

# **Violence and Learning: Issues of Inclusivity**

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### **Introduction**

This short paper is designed to support teachers in the Lifelong Learning Sector to think about the issue of violence in their practice. Even though we may not be aware of it, the experience of violence will be present in the lives of many adults who we teach. It frequently remains invisible, unaccounted for and something that educators feel uncomfortable acknowledging and engaging with. It is often seen as a private issue which is outside of the remit of teaching and learning; something that stays outside the classroom door. And yet figures would suggest that it is not an isolated experience affecting only a few people. It is a large scale and hidden problem.

As educators, particularly if we believe in the democratic principles of education (Freire 1972), we cannot ignore the lived experiences of the people we teach. To look at the issue of violence and its relationship to learning we will start by considering what it is, where and how frequently it occurs and what the cost is to individuals and society. Domestic violence is an area that is particularly invisible, frequently seen as a 'personal problem' and one related to the private domain of home and family life. Whilst aware of the many forms and contexts of violence in people's lives domestic/gender violence will be the focus here. It is an area that has benefited from interventions from both activists and policy makers and will provide a concrete and important example to raise the issue of violence in people's lives and the relationship of this to learning.

### **Violence in people's lives: The cost to individuals and society**

Violence is often a hidden part of the experience of many people that we teach, both children and adults. Our concerns here will be adults and teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector, but there is obviously much overlap with some childhood experiences being carried into adulthood and some adults supporting children with experiences of violence.

The interconnectedness of violence is important to understand, both in people's lives and in society. We cannot simply see violence as random or individual acts; it tells us much about the structures and health of our society. As such it is a barometer illustrating the relationship of people to the state and the social values that we live by. The Learning and Violence website, a collaboration between practitioners, trainers and activists, describes this interconnectedness:

*It is important to see the whole range of violence in one picture – including state and individual, public and private. Violence includes childhood sexual, emotional, and physical violence; "domestic" violence and stalking; rape and the threat of rape in the public sphere; dangerous working conditions, state-*

*sanctioned violence. Racism, ableism, homophobia, poverty, sexism, and other oppressions foster violence. ([www.learningandviolence.net](http://www.learningandviolence.net))*

Adult learners coming to learn, whatever the subject and whatever the level of study may be seeking refugee or asylum in the UK. They may have come with experience of physical violence, torture, imprisonment, loss of family and dislocation from their home countries. Other learners targeted by Lifelong Learning provision, particularly the 14-19 age group, may be young and homeless with experience of violence in families or relationships, on the streets and in relation to drug or alcohol dependency. For some women, violence, sometimes in addition to those mentioned above, takes place within the family and within intimate relationships.

The pattern of violence that people experience depends on their gender, race, cultural and religious background as well as sexual identities. A large research programme found that:

*The patterns explored here show that the various forms of violence are different for different people. Women are most likely to be physically and sexually assaulted by men. Men are most likely to be physically and sexually assaulted by other men. Children are at risk from those who have access to them: the family and school feature prominently as sites of children's abuse. Those who experience discrimination because they are gay or lesbian, have experienced psychiatric treatment, or have mental health problems, are members of disabled, disfigured, racial, religious or 'ethnic minorities', also report high levels of violence. (Stanko, O' Beirne, Zaffalo 2002: 42)*

Violence impacts upon individuals and their families in many ways including mental and physical health, confidence and material resources. Figures show rates of homophobic, antiracist and other forms of violent and abusive behaviour in our society (see for example Social Trends [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk) and the ESRC report on interpersonal violence, Stanko, O' Beirne, Zaffalo 2002), although these 'hate crimes' are likely to be underreported.

Domestic violence, often termed gendered violence, is part of the pattern of violence that mainly women experience. It is difficult to calculate precise figures for domestic violence as it is not part of official crime figures. However, many involved in campaigning around domestic violence issues suggest the figures are alarmingly high. Women's Aid, a national campaigning and support organisation, say that it is as high as two deaths a week. They also show the high number of women who are affected by domestic violence:

*1 in 4 women experience domestic violence in their lifetime and between 1 in 8 to 1 in 10 women experience it annually. Less than half of all incidents are reported*

*to the Police, but they still receive one domestic violence call every minute in the UK. (www.womensaid.org.uk).*

The impact of gender related violence often results in long term health problems, both physical and mental; disruption to families and schooling; physical dislocation and; poverty. All of these potentially impact upon learning.

