

Domestic Abuse: Definition, Prevalence, Impact



A briefing for professionals by the Equally Safe Edinburgh Committee

Contents

What is domestic abuse?	2
What is Coercive Control?	3
Prevalence of Domestic Abuse	3
Impacts of Domestic Abuse.....	3
Links to further reading and resources:	4

Image credit: [Katrin Bolovtsova](#)

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic Abuse is against the law in Scotland. According to the [Domestic Abuse \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#), Domestic Abuse means any behaviour that causes **physical and/or psychological harm** towards a current or ex-partner. ‘Abusive’ behaviour includes any kind of physical or sexual violence, threats or intimidation that:

- makes the partner or ex-partner dependent on the perpetrator of abuse
- isolates them from friends, family and support networks
- controls or monitors their daily activities
- restricts or deprives them of freedom- basic needs such as food, money, ability to sleep etc
- frightens, humiliates, degrades or punishes them.

This Act makes domestic abuse an aggravated offence if it involves a child. This can mean that:

- The behaviour targets a child
- The perpetrator uses a child to abuse their partner or ex-partner
- The child sees, hears or is present during an incident of abuse towards the partner or ex-partner

What is Coercive Control?

Coercive control is pattern of behaviours that aim to threaten, harm, punish or frighten the victim/survivor. These behaviours can include assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation.

Coercive and controlling behaviour is at the heart of domestic abuse. It aims to make a person dependent on the abusive partner by isolating them from support or exploiting them. They may deprive them of independence by regulating and monitoring their behaviour constantly such as through the use & abuse of technology, or by stalking and harassing them- including online harassment and sharing of intimate images (or threats of). Coercive control ensures that the abusive partner is present in every aspect of the victim's/survivor's life regardless of whether they are physically present or not. In the end the victim/survivor no longer has any control or agency over their life and may longer identify that they are being abused by a partner/ex partner.

Coercive control is against the law in Scotland.

Prevalence of Domestic Abuse

"Equally Safe" is Scotland's strategy or preventing and eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls'. It says that "VAWG is one of the most common types of psychological trauma [...] in Scotland" (p.19).

Police Scotland attends an incident of domestic abuse on average [every 9 minutes](#). In 2022-2023 , [Police Scotland responded to approximately 62,000 calls](#) about domestic abuse, and 81% of incidents involved a female victim and a male suspected perpetrator. 16% involved a male victim and a female suspected perpetrator¹. In the same year, there were 1781 crimes recorded under the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018. Of those crimes 95% involved a female victim and 5% had a male victim². In [2023-2024](#), the total number of domestic abuse calls to Police Scotland had risen to nearly 64,000. It is also known that many victims of abuse do not report directly to the police, and these figures are therefor likely to be an underestimate of the true extent of abuse.

In 2023-2024, specialist services in Edinburgh supported 2885 people affected by domestic abuse. This number includes 232 children under the age of 15.

Impacts of Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse is traumatic. It can affect survivors in both the short and long-term. Every week in the UK, 2 women are killed by partners/ex-partners and levels of domestic homicide and suicide rates amongst survivors remain at a consistent and unacceptable level. It can also have serious impacts for any children who witness or experience it. According to Equally Safe, "women, children and young people without access to the right support at the right time face increased risk of other types of trauma and adversity throughout all stages of their lives" (p. 19). These include:

- Retraumatization when attempting to access justice and while going through court proceedings
- Developing unhealthy coping strategies, for example using alcohol, drugs or self-harming to cope

- Pregnancy, gynaecological and childbirth complications
- Mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder)
- It compromises the ability of the non-abusive parents to parent child(ren) effectively
- It ruptures the relationship between parents and children – both the abusive parent and the protective parent
- Social isolation and loss of support networks
- Negative impacts on children’s psychological, emotional, social, physical and sexual development
- Negative impacts on children’s educational attainment through increased absences, social isolation or acting out at school
- Risk of revictimization, or multiple victimisation in large or complex family systems
- Poverty and homelessness – in Edinburgh, domestic abuse is one of the three key reasons for women’s and children’s homelessness.

Links to further reading and resources:

- [Equally Safe: Scotland’s strategy for preventing and eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls](#) (2023)
- Domestic Abuse information from [Police Scotland](#) – including how to report it and where to access help
- [Scotland’s domestic abuse and forced marriage helpline](#)
- [What is domestic abuse?](#) Information, animations and resources by Scottish Women’s Aid
- [Facts](#) and [Myths](#) about domestic abuse from Women’s Aid England and Wales
- [Why we say that domestic abuse is gendered](#), by Women’s Aid England and Wales
- [Domestic Abuse: Statistics recorded by the Police in Scotland, 2023-2024](#).
- [Domestic Abuse information](#) on the City of Edinburgh Council Website, including a directory of [Council Services](#) and [external support organisations and services](#)