



Carer harm – creating enabling safe spaces when harm may be intentional

Professor Sarah Wydall s.m.wydall@swansea.ac.uk

Department of Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy, Swansea University

Definition of domestic abuse

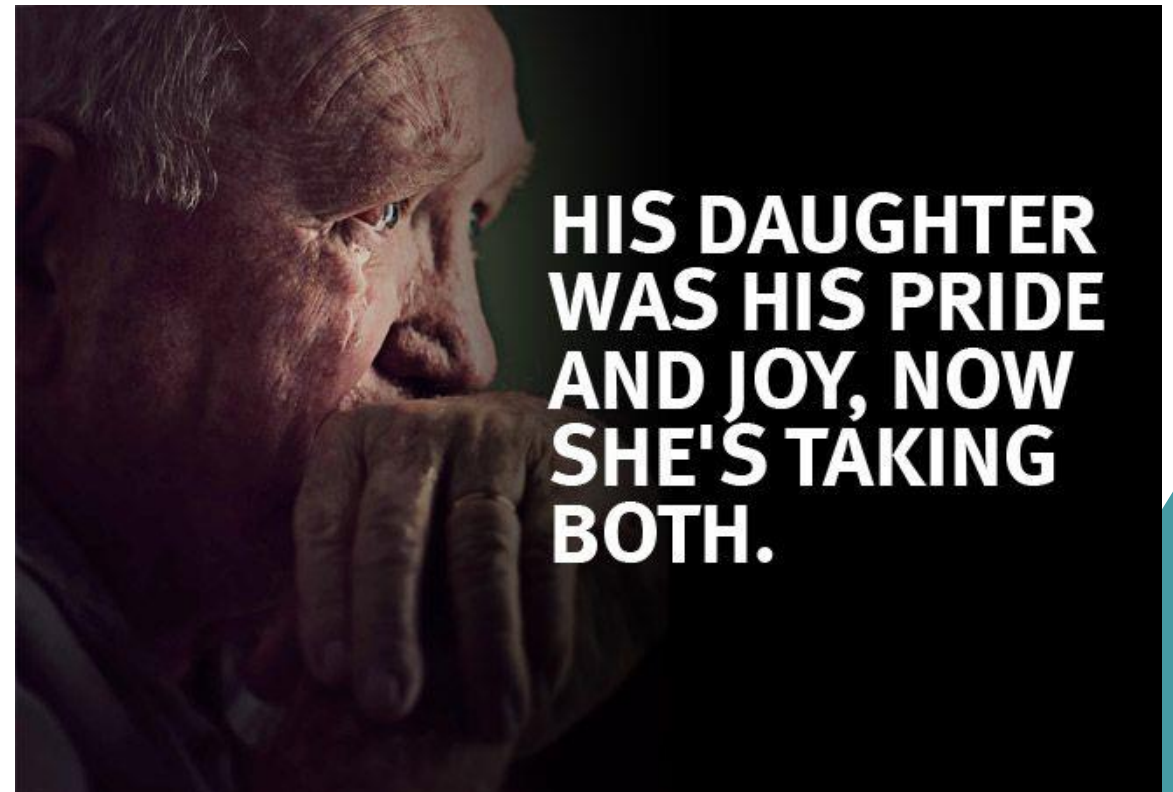
In **England and Wales**, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 defines domestic abuse as:

*'a single incident or course of conduct between those who are aged 16 years or over who are, or have been, **intimate partners** or **family members**.'*

