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INFORMATION BRIEFING – NO. 1

Understanding the relationship between domestic abuse and alcohol use

Introduction

The link between domestic abuse and alcohol is a controversial issue which has been the subject of much debate and research. This information sheet provides a brief overview of the dynamics and consequences of alcohol use in relationships where there is domestic abuse.

Domestic abuse is a gender-based crime often accompanied by stigma and shame. The presence of alcohol adds an additional dimension to this and has an effect of blurring understandings of blame. Research into popular perceptions of domestic abuse indicates that increased blame is attributed to victims of abuse who have been drinking than those who have not. On the other hand, perpetrators who have been drinking receive less blame (Harrison and Willis 2000).

Police in Scotland recorded over 53,000 incidents of domestic abuse in 2008-09 (Scottish Government 2009). Research has also shown that 1/3 of all domestic abuse incidents reported to the police involve alcohol (Humphreys et al 2005). The ways in which findings such as these are interpreted vary considerably, but a common conclusion is that alcohol consumption is the cause of domestic abuse. Before jumping to this conclusion, it is important to note that domestic abuse is greatly under-reported and the majority of cases do not come to the attention of the police (Hutchison 2000). Research also suggests that alcohol use can heighten the severity of physical violence, and this in turn leads to greater likelihood of police intervention (Hutchison 2000, Thompson and Kingree 2006). When situated in this wider context, it becomes apparent that the presence of alcohol in many of the domestic abuse incidents recorded by the police does not mean that alcohol is the cause of domestic abuse.

Understanding the connection

The role of alcohol in domestic abuse has been framed in various ways (Jacobs 1998):

- 'Alcohol as an excuse': perpetrators are not held responsible for their actions when under the influence of alcohol.
- 'Drinking and violence as manifestations of similar underlying problems': there is no causal link between drinking and domestic abuse but they are caused by similar life stressors.
- 'Alcohol use as a means of gaining power and control': social norms of male violence and need for control and power result in men using alcohol as an additional weapon of domination.

Research into women's own understandings revealed that the majority of women believed that their partners had a choice about how much they drank and how they behaved under its influence (Galvani 2006).

Although the connection between domestic abuse and alcohol consumption remains somewhat contentious, there is a notable shift and growing recognition that alcohol is not a direct cause of domestic abuse (Jacobs 1998, Hutchison 2000, Humphreys et al 2003, Gonzalez 2006, Gelles et al 2005). Rather, more deeply rooted societal factors of normalised violence and men's power and control play a fundamental part. However, the presence of alcohol has a variety of effects on the nature, frequency and consequences of domestic abuse.

Patterns of alcohol use and domestic abuse

The relationship between alcohol and domestic abuse is complex and there are important differences in patterns of use for perpetrators and victims.

Perpetrator's alcohol use - alcohol consumption on the part of the perpetrator tends to increase levels of violence and the likelihood of causing physical injury. When alcohol is combined with other substances, the violence becomes still more dangerous (Humphreys et al 2005). Most women report that their partners are also abusive when sober.

Victim's alcohol use - women's own alcohol use is unrelated to likelihood of sustaining a physical injury (Thompson and Kingree 2006). Studies consistently highlight that women who experience domestic abuse and use alcohol, tend to do so as a consequence of the abuse (Humphreys et al 2005, Jacobs 1998, Taylor 2003). This is reported to help dull the physical and emotional pain (Humphreys et al 2005). In cases of women's abuse towards men, men's risk of injury is largely unrelated to their partner's alcohol use (Thompson and Kingree 2006).

Key findings:

- Violence is more likely to be at the severe end of the spectrum when the perpetrator consumes alcohol (Humphreys et al 2005).
- Women who experience domestic abuse and use alcohol tend to do so as a consequence of their abuse experiences.
- Domestic abuse accounts for 25% of violent crime, with 1/3 of reported incidents involving alcohol (Humphreys et al 2005).
- Women are more likely to report an incident to the police when alcohol is involved, likely due to the increased severity of physical violence when alcohol has been consumed by the perpetrator (Hutchison 2000, Thompson and Kingree 2006).

Consequences of domestic abuse where alcohol is involved

Alcohol use by either perpetrator or victim has important consequences. At this point it is important to make a distinction between alcohol 'use' and 'misuse'. As discussed above, alcohol use on the part of the perpetrator may increase the severity of physical violence, and perpetrators may use alcohol as an excuse for their behaviour. Alcohol use on the part of the victim is often as a consequence of the abuse they experience. With regards to alcohol misuse, there are further implications to consider.

A perpetrator's alcohol misuse is likely to be accompanied by a variety of dimensions of abuse such as economic abuse through withholding finances or coercing his partner to fund his habit. Perpetrators may also seek to control their partners by coercing them into alcohol/drug use (Taylor 2003). Together, these factors hinder women's ability to cope with the abuse and their vulnerability is heightened.

Victims of domestic abuse who use alcohol often encounter difficulties in accessing support services such as refuges, which may not be able to accommodate them due to their alcohol use. They can also face eviction from sheltered housing for disturbing other residents, who may themselves have negative feelings towards alcohol use following their own domestic abuse experiences (Taylor 2003).

Key findings:

- In a study of domestic abuse and substance misuse in Tower Hamlets, nine out of thirteen services stated that perpetrators actively encouraged their partners to use drugs/alcohol as a means of increasing control over them. When women attempt to detox, it is common for the domestic abuse to increase, the detox being perceived as a challenge to the man's power (Taylor 2003).
- A perpetrator's coercive behaviour often focuses on removing his partner from her family and friends. This isolation is exacerbated when a woman uses alcohol and as a result women who experience domestic abuse and use alcohol are likely to lack significant networks of support. They are therefore more vulnerable and their agency in dealing with or leaving the abusive situation is reduced (Swan 2001).
- Alcohol use can reduce a perpetrator's motivation to change (Taylor 2003).

Implications for service provision

The connections between domestic abuse and alcohol have important implications for service provision. When accessing services, women who experience domestic abuse and also misuse alcohol tend to approach either substance misuse agencies or domestic abuse agencies. The different approaches and messages given by these agencies can complicate the situation. Substance misuse services tend to portray alcoholism as an illness. As a result, victims whose partners misuse alcohol may excuse their abusive behaviour and feel the need to stay and support their partner. Domestic abuse services on the other hand tend to work with a gendered understanding of abuse which focuses around power and control (Humphreys et al 2003). Alcohol is not considered a cause of domestic abuse and the perpetrator's responsibility for his actions is not reduced if alcohol is consumed. It is likely that where women present with the issue of alcohol misuse, other needs and problems such as domestic abuse may be masked. Gender adds an additional dimension to this due to the stigma and shame associated with alcohol misuse, particularly if they are mothers (Taylor 2003).

The presence of alcohol in cases of domestic abuse represents for many an area of blurred understandings of blame and causation. It is important that the complexity of the relationship is understood by service providers. While there are certain patterns and consequences of alcohol use in relationships where there is domestic abuse, alcohol is not the cause of the abuse and treating alcohol use alone will therefore not solve the social problem of domestic abuse.

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Scottish Women's Aid charity number SC001099. Recognized as a charitable organization by the Inland Revenue in Scotland.

January 2010