



Reaching out, closing in
The role played by community resources in ending violence against women
Briefing paper, September 2014

Social and familial networks are frequently important enablers, but many remain barriers for women striving to rebuild lives free from abuse.

Background

This briefing paper draws on the findings of a three year longitudinal study which followed 100 women and their children as they rebuilt their lives after domestic violence (Kelly, Sharp and Klein, 2014). It explores the role played by community resources (family, friends, neighbours, employers and religious communities) in ending violence against women.

Key messages

- Women seek recognition of abuse and its harms, respect for their decisions and safety needs, and a sense of belonging to strong social and familial networks.
- Whilst social and familial networks can be significant sources of support, 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. Community resources, therefore, hold the potential to be enablers or barriers to women re-building their lives.
- In post-crisis situations and in the current context of eroded rights to welfare support, social housing and Legal Aid the significance of social and relational networks increases.

The role of community resources in ending violence against women

Most research, in focusing on crisis interventions, emphasises the role of statutory and voluntary agencies in supporting women to end violence. As a result there is relatively little research on the roles played by family, friends, neighbours, employers and religious communities, despite the fact that they are often the first to know about abuse and can act as gate openers or gate closers in terms of help seeking. Indeed, 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.

Whilst living with abuse

The potential for asking for and receiving support from the community was often limited by the control strategies of abusive men. For example, only 24 per cent of women had been able to see friends and family when they wanted to when involved with their ex-partner. A similar proportion (26%) reported having enough friends at the outset of the study. Whilst some community members acted 'for her' through listening, offering advice and/or practical and financial resources, others were perceived as being 'against her' by failing to provide support, being involved in abuse or siding with the abuser. Some network members had divided loyalties, changed their responses over time or were manipulated by the abuser. Revealingly, no examples were offered of members confronting or challenging perpetrators.

After leaving

Many women 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, friends and other community members. However, even when women spoke to other people about what had happened, many still filtered how much and what they revealed for a range of reasons, including: 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. Some network members not only blamed women but in the process excused the perpetrator.

Family and friends

Although the ability to see family and friends increased dramatically on separation, it then remained constant. An unexpected finding was how much work women put into managing relationships with the people around them, making very deliberate choices about whom 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.

Neighbours

Being settled in a new home enabled women to connect to their wider neighbourhood. Women increasingly reported feeling connected to their local community and being an active member of it. Supportive neighbours created not just a sense of connection, but of feeling safer as well. Unfortunately, however, the reverse could also be the case, with neighbours holding women responsible for post-separation harassment by their ex-partners or being aggressive themselves.

Employers

Some women had to give up work after leaving the perpetrator since this became a place where he could find her. In addition, fourteen per cent of women whose assets or status were threatened as part of post-separation abuse reported that the perpetrator tried to interfere with their employment by discrediting them to their employer. 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.

Religious communities

Almost two-thirds of the women in the study (n=65) defined themselves as religious (27 Christian; 19 Catholic; 14 Muslim; 3 other; 1 Buddhist; 1 Sikh) and some drew strength and support from a faith community, including financial assistance. Again however some women had to change their place of worship since this was somewhere they could be found. In addition, some reported being ostracised by faith leaders and communities as a consequence of leaving the abuser and/or seeking a divorce.

Recommendations

- If women are to be relieved of some of the burden of safety work after separating from a violent partner, there needs to be more awareness about what domestic violence is and especially the potential for post-separation abuse.
- Education about domestic violence needs to be directed to society as a whole, rather than simply those it directly affects.
- In addition to general awareness-raising, clear messages need to be communicated about listening to and respecting survivors and offering support when needed.

Kelly, L., Sharp, N. and Klein, R. (2014) Finding the Costs of Freedom: How women rebuild their lives after domestic violence can be found at: <http://www.cwasu.org> and <http://www.solacewomensaid.org>