window (C4, W1).*

Women talked about 'things happening' to their children if they left them alone with their father – for example, one child's arm was broken. This led some to take over all child care, reinforcing their sense of isolation since it made it harder for them to go out and access their social networks. For other women the perpetrator insisted on a rigid division of labour, where children and child care were left to them.

- ““ *I never really had any time for myself; he would never give me any time, he was never there really for the kids, he was doing his own kind of thing, and I had the kids all the time, he'd never lift any kind of hand (62, W1).*
- ““ *If I wanted milk from the shop he wouldn't go and get it. I either had to take the four children or pay him to babysit the four children whilst I went to the shop (87, W1).*

Impacts on children

Interviews with children and their mothers revealed the burdens children carried when they lived with the perpetrator: children described feeling sad, upset, unhappy, scared and worried that someone would get hurt (see also Mullender et al, 2002). They reported crying and having nightmares, and one young person disclosed self-harming because he was worried about turning into a man like the perpetrator.

Young people in the focus group talked about not telling anyone what was happening at home in case the police got involved, their parents were arrested and they were taken into care. Some discussed being scared of not being believed or their accounts being minimised. This was not an unfounded fear, one young man did try to seek help, but no one listened. He did not understand why it had to go so far – attempted suicide – to get people to hear his distress.

- ““ *He's been through Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression he's on the same tablets as me basically he tried to hang himself at school. He's seeing a psychiatrist and he has nurses coming home every day. He's not allowed at school at the minute (100, W2).*

Children in both the interviews and focus group talked about trying to escape the abuse by going to their bedrooms, listening to loud music and trying to distract themselves (see also Mullender et al, 2002).

Emotional map (24, W1)



Release and distress

After leaving, women's concerns were most intense with respect to children's emotional well-being, with some women noting that their children were angry.

●● *My son is a happy child, but sometimes I can still see the effects of domestic violence he experienced. And he gets angry very quick even though he had therapy (FG, W3).*

One young woman explained that her frustration was because she had to give up her home, school and pets whereas the perpetrator did not have to give up anything at all.

Other women put this in stronger terms: that their children were traumatised. They lacked confidence, were anxious and clingy, self-harmed, wet themselves, had panic attacks, ran away, became anorexic and displayed compulsive behaviours.

●● *Through the course of rebuilding our relationship she revealed that when she went into the refuge she had been self-harming and I had no idea (90, W2).*

●● *Now we are dealing with anorexia... her father's always been a health fanatic and used to tell her she was fat (FG, W3).*

Some women observed that their children 'acted' out specific abusive situations that they had witnessed with siblings. They also reported being physically attacked, especially by sons. A couple of young men tried to 'control' their mothers in the same way as their fathers had, whereas some daughters had become wary of men.

- “ How the big one grabs the small one just reminds me of how his dad did me and even when I talk to him. He’s just like him that rage (95, W2).
- “ Sometimes when he talks to you, he talks to you in a tone like he wants to control you. And I just have to try and tell him, don’t talk to me like that. But still, you tell him but he won’t keep from doing it because his Dad told him he’s the man in the house – can you imagine? (94, W2).
- “ He’d picked up the ways of my ex-husband, cos he was in his care all the time. So it was like I’d got rid of one perpetrator, but I was living with another – and to break that was really difficult, really bad (71, W4).
- “ I think they’re [daughters] very wary about men. They say they wouldn’t marry anyone. I think they’re frightened, that sort of thing (20, W1.)

Women worried that their sons might turn out to be perpetrators and their daughters’ victims of domestic violence, highlighting the ubiquity of ‘cycle of abuse’ ideas. What perplexed many was not knowing how far their children’s behaviour could be considered ‘normal’ and how much was connected to living with domestic violence.

- “ I’m having a little bit of behaviour problem with my daughter at the moment, I don’t know whether it’s a coincidence or whatever...I mean they do go through little stages, all children do, I know that, but I don’t know whether it’s to do with that (6, W1).
- “ Is that within the normal range of behaviour [or] was that because she has witnessed something that she shouldn’t have and is acting it out? It’s very hard to gauge. Is it learnt or is it age appropriate? (89, W1).

Positive changes

Mothering after domestic violence created new and different challenges. Removing children from the violence led, for most, to positive changes, especially in the mother-child relationship. Both women and that their children observed that they spent more time together.

- “ I guess my coping was to just to lock myself away and just – shove it all, go away...I really feel like I just kind of switched off from it. Or I just kind of withdrew into my bedroom (C1, W4).
- “ Our relationship’s probably got, we got closer – ‘coz when he was in the house, she used to go to her room a lot and we didn’t talk that much (62, W1).

There was, therefore, an extension of space for action for children themselves, including being able to spend more time with their friends. Women remarked on their children’s growing confidence.

- “ I enjoy seeing them a bit lippy sometimes, challenging my authority as a parent and the decisions to make because they have the liberty to do that rather than [him] just dictating (88, W1).
- “ I think now has been the longest that I’ve seen them genuinely happy, without a worrying look on their face, or like they’re wondering or thinking about certain things (42, W2).

Those women who had left whilst pregnant noticed the difference between children who had not been exposed to violence and their older siblings.

- “ He didn’t really get affected much by the domestic violence, because obviously I had split before – five years ago, when I knew I was pregnant because I didn’t want him to witness it... the other two had. You can notice the impact it has on children, because my other two – they’ve seen a lot, they’ve heard a lot (19, W3).

Support for children

Sixty-four per cent of women had sought support for their children. When asked about what had helped them, the children mentioned support from siblings, therapists, social workers and counsellors. They talked about the strategies that they had learned to manage their emotions.

““ *I’m calming myself down, counting to twenty if I’m really angry. Or I count to ten, or five. And I will take deep breaths (C4, W4).*

Children were involved with a number of professionals including: psychiatrists; psychotherapists; CAMHS; anger management programmes; the family GP; speech and language therapists; mentors and staff from children’s centres. However, it was the play and art therapists at Solace Women’s Aid that were most highly praised.

““ *My son is really changed; he’s sleeping in separate room now - no more sleeping with me. It is really good, even discipline because before he used to hit me...they [the refuge] referred me to a family support worker here... now if you see him he’s not hitting anyone he listens, he’s more disciplined he is just a completely different boy than when in refuge (18, W2).*

““ *They’ve come out of it ok because we had the right support at the right time. I’m glad we did what we did; I think the best thing ever was that we went to the refuge and the services were there (15, W3).*

Women put a lot of work both securing support for their children and into creating supportive environments through undertaking parenting courses so they knew how to respond to children’s distress and behaviour. Here again Solace Women’s Aid was noted for helping them become better parents.

““ *It’s amazing how much just communicating and breaking down the barrier of secrecy really helps because the school are involved, CAMHS are involved and my family and friends know so it’s nothing in a way to be ashamed of, it’s open and he’s getting help, which is the best thing (36, W4).*

““ *They not only supported me, they supported the kids as well. It’s not even just the drama and art, it’s they know there’s somewhere that Mum goes if she gets overly stressed (87, W4).*

Support for children was complicated where they did not want to speak about the abuse, but even when they were ready the dearth, or closure, of appropriate services undermined the best intentions of some mothers.

““ *It’s – because I was a witness to things – to it – but it happened to my Mum. She was the victim, I feel like if I was to tell anybody I’d have to have her permission to do so really (38, W4).*

““ *We were seeing the family therapist we’re not seeing him anymore because they closed [local authority] cut the funding (82, W2).*

Involvement with social services

It has long been documented that women living with domestic violence are anxious about the involvement of social workers due to fears the children will be taken into care – a fear often played on by the perpetrator. This held true for some of the research sample:

““ *Social services, you know, they’ve got a name for taking the children off you; I’d die if they took my children away, you know, that was my biggest fear with them (48, W1).*

““ *What can I say? They are a children’s service. Nobody wants to have dealings with them, because it usually means that you’ve failed in some respect as a parent (32, W4).*

That said, other women sought out the support of social services. Some women who sought help were told that they did not ‘qualify’, one was told that she was ‘too articulate’ to be in need of help. Thirty per cent of women had had contact with social services, with a few reporting positive engagement.

““ *It started off with the contact from the school, when he was taking the children and not bringing them back, so they [social services] got involved...she was really nice, she’d come to the school and help me, talk me and advise me (2, W1).*

For the majority, however, their experience was negative both prior to leaving and after having done so. Examples of poor practice whilst living with abuse included: social workers visiting the family home to talk about domestic violence when the perpetrator was present; women being told to leave with nowhere to go to; the perpetrator not being held accountable for his actions; and social workers attributing men’s violence to ‘cultural differences’.

““ *And social services say ‘Oh, this is a nice tidy house. Oh, you’re pregnant? What went on?’ [I said] ‘Oh, nothing, it was just - just verbal, nothing much’. Because obviously he [perpetrator] is standing there (36, W1).*

Three women in the sample did have their children removed (in one case they were later returned) and for all this was devastating. A couple of other women reported threats to remove their children.

““ *I’m trying to get a divorce and I’m trying to serve him with injunctions, but social services are telling me if he doesn’t stop smashing my windows in they’re gonna remove the children from me, because I will be neglecting them because I love my violent relationship (87, W1).*

After leaving the concerns about social work practice included: being made to go to meetings with the perpetrator; the perpetrator continually making allegations about them which then had to be investigated; and being held responsible for his behaviour.

““ *Social services were making me go to meetings with this man. Solace wrote them a letter saying that he’s high-risk, and in no circumstances should I have to attend meetings... They didn’t listen... He just flew up off the chair, near enough hitting the table, and went to go for me. And the social worker had to get in the middle (48, W4).*

““ *The dad hit the kids when they were on a visit to him. Social services were called in. We were all interviewed, and he wasn’t. And it was signed off. But it went on for weeks on end. And I was made to feel like the perpetrator (FG, W1).*

Two young people had felt both disbelieved and abandoned by social services, with a further young woman reporting that she had had five different social workers who appeared not to have even read her case notes.

A common complaint was the content of social work reports in child contact proceedings, in which women were represented as ‘instructing’ and ‘brainwashing’ their children, or inaccurate information was included. One woman was told that she and her children had ‘ganged’ up on her ex-husband.

““ *She’s written what I’ve said to her, and then she’s put “However I believe” and then she’s written her opinion – like when she interviewed [child] and [child] said ‘Yeah I saw Daddy pull a knife out to Mummy’. However, I believe that the child has been instructed by his mother (5, W1).*

“ He wrote that I had a doctor I never had. So they said, ‘Mother’s suffering from mental illness, Dr X from [surgery] has confirmed this’ but the [surgery] said the social services never contacted them (32, W1).

Several women had to contend with repeated allegations made by the perpetrator after ending the relationship.

“ Every time they come here and they say ‘Oh your husband said you’ve done this, you’ve done that’ – second time, third time, how many times can a person come to you and say something and then can’t find anything? (70, W1).

Although women’s contact with social services decreased across the research period, involvement was invariably a source of continual worry, and some described it as the hardest thing to deal with as they were trying to rebuild their lives.

“ What’s been the most difficult? The social services were very difficult for me. Handling the whole, the court thing with the custody and the – that was the most difficult thing. That put a lot of stress on me (5, W4).

“ The complete – the interruption and the disarray caused by external services. That has been a nightmare. It’s enough to make a person go crazy; specifically social services (88, W4).

Even where women made complaints about poor practice, this did not make a difference.

“ As soon as you make a complaint against them they make your life hell (48, W3).

Whilst acknowledging that poor practice existed, key workers were more positive about social services when they were working in partnership within a multi-agency response, perhaps suggesting that the advocacy role Solace plays makes a difference.

“ And we’ve had some really great experiences with social workers, where there’s been lots of contact; we’ve all worked together as a group of professionals around a child. Social worker’s been completely upfront and honest with the parents, completely upfront and honest with us. And we’ve all sort of shared decision-making, as it were (KW2, W1).

Child contact

Contrary to popular belief, women went to great lengths to facilitate child contact with fathers when they felt it was safe to do so (see also, Coy et al, 2013).

“ Contact has always been there since day one and it was something I insisted on because it was traumatic enough me ripping them out of their home without them losing their dad in the process (33, W2).

Women sought to minimise the impact of leaving, making informal arrangements for contact, which worked well in some cases. Some women noted that they agreed to informal contact to prevent their ex-partner seeking court-ordered contact, thus maintaining some control of the situation.

“ I can just stop it with him when I like; if he’s got a court order he’s constantly using this power (48, W3).

Facilitating contact with fathers was painful if the men encouraged children to hold women responsible for the break up.

“ My son was saying ‘You don’t want Daddy to come back, I hate you. ‘I wish you were dead’. That was really hard... sometimes I think that he wants to control everybody in this house (94, W2).

“ It’s very hard for mums that person has destroyed everything in the kid’s life, and then you think is it wrong or right, it’s like the kids have so much admiration for their dads. It’s just so very irritating and frustrating that you put all that work in (32, W3).

Women whose children were older towards the end of the research period observed that they were starting to recognise the dynamics of the situation.

“ They very much loved their Dad when they were younger, but as they got older you know, they saw what was going on (10, W3).

Responses to young people who told their fathers they did not want to see them were generally not positive. One young person received abusive texts. In other cases, contact ended at the instigation of the father, often when they got involved in new relationships or realised the separation was permanent.