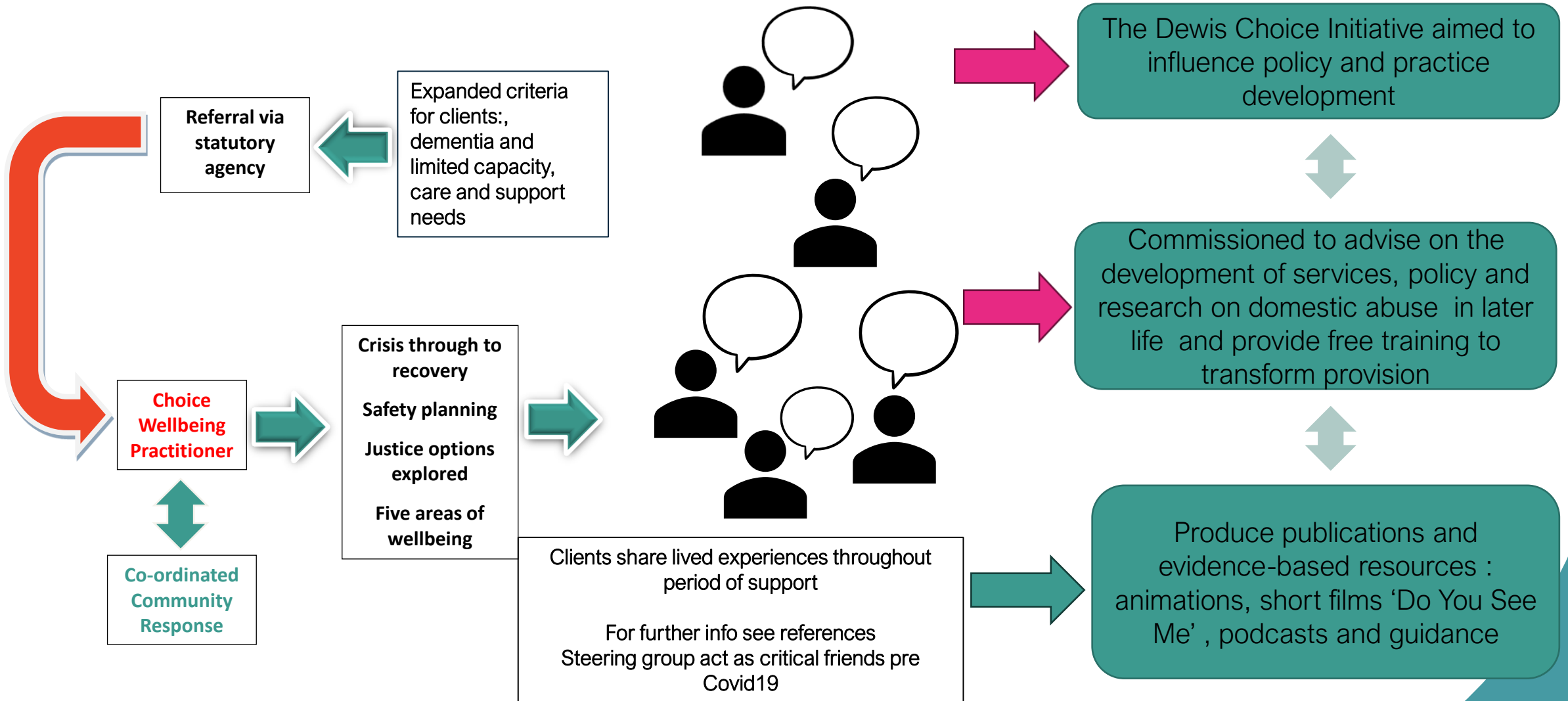
- physical
- sexual
- economic
- emotional
- psychological
- controlling and coercive behaviour

There is limited mention of caring roles in legislation or across third sector DA agencies

'...everyone sees me as a hero , but it's a hell and I sometimes feel they [services] give me this label to save them the trouble, so I'm carrying everything and its relentless' (Judy: 77 yrs old)



longitudinal research into the 'lived experiences' of older victim-survivors and their 'justice seeking' and help-seeking journey



DEWIS CHOICE INITIATIVE DEMOGRAPHIC

N=164 COLLABORATORS

- 31% of client referrals are males
- Very few LGBTQ+ victims feel able to disclose gender and sexual identity
- Age range 58 – 93 years
- Two thirds are aged 75 year and over
- Half of client referrals are adult family abuse
- 60% of referrals the victims-survivor had a disability
- 20% of referrals feature dementia
- 16 of 164 were victim-survivors who were experiencing carer harm, 6 of whom were experiencing both AFA and IPA .

Other examples where harm appears unintentional (see recent study in Ireland Donnelly, S., Milne, A., O'Brien, M., Dunne, N., & O'Donnell, D. (2025). *The British Journal of Social Work*, bcaf004.



Not being heard, listened and responded to. Carer Harm and domestic abuse , an inconvenient truth?

Features :

In seeking help –survivors exercised considerable **agency** in multiple settings (housing, health, CJS, social care, third sector.)

