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Gender and domestic abuse victimisation amongst churchgoers in north west England: Breaking the church's gendered silence

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Abstract:

Domestic abuse is often hidden in church contexts. Despite a body of North American research, it has rarely been researched in the UK. This article offers new empirical findings on the nature and extent of, and attitudes to, domestic abuse among churchgoers. The data are drawn from a cross-denominational survey of 438 churchgoers in rural north-west England. The majority of the survey respondents were female and aged over 60, providing important evidence of domestic abuse victimisation amongst this seldom-heard group. Using a broad measure of domestic abuse encompassing physical, emotional, sexual, financial and spiritual dimensions, the results revealed that one in four had experienced at least one abusive behaviour in their current intimate relationship. While headline figures for prevalence are similar for women and men, analysis revealed gender differences in four areas: number of abusive behaviours experienced, types of abuse, frequency of victimisation and impacts of abuse, with women experiencing the most frequent and high-impact abuse. Churchgoers' comments on the church's response to abuse reveals silence as a key theme, and the article attributes the church's silence to gendered power relations in the wider church.

Key words: domestic violence, domestic abuse, Christianity, churches, gender

Key messages

• The article offers new empirical findings on attitudes to and experiences of domestic abuse among UK churchgoers, from a survey of 438 churchgoers in north-west England.

• Gender inequalities were integral to both the pronounced nature and impact of women's experiences of domestic abuse, and the church's social silencing of domestic abuse.

Introduction

"The fact that the church is an open door can be a blessing and a problem, a blessing as it welcomes the stranger, and a problem as it allows them somewhere to hide".

These words, from a participant in our survey, powerfully capture the importance of conducting research on domestic abuse in church contexts. The church can be a resource for responding to domestic abuse, but often it is a place where silence leads to survivors being invisible and perpetrators not being held to account. While overall church attendance is declining, a significant minority of people continue to attend church regularly. 5.4 million people attend at least monthly (Brierley 2014), whilst many more pass through churches for community, welfare and educational activities (Bickley 2014). In some rural communities, following cuts to public and third sector services, churches may be the only remaining social institution (NRCN 2019). As such, there is an opportunity for churches to proactively become a place of safety for victims/survivors of domestic abuse.

Despite this potential, domestic abuse often remains shrouded in silence in churches. Older churchgoing women do not seek help as they fear clergy will instead 'maintain the status quo' (Beaulaurier et al. 2007: 750). North American research indicates that church leaders and members may unintentionally jeopardise the safety of victims/survivors of domestic abuse. This occurs through the perpetuation of conservative religious teachings which justify violence, abuse and coercive control as part of a doctrine of male 'headship' and female submission, and prioritise the sanctity of marriage even where this compromises the safety of victims/survivors and their children (Nason-Clark 2009; Knickmeyer et al. 2010; Nash et al. 2013).

This article presents findings from the largest UK academic survey to date of churchgoers' attitudes to, and experiences of, domestic abuse. The findings, based on a sample of 438 respondents in the English county of Cumbria, focus first on churchgoers' self-reported experiences of victimisation in intimate relationships. Gender differences are highlighted, such as women reporting being subjected to a higher intensity and severity of abusive behaviour. Second, responses to two open questions about the role of the church in responding to domestic abuse reveal three themes: the church's poor or minimal response, the church's role in offering support for domestic abuse, and the church's role in awareness-raising, which, respondents argued, needs to be improved. The importance of the church speaking about domestic abuse and breaking its silence was identified as an overarching theme. Drawing on literature on silence and domestic abuse, the article argues that, just as the continued gender differences in the nature, extent and impact of domestic abuse reflect wider patriarchal norms and structures in wider society, the church's silence reflects gendered inequalities in the institutional church. Breaking the silence on domestic abuse will play a vital part in transforming the church in a more egalitarian direction.

First, a note on terminology: literature about violence and abuse in intimate relationships uses a variety of terms such as 'domestic violence', 'domestic abuse', 'intimate partner violence' and, in North American literature, 'battering'. We use authors' preferred terms when discussing their work. Our preferred term is 'domestic abuse', encompassing physical,

emotional, financial, sexual and/or spiritual dimensions of violence and abuse in intimate relationships.

