



Reframing the conversation around Domestic & Sexual Violence and Abuse.

This post is a collective piece, thanks to all who have [contributed](#). It is going to focus on men who abuse women and children. We acknowledge that there are female offenders, but this post will not be discussing them. It comes with a content note for Domestic & Sexual Violence and Abuse.

What do we mean when we say language matters? The words that we use say a great deal about our interactions with the world, about us, and about how we discuss difficult topics. The words that we choose need to have impact and power if they are going to help us change the issues around domestic and sexual violence and abuse.

We're going to start with problematic terms that we've been sent by our site contributors, and include some alternatives. These alternatives help to reframe the debate - using terms that some may find upsetting needs to be balanced with a decision that we make a conscious choice to use terms that reflect what we are actually talking about. This avoids us talking around the topic.

Child Sexual Abuse

Some of the terms may feel unpalatable. Talking about 'indecent images of children' or 'images of child sexual abuse' may feel difficult when compared to the ubiquitous term 'child pornography', for example. But why does it matter? Discussions on twitter about this from those who suggest that the term 'child' negates any consent inferred from the word 'pornography' miss the point - sex offenders use the phrase as their [preferred term](#). They are aroused by these images - so indeed, to a sex offender, they are considered 'pornography'. If we use the term pornography to denote indecent images of children, we are using the term preferred by the men who use images of child sexual abuse to get aroused. Not so comfortable now, is it?

Alongside this term, we have other terms used about child abusers. '[Sex tourist](#)' - the men who travel to other countries to sexually abuse children. 'Child sex' is another phrase where the presence of the word 'child' does not negate the consent implied by using the word 'sex'. What we really mean when we say this, is 'child rape'. The child has been raped, by a man who had power and control over them. Using the term 'child sex' adds to his power. He probably didn't think he did anything wrong. He probably thought the child 'wanted it'. Maybe they were 'provocative'. Maybe they gave him the 'come on'. He wants to detract from his rape of a child, and describe it as sex, as it is more comfortable for him. How does that feel for you, aiding a child rapist to feel more comfortable?

Another questionable term used about children is 'child prostitute'. The term 'prostitute' is debatable in itself; women prefer the term 'sex worker' (for those who believe it to be work, same as any other form of work), or 'prostituted woman', for those women who have their choices taken away from them and are prostituted by others who financially gain from the purchase of sexual activity. The term 'child prostitute' suggests consent - that the child made an



active, conscious choice to engage in sexual activity where payment is received for said activity. Again, the argument against this is that the term 'child' negates that. No, it doesn't. Name it - a 'prostituted child' a 'child raped by men who pay for this service'. Let us not collude with the rape of children.

'[Kiddy fiddling](#)'. This is one of the worst phrases that we have ever heard. We're pretty sure that we can leave that one there, with no need for further explanation.

'Under age sex'. What does this term say? To us, it suggests that a young person is having sex under the [age of consent](#) (16 years, in the UK). We have worked extensively with children and young people, and know that they do, of course, have 'under age sex'. However, the sex they have is usually with young people of a similar age and circumstance - using the term 'under age sex' to describe sexual activity after grooming, exploitation or coercion by an older and more powerful man is not under age sex. It is a crime, often prosecuted as 'sexual activity with a child'. Using this term suggests consent and therefore takes responsibility away from the sex offender.

[Paedophile](#) is another term that came up when we asked for suggestions. It means 'lover of children'. Do people who love children sexually abuse them? This is another term preferred by perpetrators, as they describe their sexual activity with children as part of their sexuality. This piece is not going to discuss that further, but there is research around this topic that can be found easily via Google. Using the language preferred by perpetrators helps them excuse, minimise and deny the abuse, and we'd not want any part of that. Lets call them what they are - child sexual abusers, instead.

Moving away from abuse of children to abuse of women. We found so many problematic terms, we are going to divide this section into Domestic Violence & Abuse (including rape and sexual abuses by partners/ex partners); Domestic Homicide/Murder and Sexual Violence & Abuse.

