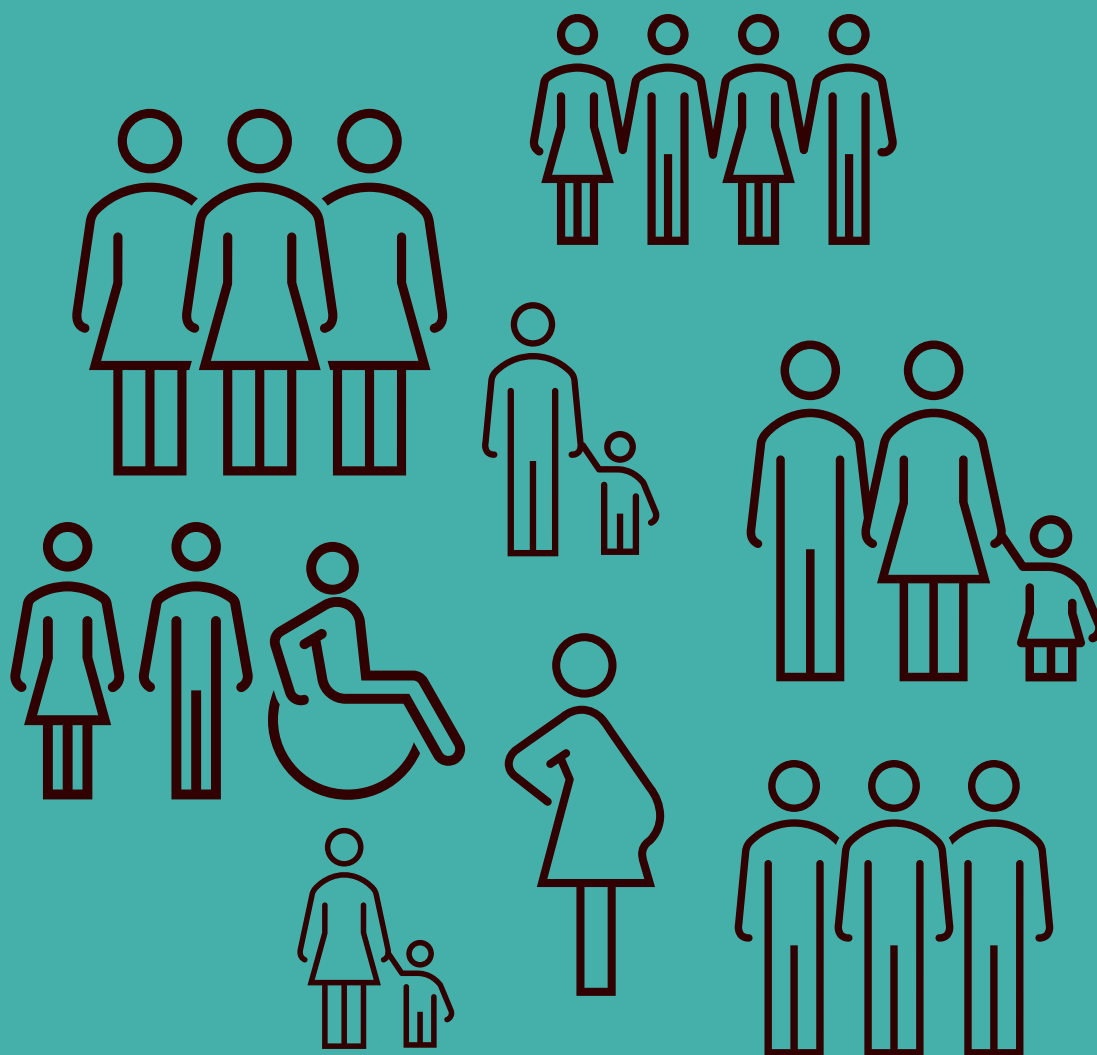


Domestic Abuse: Individual characteristics and disclosure



Contents

How do individual characteristics affect disclosures of domestic abuse?	3
• Age	3
• Ethnicity.....	3
• Nationality and Immigration Status:	4
• Disability.....	4
• Neurodivergence	5
• Sex:	5
• Religion/Belief:.....	5
• Sexual Orientation and Transgender/ Non-binary identity:	5
• Marital/Civil Partnership/Relationship Status:	6
• Pregnancy:	6
• Care Experience	6
• Involvement in the Justice System:	6
• Substance Use:	6
• Socio-economic status:	7
• Violent Resistance:.....	7
Key messages	8

How do individual characteristics affect disclosures of domestic abuse?

