

## **Working towards Safety: Supporting women alongside DVIP's perpetrator programme**

**Written by**

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For the last four decades, support to women experiencing domestic violence has involved assisting women to escape from the abuser and resist abusive men's coercive control and life-threatening behaviour. The idea of holding perpetrators to account, and totally responsible for their abusive and violent behaviour, has gained attention and credence only in the last two decades or so. The Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DVIP), a pro-feminist London-based organisation, has been delivering perpetrator programmes since 1991.

We do some complex work at DVIP. The ongoing process of assessing risk and vulnerability, reporting to courts, reporting to child protection services and reporting to funders all focus heavily on our understanding and skill in talking to, and working with perpetrators of domestic violence and our position of placing the risk of domestic violence where it belongs, with the abuser. But as an agency, the primary aim of DVIP is to increase the safety of women and children and we will only work with men where we are able to offer the delivery of an integrated women's support service (WSS) for the partners and ex-partners of the men.

What we wanted to do for this piece, however, was to speak about the aspect of our services that is unique to the field of offender-orientated work, the work of our women's support services; the parallel programmes that we offer and what we feel are outcomes in terms of our particular combination of services; the 'invitation to responsibility' for abusers alongside the offer of proactive support for survivors and victims of this abuse.

We will focus on the aims and principles of the women's support service and elaborate on the crucial role it plays in supporting the partners of men who are attempting to change their abusive behaviour in intimate relationships, sometimes successfully but at other times not. The women's support service at DVIP is a little known vehicle for change and agency for women who:

- are not yet ready to leave an abusive relationship and are hopeful that the programme will repair their relationship,
- are involved with Children's Services due to having an ongoing relationship with the abusive fathers of their children,
- have been directed by the family courts not to obstruct contact between

### Case study 1

In this case, the perpetrator used severe violence shortly after completing the assessment with programme staff. The resultant DVIP report went via Children's Services to the Probation Service, and lent support to a successful pre-sentence report request for a custodial sentence. Children's Services were still concerned about the perpetrator's ex-partner, her vulnerability and the impact on her of his violence. Although the perpetrator did not participate in a programme, in this case his ex-partner was able to engage with the service and completed a structured group-work intervention. This work felt very much like a consciousness-raising experience for her, an opportunity to see the domestic violence she had experienced placed into a group/social / cultural context. The complexity of her life, and the severity of this man's violence had left her confused and self-blaming and, our very straight forward message, 'his violence is not your fault' had a tremendous impact.

abusive ex partners (fathers) and children,

- may be separated temporarily from their partners on the condition that they engage with the programme and change their behaviour.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge the potency of proactive support for survivors, even where intervention with the perpetrator is not possible or likely to work. At DVIP we feel that the women's service is the core of the programme work. It is certainly not just about information sharing, risk assessment, or checking the validity of a perpetrator's account of his violence or abuse. It is about a woman-focussed intervention service supporting a victim of violence and abuse as she is empowered to make safer choices for herself, and begins the process of disentangling her life experiences from his abuse of her. The programme carries the message that

his violence is his responsibility and that there are agencies and individuals willing to hold him to account.

The Women's Support Service (WSS), in the context of a violence prevention programme, is a complex piece of work. Some of this complexity has to do with the fact that the terrain through which we accompany our women is one of hope, expectation that he will change, and the possibility that their idea of who he could be (or once was) will save the relationship.

In other cases, women have turned to the programme, wanting their experience of abuse validated. "He won't use/learn from the programme, he will charm everyone, no-one will believe how he really is with me". Often our work with her is about laying bare the extent of his manipulation (of her, and his attempts to manipulate other agencies and the DVIP programme) and building trust in her own sense of judgement, to counter his attempts at "crazy-making". The WSS role is to develop her sense of how her needs are met or not met within the relationship; highlight her actual experience of him versus her idea of who he is to her; embark on her own journey of what she wants from her life; and to come to terms with the impact his abuse has had on her and her children, building on her conviction that she is the best judge of his change.

