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Article

Self-blame and (becoming) the crazy ex: Domestic abuse, information sharing and responsabilisation

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Abstract

The 2021 Domestic Abuse Act puts the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (Clare's Law) on a statutory footing which allows police forces to share someone's criminal history to prevent domestic abuse. In this article, we draw on the findings from a wider study on women's experiences of accessing such schemes and instead highlight the *informal* ways in which women shared and received information about domestic abuse experiences among each other to prevent domestic abuse. These experiences are located within a 'red flag' discourse which we argue inadvertently responsabilises women, who in turn blame themselves for failing to leave abusive relationships. The conclusion makes some suggestions as to how a better understanding of the reality of victims-survivors' everyday lives might inform the practices of those tasked with supporting women in making sense of disclosures of domestic abuse and providing appropriate support at the right time.

Keywords

Clare's Law, domestic violence disclosure schemes, information sharing, responsabilisation

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Introduction

This article emerged from a British Academy funded study exploring the experiences and perspectives of women accessing Domestic Violence Disclosure Schemes (DVDS) in the United Kingdom, also known as Clare's Law (Barlow et al., 2023). DVDS allow for otherwise confidential information about an individual's criminal history held by the police to be disclosed when that person might pose a risk to an intimate partner. Primary and third-party applications can be made to the police through the 'right to ask'. Information of concern can also be shared formally by the police without a formal application through the 'right to know' when potential risk to an intimate partner is known. However, although the focus of the wider project was on victim-survivors experiences of the DVDS, it becomes apparent that the ways in which women are responsabilised and consequently engage in self-blame extended beyond their experiences with DVDS and into their lives more broadly as women living with domestic abuse. The data reveal that women were talking to each other about their experiences of domestic abuse with an (ex)partner. This led us to think more carefully about information sharing in the context of women's real lives and how partners and ex-partners are interconnected, if not by proximity, certainly by social networks and social media platforms. In this sense, information sharing in the context of domestic abuse prevention takes two forms: formal and informal. It is the latter which is of interest to this article, and we draw on this to understand how the women we spoke to share, learn and benefit from informal information about (ex)partners as a form of *safety work* (Kelly, 2012).

Feminist research on violence against women has long highlighted the ways in which women have been responsabilised in both policy and practice for preventing male violence (Campbell, 2005). Stanko (1997) names these processes and their impact as creating technologies of the soul. In the context of sexual harassment and violence in public spaces, Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020) suggest the 'seemingly well-meaning campaigns' (p. 7) targeting women with safety advice do so in total disregard of the evidence that women are already engaged in safety work (Campbell, 2005; Stanko, 1997). Safety work refers to how women (often automatically and unconsciously) develop habits and engage in a range of strategies as a response and a precursor to preventing male violence and unwanted intrusions in their everyday lives from men that they know and do not know (Kelly, 2012; Stanko, 1990; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). Moreover, Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020) contend then that

The safety work that women conduct in public is not only in response to individual actions by individual men. Instead, the vast majority of women's safety work is conducted before anything happens 'just in case'. Women learn to adapt their behaviour and movements, habitually limiting their own freedom in order to prevent, avoid, ignore, and ultimately dismiss what they experience as ordinary. Over time, the repetition of this behaviour renders it invisible: what started off as work is reconceptualised as common sense. This legacy of three decades of feminist informed work clearly points to the ways in which women are responsabilised for reducing the incidence of male violence and are also blamed if their strategies to do so fail. (p. 7)

As Stanko (1997) observes,

Women who do not follow the rules for prudent behaviour, it is presumed, deserve to be excluded from any benefits of public provision of safety, because *those* women [not us] fail to take appropriate measures to protect themselves from harm. (p. 486)

DVDS, presented as a beneficial public provision of safety, are arguably another example of a seemingly well-intentioned initiative intended to aid safety work but in doing so disregard women's real lives.

