**Areas to explore when taking history for domestic violence risk assessment**

**Alleged perpetrator**

(I have used gendered language here but these areas are relevant for both men and women who have used violence in relationships. However the research base for risk factors associated with women’s violence in relationships is much smaller than for men)

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| Static (historical) factors | |
| Attachment problems in childhood | Disruption in care, mother/father described as rejecting, no memories of loving supportive behaviour, loss of parent/s. |
| Maltreatment in childhood | Emotional, physical, sexual, neglect, both within and outside the family. Ask about mother’s subsequent partners if parents separated during childhood. |
| Exposure to violence/abuse in childhood | In addition to violence between parents and step parents, check out the extent and impact of any bullying experienced. Also exposure to violent peer group in adolescence. |
| Conduct/adjustment problems as a child/adolescent | Here we are looking for persistent or severe behavioural or adjustment problems, beyond what is normative for adolescents. Early substance abuse, fighting, bullying, criminal involvement, exclusion, running away, involvement with children’s services etc.  *With all the developmental factors, it is useful to test out the person’s capacity to reflect on how these experiences have influenced how they turned out as adults, and also any links they can make between their childhood experience and their own children’s experience.*  *A capacity to reflect in this area may indicate a reduction in the significance of these as current risk factors.* |
| Employment problems | A failure to sustain employment often indicates irresponsibility, propensity for conflict, impulsivity and problems in social adjustment. Has he been sacked, left a lot of jobs because he was bored, problems with authority, never worked, lived off others etc.? |
| Substance use problems | Both current and historic. There is some evidence that the personality characteristics of those who have had chronic substance abuse problems increase the risk of abuse even after the substance abuse problems have abated.  Explore the links between substance abuse and domestic violence – is violence used to sustain a habit, to ensure funding for drugs/alcohol, as a proactive excuse for abuse, i.e. he/she gets mad, goes for a drink, is abusive then blames the drink? Is he more aggressive when he’s used the drug, or when he is coming down/ can’t get it? Is there co-dependence related to substance abuse – i.e. is the recovery of one partner dependent on the other’s capacity to change? How does he see the link between substance use and violence? If he attributes all abusive behaviour to alcohol, check both with him and his partner whether he’s ever been violent when not drinking. |
| Mental health problems | Recent or enduring psychological problems (or neurological impairment). Mental health problems are also linked with dropping out of treatment and with post-treatment recidivism. Current substance abuse exacerbates this factor. |
| Criminal history | Don’t ignore non-violent offences – any kind of offending is associated with increased incidence of domestic violence. Look for ‘criminal versatility’ i.e. lots of different types of offences. Also criminal offending over a long period of time. If a man is still offending in his late thirties onwards it’s an indication that the usual maturation process which stops most young men offending eventually hasn’t taken place. |
| Aggression outside the family context | Violent crime, instrumental aggression, fighting with other men – ‘pan-violent’ men generally poses higher risk of more severe violence than ‘family only’ offenders. |
| Aggression to another family member | As an adult. I would include aggression in childhood or adolescence in the section on this above. |
| Defiance of authority | Repeated breaches of injunction, offences on bail, deceiving local authority, resisting arrest etc – indicates a poor prognosis for abiding by agreements. |
| Domestic violence in another relationship/s | If there is a history of violence or abuse in previous relationships it is harder to argue that there factors specific to this partner or this relationship were driving the abuse. |
| **Domestic abuse in current relationship** | **Explore all forms of domestic abuse with both parents. Inventories are a useful adjunct to this section. You are looking for patterns of behaviour beyond what is listed in the chronology, in particular ongoing threat and control, and also a sense of what it was like for the children to live with this.** |
| ***Psychological abuse of the mother*** | Ask about the nature of verbal abuse and its impact – what does he say when he’s angry, what names does he call her, does he constantly criticise? (Mothers report that it is the emotional abuse that has the most significant and long term impact on their functioning) |
| ***Possessive behaviour towards the mother*** | Jealous questioning, checking, restriction of where s/he goes and who s/he sees, actions which isolate her from friends and family. Irrational jealousy.  Also look for attitudes which indicate possessiveness towards the children - “I won’t have another man around my child”. |
| ***Coercive control of the mother*** | This is now a crime. Here you are looking for a pattern of behaviour (course of conduct) which has a “serious effect” on the victim, meaning that it has caused the victim to fear violence will be used against them on “at least two occasions”, or it has had a “substantial adverse effect on the victims’ day to day activities”(legal definition). With the alleged perpetrator ask about overtly controlling behaviour as well as any behaviour which is likely to have caused fear. Ask if his partner has ever been afraid of him. Would she be afraid of his reaction if she did something he doesn’t like? Has he made threats, or punished her emotionally or physically for doing something he didn’t like (i.e. done something to ‘pay her back’, ‘show her’ or ‘teach her a lesson’). Explore this area with the partner too, did his moods dominate the house, what was it like to disagree with him, was she afraid of him physically, was she afraid of his temper, were his moods such that she changed her behaviour to fit in with him? Did she ‘walk on eggshells? |
| ***Assault against the mother*** | Take a behavioural sequence from both parents of, at a minimum, first, worst and most recent incidents. Note the specific forms of violence used, frequency, severity, duration. |
| ***Sexual abuse of the mother*** | Often difficult to elicit with the perpetrator. You can ask if he thinks she ever felt she had to have sex to keep him in a good mood, or to make up after violence. What he was like to be around if she didn’t want to have sex, would he sulk, act out, engage in jealous questioning or accusations? Ask similar questions with the mother. |
| ***Harassment of the mother*** | Post separation. |
| Exposure of child to domestic violence | Seeing or hearing, getting caught up in conflict, intervening or trying to distract parents, exposure to aftermath, damage in the house, parental distress, disruption in the family caused by police involvement etc. |
| Child Maltreatment | (over and above emotional harm caused by exposure to domestic violence) There is a strong overlap between domestic violence and direct maltreatment of children. The more frequent and severe the domestic violence, the more likely that the children will also have been maltreated. |