At DVIP, practice is based on the ethos and intervention provided by our manuals. In 2000, Kate Iwi and Jo Todd wrote and compiled **Working Towards Safety – a guide to domestic violence intervention work**, volumes 1,2 and 3, and in 2009 a new and updated manual was written by Kate Iwi and Dr Chris Newman. Daily practice at DVIP is guided by these manuals. In volume 2, the manual that forms the basis of our women's support service, Iwi and Todd clearly lay out the objectives of the service:

*The very fact of a man's attendance on a Perpetrator Programme or in counselling is likely to influence significantly his partner's decision about whether or not to stay in the relationship. Many women then choose to stay, to give their partner another chance because he's trying to get help, when they otherwise would have left. This means that his attendance may actually put her at risk. It is absolutely essential that a Women's Service linked to a Perpetrator Programme is able to counteract this effect in order*

*to prioritise her safety and encourage her to make decisions for herself and her children regardless of the man's attendance on the Perpetrator Programme.*

*Therefore, the Women's Service linked to the Perpetrator Programme has special responsibilities and duties, above those of any other Women's Service, to:*

- *Give a woman whose partner or ex-partner is a client of the Perpetrator Programme clear, general information about the Programme itself*
- *Let her know she can have more detailed information if she requires it, including information about the group-work Programme modules.*
- *Run regular information sessions about the Perpetrator Programme, either as part of the structured group-work programme or separately. These should give women a chance to meet a worker from the Perpetrator Programme.*
- *Keep the woman informed about her (ex-)partner's attendance on the Perpetrator Programme. Inform her of any changes to her (ex-)partner's client status - for example, whether he drops out or is suspended from the Perpetrator Programme and the reason for this, if known. Inform her if her (ex-)partner breaches his probation order.*
- *Give information about what his attendance, completion or failure to complete the Perpetrator Programme might mean for her.*
- *Give clear messages about the Perpetrator Programme and men's ability to change.*
- *Talk through her hopes, fears and other feelings about his attendance, completion and so forth, and dispel false hopes and promote realistic expectations about his ability to change and the likely 'success' of the Perpetrator Programme.*
- *Raise with her as soon as possible, in some cases immediately, any safety concerns that arise from the Perpetrator Programme workers' contact with him.*
- *Provide reports from the Perpetrator Programme about the man, where to do so would increase the safety of the woman and children.*

- *Respond to her requests for information about her (ex-)partner, within the constraints of the organisation's confidentiality policy, about which she should have been informed from the start.*

## Confidentiality

DVIP is a Respect-accredited organisation and therefore abides by the principles and guidance set in the Respect Accreditation standard (Second edition July 2012, quoted below). DVIP is required to provide “limited confidentiality to DVPP clients and greater confidentiality to survivors”. This is a critical element to the safe working of integrated services and ensures that the focus remains on holding the perpetrator accountable whilst working to increase the safety of women and children.

In relation to direct contact with women, the interplay between the two levels of confidentiality is translated in to daily practice through the following:

- Where the service is working with more than one partner or ex-partner of a client, they must ensure that different workers are allocated to each and that procedures are in place to prevent them meeting.
- Feedback to the woman regarding her (ex) partner’s assessment; whether he has attended, the outcome and what this means in terms of treatment.
- Feedback with regards to the woman’s (ex)partner’s attendance on group; “Informing an individual woman if her partner/ex-partner fails to attend or is suspended from the programme, or if there are particular concerns about her safety”
- No information is disclosed to the perpetrator with regards to his (ex) partner’s engagement with the women’s support service.

The woman’s confidentiality is complete with the following exceptions:

- Where we have concerns regarding the safety of a child with whom her or her (ex) partner have involvement;

- Where she or her (ex) partner disclose a level of violence towards her that indicates she is at a high risk of harm;

### Case study 2

One thing that we are able to offer to women and partner agencies is work around violence and abuse where couples are choosing to stay together. As practitioners, we feel our best (and most emotionally satisfying) work is when we enable a safer separation than might have otherwise happened.