Domestic abuse and the church – the knowledge base

There is extensive evidence of the pervasive prevalence and impacts of domestic abuse. The Crime Survey in England & Wales (CSEW) finds that 24.7% of women and 10.3% of men aged 16-74 years old have experienced partner abuse since the age of 16, defined in the CSEW as including one or more of non-physical abuse, threats, force, sexual assault and/or stalking (ONS 2019a Table 1a). However, whilst evidence amasses regarding the intersections of domestic abuse victimisation with various aspects of identity, there is a dearth of research in the UK concerning domestic abuse among churchgoers.

In North America, research about church responses to, and churchgoers' experiences of, domestic abuse has been developing over the past 25 years. Prominent scholar in the field, Nancy Nason-Clark (2009: 389), states that 'there is ample evidence that religious faith and domestic violence are co-mingled'. Her and others' work demonstrates that it is too simplistic to infer a causal relationship between having a Christian faith or attending church and domestic abuse victimisation. Some studies have found that women who attend church are less likely to report experiencing domestic abuse (Shannon-Lewy and Dull 2005; Gillum et al. 2006) and that men who attend church are less likely to report perpetrating (physical) domestic abuse (Ellison and Anderson 2001; Cunradi et al. 2002). Conversely, other studies find equal or higher risks to churchgoers compared to non-churchgoers (Drumm et al. 2009; Wang et al. 2009).

Other research indicates that this 'co-mingling' of faith and domestic violence affects women's journeys through domestic abuse. Theology appears to be a factor. Wang et al. (2009) conducted telephone interviews with 1,476 Christian women in a metropolitan region of south-west USA. They found that women who attend churches with theologically conservative views on divorce were slightly more likely to report experiencing domestic abuse, arguably due to women feeling obliged to remain with abusive partners longer. Knickmeyer et al.'s (2010: 102) qualitative study with 10 female victims/survivors in Memphis found that the women's husbands used conservative Christian ideals of female submission 'as a license to abuse', compelling their wives to submit to their control because they said the Bible required it. Knickmeyer et al. (2010: 103) report that all bar one woman 'indicated that they attempted to conform to a Biblical standard of submission and…believed this conformity contributed to the occurrence of domestic violence'. Importantly, however, the 'co-mingling' of religion and domestic violence is not restricted to negative influences of churches or theological interpretations on women's experiences of domestic abuse. Instead, some studies demonstrate positive impacts of faith in helping women to leave and recover from abusive relationships (Wang et al. 2009; Anderson et al. 2012).

Less research exists in the UK. A recent analysis of CSEW data, focusing only on women, compared rates of domestic abuse victimisation across different religions. Women who identified as having no religion were most likely to report having experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months (7.4%), followed by Christian (5.7%), Muslim (2.9%) and Hindu women (1.8%) (ONS 2018). A helpful starting point, its limitation is that identification as Christian does

not elucidate whether an individual belongs to a church or is influenced by Christian teachings, as the majority of those who tick 'Christian' in the Census do not attend church. Besides official statistics, a survey of 557 Methodist ministers and lay workers found that 17% of respondents had been victims of domestic violence, and that 1 in 4 female respondents and 1 in 9 male respondents had experienced partner violence as an adult (Radford and Cappel 2002). Overall, the lack of robust pan-denominational survey research means that we know neither the scale, nature, dynamics and impacts of domestic abuse in UK churches, nor what churchgoers think about their churches' response to domestic abuse.

Methodology

Research design

A quantitative survey was designed using mostly closed questions, plus two open questions to add depth and detail. The survey collected data about churchgoers' demographics, church involvement, attitudes to domestic abuse and perceptions of their church's responses, personal experiences of victimisation and help-seeking.

Some questions about victimisation were adapted from the CSEW, with new items added to capture data about spiritual forms of abuse. Spiritual, or faith-related, forms of abuse included being prevented from attending church or practising one's faith at home, being verbally abused or mocked for one's faith or beliefs, and being made to take part in religious practices which one feels uncomfortable with (see Oakley and Kinmond 2013: 21, who conceptualise spiritual abuse as 'coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context', either within or outside of intimate relationships).