Elsewhere it has been argued that such schemes have unintended consequences in responsabilising women by expecting them to act on disclosure information about an abusive partner, even if they have not requested this information (Barlow et al., 2023: see also Duggan, 2018). The authors have also highlighted elsewhere the ways in which victim-survivors can feel a sense of responsibility to seek information through Clare's Law and warn others as necessary (Barlow et al., 2023). Such schemes do allow women to check out a new partner *just in case* they have a violent history however, pertinent to this article, a request for disclosure from a woman herself suggests that she has had, or is having, experiences about which she is concerned. Such inclinations, commonly understood as warning signs or 'red flags', are frequently shared and learned about through apparently well-meaning domestic abuse campaigns, websites, and advocacy services. Red flags are also imparted to victim-survivors in service provision and are drawn upon by professionals to recognise dating violence and prevent intimate partner homicide (Monckton-Smith, 2021: 21; Munoz-Rojas et al., 2022). Monckton-Smith (2021: 21) argues that 'red flags' are often revealed in how an abusive person 'talks and behaves', in routine possessive and jealous behaviour and language and should not be ignored. She says,

These are all red flags. Take any hint of a history seriously; never assume it's all a misunderstanding or maliciously concocted by a vengeful ex. (Monckton-Smith, 2021: 51)

This article explores women's appreciation of what seems to have become a common sense 'red flag' discourse, how they make sense of their experiences of domestic abuse, and how they internalise the societal expectation that they, as women, are responsible for preventing this.

The article is divided into four parts. In the first, we elaborate on understandings of women's safety work in the context of domestic abuse and the relevance of this to the efficacy of Clare's Law/DVDS. In the second part, we outline the research methods used. In the third part, attention is drawn to two themes identified from the data collection within this broader project. These themes illustrate the ways in which women blame themselves and are blamed by others for domestic abuse. Self-blame occurred when women saw themselves as failing to recognise or for ignoring what they considered to be 'red flags'. Blame by others was used as a strategy by abusive men to construct them, victim-survivors, as the 'crazy ex' and our respondents pointed to consequences of this for them. In the last part of this article, these issues are situated within the complexity of formal and informal information sharing processes, and the responsabilisation associated with them, endemic in responses to domestic abuse as exemplified by Clare's Law.

Women's safety work, domestic abuse and responsabilisation

From a feminist-informed perspective, the extent to which policies and practices can appreciate women's safety work is contingent upon their capacity to consider safety through a gendered lens. Walklate (2018: 286) has argued that such a lens requires taking account of six inter-related issues: the epistemic (who can know things), the methodological (how things, like violence against women, can be known), the conceptual (how to make sense of what we think we know), saliency (which variables count and when), policy (what can be done in the light of the foregoing issues), and the global (the impact of Northern theorising on policies and practices). Acting on all these questions means thinking hard about what is meant by security and for whom, who and what is thought of as risky, and what counts as safety. For women, all these terms need to be understood as an 'ordinary' feature negotiated as part of their everyday lives with men that they know, and they do not know (qua Stanko, 1993). Thus, as Walklate (2018) states, 'the feminist path offers an appreciation of women's lives as differently and differentially informed by the everydayness of ordinary fears' (p. 288). Such ordinary fears become, for women, common sense (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). The salience of the ordinary is captured by Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2003), who, in discussing femicide, asks,

What is the alternative if her male adult 'protector' abuses her (sexually, emotionally, physically), and how can she speak about her abuse if she has never learned that it is possible to voice personal matters? How can she speak out when she knows that customs and cultural codes may be used to cause her death? How can she ask for help when her protectors might also be her enemies? . . . What happens if the legal system supports her femicide? (p. 603)

While this quote draws out important questions in what is the gravest of circumstances, it tellingly reveals not only how women's safety work might be quite differently informed than that assumed by policy, but also how that safety itself can only be understood by taking account of the real context of women's lives. Lives that can be differently gendered and ethnicised (see, for example, the work of Harrison and Gill, 2019).

Thus, how and under what conditions women feel safe is deeply embedded in their relationships with others. Women learn in the context of these relationships how to maintain their safety. Women know who threatens their safety, whether that be in their homes, in the street or the workplace. They know to whom the problematic footsteps behind her might belong (Morgan, 1989). For women living with violence, and/or the threat of violence in their everyday lives, this knowledge renders their lives precarious, and it also means that being safe might demand staying with the person who threatens them most. This is a 'truth', drawn from women's real lives that policies and (some) advocates find it difficult to grasp. This article illustrates how the women we interviewed engaged in this kind of safety work. The data points to the internalisation of what has become a 'common sense' red flag discourse in preventing domestic abuse against them and warning future partners about the men who had harmed them: self-blame and responsabilisation. These women also told us about how the men they were partnered with constructed them and their previous partners as the 'crazy-ex', as a strategy to deflect their own

abuse, apportion blame, and extend their control over victim-survivors. These women consequently were both blamed by others and responsabilised by others. Before discussing these two data driven themes in more detail, it will be of value to offer some insight into the methodological approach taken towards the investigation.

