MYTHS AND REALITY

Objective
By the end of this activity participants should be able to:

- Describe and dispel some common myths about domestic abuse

Materials
- Activity Sheet: Myths and reality - statements. See pages 43 and 44. (Methods 1 and 2)
- Myths and reality - Statement Cards, divided into sets for each group, or choose a selection. In Folder 1 - blue cards at the back. (Method 3)
- Activity Sheet: Myths and reality - Information on myths and reality statements - a copy for yourself and/or participants. See pages 45 to 49

Equipment
- None

Suggested timing
- 30 to 45 minutes (Methods 1 and 2)
- 45 to 60 minutes (Method 3)
MYTHS AND REALITY

Method 1

1. Invite participants to complete the Activity Sheet ‘Myths and reality statements’ individually, then either discuss the reality of each statement or ask participants to discuss their responses in pairs before giving them the Activity Sheet ‘Information on myths and reality statements’.

2. Review the activity by using the discussion points from Method 2.

Method 2

1. In advance, display 3 flipchart sheets around the room so that there are 3 ‘bases’ around which participants can congregate. These should be headed: ‘agree’, ‘disagree’ and ‘unsure’.

2. Also in advance, choose several statements from the Activity Sheet ‘Myths and reality statements’ that are most relevant to the group, or those that are likely to generate debate.

3. Read out the first of your chosen statements, and then invite participants to move to the base that fits best with their response to the statement.

4. Once everyone has chosen a base, invite them to talk to one or two other people at the same base about why they chose that particular response. If there is only one person at any base, then miss out this step and move directly on to the next step.

5. After a short period of time, invite participants to find someone who chose a different base and share their reasons for their different choices.

6. Afterwards, inform the whole group of the reality of the statement, using Activity Sheet ‘Information on myths and reality statements’ to support you. Allow time for any final comments before moving on to repeat the process with the remaining statements. Ask individuals to move to a neutral position before each new statement is read out.

continues overleaf...
7. Possible discussion points for a plenary session:
   • Where do these myths come from?
   • What effects might they have on women and children experiencing domestic abuse?
   • What effects might believing in some of the myths have on the way we work with women and children and the service we offer?

8. You may want to give each participant a copy of Activity Sheet ‘Information on myths and reality statements’, which covers a wider range of statements than you are likely to have covered in this activity.

Method 3

1. Give small groups 3 flipchart sheets headed: ‘agree’, ‘unsure’ and ‘disagree’. Next, give each group a set of Myths and reality statement cards (or a selection of these), plus some Blu-Tack. They should place these face down like a pack of cards on a table, or on the floor in the middle of the group.

2. Invite one participant to pick up a card and read it to the group. Afterwards, the group discusses the statement and decides whether or not they agree, disagree or are unsure about it, discussing their reasons why. The group should try to come to a consensus about where to place the card. They repeat this procedure with the rest of the cards, sticking each under the appropriate heading, as demonstrated below. Allocate a set period of time for this.
3. Invite feedback from each group, one statement at a time. After all groups have discussed their views on a statement, inform them of the reality, using the Activity Sheet ‘Information on myths and reality statements’. Allow for reasonably lengthy discussions during this session. Alternatively, each small group could go through the activity sheet and compare the reality to their own responses. They could then bring one or two key statements for discussion to the larger group.

4. Possible discussion points:
   - Where do these myths come from?
   - What effects might they have on women and children experiencing domestic abuse?
   - What effects might believing in some of the myths have on the way we work with women and children and the service we offer?
MYTHS AND REALITY STATEMENTS

Women who experience domestic abuse sometimes provoke it.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

Domestic abuse mainly happens in problem families.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

Most men who abuse their partners are either mentally ill or have drink problems.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

Women who experience domestic abuse come from diverse backgrounds with no predominance of abuse present in their histories.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

Children who experience domestic abuse are caught in a cycle of violence and often become abusers as adults.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

The murder rate for men and women who are killed by their partners is the same.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

