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Community and Safety

Paula:  Do any of them ever help you out with anything like lend you things, or can you borrow stuff off them?
Lucy:  Yeah, yeah, next door, they always like if I'm really, really like skint at weekend then [female neighbour] will lend me some money like till Monday ...
Paula:  And do you help them out as well in any way?
Lucy:  Yes, when she hasn't got nobody to look after the kids cause like they do pools on a Thursday night and it's a bit hard taking kids with them, so I watch kids sometimes for her.

Introduction

In the last chapter we saw that women disclose domestic violence to family and friends before turning elsewhere for support. Most family and friends gave support of some kind but this was inconsistent in its helpfulness. In this chapter I broaden my lens, taking an overview of the wider community in which women lived their lives looking at the nature of support in the wider community, from neighbours and social agencies. Research and practice over the past decade demonstrates improving responses to domestic violence in social agencies (although still more needs to be done) but we have much less knowledge about responses amongst the community-at-large. Indeed, whilst there has been a resurgence of interest in community in many fields this has been singularly missing in relation to domestic violence in the UK (Walklate, 2002). Furthermore, I argue that the dichotomisation of formal from informal support has hidden the ways in which they intersect. The aims of this
chapter are, therefore, threefold: to look at responses in women’s neighbourhoods, to assess agency responses towards women participants and to explore the intersection of informal support with formal support.

**Informal support in the community**

**The neighbourhood**

An important factor for the women who had to leave their own homes/communities was the neighbourhood they moved into. The study neighbourhood was located in an area of local authority social housing, of considerable poverty and deprivation; employment was scarce and transport into the city centre expensive. Little neighbourhood infrastructure existed to facilitate women new to the area in making social contacts and friendships. I asked the women to rank the factors they thought important in their new neighbourhood. They ranked as positive: firstly, a quiet and safe area, secondly, good public transport and local shops and thirdly, friendly neighbours. Women wanted to feel safe and to live in an area which had the necessary infrastructure to combat feelings of isolation. They ranked as negative: an unsafe area for children to grow up in.

Neighbourhoods impact significantly on women’s prospects for building positive futures for themselves and their children. A safe neighbourhood with good quality housing increases women’s sense of safety. Moving to an unsafe neighbourhood, into a house in disrepair, has the opposite effect. In the present study four of the women said they felt unsafe where they had been re-housed, supporting Nicky Charles’ contention that housing agencies do not always take safety sufficiently into consideration in offering accommodation to women leaving violence (1994, p. 481). Whilst most of the women were housed in safe neighbourhoods, a significant minority had negative experiences. Lucy and Louise had different experiences on the same estate due to variation at neighbourhood level:

*This bit here what I’m on, it’s like quiet, I mean it’s brilliant on this bit, but further down [estate] it’s really, really bad, there’s all like drug addicts and taking heroin and I mean no end of times we’ve been up at school and there’s been like needles on school and we have had to move ‘em before kids go on ‘em and that, but I mean it can be good but there’s also like really, really bad points for it* (Lucy).