Sampling and recruitment

As a pilot for a national study, this study took place in Cumbria, a predominantly rural county (estimated 2017 population = 498,375) in North-West England. Cumbria was selected due to links between our national partner NGO, Restored, and a local NGO, Churches Together in Cumbria (CTiC). CTiC offers pioneering domestic abuse training to church leaders and members of all denominations (in partnership with former Cumbrian domestic abuse service, LetGo). At the time of the survey, CTiC and LetGo had trained 300 Cumbrian churchgoers and/or leaders. Partnering with CTiC improved access to local churches and increased the chances of church leaders being receptive to promoting the survey.

Sampling and recruitment took place in two waves. In Wave 1, to compare churchgoers and leaders of 'trained' (that is, at least one person had taken part in the training) and 'untrained' churches, CTiC generated a random stratified sample of 230 churches in Cumbria. The sample was stratified to reflect the denominational make-up of Cumbrian churches; for example, 50.3% of churches in Cumbria are Anglican, therefore half of the randomly selected churches were Anglican. Random sampling maximised representativeness of the sample.

The 230 churches' leaders were invited to promote the survey to their congregations. Wording for an announcement was provided, stating that the survey was for all churchgoers,

not only those who have experienced domestic abuse. One hundred and twenty-nine churches agreed to distribute the survey; whether they all did is unknown. Uptake by church leaders varied according to denomination. The lowest uptake was amongst Independent and New churches, which are predominantly evangelical. This low participation may reflect some evangelical churches' reluctance to engage in ecumenical partnerships (they may have been deterred by CTiC's involvement); or it may reflect reluctance to engage with the subject of domestic abuse.

Wave 2 widened participation to all churchgoers in Cumbria. This involved advertising the survey in local media, Christian groups and businesses, social media and email or postal requests to all remaining churches on the CTiC database, along with others identified by the research team. 60.7% of responses came from Wave 1, 39.3% from Wave 2.

Description of sample

In total, 438 questionnaires were completed. Three-quarters (74.3%) of the sample were women. The skew towards older women reflects church attendance demographics: women constituted 57% of church attendees in 2005 (Brierley 2006: 12.3) and a third of regular church attendees are 65 and over (Brierley 2014: 16.8). It also reflects the older age profile of Cumbria (median=44 years compared to median=39 years in England & Wales [ONS 2012]). Men's under-representation may also result from the perception of domestic abuse as a 'women's issue'.

Whilst all age groups took part (18 to 80+), 68.8% were aged 60 years and above (evenly split between 60-69 and 70+) and only 6.7% were under 40. This limits the sex and age comparisons that can be made. Despite these limitations, this survey is unusual in having collected important data about domestic abuse victimisation amongst men, unlike most previous church research, and those aged over 60, given that the CSEW until recently only surveyed adults up to the age of 59.

The sample was almost wholly white (97.9%), mirroring the wider Cumbrian population (98.6% of residents are white) (ONS 2012). Over half (57.8%) were retired. The vast majority (78.1%) were parents, but mostly to adult children; only 11.8% had a child/ren under the age of 18.

Survey respondents were regular churchgoers, with 86.6% attending at least once a week. Almost half (48.4%) attended an Anglican (Church of England), followed by Methodist (22.2%), and Roman Catholic (12.9%) churches. Smaller numbers attended Pentecostal, United Reformed, Independent Evangelical, Baptist, Quaker Meetings, Church of Scotland, Brethren or New churches.

Data collection

The questionnaire was available online via Bristol Online Surveys (BOS) or as a paper copy, with freepost envelopes for confidential return. Only 37.4% of respondents completed the survey online; the majority returned paper questionnaires. This illustrates the continuing

importance of making paper questionnaires available, particularly in rural areas with limited internet connectivity and older populations.

Ethical considerations

Given the survey's focus, participants' safety and wellbeing was paramount. The research was guided by the British Sociological Association Statement of Ethical Practice (BSA 2017) and approved by Coventry University's Ethics Committee. Only adults (aged 18 and over) were invited to complete the survey. The survey began with an informed consent briefing which explained that the questionnaire included some sensitive questions, but participation was voluntary, anonymous, and participants could withdraw prior to submitting or returning their responses. Information was provided about domestic abuse support services.

