Information Sheet 2
Domestic Abuse

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is a pattern of any form of physical, verbal, sexual, psychological, spiritual or financial abuse which take place within the context of an intimate relationship. Domestic abuse can happen to anyone, regardless of age, class, sexual orientation, ability, race, gender or religion.

In Scotland, legally, domestic abuse is abuse between partners or ex partners although abusive patterns of behaviour can also be found in other family relationships. We define domestic abuse as a perpetrator using a persistent pattern of coercive and abusive behaviour which is intended to exercise power and control over a partner or ex partner and which may cause physical, sexual or emotional harm.

We agree with the Scottish and UK governments, the United Nations and the World Health Organisation that domestic abuse is a form of gender-based violence. We know that domestic abuse is, in the majority of cases, experienced by women and children and perpetrated by men. In Scotland in 2024-25, over 80% of victims of police recorded domestic abuse incidents were women. When we look beyond individual incidents, at patterns of abuse, where there are multiple incidents over a period of time, women are victims in almost 90% of cases.

We recognise that men and women experience domestic abuse differently and therefore we recognise that our responses to domestic abuse need to be gendered in order to support all survivors effectively.

Coercive Control

Traditionally, domestic abuse has been understood as a single incident or series of incidents of physical violence carried out by a partner or ex-partner. Sometimes, domestic abuse was considered a ‘fight’ between two equals. Coercive control provides a different way to think about domestic abuse which moves beyond looking only at physical violence. Coercive control is a pattern of behaviour including threats, humiliation, assault and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish or frighten a victim. Coercive control is designed to make a person subordinate to or dependent upon their partner by isolating them from external sources of support, depriving them of their independence and of the ability to resist and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour

Coercive control is sometimes referred to as domestic terrorism because of the impact it has on a survivor. Focusing on coercive control allows us to understand the full picture of what is going on in an abusive relationship rather than looking only at individual incidents of violence.

Coercive control is criminalised in Scotland in the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018.

What is the difference between domestic abuse and situational couple violence?

Domestic abuse is a pattern of controlling behaviour, and does not necessarily involve physical violence. Domestic abuse is therefore different from either violence used as selfdefence or from what some sociologists call 'situational couple violence'. Situational couple violence is perpetrated more equally by men and women and refers to one-off, sometimes extreme, sometimes low level, acts of violence in response to a conflict in a relationship. While this is unhealthy and unacceptable in any relationship, this form of violence is not domestic abuse as it is not part of a pattern of other controlling behaviours that we define as coercive control.

Through working on violence against women, girls and children, we want to create a gender just church where healthy, positive relationships are enjoyed by everyone and where no one experiences unhealthy relationship behaviours or domestic abuse.

Children, Young People and Domestic Abuse

Children growing up in households where domestic abuse occurs are affected by seeing, hearing and experiencing domestic abuse, even when it is not directed specifically at them. Abusive behaviour directed towards children and young people can also be considered separately under child abuse or neglect provisions. However, the law in Scotland now recognises that witnessing domestic abuse is in itself a form of domestic abuse, which can have a serious impact on the health and wellbeing of children and young people. Teenagers and young people can also experience domestic or sexual abuse in their own relationships.

We are committed to offering our best possible pastoral care to everyone who has experienced domestic abuse, regardless of age or gender, and to help them access any support or resources they may need.