Domestic abuse occurs because some men just lose control.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

Women could stop the abuse if they stood up to their partners.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

continues overleaf...
Domestic abuse is accepted in minority ethnic communities.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

If it’s just an isolated incident and if the man is sorry it’s unlikely to happen again.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

Women who experience domestic abuse have mental health problems.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

Women should stay for the sake of the children. Children need a father.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

On the whole, children are unaware of the domestic abuse going on.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

Domestic abuse often reduces or stops during pregnancy.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

In most cases, the abuse ends when the woman leaves the relationship.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

Most women who leave domestic abuse return to the abuser.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree

Domestic abuse crosses the gender divide. There are as many men who are abused by their female partners as there are women abused by their male partners.

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Neither Agree/Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Strongly Disagree
INFORMATION ON MYTHS AND REALITY STATEMENTS

**Women who experience abuse sometimes provoke it.**

By accepting this we blame the woman for the abuse and absolve the man of his responsibility. There can be no justification for using violence, unless your life is in danger. No one deserves to be abused; there is always an alternative no matter how angry you are.

**It mainly happens in problem families.**

Men from all walks of life, all ethnic backgrounds and all ages abuse their partners. There is no typical abuser, and no typical woman who experiences domestic abuse. Most women who go to Women’s Aid for support have no problems in their lives other than those caused by their partner’s abuse.

**Most men who abuse their partners are either mentally ill or have drink problems.**

For a lot of people it is easier to believe that an abusive man is mentally ill than it is to accept that he knows exactly what he is doing when he assaults, rapes or emotionally tortures his partner. Most men who abuse their partners are only abusive to them, never to anyone else.

While it is true that some men only abuse their partners when they have been drinking, some only do it when they are sober and some do it drunk or sober. Alcohol (and to an extent drugs) can provide an easy excuse, but it is more of a trigger than a root cause.

**Women who experience domestic abuse come from diverse backgrounds with no predominance of abuse present in their histories.**

While domestic abuse is found across all age groups and social strata, it is clear that there are certain risk factors which increase the likelihood. The prime risk factor is being female - women are far more likely than men both to experience domestic abuse, and to be physically and emotionally damaged by their experiences.

*continues overleaf...*
Other risks include:

- being young
- the presence of dependent children
- pregnancy
- relationship breakdown and separation
- financial pressures
- drug and alcohol abuse
- disability or ill-health

Children who experience domestic abuse are caught in a cycle of violence and often become abusers as adults.

There is no evidence that there is a ‘cycle of violence’, whereby children who were abused, or witnessed abuse, go on to become abusers themselves. While surveys have established links, it’s not at all conclusive as many men who abuse come from families with no history of abuse. Children who witness abuse do not automatically grow up to be abusive towards their partners. Many completely reject the use of abusive behaviour as a result of their experiences.

Many men who abuse, and whose fathers were abusive, have brothers and uncles who do not abuse. Evidence suggests that within families, most victims of maltreatment do not go on to abuse their children (Kaufman & Zigler, 1993; Egeland, 1993).

The murder rate for men and women who are killed by their partners is the same.

For homicides recorded for the ten years 1991 to 2000 inclusive, 54% of female victims aged between 16 and 69 were killed by a partner (Source: Statistical Bulletin Crj/2001/9 Homicide in Scotland 2000) The figure for male victims aged between 16 and 69 killed by partners is given as 8%.

Domestic abuse occurs because some men just lose control.

Abusive men actually exercise a lot of control. They are seldom abusive in front of other adults. They often deliberately avoid marking their partner’s face or other visible areas. They manage to control who they abuse - it’s their partners not friends, workmates or the boss.
Women could stop the abuse if they stood up to their partners.
Research has shown that a woman is most likely to be killed by her partner if she fails to obey orders or mounts a challenge to his self-esteem and power (Browne 1987, Gelles 1974, Luckenbill 1977).
Murder can be the final act of men seeking to re-establish control over their partner’s behaviour and/or affections (Katz 1988, Zahn, 1989).