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| **Dynamic factors (these are highly interdependent)** |
| Capacity to recognise the characteristic emotions and thinking patterns linked to violence and abusive behaviour – and to use these as a warning sign in future to avoid such behaviour. |
| Does he explicitly or implicitly justify abusive behaviour? |
| Denial – is not necessarily related to risk, but high levels of denial make treatment less viable. Denial also prevents the parent acknowledging the child’s experience and giving accountable and responsible messages about the abuse.  What is driving the denial? Self-deception is more worrying than shame-based denial or denial to avoid consequences (where there is at least some awareness that the behaviour is inappropriate). |
| Attitude to (ex) partner – continuing resentment, rumination about her faults, high level of ‘partner blame’, i.e. she needs to change before he can act differently. Distorted thinking about her motives. Suicidal ideation coupled with resentment of partner is particularly dangerous. |
| High levels of jealousy. Morbid (highly irrational) jealousy. ‘Victim thinking’. Attitudes that condone retaliatory or punitive violence. |
| Attitude to abusive behaviour – capacity for remorse, guilt |
| Emotional regulation - capacity to contain feelings of vulnerability and anger. |
| Empathy – capacity generally to understand the mental states of others. Capacity to conceive of his partner as an independent person with her own needs and wishes. Capacity to understand impact of abusive behaviour on partner.  Capacity to acknowledge exposure of children to abuse/violence/conflict. Capacity to understand the emotional impact on them of this. More generally, understanding of the potential impacts on any child of exposure to domestic violence. |
| Motivation – recognition of abusive behaviour as a problem, along with some desire to address it. |