Domestic Violence & Abuse:

Tempestuous / Volatile / Acrimonious / Stormy / Tumultuous Relationship. Crime of Passion. Altercation. Lovers Tiff. What do those words say to you? To us, they suggest that both parties are involved in the abuse. They suggest that the 'volatility' in the relationship is two-way, where both parties suffer physical and emotional harm from the other partner. It shares the blame with the victim without the perpetrator having to do anything. Nice work, huh? Using these terms aids that. Call a domestically violent and abusive relationship 'volatile'? Your sympathy is with the perpetrator. You're aiding him excusing his behaviour. In fact, you're not aiding it - you've done it for him. How does that feel?

He is a 'batterer'. She's a 'battered woman'. When we hear that term, the first image that comes into our head is of the local fish & chip shop! It completely ignores the emotional, psychological and financial abuse suffered by women. It dehumanises her and should be used with extreme caution. In our experience, it is rare to find a woman who suffers [only physical abuse](#) at the hands of their abusive partner. The other strands of abuse link closely in order for the man to gain, and retain, control over his partner.



Generally, when these terms are used, they mean domestic & sexual violence and abuse, perpetrated by men, against women. Why is it so hard to say that? What does it tell an abuser who physically assaults his wife, who then fights back by scratching his face? It tells him that it's ok. It tells him that he has no need to provide excuses or explanations; we will do that work for him. It tells him that she is just as bad as him, and his behaviour is justified, without him having to acknowledge what he's done. It tells him we understand. Life is difficult. Their relationship is 'volatile'. We understand. It's ok.

Actually, it's not ok. Using those terms completely ignores the [issue of power](#). He is likely to be more powerful than her - not just physically, but emotionally, too. After all, he doesn't live in fear. He isn't worried about disclosing to someone and finding an under-trained social worker on the doorstep talking about 'leaving' and 'protecting the children'. He isn't in fear that he may receive a text message that triggers an all-night assault because she's "obviously having an affair". He isn't in fear that he may be killed, if he says the 'wrong' thing at the 'wrong' time. Lets not use language that gives him more power - after all, this contributes to his ongoing abuse of her, and we aren't going to collude with that, are we?

Or are we? We also ask 'why doesn't she leave?' Or 'why does she put up with it?'. These questions are asked from a position of ignorance. How about we reframe the question? '[Why doesn't he stop abusing her?](#)'. That question lays the blame in the appropriate place, with the responsibility on the perpetrator. Let us not make survivors and victims any more responsible than they already feel.

How about the term '[gendered violence](#)'? Using this term acknowledges that DVA is a gendered issue, but it's not specific enough. The problem is violence and abuse against women, perpetrated by men. Women are at much greater risk, and often they are abused because they are women. Using the term 'gendered' is a misnomer. If we are going to talk about gender, lets talk about it properly.

'Interpersonal violence'. We understand interpersonal to describe relations between people, but this completely detracts from the closeness of the relationship. Domestic abusers don't usually berate or assault their co-workers, friends, or other people they come into contact with - they abuse their intimate partners, ex-partners, mothers, sisters, children. Women they have power and control over. Interpersonal doesn't cover the root causes and we suggest it is avoided unless you are discussing men who abuse most of those they come into contact with, not just those they are, or have been, emotionally connected to.

Domestic Homicide/Murder:

A 'tragic, isolated incident'. Where to start with this one? It is indeed, tragic, when a man kills his partner or ex partner, and the children. It is certainly not an 'isolated incident'. Abusive men do not kill their partners and children in a vacuum. There will have been an ongoing, systematic, campaign of abuse against the partner (and children, they are affected even if they don't directly witness the abuse), over a number of months or years. There may have been reports to the police, possibly criminal charges or convictions in relation to DVA. Maybe she never reported him to the police and so her murder came 'out of the blue' or 'couldn't have been predicted'.



Maybe the neighbours didn't think it was any of their business. Maybe the police labelled it as a 'domestic' and didn't offer the right support. Maybe there were 'extenuating circumstances'. Maybe she 'provoked' him; perhaps she was leaving, or had left the relationship. Maybe it happened 'behind closed doors'. Maybe it was considered 'private' or a 'family matter'. Not so private now though, is it? Now, the woman and possibly her children are dead because we used terms that help us ignore the [ongoing abuse which culminated in him killing them](#).