This document aims to support professionals to better understand how individual characteristics (both protected and unprotected under the Equality Act 2010) may influence a victim's/survivor's ability, readiness, confidence and safety to disclose domestic abuse. They may also influence a person's understanding or conceptualising what they're experiencing as domestic abuse. It should be used to enrich trauma-informed practice and engagement with people that could be affected by domestic abuse and to promote best practice. It should also enable you to tailor your responses to an actual or potential victim/survivor by helping you to better understand the experience of domestic abuse from the perspective of people with diverse characteristics, preventing assumptions and promoting more open dialogue.

It's important to bear in mind that both victims/survivors and people who use abusive behaviours towards their partners/ex partners will have a range of diverse characteristics (both protected and unprotected). This will influence both how they disclose and discuss their experiences, how they engage with services and the best way to shape the right response.

- **Age:** A person's age can influence how they perceive and disclose domestic abuse. Children living with domestic abuse between their parents/carers might internalise the abuse and consider it 'normal'. Depending on their age and developmental stage they may not be able to articulate what they are experiencing as abusive and instead express distress in different ways. For example, they may become withdrawn, disruptive, they may act out at school, they may accumulate unexplained absences from education or display presenteeism at school. Children and young people may also experience abuse in their own romantic relationships, particularly in their teen years, at which point they may be able to verbalise their experiences and risks they are facing. People in their middle/older years may think that it is acceptable for a relationship to involve control, emotional or physical abuse. Some people have been raised to believe that 'men can't help themselves', or that they are 'entitled' to women's bodies. Some generational beliefs also include that it's normal for one partner to be 'in control' of another, or for one partner to have to completely control the household's finances, to have all the responsibility for household chores and childcare.
- **Ethnicity:** In diverse cultures there are different beliefs around gender roles. For example, men and women are expected to behave in certain ways: women are often expected not to have a career or further education and to be dedicated to taking care of the household and children, while men are responsible for earning and controlling the household's income. People who are migrants or who don't speak English as their first language might not have the vocabulary to describe experiences of abuse, or they may consider their experiences to be universal. For more information, please see additional sections of this document: Nationality and Immigration Status (p.4) and Religion/Belief (p.5).

- **Nationality and Immigration Status:** People from diverse ethnic backgrounds, can face additional barriers to disclosing domestic abuse. This also applies to refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and Gypsy/Travellers. This is often due to the close-knit nature of some diverse/migrant communities. Issues that affect people from diverse backgrounds seeking support for domestic abuse include:
 - Language barriers
 - racism/fear of racism and discrimination
 - lack of knowledge of systems and services and how they work
 - immigration status, especially when the victim/survivor depends on their spouse to stay in the country
 - beliefs that domestic abuse is 'acceptable' because of traditional interpretations of gender roles.
 - Uncertain immigration status and 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF)
 - The risk of poverty and destitution
 - Institutional racism: services might not identify domestic abuse for people from diverse backgrounds
 - Migrants who do not depend on a spouse visa may be unfamiliar with services or how to access them.
 - Migrants may also not understand what we mean by the term 'domestic abuse' in Scotland.
 - People who don't speak English as a first language might not be able to explain their experiences.
 - People from diverse backgrounds might mistrust services, particularly statutory services like social work or the police
 - People from religious or faith-based communities might experience spiritual abuse. This is when a partner/ex-partner uses faith or religion to abuse the victim/survivor. For example, an abusive partner might force a Muslim victim/survivor to eat pork which is forbidden in Islam. More information on this can also be found in the Religion/Belief section of this document (p. 5)
 - Abusive partners/ex-partners might also use religion to control a victim/survivor. For example, some religions do not allow divorce. Some religious leaders do not allow women to seek a divorce and only grant one if a man requests it or consents to it.
 - Service providers must consider these concerns when providing support to minimise service-generated risks.