Data analysis

Data were collated within BOS, exported to SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), then cleaned, coded and analysed. Descriptive analysis was performed on all questions, and bivariate relationships were explored between respondents' attitudes to, and experiences of, domestic abuse, and their sex and age.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to code the 331 responses to two open questions: 'Do you have any other comments about the role of the church (your church, or more generally) in responding to domestic abuse?' (answered by 113 people) and 'Do you have any comments or suggestions regarding how churches can better support people experiencing domestic abuse?' (218 people). Responses focused on what the church was currently doing (or not doing) (question 1), and what they believe it should be doing (question 2). Some participants commented on what churches should be doing in question 1, and what churches were doing in question 2, rendering it sensible to combine responses for the analysis. Subsequently, three major themes were identified.

Findings (1): gender and domestic abuse victimisation

The nature and extent of churchgoers' experiences of domestic abuse victimisation

Respondents were asked about physical, emotional, financial, sexual and spiritual behaviours that they may have experienced in their current relationship or in any previous intimate relationship since the age of 16. For each of the five abusive behaviour categories, a number of items were listed, with an 'other' option added (for example, for physically abusive behaviours, "My partner hurt me in another physical way") (see Aune and Barnes 2018 for the complete list). Respondents were asked how frequently they had been subjected to each behaviour, on a 5-point Likert scale from 'Never' to 'At least weekly'.

A quarter (24.9%) of the sample reported having experienced at least one abusive behaviour in their current relationship. Further, 42.2% reported having experienced at least one abusive behaviour in any intimate relationship since the age of 16. This figure is much higher than the CSEW domestic abuse prevalence figures which indicate that 24.7% of women and 10.3% of

men have experienced abuse from a current or former partner since the age of 16 years old (ONS 2019a). However, two key contextual factors are relevant. Firstly, unlike the CSEW, this survey was not based on a random sample, and victims/survivors of domestic abuse were likely to be over-represented. Secondly, the measure of domestic abuse used in this survey was broader than the CSEW measure, thus capturing a wider range of abusive behaviours (see Donovan and Barnes 2019).

Gender differences in domestic abuse victimisation

It might be presumed that the over-representation of women in the survey would elevate the prevalence figures. However, the lifetime prevalence figures for female (42.7%) and male (41.1%) churchgoers are similar. This suggests gender parity of victimisation, in line with the many family violence studies that have collected self-report data from the general population (see Kimmel 2002). However, examination of the intensity and impacts of victimisation demonstrate that women's and men's reported experiences are different. This resonates with Johnson's recognition of different types of domestic abuse: the more gender-symmetrical 'situational couple violence' (SCV) versus the predominantly male-perpetrated 'intimate terrorism' (Johnson 2011).

Using only data about current relationships, there are four key findings about the gendered nature of churchgoers' experiences. Firstly, female churchgoers reported being subjected to a higher number of abusive behaviours. Of the quarter of the sample who reported having experienced at least one abusive behaviour on one or more occasions, most had experienced multiple abusive behaviours. Of 23 abusive behaviours asked about, the maximum number reported by women was 20, while for men it was seven. On average, women who had been abused reported experiencing more behaviours than men who had been abused; 5.16 compared to 2.60 (Mann-Whitney U, p=0.007). Importantly, whilst male victims/survivors had most commonly experienced one abusive behaviour (42.9% said this), and over 90% reported having experienced five or fewer behaviours, a third of women (compared to 8.6% of men) reported experiencing six or more abusive behaviours. This includes 8.2% who reported 10-14 behaviours and 15-20 behaviours, respectively (Table 1).

Table 1 here

This points to a gendered pattern: male churchgoers' victimisation involves a smaller number of abusive behaviours, whereas female churchgoers experience a wider breadth of abusive behaviours. All respondents who reported having experienced ten or more abusive behaviours were women, indicating that female churchgoers' victimisation is more chronic and systematic, as epitomised by Johnson's (2011) 'intimate terrorism'.

A second gender difference is that male churchgoers seldom report experiencing sexual, financial or spiritual abuse. This supports CSEW statistics which finds that men report lower rates of sexual and financial abuse than women (ONS 2019b), but this research is novel in finding that this is mirrored for spiritual abuse too. Emotional abuse was the most commonly reported type of abuse, with 42.6% of women and 41.7% of men reporting having experienced one or more emotionally abusive behaviours in their current relationship. In contrast, women were four times more likely to report having experienced sexual abuse at

least once (23.7% of women compared to 5.2% of men). Financial abuse was reported by over a quarter of women (26.5%) compared to one in ten men (10.3%), and a fifth of women reported having experienced spiritual abuse at least once compared to one in ten men (11.1%).

