

ABUS

Out of sight, out of mind?

Transgender People's Experiences of Domestic Abuse



In memory of Samantha, a young woman with a transsexual background,
who died after experiencing many of the issues detailed in this report.

Research by:

Amy Roch

Graham Ritchie

LGBT Youth Scotland

James Morton

Equality Network

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FOREWORD

This research lifts the lid on transgender people's experience of domestic abuse in Scotland. The limited research available suggests that prevalence rates of domestic abuse may be higher for transgender people than any other section of the population. That statement is what led the LGBT Domestic Abuse Project (managed by LGBT Youth Scotland), in partnership with the Scottish Transgender Alliance (managed by the Equality Network), to examine transgender people's experience of domestic abuse in Scotland.

The picture painted is one of high levels of prejudice and abuse in transgender people's relationships and home life, coupled with unacceptable negative experiences of accessing services and support when they are so fundamental.

LGBT Youth Scotland and the Equality Network support the recommendations of the report in helping to ensure that transgender people experience an adequate and positive response, regardless of the service they access. We are committed to working with the gender-based violence sector to improve things for transgender people experiencing domestic abuse and we encourage others to do the same.



Fergus McMillan
Chief Executive
LGBT Youth Scotland



Tim Hopkins
Director
Equality Network

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We would especially like to thank all the people who gave their time to share their personal experiences, without them the research would not have been possible.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Although there has been some research published looking specifically at same-sex domestic abuse and the prevalence rate of domestic abuse for lesbians, gay men and (to a lesser extent) bisexual people, there has been no published research focussed solely on transgender people's experiences of domestic abuse in the UK. General research estimates that 73 percent of transgender people have experienced transphobic harassment¹ and the Scottish Transgender Alliance found that 46 percent of transgender respondents to their 'Transgender Experiences in Scotland' survey had experienced transphobic abuse within a domestic relationship².

The LGBT Domestic Abuse Project is funded by the Scottish Government to raise awareness and improve service responses to LGBT people who experience domestic abuse. The project is managed by LGBT Youth Scotland and focuses on the experiences of people of all ages. The project is supported by a reference group of members from the Scottish Government's Violence Against Women team, Scottish Women's Aid, Stonewall Scotland, Women's Support Project, Open Road, Equality Network and Scottish Transgender Alliance.

The Scottish Transgender Alliance is funded by the Scottish Government to raise awareness and improve transgender equality, rights and inclusion. The Scottish Transgender Alliance is managed by the Equality Network.

The LGBT Domestic Abuse Project and the Scottish Transgender Alliance have undertaken this research to investigate the ways in which transgender people experience domestic abuse and to help determine the specific needs of the transgender community when accessing services which provide support and advice to those experiencing domestic abuse. An additional focus of the research was to explore some of the barriers faced by transgender people experiencing domestic abuse when accessing mainstream domestic abuse services.

2. KEY FINDINGS

- 80% of respondents stated that they had experienced emotionally, sexually, or physically abusive behaviour by a partner or ex-partner.
- Although 80% of respondents identified having experienced some form of abusive behaviour from a partner or ex-partner, only 60% of respondents recognised the behaviour as domestic abuse.
- The type of domestic abuse most frequently experienced by the respondents was transphobic emotional abuse, with 73% of the respondents experiencing at least one type of transphobic emotionally abusive behaviour from a partner or ex-partner.
- 60% of respondents had experienced controlling behaviour from a partner or ex-partner.
- 45% of respondents had experienced physically abusive behaviour from a partner or ex-partner.
- 47% of respondents had experienced some form of sexual abuse from a partner or ex-partner.
- 37% of respondents said that someone had forced, or tried to force them to have sex when they were under the age of 16.
- 46% of respondents said that someone had forced, or tried to force them to engage in some other form of sexual activity when under the age of 16.
- 10% of respondents stated that someone had forced, or tried to force them to engage in sexual activity for money.

Seventy-five percent of the respondents answered questions relating to the impact that domestic abuse had on their wellbeing. They also answered questions about whether they had contacted any support services about their experiences of domestic abuse. Their responses are as follows:

- 98% identified at least one negative impact upon their wellbeing as a result of their experiences of domestic abuse.
- 76% identified having experienced psychological or emotional problems as a consequence of the abuse.
- 15% said that they had attempted suicide as a consequence of the abuse.
- 24% told no one about the domestic abuse that they had experienced.
- 18% felt that the most recent domestic abuse that they had experienced was “just something that happened”.
- 51% thought that the most recent domestic abuse they had experienced was “wrong but not a crime”.

3. DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

In Scotland, the terms **transgender people** and **trans people** are used as equivalent inclusive umbrella terms encompassing a diverse range of people who find their gender identity does not fully correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth.

The term **gender identity** refers to “each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms”³.

Within some parts of this research report, the transgender respondents have been divided into three different groups:

- **Trans men** - who have previously transitioned, or are currently transitioning, from female to male (FTM) and are therefore living as men.
- **Trans women** - who have previously transitioned, or are currently transitioning, from male to female (MTF) and are therefore living as women.
- **Other gender variant trans people** – who have not transitioned on a permanent basis from female-to-male or from male-to-female. Instead they either live partly or fully as the gender which corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth or live in a non-binary gender which is not clearly male or female. This group includes, but is not limited to, transvestite/cross-dressing people (those who wear clothing traditionally associated with the other gender either occasionally or more regularly) and androgynous/polygender people (those who have non-binary gender identities and do not identify as male or female).

In this report, the term **transphobia** is used to refer to negative attitudes and behaviours towards transgender people which are motivated by the perpetrator’s aversion, disgust, fear, hatred or prejudice of transgender people, gender reassignment or gender variant behaviour.



The Scottish Government defines **domestic abuse** as the following;

Domestic abuse (as gender-based abuse) can be perpetrated by partners or ex-partners and can include physical abuse (assault and physical attack involving a range of behaviour), sexual abuse (acts which degrade and humiliate women and are perpetrated against their will, including rape) and mental and emotional abuse (such as threats, verbal abuse, racial abuse, withholding money and other types of controlling behaviour such as isolation from family or friends).

In accepting this definition it must be recognised that children are witness to, and may be subject to, the abuse and children who witness or are used in the abuse, can experience stress and fear and may suffer a range of adverse effects, including physical injury, poor health and an array of psychological difficulties.

This project supports the Scottish gender-based definition of domestic abuse. The gender-based analysis of domestic abuse can be applied to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people’s experiences of domestic abuse. We have, however, amended the definition to take account of specific experiences applicable to LGBT people and to ensure that gay, bisexual and transgender men are fully included within the aims of this project.