Methods

This article focuses on the voices of a self-selecting sample of victim-survivors, and practitioners who also identified as victim-survivors (referred to hereafter collectively as 'victim-survivors'). The data were gathered from semi-structured interviews and an online survey with opportunities for free text answers. Ethical approval was granted by Lancaster University Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Participants were recruited for this research in two ways. First, through a project website. This was designed to include an accessible participant recruitment poster and detailed how to contact the Principal Investigator to engage further in the project. Second, participants were also recruited through email using professional contacts and social media. The interviews were carried out online through MS Teams or by telephone, were either video or audio recorded (depending on the victim-survivor's preference), and then transcribed and anonymised at the point of transcription.

All 26 victim-survivors who participated in semi-structured interviews were female. One participant identified as lesbian and another bisexual. All were aged between 18–34 ($n=8$) and 35–59 ($n=18$). Two women identified as disabled with the type of disablement reported as Autism ($n=1$) and poor mental health affecting daily life ($n=1$). Three interviewees identified as coming from a minority ethnic community. Participants were geographically spread across the United Kingdom, namely the North and South of England, Midlands, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The survey was developed using similar questions to those asked during the interviews. Out of the 57 victim-survivors who responded to the online survey, 57 identified as heterosexual, one as lesbian, with one respondent preferring not to say. All but one of our respondents were aged between 18 and 34 ($n=20$), 35 and 59 ($n=36$) with one, aged between 60 and 74. Ten victim-survivors identified as disabled (13%) with the type of disablement recorded as 'Poor mental health affecting day to day functioning' ($n=6$), 'physical impairment' ($n=3$) and 'multi disabilities' ($n=1$). In total, 6% of respondents ($n=3$) identified as being from a Black, Asian, or other ethnic minority background and one woman with insecure immigration status. The interview and qualitative survey data were coded and analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis in which we explored the data from a feminist perspective (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021). To enhance inter-rater reliability, two researchers performed this analytic stage in which themes were independently identified within the data and then compared and discussed to reach thematic consensus. The data presented throughout the rest of this article relates to the qualitative responses received in the survey and interview data. While the data draw on a wider study about women's experiences and perspectives on Clare's Law and DVDS, this article is concerned with the ways in which women internalise responsibility for preventing and are blamed for domestic abuse. The very nature of the research – that is, the purpose of DVDS and its implied understanding that women will leave if a history of violence is known – led to women

talking about why they did not leave an abusive relationship many years previous and before DVDS was introduced. From the analysis, two main themes were identified: *Red flags and self-blame* and *Blame as a strategy of men's control – (becoming) the 'crazy ex'*. Both themes are connected by blame and responsabilisation. Women internalised blame for failing to recognise or for ignoring red flags in their relationships, hence, responsabilising themselves for the abuse and for failing to leave (self-blame). Blame and responsabilisation was also used as a strategy by the abusive partner to distort and control women. This came in the form of character assassination of their so-called 'crazy ex' therefore discrediting any warnings of abuse they might disclose. Some women spoke of being provided with 'red flags' by the abusive male's previous partner and *becoming the crazy ex* themselves when they shared with other women their own experiences of domestic abuse.

'Red flags' and self-blame

The unintended consequences of initiatives such as Clare's Law have been documented elsewhere (Barlow et al., 2023; Duggan, 2018; Hadjimatheou, 2023). Evidence indicates that DVDS can responsabilise women who fail to act on formal disclosures (Barlow et al., 2023), are held accountable for any harm caused to children and, as a result can be viewed as complicit in the abuse they experience themselves (Hadjimatheou, 2023). In a similar vein, when reminiscing about their previous domestic abuse experiences – even before the inception of Clare's Law disclosure schemes – our interview data revealed that all the women to some extent blamed themselves for failing to leave their relationship with their abuser. Respondents appeared to engage in self-blame when, on reflection, it became apparent that they had 'failed' to recognise warning signs for abuse; recognising the 'red flags'. One victim-survivor blamed her naivety and lack of 'life skills' for failing to recognise the coercive power her husband, a police officer, had exerted over her for many years (Terrie, 55, victim-survivor, White-British). She and one other woman also referred to their youthfulness and absence of previous relationship experience as being implicated in their failure to recognise the problems in their relationships. As one woman said,