Thirdly, female churchgoers reported experiencing abusive behaviours more frequently than male churchgoers. As Table 2 shows, men who reported having experienced abusive behaviours typically said this had happened 'once or twice ever'. Very small proportions of men reported being subjected to abusive behaviours at the highest levels of frequency. The exception was emotional abuse: 16.7% of men reported being emotionally abused several times a year or more, including 6.3% who had experienced this at least weekly. 2.6% and 2.0% of men reported being subjected to sexual and physical abuse, respectively, on at least a monthly basis. Most female churchgoers who reported having experienced abusive behaviours also said that these had occurred 'once or twice ever' (except for sexual abuse, where 'several times a year' was most often reported). Yet, significant minorities of female respondents reported high-frequency victimisation. For example, 13.0% and 9.7% reported having been emotionally or financially abused, respectively, at least weekly. The reported weekly incidence of physical and sexual abuse on weekly basis was lower at 3.2% and 5.4% respectively, while no male respondents reported experiencing either physical or sexual abuse on a weekly basis.

Table 2 here

Whilst for both female and male churchgoers, the high prevalence of infrequent victimisation is indicative of Johnson's (2011) SCV, a significant minority of women reported more frequent and systematic victimisation which, as argued above with regard to breadth of victimisation, points to a chronic pattern of intimate terrorism. Distinguishing between these two forms of domestic abuse is important because the support needs associated with each differ (Donovan and Barnes 2020).

Finally, alongside frequency, reported impacts of victimisation are key to understanding the context of domestic abuse victimisation (Williamson 2013). Echoing previous research (Archer 2000), women reported more extensive and serious impacts. Participants were asked to consider the worst incident that they had experienced and select the impacts of the incident from a list of 15 possible impacts. Of those who answered these questions regarding their current relationship (n=48), women reported an average of 4.5 impacts compared to an average of 1.8 impacts for men; in previous relationships (n=77), women reported 5.9 impacts to men's 3.6. The most commonly reported impact during their current relationship was 'My self-esteem was diminished', reported by 64.9% of women who answered this question and 90.9% of men. Other impacts that were frequently reported by both women and men were becoming depressed and withdrawing from family and friends.

Women were much more likely to report impacts related to fear and perceived risk of harm: almost half (45.9%) of women in currently abusive relationships reported being anxious or scared, compared to 9.1% of men. Such fear may be reflective of women being more likely to have been physically injured by their partners; three times as many women (29.7%) than men (9.1%) reported having sustained injuries for which they did not seek medical treatment,

while 10.8% of women reported having needed to seek medical assistance for their injuries, but no men did. Critically, 12.5% of women being abused in current relationships were in fear for their lives, whereas no men were. Previous research underlines that such fears are often not unfounded (Bowen 2011).

Unlike most studies of domestic abuse, data was collected about spiritual/religious impacts: almost a fifth of women (18.9%) and a tenth of men (9.1%) reporting on current relationship stated that they had stopped attending church and/or that their faith had been negatively affected. Recognition of these religious/spiritual impacts signals a role for churches in responding to domestic abuse within their congregations and supporting secular domestic abuse agencies to better understand and meet the spiritual needs of victims/survivors who have a faith.

Findings (2): gender and the church's response to domestic abuse

In the two open questions, comments on the church's role in responding to domestic abuse focused on three themes: the church's role in *awareness-raising* about domestic abuse, the church's role in *offering support* for domestic abuse (in and/or beyond the church) and the church's *inadequate response*. The largest number of comments on the church's current role concerned its inadequate response (over a third of comments), with awareness-raising and support each accounting for about a quarter of the comments (the remaining comments were categorised as 'other'). In contrast, over half of the comments on what the church should be doing focused on awareness-raising, around a quarter on support, and a tenth on the church's inadequate response. These churchgoers want the church to respond to domestic abuse, observe that it is only sometimes doing so, and want its response to improve. They identify raising awareness about domestic abuse as the single most important action the church can take to improve their response.