Choice Wellbeing Practitioners : '**Expanding space for action**' across three, often competing identities:

- in this case as a carer of family member and/or intimate partner who is abusive;
- as an older man or woman with health and wellbeing needs and rights;
- as a victim-survivor of domestic abuse (Wydall , 2021)

Experiencing a '**rule of optimism**' by external help providers (Wydall et al 2018)

Multiple oppressions and prejudices follow them through processes (Isham 2021)

Home is a site of ontological insecurity, it is a precarious, constrained space (Wydall 2017)

Extrinsic factors influence choices, social embeddedness and sense of wellbeing



Creating windows of opportunity given the increasing complexity at this stage in life course

It's not one size fits all, but when you talk about domestic abuse you are talking about families and people having to make a judgement call about their relationship, long term relationship.

That is probably the biggest decision. "How far do I take this and risk the relationship going down the river?"

That is a big decision when [older] people value family ties, it's the final straw for the victim and they have put up with many years or situations of abuse and you can sense when they have made the decision and it will be theirs. It's tangible. The sense of urgency is there (Safeguarding Officer: 9).

Providing significant expanded space for action – trusted practitioner

Many sites of conflict : Formal and Informal ,
Public , Social and Private

Sense of anxiety, trauma, stress and rumination;

Regular embodied sense of ‘fight or flight’ sensations

Economic and social restrictions and a sense of injustice within
the home, the family and with services;

**‘Liberty harm’ – sense of entrapment in relationship and in new
and ongoing role as carer**

Sensing justice is dynamic, partial and ongoing beyond public
responses;

Being heard and validated by family and professionals

Constructions of gender, age and victimhood intersect;

Empirically hard to separate impact of each identity

The majority choose social, sexual, spiritual and economic
freedom;

**Even if not leaving the relationship , support could assist with
creating safe spaces and developing freedoms**

Transition into safer spaces; rework self narratives;

**Over time the narratives in the research guided discussions
shifted from self blame to blaming the wrong-doers**

Yet neither social policy nor legal mechanisms are equipped
to deal with new independence at this point in life.

**Systemic ageism and a lack of knowledge about pensions,
later life , dementia and co-existence of domestic abuse
made ‘taking action’ difficult , yet still possible if a supportive
professional /advocate in place (Wydall, S., Clarke, A.,
Williams, J. and Zerk, R., 2018, Wydall 2021).**

Two examples of client 'lived experiences' of carer harm

A stigmatized family *'We are one of those families, so we are always last on the 'to do' list'*

F Long term IPA and AFA , M has complex needs, proximity of care increasing risk, son has spina bifida, carer has mental health needs . Housing did not recognize DA. (June 65 yrs)

'It's expected of me, as a woman, wife and mother... life is just hard work and I'm sick of it'

IPA, F at risk of significant harm , police stated they were not arresting perpetrator, M *because of care needs* , F living in bedroom with door locked, Son with learning needs. (Erin 74 yrs)

Leveraging power and choice

Intensive support promoting informed choice

Integrating systems and services

Challenging stigma and systemic ageism

Working with client not on behalf of them

Building positive connections

Recognition of the significance of safe spaces

Institutional and Organisational Barriers

Older carers are not represented in marketing materials

Ageism and intersections of identities influence carer experience of help seeking

Stereotypes of the DA victim and the 'perfect carer' and idealised views of care dynamic

Reinforcing stereotypes in conjugal roles

Discriminatory practices

Inappropriate action or inaction of practitioners

Assuming aspirations of older person

Paternalistic responses and / or compassionate ageism

Existing services are not always suitable for older carers

Responding to domestic abuse : led by carer, creating safe spaces



Terminology

Responding proactively – *“I wanted someone to ask me”*

Facilitating Enabling Environments for Help-seeking – What can practitioners do?

- ✓ Attempt to create a safe space to have a conversation alone with the person (Ask again and keep asking)
- ✓ Reassure that disclosures are confidential
- ✓ Use language the person is comfortable with
- ✓ Allow the individual to disclose at their own pace
- ✓ Check the person knows who to contact for help
- ✓ Promote engagement with positive social ties
- ✓ Safely record disclosures
- ✓ Carer support systems - e.g. use of texting/online/emails



Bibliography

Benbow, S. M., Bhattacharyya, S., & Kingston, P. (2018). What's in a name? Family violence involving older adults. *The Journal of Adult Protection*, 20(5/6), 187-192.