As a result The LGBT Domestic Abuse Project uses the following definition:

Domestic abuse can be perpetrated by partners or ex-partners and can include physical abuse (assault and physical attack involving a range of behaviour), sexual abuse (acts which degrade and humiliate and are perpetrated against the person’s will, including rape), and mental and emotional abuse (such as threats, verbal abuse, racial abuse, homophobic/ biphobic/transphobic abuse, withholding money and other types of controlling behaviour such as ‘outing’, the threat of ‘outing’ or enforced isolation from family and friends).

4. METHODOLOGY

Access to an online survey was provided for a total of three months via matching webpages on the LGBT Domestic Abuse Project and Scottish Transgender Alliance websites. The online survey was advertised by email and paper flyers amongst LGBT and transgender networks specifically, although not exclusively, within Scotland. Paper versions of the survey were also distributed through several local transgender groups across Scotland. A total of sixty usable responses were obtained. Respondents were also asked if they would be willing to participate in qualitative interviews to obtain more detailed information and seven in-depth interviews were conducted.

As the survey recruitment strategy was primarily through LGBT and transgender networks, it is unlikely to have reached the whole trans population. It may not, for example, have reached transitioned people who no longer see themselves as being 'trans' or those who are isolated by other circumstances from transgender support networks. Using this recruitment strategy also means that response rates cannot be calculated as there is no way to know exactly how many people heard about the survey. These factors combined with the relatively small scale of the research mean that the results of the survey cannot claim to be representative of the whole transgender population in Scotland. The research does, however, clearly highlight transgender people's experiences of domestic abuse and their access to, and experiences of, support services. As a result, we have been able to produce some key recommendations through this research.

5. DEMOGRAPHICS

AGE

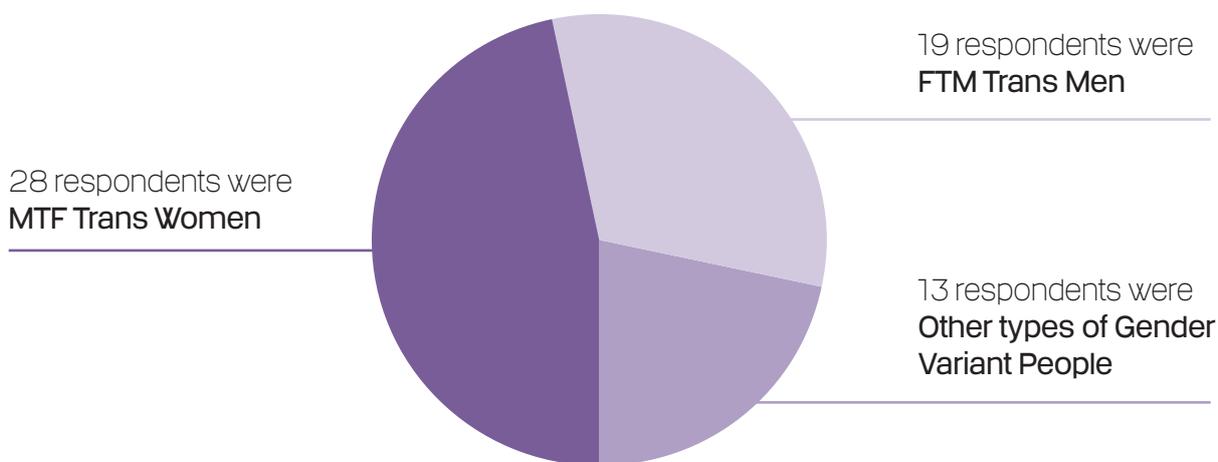
The age distribution of respondents showed a fairly even spread of people from ages 16 to 60 with only one respondent over the age of 60. The mean average age of respondents was 37.

GEOGRAPHY

Most of the respondents (70%) were from Scotland with a much smaller number (just over 20%) from other parts of the UK. The survey was also completed by five people who reported that they lived in the USA⁴. The response in Scotland was much greater owing to the strong distribution networks in Scotland and the physical location of the partner organisations working on the research.

TRANS SITUATION

Trans situation of the 60 respondents



Nearly half of the respondents were male to female (MTF) trans women, almost a third were female to male (FTM) trans men and just over a fifth were other types of gender variant trans people. Across these three broad categories, respondents were given a list of further transgender terminology options to self-describe their particular trans situations and many selected multiple terms from the list. This highlights the complex nature of transgender terminology use.

The respondents who had transitioned from female to male or from male to female were asked how long they had been transitioned (i.e. living full-time in accordance with their gender identity). Most respondents had been transitioned for less than 5 years.

⁴. We used online forums for distribution of our surveys and decided it was important to include the perspectives of all participants who took the time to complete it.

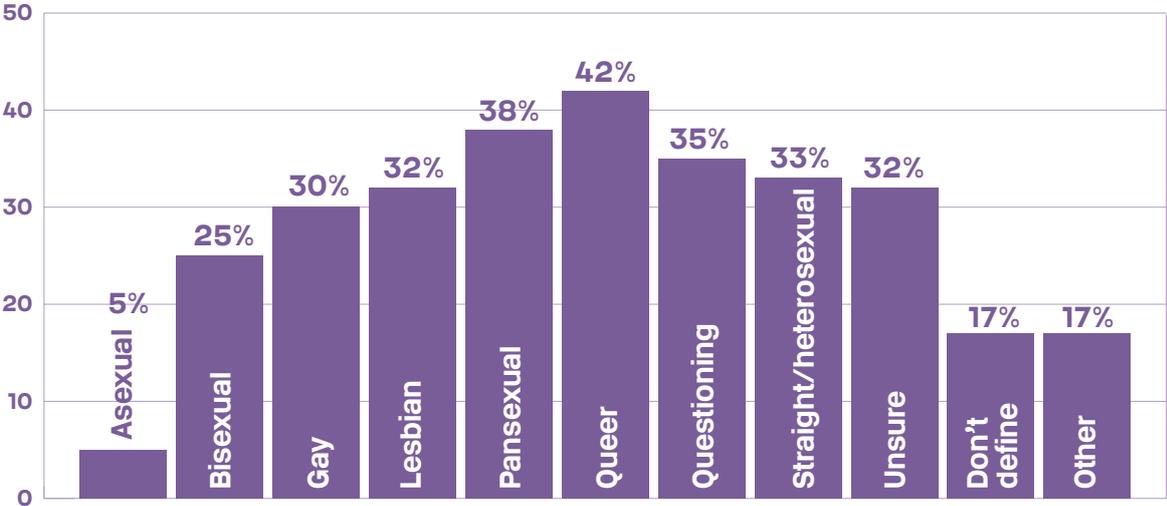
EDUCATION

The respondents had, in general, a high level of educational qualifications with over 60 percent of respondents having obtained a degree or equivalent qualification or a higher degree or post graduate qualification. This is far higher than the educational attainment of the general population, a trend also identified in previous research⁵.