The church's inadequate response to domestic abuse

Participants observed the 'hidden', 'private' nature of domestic abuse in their churches. 'Whilst we have a solemn duty to address this, most of the community are either in denial that abuse happens in their neighbourhood or feel unempowered to act', said one Anglican male (60-69yrs). 'If domestic abuse is happening to church members it is very well hidden,' an Anglican woman commented (60-69yrs). Several attributed this to the church's small size, older, white or middle-class demographic or the rural area:

> Many think that because it is a predominantly white middle class area, that domestic abuse does not exist. (female, 60-69yrs, Anglican)

> rural church of england church seems to focus on "people like us" e.g. elderly and dementia and doesn't think domestic abuse is happening in their community'. (female, 40-49yrs, Anglican)

People who had disclosed experiencing domestic abuse described being poorly supported or unacknowledged:

> I had one visit and no support since (female, 40-49yrs, Anglican)

> They don't believe it is a church matter. I mentioned it at church & they thought I had become "over-reliant" on them. (female, 18-29yrs, Pentecostal)

> People in the church witnessed an episode & it was never referred to & nothing was done (female, 40-49yrs, Methodist)

Male-dominated church leadership and patriarchal teachings were highlighted as problems. The Catholic church having only male, celibate priests was mentioned by two Roman Catholic women: 'Within the Catholic church I wouldn't expect the clergy to be confident in assisting/responding to domestic abuse because priests are unmarried possibly remote and inexperienced' said a 60-69 year old, while the other suggested that 'More female church leaders in the Catholic Church would help women who want to talk about their experiences' (40-49yrs). Male leaders' tendency to confront perpetrators was criticised by an Anglican in her fifties:

> The instinct of male ministers seems to be to confront the perpetrator, ("Come on, old chap, behave a bit better won't you?") which prompts a public denial ("She's just a silly little woman...") and a private victimisation ("What have you been saying to the pastor, you stupid woman...?")

Another Anglican woman (30-39yrs) commented:

> This is an issue that should be talked about more in a church context - I think there are many church going families out there where DV is a reality, but it is hidden by descriptions such as 'wives being submissive to husbands' - but taken out of all bounds and context...

The final issue discussed was that the church prioritised other needs, such as supporting food banks.

The church's role in offering support for domestic abuse

In contrast to those more negative comments, participants observed that churches were giving practical and emotional support to attendees and the wider community. This included the (Anglican) Mothers' Union participating in the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence:

> Abuse is mentioned and our church sponsors a local hostel for domestic abuse (female, 50-59yrs, Anglican)

> I know Church goers are actively involved in Domestic Violence Support Groups, have made sure I have information and are helping me get access to training. (female, 40-49yrs, Anglican)

Respondents wanted more work to occur to offer support within the congregation. The words 'confidential' and 'non-judgemental' were repeated, to indicate what sort of support should be given. Listening skills were emphasised:

> The main things I can think of are emphasising listening and being non-judgemental and improving listening skills for congregations for any who will attend a session or a few. Praying more. (female, 60-69yrs, Anglican)

A Quaker in her sixties summed it up as 'Just be there for them, to listen and possibly signpost'. Building a trusting community, where people felt safe to disclose, was advocated.

> The key thing is to be safe environments where people feel it can be discussed. (female, 30-39yrs, Methodist)

Suggestions for improving the church's internal response were offered, such as providing counselling, running a support group for victims/survivors and having a nominated person leading domestic abuse support. Many respondents advocated signposting to external support services such as GPs and refuges, supporting refuges financially and working with other churches to coordinate provision. How far the church should be the main support was debated, with some arguing that the church should restrict its role to listening or emotional support, and refer victims or survivors to external services for more extensive support.

The church's role in awareness-raising about domestic abuse

Respondents commented mostly on how the church should do more to raise awareness, rather than discussing current awareness-raising work. There was limited evidence of systematic awareness-raising work going on, although exceptions included a church displaying a poster offering advice, another teaching on loving relationships, and a couple mentioned the CTiC domestic abuse awareness training. An Anglican male survivor in his 50s described addressing a national conference.

Awareness-raising was the most frequently articulated of the three themes, and many people advocated that the church do more. Comments focused on three areas: general awareness-raising, the need to talk openly about domestic abuse in church, and undertaking training on domestic abuse.