“ It was alright for a couple of weeks, he was coming every week, then all of a sudden he just stopped coming; just all of a sudden, stopped paying maintenance, and stopped coming (5, W2).

“ He’s more focused on his girlfriend, his own private life now (12, W3).

“ And then he called me and he was like ‘If I can’t have you back then I don’t want to see the children, I only did this for you’. And I was like ‘Did what for me?’ [he said] ‘Well I thought that maybe if you could see how good a dad I am then you might ...’ (42, W3).

Since children often looked forward to seeing their fathers, this placed an additional emotional burden on women: having to be the one to tell them he was not coming. Some fathers had not seen their children at all since the split and did not express any motivation to do so.

“ I1: Funnily enough, since I left he hasn’t even asked

I2: So how long’s that?

I1: It is three and a half years now

I2: And he hasn’t seen them at all?

I1: He hasn’t seen them

I2: That would be bliss! (FG, W3)

Forty-two per cent of children had no contact with their fathers by the end of the research period, with both women and children reporting that this was accepted and in some instances welcomed.

“ Cos I don’t like him saying all the rude stuff to me and that he’s going to kill me and stuff. I feel scared (C4, W4).

Managing contact

A challenge for all the women who were mothers was the inconsistency of parenting that arose out of children spending time in two different family settings. Whilst some had met the father to resolve these tensions, the majority tried to have as little to do with their ex-partner as possible, due to safety concerns, making joint parenting difficult.

“ It’s actually destroyed our family. I can’t even begin to explain the effect it’s had and the effect on him will be later seen. He’s being shared and obviously we hate each other, both sides of the family. So he’s going there and he’s hearing all this stuff about mummy (32, W3).

Men who had not been interested in parenting in the past were a particular cause for concern.

“ My daughter described it like he was only their father in name, because he never did anything with them. He wouldn’t even go – in those days you had to go and have interviews for secondary school, and he wouldn’t turn up (20, W1).

In such cases children reported being bored during contact visits since they would be left to entertain themselves.

New issues arose around parenting in cases where women learned that their ex-partner had gone on to meet someone new. Some children enjoyed spending time with their second families, especially when the new partner had children of similar ages. Other children, however, reported being treated badly. One woman had learned that her ex's new girlfriend had been racist towards her children. Another reported that her child was inappropriately exposed to his father's intimate behaviour and was exhibiting sexualised behaviour. In addition, a few children reported that their father was violent toward his new partner.

“ And then, when he was supposed to see his dad, and his dad didn't turn up, he'd a little smile on his face. And I'm like 'Daddy didn't come, aren't you upset?' He said no, and then he started telling me that he was abusing the new girlfriend in front of him (5, W2).

In two cases a young person had decided to stay with their father so that they could 'look after' him, which was very difficult for the mothers involved. Similarly a couple of children preferred spending time with their fathers who generally had more financial resources than their mothers, living in more spacious accommodation with the latest technology.

Child contact as a mechanism for abuse

Reflecting previous research (Hester & Radford, 1996; Thiara & Gill, 2012; Coy et al, 2012) child contact was used by some men as a mechanism to control women. The post-separation abuse questionnaire administered in Wave Three of the research showed that this was the case (see Figure 5.4 in chapter five).

Key workers confirmed this.

“ Everyone can clearly see, it's [child contact] used in order to subject the woman to further abuse... a controlling way of knowing what's exactly going on in the woman's life (KW9, W1).

Some women talked about their ex-partner physically and sexually assaulting them during unsupervised child contact visits, as well as being subjected to verbal abuse, including threats to kill. Ways of managing this included arranging for a third party to facilitate the pick-up and drop off; others met their ex-partner in public places so they would not know where they lived. Where the partner did know a new address many women refused to let him into the house. Here several talked about drawing on learning gained from their experience of attending group work sessions at Solace Women's Aid, especially the importance of putting strong boundaries in place.

“ I'd been to a counselling session and I remember a new girl coming in and saying about how her partner, one step at a time, little bit by little bit and now he was actually in the house every time the kids were being picked up and dropped off and all I remember that day he rang that buzzer was her - you're [ex-husband] not taking that little step (15, W2).

In some cases children were used to facilitate the abuse post-separation, with men using derogatory language about women in front of their children which was repeated when they came home.

“ The next day she told me 'Mummy you are poisonous' and she didn't even know what poisonous means (70, W3).

Some put pressure on children to plead their case, or questioned them in order to find out things women had chosen not to tell them.

“ She would sob all the way back to London on the train 'Oh mummy why don't you love daddy? Daddy cries every night because we're not there' (39, W3).

“ He’s played a lot of mind games with my eldest just for information, not because he cares or wants to help the child with his life in any way (87, W4).

Knowing about women’s new lives enabled men to be disruptive by deliberately turning up late to collect the children or failing to turn up at all when they were aware that she was meeting friends or had an important event to attend. In cases where children were brought home late, several women talked about being fearful that their child would be abducted, particularly when he ex-partner was an overseas citizen.

Awareness about the complexities of child contact was influential in the decision of one woman to stay with her partner.

“ Because I could expect, you know, having listened to other women’s stories, that you may rid yourself directly of the relationship but if you have children you have that person in your life, as they were (89, W4).

Family courts

Where children had themselves been abused or threatened women were more likely to oppose contact or would only consider supervised or indirect contact arrangements made through the family courts, this was the case for almost a fifth (n=19).

“ So he needs to be monitored with my children. I cannot leave my children with him EVER (75, W2).

There were some examples of positive decisions being made by judges in the family court. Fact finding hearings were undertaken and abusive men made to attend a perpetrator programme. This was then taken into consideration when contact orders were considered.

“ In the end, significant findings of domestic violence were found, and then, he was ordered to do an assessment to see if he would engage in DVIP³ (88, W2).

Unfortunately the more common account was of proceedings extending over years. A couple of women reported feeling close to break down as a consequence; which sometimes led to them agreeing to arrangements that they were not happy with.

“ She lives with him. That was by mutual agreement in the court. I fought him for – this had been going on for three years – and then in the end I just decided it’s not worth it, allowing my child to be used as tool, I just shut down. I said no, enough (90, W3).

“ They were the worst years of my life. There was always something going on. It was wearing me into the ground (20, W4).

“ His Dad’s continuously, since 2009, been fighting me in court for custody. I just try and keep as little communication, as little contact with him as possible (48, W4).

The protracted nature of the process was often due to men using the family courts as a mechanism to continue exerting control (see also Coy et al, 2012). One woman questioned why the system allowed him to keep taking her back to court, despite the level of proof of domestic violence which included death threats. The presumption made by many judges that contact was always in the best interests of children was perceived by some women as bias.

“ “ *I haven't felt that traumatised for a long time, actually going into that court... because I thought this is what I'm up against, this is what I've got to protect my children. It's like an old boys club – men together and we are nothing (76, W1).*

“ “ *I was battling to prove that actually it's not his right to see the children because he's their biological father; it's their right for them to be safe from whoever's being abusive. And if you've been within the family court system you know that's what your own solicitor will say to you 'Well it's a father's right to see his children' – what? (FG, W4).*

“ “ *The judge was really biased. Really, really biased, because he read through the judgment which was quite long, and like I said there were significant findings... and at the end of it he said 'I'd like to see you have contact re-established as soon as possible. You haven't seen them in over a year' and that was his attitude. And he didn't acknowledge any of the domestic violence (88, W4).*

A few women were advised by their own solicitors not to allege domestic violence in child contact proceedings. When it was alleged, fact-finding hearings did not always get ordered (see also Coy et al, 2012).

“ “ *I mean, I've been going to the family courts for 18 months now. We haven't got any further because nobody ordered a finding of fact hearing (FG, W1).*

“ “ *She'd been a social worker for 20 years in child protection, and she phoned me up and she said 'So these allegations are really, really grim, and some of the worst, that I've seen and I can't believe nobody's done a fact-finding hearing' (36, W2).*

Within women's accounts of their dealings with family courts were examples of men manipulating circumstances. One had been harassed by her ex-partner to accompany children on a contact visit; this was then used in court to suggest that she had been lying about the domestic violence. Other issues which were beyond women's control (such as not yet having stable housing) were used against them.

“ “ *He told everyone at court, 'I took a trip to [place] and she came with me' and his solicitor says to me 'That's very odd.' And he [the judge] sort of looked at me... but he [ex-partner] hassled me – he will ring up and hassle, then he'll go 'Five, four, three, two, one, I'm outside your house' (32, W2).*

“ “ *I don't know how to go about getting a permanent place because they [the court] say that... because I move so much with the children it's not good either (95, W2).*

Several women reported being physically assaulted in the communal areas outside of the family court. Furthermore, verbal abuse in the court room was reported.

“ “ *He wouldn't speak to my barrister in court, he was swearing at my barrister – do you know he got called three times by the usher to be quiet and the judge still never took this up (48, W4).*

Other examples of unsafe practice included addresses being disclosed by the court, in one case even when the perpetrator had been convicted in a criminal court for assault. A couple of women also mentioned that the court had disregarded evidence from social services recommending that contact should not be granted. Children being called as witnesses was another difficult issue.

“ “ *But because I had a daughter that witnessed it all it's – she had to go up on the stand and say these things about her father. And it doesn't matter how much you dislike him, it's very hard to do things like that (20, W3).*

Family court outcomes

Some men were using family court proceedings to continue exerting control was supported by women's experiences after the case had been concluded; having fought for contact over months they then chose not to see their children, similarly if they were granted indirect contact via letter writing this was often irregular or short-lived.

“*Sporadically he'll send maybe one a birthday present and then not send another (88, W4).*

In cases where contact did take place, women had to manage this for themselves and their children, particularly when it was unsupervised. Where children were anxious they would try and avoid overnight stays by suggesting early pick-ups instead. They also had to remind their children that the situation would not last forever.

“*He was scared, wetting the bed, anxious, you know; he was getting really, really stressed over it [contact] (5, W2).*

Shared custody brought particular challenges. Women's space for action was constrained since there were restrictions on where they could live or where their children went to school. Women with young children also indicated that children felt torn and would filter what information they shared with which parent. Relationships were affected by the nature of living arrangements.

“*The bonds will start up again and ... but otherwise the minute he comes back, he's very cold... he's like not bonding with me. And then by the end of the week we start to bond a bit and then he goes back, so it's kind of difficult (32, W3)*

Schools

Helping children settle after separation was a priority for almost all mothers. Obviously child contact arrangements made this challenging; however the area in which women generally had control in was schooling. Many tried to keep children in the same school to limit the disruptions in their lives. For women who had moved some distance away this could involve travelling for up to two hours each way, and in other cases putting measures in place that protected children.

“*I kept her at the same school because I just thought with so much upheaval and she's so happy in her little school (39, W2).*

“*We went to court and we've just got an order drawn up that he's not allowed to come near the children or near the school (88, W2).*

Some women reported feeling let down by the school's response to their disclosures of domestic violence, through betrayals of trust or failure to take account of their current circumstances.

“*I'm really disappointed with the school because I confided in them straightaway; however at the last meeting I had with the Head Teacher they had done a referral to Social Services without my knowledge (88, W1).*

“*We were moved into a safe house for a few days and I rang the school to tell them what was going on. But the school rang me every single day to ask me what was going on otherwise they were gonna put it to the Attendance Officer, and have me prosecuted. That was two days off school, in an emergency situation (87, W4)*

Where children had to change school, there were mixed reports. For women in refuge it was usually more straightforward since Solace had established relationships with local schools, again illustrating the role of advocacy to ensure women realise their rights across a range of issues. Obtaining new school places through their own efforts was more difficult, especially when women had more than one child and could not get them all places in the same school.

“ I had to remove the children, because MARAC said... but at the same time I'm still having to do it all on my own (FG, W1).

“ When we first come here, none of the kids had a school. Now they [social services] could have helped with letters to get them in school, saying about the domestic violence and that (74, W3).

Once children were in school most caught up with their peers quickly and within a couple of months had settled in well, especially where they had access to counsellors and mentors. Women also mentioned services such as Sure Start that were linked to schools and which they found helpful, although some noted changes to such services.

“ Sure Start always used to help me, they're brilliant, I hate that they've changed to Children's Centres because you don't get the same one on one attention and that is what I always loved about Sure Start, you don't get that same thing with the Children's Centres. Nowhere near as good as it was, I think they've ruined the system (64, W1).

Children's happiness at school, as well as their educational achievement, was a priority for women, and many made great efforts to ensure their children were also involved in extra-curricular activities.

Mothering after domestic violence

The findings in this chapter confirm the dilemmas and challenges that mothering through the aftermaths of domestic violence entails (Radford and Hester, 2006). Women were asked whether being a mother/ having children had made it easier or harder for them to move on with their lives. Most concluded it had been easier, since children were a reason to keep going, a driving force to prevent them from giving up on their goals and dreams.

“ I say loads of stuff to her, sometimes maybe I say too much. You know, maybe burdening her emotionally. I don't know (62, W1).

“ Probably in the past I leant on them, in a way. I don't lean on them but they're supportive in their love ... I learnt a lot from them and I learned hopefully to be a better person from them, they've given me strength in the fact that it was for them that I had to find the strength (36, W4).

Of the women who thought being a mother had made things harder, this was connected to the fact that they could not disconnect themselves from the abuser since he was the children's father.

