

# Intimate partner sexual violence

**IMPORTANT NOTICE: This information sheet does not constitute medical advice or guidance. Its purpose is to give general information about intimate partner sexual violence. Beira's Place is not a medical service and cannot diagnose physical or mental health conditions.**

**If you have been hurt or injured and think you need immediate medical treatment, call 999, or call NHS 24 on 111 for physical or mental health advice.**

Domestic abuse is usually described as “physical, emotional, financial or sexual abuse” but the focus for service provision, training workers, news articles and even information for women who are living with, or have lived with an abuser, still seems to be on physical abuse and more recently, coercive and controlling behaviour. Coercive control is something that’s been overlooked for so long, but the one aspect of domestic abuse that is very rarely talked about, or has been written about, is sexual violence and abuse. We have seen greater acknowledgement of this aspect of domestic abuse in recent years, in the form of information and legislation.

When women are living with an abusive man, it can be almost impossible to have the time and space to analyse what’s going on, to identify and name his behaviour, or her own behaviour and how she is coping with his abuse. Women sometimes take years to see the sexual abuse that happened to them, because even when a woman is able to leave the abuser, her priority is almost always finding a safe place where he will not find her, ensuring the safety and wellbeing of her children, trying to be financially stable, negotiating the benefits system and the housing market. She may also be navigating her way through the criminal justice system if the abuser has been charged with crimes of violence against her or her children and trying to recover from the trauma she has been living with for years.

For some women, the sexual abuse has been violent, resulting in long term injuries and health problems and this can be a priority for a woman who has been able to leave and get to a place of safety.

Pornography is also a factor in Intimate Partner Sexual Violence (IPSV) and the abuse of women in pornography. Pornography shows severe acts of violence against women and these are often played out in IPSV where the abuser expects his partner to act out or replicate the acts he has viewed online.

Like all aspects of domestic abuse, intimate partner sexual violence is probably the least reported crime in the UK, and arguably across the world. In this information sheet we’re not talking about ‘marital rape’ or ‘partner rape’ because the spectrum of sexual violence and abuse within the context of domestic abuse is often invisible and, for some women, difficult to identify. Many women struggle to name intimate partner sexual violence if physical violence or threats have not been involved.

## ● Defining Intimate Partner Sexual Violence

We define IPSV in its widest context in this information sheet. Below, we will break down these forms of IPSV with clearer explanations on why they are included:

- Rape
  - Coerced or pressurised sex
  - Transactional sex
  - Appeasement sex
- Penetration by objects (a new offence within the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009)
- Online sexual abuse
- Sexual exploitation

### Rape

The legal definition of rape in Scotland is penetration by a penis without the person's consent, or without any reasonable belief that the person consents. Penetration can be in the mouth, vagina, or anus. There does not have to be force of any kind and consent must be by 'free agreement' which means in the legislation that there is no coercion, fear, deception, or penetration while someone is asleep, unconscious, or unable to consent because of high levels of drugs or alcohol taken.

Women often find it hard to define rape because, historically, we have viewed rape as an act where violence is used, where injuries and bruises make it easy to identify, and where physical force is evident. Where there is no physical force, no bruising or act of violence such as strangulation, it can be more difficult for women to name it.

In situations where women do not say 'no' and in some cases where they initiate the sexual act, it can be extremely difficult to name their abuse. But if refusing the sexual act means that there will be consequences for the woman or her children, the act is not 'free agreement', it is a survival strategy.

### Coerced or pressure sex

Most women who have worked in support services for domestic abuse or rape and sexual assault have heard survivors speak about the pressures they felt to engage in sexual acts with their partners. This serves to put the responsibility for the abuse on to the woman rather than on the abuser. His reasoning is that if she doesn't accede to his demands, he will be violent, angry, have sex with other women, verbally or emotionally abuse her, and many, many more abusive behaviours that the woman can be blamed for because she says no. Women's agreement to the abuser's sexual demands are often one of the survival strategies she uses to manage his behaviour. Women talk about 'keeping him sweet', or 'keeping him quiet' when they describe the sexual coercion.

It's also important to acknowledge the invisible pressure women experience. It's not only a case of the abuser demanding sex, or actively pressurising the woman, but that invisible pressure she is under to anticipate his moods and ensure that he is 'kept happy'. This may be a case where the woman will initiate a sexual act, to change the abuser's mood and ultimately protect her and her children from other violent or abusive acts. It's not unusual for women to take a long time to see this as sexual abuse.

### Transactional sex

Where there is financial abuse, it is common for the woman to have to exchange sex for payment of bills, clothing for children, and for food for the family. This often accompanies rigorous micromanagement of spending, providing receipts for any shopping done, or the woman handing over her pay to the abuser if she is working, and being given the exact amount she needs for travel to and from work. With the abuser in complete control of all family finance, the woman will do what she must to ensure that her children are fed, clothed, and housed. Transactional sex can carry on after the woman has left her abuser, particularly if she is dependent upon him for child maintenance payments, or to pay a mortgage. It is not uncommon for abusers to use money and child contact to continue controlling and sometimes stalking behaviour.