Awareness-raising about domestic abuse in general was identified as a major need of churches:

> We need to make people more aware of the issue (62, female 80+, United Reformed)

> Give it a higher profile in seminars/discussions/prayers/magazine articles etc. (male, 60-69yrs, Anglican)

Other comments were more specific:

> Leaflets advertising help for domestic abuse victims […]should be available. Many churches insist on marriage preparation causes-domestic abuse&how to avoid/deal with it could be included. (female, 70-79yrs, Roman Catholic)

> I have never seen a poster up about domestic abuse in the church that I attend - so I reckon that could be a start (female, 60-69yrs, Anglican)

More discussion about domestic abuse was advocated, with some alluding to current silence about abuse. Phrases such as 'strip away the secrecy' (male, 70-79yrs, Roman Catholic) and 'bringing it out into the open' (female, 50-59yrs, Anglican) were used.

> The Church should talk openly about domestic abuse, regardless of certain people who think its too personal & should not be spoken of (female, 70-79yrs, Anglican)

> Talk about it so that it is not hidden considered off limits' (male, 60-69yrs, Anglican)

Preaching was advocated as a way of talking publicly about domestic abuse, with sermons seen as having potential to increase knowledge and prevention education for those in relationships:

> Use appropriate passages in the Gospel during the homilies [short sermons] to refer to domestic abuse; offering mercy&pardon to abusers would make it easier for victims as they would not be seen as disloyal or troublemakers but in a situation in need of prayer. (female, 70-79yrs, Anglican)

Prayer groups and alternative liturgies [service wording] were also advocated as places to vocalise about abuse.

Attending training on domestic abuse was advocated as important, for church leaders or for a nominated person leading domestic abuse support, or the whole congregation. Some specified what they would like training on, for example, listening skills.

> Provide training for those who may be seen as the 'Go to' people in a Church. Assuming anyone can do this is not advisable. (female, 60-69yrs, Anglican)

> More training and awareness in our churches about rural problems+domestic abuse. (female, 18-29yrs, Anglican)

Discussion: Breaking the church's gendered silence

These Cumbrian churchgoers identify the church's response to domestic abuse as inadequate. Some respondents criticised the gendered structures of the church (Roman Catholicism not allowing female priests, or Bible verses about wives submitting to husbands). Others highlighted the church's silence on domestic abuse and the need for churches to talk and do more. Overall, they call for increased awareness and discussion, to, in one female Anglican's words (70-79yrs), 'allow it to become a non-taboo subject'. There is considerable silence around domestic abuse in these church communities.

Silence, we argue, is the underlying problem requiring interrogation. Why is the church often silent on domestic abuse, and can this be changed? In what follows, we argue that church silence is a dimension of wider gendered power relations in the church, and breaking the silence on abuse should be combined with more structural change.

Silence – the silence of victims/survivors and of those around them – is increasingly highlighted as an important theme in domestic abuse research (e.g. Ahmad et al. 2009; Silva-Martinez 2016), sometimes regarding particular silenced groups, such as older women (McGarry and Simpson 2010) or children (O'Brien 2013). Pokharel et al.'s (2020) review identifies factors that reinforce silencing of women subjected to interpersonal violence. They find that women's silence is most affected by 'microsystem' factors (women's perceptions, actions and interactions), such as self-blame, and second by 'macrosystem' factors (social policies or cultural norms), such as gender norms. They identify religious values as an important aspect of this macrosystem: religious values contribute to silencing abused women.

Wendt (2008) analyses how women, human services workers and community members in rural Australia talked about Christianity and domestic violence. They 'acknowledged the church's power to silence the discussion of domestic violence in the community and recognized the consequences of such power and how it could be used to perpetuate ongoing abuse' (Wendt 2008: 149). From a poststructuralist approach, Wendt argues that discourses powerfully shape experiences of domestic abuse. Christian discourse, and Christian silence, contributes to keeping domestic abuse hidden. Conservative Christian discourses of femininity and masculinity 'support and even reinforce the acceptance of abuse' (p.152). The importance of family, Christianity and self-reliance Wendt found in rural Australia has echoes in our Cumbria study: in both places, the rural, Christian contexts encouraged silence.