Clarke, A. H., Wydall, S., Williams, J. R., & Boaler, R. R. (2012). An Evaluation of the 'Access to Justice' Pilot Project.

Clarke, A., Williams, J., & Wydall, S. (2016). Access to justice for victims/survivors of elder abuse: A qualitative study. *Social Policy and Society*, 15(2), 207-220.

Crenshaw, K. W. (2017). *On intersectionality: Essential writings*. The New Press.

Condry, R., & Miles, C. (2023). Who counts? The invisibility of mothers as victims of femicide. *Current Sociology*, 71(1), 43-59.

Donnelly, S., Milne, A., O'Brien, M., Dunne, N., & O'Donnell, D. (2025). Exploring unintentional 'carer harm'—Insights from family carers and professionals: An Irish case study. *The British Journal of Social Work*, bcaf004.

Hester, M. (2013). Who does what to whom? Gender and domestic violence perpetrators in English police records. *European Journal of criminology*, 10(5), 623-637.

Isham, L., Bradbury-Jones, C., & Hewison, A. (2020). Female family carers' experiences of violent, abusive or harmful behaviour by the older person for whom they care: a case of epistemic injustice?. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 42(1), 80-94.

Knight, L., & Hester, M. (2016). Domestic violence and mental health in older adults. *International review of psychiatry*, 28(5), 464-474.

Mackay, K. (2017). Choosing to live with harm? A presentation of two case studies to explore the perspective of those who experienced adult safeguarding interventions. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 11(1), 33-46.

Wydall (2021) Intimate Partner Violence - Transforming the response to older victim-survivors in later life in *The Routledge International Handbook of Domestic Violence and Abuse Edited Book*. Devaney, J., Bradbury Jones, C., Holt, S., Macy, R. J. & Øverlien, C. (eds.). 1 ed. Taylor & Francis, Vol. 1. 27 p. 14 (March 2021)

Do You See Me? is a short co-produced documentary exploring the lived experiences and first hand accounts of older LGBTQ+ people who are victim survivors of domestic abuse. Gordine, C., Wydall, S., Zerk, R., Chapman, T., Joiner, A., Craine, J., Mitchell, X. & Bulman, R., 17 Nov 2020, The Centre for Age, Gender and Social Justice.

Wydall, S., & Zerk, R. (2020) 'Listen to me, his behaviour is erratic and I'm really worried for our safety...': Help-seeking in the context of coercive control'. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, pp 1-19

Wydall, S., Clarke, A., Williams, J. & Zerk, R., (2019), 'Dewis Choice: A Welsh Initiative promoting justice for older victim-survivors of domestic abuse' *Violence Against Older Women : Responses*. Bows, H. (ed.). 1 ed. Springer Nature, Vol. 2. p. 13-36 24 p. (Palgrave Studies in Victims and Victimology).

Wydall, S. & Freeman, E. (2019), 'Older People and Domestic Violence and Abuse' in *Domestic Violence in Health Contexts: A Guide for Healthcare Professionals*. McGarry, J. & Ali, P. (eds.). Switzerland: Springer Nature

Wydall, S., Clarke, A., Williams, J. & Zerk, R. (2018), 'Domestic Abuse and Elder Abuse in Wales: A Tale of Two Initiatives' In : *British Journal of Social Work*. 48, 4, p. 962–981

Wydall, S. and Zerk, R. (2017) 'Domestic abuse and older people: Factors influencing help-seeking', *Journal of Adult Protection*, 19(5), pp. 247–60.

Clarke, A., Williams, J. & Wydall, S. (2016) 'Access to justice for victims/survivors of elder abuse: A qualitative study', *Social Policy and Society*, 15(2), pp. 207–20.

Sharp-Jeffs, N., & Kelly, L. (2016) *Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) Case 20 Analysis: Report for Standing Together Against Domestic Violence*, available online at <https://repository.londonmet.ac.uk/1477/> (accessed 0402)

For further info about Dewis Choice and its impact see link <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/45165906-c80a-41ca-a281-4d5d63085435?page=1%C2%A0>

Thank You

Professor Sarah Wydall

<https://www.swansea.ac.uk/staff/s.m.wydall/>