OK, So I have been in three domestic violence relationships. The first one I didn't actually recognize it. It was controlling coercive behaviour. And being a young lady and not having much work experience and having limited friends, I was isolated by my ex-husband; all my friends were his friends and vice versa and a couple things like that it took time to realize that, that's all I knew, I didn't have any other relationship experiences cause he was my first boyfriend. So, it wasn't until I went to university and started to spread my wings a little bit, get my knowledge and get that understanding of the world that he didn't like that and that's when what I now know as red flags started to show up, but then, the marriage ended. (Anna, 45, victim-survivor, White-British)

Another woman similarly reflected on the fact that her failure to recognise 'red flags' was attributed to the lack of previous romantic relationships. She had no 'template' for knowing what was acceptable or healthy in a relationship. She said,

So I was 19 when I first like entered the relationship and it was my first serious relationship. You know, when you're like younger and have like boyfriends, but it lasts for months and it's just doesn't count. So this was like a first serious one and we met in Uni in [city]. And I think maybe at first everything was fine, but I also think because I didn't have a template of what was healthy, I couldn't really start picking apart red flags. Whereas now I can go back and think about it, so like it started for me, it definitely started with like more coercive controlling behaviours to begin with. (Jasmin, 27, victim-survivor, British-Indian)

Even though the abusive person they were speaking about was responsible for their behaviour, these women all appeared to place as much (if not more) responsibility on themselves. These accounts suggest had they only been older, more mature or more experienced, then they might have recognised these abusive behaviours as red flags and taken action by leaving the relationship earlier.

Noticing red flags for domestic abuse, however, did not necessarily translate into victim-survivors acting upon that knowledge. When reflecting on their experiences of domestic abuse, 15 women attributed blame to themselves for failing to acknowledge or act upon what they felt or knew to be red flags. In some cases, women acknowledged that they had become invested in the relationship and had chosen to ignore the signs as a result. This also led to self-blame:

When I am looking for a partner, I want the long term, stability, marriage, kids, that's what I am looking for. And I think people who have been through what I have are looking for this, you're not always looking in the direction of the right person. So even when you see the flags, you convince yourself you are imagining them, because you are so fixated on having a stable life that you haven't had before you know? You sort of ignore them (Tessa, 29, Black-British)

Another woman, who was 18 when she met her partner, said she was 'absolutely dotty about him' and was excited to start their lives together in their newly purchased home. She explained how she chose to ignore his admission of 'accidentally' hitting a previous partner, something which she now knew to be more serious and in 'hindsight' understood him telling her this to be his way of 'getting in there first' before hearing it from someone else. In retrospect, she now also blamed herself for forgiving him when he assaulted her for the first time:

And I was standing at the kitchen cooker, stirring the casserole that I was making, and he comes in through the door and it was quite shocking really, 'cause I'd never seen him like this, but he was punching walls. He threw his bag on the floor and was shouting and screaming and he told me that he'd been made redundant. I didn't know what to do really 'cause I thought we just moved into this house. He came into the kitchen, I carried on stirring the pot. I didn't really know what to do. I'd never seen him in that way before and he just walked right up to me and said 'What are you going to say about this?' That kind of thing and he just punched me in the face for no reason, out of his anger, and my nose was bleeding, and he was very apologetic immediately. 'Don't tell anyone', you know, 'it will never happen again'. I was really shook up from this. I had never ever experienced that before and never seen anything from him, never seen any red flags. So I didn't tell anyone and I forgave him (Nicky, 42, victim-survivor, White-British)

Another woman described her partner's behaviour as 'textbook' domestic abuse and was 'really cross' with herself for 'not recognising' and acting upon this earlier (Sam, 34, victim-survivor, White-British). Although describing her (ex)partner as initially 'wonderful, charismatic . . . and everything you could ever wish for in a partner', within 12 months of the relationship beginning he had become abusive and violent, particularly when drinking. Despite this, she blamed herself for choosing to ignore what she now knew to be a red flag the first time she met him. As she said,