The high educational qualifications of respondents is in sharp contrast to their incomes. It is generally expected that highly qualified people will have above average incomes, yet this is not the case for the respondents. While over two-thirds of the respondents were well educated and in paid employment, almost half of the respondents had a gross annual income of less than £15,000, with almost a third living on an income under £10,000.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Sexual Orientation of Survey Respondents



As shown in the graph above, there was a broad and complex range of responses relating to how transgender people defined their sexual orientation. A quarter of the respondents chose to simultaneously tick more than one option to define their sexual orientation.

It is important to note that gender identity and sexual orientation are two separate aspects of identity. Although many transgender people identify as part of a wider LGBT community, some transgender people who strongly identify as Straight/Heterosexual may react negatively to services assuming that they see themselves as part of a larger LGBT community.

5. Whittle et al. 2007: 66.



The most common response from MTF trans women was Lesbian (almost double the number of MTF trans women respondents identified as Lesbian than identified as Straight/Heterosexual). The terms Queer, Pansexual and Straight/Heterosexual were all common responses from FTM trans men. For non-binary gender variant respondents, the term Queer was three times more common a response than Straight/Heterosexual.

There were also a significant number of respondents who selected Questioning, Unsure and/ or Don't Define. As sexual orientation terms such as Straight/Heterosexual and Gay or Lesbian require the genders of the person and partner(s) to be clearly established, it can be very difficult for transgender people to work out which term to use if they currently live in more than one gender role or have remained with the same partner throughout their transition. These responses could also result from the renegotiation of sexual orientation that many transgender people experience when transitioning. The responses thus highlight the complex nature of sexual orientation diversity among transgender people.

“I was, and still am, attracted to females. But now, my transition, I’m seriously questioning where I am with it. But again, I won’t label myself. I will not say, you know ‘I’m lesbian,’ ‘I’m gay’ or ‘I’m bi’. I will take it as it comes. I’ve never had a gay experience, but what didn’t appeal to me once is starting to appeal to me now. So, I’ll take it as it comes.”

RELATIONSHIPS

Previous Partners of Survey Respondents

| Total number of Different Partners | Percentage of Respondents |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Have never had a partner | 5 % |
| One partner | 5 % |
| From 2 to 5 partners | 45 % |
| From 6 to 10 partners | 15 % |
| From 11 to 20 partners | 8 % |
| From 21 to 50 partners | 10 % |
| Over 51 partners | 2 % |

Most respondents said that they were currently single. When asked about previous partners, the majority of respondents had less than six partners. As demonstrated later in the report there are a variety of reasons that make relationships difficult for transgender people. These reasons include, but are not limited to, the renegotiation of gender roles within existing relationships and the isolation and stigmatisation of transgender people in relationships or society.

6. EXPERIENCES OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

80% of respondents stated that they had experienced emotionally, sexually, or physically abusive behaviour by a partner or ex-partner.

The survey first asked respondents to identify from a list of various behaviours, any which they had experienced from a partner or ex-partner. The behaviours were grouped into three types of emotional abuse (controlling behaviours, threatening behaviours and trans specific behaviours), then a set of sexual abuse behaviours and finally a set of physical abuse behaviours.

After the list of different possible partner or ex-partner behaviours, the survey also directly asked respondents the question *“Do you personally feel that a partner or ex-partner has ever done anything to you which could be considered abusive?”* Although 80 percent (48 out of 60) had experienced behaviours which could be considered abusive, only 60 percent (36 out of 60) stated a definitive “YES” to this question. A further 27 percent stated “NO” and 13 percent were unsure or preferred not to answer. The survey responses suggest that some transgender people may experience domestic abuse and resulting negative impacts upon their wellbeing but be reluctant to formally acknowledge that the behaviours they experienced are abusive.

This research shows that **the type of domestic abuse most frequently experienced by the transgender respondents was transphobic⁶ emotional abuse**. Seventy-three percent of the respondents experienced abusive behaviours from partners or ex-partners which specifically aimed to oppress or invalidate the transgender person’s gender identity, undermine their ability to transition, or to influence their decision about coming out to others. Forty-two percent of respondents stated they had felt insecure about their gender identity as a result of a partner’s behaviour. Both transgender specific emotionally abusive behaviours and the negative impacts which result are often not fully understood or acknowledged by service providers.

6.1. EMOTIONAL ABUSE: CONTROLLING BEHAVIOURS

| Emotional Abuse: Controlling Behaviours by Partner or Ex-Partner | Respondents who have experienced |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Stopped you having your fair share of money or taken money from you | 18 % |
| Stopped you from seeing your friends and/or relatives | 30 % |
| Repeatedly put you down so that you felt worthless | 45 % |
| Behaved in a jealous or controlling way e.g. restricting what you can do, who you can see, what you wear | 48 % |
| Partner or ex-partner carried out at least one of these controlling behaviours | 60 % |

Respondents disclosed experiencing very high levels of emotional abuse in the form of controlling behaviours from partners and ex-partners. Almost half the respondents said that their partner or ex-partner had behaved in a jealous or controlling way and 45 percent said that a partner or ex-partner had repeatedly put them down so that they felt worthless.

"[My partner and I] had gone into a bar... I was chatting to [another] guy... He went mad, total mad... It's scary, it is scary. I got dragged out of this bar by him. We went back to our hotel room and luckily for us the people in the room next door obviously realised we were having this domestic situation, and they actually phoned the police... I was very scared... he just snapped."

Other controlling behaviours experienced were in relation to access to money, friends and family. By doing this, abusive partners can isolate their partners from supportive social circles. As a result those experiencing abuse are less likely to acknowledge it as abusive or have the confidence to seek advice and support services.

