



CRIMINAL JUSTICE SOCIAL WORK  
DEVELOPMENT CENTRE *for* SCOTLAND

## *Towards Effective Practice*

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### **Perpetrator Programmes for Male Domestic Violence Offenders: What do we know about Effectiveness?**

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#### **Summary**

The development of programmes for male domestic violence perpetrators has been a controversial issue over the last two decades with protagonists for and against. The main debate centres round the *effectiveness* of group-work programmes and whether these programmes contribute in any real way towards the safety of women and children. Although there is as yet no unequivocal evidence that such programmes 'work', key elements about the ingredients which contribute towards effectiveness are emerging from recent research, viz:

1. The quality of programmes
2. The *broader system* in which programmes are located
3. The competency and commitment of facilitators

#### **The development of programmes**

Programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence began in the United States in the 1980s and have now spread to Australia, Canada, Europe and a number of developing countries. It has been a feature in most countries that men's programmes have mainly been instituted by community activists and practitioners rather than by governmental policy initiatives. Many grew out of the women's shelter movement. The US flagship programme, in Duluth, Minnesota, has probably been the most influential of all, and the early UK programmes drew heavily on its work. The central tenet of the Duluth philosophy is that men's programmes should be but one feature of a co-ordinated community response to domestic violence, encompassing a multi-agency approach (Pence & Paymar, 1993).

Mullender & Burton noted over thirty domestic violence perpetrator programmes in the UK in 2000. Many more have since developed, most within the criminal justice system whereby offenders take part as

a requirement of probation, and some in the non-governmental organisation sector. The latter take referrals from a range of agencies as well as from men themselves.

In Scotland there are a number of established criminal justice based programmes, some with a track record of twelve or more years. Learning from reputable programmes in the US, the original Scottish programmes (CHANGE & DVPP<sup>1</sup>) were designed to work within the justice system for a number of reasons. Primarily this has been seen as an important safeguard for women and children as programme staff, criminal justice workers and the police can all monitor men's behaviour. In addition this method has an impact on the institutions which dispense justice. Their response in turn influences the way that the community perceives this behaviour and may therefore impact on public tolerance of it.

### **Defining 'what works'.**

Throughout the last two decades the important question has been, do men's programmes work? In devising programmes, UK practitioners have attempted to apply a 'what works?' approach, but research has not been conclusive. Although there have been efforts to evaluate programme effectiveness, much of that research has been hampered by methodological difficulties that continue to pose problems in interpreting the results (W.H.O., 2002:106). Nonetheless some consistency is emerging from research findings across the world, but before looking at these findings I want to look at some of the methodological difficulties in establishing effectiveness in this area of work.

The first question that must be addressed is what do we mean by 'what works?' Generally in criminal justice, this is measured by recidivism rates involving re-arrest. However, in domestic violence this is a complex issue. Many reviews of the literature acknowledge the practical and ethical problems in determining effectiveness (Brandl, 1990; Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh & Lewis, 2000; Edleson & Tolman, 1992; Gondolf, 2002). The main difficulties arise over definitions of success, sources of data, follow-up periods and research design.

In defining 'success' what is the acceptable measure? Some studies consider *reduction* in incidents of violence a success, others set *complete cessation* of violence as the criterion, while still others posit an *end to the 'constellation of abuse'* (Dobash *et al.*, 2000) including psychological maltreatment. Edleson & Tolman (1992) conclude that studies employing the most inclusive definitions of abuse provide the highest levels of accountability as well as the greatest validity in determining whether men have changed.

Sources of data for determining 'success' are also problematic. Edleson & Tolman suggest that studies using men's self-reports are not reliable as there is evidence that men consistently under-report their violence. Nor is police arrest data a reliable outcome measure. Domestic abuse is notoriously under-reported,<sup>2</sup> and the pressure on women from partners on programmes not to report further abuse to the police is recognised as a problem by researchers. Despite the difficulties involved in obtaining information, Edleson & Tolman

<sup>1</sup> The CHANGE Project began in 1989 in Central Region, Scotland and the Domestic Violence Probation Project (DVPP) in Lothian, Scotland in 1990. CHANGE can be contacted at 4-6 South Lumley Street, Grangemouth, FK3 8BT, or 01324 485595. For more information go to [www.changeweb.org.uk](http://www.changeweb.org.uk). For DVPP information, please contact Rona Fraser at 21 Market Street, Edinburgh.

<sup>2</sup> For examples: Dobash & Dobash (1979) believed domestic violence to be one of the highest 'hidden' figures of any crime. Daminy and Radford (1996) found that 64% of women who had experienced domestic violence had never sought help, let alone reported it to the police. Mooney (2000) uncovered high levels of unreported domestic violence in North London.

suggest that most confidence can be placed in those studies that use women's reports or combined male-female reports.

Follow-up periods employed by the studies reviewed by Edleson & Tolman ranged from a few weeks to three years. They conclude that most confidence can be placed in studies with lengthier follow-up periods as some men may give up their abuse for a short time following intervention, but later re-offend.