. . . I was aware of the sort of person he was, but despite that I was still making wrong choices. So I think Clare's Law would be particularly effective if you start the relationship and you start to see those red flags, and you access Clare's Law before it starts getting serious. But you have got to have a good reason to access it. Whereas with hindsight, the very first night we met I saw a red flag that I chose to ignore. We had spent a night together in the pub, got on really well, and then a group of friends came in and he had a real tantrum, threw his pint across the room and stormed out. And I thought do you know what, I don't care if I don't see you again. And then he sent me a message the next day that was lovely and apologetic and so I put it behind me and sort of forgot about it. But looking back on that, me talking to other people, you know that was a huge red flag. So you almost need to have that natural distrust, be able to recognise red flags and not be in too deep I think which is when Clare's Law may be the most beneficial, realistically.

Sam contextualised her experiences within the context of Clare's Law and the limits of its efficacy, suggesting that for DVDS to work effectively, women need to both recognise the 'red flags', but to do so early enough before they become too invested in the relationship.

For the women interviewed in this project, a perception that they themselves had 'failed' to recognise these signs early resulted in self-blame. This was further complicated for the victim-survivors interviewed as part of this project whose role it was to support women who had experienced domestic abuse. For example, one woman worked at a domestic abuse charity and said she now 'always kick[ed] [her]self in the teeth' when reflecting on the abuse she experienced,

I was in a very controlling and coercive relationship as well but I never really saw the red flags until much later on, until I left the relationship and reflected on what happened. I then realized, I know that I have a lot of self-blame and feeling like I should have known better but I also know that people who are very manipulative and just target people. My understanding and experience of domestic abuse now, I'm on my own journey, healing and recovery, and I try to just raise awareness with other people and in every day-to-day conversation, just trying to have like normal, meaningful conversations, just to raise awareness. (Ameerah, 27, British Pakistani)

Raising awareness and educating people about red flags as a preventive strategy was raised by most of the women we interviewed. Ironically, having this knowledge left many of them feeling responsible for the domestic abuse they had experienced *and* for preventing it in the future. Recognising the red flags had become another form of common sense safety work where women internalised blame (even retrospectively) and responsabilised themselves when they failed to act upon what they knew. A cycle of

self-blame was also evident among the women we interviewed when the red flags in the abusive male partner's relationship histories were (perhaps) obvious but nonetheless ignored. As one woman said,

I was aware his previous partner had a non-molestation order out on him. And he wasn't permitted to see his son. Initially I thought 'what a cow, isn't she awful', but retrospectively I am like, what an idiot (Sam, 34, victim survivor, White-British)

In the following section, the second substantive theme identified from within this data is discussed: *Blame as a strategy of men's control: (becoming) the 'crazy ex'*. This theme illustrates how, what would ordinarily be considered reliable evidence of domestic abuse (such as that mentioned earlier), is distorted by men to exonerate themselves and apportion blame to women.

Blame as a strategy of men's control – (Becoming) the 'crazy ex'

Red flags emanating from women sharing information about their experiences of abuse by an ex-partner was sometimes welcomed by the women in this study. One woman noted how a woman had 'reached out' to tell her about a 'history of manipulating, coercing and stalking' but how she and other women had been 'too afraid to report' their experiences to the police (survey respondent). A DVDS would not have helped in this situation, as no abuse had been reported to the police, but the informal sharing of information between women provided validation for this respondent and her experiences of abuse. Another woman noted how she would not have known about domestic violence disclosure schemes had it not been for a woman contacting her 'anonymously after the event' (survey respondent). Notably, information sharing does not only occur between different criminal justice and other agencies. Women also share information informally. Indeed, while the role of peer support is relatively unexplored, evidence does suggest that reaching out to friends and family is the first call for women (see inter alia Burgess-Proctor, 2012; Naudi et al., 2018; Postmus et al., 2009). However, the extent to which victim-survivors rely and act upon the domestic abuse disclosures made by other women who are not known to them is complicated by widely accepted gendered and victim-blaming discourses.