Domestic violence is also seen as a social issue affecting the stability and equality of society. A government backed report commissioned by the Women and Equality Unit called *The Cost of Domestic Violence* (Walby 2004) showed the social cost of gendered violence. It found that domestic violence cost the state around £3.1 billion and employers around £1.3 billion. Added to which the human and emotional cost is estimated to be £17 billion – in total £23 billion. Many of the activists in this campaign felt it important to make visible to government what social issues are carried as hidden costs and individual burdens.

A study focusing on young people's experiences of violence found that violence was not 'something out there,' it often occurred or was know about in intimate relationships. The study found that:

- 23% of young women and 7% of young men knew someone who had been forced to have sex.
- 56% of young women and 31% of young men knew someone who had been hit by a partner.
- 65 of young women and 15% of young men had been told about an abusive experience by a friend or relative.
- About a third of young women and young men also know a perpetrator. (Kelly and Lovett 2005: 8)

This suggests that friends and peers may be aware of experiences of violence in classmates and in friendship circles even if teachers, or those who support their education, are unaware.

## **Violence and learning**

Where writers/activists have looked at violence against women in post-compulsory education (e.g. Horsman 1990, 2000, 2004; Morrish, Horsman and Hofner 2002; Raphel 2000; Mojab and Mc Donald 2001) they provide compelling evidence to show how violence affects learners' and their learning. Many of these writers make the link with the physical and physiological effects of experiencing violence with those of post-traumatic stress. This affects the ability to concentrate, to trust others, to interact in social settings, to be able to plan for the future, to have confidence in ones self and the ability to retain information and learn new skills. These are all important factors in being able to learn successfully.

Recent research linking lives and learning (Barton et al 2007; Appleby 2008) shows the importance of taking account of people's histories, current circumstances and futures, including violence. Non-attendance, lack of concentration and difficulties in prioritising learning can be viewed differently when the experience of the learner and the complexity of their life is central to teaching and learning.

Two examples from this research, Suzanne and Caroline, show the impact of violence on lives and learning.

**Suzanne** was forty years old and had been living on her own for nearly eighteen months with her three-year-old daughter. She comes from a large family in Liverpool where she experienced physical violence and neglect from an early age. Her family lived in poverty with much ill health. Experiencing bullying and violence both inside and outside the home, she left school unable to read or write. In her late teens she lived with her father in a one bed roomed flat looking after him; she was unable to do paid work or have any independence. Suzanne acknowledged that her early marriage was her escape route, soon finding that she had left one place of domestic and financial imprisonment for another. Her husband became increasingly violent with the birth of their two sons. He refused to work, staying at home to "keep an eye" on her and monitoring all her movements. Suzanne was dependent on him for her day-to-day existence, unable to read household bills or read instructions on food. An attempt at learning at a local college led to derision and resentment from him accusing her of "being stupid". She became increasingly frightened, isolated and lonely "going off her head" as her sons began to adopt their fathers' behaviour, becoming violent towards her.

After the birth of her daughter Suzanne went to a refuge making contact with a local self-run domestic violence support group. Suzanne described living independently as terrifying. She was scared of the ever-present threat of her husband's violence towards her and her daughter; she was scared of not being able to manage to run a house and of getting into debt; she was scared of not being able to look after her daughter properly or giving her food poisoning because she was unable to read the food instructions; and her biggest fear was that she would lose her daughter if the "authorities" deemed her to be an unfit mother. Without being able to read she had to navigate the complex legal system to divorce her husband and establish supervised visiting to their daughter.

Suzanne described being depressed and sometimes overwhelmed by the stress not knowing "whether they are going to take my baby" and not being able to read the documentation and reports that were written by various professionals about her. This made her angry, both because she couldn't read what was written about her and also because she felt that her values and experience as a parent were disregarded by the official system. Suzanne wanted to learn to read and write for herself, she wanted to live independently and to be able, for the first time in her life, to get a job.