Research design in this field has also been problematic. Design has taken one of two main forms: experimental or quasi-experimental. In social research experimental design is generally viewed as the most rigorous. This design randomly assigns participants to two groups: a control group, which does not receive the intervention being tested, and an intervention group. Outcomes for the two groups are then compared to establish if the intervention has had a measurable impact. (Bennett & Williams, 2001; Dobash *et al.*, 2000; Gondolf, 2002; Laing, 2003). Studies employing this method have been largely inconclusive, although Bennett and Williams (2001) quote four American experimental studies where two found no difference in recidivism between the two groups, while two others found small but significant reductions for the men in the research group. However, the methodological and ethical problems associated with experimental design such as the difficulties in obtaining matched samples and the drop-out rates of programme participants, have led to criticism that such an approach is not best suited to this field of study (Gondolf, 2002).

Researchers using a quasi-experimental design have argued their approach is more ethical allowing comparison groups to emerge 'naturally' by selecting men from differing outcomes according to circumstances. For example, in their study of two Scottish programmes (CHANGE & DVPP), Dobash *et al.* compared two groups of men according to whether they were placed on probation with a condition to attend a programme or given some other court sanction. The comparison was weighted to take account of other factors such as personal characteristics, marital status, violence in family of origin and offending history. Using a concept they call 'the transformative project' they sought to elucidate a number of different but related aspects in terms of 'success'. These were; to clarify our understanding of the nature of men's violence and women's experiences of it; to examine the 'fit' between the nature of violence and the way programmes articulate and seek to promote change; to ask if violent men *can* change and to look at the process such change involves. Thus they sought to measure change not just in terms of physical assault, but also in terms of the 'constellation of violence' as women experience it. They examined the significance of the criminal justice context, and the content and delivery of the programmes concerned, and used women's and men's accounts as the sources of information about men's change. Their conclusions are complex, but:

'strongly suggest that criminal justice-based profeminist, cognitive-behavioural programmes are more likely than other types of criminal justice interventions to affect the constellation of violence.' (Dobash *et al.* 2000:181)

### **What make for effectiveness?**

Consistently within the literature there appears to be an increasing consensus that the most credible, accountable and effective programmes share a number of features (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Dobash *et al.* 2000; Gondolf, 2002; Mullender & Burton, 2000; NCAVCU, 1998; Scourfield & Dobash, 1998). A central feature is an analysis that the man's violence is the problem in question and a recognition that he

resorts to violence because of expectations of authority and rights in a personal relationship. There is also an understanding of violence as being physical, sexual and psychologically abusive behaviour. Successful programmes are structured, accountable, with clear inter-agency protocols, have parallel women's services and evaluate their practice. Sessions are co-facilitated by men and women who can model respectful, egalitarian ways of working. Content includes an analysis of violent or abusive incidents, the recognition and tracking of moods and emotions, the examination of male socialisation and attitudes to women, developing empathy with others and the development of a range of cognitive skills and techniques for increasing control over one's own well-being and behaviour.

Another issue is that of dosage; how much intervention is needed to effect long-term attitude and behaviour change in participants. Gondolf (2002) found that men in the two longer programmes he studied were more likely to demonstrate changes in underlying attitudes to women which support men's abusive behaviour. He suggests that:

‘batterer programs may need to be longer and perhaps more therapeutic to affect ... underlying resistance’ (p. 150)

Practitioners recognise that attitude and behaviour change is a long-term process and programmes draw on a range of therapeutic techniques from cognitive behavioural therapies. Many have increased their core contact time with participants over time. Duluth has increased core time with men from twenty-four weeks to up to two years.<sup>3</sup> RESPECT (2000) recommends that the group-work linked contact is *at least* 75 hrs over a minimum of 30 weeks. CHANGE (2001) recommends six months of group-work with men in the context of a two-year probation order where individual sessions follow up and reinforce the programme's themes.

### **Programme context**

In his multi-site evaluation, Gondolf (2002) studied four longstanding programme sites over seven years in the US. Acknowledging the debate about experimental versus quasi-experimental approaches to researching men's programmes, he explains his design of a ‘naturalistic comparison’ of intervention systems. In this research, teams attempted to capture the programme context, programme approach, changes in the programme, and community or system changes over time. All the programmes studied adhered to local State standards of good practice. He found a more positive picture than previous evaluations and an implicit endorsement of such work. Despite the complex variations both across and within the four sites, what emerges is that outcomes at all four sites were very similar. Using comparable measures to those advocated by Edleson & Tolman, he found the vast majority of men to have sustained a cessation of violence at the 2.5 year follow-up (p. 131). The major conclusion he draws is that *the system* matters. That is:

‘program outcomes appear to be substantially influenced by how well the police, the courts, probation, women's services and other community services all work together’ (p. 23)

Gondolf's findings endorse the principles which practitioners have been advocating since men's programmes began: that an approach to domestic violence is needed in which intervention work with men is but one element of a co-ordinated approach to tackling domestic violence (RESPECT, 2000; Shepard & Pence,

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication

1999). Women's and children's safety is the priority, with the emphasis on the need for prevention through wider social change.

