

28th July 2023

ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE: Equality and Social Justice Committee: The public health approach to preventing gender-based violence

Overview:

In our written and verbal evidence to the Equality and Social Justice Committee for the inquiry into Public Health Approaches to Gender-Based Violence, we shared our perspective on the need to take a relational approach to people who cause harm – in particular, recognising the impact that restrictive masculinity, shame and trauma can have on people causing harm, and people around them. In order to shift our society so that we work to reduce intergenerational violence, move to a preventative, public health approach, and address the community trauma, we need to address the shame that constrains the way in which we work with people causing harm and their families. This document sets out an expanded perspective on what this approach to reducing shame means, specifically in terms of risk. We argue that shame makes it harder to work with families, to see risk clearly, and to achieve healing and safety for survivors and their families. This means as services and professionals we should be thinking carefully about *how* we intervene – following appropriate responses to risk and creating safety, whilst also ensuring the work we do creates the right conditions for change, and to build a space for people who cause harm to acknowledge the harm they have done, enable healing, and break the intergenerational cycle of violence.

Introduction

Towards the end of the evidence session (22nd May 2023), the Chair of the Committee, Jenny Rathbone MS, requested further evidence if it was possible, on:

“...what work you’re doing with the heavy end of children’s social work to support your argument that we need to be seeing perpetrators in context of them being victims...”

This is an important question that gets to the core of the issue: how can services, and wider society, make the shift to a trauma-informed, relational way of working, when it can feel heavy with risk? Given that it is at the “heavy end” of child protection that children are at serious risk of harm or death, people will want reassurance that a trauma-informed, relational approach is safe and effective.

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Four key points

Our perspective is very clear on this: the current system of shame and blame does not keep children or survivors safe. By working relationally and understanding the reality of lived experience for people who cause harm, we can reduce risk. This works in four key ways, by:

- 1) Reducing shame and blame will make it easier for survivors to seek help earlier** – often the reality for survivors is that the fear of the shame or repercussions on their partners is one of the many contributory reasons for staying in an unsafe relationship. With a shame-saturating system, it can reduce the options available to survivors to a reductive binary: either it is so bad and dangerous they must leave, or it is a relationship that can be fixed and therefore can create feelings that they “must” stay. Practitioners can help reduce shame and blame by avoiding simplistic approaches such as telling men to “take responsibility”. Often, this can reinforce men’s history of being shamed, or feeling ‘bad’, which can actively increase risk due to increased toxicity. We break down below that this does not mean avoiding accountability for behaviour, but it does mean recognising that what is *effective* at building relationships, and at offering (particularly) men who cause harm an alternative identity to explore, is not always the same as what *feels* right. This counter-intuitive feeling is what we would want practitioners to be able to sit with – which is what being relational involves. It means professionals working hard to avoid creating shame and blame in professional circles and the wider whole system, and creating the conditions for relational change and healing. There will, of course, be times when an intervention is needed to protect a partner and any children. However, at minimum, an approach that avoids shame will help establish trust and engagement from all involved, including both survivors and perpetrators, more than one that seeks to correct and cajole. At best, it will create the conditions to prevent intergenerational harm and entrenched violence towards women.
- 2) Reducing hostility and defensive behaviours can help engagement with people who cause harm.** When people such as child protection social workers or other professionals, engage with people who cause harm, often the responses to the professional can be to obstruct, obfuscate, or object. The barriers put in place can make it harder for professionals to see the real behaviour dynamics at play in the relationship. This does not mean ‘befriending’ someone who causes harm, but it does mean seeing a more holistic picture of the family unit. Risk management in these contexts is very much predicated on gathering of rich, helpful data – so any approach adopted that maximises the gathering of data as quickly as possible is a positive step forward. By creating a practice relationship with people who cause harm, where we challenge dominant ideas of masculinity, we can create a space for engagement and potential change. This is understanding that all behaviour is communication of unmet need of some kind – and, whilst not absolving of accountability, understanding people’s needs can mean we can better target interventions or solutions to people’s lived experiences.

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- 3) **Approaching people who cause harm, holistically, can help reduce immediate risk.** Emotional dysregulation can be overwhelming – and the majority of people who cause harm have experienced high levels of relational trauma in their early lives. Working relationally as professionals, with people who cause harm, can help them understand their threat responses and what triggers them, and can create the potential capacity for self-reflection which in turn can start to create safety in the family unit. The approach that is often taken around children’s safeguarding, for example, is to “split” the relationship that creates risk – but this can lead to false compliance, where the real risk is pushed away from view. We need to understand that violence is often situated within the individual, but it is also present within the networks around them, and we have to work holistically to solve it.
- 4) **Intervening early to foster healing and recovery can break the cycle of intergenerational violence.** In our verbal submission to the committee, we talked about the often-arbitrary lines we set between who is an adult, and who is a child – and how this is not consistent across our society. The majority of people who cause harm have themselves experienced harm in their own family unit – and so the best and most effective way of reducing domestic abuse in the future is to tackle the impact of trauma in young people.

These are four ways in which adopting a trauma-informed approach to people who cause harm – and crucially to those who live with them or around them – can help to reduce risk. In this sense, we would describe this approach as “complexity-informed risk”, which recognises that human relationships are complex, and that simple approaches to risk are not fit for purpose. The solutions we must adopt to keep people safe therefore, must be cognizant of this complexity, and not seek linear or binary responses to safety. This does mean the relational work must rely on robust risk assessment, and consideration of harm to children, and families, caused by violence – which might sometimes require interventions as argued above. However, without relational work with all parties, these approaches are unlikely to reduce risk overall in the longer-term. For example, this might look like feigned compliance, cyclical abusive relationships, or more, and this only serves to perpetuate the intergenerational impact of domestic abuse – leaving children experiencing loss and trauma without any hope of resolution.

A relational approach, together with a robust risk assessment approach that accepts complexity, and uses curiosity, empathy and accountability to help create safety, is one of the ways we can begin to break the intergenerational legacy of domestic abuse.

Conclusion

It is equally important to identify what we are **not** saying with this evidence, because there are very important nuances that we do not want to miss.

- 1) **We are not saying that survivors have a duty, or requirement, to stay in abusive relationships, no matter what traumatising experiences their partners have had.**

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- 2) We are **not** saying that all people who cause harm are in a place where a trauma-informed approach will help them change or reflect on their behaviour.
- 3) We are **not** saying that people should avoid accountability and justice for what they have done – reducing shame is not the same as avoiding accountability and justice.

At its core, we argue that gathering information from families at risk is difficult and is only ever made harder by the walls put up by shaming inquiry, and we can reduce the impact that defensiveness can have, by reducing how much and how quickly that defensiveness is activated. This requires us to accept and work with complexity, and with the reality of the situation as it is.

Submitted by:

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