6.2. EMOTIONAL ABUSE: THREATENING BEHAVIOURS

A high number of respondents had experienced threatening behaviour from a partner or ex-partner. Almost a third of respondents stated that a partner or ex-partner had threatened to hurt them. A person who has been threatened with physical harm often experiences intense levels of fear and terror about experiencing future physical abuse and may feel unable to seek help from service providers without providing evidence of an assault. Living on a daily basis with the fear and uncertainty generated by threatening behaviours can have a major negative impact on wellbeing and also leave people uncertain about whether or not to self-classify as having experienced domestic abuse if the threats do not escalate to physical abuse.

| Emotional Abuse: Threatening Behaviour by Partner or Ex-Partner | Respondents who have experienced |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Threatened or attempted to kill themselves as a way of making you do something or stopping you doing something | 25 % |
| Threatened to, attempted to, or actually hurt, themselves as a way of making you do something or stopping you doing something | 25 % |
| Threatened you with a weapon, for example an ashtray or a bottle | 12 % |
| Threatened to hurt you | 32 % |
| Threatened to hurt someone close to you, such as your children, family members, friends or pets | 8 % |
| Threatened to hurt your other, previous or new partner | 5 % |
| Threatened to kill you | 13 % |
| Partner or ex-partner carried out at least one of these threatening behaviours | 60 % |

A quarter of respondents stated that their partner or ex-partner had threatened or attempted suicide or self-harm as a way to make them do, or stop them doing something. Receiving such threats from a partner or ex-partner can generate intense feelings of guilt and concern for the wellbeing of the partner or ex-partner particularly since suicidal thoughts, threats and actions are strongly associated with mental illness, severe emotional distress, and vulnerability. As a result of these associations, it can be difficult for a person experiencing domestic abuse to identify their partner or ex-partner as holding abusive power over them. They may instead feel obliged to fulfil a care-giving role towards the threatening partner or ex-partner. The presence of threats of suicide or self-harm can lead people to try to excuse (through narratives of illness and diminished responsibility) other abusive behaviours carried out by the person making the threats. Where a transgender person already feels guilt about possibly causing distress to a partner or ex-partner by coming out as transgender or starting to transition, threats of suicide or self-harm by a partner or ex-partner are particularly likely to result in a transgender person feeling unable to express their gender identity or continue to transition.

6.3. EMOTIONAL ABUSE: TRANSPHOBIC BEHAVIOUR

“She knew about my transgender status. At first she was okay about it, but then she started using it against me. She was happy when she thought I was more like a transvestite, you know, cross-dressing, but as it carried on, she wasn’t happy about it. She started threatening to tell my friends about it if I didn’t do what she wanted... I trusted her, but she abused that... After we broke up, she went around my friends and told them I was transgender.”

| Emotional Abuse: Transphobic Behaviours by Partner or Ex-Partner | Respondents who have experienced |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Stopped you from taking medication or having treatment that you need to express your gender identity (e.g. hormones, surgery) | 7 % |
| Stopped you from being able to express your gender identity through other changes in your appearance (e.g. the clothes you wear, hair, make up) | 30 % |
| Stopped you from being able to express your gender identity through how you describe yourself (e.g. the name and pronouns you use) | 33 % |
| Stopped you from telling other people about your trans background or identity | 30 % |
| Threatened to tell people about your trans background or identity who you don’t want to know | 13 % |
| Made you feel ashamed, guilty, or wrong about your trans background or identity | 52 % |
| Stopped you from engaging with other trans people or attending transgender social groups and support groups | 15 % |
| Drawn attention to, or focus on, parts of your body that you feel uncomfortable about | 43 % |
| Partner or ex-partner carried out at least one of these transphobic behaviours | 73 % |

The above behaviours are types used by abusive partners or ex-partners against transgender people specifically due to transphobia. The types of emotionally abusive transphobic behaviours listed in the above table were not intended to be fully comprehensive but instead were selected due to being the most clearly transphobic in motivation. Transgender people can also experience sexual and physical domestic abuse which can be transphobic in motivation.

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Respondents reported high levels of control and coercion from partners relating to the process of transitioning, either by preventing them from expressing their true gender identity or, in a smaller number of cases, forcing them to 'out' themselves through threatening to tell others of their trans background or identity.

Another way in which respondents reported emotionally abusive transphobic behaviour from partners or ex-partners was through the use of guilt and shame about their transgender identity. Abusive partners may use their partner's transgender identity to control their actions and behaviours. This could be through blaming the problems or abuse within a relationship on the transgender person, based on the inaccurate assumption that it is a 'choice' to be transgender.

Previous research has indicated that 62 percent of transgender people experience transphobic harassment in their day to day lives⁷, which negatively impacts on their sense of self and emotional wellbeing. To experience transphobic emotional abuse from a partner compounds this feeling of worthlessness.

Mental health practitioners experienced in working with transgender people have found that transphobic reactions from partners and pressure on transgender people not to express their gender identity or transition have very negative impacts on their mental health⁸. Thirty-four percent of 872 transgender people surveyed in the UK had attempted suicide at least once due to other people's reactions to their trans identity⁹, which is 7.7 times the 4.4 percent suicide attempt rate of the general population¹⁰. It is therefore a highly abusive and dangerous form of control for a partner or ex-partner to target a person's transgender identity in a negative way and to prevent them being able to express themselves as who they are.

6.4. SPOTLIGHT: COMING OUT AND TRANSITIONING IN AN EXISTING RELATIONSHIP

The research responses, particularly the detailed qualitative interviews, revealed that transgender people are at a high risk of domestic abuse, especially emotionally abusive transphobic behaviours, when they come out as trans for the first time to existing partners. A second high risk point for domestic abuse, especially emotionally abusive transphobic behaviours, occurs when a person reveals plans to undergo gender reassignment to a partner who is already aware of the person's trans identity but has been assuming that they would not transition. The negative partner reactions reported by the survey respondents included a range of verbal, emotional and physical abuses. Cases that involve extreme violence have also been noted to the Scottish Transgender Alliance. These include a trans woman who had boiling water poured over her head by her partner.

Being the partner of a person who has come out as transgender can be highly stressful. It can expose partners to transphobia for the first time, raise questions about their own sexuality, and bring rejection and isolation from family and friends. Expressing a need to transition is seldom meant to be a rejection of existing relationships but may feel like one to partners, especially when partnerships have been formalised (through marriage or civil partnership) since a divorce or dissolution is required in order for the transgender individual to receive a gender recognition certificate. The resulting intense inescapable stress can be extremely difficult and can result in major relationship difficulties for couples, however this stress never justifies abusive behaviour.

People who experience abuse at the point of coming out often express feelings of guilt about their trans status disrupting their partner's life and worry about being seen as selfish if they express their gender identity openly. Trans people who experience abusive reactions from their partners upon coming out are likely to blame themselves rather than recognise that the behaviour of their partner is unacceptable and abusive. Many people hope that their partner will come to understand their need to transition, so they put themselves at risk for longer, in the hope of saving their relationships and sometimes, in the mistaken belief that no-one else would love them.