In some cases in these data, it was the abusive men themselves who raised the issue of their ex-partners and how they viewed them. One woman told us that an elaboration by her abusive (ex)partner about police involvement in his previous relationship was sufficient to serve as a red flag:

One evening, after we had been in the house 5 months or so, he asked if I had been talking to the friends of his ex-wife. And he started talking about the police had been involved there, but was being very coy and said it was something she had done and even though he was a very clever man, that was a big mistake he made because he actually mentioned the police. (Diane, 46, victim survivor, White-British)

However, it was not always the case that victim-survivors recognised or welcomed women's allegations about an abusive male partner as red flags. This was made possible by counter-allegations of infidelity, drinking and substance abuse (Anna, female White-British) and by constructing them as failed women and bad mothers. Such elaborations were often used to conjure sympathy, described by the following woman who was trying to explain why she had failed to leave the abusive relationship when questioned by friends:

and then I think you know people, a lot of people asked me like 'well how did you meet him, and like you know how on earth did you end up staying? Nobody's hit me twice'. A lot of people I'd say that kind of thing and it's like well, I met this man he was telling me all these sob stories about how evil all these other women were, that he had been with and that all he'd ever wanted was just the best for his children. And you know that they were in his care, you know things like that. (Ellen, 33, victim-survivor, White-British)

Infidelity was drawn upon as a key strategy by abusive men to anticipate and mitigate concerns and exonerate themselves from previous police contact and convictions for domestic abuse. While both male and female infidelity within intimate relationships is harmful, sexual indiscretions are gendered in how they are perceived. For men, these often translate into sexual prowess associated with a socially desired masculinity, while for women sexual promiscuity is constructed in pejorative terms. Such gendered discourses can affect on whether women are seen as ideal victims – in other words, 'bad things don't happen to good girls' (Madriz, 1997). As one respondent said,

But he always said to me, that something has happened with his ex who he had a wee girl with and the police were involved, he got that in quite quickly but he totally played it down saying that he had caught her in a bed with another man and he'd hit the man and the police had come and he'd been charged with it. I think that was him dropping it in, in case someone mentioned it or something had got back to me. But what turned out, in the end I found out, he'd actually been abusive to her for six years, he'd broken her nose, and he'd climbed in a window to get to her, she was just in bed herself and he'd pinned her down and strangled her unconscious. (Karen, 42, victim survivor, White-British)

A similar story of infidelity to mitigate and distort victim-survivors' perceptions of previous domestic abuse was told by another woman:

But anyway, they said, they told me was he was flagged up on their system as a violent domestic abuser with history of using weapons. and then they went through the incidents and so they didn't even have to say the names. I knew which partners. 'cause I knew about them. He briefly told me about an incident with his ex. He has a child with her. But the story he told me was very different, he said it was a heated row before Christmas Day because she had another man in the house after they had broken up and so they ended up having a fight. And that's all he said to me. But the story that the police told me was very different, which is that he broke into the house by smashing the windows. He got into the house. She was in the house with a friend. And he then he slashed the man's face and back, and he punched and kicked the girl., but neither of the two people ever would give and give a statement or anything and he was never prosecuted for it. (Rachel, 50, White-British)

Inverting blame for domestic abuse was also a common strategy discussed by our respondents. Eight women said that their abusive ex-partners had claimed to be the victim of domestic abuse or ‘crazy’ women. Invoking the ‘crazy ex’ as a strategy of blame was used to distort victim-survivors understanding of their own experiences, conjure sympathy for the abuser in the aftermath of violence, and serve as a strategy for control when women tried to leave. Despite her abusive (ex)partner having an extensive domestic abuse history, the following woman did not seek support for some time believing that his abusive behaviour had only been used on her. She told us,

I was told a story about his ex and he’s got a daughter with his ex-partner. So I was kind of sort of told this story about how crazy she was, how controlling, how abusive she was and I had no reason not to believe it. You know and I think you know, there’s many men and women, of course, are able to tell you those kinds of stories, and why would you question it? And so, you know, that relationship wasn’t good from the start. You know, there wasn’t ever a relationship that I had with his ex, cause, his daughter used to come and stay, so there was never a good conversation. I’d been told this story about her and that was the end of that. Now you know, I’m sure I’m now the mad crazy ex. You know, he’ll just keep perpetuating that. (Laura, 47, White-British)