The challenge and demands of being a single parent were frequently raised, juggling time and priorities on limited resources, often leaving them exhausted with very little time for themselves.

“ *But when you have to do everything on your own. I’m tired but I still have to cook and sometime when I really, really feel tired (94, W2).*

Despite the sacrifices they had made and the strength they had to find, some were aware of, or feared, being judged for being a single mother.

“ *Because I could have weakened at any point and said ‘Right, come on, come back.’ You know, if I didn’t give a - about the children’s future I could have had the easy life. I could have had the odd slap and still had a man who was bringing in money and the children still would have had a father...I wouldn’t have had people looking down their nose at me for being a single parent. I wouldn’t have had to explain myself to the authorities (87, W4).*

The space for action questionnaire consistently showed that parenting was the one area of women’s lives in which they had most confidence – both when they were experiencing abuse and afterwards. A number, in hindsight, thought they may have under-estimated the impact that the abuse had on their children. The overwhelming evidence was that women put their children first and did not regret having left.

“ *When I look back I don’t even know how I brought my kids up. I don’t even know how I had the energy. I was just zapped and exhausted. I don’t know how I was so strong and made sure my kids were looked after properly and everything else with him (62, W4).*

“ *[My daughter] is 15 now and she’s doing great; I’m really pleased. She’s doing well she’s really doing well; I was worried well, up to now, for everything... I really think it was my decision to leave him – 100 per cent positive (24, W2).*

“ *It felt really wonderful to see him growing. When he was going to the church group at the end of it they have a concert and he was up on the stage singing and dancing ... and you know that was when I really began to see you know all the really hard work ... and it was hellish trying to get him to turn around (71, W4).*

Others were still waiting for this reassurance.

“ *This is one that I know that I always struggle with, because I don’t see myself as a good mother until my son’s grown and hasn’t got problems (72, W4)*

Conclusions

Whilst it is recognised how much work parenting involves, this takes on additional and demanding dimensions in the context of domestic violence. The decision to leave goes against familial ideology and invariably results in losses and disruptions for children. Women did all they could to minimise the disruption - not changing schools, putting informal contact arrangements in place – and endeavoured to be the best parent possible on depleted resources. They invested time and energy in dealing with children’s distress and difficult behavior; this involved considerable emotion work to manage their own hurt and humiliations when children repeated scripts abusive men had given them. Most took advantage of the support for children and for themselves as parents that Solace offered, and sought additional support where children were struggling. Extended family court processes and/or being under scrutiny from social services were additional burdens, especially since both were inconsistent in the recognition and understanding they accorded to the impacts of domestic violence. Having an advocate through Solace was a definite advantage in dealings with outside agencies. It was also mothers who were left to explain to children why their father failed to turn up for contact, or chose not see them at all. Despite these challenges and with the exception of the two women whose children were taken into Local Authority care, by the end of the study women had recognised and were talking about what they and their children had achieved.

10. Education, employment and financial stability

“ For the first time in my life I can write a CV – there’s whole chunks of stuff I’d forgotten about. So it’s like I’ve put myself back together (26, W2).

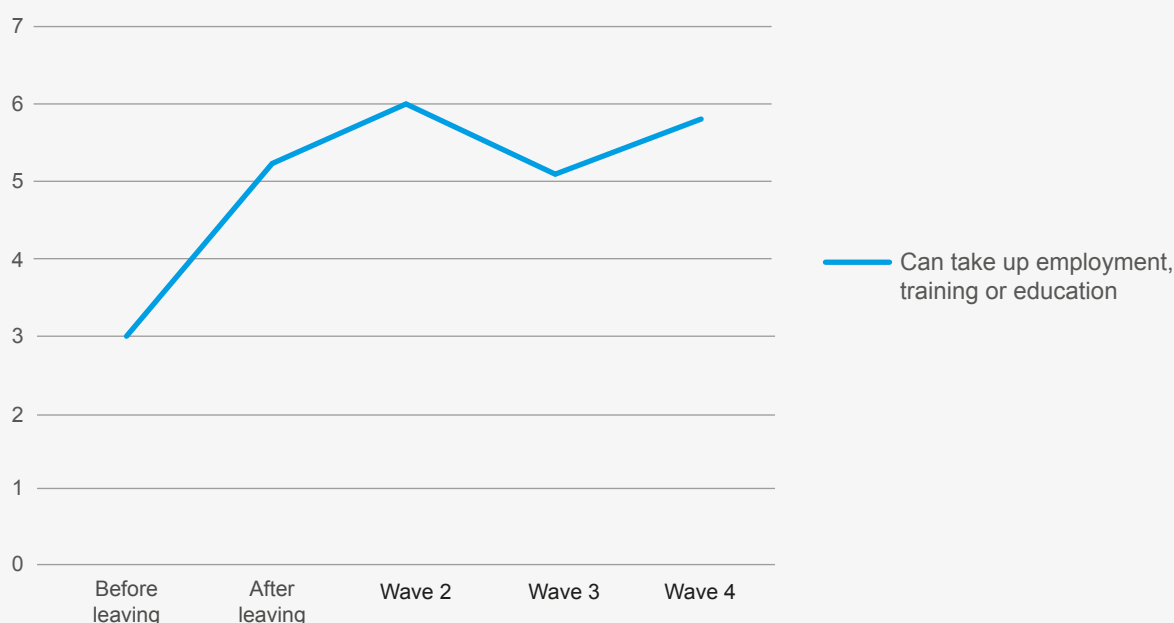
Previous chapters have alluded to the ways in which domestic violence interfered with women’s careers and aspirations, in this chapter we explore this in more detail, including the ways in which legacies of abuse and new benefits regimes continued to thwart some women’s ability to reach for their dreams. We also report on the achievements of others who had been able to draw strength and new directions from this crisis.

Education and employment histories

At the outset of the study, 94 of the women reported having academic qualifications which ranged from school leaving qualifications to higher degrees. However when asked if they were able to take up employment/ education/learning opportunities when they were experiencing domestic violence, only 24 of 92 agreed. This echoes previous findings that abuse interferes with women’s employment and careers.

The proportion of women who felt able to take up employment or education increased considerably after leaving and stayed relatively high over time but with some fluctuations (see Figure 10.1).

Figure 10:1 Changes in of space to take up employment, education or training over time



Over the course of the study women took advantage of a wide range of educational activities from skills workshops (for example, DIY and sewing) to NVQs, access courses, under-graduate and post-graduate degrees. In Wave Two 35 per cent reported gaining new qualifications, in Wave Three 12 per cent and in Wave Four 16 per cent. Such opportunities were not always easy to maintain, with some having to drop out of college or university as their time and energy was taken up with competing priorities such as housing and family court proceedings (see also Coy et al, 2012).

““ *I just feel I can't give myself a hundred per cent at the moment. I'm trying to do an access course and go on to do a degree but...I need to get my foundation, have a happy home – get a home sorted out that I feel comfortable in. It's hard to study and get things done when things aren't right you know (62, W2).*

““ *He appealed again [family court decision]...they changed the court date four times; every time I am kind of holding the stress up to the last moment and then one day before they tell me it's been set back for two months - again and again and again. I cannot go to university and say, look this is my life (70, W2).*

For those who 'stayed the course' their performance was at times affected by the disruptions in their lives, some expressed disappointment with their final grades because they were juggling their coursework and examinations with other issues, including ongoing abuse.

““ *I remember about the time I was trying to hand in that dissertation and I still had three essays to hand in and four exams to do, all in six weeks, and I had to move flat in the middle of it... and then my daughter's father became extremely aggressive and started threatening a lot during that time (39, W2).*

Educational establishments and, in particular, teachers were accommodating and supportive with, for example, one woman allowed to re-sit an examination that she failed after submitting a letter to the college about the domestic violence.

Women with little English at the beginning of the research period had to pass competency tests before being allowed to progress further in education. A couple of Irish Traveller women in the sample also had to learn to read and write. Women without school leaving qualifications in Maths and English had to obtain these first. Often these subjects were taken alongside Information Technology (IT) at the local college.

Barriers preventing entry or completion of courses included for at least two women financial abuse which had created ineligibility to educational support such as student loans.

““ *I'm still waiting for hopefully for them [charity] to be able to give me a grant to pay for my course, because it's going to be thousands I think, so it's quite a lot of money (72, W4).*

““ *Because he made me take out a career development loan to cover his non-payments on his loans and credit cards and things I can't take out the career development loan so I can't get funding for the MA (39, W2).*

Child care was also an issue for women with children since many courses finished after the end of school time.

““ *At the moment, on a Tuesday they go to After-School Club; that finishes at six, and on a Wednesday, one of their friend's mums picks them up, and then I meet her on the way home. So hopefully I can do that again next year (42, W2).*

Some put their educational aspirations on hold until after their children had finished school.

““ *Of late I seem to think maybe that it's not worth studying anymore, or trying to pursue any more goals, maybe just you know try help the kids. I feel I have to forget myself for a long time to come...I can't do anything for me (44, W4).*

‘Just to give something back’

Women’s career aspirations often involved occupations that would enable them to support women experiencing domestic violence, reflecting a long tradition of survivors working in the violence against women and girls sector.

- “ “ *We had a woman who trained as a nurse after she left the refuge. And she wanted to come and do a placement in the refuge and to be able also to give something back. Because domestic violence was one of the specialist areas she wanted to do as a nurse (KW8, W1).*
- “ “ *I have a strong urge to do some sort of work that empowers other women – that is close to my heart, because I think there’s so many women that are in situations like myself or whatever, just through lack of self-worth... I would love to be able to get women to where I am (71, W4).*
- “ “ *I’m doing an Access to Higher Education course at the moment. I want to go and study psychology. So maybe one day I’ll be a part of Solace as a counselling or key worker just to give something back (42, W4).*

Alongside undertaking professional development with Solace, women were keen to volunteer for the organisation. They reported having provided support in relation to fundraising and acting as spokeswomen in both local and national media (website, blogging, television, radio, newspapers). Women who talked about writing books as a way of processing what had happened to them also saw this medium as a way of raising awareness.

- “ “ *I’m hoping to move forward and also to be a role model to other women who are going through what I’m going through telling them that you can do it (82, W3).*
- “ “ *Solace actually helped us a lot so really it would be nice to give something back (63, W3).*
- “ “ *With the publishing of the book...I still think it’s a subject that’s not really talked about (85, W3).*

Some expressed frustration that they had to wait two years before they were allowed to be casework or refuge volunteers. It is worth noting that women were already supporting friends and colleagues informally and many women, as noted above, were doing so in a professional capacity too. Some spoke at events and sat on trustee boards of other voluntary organisations.

- “ “ *I’ve spoken at one of their events... and they’ve asked me to be a trustee on their committee board. So that’s how far that’s progressed from me being one of their service users... acknowledgement of what I’ve been through (FG, W4).*

Other women talked about how their experience of specialised support would shape their own work practice when they came into contact with other women experiencing domestic violence in the future.

- “ “ *Because I’ve now had an experience, I am a lot more understanding to my families and their situations, I’m obviously more understanding to domestic violence, I’ve actually sent people to Solace for example, I feel in a way it’s been quite helpful to my job (96, W1).*

Employment

Despite the high number of women with qualifications, only 26 per cent were working at the beginning of the research period. This had increased significantly to 45 per cent by the end of the three years. Some had given up work as a consequence of the abuse.

- “ “ *I had to leave work; I didn’t have a choice, cos I kept getting beaten up and stuff, you know, black eyes (35, W4).*

Others had to leave employment after they had exited the abuse, especially those who went into refuge accommodation as the rent was unaffordable on low incomes or for safety reasons. Indeed it was the cost of refuge accommodation for those in paid work that led some women to take a different route. One woman worked with the refuge and her employer to find a safe way for her to continue to work on a part-time basis.

““ *Why would I give it [her job] up? I did leave it for two weeks at the beginning because the refuge said, you know, we think it's best... but after two weeks of the Job Centre giving me hell I just called them [work] back up and said please can I come back (15, W2).*

Some women gave up work because they wanted to support their children; others due to the complexity of re-housing.

““ *I mean I gave up my job, I had a very well paid job ... but I saw that my son was really in distress and I thought if I don't take this opportunity ... as hard as it's going to be ... he's going to be troubled for a long time (71, W2).*

““ *I would love to go back to work, because... it's a social group, you can't just sit indoors doing nothing, vegetating, it's horrible. So work would be lovely, but housing would be lovely too, that would allow me to afford to work (32, W2).*

Perpetrators knowing where women worked or working for the same employer was another reason for giving up jobs. A couple of women also talked about extended criminal and family court processes interfering with their employment.

Almost all of the rest expressed a desire to be in employment, although several were unable take up paid work because they were full-time carers for older relatives or children with special needs.

““ *I think I just need to...be doing something, rather than – you know, obviously I love being a Mum, but I'm sick of being just Mum (64, W2).*

Working women

Women who were employed occupied an array of positions including in business, charities and the public sector. Some had set up their own business with loans from Job Centre Plus or via schemes such as The Prince's Trust. Employment was rewarding and distracted them from difficulties associated with the abuse.