A 'murder/suicide'. A 'suicide pact'. Again, these terms are used to describe a [family annihilator](#). We can say with certainty that the woman didn't sign a 'pact' that resulted in the death of her and her children at the hands of a man who will have claimed to love them.

Rape and Sexual Abuse:

'Date rape'. Because that's not as bad as 'stranger rape', is it? She knew him, maybe she invited him in, maybe they'd had sex before and so he assumed that he could have sex with her again. Maybe she was drunk, had been flirting, leading him on.... The excuses are endless. Rape is rape, no matter what the relationship is between the perpetrator and the victim. Sexual contact needs informed and enthusiastic consent. No consent? [No sex, or you're a rapist](#).

'Sex crime' 'having sex' 'sex case' 'sex scandal' 'sex controversy'. It's hard to know where to start with these terms. If an allegation of rape, or sexual assault has been made, this is not about sex. Reframing the conversation means calling it what it is. Rape is not about sex, arousal or desire. It is about [power and the need to control](#). Men do not rape women because they 'cannot help it'. If they could stop if the police, or a man held a gun to their head, or the children walked into the room, they can stop if a woman doesn't say yes. The only people who think all men are rapists, are other rapists. Let us not call them 'sex crimes' or any of the other tabloid-esque terms listed above. Let us call them what they are - rapists, sex offenders, men who sexually assault women.

There are terms that cover all of the above areas. They may crop up in family court proceedings; they may be used by professional organisations. They talk of 'alleged abuse or violence', even when there has been police contact and even prosecutions against the men, or where there is evidence of the individual act of abuse being part of a wider campaign against the woman. The perpetrator is described as being the woman's 'lover', rather than partner or girlfriend. Why is this problematic? The term 'lover' suggests promiscuity. It suggests that there may be other 'lovers'. Those promiscuous women invite violence, with their provocative and flirtatious behaviour. Violence against them isn't as bad as it would be against a woman who fits the patriarchal-ideal of how a 'decent' (read: heteronormative) woman should behave.

This links closely with the need to 'other' crimes of domestic & sexual violence and abuse. We use cultural differences as a cover for the fact that they are not 'like us'. 'Our' men don't gang rape women on buses who later die from their injuries, [so severe was the attack](#). 'Our' men don't sexually exploit children who are being ['cared for' by the Local Authority](#). They do. We just choose to emphasise the cultural differences, not the similarities in relation to abuse. It suits the narrative to other the abuse of women and girls, by describing sex offenders and rapists as [monsters](#).



We talk about 'domestic violence' in a way that detracts from other forms of 'violence'. It's only a 'domestic'.

We're not 'prostitutes' who are murdered - we're different. We haven't put ourselves at risk, or done an activity that is used to replace the word 'woman'. '[A prostitute was murdered](#)' (read: not someone like you, don't worry). We don't say 'a bank clerk was murdered', do we? No. We say 'woman', as we should do.

We talk about 'troubled families' and the government throws millions of pounds to provide interventions based on flawed [research](#).

We talk about harassment instead of [stalking](#). We don't link stalking to DSVVA and so we can't join the dots.

We talk about 'sexual assault' when what we mean is oral, vaginal or anal rape.

We talk about '[innocent victims](#)', as if somehow some victims are more deserving of our support than others

Othering violence and abuse against women is almost insidious. It seeps into all the reporting, the [media coverage](#) and day to day discussions. In some ways, it allows us to manage the fear that comes from being a girl or woman, and the constant risk assessing that is second nature to us.

So what terms should we use? We've used Domestic & Sexual Violence and Abuse as a catch-all, but we're not sure it's ideal.

We will not change the risk to all women unless we are using correct terms. The problem is men's violence against women and children. Let us use the language of survivors and victims, not the language of perpetrators. When the UK Prime Minister uses the term '[child pornography](#)', we know we have a lot of work to do.

Let us not waste the power that our words can have.

You can find out more about our campaign [here](#).