- **Disability:** People with disabilities and long-term conditions are more likely to be living with the abusive partner. They are more likely to experience abuse for longer before seeking support. The abuse they experience might also specifically target their disability or condition. For example, the abusive partner/ex partner might obstruct their access to healthcare. They may prevent the victim/survivor from taking medication. They may also interfere with equipment that supports the victim's/survivor's independence. People with communication difficulties face additional challenges when accessing services and women with learning disabilities may struggle to describe their experience of abuse. The abusive partner might also intervene in the victim's/survivor's appointments. Lastly,

people who receive or who provide long term care may feel the need to stay with the abusive partner as there is a dependent caring relationship in place.

- **Neurodivergence:** Neurodivergent people experience higher risks of domestic abuse. They are also at higher risk for bullying and coercive and controlling behaviour. Neurodivergent people may struggle to tell when a partner/ex-partner is lying to them. An abusive partner/ex-partner might also take advantage of the victim/survivor's neurodivergence when impulsivity and oversharing are features of the neurodivergence. Although neurodivergence never causes domestic abuse, it can pose a challenge when supporting a person who abuses their partner/ex-partner.
- **Sex:** The majority of victims/survivors of domestic abuse are women and girls. In 2024-2025, 94% of recorded Domestic Abuse crimes in Scotland involved a female victim and 6% involved a male victim¹. In 2023-2024, 81% of Domestic Abuse crimes involved a female victim and male perpetrator, 15% involved a male victim and female perpetrator, while in 3% of cases the perpetrator and victim were of the same sex². However, domestic abuse can affect anyone. Anyone would struggle to recognise and disclose domestic abuse and this is why service providers have a responsibility to enquire. Men and boys might not identify or report domestic abuse because of gender norms and societal expectations on men and boys not to seek help. There is also a perception that 'real men' don't experience abuse, while many cultures expect men to be 'in control'. All these expectations place additional barriers to men and boys disclosing domestic abuse.
- **Religion/Belief:** People from religious/faith-based communities can face spiritual abuse, where a perpetrator uses faith or religious doctrine to abuse the victim/survivor (for example, a perpetrator might force a Muslim victim/survivor to eat pork, which is forbidden in Islam). In other situations, religion might be used to prevent someone from seeking support, for example in some religions where divorce is prohibited. In some faiths it is also not culturally acceptable for women to seek a divorce, with religious leaders only granting a divorce if the husband requests or agrees to it. It is important to bear in mind that no religion condones or encourages forcing people, especially children, into a marriage – this is a cultural rather than a religious practice.
- **Sexual Orientation and Transgender/ Non-binary identity:** LGBT+ people can experience additional forms of domestic abuse. Domestic abuse and coercive control may target their sexual orientation or gender identity. For example, the abusive partner/ex-partner may threaten to 'out' victims/survivors to their friends and family. LGBT+ Victims/survivors may also not want to report for a number of reasons. For example, they may not want to disclose that they are in a same-sex relationship. They may fear discrimination on the basis of gender identity or may not want to disclose their transition. Further, the heteronormative society and services may not feel welcoming to

¹ [Recorded Crime in Scotland, 2024-2025](#)

² [Domestic Abuse: Statistics recorded by the Police in Scotland, 2023 to 2024.](#)

LGBT+ people. This poses additional barriers for LGBT+ people to disclose domestic abuse.