““ *Sometimes I go to work and I think I really don't want to go or I can't face it... things like that... not because of the job but because of depression sometimes. But then when I get there I kind of pick up again because I'm around people (6, W4).*

Those who had been able to maintain employment talked about the critical role of supportive workplaces. Here, after confiding in employers, safety measures were put in place, including injunctions against the perpetrator, transfers to new offices, or being walked to their car. Being given time off to sort out legal and practical matters was also appreciated.

““ *My boss was really nice, you know, I explained what was going on and he gave me two weeks off paid (42, W1).*

Unsurprisingly this was not always the case, and several women talked about how their understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence provided a new lens through which to view their working lives.

“ They expect huge amounts of their staff, to the point where it’s not unheard of people staying till late at night, not eating supper, not getting a lunch break... if you say no they start to kick up a fuss and I find that toxic because it smells slightly of an abusive situation to me (6, W4).

“ I think it’s a catch 22 you know for any working mum – is that actually I’m doing a full-time job in part-time hours... in a way it is an abusive relationship (89, W4).

This led some to establish new boundaries in the workplace and make complaints against managers. One woman also expressed the opinion that this could be an area that Solace Women’s Aid could provide guidance on.

Work and single parenthood

Some of the women did not have to work and were on income support due to the age of their children; however this changed over time.

“ Speaking to the Job Centre today, they’re now telling me that I actually have to work – I can’t do volunteering because my [child] goes into school in September (72, W3).

For mothers in employment, accessing childcare was difficult. Many relied on friends, family and in a few cases new partners. This was particularly challenging when children were sick and they had to take time off work at short notice or when they worked outside office hours. One woman even had to resort to asking her ex-partner for support.

“ I didn’t have child care and the hours that [place of work] were giving me – sometimes I’d finish at midnight. And there would be no childcare possibilities so I would have to ask him [perpetrator] and for him to think he’s in a position, in a position of living in my house (29, W2)

Combining childcare with part-time work and studying meant little if any time for anything else, but being employed was significant not only in terms of financial and emotional well-being but also because of the messages it sent both to their children and wider society.

“ I found there were a lot of assumptions about me because I was a victim of domestic violence; that I was a woman that didn’t work and that I just stayed at home all day and did nothing... whereas it’s not like that. You know I work; I support myself (6, W1).

“ When I say ‘And then soon mummy’s going to work’ they say ‘Mummies don’t work – daddies work’ (50, W4).

Employment support allowance

Some women were unable to work both as a consequence of the physical and psychological impact of domestic violence and unrelated health conditions. Many found this very frustrating as paid work represented an important milestone in rebuilding their lives.

“ I decided at the end of last year that I needed to have some time out to recuperate my health and I just decided to stop some things you know. I stopped working and I took a break from my law degree (88, W4).

“ I don’t like it not just from the money point of view but from the social interaction and stuff like that I do miss that you know because I’m quite a people’s person so I do find it I do find it quite lonely (71, W2).

At the beginning of the study women with physical and psychological conditions were relying on Incapacity Benefit; however due to changes in the benefit system this became Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). As a consequence women had to go through the reassessment process – an experience that was overwhelming reported as negative. The assessment itself and the outcomes were seen to fail to capture the reality of their conditions. A lack of sensitivity by the medical assessors was also mentioned.

“ I'd had my diagnosis of [condition] the day before, and they gave me zero points because I was neat and well presented, I was able to conduct a conversation with clarity. I was aware of my condition, I was able to look the medical professional in the eye, and I was also able to walk the eight steps to the examination couch unaided ... so they gave me zero points (39, W4).

“ At my medical for the ESA they asked 'Have you got a history of being violent with other people?' and I just sat there on the floor going 'I'll think you'll find there's a history of people who are violent with me which is why I'm sat here on the floor' (26, W3).

Interestingly a number of women went on to describe how Job Centre Plus staff responded to these assessments when they were declared fit to work and had to start attending appointments. The general response was one of disbelief and women were encouraged to appeal.

“ The first one that I went to I couldn't even stand up, and the woman just took one look at me and she said clearly you're not able to do this interview (41, W4).

“ The Job Centre's only across the road. Yeah I went in there and the guy looked at me ... a really nice guy actually ... and he said to me 'Why are you here?' (38, W4).

Appeals were invariably successful, although one woman thought she had received bad advice from a voluntary organisation and lost. Despite success however women had to go through the process of being moved from Job Seekers Allowance to the Employment Support Allowance - something that took time and resulted in them struggling financially.

“ And they took me to tribunal the same week, the DLA one was on the Monday, and the ESA was on the Saturday and they overturned that one as well, so I won both of them you know it's a massive relief that I've won both of these appeals (39, W4).

“ Well the man at the Jobcentre... he could see that I wasn't well, I kept breaking down and everything... but I had to wait six months then to get that [ESA] back again (93, W4).

Women who were in the process of appealing talked about not getting any benefits until a resolution had been reached. One woman was surviving on child benefit, another had no income at all.

“ I don't know how I'm fit for work if I've got a slipped disc in my neck and one in the bottom of my spine. Because I told them I want to appeal about JSA, they said I can't claim JSA. So, now I'm sort of stuck. Can't claim Income Support because I haven't got children, I'm stuck with nothing, absolutely nothing (17, W2).

This destitution is something that was documented in the earliest studies of domestic violence. Whilst no politician would support it in principle, the reality is that changes in the UK welfare regime are having this result. The absolute safety net provided by community care grants and crisis loans were removed in April 2013. Local welfare provision which replaced this is patchy and often consists only of food banks.

Finding a job

Women who did not have the work experience that was required, women who were unfamiliar with the process of job hunting and women who needed to update their skill set reported difficulties in finding employment. This group was generally older and some felt that their age was acting as a barrier.

- “ I’ve had a meeting with my personal advisor at [JCP] she asked me to bring my CV and I said they weren’t invented when I was at work (20, W2).
- “ Well, I did a two years secretarial linguist course so I am qualified in that respect. It’s just a case of having training on the new technology that’s come into effect. I mean we’re talking about 12 years that I haven’t worked for so long things have changed (26, W2).
- “ It’s a bit difficult getting a job at my age. Employers are not looking for old people, forty plus (43, W3).

Being out of work for a long period of time due to health conditions was reported as a challenge since women were struggling to overcome stigma, especially around mental health conditions.

- “ If you’ve been out of work for a long period; having been on incapacity due to my injuries and stuff. So it doesn’t look good [to employers] really (44, W2).

Those who had trained abroad had difficulties applying for the equivalent jobs in the UK market and had to undertake further training before they could do so. Some reported having to wait until their immigration status was resolved.

Finally there was reference to the competition involved in looking for work with so many people applying for jobs in a challenging economic climate. This was further illustrated with several women reporting redundancies over the research period.

- “ The job I’m doing is working as a carer... I might have applied for a better job. But you know it was like two hundred or three hundred people – there are so many people out there (94, W2).
- “ And my Mum’s like, there’s three million other people who can’t get work, what makes you so special? I’m very scared of that because I’ve met a lot of people who’ve been unemployed for a long time (35, W4).

Women had undertaken a number of steps to improve their employment prospects through volunteering and attending specific courses related to business skills. They also linked into employment agencies that helped them build their skills.

Job centre plus

Women on Job Seekers Allowance regularly referred to the role of Job Centre Plus. Overall, women expressed unhappiness at the way in which staff dealt with them, perceiving that they were judged and stereotyped as not wanting to work and being uneducated.

- “ Sometimes I go there and say hello, they don’t even reply... it’s like they don’t really see you as a client (70, W4).
- “ The Job Centre have really knocked me down the ladder. Say I’ve come 100 steps to get this far – I’ve gone back 200 steps because of the Jobcentre. It’s the way they talk to you...they belittle you; they think you’re a child (93, W4).

The attitude of staff and the public nature of the space also acted as barriers to women being willing to disclose and/or discuss their experience of domestic violence. Several had complained about members of staff and then found that their benefit payments were not made the following week. Perhaps most crucially, the Job Centre was not helpful in helping them find a job.

- *Nowadays they leave everything down to you – all they want you to do is come in and sign and provide proof that you've been looking for work, they don't sit with you like they used to and make the initial contact - get you over the first hurdle (22, W3).*
- *As much as you go to the Job Centre, and they say right, you need to get back to work, they don't really offer you any kind of avenue of how to get there (49, W4).*

Many referred to a new system of being sent by Job Centre Plus to employment agencies who worked to targets. Women's views on these were mixed, some finding them helpful and others not at all. Women who had never signed on before and who had enjoyed professional careers, spoke about staff being at a loss as to how to support them.

- *When I did the diploma before the woman said to me 'you know we've never dealt with someone on your kind of level of what you're doing' (92, W4).*

Indeed women's narratives about looking for work whilst accessing Job Seekers Allowance highlighted conflicting agendas. A number reported wanting to turn the negative of experiencing abuse into a positive by using the opportunity they had to better themselves through developing a career and fulfilling potential as opposed to just taking any job.

- *I never had the dream of going to university, now I can dream about it and I know if I work hard for it, I'll be there one day (58, W4).*
- *How I'm describing it to everyone is that I've been given this blank canvas. And it's for me to paint on my canvass what I want – so that's my life and it's up to me how I go forward with my life, and that's how I'm looking at it (71, W4).*

Rather than Job Centre Plus supporting these ambitions, women had a sense they did not care what kind of employment it was so long as they took up paid work.

- *That's a real fear of mine...everything I've struggled to try and do in my life to better myself, I do not want to go and do a job where I'm on a minimum wage just for the sake of the DWP sending me back to work so they can make up their statistics (39, W4).*

Several catch 22s confronted women with children. Mothers who wanted to study were discouraged from doing so or else told that they had to do 16 hours paid work on top of study and looking after their children. Mothers on Income Support with younger children who wanted to do some training did not have access to the free training that those on Job Seekers Allowance did.

- *I tried to put myself on a course that was free to people who are on Job Seekers' Allowance but not those people who are on Income Support. So I was like, why is it good for one and not good for the other? They're all on benefits. The system is so twisted (35, W4).*

The requirement of having to apply for a certain number of jobs a week in order to qualify for Job Seekers Allowance also caused difficulties. Women who were not used to using the internet struggled to use this method of finding and applying for jobs. Those attending lots of interviews talked about the costs.

- *They said I've got to go on the internet looking for jobs. I was looking for one yesterday... I don't know how I got into it but I managed... and if I don't apply for three jobs a week I'm going to lose my money (93, W3).*

●● *I try and apply for 5-6 jobs every week. We only get like a little bit of money when you think about it, and I've used so much of that going to interviews (35, W3).*

Other conditions such as being sent on the job search programme, usually at short notice was problematic for women who had to put childcare in place. Some also reported that they had to miss counselling sessions in order to attend.

●● *Job Centres tend to give appointments with no respect for – they just put them in training and that sometimes impacts on their attendance to the counselling sessions; there's been a huge increase of people asking for supporting letters, you know, giving confirmation that they are here in counselling for a reason (KW4, W4).*

Having to attend to sign on every two weeks was a demanding requirement for women who were studying and it shaped the part-time hours that women could work.

Career development

A number of the women who were working during the research period reported being promoted or successfully applying for a new and better paid job.

●● *Well I think it was round April time I got promotion at work – it's much better, two grades up the admin scale where I work so I have quite a lot of responsibility but it's much more interesting and it's much better money and it did give me a good boost, you know, because it was definitely a step up (6, W2).*

However, other women who were used to higher salaries reported ending up in minimum wage work and felt undervalued.

●● *I've gone from being a professional person with a long history of working for the government at pretty high-level responsible jobs and now I feel so diminished (68, W3).*

For another group low paid and part-time work was a deliberate choice since it suited their current situation.

●● *I think that's what I need at the moment, I don't need nothing too demanding, I still think I'm getting myself back together. I've got no time for anything, that's what it feels like. I'm quite content (9, W2).*

●● *And they were even offering me another job and I've been thinking about it... but my kids need a lot of support. So I know the money will be good but sometimes you have to let it go (63, W4).*

These women were doing work such as caring, cleaning and child care that could fit around the school day. Not exceeding a 16 hour working week became a marker for those where this would affect benefits and other financial support.

●● *I've got the opportunity to work full-time, but if I work full-time I'd be only working to pay rent and I can't afford to do that because I still have a four-year-old to look after and it's just too much (52, W2).*

●● *I got a promotion but am still doing part-time because of the situation with the housing - if I took full time I would probably lose all my benefits and I couldn't afford the rent...but when I'm ready they'll take me on full time (15, W3).*

As with educational aspirations, some women chose to put their career progression on hold until their children were older or their circumstances changed.

●● *It works for me for now for the next couple of years basically until my son goes to secondary school and then I'll go full-time (83, W2).*

Financial (in)security and budgeting

Financial security was very important because women recognised only too well how it impacted on their choices and the ways in which they lived their lives. This was very apparent when women reviewed their space for action scores during the last interview. Many noted that a constraining factor across many aspects of their lives was money.

“ I think being poor in London... I mean this country's supposed to be at the forefront of women's rights and everything else... and I think being a woman here is not good, it's not good being a single woman here (32, W3).

