

VIOLENT RESISTANCE / SELF DEFENCE BY WOMEN IN INTIMATE PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

DATE PUBLISHED - FEBRUARY 2023

INTRODUCTION

This guide will help you to

- Learn more about violent resistance and understand the context in which it happens.
- Learn how to identify who the primary perpetrator and primary victim is, in what might appear to be a relationship where both parties are behaving equally abusively.
- Learn how to support the primary victim when violent resistance is used.

WHAT IS VIOLENT RESISTANCE?

Violent resistance (sometimes known as 'self-defence' or 'retaliatory abuse') is when a domestic abuse victim, usually a female, perpetrates violence towards her coercive controlling and physically violent partner, Johnson (2002).

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND VIOLENT RESISTANCE?

This type of abuse is sometimes miscategorised, often described using language such as 'they are both as bad as each other' or labelling the situation as a 'toxic relationship'. This way of thinking and talking about violent resistance is wrong and can cause harm. This approach also means that the pattern of coercive control and abuse that led to the act of resistance is not recognised or acknowledged, and risk is not understood, therefore appropriate support and safety plans are not put in place.

For example, in the Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) 'Leah', professionals, including MARAC representatives, failed to identify the violent resistance and did not understand the context of Leah's relationship or the abuse she was experiencing herself. Instead, Leah was arrested at the incident and referred to MARAC as the alleged perpetrator of abuse and her children were referred to Children's Social Care on the misunderstanding that she was a high-risk perpetrator of domestic abuse. She later died by suicide.

DHR Leah taught us that when violent resistance is happening it is essential to understand the context of the act of violence. For example, if a victim/survivor is experiencing coercive control and intimate terrorism they will have little to no 'space for action' and their entire life could be being micro-managed by their abuser. They may have no choice about where they go, who they talk to, when they eat, what they wear and be living under the constant threat of physical and sexual violence. Resisting this regime can sometimes be the only way that survivors are able to assert themselves and, although the act of violence itself should not be excused, resistance itself is a psychologically helpful response to coercive control.

Therefore, by being able to identify and understand violent resistance, it may alter a professional's perspective on how they view the woman and her position in the relationship. This will allow for practice to be adapted and a trauma-informed approach taken leading to the development of safety and support plans focused on the woman's individual risk and needs.

LEARNING FROM RESEARCH - WHY DO WOMEN USE VIOLENT RESISTANCE?

The majority (9 out of 10 women¹) of women who perpetrate domestic abuse are themselves victims of 'intimate terrorism' domestic abuse by their male ex/partner.

Intimate terrorism is the use of severe violence and patterns of coercive and controlling behaviour and is generally (though not exclusively) perpetrated by males towards their intimate female ex/partners. Johnson (2002) explains that women who are in these relationships may '*at some point fight back*'. The reasons why women may fight back include (listed in order of likelihood): -

- a. Self-defence which accounts for around 75% of cases
- b. Fear or frustration.
- c. The need to protect their children from the perpetrator.
- d. To attempt to gain or regain control.
- e. Retribution or 'to get back' at the perpetrator for being hit first or to 'get even'.
- f. The need to escape – Johnson explains that in a few cases after years of entrapment and abuse the woman may think the only way to escape the relationship is to kill the abuser.

These women usually have environmental, family, and personal risk factors which include:

- Experience of childhood abuse and trauma²,
- Having social work involvement as a child³ and / or being care experienced⁴.
- Depression and anxiety⁵, mental health conditions (for example PTSD) and /or misuse of substances. Research finds a higher prevalence these factors in women who cause harm.
- Using self-harm, previous suicides attempts and detoxification from substances⁷.
- Being unemployed and / or having financial stress.
- Using aggression in other situations.
- Possible involvement in the criminal justice system⁸.

HOW TO WORK WITH A WOMAN WHO HAS FOUGHT BACK

1. **Use a trauma informed approach and be professionally curious.** If you are not trained in trauma informed approaches, discuss the case with your supervisor and ask for their support.

Ask if you can attend a **trauma informed training course**, which is run by Sheffield City Council and open to outside agencies.

<https://www.safeguardingsheffieldchildren.org/form/3E5D2D5DD8AA65F8C92528B922432D28>

When you start the discussion take your time, be mindful about the language you use.

Ask, 'what happened to you?' instead of, 'what is wrong with you?'

¹ Swan, C.S, Gambone, L.J, Snow, L, D (2008) Review of research on women's use of violence with male intimate partners

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2968709> estimated it is between 86% to 92% of all incidents of female perpetrated domestic violence.

² Swan, C.S, Gambone, L.J, Snow, L, D (2008)

³ Intelligence shared by Sheffield professionals at the Domestic and sexual abuse provider consultation meeting, 2nd November 2020

⁴ Swan et al (2005) found 60% of the women were neglected, 58% had experienced sexual abuse, 52% had witnessed physical abuse between parents and 41% had experienced emotional abuse.

