



Mothers living with domestic abuse in Scotland – a tale of poverty and social inequality

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Key Points

- Among mothers of young children, 14% report experiencing abuse in the 6 year period since the birth of their child who is in the study. With c.320,000 children in Scotland currently aged under 7 years old, this means that approximately 45,000 children aged under 7 are potentially affected by domestic abuse.
- The most commonly experienced forms of abuse were coercive control (11%), followed by physical violence (7%) and threats (7%).
- Compared to mothers in the highest income households, mothers on the lowest incomes were far more likely to experience any abuse, and they had 5 times greater odds of experiencing more types of abuse more often, highlighting the impact of poverty.
- For mothers who were both in the youngest age category and the poorest income category it is predicted that 1 in 3 experience some form of abuse. By contrast, 1 in 10 mothers who were neither in the youngest nor poorest categories are predicted to experience abuse.

Background

Domestic abuse is a pernicious societal issue that has both immediate and long-term consequences for those who are victimised. Research points to motherhood as being linked to experiences of domestic abuse, with pregnancy being a particular point of risk. Across UK jurisdictions, new legislation aims to extend the criminalisation of domestic abuse to include coercive control. Less clear is the relationship between mothers' victimisation of different forms of abuse and other factors like age, socio-economic status and level of education. In our research we explored the relationship between social inequality and mothers' experiences of domestic abuse. We explored the relationship between multiple and overlapping dimensions of disadvantage and poverty and experiences of domestic abuse.

The study

Our study used data from the Growing Up in Scotland survey, a longitudinal nationally representative prospective study of pre-school children and their families in Scotland. The survey cohort used in this analysis consisted, at the first survey, of 5,217 babies born between 06/2004-05/2005. At the 6th survey sweep when children were 6 years old, mothers were asked about experiences of domestic abuse. We had data on a subsample of 3,633 mother-child pairs for analysis. Full details on the methodology and analysis can be found in the journal article where this research was published (Skafida, Morrison & Devaney, 2021).

Our study looked at experiences of any abuse defined as mothers who had replied 'yes' to any of the following questions since the birth of the study child: "In the time since child was born, has any partner or ex-partner ever done any of the following things to you? [yes/no]"

- Stopped you having a fair share of the household money or taken money from you
- Repeatedly put you down so that you felt worthless
- Behaved in a jealous or controlling way, e.g. restricting what you can do, who you can see, what you can wear
- Pushed you or held you down

- Kicked, bitten or hit you
- Choked or tried to strangle/smother you
- Used a weapon against you, for example an ashtray or a bottle
- Forced you or tried to force you to take part in any sexual activity when you did not want to
- Threatened to hurt you
- Threatened to hurt someone close to you, such as your children, family members, friends or pets
- Threatened to, attempted to, or actually hurt themselves as a way of making you do something or stopping you from doing something
- Threatened to kill you

We created a scale to capture abuse intensity using information on how many different forms of abuse women had experienced, and on how often the abuse had occurred. Based on this scale we differentiate between those who experience no abuse, 'low intensity' abuse (the bottom 50% of the scale); 'high intensity' abuse (the top 50% of the scale). Women in the 'low intensity' category would generally report having experienced fewer forms of abuse and on fewer occasions, and vice versa for mothers in the high intensity group. There are limitations to trying to measure intensity this way, or at all. For example, a woman may only have been threatened once, but the severity of this threat could lead a woman living in fear of abuse on a daily basis. Thus, counting incidents runs the risk of not recognising the nature of domestic abuse and the impact it has on women and children (Myhill & Hohl, 2019). We recognise this inherent limitation in this measure but hope that the analysis of it can nonetheless provide useful insights by contrasting the two halves of a spectrum of abuse experiences using such simple indicators. We were also able to look at different forms of abuse and compare differences in experiences of coercive control; threats of abuse; physical abuse, including sexual abuse. The conceptual categories were based on how the survey had conceptualised and differentiated the different forms of abuse.

| Weighted data | % | 95% CI |
|--|------|-------------|
| Experience of number of types of abuse | | |
| None | 86.4 | [85.1-87.6] |
| One | 5.8 | [5.1-6.6] |
| Two | 2.5 | [1.9-3.1] |
| Three or more | 5.4 | [4.6-6.3] |
| Since the birth of the sample child (current or previous partner) | | |
| Experience of any coercive control | 10.6 | [9.6-11.8] |
| Experience of any physical violence | 7.2 | [6.2-8.2] |
| Experience of any threats | 6.6 | [5.6-7.7] |
| Experience of any abuse (any of the above) | 13.6 | [12.4-14.9] |

Findings

Around 14% of women reported experiencing abuse since the birth of the study child. Since the birth of the study child most women who did experience some form of abuse experienced one type (43%) while just under 60% experienced two or more types (percentages derived, not shown). Among women experiencing abuse, 15% of women reported this happening too many times to count, though this excludes 26% of women who did not remember, didn't know or did not wish to answer questions on how often abuse occurred. The most commonly experienced form of abuse was coercive control. This form of abuse has only recently been recognized in criminal legislation in the different UK countries, which is a significant improvement in the legislative structure and protections afforded to adult victims given how prevalent it is. If our study had measured only physical abuse, the prevalence estimate would be half (7%) of what it is.