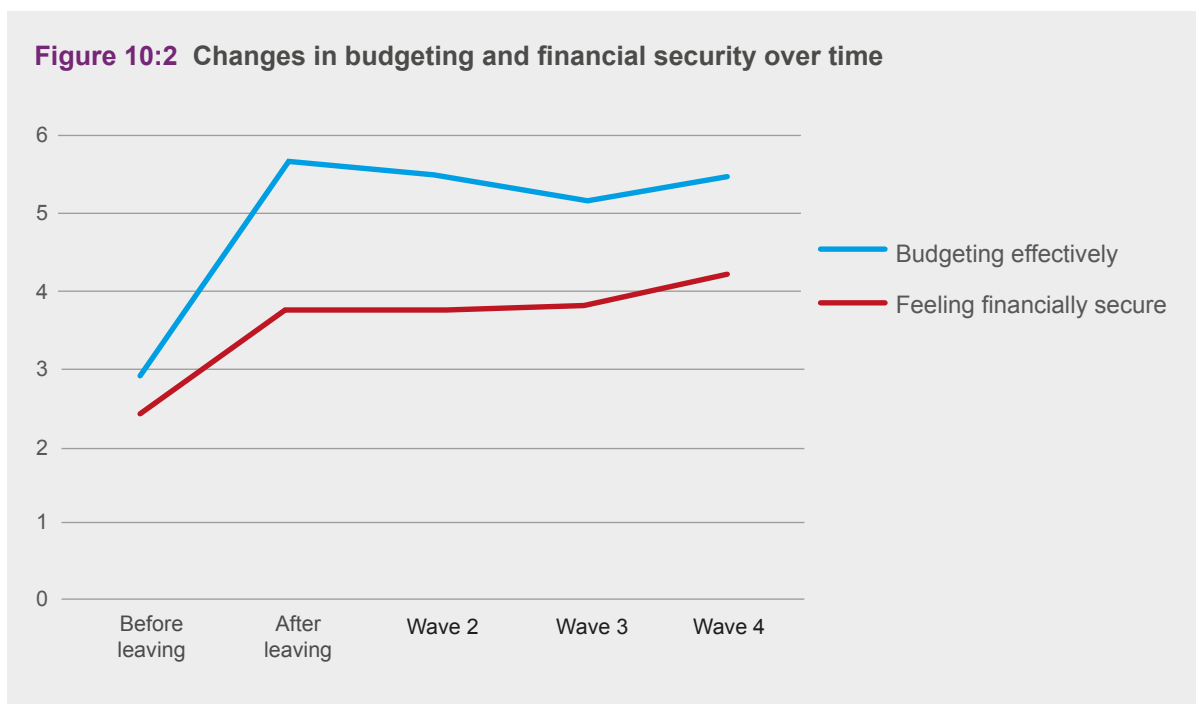
“ Money – I think that's a very big issue... people need to bear in mind that actually money can have a massive impact on the choices that you're allowed, or the resources that you can link into... so I think that money or how it is impacting on people, on women, it's going to determine a lot about what they're prepared to put up with... we can't put aside the economics of abuse (89, W4).

“ I mean in terms of that 'I am free to lead ...' obviously I'm free to lead the kind of life that I can afford to lead in the circumstances that I'm in at the moment (71, W4).

A quarter (=24) had reported experiencing financial abuse as part of the domestic violence In Wave One. Women talked about being denied money (including having their own money being taken away and in one case burned). A number of women also talked about being left with debts.

“ I can assure you that if it had not been for the fact that he manipulated my financial life to the point where I was terrified that he would leave me with all the debts, which he eventually did anyway, there's no way I would have put up with five years of him doing what he did (68, W1).

Feelings of financial security improved after leaving but the percentages of women who felt financially secure over time whilst increasing after separation, did not increase as much as other measures and remained lower than their ability to budget effectively (see Figure 10.2).



Women's space to budget effectively also widened considerably after leaving. Before leaving, only 16 per cent of women report space for budgeting; this increased to two-thirds after leaving reflecting the control they had over the financial resources that they did have.

““ *The benefits are fine. I have everything what I can get and the money is pretty good you know. I am pretty happy because they are also helping me with the house (24, W2).*

This was challenging for some women though as they did not have experience of budgeting.

““ *So I have to start to change the way of doing things – kind of a change of life of ... you know I have to think what is important, what is not important (86, W4).*

Others struggled to survive on the income they received. A number of women moving out of refuge accommodation said they were unprepared for the costs associated with living independently.

““ *It's all about money. I have bills to pay, I don't really starve, I'm not gonna say that, , but I have to buy what I really need. And that's not how I used to live before (94, W2).*

““ *I always think that when women are in the Refuge, there should be some kind of – they should be encouraged to live on as little money as possible during the time they're in the Refuge, and maybe put some money into an account, so that when they leave they've got a little pot of money that they can use to, to move on (FG, W3).*

For women left with debts who had to make monthly payments life was especially hard. Several were using the services of debt management companies and some had even considered being declared bankrupt. Benefits being paid late also created unnecessary difficulties. Several women mentioned owing money to utility companies. A few women talked about their partner not having taken them off bills in their old household and it impacting negatively on their credit rating. One woman was threatened with court for non-payment of her TV license.

““ *He phoned me up and told me that I had to phone Southern Electric and I said 'What for?' and he said 'Your name is still on the bill'. And I said 'I've been left three and a half years, are you joking me?' (15, W4).*

One of the key workers in a refuge talked about how they were no longer able to get advance payments on benefits. Since the welfare reforms, the council had started to advise women to use a food bank instead.

““ *But they do not give them any money in advance if they're short of payment in advance for food because women can go to food banks. That is their actual policy (KW2, W4).*

Once more, austerity and the cost of living was a theme throughout discussion about finances with women talking about how costs were going up more generally. This had caused many of them to revisit their budgeting as things got tighter.

““ *If I get paid on a Tuesday, by Wednesday, Thursday at the latest, it's all gone. I go to the post office and I pay my bills there, go shopping, come home, the next day it's gone (93, W2).*

““ *Things have got harder for me financially; I think they have for a lot of people haven't they? (16, W4).*

Welfare reform

From Wave Two onwards women who were supported by state benefits began to voice concerns about changes to the systems and how this would impact them and their families. This was exacerbated by either a lack of information about the planned changes or being provided with the wrong information.

““ *At first they sent me a letter [about the benefit cap] they said to me I'm going to start to pay like £100 and something extra every week [towards housing costs]. And after that they said to me now it's only £60. And after that they said to me you don't need to pay anything (56, W3).*

Having to pay back overpayments, even when then this had not been their fault, was widely resented. One woman was paying back money obtained via benefit fraud that she had been coerced by the abuser to commit.

““ *Last December was awful. I was upset because of the housing benefit. They give me around £7,000 overpayment. It wasn't my fault. I give them the correct document when I start my job. Every week they take three pounds you know, when I owe money, I don't like it. I feel bad (58, W3).*

Being on benefits was experienced as demeaning, especially if women who had been in waged work previously.

““ *I never had to take anything off the benefit state until I became part of his life; I'd always worked hard for a living had a really good job before he came into my life and he took everything (15, W3).*

““ *Every month I have to send my payslip for them to see how much I'm getting... it's still degrading to me, I can't get used to that. And I don't think I'll ever get used to it (44, W4).*

A couple of women had refused to sign on, due to what they saw as an inherent humiliation.

““ *I'm not going to go to sign in the Jobcentre. I feel like a child when I go to sign in ... being told every time that I go there because they don't think that we make the effort... or I am not making the effort to look for a job, but I really do (11, W4).*

The prospect of being on benefits long term represented a slippery slope to some women who thought it would interfere with regaining their independence and did all they could to avoid this. After exploring her options around leaving, for example, one woman recognised the massive impact this would have financially and so chose to stay at home after her husband admitted he had a problem and took steps to address his behaviour.

●● *He provides us with a good home, and a good lifestyle (89, W2).*

Women accessing benefits were very clear that they would rather not do so and many had set coming off them as a goal they wanted to achieve.

●● *What's really driving me this year is the goal of getting off benefits (26, W2).*

Yet, as noted above, this was a complex calculation, since it required balancing hours worked with the financial support available. Two women talked about refusing pay rises since these took them over earning thresholds. Whilst these traps were difficult they were not as complex as those who had no recourse to public funds.

No recourse to public funds

For some women, of course, accessing benefits was vital as they were unable to work due to their immigration status. Ten per cent of women in the original sample were in this situation. The beginning of the research coincided with a pilot project (Sojourner) enabling women in the UK on a spousal visa to access benefits for a limited period while their application for Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK was considered. Women with insecure immigration status were in a highly precarious position.

●● *When I first met you [research team] I had £10 a week for food and no benefits, and no job (75, W4).*

●● *A few years ago you'd deal with a woman who had no recourse to public funds and she had a child; Children's Social Services would step in. Now they're still stepping in but what they're saying is that they're happy to send the mother back to her country, and take care of the child or send it back to the father (KW12, W4).*

Child maintenance

Twenty-five per cent of women indicated they did not receive child maintenance from their ex-partners. Some were positive about this precisely because they viewed maintenance as a way of being controlled. Indeed women who were receiving child maintenance talked about how this would suddenly be dropped either permanently, or paid inconsistently, whenever their ex-partner felt like he was losing control. This irregularity made it virtually impossible for women to plan and budget.

●● *There are physical, emotional of course, psychological... and the final layer he had was financial... he stopped everything – child maintenance (34, W2).*

●● *He must of realised they'd [children] had the best time [on holiday] and decided he didn't have any money to give me. And you know when you've factored in for that; I hadn't banked on him pulling the purse strings on me (15, W4).*

●● *He's paying me £55 per week for my daughter and even me taking her to school and coming back costs at least £30 a week... but he takes her out, he buys her lots of things, and then he leaves the receipt in the bag for me to see that in two, three hours I can spend this much money, but I'm giving you £55 per week (70, W3).*

Ability to provide financially for children

A strong theme in the parenting section of the space for action questionnaire was not having the financial resources to give their children the kinds of lives they wanted them to have. Women spoke about not always been able to afford school trips or pay for music lessons.

- *They ask you for something, and I have to think to myself, oh my God, I don't have enough money to last to the next day (43, W3).*
- *You know the children, all the time they ask for something 'Mummy I want laptop'. You know now I'm living only £100 a week – I need to pay the bills and the rest I'm going to do shopping (56, W3).*
- *The other day he said 'I would like to have a guitar lesson and I'm not able to afford that – impossible. And he was feeling very sad and I feel very guilty that I cannot give him something that he wants (11, W4).*

Divorce settlements

For women who were married the possibility of accessing an income through financial settlements following divorce was an important theme. For a couple, this had worked out well. One received a financial settlement that gave her some breathing space for the next few years. Another received a home although she was constrained in where she lived due to shared custody arrangements.

The majority, however, did not fare as well. One became aware of high levels of debt as part of the legal process that she had been unaware of and became jointly liable for. Others discovered their husband's had hidden their financial assets or transferred them to family members, refused to do the financial statement required for the divorce settlement and/or pay the money awarded.

Legal Aid cuts curtailed women's ability to challenge these unfairnesses in court. Some were having to act for themselves, and several suggested that the abuser was taking them back to court over and over again to deplete both their financial resources and will power.

- *I have to stand for myself at court. So things are getting tougher for me (70, W3).*

Equally men were representing themselves in child contact proceedings so that women were subject to questioning by their abusive ex-partner. This has been made illegal in criminal prosecutions but in family courts the removal of Legal Aid is providing men with an institutional route to continue their abusive practices.

A number of key workers observed that Legal Aid was more difficult to apply for. One key worker commented on the financial cost of the evidence gathering process for women when applying for Legal Aid with letters from doctors costing £50. Moreover key workers noted that in some cases where women did not qualify for Legal Aid, perpetrators did.

“ So I don't know why it's easier for perpetrators to get legal aid, but it really did seem to be (KW4, W4).

These changes created conditions in which women's rights to financial settlements in divorce were being undermined. Several chose not to fight for a financial settlement since the legal fees would diminish whatever they might gain.

Women seeking to challenge statutory authorities through civil litigation also observed that in the absence of Legal Aid a failed action would result in them being liable for costs.

“ Unless you've got lots and lots of money you can't get any justice. If you've got no money, that's okay but if you're in the middle range what justice is there for you? (36, W4).

Other financial support

Women talked about obtaining financial support in other ways. This included support from religious institutions, charities and family, friends and work colleagues. The children of some women also started contributing to household expenses when they reached working age and this made a big difference.

“ I was so heartbroken that I couldn't afford to even buy my son a cake, but a colleague at work bought him one ... they're there for me and if I need the money sometimes for a bus fare even. Do you know what I mean? Just to help tide me over, so and that's definitely helpful (72, W4).

“ I was referred to DAME and they were helping me when they were around – they're closed since. They helped me to get a grant to pay the electricity (41, W3).

There was also an example of one woman's new partner receiving compensation for injuries caused by the perpetrator. A couple of women were also considering this for injuries that they had received.

Summary

Whilst some women had moved through a process during the research of establishing financial security, more were still financially insecure, and this had obvious implications for the project of rebuilding their lives. For some this was a continuation of abuse as men saddled them with debts, refused to pay maintenance or agree to financial settlements. Inconsistent payments also caused considerable hardship. The rationing of Legal Aid resulted in some women giving up rights that previously might have been enforced by the courts.