This man referred himself under a community mandate from extended family and presented with very little genuine motivation. When WSS established contact with her she was scared and unable to imagine her home as a safe space for her and her very young children. Her fear was very tangible to her, as was the impact of his verbal abuse on her four-year-old son. She felt the only choice that lay before her was to leave the family home to escape. Her sense of entitlement to the comfort of her own home and to least disruption to her children's lives made this choice untenable. She certainly couldn't imagine him leaving without violence. The women's services set out to provide her a space where she could track the impact of his abuse on her life over the last decade. Attention was also focussed on her aspirations for her children and their need for a father who did not invoke fear and insecurity. The VPP was targeted at keeping this man engaged and open to the programme material rather than challenging any particular concerns raised in case management alongside WSS.

Programme support enabled him to see just how withdrawn she was from him and, on being pressured by him to make clear "where he stood", she was able to ask him to leave. Again, programme support during this period helped contain his anxiety and sense of rejection, facilitating a non-violent separation. The work with the VPP helped him to contain his anger with structured intervention tools, drew on his own experiences of being frightened by his father to allow him to empathize with his partner and children and supported him as he slowly faced up to the harm he had caused and the realisation that she could no longer stay with him.

This was long-term work, the decisions and insight needed for both the perpetrator and the victim were explored over a 20 week period. Challenges remain around monitoring his behaviour during child-contact but the WSS will continue to be involved for 6 months after he leaves the programme.



- Where she specifically requests that we pass information onto another person or agency, and we have discussed with her the safety implications of this.

Information is shared between WSS and Violence Prevention Programme (VPP – i.e. the perpetrator workers) “to ensure that work with survivors of domestic violence is enhanced by using what is known about the risks the partner or ex-partner poses”. The framework for this sharing of information is provided within case management, which takes place on a monthly basis between the relevant WSS and VPP workers. Where there is an immediate risk concern, information is shared outside of the monthly meeting.

A woman’s confidentiality remains intact with regards to sharing information with professionals. Outside of the exceptions stated above, the only information commonly shared with associated professionals relates to attendance. There are circumstances in which a woman consents to the WSS worker sharing additional information; this tends to be an instance where the WSS worker is able to advocate on behalf of the woman, in order to increase her safety or better the professionals understanding of the woman’s situation.

Where there are safeguarding concerns raised by a woman that require sharing information with the appropriate service, attempts are made to use disclosures from the (ex)partner – for example, a related disclosure he may have made on group – when communicating the risk to professionals. This process aims to limit the risk to the woman and children and also maintains the ethos of holding the perpetrator accountable.

## Strains/watch-points for information sharing between VPP and WSS

At DVIP, we have had to be watchful of the relationship between the WSS and the Violence Prevention Programme, particularly when risk levels are high and/or when the perpetrator is unresponsive or hostile to the learning process. Broadly, all considerations about safety and risk begin with prioritising the safety of women and children. This is adhered to in case management discussions that are led by the woman's worker's insight into the needs of her client.

Perpetrator workers are often in the position of having to contain their anxiety around the efficacy of the intervention with him, and have to guard against passing on their

### Case study 3

In a sense, when men come to the programme after several years of being violent and abusive and cease violence but continue to be emotionally abusive throughout the program, the message to give her is “this is as far as he’ll go”. One such case is where the perpetrator, a father of five from a 15-year relationship, self-referred. His presentation on the programme was initially defensive and brittle, often responding dismissively and with hostility to challenge and support alike. Throughout the program he disclosed emotional abuse to his partner and children, usually in the form of rudeness or verbal abuse and sulking. He was able to make some links with the need for his own self-care and ability to contain his own vulnerable feelings, but was unable to shift his focus from releasing his own discomfort to the emotional well-being of his family and their right to not be dumped upon by him. His partner's use of the women's service gave her a sense of validation that her own experience of him mirrored what a difficult presence he was to the group and facilitators, and assisted her in addressing just how much change was enough to continue living together, co-parenting their children.

She was consciously choosing to stay with this man, he had ceased the violence (and reduced his dangerousness) but in term of any deeper respectful change, the underlying sense of entitlement to service and authority remained unchanged. And the WSS feel it is important to support her with the message “this is as far as he’ll go and we can support you regardless.”



anxiety to the women's service with enquiries such as "Can you contact her to find out how he's doing... I don't know if he is really understanding programme material", or "Can you call her, he is really risky right now", or "You need to speak to her, his disclosures have been really high risk". As the WSS is provided in parallel to his group work programme, it is common for the women's workers to hear of his violence and abuse from her before he makes disclosures in group. Where the VPP is first to hear of an incident via his disclosure, very basic information ("he was violent/abusive") is shared with the WSS. Too much shared information between services actually creates stresses and strains, e.g. if the WSS worker is told of the details of his disclosure, and then reports exactly what has been said in the men's group, it is quite likely that women (partners) will report that to the men with negative results. For instance, she might say 'DVIP says you're a liar, you said we'd had a small disagreement but I told them you'd given me a black eye! The result of this is a) a fight between the couple, and b) a loss of trust in the safety in the service from both male and female clients.

