

Focus on coercive control and gendered approach must be at the heart of efforts to address domestic violence and abuse

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The Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which received Royal Assent in April, has the potential to save lives, increase safety, protect children from the ongoing impact of growing up with violence and abuse, and improve the protections available for victim and survivors in the family courts and beyond, an expert from the University of Exeter Law School has said.

Dr. Charlotte Bishop, Senior Lecturer in Law, has warned the legislation does not provide the groundwork for the far-reaching systemic change that is needed. In a study published in *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, Dr. Bishop says a "gendered approach" is needed by those working to tackle [domestic violence](#) and [abuse](#). Under this approach it is not merely 'coincidence' that the majority of domestic [violence](#) and abuse is commissioned by heterosexual males; men who are violent towards their wives and female partners do so as a result of conforming to [cultural norms](#) that support male dominance.

The research says putting coercive control at the heart of domestic violence and abuse would enable greater identification and prevention of the root causes; pervasive sex-role stereotypes and expectations rooted in [gender inequality](#) at a social and cultural level.

Dr. Bishop said: "Women are disproportionately impacted by domestic violence and abuse, so there needs to be a gendered approach to addressing it, which takes into account social and cultural inequalities. There needs to be a shift in focus away from discrete incidents.

"This Act is welcome, and has clear potential to improve prevention and protection for individual victims, but much more is needed in order to truly transform the response to domestic abuse in England and Wales.

"The legislation itself will not transform understandings of domestic abuse, in large part because of its gender-neutral approach and the fact that it does not place coercive and controlling behaviour at the heart of the wrong of domestic abuse. This means the improvements in responses and protections for victim/survivors in the civil courts, police and criminal justice system, and statutory and non-statutory agencies that are set out in the Act can only go so far."

The study says the wide-ranging provisions under the Domestic Abuse Act have the potential to protect many more victims and prevent abuse from continuing and escalating. These include enhanced protection orders, new measures for victims in the courts, obligations on [local authorities](#), and the inclusion of children in the definition of victims. But it warns there is inadequate funding and allocation of resources, which could reduce the effectiveness of the new measures and obligations.

Dr. Bishop's analysis shows the legal duty on local authorities to provide refuge accommodation has the potential to save lives, but this provision will be undermined if it is not matched with adequate and sustainable funding for specialist women's services and ongoing support for victims and survivors. The study calls for a commitment to long-term funding for these vital services.

Dr. Bishop said: "It is very important that the passing of this new legislation is not allowed to act as a distraction from the lack of government funding in this area."

Provided by University of Exeter

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