

WOMEN, DOMESTIC ABUSE AND SOMEONE ELSE'S SUBSTANCE USE

Findings and recommendations from our
project supporting women

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Introduction

Domestic abuse predominantly affects women, and 35 years of experience supporting families affected by substance use has taught Adfam that women are disproportionately affected by the problematic drug or alcohol use of a loved one. The relationship between domestic abuse and substance use is non-causational, but the impacts of the two are interrelated. Despite this, services are rarely constructed with this dynamic in mind.

In the UK, nearly a quarter of women affected by someone else's substance use report having experienced physical violence or abuse in relation to the problematic substance use. To address this issue, Adfam's Women's Project (2017-2020), funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (via the 'Tampon Tax' fund), sought to reduce the risk to women affected by co-occurring substance use and domestic abuse through a national training programme helping practitioners to identify and support women at risk of domestic violence in this context, along with a programme for volunteers and experts by experience, empowering them to support women in their communities. This report, which draws together our learnings from the frontline of service provision and makes a number of service and policy level recommendations, represents the third phase of our project. We hope that the insights gathered here will inform service practices nationally, and help shape future discussions around the relationship between substance use and domestic abuse.

Women's Substance Use and Domestic Abuse

The interface between substance use and domestic abuse is complicated and multi-faceted. Women and girls who experience domestic abuse are more vulnerable to alcohol and drug problems. Harmful drug and alcohol use, or the drug and alcohol use of a partner, also makes women more vulnerable to domestic abuse. Mothers of children who use drugs and alcohol problematically are also vulnerable to child to parent abuse (CPA), which, like other forms of domestic abuse, can be physical, emotional, financial or coercive.

Findings from the frontline

The Woman's Project employed two mechanisms for collecting insights regarding the needs and concerns of practitioners and women affected by domestic abuse as well as somebody else's substance use. In 2017 an online consultation along with a series of local focus groups set the agenda for the project. Throughout the project we continued to gather insights from the 'Healthy Relationship Champions' involved in our volunteer training programme and the attendees at the practitioner trainee events.

Practitioners displayed a clear passion for supporting women in need, and were keen to share their positive experiences of working in a flexible manner, in collaboration with other

practitioners and services, around small caseloads. However, these experiences did not represent the default state of affairs.

Practitioners involved in the project identified the following challenges:

- Budget cuts have resulted in growing caseloads and shrinking services, which has reduced practitioners' ability to carry out preventative work.
- Women rarely face substance use related harm and domestic abuse in isolation. Practitioners are required to approach a number of issues at once, and require joined-up services to support their work. Long term austerity has led to a rise in the number and severity of complex needs experienced by vulnerable women.
- Domestic abuse services and drug and alcohol services are commissioned through different bodies, making it hard for practitioners to incorporate support for both issues into their work. Funding decisions are made without sufficient regard for long term cost-saving effects of holistic support now. Short term commissioning practices create confusion, waste resources and cause clients to fall through the gaps.
- Financial, time and caseload pressures, along with narrow commissioning outcomes means practitioners don't have the time or mandate to build networks between services. A lack of funding for preventative work renders later support 'too little, too late'.
- One-size-fits all approaches are not effective and do not take account of the often complex needs of their clients.
- Women at risk of harm often require specialist legal services, which practitioners are unable to provide alone.
- Providing complex support to women who are often traumatised carries a high risk of vicarious traumatisation. Practitioners are not able to access structured support to help them deal with growing caseloads, shrinking budgets and short term commissioning cycles.
- Women from black, minority ethnic and other minority communities face additional challenges, and mainstream services are not always equipped to engage or support them. Tailored services are required to end the exclusion of under-represented groups.

Recommendations

This report has drawn on research gathered throughout our project into the challenges and barriers faced by women affected by co-occurring substance use problems and domestic abuse, as well as the practitioners working to support them.

For local Authorities and Commissioners:

Services require greater financial autonomy and the ability to focus their resources flexibility if they are to meet client needs effectively. Client-centred services must be supported to seek out, employ or build relationships with specialists to meet particular needs. Flexibility in services ought to be supported by robust information sharing protocols, allowing services to work together safely and efficiently. Commissioners ought also to recognise the effects of short term, siloed commissioning practices on service outcomes. Competition often displaces collaboration between services, and limited service resources are diverted away from frontline work towards securing and maintaining funding.

For Government and Policy Makers:

Meeting the needs of clients requires a person centred, rather than issue led, approach. It is important to remember that the problems clients face are symptomatic of their context and experience, and addressing these contexts are imperative in their support. Greater investment in preventative approaches is required to prevent significant escalating harm and multiple client needs later on. Recognition of different forms of abuse, as well as the barriers to support that under-represented communities face, must be integrated wholly into service objectives and design.

Adfam welcomes the 2020 changes made to the Domestic Abuse Bill. This report also calls upon the government to extend the statutory duty beyond refuges to ensure that community services are trained in the prevention of domestic abuse.

Conclusion

During the course of Adfam's Women's Project spanning from 2017-2020, a number of worrying patterns emerged. The nature of the problems faced by women in need are becoming more complex, and the needs themselves are multiplying. At the same time, practitioner caseloads are increasing, and funding is ever more stretched. The Covid 19 pandemic has exacerbated the harms experienced by families affected by someone else's problematic drug and alcohol use, and lockdown has compounded the risk of domestic violence. However, Adfam found that practitioners have a clear sense of the actions required to build robust, person-centred and inclusive services. Practitioners working with women affected by domestic abuse and somebody else's drug or alcohol use are passionate about working collaboratively with services and experts in different fields to meet the needs of the women they serve. It is now incumbent on policy makers and service commissioners to adopt these objectives also.

To read the full report, please visit: <https://adfam.org.uk/our-work/projects/Women>