A minority had maintained employment throughout the three years, with others re-entering during the three years, albeit often at lower levels than where they had been. For those seeking to return to paid work a number of barriers persisted: extended legal processes, especially in the family court; affordable child care; working hours when having primary responsibility for care of children and others; ongoing health conditions. Completing or taking up education was also a challenge, especially for single parents and changes in benefits rules which meant women with children over 5 were no longer permitted to be in full-time education. The removal of advance payments and the suspension of benefits whilst appeals were being resolved caused considerable hardship. Several women had periods of destitution during the study, where they were reliant the good will of family, friends and community organisations. The huge changes wrought through layers of welfare reforms could be described as a toxic cocktail which undoubtedly undermined women's ability to rebuild their lives

11. New intimate relationships?

Credit: Janetka Platun (image from workshop – W1)



Research on domestic violence has rarely followed women long enough to explore whether and how they establish new intimate relationships, nor how those who reconcile after accessing services fare. These are the issues addressed in this chapter.

In this sample, there were only four cases in which relationships continued/were resumed. In the Wave One interview, three women were still in a relationship with the abuser after accessing Solace's services and at the Wave Two interview four women reported being in a relationship with him.

“ We were sort of still seeing each other a little bit, and weren't together, and then one point I think, you know you just sort of realise what you're doing, I had him like in my flat every day and I realised 'I've gone back into the same thing without even realising' (9, W2).

By Waves 3 and 4 just one woman was still in a relationship with the man who was the reason she contacted Solace. This woman had chosen to stay with her partner and had a relationship with him throughout the research period. After issuing an ultimatum that she would leave if he was abusive again, and him attending a programme, there had been no further violence.

“ He's been willing to change. I think if there had been no sense of wanting to change I wouldn't be having this conversation with you at all. There's no more threat of violence – I couldn't live with it (89, W2).

In two other cases husbands had moved back into the family home, but neither involved intimate relationships: both women reported verbal and physical abuse, but that they were stronger.

-
- *So when he is abusive I just talk to him, and I try to stop him; I don't feel scared to say anything. Before I used to hide like I was a little frightened mouse just hiding in the corner. No not any more. I try to tell him 'No I don't like the way you are behaving, if you're going to carry on like that you've got the door there in front of you' (96, W3).*

Three others had considered reconciling

- *In the short term I thought I might go back to him... not because I wanted to...there was part of me that's going 'You're going to do this, you're going to do this' and the other part of me is like 'You've got to go back' (42, W4).*
- *I remember those first few nights lying there [in refuge] thinking 'What the hell have I done?' but at the same time thinking 'Oh it's so peaceful not to have... you're doing something wrong or the way you look or speak' you know he would be so constant (15, W3).*

The domestic violence awareness course some women had participated in at Solace Women's Aid had helped them re-frame how they viewed the relationship.

- *It ran for about six weeks... somebody gave me that circle of domestic violence. It is amazing... if somebody had just given it to me ten years ago (FG, W1).*
- *I do thank Solace for that, because before I went to that programme, I didn't really understand all the different emotional and physical [forms of abuse]... after those six weeks, you're just sort of rebuilt and on the path to success (35, W3).*

Breaking the ties that bind

Not all the women who were married had divorced, in many cases this was due to deliberate delaying tactics, but some women were under pressure from family/community/church not to do so. Several talked about their husbands resisting divorce because of their sexualities and not wanting their families to find out. In one case this was tied up in religion and inheritance, in another it was related to cultural taboos around homosexuality.

For some women from minority ethnic backgrounds they had to acquire a religious divorce as well as a legal divorce and so this slowed the process down, especially when there were difficulties in relation to locating and obtaining copies of legal paperwork from abroad. Several of the research participants had been forced into marriage at a very young age and one was unsure whether paperwork existed or even if the marriage had been legal.

- *We were doing a handover of the kids and he just went 'I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you' and I went 'Oh thank god, now can we get on with the paper bit?' And if he's given me the Islamic one then as far as I'm concerned he's accepted it but then the English divorce is just the controlling side of him (15, W2).*

Whilst for some women divorce was insignificant, it represented a significant step in journeys of moving on for others, an opportunity to reclaim their identity, including returning to their names before marriage.

- *My solicitor sent my divorce paper to me yesterday. That just made me so happy...because it's like you've been set free. You're free! (FG, W1).*
- *So I'll be officially on my own with that paper, free to do whatever I want to do, you know – I'll be free to be me again. I am ready for the picking up of my pieces (75, W2).*

The freedom referred to here was denied to those where proceedings were dragging on, some women talked about being in limbo and unable to move on until the matter was resolved.

““ *I cannot go on another year – although we don’t see each other or anything like that, I feel that I’m still attached while I’m still married to him (50, W2).*

Overall, for most women getting a divorce enabled them to move on although it held particular challenges for women from some ethnic groups who reported being ostracised from the community as a consequence. Contexts that precluded divorce continued to tie women into connections that militated against their even thinking about new relationships.

Relationship status

The majority of women remained single across the project (Wave Two: 59 per cent; Wave Three: 68 per cent and in Wave Four: 61 per cent). The strongest reason women gave for not entering a new relationship was difficulty trusting after domestic violence. The safety of themselves and their children remained paramount.

““ *I’m scared to have a relationship now...I can’t really trust any more. It’s going to be difficult for somebody to get that trust (53, W2).*

““ *I think I have a huge problem with trust. I don’t know. I suppose I’m just keeping myself safe (62, W2).*

Some women questioned their judgment when it came to potential new partners and talked about how their friends and family members ‘vetted’ potential new partners.

““ *Well my friends have all decided now that I’m not allowed another man in my life unless he’s been vetted by them (FG, W3).*

Lacking confidence in their own judgment was connected to confused feelings of self-blame; something which was reinforced by the responses of others.

““ *The difficult thing you find to cope with is how did you put up with it and why did you – you know, it’s like you have to keep punishing yourself, it’s why didn’t I see it? Why did I put up with it for so long? (5, W1).*

Being controlled or being in control

Experiences of being controlled and then the subsequent regaining of space for action made women wary of being in a relationship, they had put considerable time and effort into rebuilding their lives and, in some cases, those of their children. They did not want to put this hard won freedom at risk.

““ *I want to have my own money, I want to have my house, I want to have my things and that will be really give me the strength to say yes or no because sometimes women are vulnerable (24, W2).*

““ *You have your space, I have my space. You want to occasionally share my space, that’s OK. But I’m very guarded about forming a full-blown relationship (90, W3).*

““ *I believe I will get there, but I just need my kids to grow up. I mean, men they always want your time. And my hands are actually full at the moment, so... (63, W3).*

““ *People say to me you need to move on now. It's been a long time. But I don't know. To me it doesn't seem long enough. I've got my whole life to have a relationship I just want to be a very good parent (35, W4).*

For some it was a matter of wanting to take time to rebuild their confidence and self-esteem: they did not rule out a relationship in the long term but wanted to concentrate on themselves first.

““ *Although I know it wasn't my fault, any of it, I have looked at the way that I behave and the way that I behave in relationships and the way I behave myself because I think I need to be more aware of certain things I probably wasn't aware of before. And obviously I need, I've been working on my self-esteem, my confidence issues as well (6, W2).*

In contrast, single women who wanted to start a family felt under some pressure to enter into a new intimate relationship, especially if they were older.

Starting again

Intimate relationships with new partners were reported across the project. What was unexpected was that a number of women also reported resuming relationships with men they had previously been involved with, but who were not the abuser (Wave Two: 14 per cent; Wave Three: seven per cent; and Wave Four: 30 per cent).

Safety may help explain why, of the women who entered into a new relationship, many did so with a previous partner.

““ *It's also been quite nice because we have been, you know, friends and lovers since we were kids. So he's a really safe person (26, W2).*

In a couple of cases, these men were the fathers of the women's children and had become more involved in their lives as a consequence of the abuse. Another advantage here was that they did not have to explain the abuse. Others began relationships with male friends who were already trusted and were aware of their situation.

““ *The complexities of DV and the complexities of what I've been through, and the way it's affected me and the children, it's just too much to tell anybody in a sense. It would take years, and I haven't got years to say it all, you know – but he knows it all because he's been there for twenty-five years (36, W3).*

Meeting new partners through existing friends was also mentioned by several women, again suggesting a mechanism for exploring whether potential partners are trust worthy.

““ *When we met it was a very instant friendship and we had mutual – we knew people – you know he was a good friend of a friend of mine from school, so we had mutual friends (10, W3).*

Yet another way that women safety checked potential new partners was through his friends and family. This enabled them to see what type of people he spent time with; presumably this may also have been a method of gathering intelligence about him and his previous relationships.

““ *I knew it was important to try and make friends with his friends because you learn a lot about somebody like you say from the people that they spend time with (3, W2).*

When exploring their children's safety, women talked not only of different ways that they might check out a partner's past (for example, the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme – pilot assessment, Home Office, 2013) but also keeping the relationship from their children until they were happy to introduce a new partner to them.

“ I have to consider my children you know... because I think most probably that if I should get involved with someone I'd most probably take his name to the police station and find out if he'd done anything wrong in his past (50, W2).

“ I'm currently seeing a guy at the moment but it's when the kids go to their dad's on a Monday and Tuesday, that's when I see him. Not all the time just, you know, very casual dating - nice dinner, movies (15, W3).

Furthermore, some women did safety work to prevent their ex-partners becoming aware of new relationships – another reason why new relationships were kept secret from children. When asked in Wave 3 about post separation abuse, 8 per cent of the remaining women (n=72) said that their previous partner had attacked a new partner. This also led to several women putting off living with new partners.

“ He went to prison, came out on a tag, and broke into the house and beat – well, hit my partner and went back inside (10, W1).

“ He hasn't moved in, no, still. Because I dread a showdown between the two of them, do you know what I mean? (87, W4).

A different model of relationship

Contrary to the cycle of abuse theory, the majority of women who were in a new relationship described it as non-abusive. Clear differentiations were drawn between the previous relationship characterised by coercive control and new relationships in which women maintained their space for action.

“ Its' completely different...because he's not putting any pressure on me...with the others, they were trying to make me into something I'm not. I mean, I had to fulfil this kind of a role second-guessing, you know, 'Is he going to kick off because I'm not wearing the red nail-varnish?'... It was exhausting, it was. But now I can be totally relaxed, totally be myself (6, W2).

“ He's not possessive, he don't shout at me, he's not nasty to me, he don't try and tell me what to do, what I can and can't wear you know, so... it's just more laid-back (64, W2).

“ He doesn't ring and check where I am or what I'm doing he just lets me get on with it. It's like completely different...like with [ex-partner] he was like 'Where are you, what time – you don't need to stay out till the end, you don't need to...let me hear your friends in the background, let me see your receipts, let me see'...[new partner] is just sort of easy-going and caring (9, W3).

This is not to say that none of the women entered into a relationship with a man who was abusive during the research period. Several did. However they reported being alert for the warning signs and when they recognised them, exiting from the relationship promptly.

“ I look for signs for things, anything I don't like I have to sort of pick up on it very quickly now whereas before I'd just think. I'm just much more aware I think, you know, much more aware of little signs. (6, W2).

“ I think it must have been two weeks and I was saying to one of my neighbours something don't feel right here and I'm like it's either he's really over protective or he's on the borders of possessive (83, W4).

Some of the challenges in new relationships were anticipating abuse and children being anxious if there was an argument.

“ Something about being in a relationship with my partner that I'm in now is you don't realise the fears that you have... I started to notice when I thought I was completely over DV and how sometimes I would expect it to happen you know (92, W3).

“ I said to the boys 'Oh guess what – you know that disagreement I had with [new partner], guess what he did afterwards?' And [child one] went 'smashed the whole place up' and [child two] went 'left'. I went 'No boys, he bought me some flowers!' (36, W4).

Maintaining independence and taking things slowly were important too.

“ I don't want him taking on the full responsibility of me and my daughter and I don't really want that so when I go back to work and I'm paying everything full and I'm not on any benefits then I think we'll look at moving in together but that's only the thing that's really stopped us (49, W3).

Even when non-abusive new relationships did not work out women still saw them as positive experiences since they confirmed a resolve to not settle for less than safety and freedom to be themselves.

“ I will always sort of be grateful in a way for that relationship in a sense because it ... it sort of got me out there, it got me you know sort of feeling slightly normal again (36, W4).

“ And the fact that I ended that other relationship, as soon as it didn't feel like it was going anywhere; it felt really good. I think I'm much better now at saying this situation is not good for me. I am therefore going to change it. I am not going to feel stuck in it or trapped by it or acted upon by it (3, W4).

Where men were unaware of women's history the question of how much to tell was a pressing one. Those who decided on total honesty were pleasantly surprised that they were not blamed, and men were supportive. Women's descriptions of how new partners reacted to hearing about their previous experience were generally positive in that the men expressed disgust at the women's ex-partners' behaviour and were not victim-blaming.

“ He didn't judge me; he didn't ask too many questions. He left me to open up what I needed to say, you know (15, W2).

“ He was disgusted obviously at some of the things I told him. And he was just supportive and we sort of talked... it was nice to talk to him about it and be able to say them things and sort of move on (9, W3).

Others decided on a 'safety first' approach, to protect the new found strength and positivity they had worked so hard to build.

“ I just think I feel a bit more in control, I feel like I want a fresh start and that a way of doing that is to take control over how I present myself... and I feel like I'm starting this relationship on that footing rather than feeling he knows all this stuff about me and I can never get away from that (3, W3).