This quote illustrates stories of a ‘crazy ex’ that are used as a means of controlling them and for them to recognise how they had now become the crazy ex themselves. For another woman, having experienced elaborate stories about a ‘crazy ex’ during her own relationship had deterred her from warning other women for fear of not being believed:

So he had three girlfriends, so me and two other girls over the course of so many years. So I had nothing to do with his girlfriends. They came after me, but I didn’t bother warning them because I knew they would just say I was a crazy ex-girlfriend and I was, you know what he always did so I didn’t bother. But then one of his new girlfriends started doing weird stuff. So like adding me on Facebook but then not talk. I would remove her, but then I don’t know why, I just got this weird feeling that she was trying to tell me something but never did. Then one day I just started talking to her when she added me again and I just said, can I ask, ‘has he ever hit you’ and she said ‘yeah but please don’t tell anyone’. Then it all started coming out. Then I went and picked her up from his and she was covered in bruises. (Paige, 32, victim survivor, White-British)

Another woman reflected on her realisation that her ex-partner had framed her as the ‘crazy ex’:

And I questioned this with the solicitors and because he gaslighted me for years and said I was crazy and 4 years on. I have now realised that he did it on purpose because he had done it before to his ex-partner in different circumstances, but he intimidated her, gas lighted her and fortunately there was no children there but he knew how to hurt me with the children. (Maria, 57, victim survivor, White-British)

To achieve domination and control, perpetrators use what Biderman (1956) termed the monopolisation of perception: an enforced acceptance of a perpetrator’s perspective and interpretation of reality, in order to under-mine the victim-survivor (concept used by

Hadjimatheou, 2023). Henning and Holdford (2006) note the ways in which perpetrators frequently misrepresent their own histories to their partners and others around them to construct a reality whereby they are innocent victims themselves. Hadjimatheou (2023) outlines the ways in which police officers attempt to use criminal history disclosures within DVDS to counter and disrupt a perpetrators misrepresentation of themselves and to empower victims. However, as noted by the women in our study, knowing a partner's criminal history cannot in and of itself break the 'monopolisation of perception' that perpetrators hold, reducing the preventive power of DVDS. Thus, the experiences reported here, albeit from a small number of respondents, raise some interesting questions about where initiatives like DVDS fit when their efficacy is situated within women's real lives and their own practices and knowledges about information sharing.

Domestic abuse, information sharing and responsabilisation

The responsabilisation of women for the violence in their lives is not a new phenomenon. Women have long been rendered responsible for what happens in their relationships if only through the time worn question still asked of 'why doesn't she leave?' Failure to leave is still seen as a failure on the part of women to action in the face of the violence(s) she may be experiencing. This is despite a wealth of evidence that points to the powerlessness that many women living with violence(s) have, especially when living with a controlling partner in which physical violence is only part of the problem. The question preferred by feminist informed work of 'why does she stay?' captures some of the issues faced by women. These include the often overlooked but important question of 'love matters' (Kuennen, 2014) alongside the powerful social expectations associated with intimate partner relationships (Hayes, 2014) conjoined with the expectations of good motherhood (Stubbs and Wangmann, 2015). Seeking help, which includes information, under these circumstances, can be both intimidating and fraught with difficulties, made no less difficult when friends and family may be asking why she puts up with it (Storer et al., 2021). The experiences of the women in blaming themselves and being blamed by others for the shape and form of their relationships reported in this article fit well with this long-standing narrative. The question raised then is, if all of this is well-known, where might an information sharing scheme, like that of DVDS fit, if at all, for women living with, and/or suspecting they are potentially in a relationship with, a domestic abuse perpetrator? The women who took part in our study provide some tentative clues as to how this question might be answered. There are three avenues of interest here: the timing of information sharing, who shares information with whom and affording a space for taking account of women's real lives. Each of these is discussed in turn in what follows.

The question of timing in relation to information sharing is an interesting but important one. Women will only act on what they know, or indeed what they are told, about their abusive partner when they are ready to do so. The barriers to doing otherwise are well-documented in the literature. The enablers for such action include information alongside support from family, friends, having the financial resources available, alternative housing opportunities and so on (see *inter alia* Kirkwood, 1993, on leaving abusive partners). In other words, simply telling a woman, especially if she has not requested the

information, whether by formal or informal means, that her partner has an abusive history is at best only going to add to her concerns, especially if she is aware of 'red flags' and choosing not to act on them for all the reasons that are well-known. However, in the longer term, such information may also assist her. Getting the timing right on when this information is given is therefore of the essence.