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| Domestic violence risk/vulnerability factors for women  Static (historical factors) | |
| Attachment problems in childhood | Disruption in care, mother/father described as rejecting, no memories of loving supportive behaviour, loss of parent/s. |
| Maltreatment in childhood | Emotional, physical, sexual abuse both within and outside the family. Neglect.  Ask about mother’s subsequent partners if parents separated during childhood. |
| Exposure to violence/abuse in childhood | In addition to violence between parents and step parents, check out the extent and impact of any bullying experienced. Also exposure to violent peer group in adolescence. |
| Conduct/adjustment problems as a child/adolescent | Here we are looking for persistent or severe behavioural or adjustment problems, beyond what is normative. Early substance abuse, fighting, bullying, criminal involvement, exclusion, running away, involvement with children’s services etc.  With all the developmental factors, also enquire about how they make sense of these experiences now – a capacity to reflect in this area may indicate a reduction in the significance of these as risk factors  Mothers are often very attached to an ideal of family life, if they feel they lacked this as a child.  Also, look for how early attachment issues may influence relationships – e.g. persistent jealousy, fear of abandonment, clinging to an abusive partner rather than facing life alone etc. |
| Substance use problems | Parents had substance abuse problems; early alcohol/drug problems; substance related violence or arrests; recent alcohol/drug problems; consumption of spirits; poly-substance user; relapse after treatment |
| Mental health problems | Look for issues which would raise vulnerability generally, such as personality disorder. Also any persistent mental health problem raises risk of being subjected to domestic violence (as does physical disability, learning disability or ill health) |
| Subjection to sexual or violent assault by a non-intimate | This raises risk as it can leave a woman more emotionally vulnerable. In addition some men become abusive when they find out about previous sexual assault. |
| Criminal History | Prior arrest; imprisonment; criminal lifestyle; non—violent convictions; criminal versatility; anti-social behaviour |
| General aggression | Frequent fighting; multiple incidents with different victims; injury inflicted; |
| Aggression to another family member | Aggression to members of own family; aggression to in-laws; aggression to her partner’s friends or his ex-partners |
| Defiance of authority.  Non- cooperation with social services | Repeated breaches of injunction, offences on bail, resisting arrest etc – indicates a poor prognosis for abiding by agreements.  Breach of care plan; breach of agreement; hostile attitude to social worker; deceiving or non-compliance with local authority; ‘feigned compliance’. |
| Adult attachment problems | Lots of short-term relationship or infidelities; history of unstable relationships; emotional dependence; intense irrational jealous behaviour |
| Subjection to domestic violence in another relationship | Domestic violence is endemic in our society, so in itself being subjected to domestic violence in more than one relationship is not statistically unlikely.  However, violence in previous relationships can increase future vulnerability through its impact on the victim’s self-esteem and emotional stability, and can exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities.  This may also reflect something about the pool of partners she is choosing from, so it is worth investigating whether she associates with a criminal/violent peer group. |
| Subjection to domestic violence in this relationship | Again, address all areas. Explore the impact of this. Use inventories to expand the person’s definition of what constitutes domestic abuse. |
| Aggression towards a partner | Conflict escalation; verbal and/or physical aggression. Check out the relative physical size and capacity for violence of each partner. Who would win in a stand up fight?  At a minimum this is a safety planning issue for her – women who use violence in relationships greatly increase the risk of suffering violence themselves. |
| Inability to protect herself from domestic violence | What did she know about current and past partners when she met them? Knowingly entering a relationship with a man with a history of violence is a worrying sign. Rushing into relationships; rejecting help; returning to a violent relationship; remaining in abusive relationships (when resources are available to leave). To what extent was fear a factor?  (This is an area where it is important to try as much as possible to gain a deep understanding of the practical and emotional/cognitive barriers to keeping herself safe.  Also make a genuine enquiry into all the ways in which she did try to keep herself and her children safe, even if these have turned out to be ineffective.) |
| Inability to protect her child from domestic violence | Disregard for the children being present; active involvement of the children; remaining in abusive relationships when resources are available to leave. Prioritising her need for intimacy over the safety of the children. |
| Child Maltreatment | Neglect; emotional abuse; physical abuse; sexual abuse. How did the abuse affect her parenting? Ask about his treatment of the children. |
| Other issues | How have family/community protected, failed to protect or contributed to the abuse?  What does her religion /culture say about domestic violence, about women who leave partners? |

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| **Dynamic factors (these are highly interdependent)** |
| Understanding of risk concerns; |
| Capacity to take responsibility for her role in the family’s difficulties (or, paradoxically, an over-eagerness to blame herself for the abuse). |
| Denial. Try to understand the drivers for denial – shame, an exaggerated fear that any disclosure will lead to her children being taken away, lack of awareness of how serious things have been, desire to protect her partner or her relationship with him, resentment of professional interference in her life. |
| Awareness of impact of domestic violence on children – both generally and specifically on her children – try to ask about this after you have gained some sense of what life has actually been like for the children and what happened during specific incidents. |
| Awareness of the impact of domestic violence/abuse on self – on her capacity to make good decisions, on self esteem, on capacity to envisage a future outside the relationship, etc. |
| Attachment to abusive partner – what keeps/kept her in the relationship longer than was safe for her? What is it like for her to contemplate being alone/lonely? Does she still hope that she can rediscover the good times at the start of the relationship. Does she feel sorry for him, think that he needs her, has there been a confusing mix of abuse and caring behaviour?  Does she just think that all the concerns are exaggerated and that the relationship is ok? |
| Attachment to an ideal of an intact family and/or of children having a father in their life. Explore the history of this idea for her. Belief that marriage is sacred. |
| Explore other factors that kept her in an abusive relationship – what practical barriers are there? What barriers in her family and culture? Also in many relationships there is the fear of what he would do if she left. Has he made specific threats about this? |
| Emotional regulation |
| Violence in relationships – explore the motives and circumstances of her use of violence this, anchoring your enquiry in the detail of specific incidents |
| Very low self-esteem |
| Motivation to change |