"I told [my wife] that I was wanting to go for the operation... And she said 'yeah okay I can sort of understand that, I can go with you'... [Then a friend] said something to her which really hit home: that once the operation is finished and all the rest of it and I've went through it all, she's going to have a lesbian relationship. That struck home and she started to turn... And I also said to her, 'well to go for the gender recognition certificate, I do have to have a divorce, although if you want, you know, we'll have a civil partnership'... And it turned really, really nasty then... every time we were talking to each other it was anger that was coming out... 'You and your cronies are freaks, you're just all f-in freaks'... Well you've 30 years of marriage behind you, and for your wife who knew all about you... But suddenly I'm a freak... You know, and it permanently got to me."

6.5. SEXUAL ABUSE

| Sexual Abuse by Partner or Ex-Partner | Respondents who have experienced |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Pressurised, or tried to force, you to have sexual intercourse when you did not want to | 32 % |
| Pressurised, or tried to force, you to take part in another sexual activity when you did not want to | 32 % |
| Pressurised, or tried to force, you to view material which you considered to be pornography | 12 % |
| Pressurised, or tried to force, you to engage in sexual activity with other people for payment | 2 % |
| Partner or ex-partner carried out at least one of these sexual abuse behaviours | 47 % |

When asked about their experiences of sexual abuse within relationships, almost a third of respondents reported that their partner had pressurised or tried to force them to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to. Many transgender people feel uncomfortable with their bodies, particularly before or during transitioning. Abusive partners can use this discomfort as a way of pressurising their partner to engage in sexual activity that is unwanted or as a way of attempting to invalidate their gender identity.

Twelve percent of respondents' partners had forced, or tried to force, them to watch pornography. One person's partner had forced or tried to force, them to engage in sexual activity for money.

“Emotionally she would act very cold with me in public places and with friends, but then privately she would constantly try to persuade me to be physically and sexually affectionate, often with unpleasant stories to try and guilt me into it. Physically she would hit and kick me whenever I did something she didn’t like or joked around, and on a few occasions attempted to strangle me...She would tell unhappy stories of her childhood, usually related to something sexual, in a very bizarre way to bring up the subject of sexual relations... They made me feel uncomfortable, but I was timid and attempted to be a good listener and to be compliant, rather than confronting her. I was [afraid of her on] many occasions... I was fearful of her fairly irrational behaviour, because when she got upset she... was more likely to resort to violence than dialogue... but my youth and lack of certainty about future possible transition [from female to male] meant that I generally just laid down and accepted it, not having the hope for the future that I have now.”

6.6. SPOTLIGHT: OVEREMPHASIS OF BIOLOGICAL SEX UNDERMINING GENDER IDENTITY

Social pressures surrounding gender identity and biological sex can impact greatly on people's expectations of intimate relationships. For transgender people, these concepts and how they interconnect are particularly complex and can be very stressful and difficult to fully explain to others.

"The physical intimacy side was difficult because I felt very much that he was finding his feet and I was finding my feet."

It can be difficult for some people to conceptualise gender as complex, fluid or not necessarily always congruous with biological or assigned sex. For some partners of trans people this can be an issue and raise questions about their sexual orientation and understanding of gender. This can lead to denial, confusion, resentment and anger for the partner and a resulting overemphasis on biological sex rather than gender identity can negatively impact on the self esteem and self image of the trans person.

"I had just left a very short relationship with a man who saw me as nothing but female regardless of what I told him... I certainly tried to make him aware [of my identity as a trans man], as I did most of my past partners, but it fell on deaf ears... Essentially, he focused constantly on me being female in a sexual manner, so every time he spoke to me he would end up bringing up my physical sex in one way or another, which made me incredibly uncomfortable."

Transgender people with non binary gender identities are particularly at risk of invalidation of their identities because wider society generally insists that there are only two legitimate genders, making it very easy for partners and services to be dismissive and disrespectful.

Abusive partners can deliberately trigger major emotional distress with what may seem, to other people outside the relationship, like minor words or actions (for example: buying inappropriate presents, drawing attention to physical sex characteristics which are incongruous to the person's gender identity, or incorrect use of pronouns). For transgender people who have not transitioned and may only have access to validation of their gender identity through their partner, such behaviours can make them even less confident to tell others about their transgender status and seek support outside the relationship. This contributes to a cycle of increasing isolation and abuse.

"[I] dated a girl who knew a lot about my transgenderism, being a close friend of mine beforehand, and claimed to be very accepting [of my male gender identity] but throughout the relationship she stressed importance on me being female, and became emotionally and physically abusive."

6.7. PHYSICAL ABUSE

| Physical Abuse by Partner or Ex-Partner | Respondents who have experienced |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Pushed you or held you down | 32 % |
| Kicked, bitten, or hit you | 25 % |
| Thrown something at you | 25 % |
| Choked or tried to strangle/smother you | 12 % |
| Used a weapon against you, for example an ashtray or a bottle | 10 % |
| Partner or Ex-Partner carried out at least one of these Physical Abuse Behaviours | 45 % |

The responses to questions about physical abuse show very high levels of physically abusive behaviours from the partners or ex-partners. Forty-five percent of respondents said that they had experienced some form of physical abuse with many disclosing more than one type. As described below, this physical abuse is often displayed alongside other types of abuse, including controlling behaviour or sexual abuse.

“She locked me in the room and chucked the key out of the window... All sorts of things would set her off - if she didn’t want me to go to work, if I didn’t want to have sex with her, or if I wanted to use a condom. If I didn’t do what she wanted she would use aggression against me, physical and verbal... She used a cutlery knife or a chopping knife to cut my arms, sometimes she would stab forks into me. After I ended the relationship, she was still saying stuff about me, phoning me up and slagging me off and stuff.”

6.8. SPOTLIGHT: FIRST EXPERIENCES OF GENDER INEQUALITIES

Society is saturated with sexist gender stereotypes and inequalities. Through socialisation, people gradually develop techniques to assess and reduce their risks of gender-based abuse and violence. Many transgender people do not have the benefit of gradually developing these skills for their self-identified gender. They often have to learn very quickly how to deal with new gender inequalities and gender-based expectations and prejudices at the start of their transition.

“I suppose I’m more aware that as a woman I’m more at risk of certain things than previously, so whereas before I used to do a lot of walking as exercise I don’t really do that anymore, or I do it in the middle of the day when there’s lots of people around.”