The question of who shares information with whom raises a slightly different question that emanates from the respondents reported on here. DVDS assumes an information sharing flow from criminal justice professionals and others to women. It is 'top-down' and women are legally prohibited from sharing this information outside of the disclosure. The women in our study, however, reported sharing and receiving *personal domestic abuse experiences* from their partners' ex-partners, women who were not known to them previously. This is side-ways or democratic information sharing. Yet, the 'top-down' approach of policy seems to operate as if the shared and/or democratic practices of people's real lives does not exist and/or is not meaningful for those participating in schemes like DVDS. Women's sharing of their domestic abuse experiences, as we have shown, did in some cases act as a red flag which prompted victim-survivors to seek formal disclosures from the police. For others, such efforts were circumvented by abusive men who sought to capitalise on the gendered and victim-blaming discourses which so often prevent women from leaving abusive relationships. As suggested by the women here and elsewhere (Barlow et al., 2023), the decision to leave an abusive relationship was rarely based on a single disclosure, but rather a culmination of many pieces of information from different sources. Therefore, those agencies tasked with sharing disclosures could better support victim-survivors by engaging them in conversations that explore the various narratives to which they are exposed.

Finally, the data reported in this article speaks strongly to the need for policies of all kinds in relation to domestic abuse to make a space for women's real lives, especially in relation to the challenges they face when living with men's violence(s). That they, along with all women, engage in safety work on a routine, daily basis is an important place to start in ensuring that such recognition is taken on board. These women knew how to keep themselves and their children safe. Offering them more information, frequently in the absence of any other kind of support (Barlow et al., 2023), did not help or assist them but only served to make them further responsible adding to the strength of self-blame and the capacity of others to blame them.

Conclusion

The layers of 'safety work' women must engage in as a response to prevent male violence in everyday life is extensive (Stanko, 1990; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). This article has discussed the ways in which this extends beyond 'everyday intrusions' in public space, to the ways in which women navigate the internalisation of 'red flag' discourses, self-blame, the blame of others and constructions of the 'crazy ex' within a relationship. Women are persistently held responsible for their actions or inactions within the context of domestic abuse, including blaming themselves. However, at what point are women no longer going to be blamed or held responsible for not preventing men's violence and abuse? DVDS is intended to protect victim-survivors by disclosing a partner's criminal

history of violence. Evidence increasingly suggests such schemes are falling short in this regard (Hadjimatheou, 2022, 2023). Nevertheless such schemes have travelled the globe and have found a place in Scotland, Canada, New Zealand and are under consideration (again) in Australia. Indeed, that DVDS was introduced as a knee-jerk policy to a high-profile public campaign by a domestic abuse victims' family rather than victim-survivor themselves (Barlow et al., 2023) has in some respects become all the evidence other jurisdictions have required to introduce similar schemes (Walklate and Fitz-Gibbon, 2018). All this has taken place in the absence of talking to women about what would work for them.

As outlined here, victim-survivors are often already engaging in informal processes of information sharing regarding an abusive partner's violent history. This includes sharing with and between ex and current partners of their abuser. For some victim-survivors, engaging in *informal* information sharing processes seemed to circumnavigate *official* information sharing processes. Victim-survivors reluctance to engage with the police about their experiences of domestic abuse are well-documented, thus this favouring informal information sharing is unsurprising. Given the rising presence of social media since DVDS was introduced in England Wales (2014) the time is ripe to reconsider the formulation and implementation of this scheme to take account of what has been called here democratic information sharing processes. The statutory guidance for DVDS produced in the wake of the 2021 Domestic Abuse Act is notably for the absence of such considerations. The work suggests that it is timely to redress this.

In sum, many victim-survivors 'know' about their partner and are responsabilised if they do not do anything about this soon enough (i.e. leave the relationship), even though the difficulties of leaving are well-documented. At the same time, they are responsabilised for a failed relationship if they do act on information received. It would seem for some of the respondents we spoke to, they were doomed on both counts. Thus, the extent to which a formalised process of knowing (i.e. through the DVDS) can help women navigate their way through the process of leaving in 'real life' remains open to debate.

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