““ *Maybe I will [tell him] later on depending how it goes but I haven't needed to because at the moment I just want to look at the future (6, W3).*

For some a new relationship had helped them move on.

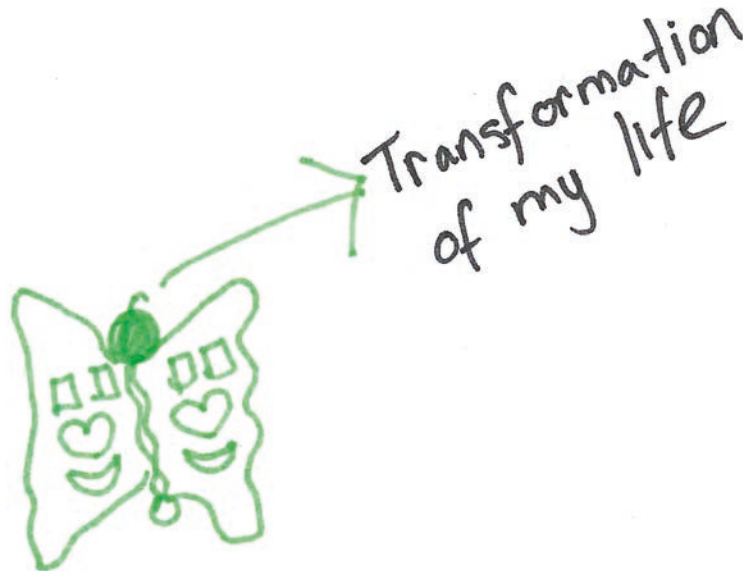
““ *I think maybe if I hadn't met [new partner] I might not have been in such a good place by now, you know, I wouldn't have had another adult to support and help and I would've found it harder. I didn't need anybody, but I think that has made my healing a lot better, easier, quicker (10, W2).*

Conclusions

For most women breaking the tie to their ex-partner, if they had been married, through divorce was important; the exceptions here were women for whom divorce might carry community penalties. In terms of new relationships almost two thirds had chosen not to, preferring to use their energy remaking their self and rebuilding their life as an autonomous person. For the third who had entered new relationships these were approached with caution. An unexpected finding was how many rekindled previous relationships, or became involved with someone they had known for a long time. We interpret this as an effort to ensure the person was worthy of their trust. The care women took to not 'move too fast' was a way of ensuring that they would retain their hard won freedoms.

12. Long journeys towards freedom

Emotional map (55, W4)



- ““ *I thought it was going to be like a click of fingers and it was just going to be life's back to just sort of falling into place and being pretty easy (7, W4).*

Whilst the details of each woman's journey over the three years of the study was unique, all traversed a process that took time, requiring them to examine and reflect on many aspects of their lives and selves and piece them back together differently. The space for action scores show that women saw an immediate expansion after leaving the perpetrator, with slower changes over time. As we moved through the Waves of the interviews there was increased awareness of tangible changes in women's capacities to think and act from their own perspectives.

- ““ *I'm not in an environment where I'm being controlled where I think 'if I do this maybe this man will come and beat me up' or 'if I go out if I dress this way' or 'if he sees me talking to this person'... so I can go anywhere I want and come back anytime I want; nobody can tell me what to do (86, W2).*
- ““ *For the first time in my life I've got my own place – no man telling me what to do, no man ordering me about. I can eat what I want, when I want, dress how I like and ... I won't get told I'm too fat and to cover up and things like that (93, W3).*
- ““ *I'm my own person; I can do what I want. I can answer my phone when I want, I can go where I want, I can eat what I want. I can wear what I want – I don't have to get dressed if I don't want to. I can watch a programme if I want. I can have a bath whenever I want. I can wake up in the middle of the night and strip naked around the house. I can do whatever I want to do (19, W4).*

The repeated references to everyday actions - eating what and when they wanted to, choosing what to do and what to wear – are yet another confirmation coercive control is a central component of domestic violence; women were no longer....feeling safe, did not dominate their lives in the same way.

No straight-forward path

Removing themselves from the immediate control of an abusive man was, however, only the first step. Rebuilding lives involved, for most, creating new homes, establishing financial security, choosing who they wanted to spend time with and finding a direction in terms of employment and/or education. At the outset of the study most imagined moving on as a linear process. This was reflected in the goals they set themselves to achieve after six months and three years. At six months, the focus was on regaining ground, being back in work or education, to have a new home and to improve their health. Women with insecure immigration status also expressed the hope they would still be in the UK.

““ *In six months' time I am hoping that everything legal is out of my life, I am hoping that if I can't stay in my home that I find a lovely property somewhere and we'll settle down and we'll move on happy and I hope and pray that I can get back into some sort of employment and start earning money again (71, W1).*

Three year goals reflected aspirations to rebuild and move on, these were: to have completed academic study; to have a successful career; for children to be doing well educationally; to meet someone new; and to be able to go on holiday.

““ *Three years... I would like to be in a nice relationship, a loving one this time. I would love another child and or be fostering; I'd like to be fostering or completed a course that I'd taken up... that's what I'd like (69, W1).*

By the end of the study a few had travelled this straightforward route and achieved their aspirations.

““ *The children are obviously much more settled now because they're living in a permanent home rather than temporary accommodation. I was surprised that I managed to get a nice home and carry on, you know, because you always think the worst don't you... where you're going to end up. So I was surprised that I got somewhere that is a nice family home (6, W2).*

““ *At one point we needed a house, a roof, but now we have got that. We sleep, we wake up, we have food on our table, we go to our church, we come back and we laugh (75, W2).*

However, for most, the process of moving on was not linear but one of 'ups and downs' and sometimes even periods of standing still. An Australian study represents these processes as a series of inter-connected spirals allowing for the possibility of movement upwards and downwards (Victoria Department of Human Services, 2004). This resonated with the ways some women reflected on their own journeys.

““ *I seem to sort of - I got so far and then sort of came to a standstill and now I'm going down again you know (38, W3).*

““ *[It's] a long road and it's an up and down road, and you don't know whether you're coming or going (19, W4).*

The mismatch between expectation and experience led a lot of women to feel frustrated and angry, particularly in Waves Two and Three. Some even held themselves responsible for the slow rate of change.

““ *I'm a bit angry to be honest because you know when you try and do your best and every time you get put back, it's like you go one step forward but like three steps back and it's just annoying (48, W2).*

“ I think I’m cross with myself because I don’t feel as though I’ve achieved anything yet. I’d hoped that I’d be more in control of the DV situation... I’d have got my physical problems sorted out... that I would have finished my Masters and be back at work and be in a happy and organised home but no, that’s not happened at all. I’m a long way from where I thought I would be and I’m kind of blaming myself for it...I’m feeling a bit of a failure at the moment because I haven’t achieved any of those things (39, W2).

Rebuilding lives after domestic violence is slow and gradual: it demands time and energy to overcome obstacles and cope with uncertainty. The spiral analogy, whilst illustrative, may serve to disguise the material realities that women in this study were contending with: for most including post-separation violence, often repeated. All faced these challenges within a changed legal and policy context in which what had previously been considered rights were eroded. Reduced access to social and permanent housing and benefits reform increased the potential to impoverish women and children, raising the costs of safety and freedom considerably. Our study traced not just the journeys of individuals, but the context in which they were making them, and our findings show the impacts of many policy changes on women’s ability to rebuild their lives. However determined an individual woman might be, however well supported, this cannot compensate for an absence of suitable housing, being trapped in poverty or a failure of agencies to protect from further abuse and manipulation.

Enablers

As previous chapters have documented there was no single shared story, and thus no formula for rebuilding lives after domestic violence. Yet within this diversity it is possible to identify the enablers that helped facilitate the process of moving on. Key for most of the women was the support they had received from Solace, in particular the holistic services they had been able to access. Supportive friends and family were also key. This combination enabled women to remake their selves, grow in confidence and reclaim relationships with their children and others they had become estranged from. A number discussed being involved in the research as an enabler, highlighting that having the possibility of reflecting on the rebuilding process once a year was not only valued, but useful.

The foundation stones of a new life were:

- Having opportunities to explore domestic violence and its legacies through counselling, but also with trusted family and friends;
- Being and feeling safe;
- Being settled and able to make a new home;
- Improved health/ability to manage health conditions;
- Children in new schools and less anxious, able to make and see friends, safe child contact;
- (Re)entering employment and/or education and training;
- A tight, but trusted, network of family and friends; and
- Financial security.

Few women had all of these in place, but all had laid some of these foundations. In terms of policy and practice the most important learning here was the crucial role played by holistic and longer term support in enabling this.

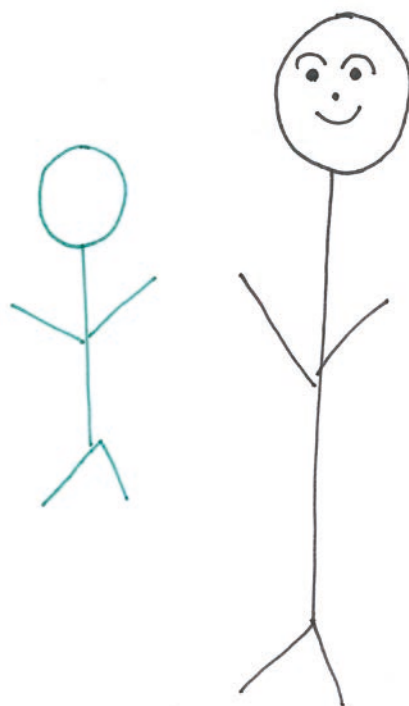
Holistic support

The dramatic expansion of women's space for action following separation was also connected to being in an empowering environment, supported by committed individuals who understood domestic violence. The holistic model of service provision provided by Solace meant that each woman could dip in and out of support as required, creating their own 'basket of resources' fitted to their particular needs and circumstances.

Apart from the advice and advocacy of key workers, floating support, legal services and IDVAS to resolve practical matters; counselling, alongside workshops addressing confidence and understanding domestic violence and self-help groups emerged as long term enablers. Over the course of the four interviews repeated references were made to learnings and change attributed to these interventions. This is a very different model to the current emphasis on short-term interventions that reduce risk. Holistic provision enabled women not only to 'be' safe but to begin to 'feel' safe, supported them through complex negotiations with other agencies and enabled them to deal with the legacies of abuse for themselves and their children.

Solace's services continued to be used, and advice, was sought throughout the research period. The prevalence of perpetrator manipulation of statutory agencies post-separation reveals the importance of factoring ongoing support needs into responses to domestic violence.

The upturn in women's space for action at Wave Four was for most the outcome of finally - after three years - beginning to have a sense of being settled. It was here that a statistical 'collapse' between the different areas explored in the space for action scale was evident. In other words, women's lives had become more integrated resulting in them feeling more comfortable and relaxed with a stronger more coherent sense of self.



“ That last time I didn't have a face, but this time I've put a smiley face, so that's a bit of a difference. I don't know why I didn't, maybe because I was very sad at that time and broken and didn't know who I was. But I'm really coming to terms with who I am; the person that I want to be and that I'm determined to be (71, W4). ”

Driving forces

Given the multiple and often ongoing challenges, women talked about the importance of having a 'driving force' to help them 'keep on track'. At early points this was as simple as believing there was light at the end of the tunnel and needing to change things for the children.

“*Eventually there will be light you know; if I was with him there would be no light (FG, W1).*

“*Being a mum that's what gives me life, that's what keeps me going (100, W1).*

Later on women saw their increased space for action, and emerging freedoms, as what kept them moving forwards.

“*I could easily get back into a relationship with him but I've chose not to because I want that freedom of space for myself (9, W1).*

For some women, being part of the research project had acted as a driving force, highlighting the cross-over between research and intervention.

“*I feel it's important that you do what you do especially for people like myself because you actually remind me of where I'm going, what path it is because... you forget what you're doing, where you're heading and I mean after talking to you I've remembered where I've got to keep going, I've got to keep going down that path, I've got to keep pushing (28, W3).*

“*I get to have somebody monitoring how I get on - puts a bit of pressure on me to make sure I have something to tell you... I imagine if I was just like the same every time... so I've tried really hard to invent myself again just to give you something to talk about (34, W3).*

It was an important part of the methodology of this study to provide space to explore and process change with each participant. In the business of everyday life, especially for those who were single mothers and still dealing with ongoing issues, there was a strong sense that they had no space to stop and think about what they had achieved. The input from the research was relatively small but it was, for many women, a welcome space for reflection.

“*It has made me reflect on it, because otherwise your day to day stuff, especially in London, everything's so fast paced. You don't have time to reflect, so even just sat here today and you know going over it has made me realise (8, W4).*

“*It's only just been the journey over the last three years and especially with the picture, you can have a look and you know where you've moved on to because sometimes it's not visible (20, W4).*

“*Looking at this chart it's helpful, at least I can see the improvement... seeing that visual in front of me, it's an absolute proof that I changed, the situation changed for the better (58, W4).*

Barriers

Very few women (n=8) at Wave Four had no barriers to talk to, with 44 identifying two or more. Unsurprisingly access to economic resources, safety, health and immigration status were the issues that women most often identified as ongoing barriers in their journeys forward.