Income poverty as a key risk factor

We found that the biggest differences in experiences of abuse emerged when comparing women by age and income. Compared to women in the highest income households (the top fifth of the distribution), women on the lowest incomes were far more likely to report experiencing any abuse, and they were particularly more likely (5 times greater odds) to experience 'high-intensity' abuse, which in our study was defined as having experienced more forms of abuse, more often. This pattern also applied when looking at each form of abuse separately.



Age was the second most important dimension in understanding experiences of abuse. The only statistically significant difference was between the youngest women and the oldest women, where the former had a c.150-160% higher odds of experiencing any abuse, of experiencing more forms of abuse more often, and of different forms of abuse. A younger age at childbirth is correlated with other characteristics which we accounted for in the model, but even when accounting for these in the analysis, women who were younger at childbirth remained a significant factor. It may be that older mothers might have different characteristics, such as more established and extensive social networks, although this might be as likely linked to the characteristics of male partners of older women. This issue is one which warrants further study.

Overlapping dimensions of disadvantage and heightened risk of abuse

Women who were both in the youngest age group and *also* on the lowest household income group had a significantly much higher chance of experiencing domestic abuse. For example, among mothers who were under 20 years old (when the study child was born) and who were also on the lowest income fifth of the income distribution, 34% were predicted to have experienced abuse. By comparison, for mothers who were 20 years or older and who were not in the lowest income fifth, the predicted probability of experiencing abuse was just under 11%.

These results point to the importance of understanding how experiences of domestic abuse are best understood by taking into account how dimensions of disadvantage overlap and interlock with each other. The experience of these women is not that they are either poor *or* young, but that they can often be both poor *and* young, and experience of abuse was therefore magnified. The highest predicted prevalence of experiencing any domestic abuse was for mothers who were both in the youngest and the poorest groups. Among this group it is predicted that 1 in 3 of all mothers of young children experience some form of abuse. By contrast, 1 in 10 mothers who were neither in the youngest nor poorest categories are predicted to experience some form of abuse.

Surprising findings on maternal education

It appeared that, after accounting for other key mother and child characteristics, and characteristics of fathers, the odds of exposure to abuse increased with increasing education, thus representing a trend in the opposite direction to that expected given the income, age and social class findings. Below-degree level educated mothers were less likely to report experiencing any forms of abuse than mothers with degrees. We found that the combination of being in the poorest household income groups, and also having degree or above level education was associated with a much higher predicted prevalence of reported abuse. It is not clear why this might be the case. This highlights the ongoing priority needed for public education and awareness raising on domestic abuse. But this is only a hypothesis. The above results stress that what does correlate strongly with domestic violence is poverty, and more specifically income poverty. Being financially dependent and constrained increases women's vulnerability and limits options on practical and economic levels. Financial insecurity and dependency make separation from an abusive partner all the more difficult.

Sex of children

Being the mother of a male study child was associated with a small but statistically significant higher chance of experiencing abuse than being the mother of a female study-child. The sex of children of mothers experiencing domestic abuse is rarely discussed in research. Some evidence on step-fathers suggests that they are more likely to be abusive to both mothers and non-biologically related children. However, the increased risk of domestic abuse towards mothers of male step-children compared to female step-children may not be adequately explained by such theories. This is an area that requires further research.

Differences between types of domestic abuse

Overall, the most commonly experienced forms of abuse were coercive control (11%), followed by physical violence (7%) and threats (7%). The patterns of social inequality in experiences of abuse that have been discussed above applied both to any form of abuse, and also specifically to experiences of either coercive control, threats or physical abuse, and there were no significant differences in the patterns of social inequality depending on the type of abuse. The distinction of abuse types reflects the sets of questions in the survey, where threats were asked about separately, and conceptualised as being different to other questions roughly understood as psychological abuse or coercive control. One could argue that threats too are part of coercive control.

Policy Implications

There is still work to be done on how we define and measure the different forms of domestic abuse. Incidence and frequency of abuse can be an important measure, but the primary concern should be about understanding the impact. We have an increasingly more detailed understanding of how financial insecurity is closely linked with experiences of abuse. We recognise that domestic abuse is a cause of women's inequality this includes economic inequality. Policy makers should consider how current social and economic policies, and the design and implementation of income-related and welfare benefits may act to 'trap' women in relationships with abusive partners, and reduce their space for action (Sharp-Jeffs et al., 2018). For example, the relatively new universal credit payment system in the UK is meant to help people on low or no incomes manage their living costs. Yet, the system currently expects claimants who are living together to make one single claim paid out to one claimant on behalf of the couple. As a UK parliamentarian recently noted (Buchan, 2020), this potentially puts women experiencing domestic abuse at an increased risk, and it makes it easier for a perpetrator to control all couple and family finances. This, in turn, could make it harder for women to leave an abusive partner. Given the multitude of detrimental outcomes for families and children which are associated with poverty, broader measures to combat poverty and address income inequalities are also needed. Since lack of financial resources are a key obstacle in leaving an abusive partner, access to an emergency fund for women suffering from domestic abuse could be useful. In Wales, a new policy launched by the Welsh future generations commissioner gives employees working for the commissioner the possibility to apply for a £500 one off cash payment, and a salary advance, or loan, of up to £5,000 so that women can leave abusive partners by paying for anything from essential supplies to relocation costs including rent or a deposit on a home. Initiatives of this nature, and perhaps analogous ones which would also help women who are not in employment, could be a useful additional tool for policy addressing domestic abuse.

Project Details

This study is supported by UK's Nuffield Foundation grant number WEL/43875. For more information, please visit <https://growingupwithdomesticabuse.sps.ed.uk/>

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