

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

ABORTION AND DOMESTIC ABUSE



THE **SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF UNBORN CHILDREN** IS THE UK'S LEADING PRO-LIFE CAMPAIGNING ORGANISATION AND THE OLDEST PRO-LIFE GROUP IN THE WORLD

This leaflet explains the correlations between abortion and domestic abuse, and why removing abortion from the criminal law would put vulnerable women at further risk.

While abortion supporters use domestic abuse victims to argue for an expansion of abortion access, abortion can be a tool of abusers.

What is the relationship between IPV and abortion?

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a strong risk factor for abortion all over the world.^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7} The relationship between domestic violence and abortion appears to operate in two ways. First, a context of violence leads to coerced abortion, and second, abortion itself appears to promote further violence.⁸

The association between IPV and repeat abortion indicates that there is often a repetitive cycle of abuse and pregnancy.⁹

What are the rates of abuse victims undergoing abortions?

- A WHO multi-country study of women's health and domestic violence found that women with a history of IPV had increased odds of unintended pregnancy and almost an abortion rate almost three times higher.¹⁰
- In a study of London clinics, there was a six times higher rate of IPV in women undergoing abortion compared with women receiving antenatal care.¹¹

What are the consequences for women?

- Coercion and pressure are well-established risk factors for women's psychological adjustment to abortion.^{12,13} This means they are more likely to suffer mental health problems as a result.
- Women who had experienced IPV were also more likely to experience suicidal ideation if they had a history of perinatal loss, whether it was abortion, stillbirth or miscarriage.¹⁴



What could be done to help women?

Healthcare professionals should know which organisations and advocates are available to provide support in the clinical setting and in the community; for example social workers, victim advocates, domestic violence agencies, shelters, rape crisis centres, and child protective services.¹⁵ Guidelines from some official bodies (eg the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists) recommend that healthcare services should identify issues such as IPV among women seeking abortion and refer them to appropriate support services.

Domestic violence and abortion law

Abortion advocates have put forward the plight of domestic abuse victims as a reason to decriminalise abortion, and to scale down or effectively eliminate medical oversight.

However, removing abortion from the criminal law would make it easier for abusive men to force women into having abortions. Sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act, which constitute parts of the law regulating abortion, and which abortion advocates want to repeal, have been used to prosecute men who have brought about (or tried to bring about) a forced/coerced abortion.

Case study: Why the criminal law is important

Isaac Lyndsay, aged 27 from London, forced the mother of his unborn child to take the abortion drug Misoprostol. The woman had become pregnant during a casual sexual relationship with Lyndsay and he persuaded her to take the abortion drugs by falsely telling her that he had been diagnosed with cancer. Before exploiting the woman Lyndsay carried out a range of internet searches which included the entries such as, “how to convince your partner to have an abortion” and “what drugs to use to terminate a pregnancy”.

Lyndsay enlisted two accomplices to obtain the abortion drugs. They were then given to the woman, who was past the 24-week abortion time-limit.

During the trial which followed, the judge dismissed charges against the woman and told her that she had been in a controlling relationship with Lyndsay. Lyndsay had told the woman that the baby was unwanted.

The prosecution said that the woman had always wanted to keep the child. She had previously booked an appointment at a Marie Stopes clinic, but did not go ahead. The baby survived the attempted Misoprostol abortion.

Lyndsay and the accomplices admitted to conspiring to administer poison to the woman to procure a miscarriage, **an offence under section 58 of the Offences Against the Person Act**. Lyndsay was sentenced to seven years imprisonment, and his accomplices to three years each for aiding him.¹⁶

Domestic abuse and home abortion

Recent changes allowing abortion providers to send women abortion pills in the post without seeing a doctor in person raise particular concerns for victims of domestic abuse.

- With a telemedicine consultation, there is no way to ensure a woman is alone and can speak freely.
- Once abortion pills are removed from a medical setting, it is impossible to control who takes them – and under what circumstances.

