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Re: Men and Domestic Violence: What Research Tells Us - Response to Reviews of Report

My overall response to the two reviews is that they offer no challenge to our analysis of the prevalence of domestic among men and women. This is a major endorsement of the report. In particular, the reviewers offer no challenge to the criteria which we used for selecting the prevalence studies in Chapters Two and Three – that every study should be based on representative samples of men and women, similar to the criteria used in any valid epidemiological study – nor do they offer any challenge to our analysis of those studies.

The reviewers biggest reservation is that our search of the literature may not have been exhaustive – and this we acknowledge – but neither of the reviewers were able to cite one prevalence study which we overlooked. This is surprising given that the reviewers are acknowledged experts in this field. In particular, the reviewers do not show how the findings of our report would be any different if a more exhaustive search of the literature had been undertaken.

One of the reviews draws the following conclusion: “While not disputing any of the conclusions reached by the authors I feel the only way to ensure the comprehensiveness of the report is by using and documenting a systematic approach to searching for, accessing and evaluating the relevant research for each of the terms of reference”. This is a fair assessment of the report, particularly if one understands the term “comprehensive” to mean “exhaustive” and particularly if one focuses on the analysis in Chapters Four (which deals with the correlates of domestic violence) and Chapter Five (which deals with the service needs of male victims). Although neither the timeframe nor the budget for the study allowed for the type of exhaustive search which the reviewers envisage – essentially because consultancy-based research is much more constrained by resources than academic-based research - we are confident that the studies of prevalence in Chapters Two and Three are close to exhaustive since the major reviews which we consulted, our searches in TCD library and on the internet, as well as the bibliographies of those prevalence studies which we identified, yielded no references to any additional studies. Again it is significant that neither of the reviewers seemed able to cite even one prevalence study that we overlooked and could find no fault with our analysis of those studies¹.

The reviewers also raise a number of specific points which invite a response.

1. Both reviewers suggest that the report might have benefited from “the added expertise of a statistician”. This is probably true although both authors, while not statisticians, have considerable research experience involving the use of a wide range of statistical techniques. Moreover the studies of prevalence which are examined in this report involve simple descriptive statistics where the main statistical considerations are response rates (which we discuss in some detail in section 2.3.2) and the confidence intervals associated with different sample sizes. Given the statistical rule of thumb that the larger the sample the more reliable the statistics, it is significant that five of the prevalence studies in the report have samples in the range of 6,000 to 10,000. One of the reviewers

¹ It is also significant that our analysis of the prevalence of domestic violence by men and women, based on these 13 studies, has been in the public domain since the publication in June 2001 of our report for MRCS: *Distressed Relationships: Does Counselling Help?* Despite considerable coverage of the issue in The Irish Times at that time, there has been no challenge to the comprehensiveness of the studies selected or to our analysis of them. Similarly, a feature article in the Irish Times in February 2002 summarising our analysis of these 13 studies on the prevalence of domestic violence by men and women elicited no response which challenged any aspect of the analysis or its comprehensiveness.

also suggested that a meta-analysis might have been appropriate. Meta-analyses are normally undertaken when there is a large number of studies; it is doubtful if a meta-analysis involving just 13 studies would serve any useful purpose.

2. Both reviewers noted that the report did not examine violence in same-sex relationships and one noted the absence of discussion on the issue of elder abuse. In fact three of the prevalence studies which we analysed in Chapters Two and Three include domestic violence in same sex relationships while elsewhere in the report we cite evidence from four other studies on violence in same sex relationships (see section 4.4). It is true that none of the prevalence studies in the report discuss elder abuse although all of them examine the influence of age on prevalence rates. There is no doubt that the report could be extended to include elder abuse but it is doubtful if this would add greatly to the core concerns which prompted the Department of Health and Children to commission this report.

3. One reviewer makes a number of factual errors about the report which cast doubt on whether this particular review was carried out with due care and consideration. For example, this reviewer states that “many of the papers relied on, although influential at the time, were written between ten and twenty years ago and would now be regarded as historic by experts working in this area”. In fact eight of the 13 studies were published in the second half of the 1990s and five of these were published in either 1999 or 2000. Elsewhere this reviewer states that: “it is unclear why the particular thirteen studies the authors chose were selected whilst others were not”; in fact the reasons given for our selection of these prevalence studies are made abundantly clear in the Preface, in the Executive Summary and in Chapter Two. Finally, this reviewer even mistakes our conclusion – “their final conclusion that the majority of domestic violence is ... perpetrated by women” – is untrue since this not our conclusion and this is not stated in the report.

Overall, the key findings on the prevalence of domestic violence by men and women which are at the heart of this report – and the key reason why the study was commissioned in the first place – are unaffected by these reviews. We readily acknowledge that the report is not exhaustive and both its timeframe and budget clearly indicate that this was never the intention; it is perhaps worth recalling the original budget for the study was IR£7,500 (ex VAT) although this was later augmented as additional work was undertaken. Despite this limitation, it is significant that neither reviewer were able to cite one study which would materially alter our findings on the prevalence of domestic violence nor were they able to find any fault with our analysis of those studies.

It is in the nature of research that no one has the last word. Our report is offered only as a synthesis of existing research, particularly on the prevalence of domestic violence, and is designed to facilitate further research and reflection on an issue that has grown in importance in recent years. In this spirit, we acknowledge the contribution of both reviewers to that debate.