The Problem of Domestic Abuse and Homicide

What do we know about domestic homicide?

The human cost

Domestic abuse and domestic homicide are closely related. Most domestic homicides are preceded by domestic abuse, and experts argue that they are predictable (Adams 2007). The worldwide scale of domestic abuse against women is staggering and in some countries up to 71 per cent of women will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2013). In the UK the figure is believed to be 1 in 4, and 1 in 3 in Scotland, though Bradbury-Jones and Taylor urge caution when looking at these figures because domestic abuse is widely under-reported. The NSPCC (2014) report over 3,000 calls a year from adolescents experiencing violence in a relationship, and one in ten calls are from boys.

Domestic homicide, or more specifically for our purposes, intimate partner femicide (IPF), is a problem of substantial proportions on a global scale. Women across the world are being killed by their intimate partners, or former intimate partners, at significant rates. Women are at much greater risk than men of being murdered by an intimate partner, for example, statistics from the USA in 2002 show that of all the domestic homicides committed by a spouse, 81 per cent of the victims were wives; and of all those committed by a non-married intimate partner, 71 per cent of the victims were women (Chanmugam 2014). Women are nine times more likely to be killed by their intimate partner than by a stranger (Campbell et al. 2007) even though nearly all safety advice to women and girls focuses on stranger danger. IPV is also the most common cause of non-fatal injuries in women, and the biggest cause of traumatic death and injury in pregnant and post-partum women in the USA (Van Wormer and Roberts 2009). Research has shown that women
are reluctant for many reasons to seek help from criminal justice agencies, but when they do they are not always seeking prosecution, they just want the abuse to stop (Hester 2013a). Many victims will have a history of accessing healthcare as a result of abuse. An American study found that 74 per cent of murdered women and 88 per cent of survivors had sought treatment for an IPV injury from emergency services in the previous year (Roehl et al. 2005). There are cases where the woman never discloses the abuse she is suffering, but it should be noted that domestic homicide almost never occurs out of the blue. A common misunderstanding is that a domestic homicide occurs as a result of a particularly heated argument where the man has accidentally ‘lost it’ and killed the woman in an incident that could not have been predicted. Many domestic homicides are represented this way in media reporting, and even in official forensic narratives (Monckton Smith 2012). This is a problem in itself as the risk to women of homicide from abuse are not fully understood, and therefore not responded to. When police, magistrates, judges, coroners, doctors, healthcare providers, social services, housing agencies and others all share the same dominant discursive construction of domestic abuse and homicide, it becomes the ‘truth’ of the problem. Juodis et al. (2014) and Adams (2007) argue that most domestic homicide involves planning and can be predicted. It is also inaccurate to assume that it is violence which best predicts domestic homicide, Stark (2013) reports that coercive control is a better predictor of domestic homicide by a ratio of 9:1. Domestic abuse is a term which better captures the risk and dangerous behaviours than the term domestic violence. Some use the term everyday terrorism to illustrate the fear and control involved in high risk abuse.

A history of domestic abuse is the biggest predictor for future abuse (Stark 2007), and men who abuse their partners are usually serial abusers. Two women a week are killed by current or former intimate partners in the UK (Hester 2009), three a day in the USA (VPC 2005), one every six hours in South Africa (Matthews et al. 2004), 5,000 a year in Pakistan (Chang 2010), and three a week in Spain (ABC 2010); it is the only category for homicide in which women predominate as victims. But these numbers do not capture the full extent of the problem, many domestic homicides are not classified as such, but are misinterpreted as, for example, car accidents, suicides, suicide pacts, accidents, sex games, and drug abuse. Wherever there has been a history of abuse and a sudden death occurs, homicide should always be considered. An Australian coroner even re-opened hundreds of cases after realising that many may have been given the wrong verdict (Passmore and Weston 2011). But apart from homicide deaths, the number of suicides by women who are known to