It is easy for interactions with partners to be initially loaded with unfamiliar gender power dynamics while at the same time a newly transitioning person may lack self-confidence in interpersonal interactions. As a result of coping with new gender roles, transgender people (particularly trans women in the early stages of transition) may be uncertain about what strategies and behaviours to utilise to cope with gender inequalities.

“Yeah, you try not to be stereotyped about roles and expectations, but it’s different, a different set of circumstances and variables involved.”

Trans people may also find it more challenging to recognise and remove themselves from abusive situations, both within their relationships and outside the home from strangers. One trans woman explained her reaction to experiencing domestic abuse early in her transition:

“For a person who spends 35/36 years in the same gender and then to be suddenly treated like that, it’s a very, very unique situation to be in... And you do feel very vulnerable... all of a sudden... you’re being basically treated like a piece of crap... that was the first time I’d spent an entire weekend just being me... I did sit for a long time thinking ‘am I going to do the right thing here?’ “

6.9. SPOTLIGHT: SHAME AND SECRECY

Especially in mid-transition, transgender people can have unique body situations. They can be concerned that new partners may simply be attracted to them out of curiosity or, alternatively, that inconsistencies between their gender identity and their physical body could be off-putting to new partners.

“I’ve had one relationship. But no, that’s something that’s kind of difficult I suppose. Because you feel as if you’ve become a halfway house where you’re not one thing or the other.”

Feelings of bodily shame can cause some transgender people to face difficulty in negotiating the kinds of sexual relationships in which they feel validated. Since they feel that they are starting from weak negotiation positions, they are less likely to question abusive dynamics. An abusive partner, for example, may coerce a trans person into sexual acts that they find distressing by claiming that the trans person should consider themselves lucky that anyone is willing to participate in any sexual activity with them.

The qualitative research interviews also revealed particular concerns among respondents about men, who are often married, wanting to secretly date mid-transition trans women. Such men may be exploring aspects of their own sexual orientations, drawn by a voyeuristic thrill of “the other”, or simply avoiding public acknowledgement of the relationship due to fear of transphobia from their friends and families. Whatever the motivations, such relationships can result in trans women feeling shame and make it more difficult for trans women to tell family or friends if they experience abuse, thus creating greater barriers to accessing support services.

“[Since my relationship with my ex-wife ended] I’ve had two [relationships]. Just the two. But both with men. One was a married man... it was not a good relationship for me, ‘cos I knew if his wife found out it would just go horribly, horribly wrong.”

“I suppose the longer I’ve lived as myself, as female, the way I view relationships, sexual expression, has changed a lot. So whereas when I was living as a gay man I would have been much more casual in my sexual contact, that’s not the case now. Don’t get me wrong I’m not a vestal virgin, but I’ve become really disenchanted by the way men often treat trans women. So I’m very clear: if someone wants to see me, date me, whatever, they have to do it in public. I’m not going to be a guilty secret behind a closed door for some married man, that’s not for me and that’s very hard to take.”

7. OTHER GENDER BASED ABUSE (FROM PEOPLE OTHER THAN PARTNERS OR EX-PARTNERS)

Other Gender Based Abuse (from people other than partners or ex-partners)

| Has anyone ever forced / tried to force you to... | Yes - At Least Once | Yes - More Than Once |
|---|---------------------|----------------------|
| have sexual intercourse when you did not want to when you were under the age of 16 | 37 % | 12 % |
| have sexual intercourse when you did not want to when you were over the age of 16 | 45 % | 25 % |
| take part in any other sexual activity when you did not want to when you were under the age of 16 | 46 % | 18 % |
| take part in any other sexual activity when you did not want to when you were over the age of 16 | 44 % | 22 % |
| view material which you considered to be pornography | 26 % | 13 % |
| engage in sexual activity with other people for money | 10 % | 5 % |

Respondents were also asked about experiences of gender-based violence from people who were not their current or ex-partner. Forty-five percent of respondents disclosed someone forcing, or trying to force, them to have sexual intercourse when they were over the age of 16. For other forms of sexual activity, abusive partners had forced or tried to force 44 percent of the respondents.

More worryingly, a significant number of respondents said that someone had forced or tried to force them to have sexual intercourse (37%) or engage in other sexual activity (46%) when they were under the age of 16. Experiences of child sexual abuse are extremely difficult to measure, but the NSPCC estimates that 21 percent of girls and 11 percent of boys have experienced child sexual abuse¹¹. Although not directly comparable, this shows extremely high levels of sexual abuse amongst respondents.

Ten percent of respondents stated that someone had forced or attempted to force them to engage in sexual activity for money. It should be noted that this question only referred to being coerced to engage in sexual activity for money and does not include people who regarded their involvement in prostitution to be consenting. Twenty-six percent of people said that someone had forced, or tried to force, them to watch pornography.

Although the sample is too small to make reliable statements about the transgender population as a whole, the statistics show a high level of sexual exploitation amongst respondents and highlights a potential area of concern. It would be beneficial to undertake more research looking at the sexual exploitation of transgender people.

11. Child sexual abuse is defined as acts "to which they had not consented or where 'consensual' activity had occurred with someone 5 years or more older and the child was 12 years or less" Cawson et al. 2000.

8. IMPACT OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

The survey questions were structured to encourage the 80 percent (48 out of 60) of respondents who had experienced any of the listed abusive behaviours to answer further questions about wellbeing and help-seeking, even if they did not personally wish to acknowledge their experiences as domestic abuse. Forty-five of these forty-eight respondents answered the questions on impact and help-seeking. The percentages used in this report section are therefore calculated out of 45 respondents.

98% of these 45 respondents identified at least one negative impact upon their wellbeing as a result of domestic abuse.

Psychological or emotional problems (such as depression and anxiety), problems trusting people, or difficulties in other relationships were the most common types of negative impact. The table below shows the range of negative impacts which had resulted from the respondents' experiences of domestic abuse.

Negative Impact of Domestic Abuse on Wellbeing

| Type of Negative Impact Experienced | Percentage of Respondents |
|---|---------------------------|
| Psychological or emotional problems | 76 % |
| Stopped trusting people / difficulty in other relationships | 73 % |
| Isolation from family or friends | 49 % |
| Felt unable to attend work or look for work | 27 % |
| Physical injuries | 16 % |
| Suicide attempt | 15 % |
| At least one negative impact of any type | 98 % |

"I certainly don't want to spend the rest of my life alone. But it's just finding that person, and then if you do... my experience has been very minor compared to some people's experiences, I will admit that. But once you've been burnt, it's very hard to trust people again."



