WHY DO MEN ABUSE?

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

- Identify some of the reasons people give for men abusing women and children
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of some of the theories about the causes of domestic abuse

Materials
- Overheads 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8: Theories about the causes of domestic abuse.
  In Folder 1 at the back. (Methods 1 and 2)
- Trainer Support Notes: Theories about the causes of domestic abuse. See pages 69 to 572

Equipment
- Overhead projector

Suggested timing
- 20 minutes (Method 1)
- 40 minutes (Method 2)
Method 1

1. Invite the whole group to identify some of the things people currently give as reasons why men abuse their partners/ex-partners. Examples might include:
   - Growing up where there is abuse
   - Alcohol and drugs
   - Poverty
   - Mental illness
   - Men being unable to handle anger
   - Men being provoked by women
   - Men having no power in their working lives

2. Invite pairs or small groups to take a few reasons each and think of points that support each of them and points that refute them.

   For instance, statements to support the view that men growing up where there is abuse is a reason, might include:
   - they have violent role models
   - they’re more likely to think it’s acceptable for males to behave aggressively

   Statements that refute this view might include:
   - lots of men who grow up with an abusive father go on to reject abuse and violence
   - if we accept this, we’re saying men can’t control their behaviour

3. In the whole group, invite feedback from each of the small groups.

4. Explain some of the main theories about the causes of domestic abuse, using Overheads 4, 5, 6 and 7, (or you can go straight to stage 5, overleaf).

   continues overleaf...
You can use information from the Trainer Support Notes. Theories about the causes of domestic abuse to help you facilitate this part of the activity. As you go through the theories, link them to the examples the participants identified and discussed in the previous part of this activity. Possible discussion points:

- how the acceptance of each of these theories might influence their work with women and children affected by domestic abuse
- what men stand to gain from abusing their partners (power and control)

5. Finish with Overhead 8 - Feminist analysis of abuse. Explain why it is the theory Women’s Aid subscribes to: it is empowering and puts responsibility firmly on the abuser.

**Method 2**

1. Introduce the activity by inviting the group to split into two (or four) smaller groups to consider a set of statements about domestic abuse. Give the two groups the same selection of statements from the list below, or write your own to suit your situation.

   ‘Some women want to be dominated and subconsciously provoke abuse.’
   ‘Men who abuse are a different species from other men.’
   ‘Women who experience domestic abuse are different from other women.’
   ‘Domestic abuse is caused by stress and frustration.’
   ‘Men who experience domestic abuse as boys, will often abuse their partners.’
   ‘External factors such as unemployment, poor housing and poverty are often the causes of domestic abuse.’
   ‘The roots of domestic abuse lie in the inequalities between men and women in our (and other) societies.’
   ‘Domestic abuse is caused by men’s domination of and control over women.’

2. Invite one group to identify and focus on ideas/reasons that support each of the statements they have been given. Invite the other group to focus on ideas that counter the viewpoints in the statements.

The ideas they put forward may be those they have heard others mention, views from society in general, ideas/reasons they believe themselves or ideas/reasons they make up. For example, they might give the following reasons in support of a statement, but not necessarily believe them themselves:
- Women who have had dominating fathers often subconsciously provoke abuse
- Some women feel comfortable being dominated by men
- Everyone has an equal chance in life
- If a man's stressed out, then abuse is understandable

3. Allow enough time to discuss the number of statements you distributed, then:
   - take one statement at a time and invite the groups to share their ideas in support of, and against, the statement
   - give participants an opportunity to put their own views forward
   - invite participants to consider what men stand to gain from abusing their partners

4. Relate the discussion to the theories about the causes of domestic abuse. Overheads 5, 6, 7 and 8 summarise the main theories. You can use information from the Trainer Support Notes, Theories about the causes of domestic abuse to help you facilitate this part of the activity.

5. Conclude the activity by emphasising that domestic abuse is overwhelmingly experienced by women and is a result of unequal relations between men and women. Explain why the theory on Overhead 8 - Feminist analysis of abuse, is the theory Women's Aid subscribes to: it is empowering and puts responsibility firmly on the abuser.
THEORIES ABOUT THE CAUSES OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

Models of individual pathology

Abusive men are described as aberrant from the norm (Gayford, 1975) and their abusive behaviour regarded as a consequence of alcohol abuse, childhood experience, stress, low self-esteem or mental illness.