⁵ Johnson, M. P, (2002)

⁶ Swan, C.S, Gambone, L.J, Snow, L, D (2008)

⁷ Dieten, M.V, Jones, N.J & Rondon, M (2014)

⁸ Swan, C.S, Gambone, L.J, Snow, L, D (2008)

⁹ Ibid.

⁹ Dieten, M.V, Jones, N.J & Rondon, M (2014)

Dr Emma Katz recommends that, 'a survivor fighting back should be treated with great compassion, and leniency. They should be offered the supports they wish for, rather than being judged harshly or punished, **it is vital to remember that the survivor would have nothing to fight back against if the abuser stopped abusing them**'.¹⁰

2. **Build an understanding of the power dynamics of the relationship**

- Try and understand the acts of resistance. How frequent is it? What happens? What motivates the resistance? Is it fear? Self-defence? What language does she use to talk about it?
- Does her partner show an overentitlement or appear to be possessive over her? Does she have to account for her movements? Is she able to make choices freely without fear of repercussions? Does she have to 'seek permission' to do everyday activities, such as seeing friends or family, attending work, or even leaving the house?
- What type of abuse does he perpetrate? Is coercive control a factor? What are his patterns of abusive behaviour? How does this compare and intersect with the violent resistance?

There are some tools which you can use to help you.

The Equation's Screening Tool

<https://equation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Good-Practice-Guidance-Appendix-C-Screening-Tool.pdf>.

When you use the tool remember that not all victims and perpetrators of abuse will behave in the same way. However, this tool helps you to ascertain the 'typical' signs to look out for.

If you are trained in Safe and Together and the abuse is in a family context, use the **Perpetrator Pattern Mapping Tool** this will support you to identify the patterns of perpetrator behaviour, survivor strengths and help you to understand how the children are being harmed and what needs to happen to protect the children and survivor. This tool will also help you to understand how other factors such as substance misuse, mental health etc intersect with the domestic abuse.

3. **Build an understanding of her personal history and current situation**

- Sensitively explore her childhood, her mental health, her use of alcohol and drugs, her economic situation, and consider if there are other times when she has used aggression.
- Don't make assumptions about gender and sexuality; these are issues that need exploring.
- Consider her experience of domestic abuse in past relationships. Without recovery from their past experience some women's resistance against their partner relates more to harm caused by a previous perpetrator's behaviour than to ongoing abuse in her current relationship. In these cases, a referral to Power of Change¹¹ Groupwork programme may be helpful

If the woman is the victim of domestic abuse

1. **Complete the DASH risk assessment with her and refer to MARAC where the risk to her is high.**
2. **Create a safety plan with her and offer a referral into the domestic abuse support service (IDAS).** IDAS have complex needs IDVAs specifically to work with women who have additional vulnerabilities.

¹⁰ <https://dremmakatz.substack.com/p/domestic-abuse-survivors-who-fight> (2022)

¹¹ [Make a referral - IDAS](#)

Encourage her to engage with this support and offer a 'soft referral'. Contact the helpline while she is with you, offer a joint meeting. Where support is declined, offer again, and give her the IDAS helpline telephone number to call.

- 3. Help the woman to seek support for her individual needs.** These may include making referrals to mental health services, substance misuse services and housing services and supporting the woman to access these services.

If you need professional domestic abuse support and advice contact Sheffield Domestic Abuse Helpline 0808 808 2241 www.idas.org.uk

If the woman is the primary person causing the harm

1. Discuss support options and consider making a referral to Inspire to Change

Inspire to Change (provided by Cranstoun) is the support service in Sheffield which can support women if they are the primary person causing the harm to help address their needs and their behaviour. They will provide an assessment and allocate a one-to-one support worker. *'The course combines learning and support tailored to an individual's need. It is free for those who are motivated to make a change in their behaviour and work to improve their relationships'*.

You can refer to Inspire to Change online or email CITC@cranstoun.org.uk.

2. Complete a DASH risk assessment with the male survivor

Domestic abuse support is equally available to men who are experiencing domestic abuse and a DASH risk assessment should be completed safely with the male survivor if the primary perpetrator of abuse is a female.

What if the woman is perpetrating violent resistance towards another woman, in a same sex relationship?

There is no research currently on violent resistance by women who are in a same sex relationship; however, it is important to recognise how power and control plays out differently in same sex relationships. When working with an individual who is in a same sex relationship it is important to make specific attempts to identify who the primary perpetrator is.

Apply the same process outlined above when working with a woman who is LGBT+ and who has used an act of violent resistance and seek specialist support from GALOP the national LGBT+ helpline 0800 999 5428 and / or contact the IDAS helpline 0808 808 2241.

MARAC CASES WITH A FEMALE PERPETRATOR

All cases referred to MARAC with a female perpetrator should

- Have violent resistance considered as a possibility.
- The Chair and agencies should consider setting an action for an agency to work with the woman to build an understanding of the power dynamics of the relationship and where appropriate, create a safety plan and offer support to her as a victim of abuse.

MORE INFORMATION?

Attend a training session on violent resistance by IDAS. Go to <https://courses.idas.org.uk/> for dates or enquire about a group session for your team.