An appropriate use of his disclosure would be that the VPP worker informs the women's worker that he disclosed violence/abuse, the women's worker uses that information to contact her and support her with the aftermath of her experience, both its emotional impact as well as practical measures to reduce her isolation and increase her safety. If before this incident the woman did not have a rapport with the women's worker, this is an opportunity for the women's service to get "a foot in the door" of her world, to form an alliance with her that validates her experience and holds him to account for his behaviour.

Importantly, staff need to recognise that they can start to absorb or project the aggression or neediness of their clients, and to this end they regularly attend mandatory clinical supervision and, for VPP, case management. Case management discussions should veer away from extracting information from women's workers in a way that feels oppressive or in any way appeasing the anxiety of the perpetrator workers (around his difficultness, lack of engagement, violence etc.) As stated earlier, the 'invitation to responsibility' for abusers, can be interpreted as a tentative offering to him, of a vision of a life where love and intimacy is possible for him without invoking fear in his

partner. The VPP workers often have to contain their anxieties and apprehensions while facilitating and witnessing his learning, with the thought “I can’t completely trust how he is on group, as his partner is the best judge of his change”. It’s tough for workers to be working hard and long towards a goal (that he reduces/stops his use of violence and abuse) while never really knowing whether they are effective. So it is easy enough to pursue the women’s service for evidence of efficacy. Yet, the women’s service is there for her, to respond to her needs at her pace, and is not merely an extension of VPP’s information/evidence gathering efforts about whether the programme has worked.

### External vs internal WSS

In the last few years, DVIP has been in partnership with agencies in the women’s sector to deliver perpetrator programmes in certain areas of London. In these partnerships, DVIP workers deliver the perpetrator programme while the women’s sector agency delivers the women’s support service. This way of working is new to DVIP. As stated above, DVIP has its own integrated women’s support service, and working with external women’s organisations has encouraged DVIP to systematise and replicate what works well in the relationship between WSS and VPP. The following points summarize our learning through this experience:

- The need for orientation and training with external women’s support workers around the aim of the intervention, and specifically the aim of supporting women whose (ex-) partners are engaged in a perpetrator programme
- Supporting women’s workers with tools and practices that engage women in considering what it means to them for their partners to be engaged in a perpetrator programme. Specifically, this means that women’s workers will need to recognise and work with women’s resistance around engaging with the service, i.e. responding appropriately when women say “I don’t need to speak to you, my behaviour is not the problem, his is.” This is especially relevant in the

context of families who are involved with Social Services, and mothers are made to feel responsible for the children being exposed to DV in the home.

- Supporting women's workers in developing skills in engaging with women around their hopes for his change.
- Supporting women's workers in familiarising themselves with the programme's messages and content to enable them to successfully block the men's attempts to manipulate programme content.
- Supporting perpetrator workers in appropriately sharing information about his engagement and the risk he poses so that the issues already discussed earlier in this essay do not arise.

## Conclusion

Working with the partners of men engaged in perpetrator programmes is a complex business. At DVIP, the heart of our intervention has some core values that are very simple: Domestic violence is unacceptable, and the abuser is 100% responsible for his abuse. Our efforts are focussed on making 'women and children safer', placing women's services at the centre of the work we do. The Women's Support Service at DVIP continues to be its unsung hero in a commissioning climate where some funders tend towards focusing predominantly on numbers of perpetrators attending and completing groups.

The complexity and nuances in the work of the WSS are difficult to quantify, and the impact of providing women with a support service for as long as 42 weeks is not easy to demonstrate in a simplistic way. Our hope is that this essay throws some light on work that is little known but can be life changing for those it touches.

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