Women are equally viewed as contributing to their abuse either through their dysfunctional personality (Gayford, 1975), addiction to violence, or by the derivation of sexual pleasure from the abuse (Pizzey & Shapiro, 1982).

The problem is then located in the individual and the solution depends on changing those individuals concerned.

The ‘Cycle of Violence’ theory proposes that the experience of, or witnessing of, domestic abuse as a child will result in abusive behaviour as an adult. Boys will grow up to be abusers and girls will grow up to be ‘victims’ as outlined in the diagram below.

There are different variations on the cycle, including a non-gender specific cycle which says children (both boys and girls) who live with abuse go on to abuse.
Points to consider in relation to models of individual pathology

- Abusive men are not social outcasts. Abusive men come from all walks of life and from all backgrounds. They are ordinary men who abuse their partners. They can't necessarily be distinguished from non-abusing men.
- In relation to women being addicted or attracted to abusive men. A common question is, "How else do you explain why some women have numerous abusive relationships?" Studies have shown that violent and abusive men go on to be violent and abusive in new relationships, and as between 1:3 and 1:5 women experience domestic abuse, some women will be unfortunate enough to meet, and have a relationship with, more than one abusive man.
- Women living in a constant state of stress and fear may behave in ways that appear irrational and confused.

Points to consider specifically in relation to the Cycle of Violence theory

- Many studies show that the majority of abusers come from non-violent backgrounds.
- Many people resolve never to use violence or other forms of abusive behaviour.
- Many children advocate strongly against domestic abuse - no child would want to believe they are doomed to abuse or be judged by others because of their experiences - and enabling children to work through their experiences and make sense of them is a crucial role for children's support workers.
- It allows abusers to avoid responsibility for their behaviour.
- The cycle of violence is appealing to many people because it provides a simple explanation for abusive behaviour. It is backed up by appealing to so-called 'common sense', e.g. infamous cases where an abuser has been abused as a child as in the case of Fred West; personal knowledge of someone who was abused as a child who went on to abuse others; children are adversely affected by living with abuse, etc.
- The theory assumes that men are only abusive because they have lived with an abusive father, when many studies show otherwise.
Interactional and family models

The main theme here is that both partners contribute to the abuse either through lack of skills to talk things through, or due to unfortunate incompatibility. Women, for example, are said to goad their partners into being abusive through poor communication skills. The terms ‘family violence’ and ‘violent relationships’ also reflect these models.

Points to consider in relation to interactional and family models include:

- If we accept this view then we also accept that it is all right for men to be abusive and to use violence when provoked. They decide what is acceptable or what provokes them.
- We also shift responsibility away from the abuser and on to the woman. This wouldn’t happen with other crimes.
- Whilst we acknowledge that women are sometimes abusive and use violence on their partners, this is most likely to be in self-defence. There is also a difference in the likely effects of this, e.g. men are far less likely to live in fear, to have their life controlled, to be injured or killed.

Social structure

External factors such as unemployment, poor housing and poverty are identified as the causes of domestic abuse. The social structure model implies that domestic abuse is largely confined to lower income groups and sees it as a symptom of frustration over limited life opportunities, lack of education and skills.

Points to consider specifically in relation to the social structure model include:

- Research with women has indicated that domestic abuse occurs across all social classes (Mooney, 1994).
- Some women may be more visible because of their use of public services (Pahl, 1985).
- It allows abusers to avoid responsibility for their behaviour.
- It does not explain the gender specific nature of domestic abuse.

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Feminist analysis of abuse
This model suggests the roots of domestic abuse lie in societal structural inequality between men and women. It is argued that abuse of women is tolerated because it is embedded within cultural norms and the historical, unchallenged dominance of men in society. Our society is organised around the family unit with the prevailing cultural norm for the man to be at the head of that unit, to take charge, make major decisions and to have the final say. Domestic abuse is one part of a range of behaviours which constitute male abuse of power and is linked to other forms of male violence, e.g. child abuse and rape.

Points to consider specifically in relation to the feminist analysis of abuse include:

- External factors such as poverty or alcohol abuse are perceived as potentially contributing to the abuse, but these don’t explain the high prevalence of the problem or its gender specific nature
- Places responsibility with the individual, but also recognises the role of society
- Acknowledges gender specific nature of domestic abuse