We argue that the church is upholding a 'social silence' (Gracia 2004) about domestic abuse. Silence is a social norm in the church. Domestic abuse is often unspeakable and unhearable in churches. Moreover, we argue that the church's silence is gendered. Speaking in churches is something that women and men have had unequal access to – fewer women lead church services, give sermons or preside at the church's holy rites at which the pronouncements they speak are imbued with sacred power. Male clergy have historically been the people who

speak authoritatively, while women have historically been the listeners. Moreover, literalistic, non-contextual interpretations of Bible verses such as 'women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate' (1 Corinthians 14:34, New Revised Standard Version) have been used – albeit more rarely in the UK today - to assert that women's proper role is silence.

The church's social silence on domestic abuse is a dimension of gendered power inequalities in the church more broadly. While church denominations today vary, women are still barred from priesthood in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches (two of the three major branches of the global church). In the UK, most Protestant denominations opened roles as 'minister', 'vicar', 'priest' or 'pastor' to women in the twentieth century, but the largest of these, the Church of England, began ordaining women only in the 1990s (after much campaigning), and only voted to allow women to become Bishops in 2014. Many women have since trained to be priests, and in 2019 women were 32% of the church's 20,000 active clergy (Church of England 2020 p.3). Studies of the Church of England, where the largest numbers of our participants worshipped, illustrate persisting gender inequalities, with female priests encountering 'structural disadvantage' (lower pay, an 'old boys' network') and 'a hostile organisational culture' (Bagilhole 2006) and pressure to adopt 'neutral' rather than conventionally feminine dress because femininity is associated with sexuality and considered 'distracting' (Page 2014). The public, speaking image of the church is still mostly male.

Churches' social silence about domestic abuse not only reflects gendered power relations; gendered power relations and gendered Christian discourses *lead to* silencing of abuse. As Knickmeyer et al.'s (2010: 99) study demonstrates, trying to conform to a conservative Christian ideal of male leadership and female submission 'promotes silence and denial of domestic violence'. Men's performance of the 'good Christian man' image means women trust these men quickly, making their abuse hard to reconcile. Moreover, husbands used doctrines of female submission 'as a license to abuse' (p.102).

In understanding the church's social silence around domestic abuse as a manifestation of patriarchy, we align ourselves with one of two major understandings of abuse held by those working in the Christianity and domestic abuse arena: we see it primarily as 'embedded in a system of domination within the church – that is, as a structural problem', rather than 'as a misunderstanding of Christian doctrine' (Haaken et al. 2007: 113). While teachings and doctrines are important, the problem is wider and more structural than teachings alone. Moreover, while speaking out about the problem is an important first step, it is not the only one that is needed – a structural transformation of the church into a more egalitarian institution is required. But as survivors, activists, church members and leaders break their silence around domestic abuse, this speech paves the way for more profound structural changes in the institutional church's structures and cultures, resonant with the journey to recognising female priesthood and episcopal leadership in the Church of England.

Conclusion

We have argued that while the prevalence figures suggest gender parity in domestic abuse victimisation among churchgoers, four important gender differences exist. First, women report being subjected to a larger number of abusive behaviours. Second, men seldom report experiencing certain types of abusive behaviour, namely sexual, financial and spiritual abuse. Third, women report experiencing abusive behaviours more frequently. Fourth, women report more extensive and serious impacts of victimisation. Moreover, churchgoers' comments on the church's response to domestic abuse reveals that the church is often silent. This silence, we have argued, reflects gender inequalities in the church more widely. Just as the continued gender differences in the nature, extent and impact of domestic abuse reflect wider patriarchal norms and structures in wider society, the church's silence reflects gendered inequalities in the institutional church.

Future larger-scale studies of domestic abuse victimisation within Christian churches, and other religious communities, are needed. Large-scale studies will be able to assess whether the gender differences and gendered silences found amongst Cumbrian churchgoers hold in other parts of England and the UK. Future studies will enable more detailed exploration of the intersectional nature of domestic abuse within religious communities, for instance whether patterns of abuse differ by ethnicity, sexual orientation or age.

Research on domestic abuse amongst churchgoers is needed by those working with victims/survivors, by organisations which educate churches about domestic abuse, and by church denominational training and ordination programmes. This has happened in North America, and the potential for this to happen in the UK is strong.

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