In addition to the above general negative impacts, 56 percent of respondents stated they felt insecure about their gender identity as a result of domestic abuse. For trans people who face continuous transphobia and challenges to their gender identity in social interactions, this insecurity resulting from domestic abuse can have further implications. Due to this decreased resilience in daily interactions where transphobia is commonplace, many trans people become isolated and may avoid contact with others. This can make it less likely for people to feel able to access support services or report experiences of domestic abuse to the police.

Domestic abuse can also make it difficult for transsexual people to maintain progress in their transition, which (as discussed earlier) can have a very negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

Combining the experience of transphobic harassment in wider society with experience of domestic abuse can greatly impact on the confidence of transgender people to stand up for their basic rights in social situations or when accessing services. It is therefore essential that we raise awareness of the needs and experiences of transgender people so that agencies are equipped to support trans people experiencing domestic abuse.

9. SEEKING HELP AND SUPPORT

Respondents were asked who they had told about the abuse experienced and what services they had contacted. Forty-five people answered these questions.

Just over half of the respondents had contacted a friend, relative, neighbour or colleague. Almost a fifth of respondents only told a friend and did not access any support services. **Almost a quarter of respondents did not contact anyone.** The most common type of services contacted were general counselling services. Only seven percent of respondents contacted specialist domestic abuse services.

Methods of Seeking Support for Domestic Abuse Experiences

| Sources of Support Contacted | Percentage of Respondents |
|--|---------------------------|
| Contacted a friend, relative, neighbour or colleague | 51 % |
| Contacted a LGBT or transgender organisation | 20 % |
| Contacted a domestic abuse service | 7 % |
| Contacted a general counselling service | 40 % |
| Contacted more than one service | 27 % |
| Contacted only one service | 29 % |
| Contacted only a friend | 18 % |
| Did not contact anyone | 24 % |

9.1. CONTACTING THE POLICE

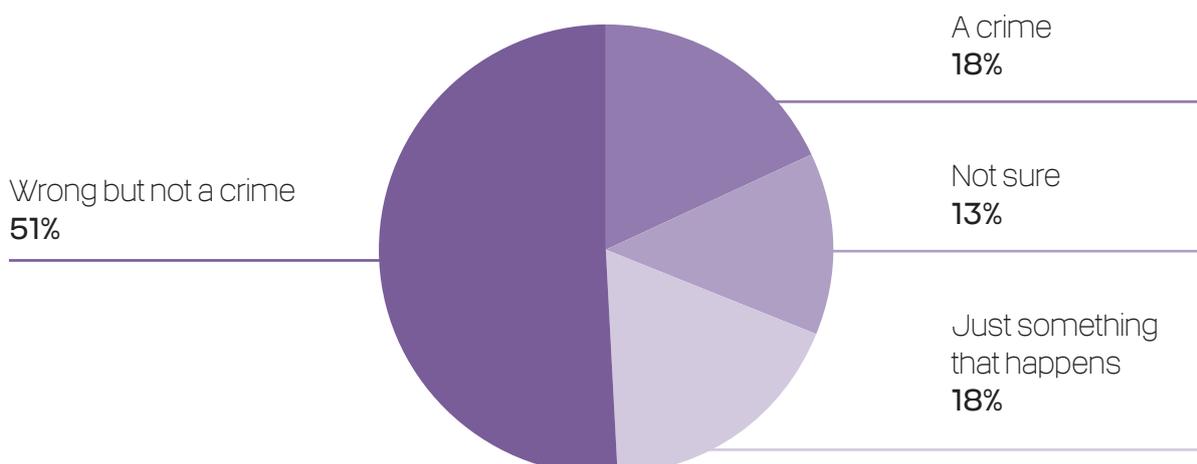
Of the 45 respondents who answered questions about seeking help and support, only 6 had contact with the police regarding their experience of domestic abuse. Two stated they had been dissatisfied with the police response, three had been satisfied and one was neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. One of the dissatisfied respondents stated that they felt the police had not taken the domestic abuse incident seriously and had made the person feel in some way responsible. The other dissatisfied respondent also felt the police had not taken the domestic abuse seriously and believed that their trans identity negatively influenced the way in which the domestic abuse incident was investigated and handled.

The respondents who had not contacted the police regarding their experiences of domestic abuse were asked the reason for their decision. The most common explanation given by 22 respondents was that the abusive behaviour was a private matter and should be dealt with privately rather than involving the police. Eight respondents stated they were frightened that it would make matters worse or that their partner would retaliate if the police became involved. These reasons are also common among non-trans people who have experienced domestic abuse. Twelve respondents, however, stated that they did not contact the police because of concerns about revealing their trans status to the police and potential transphobia they may experience at the service.

“That’s the problem that any domestic violence has, that quite a lot of the time it goes unreported. And the LGBT crime in itself doesn’t go reported widely. So, it’s a real double edged sword.”

It is not surprising that the level of police involvement was so low considering that only 18 percent of these 45 respondents thought the domestic abuse they had experienced was a crime. **Over half of the respondents thought that the most recent domestic abuse they had experienced was “wrong but not a crime”.**

On the most recent occasion when a partner or ex-partner did any of these things to you, do you think that what happened was...?



9.2. SPOTLIGHT: LACK OF SUPPORTIVE SOCIAL CIRCLES

The research revealed, especially through the qualitative interviews, that many transgender people report smaller and less supportive social circles as a result of their transgender status. In domestic abuse situations, transgender people may have even less social support available.

Most people in society are unfamiliar with trans issues until someone close to them comes out. In many cases, people are not well equipped to deal with the news that a friend or family member is transgender and can easily feel unsure about how to respond. Scottish social attitudes towards trans people are worse than for any other minority group, with 50 percent of the Scottish public stating they would be unhappy if a close relative entered a long-term relationship with a person who had undergone gender reassignment.¹²

“I think that for the majority of my friends at the time, my gender identity was a case of the elephant in the room, so they just tended to block it out rather than confront it. So whilst they weren’t any trouble, they weren’t specifically supportive either.”

In survey and interview responses, transgender people highlighted a strong awareness of the potential for transphobic reactions, often leading to avoidance of close social relationships. With the fear of revealing their transgender status arising as a common theme in the interviews, some respondents also described being introverted and private individuals who had grown up with very few close friends due to experiencing gender discomfort and confusion.

“I suppose it’s always been part of me from childhood, knowing that I was different. I’ve always hung back in terms of forming friendships in case of rejection.”

“I suppose my social circle had shrunk through my 30s and I think that was in part to do with my own sense of confusion, feeling that I... wasn’t being true, I wasn’t reflecting who I was.”