Again, this is an area where there is that invisible pressure on women to 'keep him sweet', particularly when she is expecting financial pressure, for example buying school uniforms or a large gas or electricity bill. Here she may manage the abuser by initiating sex so that he feels good, or in control of her. Women speak about not understanding themselves, knowing that their partner was an abuser, was cruel and that she was afraid of him, yet not only initiating sex, but experiencing physical pleasure as well. Understanding this as another coping strategy that women must use to manage men's violence and abuse can help with self-blame and guilt.

### Appeasement sex

For some women it's the 'making up' sex, when there's been a disagreement and they want to get things back to normal. It's not a survival strategy, but just a way of saying, 'let's put this behind us'.

Things change though when it becomes a survival strategy. It is like 'pressure sex' in that it becomes a way to calm a situation and forestall abuse. It's also like 'transactional sex' in that it can help pave the way for a request for money, food, clothing, or a little bit of freedom of movement. Survivors have spoken about using appeasement sex to calm partners down when children have been noisy or misbehaving, to distract him from hitting the children, to 'keep him sweet'. They have also spoken about using this to calm him after the woman's relatives or friends have visited because he feels he has been unsuccessful in isolating the woman the way he wants to.

*"... many women would argue that this is a gray area as most of us will use appeasement sex at some point in our relationships. However, I would suggest that when appeasement sex becomes a conscious strategy for avoiding abusive consequences, it can then be clearly placed on that spectrum of [men's] abusive behaviour."*

McOrmond Plummer, L., Eastel. P., Levy-Peck, JY., "Intimate Partner Sexual Violence: a multidisciplinary guide to improving services and support for survivors of rape and abuse" (2014) p 91, Kerr, I. "Counselling and Advocacy Perspectives on Intimate Partner Sexual Violence"

### Penetration by objects

This is a new offence that came into being in the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act (2009). Penetration by objects is a common aspect of sexual violence and abuse and can cause serious physical damage to a woman's vagina as well as the psychological consequences. It can also be used to humiliate and shame women as the abusers know that women find this

hard to talk about and may not seek medical attention because they are unable to speak to their GP about how their injuries happened.

### Online sexual abuse

This is sometimes called 'revenge porn' where intimate photographs or videos are shared online to humiliate a woman. It often happens after a woman has left her abuser. It is a criminal offence in Scotland under the **Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016**. The BBC reported on it in 2017 [New 'revenge porn' law comes into force in Scotland - BBC News](#) with Scottish Women's Aid commenting, *"So called revenge porn is not about revenge, and it's not about porn. It's about power, control, and humiliation. Sharing or threatening to share intimate pictures or videos of someone without their consent causes devastating harm to victims and it is absolutely right that the law should reflect this."*

Once the intimate images are online, survivors worry about being unable to have them removed. There are ways to do this, and a Google search will bring up a number of websites offering advice on how this can be done. However, it can be a long process and unless you are knowledgeable about navigating the web, it can be difficult.

### Sexual exploitation

Substance misuse support services often see women who are being sexually exploited by their partners. It's commonly linked to addictions where the abuser is prostituting the woman to maintain his, and her, drug addiction. Women with addictions are targeted because of their vulnerability, and there may be a history of abuse which increases the woman's vulnerability to exploitation.

But sexual exploitation is not only linked to addictions. Women survivors of IPSV have spoken about partners bringing friends or work colleagues and being forced into sexual acts. This, along with the threat of videos being shared online, often serves to silence women and ensures that the abuser continues to control her.

## ● Getting support

Any form of sexual violence is wrong and though many women, even those who have left the abuser, do not want to report to the police because they are still afraid of their partner or ex-partner, there are ways to get help and support.

Women who are living with any form of domestic abuse have a whole range of coping strategies that they use to try to manage their abusive partner's behaviour. This can have a huge impact on their physical and mental health and the ongoing coercion, control, threats, humiliation, gaslighting, and physical abuse can leave a woman believing that she was the problem, and not the abuser's behaviour. Abusers depend on this to keep their partners with them, and dependent on them.

Domestic abuse support services, such as Women's Aid will support women who are still living with their abuser, who are thinking about leaving and want to explore their options or are trying to leave and are looking for safe accommodation. Sexual violence support services can also offer support through their helplines or online.



Get support from Beira's Place. Contact us for an assessment appointment on 0131 526 3944 between 10 am and 5 pm Monday to Friday, text us on 07546 697 067, or email us at [support@beirasplace.org.uk](mailto:support@beirasplace.org.uk)

## ● National helplines

**Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline** is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They can be contacted on 0800 027 1234 or on [www.helpline@sdaafmh.org.uk](http://www.helpline@sdaafmh.org.uk)

This helpline is open to women and men.

**Scottish Women's Aid** website gives information on all local women's aid organisations. They can be contacted on [www.womensaid.scot](http://www.womensaid.scot)

**Rape Crisis Scotland** national helpline is on 08088 01 03 02 or local rape crisis centres can be found by visiting their website on [www.rapecrisisScotland.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisisScotland.org.uk). This helpline is open to women and men.

**Action Against Stalking** helpline is on 0800 820 2427 or visit their website on [www.actionagainststalking.org](http://www.actionagainststalking.org). They can also be contacted by email for support at [Support@actionagainststalking.org](mailto:Support@actionagainststalking.org).

**Revenge Porn Helpline** is on 0345 600 0459 or visit their website on [www.revengepornhelpline.org.uk](http://www.revengepornhelpline.org.uk).