- Women may have to go through the horrific abortion process with only the abuser present.
- It is much more difficult to identify domestic abuse via a phone call or video call.



Case study: One woman's experience

A 39 year old woman with three children from a previous relationship and with a "very controlling" partner told a newspaper:

"I was asked on the phone before I went to the clinic what my reasons were for having a termination, but that was it.

"At the clinic, they offered me the tablets to take away, but I said to send them through the post. I wasn't ready. It all seemed so fast. I was expecting to speak to lots of people, to be offered counselling.

"It didn't feel like a medical procedure. It took me less time to sort out than to do my Asda shopping.'

"...six hours [after taking misoprostol tablets] the pain was unbearable. I was lying on my bathroom floor, curled in a ball. I was sweating, my temperature was 39.8°C, I couldn't move.

"I had diarrhoea, I was being sick, I was shivering, shaking, sweating. I thought I was going to die.

The next day I felt really sick, faint and dizzy. I'm still bleeding even now, a few weeks on. Because my partner is here and doesn't know what I did, I've not been able to ring anyone for any advice."

Daily Mail, 29 May 2020

- ¹ Pallitto CC *et al.* (2013) Intimate partner violence, abortion, and unintended pregnancy: results from the WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence. *Int J Gynecology Obstetrics* 120:3-9.
- ² Hedin LW & Janson PO (2000) Domestic violence during pregnancy: the prevalence of physical injuries, substance use, abortions and miscarriages. *ActaObstetriciaetGynecologicaScandinavica* 79:625-630.
- ³ Taft AJ & Watson LF (2007) Termination of pregnancy: associations with partner violence and other factors in a national cohort of young Australian women. *Aust NZ J Public Health* 31(2):135-142.
- ⁴ Coker AL (2007) Does physical intimate partner violence affect sexual health? A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 8:149-177.
- ⁵ Fanslow Fet *al.* (2008) Pregnancy outcomes and intimate partner violence in New Zealand. *Aust NZ JObstet&Gynaecol* 48:391-397.
- ⁶ Coleman PK *et al.* (2009) Predictors and Correlates of Abortion in the Fragile Families and Well-Being Study: Paternal Behavior, Substance Use, and Partner Violence. *Int J Mental Health & Addiction* 7(3):405-422.
- ⁷ Silverman JGet *al.* (2010) Male perpetration of intimate partner violence and involvement in abortions and abortion-related conflict. *Am J Public Health* 100 (8):1415-1417.
- ⁸ Stephenson R *et al.* (2016) Domestic Violence and Abortion Among Rural Women in Four Indian States. *Violence Against Women* 22(13):1642-1658.
- ⁹ Hall Met *al.* (2014) Associations between intimate partner violence and termination of pregnancy: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLOS Medicine* 11(1):e1001581.
- ¹⁰ Pallitto CC *et al.* (2013)
- ¹¹ Wokoma TT *et al.* (2014) A comparative study of the prevalence of domestic violence in women requesting a termination of pregnancy and those attending an antenatal clinic. *BJOG* 121:627-633.
- ¹² Coyle CT *et al.* (2015) The relationship of abortion and violence against women: Violence prevention strategies and research needs. *Issues in Law & Medicine* 30(2):111-127.
- ¹³ Coleman PK *et al.* (2017)
- ¹⁴ Gulliver P & Fanslow J (2013) Exploring risk factors for suicidal ideation in a population-based sample of New Zealand women who have experienced intimate partner violence. *Aust NZ J Public Health* 37(6):527-33.
- ¹⁵ Miller E & Silverman JG (2010) Reproductive coercion and partner violence: implications for clinical assessment of unintended pregnancy. *Expert Rev Obstet&Gynecol* 5(5):511.
- ¹⁶ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7798101/Father-27-jailed-seven-years-manipulating-mother-abortion.html>

Are you struggling after an abortion experience?
Call us today on our Helpline **0345 603 8501**



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