

Finding the Costs of Freedom

How women and children rebuild their lives after domestic violence

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:

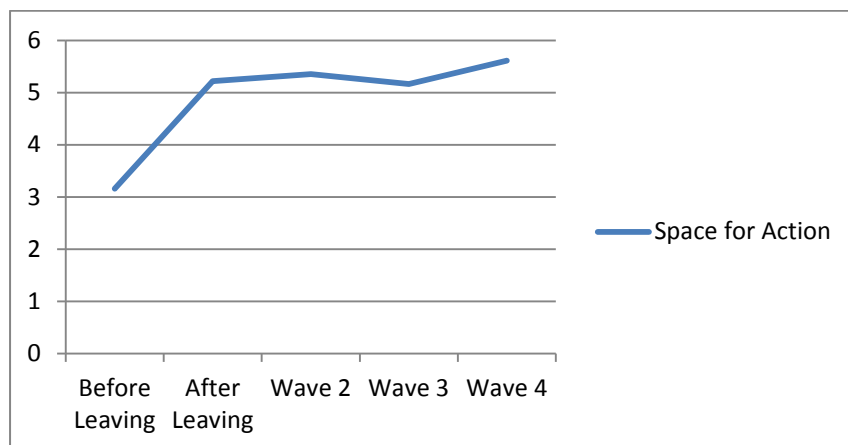
- What factors support long term settlement, how do they interrelate and at what points in the process are they particularly important?
- When do obstacles to resettlement occur and how can they be overcome?
- How can community resources best be developed and integrated for long term support of survivor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

Changes in space for action over three years (all areas)



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.

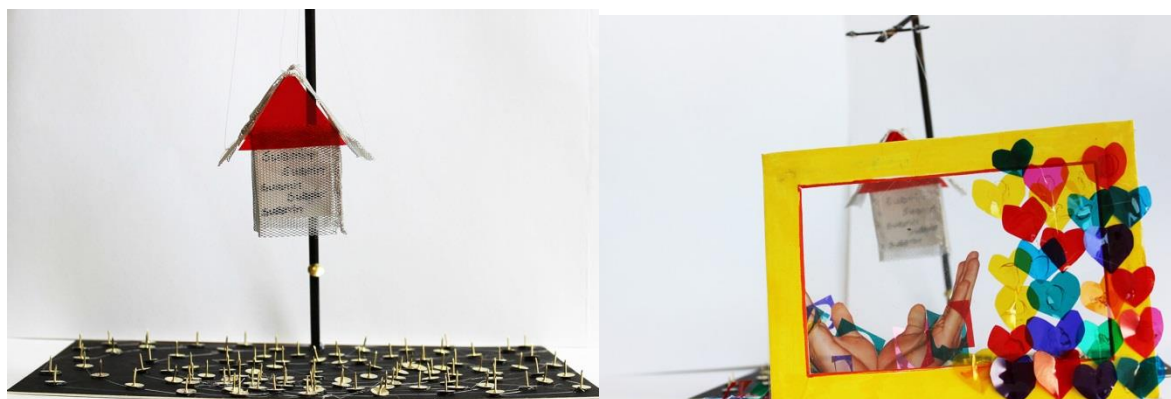
Barriers

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.



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 a 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 based 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 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.