Domestic abuse is accepted in minority ethnic communities.
This myth is linked to stereotypes, e.g.
- Compliant Asian women being controlled by men
- Arranged marriages being seen as more oppressive than other marriages and arranged marriages being seen as the same as forced marriages
- Black men being violent and dangerous

Women of different ages, race, class, sexuality, culture, religion and mental and physical abilities experience domestic abuse. Black women and women and children from minority ethnic groups face the added oppression of racism in seeking and obtaining help from agencies. In fleeing the abuse, they may be isolated from community support networks, and may also face additional discrimination in new neighbourhoods.

If it’s just an isolated incident and if the man is sorry, it’s unlikely to happen again.
When abuse occurs, the abuser may apologise and say that it was a one-off and it won’t ever happen again. In reality, most men continue to abuse and the incidence and severity of the abuse escalates through time, although there may be periods of calm.

Women who experience domestic abuse have mental health problems.
The experience of domestic abuse is stressful and a major source of mental health problems.
1. One in four women experiencing domestic abuse receive tranquillisers
2. One in four women experiencing domestic abuse attempt suicide at least once
3. 30% of suicide attempts are by women experiencing domestic abuse
4. 60-70% of women mental health inpatients have been abused and 25% of women admitted for emergency psychiatric care are experiencing domestic abuse

The question is - do they already have mental health problems or do they develop them as a result of the abuse?
Women should stay for the sake of the children. Children need a father.

Children who experience domestic abuse suffer emotionally and some may also be sexually or physically abused. Many women leave when they see the effects on their children of their partner's abuse. Children need love and security, which they can get from their mother, more than they need a 'father figure', especially one whom they know to be abusive to their mother.

Some children of women experiencing domestic abuse do, however, have a good relationship with their father, and want to continue to see him. Access visits can be arranged to allow this to happen. Women and children have a right to a life free from abuse, for the sake of both the women and the children.

Many abusers deliberately exploit contact arrangements with children to further control and harass their mothers.

On the whole, children are unaware of the domestic abuse going on.

According to Hughes, 1992, 90% of children are in the same or next room at the time of attacks. Women's Aid experience, backed up by children's writing and research, reveals that the majority of children can describe in detail assaults their parents were unaware they had witnessed.

Domestic abuse often reduces or stops during pregnancy.

Abuse often begins or intensifies during pregnancy and is often particularly directed against the unborn child. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists see domestic abuse as the commonest complication in pregnancy. The abuse may cause miscarriage, premature labour, stillborn babies and low birth weight infants. Studies also show links between violence against women and both physical and learning disabilities in children (Kelly, 1992).

In most cases, the abuse ends when the woman leaves the relationship.

Women are most likely to be killed or seriously injured as they try to leave, or after they have left the abuser, which suggests that some women may be trapped in a violent situation because of threats to murder them if they attempt to leave.
Most women who leave domestic abuse return to the abuser.

In 1999/2000, 19% of the women who left Women's Aid refuges returned to their partner, 19% were rehoused by local authorities, 4% by housing associations, 6% went to private rented accommodation, 10% went on to another Women's Aid refuge, 8% went back home as the partner had moved, 7% went to stay with friends or relatives, 25% went to some other form of accommodation and for 2%, the destination was unknown. (SWA Annual Report 1999-2000).

Domestic abuse crosses the gender divide. There are as many men who are abused by their female partners as there are women abused by their male partners.

NCH Action for Children conducted a study in 1994 which suggested that 90 - 97% of domestic abuse is from men to women. (Abrahams 1994). The Scottish Crime Survey (2000) revealed that 19% of women and 8% of men reported they had experienced either threats or force from a partner at some time in their lives.

We don't dismiss the fact that men can also experience domestic abuse. However we would argue that in the majority of situations men's experiences are different from women's in that:

- Women are more likely to have been injured and to experience multiple assaults in attacks
- Women are much more likely to have been subject to threats and to experience high levels of fear on a continuous basis