### **Programme delivery**

It has long been recognised in psychotherapy that the qualities of the therapist are *more* important for effecting personal change in clients than the model of therapeutic intervention they employ (Mearns & Thorne, 1988; Wampold, 2001). It should not surprise us then that in programmes for domestic violence perpetrators, the competence and commitment of programme facilitators are crucial. Researchers have sometimes noted the passionate commitment of programme staff to the work they do (Edelson & Tolman, 1992; Gondolf, 2002). Sometimes this is noted in the context of wish-fulfilment, in that staff may believe their work to be more successful than it is (Gondolf, 2002). What is clear is that in order for men to be drawn into the process of change, facilitators need to communicate both the possibility and desirability of the process (Dobash *et al.*, 2000; RESPECT, 2000).

As practitioners, Saunders argues:

‘we need to make sure that the leaders are competent. Competency involves both background knowledge and therapy skills. Background knowledge must include a high level of awareness of the causes of domestic violence and the impact that it has on the victim. Knowledge of the many ways that offenders minimise and rationalize their behavior is crucial.’ (1997:2)

In the UK, practitioners recognised the need to continually address competence early on. In 1992 the National Practitioners Network was formed, an informal twice-yearly forum where practitioners share and learn from peers. Agencies take turns to host meetings around the country and the next meeting will be the twenty-fourth. Network meetings provide opportunities to subject practice to peer scrutiny, to offer guidance to newcomers and to give each other support.

In 2002 the Scottish Forum was formed to enable practitioners in Scotland to deal with issues of special relevance north of the border, such as the differences in legal structures and social policy. Scottish forum meetings take place twice a year, in between the two National Network meetings.

In 2001, RESPECT, the National Association for Perpetrator Programmes and Associated Services, was launched. It grew out of the National Network to fulfil the need for a representative body that could support practitioners, give them a ‘voice’, develop a code of practice and help to disseminate information about effectiveness. Membership of RESPECT requires commitment to a developing code of practice; the *Statement of Principles and Minimum Standards for Practice*, covering matters such as the principles underpinning intervention work, parallel services for women partners, training for group leaders, group size, programme length and minimum content.<sup>4</sup> It also states that evaluating practice in terms of the safety and quality of life of women and children is central to this work.

<sup>4</sup> Contact RESPECT at PO Box 34434, London, W6 0YS [www.respect.uk.net](http://www.respect.uk.net)



## Current developments

In Scotland, the Executive's *National Strategy to Address Domestic Abuse (2000)* is seeking to promote a co-ordinated approach to tackling domestic violence. Developing more ways of working with men who abuse is integral to the Strategy. This should lead to programmes being more integrated into local *systems* of responses to domestic abuse. CHANGE is currently delivering a National Training Initiative to local authority criminal justice services funded under Section 9 of The Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968. The Initiative promotes a co-ordinated response in the development of more criminal justice based programmes throughout Scotland.

While the Scottish Executive's Strategy recognises the importance of that the criminal justice route for working with men, it also acknowledges that this will only ever account for a small percentage of men who abuse. Other ways need to be tested to target abusers. A project in Edinburgh, 'Working With Men' is currently piloting a multi-agency route to a non-court mandated men's programme. Plans to develop something along the same lines are in the early stages in the Forth Valley area.

Programme quality is also being addressed. A Scottish Community Justice Accreditation Panel has been established by the Scottish Executive for criminal justice programmes, which will encompass the accreditation not only of content, but also on-site delivery.<sup>5</sup>

Most programmes use standardised methods of intervention with all participants but researchers and practitioners acknowledge that men who abuse are not an homogenous group. An area which needs further investigation is how to tailor interventions to target different *types* of men: first time offenders, men who are only violent at home, men who are generally violent, and men with recognised mental health problems (Dobash *et al.*, 2000; Gondolf, 2002). Practitioners have long recognised the importance of assessing men for participation in programmes and the lack of resources to work with men who are assessed unsuitable. Often this is because these men are in denial. Work with sex offenders in England has identified techniques that can be used to help challenge offenders who are in denial about their wrongdoing. Practitioners in Glasgow have done some preliminary work in adapting this for use with domestic violence perpetrators. There is also a growing recognition of the need for adapted programmes for men from ethnic minority groups as well as other special needs groups. Workers in Dundee have identified the need to adapt materials for deaf clients as some concepts in use in programmes do not readily 'translate' into British Sign Language.

## Conclusion

We still have much to learn about the effectiveness of programmes for male domestic violence offenders. More research is needed as programmes evolve and practitioners gain in experience. A key factor appears to be that programme effectiveness cannot be measured in isolation; we need to examine the effectiveness of the *system* in which they operate. Programmes' success reflect the effectiveness of systems in establishing comprehensive community responses whereby police, courts and services for women all reinforce the message that men can and must end their violence.

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<sup>5</sup> In England and Wales the Home Office recently commissioned research to examine the effectiveness of a programme based on that run in Duluth. There are also plans to pilot another programme, possibly based on a Canadian model. The implications for existing programmes and practitioners remain unclear.

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