9.3. SPOTLIGHT: RELUCTANCE TO ACCESS SUPPORT SERVICES

9.3.1 FEAR OF IGNORANCE AND PREJUDICE

When asked about accessing a range of domestic abuse support services, many respondents stated concerns that service providers may not understand the complexity of transgender issues and misunderstand transgender experiences. The respondents also cited concerns that service providers and other services users will meet trans people with prejudice. **Transgender respondents were often of the view that there were no domestic abuse organisations willing and able to assist them.**

“Didn’t want to tell any service providers about the relationship problems as explaining the details would have required me to come out... I was worried service providers would be ignorant of trans identities and potentially even quite prejudiced.”

“I don’t talk to organisations. I talk to individuals who I know. There isn’t organisations out there to help. To be honest, see if you get a crisis like that, it’s an immediate thing. It’s immediate, you need help... where do you seek help immediately? It’s not there, it just isn’t there... If it had really come to it I think I would’ve phoned the Samaritans... Mainly because they’re the biggest organisation that’ll sit and listen.”

9.3.2 FEELINGS OF FAILURE AND SELF-BLAME

In common with other people who experienced domestic abuse, many of the transgender respondents were reluctant to seek help at the time of experiencing domestic abuse because they felt they were to blame for the problems in their relationship and did not feel able to acknowledge that they were experiencing domestic abuse. Some survey respondents also highlighted that feelings of unresolved guilt and self-hatred about being transgender contributed to their difficulties accepting that they were deserving of help and support.

“I didn’t [look for support], no. I was young and at the time I never really acknowledged that it was abusive.”

“At the time I did not recognise it as abusive. Felt it was my fault.”

“It was only when the relationship broke up that I realised it was wrong. At the time I did not consider myself oppressed. I thought it was wrong to be transgender and so could understand why it upset her so much.”

“Very ashamed, not wanting to admit I had failed. Was not in the relationship I told my family I was in (i.e. very loving, giving etc.).”

9.4. SPOTLIGHT: RELUCTANCE TO REMAIN USING TRANS SUPPORT NETWORKS

Many transgender people have struggled to be accepted for who they are and to live fully as their self-identified gender. The respondents who considered themselves to have finished their process of gender reassignment from male to female were particularly likely to seek acceptance as women, rather than as trans women. Gender reassignment is a long and intensely challenging process. After gender reassignment, many people want to move on with their lives and to no longer be regarded as transgender. As a result, transgender support groups can be largely attended by those who are in the early stages of gender reassignment, thus potentially isolating those who have completed their transition.

“I haven’t found them [trans support groups] to fit my needs to be honest... people there have mental health issues as well and that becomes quite the focus for the group.”

“I tend to keep away from the groups now. I’ve moved since, and now only a few choice friends [in the area] know about my transgender background.”

“You don’t want to stand up and say, well, I went through all this and I am different. Your whole point is not to be different! And this is where my friend X, she’s having great, great difficulty, because she’s got this void... she was wanting to get away from the transgender community altogether... but to do that, she has to break away from all her friends, the ones that are going to be there to support her whatever goes wrong.”

Until mainstream service providers are more willing and able to support people with trans backgrounds, those who have finished gender reassignment and no longer engage with any trans support networks will be particularly isolated from support.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Both statutory and voluntary organisations that provide support, advice and/or information to people experiencing domestic abuse should increase awareness and visibility within their own organisations of the issue of transgender people experiencing domestic abuse by:

- Inclusion of trans inclusive promotional materials, including online methods.
- Advertising by agencies that they will work with trans people (or trans women for women only organisations).
- Training for staff on the unique experiences and specific needs of transgender people experiencing domestic abuse.
- Partnership work with LGBT and transgender equality organisations to inform service design and delivery.
- Partnership work with LGBT and transgender equality organisations to undertake further research.

Police services need to work to reduce the barriers to reporting for transgender people experiencing domestic abuse by:

- Specific training for all police officers on the needs of transgender people.
- Public promotion of trans inclusion by police forces.

LGBT organisations should increase awareness and visibility within their own organisations of the issue of transgender people experiencing domestic abuse by:

- Undertaking training with staff on domestic abuse.
- Promotion of trans specific domestic abuse campaigns, including online methods.

Further research should be undertaken to gain more understanding of all forms of gender-based violence experienced by transgender people.

11. CONTACTS AND MORE INFORMATION

LGBT Domestic Abuse Project

3/2 30 Bell Street, Glasgow G1 1LG
Telephone: 0141 552 7425

Email: info@lgbtdomesticabuse.org.uk
www.lgbtdomesticabuse.org.uk

The LGBT Domestic Abuse Project is managed by:

LGBT Youth Scotland

3/2 30 Bell Street, Glasgow G1 1LG
Telephone: 0141 552 7425

Email: info@lgbtyouth.org.uk
www.lgbtyouth.org.uk

Scottish Transgender Alliance

30 Bernard Street, Edinburgh EH6 6PR
Telephone: 07020 933 952

Email: james@equality-network.org
www.scottishtrans.org

The Scottish Transgender Alliance is managed by:

Equality Network

30 Bernard Street, Edinburgh EH6 6PR
Telephone: 07020 933 952

Email: en@equality-network.org
www.equality-network.org

Scottish Women's Aid

Tackles domestic abuse and works to end violence against women.

2nd Floor, 132 Rose Street, Edinburgh EH2 3JD
Telephone: 0131 226 6606

Email: contact@scottishwomensaid.org.uk
www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk

NHS Open Road

A service for men of any age who engage in sexual acts in exchange for some form of payment.

123 West Street, Tradeston, Glasgow G5 8BA
Telephone: 0141 420 7284

Email: advice@nhsopenroad.org
www.nhsopenroad.org

The Women's Support Project

Working against violence against women and children.

31 Stockwell Street, Glasgow G1 4RZ
Telephone: 0141 552 2221

Email: wsproject@btconnect.com
www.womenssupportproject.co.uk

Stonewall Scotland

Working to achieve equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

9 Howe Street, Edinburgh EH3 6TE
Telephone: 0131 557 3679

Email: info@stonewallscotland.org.uk
www.stonewall.org.uk/scotland

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Research design by Graham Ritchie.

Research analysed and written by Amy Roch and James Morton

The full survey that respondents were asked to complete can be found online: www.lgbtdomesticabuse.org.uk



If you require this document in large print or any other format, please contact the Equality Network by phone on: 07020 933 952 or by email at: en@equality-network.org

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Registered office: The Citadel, 39/40 Commercial Street, Leith, Edinburgh, EH6 6JD

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**SCOTLAND'S LESBIAN, GAY,
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DOMESTIC ABUSE PROJECT**