

It's harder to break the cycle of domestic violence against learning disabled women

Our unique research is finding that mainstream provision can be problematic, because staff in refuges or domestic violence units have rarely been given specialist training around working with learning disabled women.

Around one in four women will experience domestic violence at some point in their lives and breaking the cycle of fear and disempowerment to get out of an abusive relationship can often be a lengthy and difficult process. But it's likely to be even harder for a woman with learning disabilities, explains Dr Michelle McCarthy, senior lecturer in learning disability at the University of Kent's Tizard Centre.

Little or no sex education and a lack of understanding of what's acceptable or appropriate in relationships make these women more vulnerable. Added to which, those with mild learning disabilities are often unemployed, on low incomes, and socially isolated, she says.

'They are often in relationships with men who don't have a learning disability and, in the absence of anything else, highly value that relationship. They are prepared to put up with a lot of abuse to stay in it,' she says.

Gap in existing research

This disparity in intellectual capacity in an abusive relationship is a common pattern, which Dr McCarthy hopes her two-year study will go some way towards unpacking. But its primary aim is to plug a gap in the extensive body of research on

domestic violence, and raise awareness of the issues around learning disabled women in this situation, both for those caught up in abuse and the professionals who might help them.

There are a few North American studies on domestic violence perpetrated against people with physical/sensory disabilities, but nothing on those with learning disabilities, explains Dr McCarthy, adding that attention has tended to focus on abuse by staff or family members rather than intimate partners.

Looking at domestic abuse

'That's partly because these are the incidents that tend to be reported within the field of adult protection, but people at the more able end of the learning disabilities spectrum don't live in residential care homes or see a social worker on a regular basis, so no one is looking out for them,' she says.

She therefore plans to interview around 20 women with mild learning disabilities who have been in abusive relationships to hear first-hand what happened to them, and how easy or difficult they find it to break free.

She will ask them about the type of abuse they endured, whether they had ever tried

'It's naive to think that if a woman with a learning disability is being sexually abused, she won't be being abused physically and emotionally as well. If she is being abused in one way, the chances are, other things are happening to her too.'

Dr Michelle McCarthy

to get out of the relationship, and what help they sought – a women's refuge and/or the police. And she will ask them whether they felt their needs were understood and met appropriately by the services they chose.

She is keen to look at all types of abuse, because emotional, sexual, and physical abuse tend to go hand in hand in this group of women, yet the professional focus is almost exclusively on sexual abuse. And she would like to be able to include women from different ethnic backgrounds to make the research as inclusive as possible.

She will also survey social workers involved in adult protection and safeguarding, managers of refuges, police, psychologists, and community learning disability teams across England – to get their perspectives and pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of the services they provide.

Limited specialist support means that women with learning disabilities have to

use the same services as other abused women. But 'mainstream provision can be problematic, because staff in refuges or domestic violence units will rarely have been given any specialist training around working with learning disabled women,' says Dr McCarthy.

Explaining where to get help

Her findings will be used to draw up best practice guidelines for professionals as well as specially adapted resources, including a DVD and a dedicated website, for learning disabled women on how to recognise the signs of an abusive relationship and where to go for help to get out of it.

'I am under no illusion that simply supplying information will solve everything, but it may at least plant a seed, and if women with learning disabilities know there's a way out, it may help them try and find it,' suggests Dr McCarthy. 'It won't be straightforward, but it's a start.'

Project: Domestic violence and women with learning disabilities

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