Suzanne struggled to find learning opportunities that recognised the violence in her life. Without this recognition she felt alienated, silenced and further marginalized. Like Caroline, below, she was very committed to learn but frequently found that learning was 'hard to reach'.

**Caroline** was in her late forties when we met her when she regularly attended a Structured Day Programme. During her high school years she did well, coming top of the class with good

reports, but became fed up in her last year wanting to leave. During that final year she started going out and drinking, by the time she was 20 she was married and soon had two children. Although she trained and got a good secretarial job she had to leave this because of childcare difficulties. After this she ended up with unskilled work and what she called 'daft jobs' like factory work.

After moving to a new area, marriage difficulties and a divorce Caroline remarried again. After three children from the new marriage Caroline divorced her second husband as he drank continually and was violent. She described this time as the worst in her life, dropping the kids off to school and drinking herself in public areas all day. As her health deteriorated she was referred to a local detox unit - somewhere she has now attended over 20 times. She has also been in unsuccessful short term residential as well as more successful longer term longer term structured rehab. When she returns home she faces the same issues.

Caroline always wanted to learn but when she attended college she felt different than the other people who talked about their families, hobbies and recent consumer purchases. She was unable to tell anyone about her alcohol dependency and the pressure meant that she drank to be able to manage her anxiety surrounding this. She found learning with 'normal' people difficult and found the Structured Day Programme, delivered by tutors from the local college, provided a secure place to be that wasn't pressurised – so she was more able to succeed at her own pace whilst managing lapses of drinking. Caroline was managing to do courses in IT, art, creative writing and music technology. She felt with her growing confidence that she would try college again, something that seems more possible as the tutor who she liked and trusted would be there to support her in her local college.

What these two cases show is that people come to learning with many existing skills and abilities even if their life, when we meet them as their teachers, is complex or turbulent. What we found in the research was that connecting lives and learning is important, especially for those who struggled with compulsory education at school. As educators we need to build bridges into learning for people like Suzanne and Caroline, which includes taking account of their experiences of violence.

We also need to be aware that if one in four women experience domestic violence at some point in their lives we are likely to have students in the class with this experience. If we teach, on average 20 students per class and have 6 classes a week we are in contact with 120 learners a year. According to the figures, one in four, or 30 women that we teach, will have experience of domestic violence. It is likely that we are unaware of this.

### **How can we respond?**

By being aware of the invisibility surrounding violence, particularly domestic violence, we can make it 'present' in our teaching. We can do this by understanding how violence may create barriers to participation and learning, becoming aware of the need to address this as part of inclusive learning. We can do this by questioning whether what

might be interpreted as apathy or erratic attendance might in fact be related to violence that makes learning difficult. We can be aware that experiences of gendered violence may be part of the lives of our students, our friends and our colleagues.

We can ask questions ourselves about why people drop out, or are unable to successfully learn. For example the Poppy Project, which supports trafficked women, carried out a research project to find out why there was low take up of ESOL (English as Second and Other Language) classes (Campbell 2006). They were able to make changes to support the learning of the women more effectively based upon their findings. We can add to work being carried out by using and developing existing resources. The Violence and Learning website is a good example of this. Take a look inside, see if you can use any of the resources in your teaching and learning and let us know if you would like to contribute anything.

[www.learningandviolence.net](http://www.learningandviolence.net)

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### References

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### **Web Resources**

Safer Lancashire at [www.saferlancashire.co.uk](http://www.saferlancashire.co.uk)

*Violence and Learning: Taking Action* (written by Mary Norton) at [www.nald.ca/fulltext/valta/cover.htm](http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/valta/cover.htm)

Violence and Learning Web site [www.learningandviolence.net/](http://www.learningandviolence.net/)

Women's Aid at [www.womansaid.org.uk](http://www.womansaid.org.uk)

Woman's National Commission at [www.thewnc.org.uk](http://www.thewnc.org.uk)