- **Marital/Civil Partnership/Relationship Status:** There are obstacles present for married or civilly partnered people. Financial abuse might be a feature of the abusive relationship. The victim/survivor might not be able to afford to seek a divorce or civil partnership dissolution. The victim/survivor may belong to a faith/religious group/community which forbids separation/divorce. People in long-term relationships face similar obstacles as married and civilly partnered people. There may be shared property ownership or children present in the relationship. The abusive partner/ex-partner might have all funds, assets and benefits under their name. Therefore, the victim/survivor may fear poverty if they leave the relationship.
- **Pregnancy:** Pregnancy is a time of increased risk for domestic abuse. Domestic abuse in pregnancy, especially physical abuse, is a child protection issue. Pregnant people and parents may fear losing guardianship of their children if they leave an abusive partner. They worry the abusive partner might accuse them of being 'unfit to care for the child(ren)'. They may also hold on to the belief that 'children need two parents'. Domestic abuse is a particularly high risk for young mothers. Young mothers are much more vulnerable to abuse and social isolation. They may also lack financial independence and life skills, and this can, in turn, increase their dependency on the perpetrator and the risks associated with disclosure.
- **Care Experience:** Care experienced people might also be more vulnerable to abuse in intimate relationships, regardless of whether they experienced care as a result of domestic abuse or otherwise. The trauma of experiencing domestic abuse or of being separated from one's family for any reason can have lifelong traumatic impacts on people's health, wellbeing and overall life outcomes. Insecure or traumatic attachment patterns can render people more vulnerable to abuse in relationships in later life.
- **Involvement in the Justice System:** Women in particular who have been involved in the justice system are extremely likely to have experienced domestic abuse and other forms of violence, abuse and trauma, often dating back to childhood. They often experience multiple intersecting needs such as a range of different forms of abuse and exploitation, alcohol and substance use, complex trauma, literacy and numeracy problems, unemployment and homelessness. Men who have been involved in the Justice System might be more vulnerable to not being believed when disclosing domestic abuse for fear of being labelled as the perpetrator. Perpetrators of domestic abuse might use a man's prior involvement in the justice system to exert further control by threatening to or by making false reports about them, further aggravating their criminal record.
- **Substance Use:** People who are affected by both domestic abuse, substance use and/or who might be involved in the criminal justice system are likely to face multiple barriers to accessing support due to an increased mistrust of services. Additionally,

support services often only have the capacity to deal with a particular issue rather than multiple intersecting issues, meaning that victims might need to access multiple services or be forced to choose what issue they need support for first.

- **Socio-economic status:** Social and economic status, level of literacy and numeracy, employment/unemployment, geographical location, prior experiences of trauma and the transience of certain populations (for example students) also interplay with the experience of domestic abuse in complex ways. Victims who are financially dependent on the perpetrator might feel unable to access support or to leave an abusive relationship, while those in different geographical areas might struggle to access information and support necessary to safeguard themselves or to leave an abusive relationship. Socio-economic status is an important consideration in domestic abuse. Poverty can be both a cause and consequence of domestic abuse, as well as a key factor in a victim's/survivor's decision to report abuse or to leave an abusive relationship – particularly if the victim/survivor is affluent. It's important never to make assumptions about a person's home life or relationship quality based on whether they are experiencing or at risk of poverty or whether they have a comfortable or affluent lifestyle. Aligned with a person's socio-economic status is also their employment status. People who are employed might benefit from the presence of a Domestic Abuse policy at work, however they may also fear disclosing domestic abuse for fear that their confidentiality may be breached or that they may be stigmatised at work. A particular challenge might be faced by people employed in the VAWG sector or in domestic abuse services, who may feel unable to request support if they are professionals within specialist organisations. It is important that organisations and services emphasise the confidentiality of any disclosure and/or provide anonymous reporting and support channels for their employees
- **Violent Resistance:** Violent resistance is a person's violent response to defend themselves against violent or abusive behaviour by their partner. In domestic incidents where there has been violent resistance, it is common for the victim of the incident to be charged with assault, even when they were acting in self-defense or to protect their children. Violent resistance can present a challenge for professionals, especially when it's not entirely clear whether the person you are supporting has violently defended themselves or if they are indeed the perpetrator. For more information on, this please see document titled 'when you suspect someone might be abusive towards their partner, ex-partner or children' in the [Domestic Abuse Information and Resources page](#). It's important for professionals to bear in mind that even if a person presents as angry, aggressive or chaotic, this could be the result of trauma from domestic abuse rather than an indication that this person is indeed the perpetrator. It may lead to victims/survivors of domestic abuse feeling reluctant to engage with services due to a lack of trust as a result of not being believed. It is also possible for the abusive partner to have no history of assault charges and to present as a victim of domestic abuse seeking support from services.

Key messages

- Every person's understanding of domestic abuse is different. Each person's characteristics will influence if and when a victim/survivor will disclose domestic abuse and the choices they will make in response to this.
- It is important to avoid making assumptions about a situation and to always consider the experiences and unique circumstances of people from diverse backgrounds.
- Being aware of how diverse people might understand and describe their experience can help you to ask questions that are relevant and sensitive.
- Sensitivity to diversity will also help you to better tailor your response by taking into account people's unique characteristics, including multiple intersecting characteristics.