

Evidence on the public health approach to preventing gender-based violence

This evidence is submitted on behalf of Learning Disability Wales.

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About Learning Disability Wales

Learning Disability Wales is a national charity representing the learning disability sector in Wales. We work with people with a learning disability and their families, Welsh Government, local authorities, disabled people's organisations and the voluntary sector to create a better Wales for all people with a learning disability.

We will be responding to the second and third question of your call for evidence

- How effective is a public health approach to preventing gender-based violence and what more needs to be done to address the needs of different groups of women, including LGBT+, ethnic minorities, young and older people at risk of violence at home and in public spaces.

We can give evidence that furthers the understanding of how best to support people with a learning disability dealing with gendered violence. We can also speak to the importance of making policies trans-inclusive.

What makes disabled people more vulnerable to be victims

We believe that any approach to preventing gender-based violence needs to look at the specific requirements of people with a learning disability.

There is significant evidence that disabled women (and indeed other people with a learning disability, especially women with learning disability), often experience abuse at the hands of partners who they rely on for support.

While there is a lack of evidence about the experiences of people with a learning disability who are not cis-gender it is likely that non-binary and trans-masculine people similarly experience higher numbers of abuse. Leaving the abusive relationship can then also mean losing that support. While this is an issue that is particularly pronounced for disabled women, economic and other material factors can be a major factor in keeping people in abuse relationships¹. Welsh Government should be more explicit on how it plans to empower women to leave abusive relationships by making sure they do not lose vital support when they leave.

Another thing that can stop people with a learning disability in particular from leaving abusive relationships is fear that they might have their children taken away. Parents with learning disabilities are much more likely to have their children taken into care than other parents². Here support for people with a learning disability should be significantly improved in order to make sure that mothers in abusive relationships are not incentivised to cover for their abuser out of fear of having their children removed.

Lack of accessible information and training on healthy relationships and how to spot abuse is another significant issue for people with learning disabilities. This is often a factor in parents with learning disabilities having their children removed. Women with learning disabilities are more likely to be in unhealthy relationships and are often targeted by men with a history of abuse. This in turn can lead to their children being removed not because of the mother's parenting skills, but due to her choice of partner and perceived inability to keep her children safe from abuse. People with learning disabilities need access to good quality information and training on relationships and abuse in a way that they can understand throughout their lives including during their school education and also as adults.

We are aware that there are also issues around the accessibility of services supporting survivors of abuse. For example, women's refuges/shelters are often not fully accessible for people with mobility issues including people who use a wheelchair. Also, many services lack awareness and understanding of the specific needs of people with a learning disability so are unable to offer adequate support to victims of abuse who have a learning disability.

Trans inclusivity

We believe that any approach to gender-based violence must be explicitly inclusive of trans and non-binary identities. People experiencing hate crimes

¹ For an overview of research see here: <https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/working-women-learning-disabilities-who-have-experienced-gender-based-violence>

² <https://www.gov.wales/parents-learning-disability-involvement-social-services>

and discrimination based on their gender identity are also experiencing a form of gendered violence that stems from the same patriarchal power structures as what we normally understand as “violence against women”. While we are happy to see Welsh Government also produce a specific LGBTQ+ Action plan, it is important that any plan to tackle gendered violence also takes these issues into account. People who were assigned female at birth but now do not identify as women will face violence based on others perceiving them as women as well as violence targeting them as transpeople. Trans women will face discrimination and violence both because they are women and because they are trans.

We were disappointed in the Welsh Government's recent “Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: blueprint high level action plan“ in this respect. We said so in our consultation response. At the time of writing the plan still includes the paragraph:

“We know both women and men can be affected by domestic abuse and sexual violence, however, women are disproportionately affected.”

This paragraph is disappointing on two fronts. Firstly, the way this is phrased implies that everyone fits in to the categories of man and women. This is simply not true and it is important to acknowledge the existence of non-binary people. Secondly, while men being less affected by gendered violence than women is undoubtedly true for cis-gender men and women, there is data showing that trans-men are significantly more likely to experience violence, even than cis-gender women³. While the general sentiment that domestic abuse affects people with different gender identities is important to express, it is equally important to be precise in the language used here.

Primary prevention and neurodiversity

While there is no evidence that neurodivergent people or people with learning disabilities are more likely to be abusers, it is important to make sure that the specific ways that people in some groups might be vulnerable to misogynist beliefs. There are some troubling cases that suggest autistic cis-gender men may be more vulnerable to specific forms of online radicalisation related to what is often referred as the “manosphere” or “incels⁴”. Preventive work should be informed by an understanding of

³ https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/lgbt_in_britain_-_trans_report_final.pdf

⁴ <https://www.spectrumnews.org/features/deep-dive/radical-online-communities-and-their-toxic-allure-for-autistic-men/>

neurodiversity and offering neurodivergent people more opportunities to develop better understandings of the world and opportunities.

- What is the role of the public sector and specialist services (including the police, schools, the NHS, the third sector and other organisations that women and girls turn to for support) in identifying, tackling and preventing violence against women, and their role in supporting victims and survivors.

It is important that those working with potential victims of abuse understand how people experiencing abuse might act differently from how they are expected to react, especially when they are from minority communities or have a learning disability or neurodivergence. Many victims of abuse experience the contact with institutions as retraumatising and distressing when they feel that they are not being believed or taken seriously. This may be even more pronounced when victims of abuse or violence do not act in a way that professionals think are appropriate. It is important for staff to receive training on how to give appropriate and non-judgmental support to victims in a way that takes their specific access requirements into account.