Regrettably, much of what they discussed were engagements with statutory services, agencies which held keys to the resources women needed to rebuild their lives – housing, protection from further abuse, financial resources, divorce, safe child contact. With the exception of some thoughtful, aware and sympathetic individuals what women reported was poor practice characterised by victim blame, delay and

misinformation. Some ruefully noted having been given literature which promised them a safe and reliable response and how this was not their experience be that from the police, the housing office or in the family court system. This became a glaring contradiction for those who were pressured to leave, especially by social services, but were offered no support to do so.

Many women expended considerable time and energy battling 'the system', and over the course of the study began to comment that their lives were now constrained by structural barriers. Some were even more explicit, arguing that they had swapped one form of control (by the abuser) for another – by the legal, welfare and housing systems.

“ You've battled to keep yourself safe; the children safe... and then there's another battle with housing, battle with the courts... it's a constant battle for everything (FG, W1).

“ Thirteen long years, that's how it feels, sort of ten years with him and three years of just battling the system. You know I'm tired of it, just tired, and I want it to be over (36, W3).

Where women had the support of an advocate, usually via Solace, responses from other agencies improved, but our findings suggest there may be complacency about the extent of change there has been in agency responses. A key theme to emerge here was lack of understanding about domestic violence or the process of rebuilding lives in the aftermath. Across all agencies domestic violence was still being reduced to incidents of physical assault, which led not only to an exclusion of women from services and support when their abuse was more characterised by coercive control, but also a minimising of post-separation abuse, which was most likely to be ongoing harassment. This misunderstanding also meant that many professionals underestimated the toll living with abuse had on women and children, expecting that separation, in and of itself, would not just create safety but also lift all the other burdens.

Not only does there still need to be a better understanding about domestic violence within statutory agencies so that the first response is a positive one, but the journeys of many women could have been made easier and speedier if responses had simply maximised and enforced criminal and civil protection mechanisms and followed policy guidance; meeting the standards required in national, European and international law.

Eroded rights

In Waves Two and Three it was clear that women were seeking to rebalance their lives in an environment where commissioning and changes to the welfare and housing systems meant their rights were being eroded.

From the very outset of the study the long established right of women, recognised by the UN, EU and Council of Europe, to protection from violence was being jeopardised by the Localism Act (2011) as responsibility moved from national to local government, leading to even less consistency in response than previously. There is now no mechanism at all for ensuring that women, wherever they live, have access to refuge and other essential services that deliver protection.

A necessary foundation stone for rebuilding lives is a safe and settled home. For a quarter of the women this meant accessing refuge accommodation, for others it meant finding alternative accommodation. The lack of move on accommodation, decreasing availability of social housing and barriers to accessing private rented accommodation meant that many women had to wait several years to settle safely, create a home and establish a routine, and some were still waiting. Being settled was necessary before women could even think about growing supportive networks, addressing health concerns and taking steps to (re) enter education and the workplace.

Financial insecurity was evidenced throughout the study with changes to the welfare system; women were affected by the benefit cap, universal credit, bedroom tax, income support and disability allowance reforms. Accessible childcare was vital, especially as a single parent in moving on; however the cost was prohibitive for many women leading them to undertake complex calculations between demands from the Job Centre to enter into employment with raising their children and ensuring they did not fall into a benefit trap. Because women with children over five years old are no longer eligible to receive benefits if they pursue full time education, many had to put their personal and career development on hold until the children were older.

Cuts to Legal Aid led meant that many women were restricted in accessing the funds they required to pay for complex and often unnecessary legal disputes over divorce settlements and child contact. Several even had to represent themselves in court and/or face cross-examination by the abuser without legal support. Women recalled becoming emotionally and physically exhausted as they sought to navigate access to economic resources whilst remaining safe. Those with insecure immigration status fared particularly badly within this context.

The erosion of women's rights means that community resources became even more important. With community care grants and crisis loans being cut, women were reliant on provision via food banks and the good will of their social networks and charities. In addition to friends and family, the workplace, religious institutions and other community organisations were all drawn on.

Each erosion of rights increased the costs of safety and freedom for women and their children, hindering or halting their efforts to rebuild their lives. For some the costs were so stark and extensive that they asked the poignant question 'what was the point?' Without serious consideration of the growing barriers we ask the equally poignant question 'will more women now stay with abusive men because the costs of leaving are now too high?' A recent Irish study on austerity and its impact on the violence against women sector reached a similar conclusion:

“ She more often than not comes into contact with a system that offers her more restrictions than options, more closed doors than open ones. Five years of recession and austerity had pared an already fragile and fragmented system of support for women and children right down to the bone (Safelreland, 2014:2).

Conclusions

It would be possible to make a lengthy list of recommendations, linked to the research findings and the international obligations national and local governments have to protect women from violence. Instead we have chosen to highlight five key themes and some, but by no means all, of the actions and implications that flow from them. Ultimately, the question we face is whether it is just and equitable that so many women and children are left to pay the costs of safety and freedom, especially when so many of the perpetrators are not held to account.

1. This study shows that ending domestic violence, dealing with its legacies and rebuilding lives takes time; some women and children were still facing post separation abuse three years on, and many faced complex legal and practical challenges across the study. The holistic wrap around provision Solace created, through a variety of funding sources, has not been sufficiently recognised, since we have neglected to pay attention to the process of rebuilding lives.

We recommend therefore that all women and children who have experienced domestic violence are in a position to access support for a minimum of two years after separation, and this should include:

- refuge and floating support;
- legal advice and advocacy;
- short courses on understanding domestic violence;
- specialist counselling and group work for women and for children;
- skills and confidence building workshops; and
- workshops and individual support orientated to single parenthood, (re)entering employment/education/training

2. Understanding of domestic violence, pre and post separation, in statutory agencies is poor, meaning that too often they hinder, rather than support, the progress of women and children rebuilding their lives. Some of this could be addressed through basic training which focuses on coercive control, rather than incidents of physical assault; and which alerts them to the reality that leaving does not necessarily end abuse.

In addition, given the repeated evidence of failure to implement existing policy and guidance, and the shift to localism, a system of monitoring the delivery of sensitive and responsive services to domestic violence survivors needs to be developed. A key component would be regularly convened (at least twice a year) panels of survivors whose recent experiences of service use – good and bad – is considered as evidence.

3. Having a safe home was crucial to the rebuilding process, since it was the reason for separation in the first place. The housing situation in London has led to a critical situation for those fleeing domestic abuse. Women cannot find refuge spaces and those in refuges are forced to stay for unnecessarily long periods due to the lack of move on accommodation. We concur with the findings of Janet Bowstead (2013) that refuges should be considered a national resource, given the needs of many women to move away to be safe, but delivered locally. Similarly many women ended up in inappropriate, and sometimes unsafe, temporary accommodation and private rentals for lengthy periods.

We recommend therefore the following:

- Refuge provision, at the level commended by the Istanbul Convention, should be guaranteed and funded through a national refuge fund with a move on pathway.
- All women in social housing in Greater London who flee domestic violence should be guaranteed a move to equivalent social housing within Greater London, unless they wish to move out of the city.
- Women and children made homeless through domestic violence should be recognised as a unique group fleeing crimes that take place in the home. This requires special measures, including the offer of a social housing tenancy.

4. Many women suffered financial abuse within the relationship, and for some this continued and even intensified when they separated. This will be exacerbated by proposed Universal Credit regulations where one partner will receive payment for the whole family. The ending of crisis loans and community care grants makes the rebuilding process even more complex, and other benefit reforms created serious hardship.

Our recommendations here are as follows:

- Universal credit payments should be made to the woman where there are children involved.
- A specific fund for families having to relocate due to domestic violence should be created by central government.
- Women should not have their housing benefit reduced for an empty bedroom for at least two years following the perpetrator leaving the family home and then the situation reviewed.

5. Community resources hold the potential to be enablers or barriers to women re-building their lives. Whilst friends and families were most significant sources of support, neighbours, work colleagues, faith communities and community organisations also featured. However, many women also encountered being discouraged from ending the relationship, and when they did too frequently were met with blame and judgment. What they sought was recognition of abuse and its harms, respect for their decisions and safety needs, and a sense of belonging to strong networks. National and local awareness raising work needs to expand understanding of what domestic violence is, including post-separation abuse, alongside clear messages about listening to and respecting survivors and offering support when needed.

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Appendices

We present here the new scales and post-separation abuse questionnaire developed for this study. If used in further research they should be cited referencing this publication.

Coercive control uk scale (CCUK)

Did the person who was violent/abusive towards you control ...?

Response scale: 1 (all the time) to 5 (never)

- Your appearance e.g. types of clothing, make-up, hair?
- When you could go out?
- Where you could go?
- Who you could go with?
- Who was allowed to visit/stay in your home?
- What activities you could engage in e.g. work, education, keeping fit?
- Whether you could interact with certain groups in your life, e.g. religious groups, support groups, social networks?
- Check your mail/e-mail/ social networking sites?
- Check the phone calls/texts that you made/ received?
- Keep you under surveillance when away from the home e.g. work, school, gym?
- Make you account for your whereabouts?
- Who did the housework?
- How it was done?
- How your money was spent?
- How the children were raised?
- When you had sex?
- What you did sexually?
- Pregnancy and birth control/contraception?
- Monitor your spending?

Space for action scale (SFA)

Response scale: 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree).

1. Parenting

- I could effectively manage my childcare responsibilities.
- I was a good mother.
- I was able to give my child/children the life I wanted them to have.
- I put my child/children first in all circumstances.
- I felt I was strong enough to give my child/children the support that they needed.
- I felt confident in my ability to parent effectively.

2. Sense of Self

- I was confident about myself and my abilities.
- On the whole I was satisfied with myself.
- I believed I could make good decisions for myself.
- I was free to live the kind of life that I wanted to.
- Overall I liked my life.

3. Community

- I was connected to my community/ communities.
- I was an active member of my community/ communities.
- I could take up employment, education and/or learning opportunities that interested me.
- I was accepted by the people I interacted with (e.g. neighbours, members of local groups, religious organisations) for who I was.
- I was welcomed at community events.

4. Friends and Family

- I was able to see my friends/family whenever I liked.
- I had enough friends.
- I had enough very close friends.

5. Help-Seeking

- I was comfortable talking about my feelings.
- I was able to ask for help when I needed it.
- I knew where to go to get the help and support that I needed.

6. Competence

- I was able to budget effectively.
- I felt confident dealing with authorities e.g. housing, benefits departments.
- I could effectively manage my household e.g. bill paying, cleaning.
- I was able to cope with day to day activities.
- I was able to cope with the pressures that I faced.

7. Well-being and safety

- I felt safe all the time.
- My home was safe and secure.
- I liked the house that I lived in.
- I felt happy about how I looked.
- I always dressed however I wanted to dress.
- I felt safe moving around my neighbourhood.

8. Finances

- I was secure financially.
- I could live comfortably on the amount of income I received.

The data were recoded so that low values indicate little space for action, and high values indicate high levels of space for action.

Factor analyses and reliability analyses suggested that four items did not fit well with any of the subscales. These items were analysed separately (I was able to manage my illness effectively; I had control over my use of alcohol and/or drugs; I felt good about my overall health; and the people I interacted with had the ability to influence what decisions I made).

Post separation abuse questionnaire (PSAQ)

Data collected on yes/no ever, yes/no still experiencing , and frequency (once, few times, many times)

Direct abuse against you

1. Attacked you physically?
2. Sexually assaulted you?
3. Verbally abused/threatened you face to face?
4. Verbally used/threatened you over the phone?
5. Sent abusive/threatening text messages?
6. Threatened or abused you using a different method? Facebook, e-mail, letter?
7. Got his friends or family to abuse or threaten you?
8. Threatened/abused a member of your family and friends?

Stalking and harassment

9. Stalked you at home/work or around your community?
10. Stalked your children around home/school or anywhere else?
11. Cyber stalked or cyber bullied you?
12. Moved/stayed close to your home?
13. Arrived at a place he knew you would be?

Abuse using children

14. Ever tried to get information about your whereabouts through your children?
15. Passed abusive/threatening messages through your children?
16. Tried to turn your children against you?
17. Exacerbated or ignored children's conditions?
18. Withheld maintenance payments?
19. Changed contact plans at the last minute?
20. Returned your child home later after contact?
21. Threatened or abused your children?
22. Sent the back to you without all their possessions/clothes and refused to give them back?
23. Abused/threatened you during child contact?

Abuse through social network

- 24. Abused/threatened a new partner?
- 25. Discredited you to a new partner?
- 26. Attacked or assaulted a new partner?
- 27. Tried to turn friends and family against you?
- 28. Sent intimate/inappropriate messages/images about/of you?

Abuse through services

- 29. Deliberately held up divorce proceedings?
- 30. Been difficult with contact arrangements? Insisting on unsupervised access, excessive travel
- 31. Made claims/counter claims to the police about you being violent and abusive?
- 32. Broke restraining/non-molestation orders?
- 33. Made false reports to social services?

Abuse through property, finance or employment

- 34. Broke into your home?
- 35. Damaged your property?
- 36. Discredited you to work?
- 37. Tried to exert continued control over your finances? Refusing to pay mortgage, took debts out in your name
- 38. Tried to interfere with your citizenship status?
- 39. Interfered with your employment? Turning up, calling incessantly, lying about you to your employer

