

You can't reduce domestic abuse by telling people that life is a power struggle between men and women.

Interview with Professor Nicola Graham-Kevan

Interview / Crime / Domestic abuse

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Written By John Barry



The [mental health impact](#) of being a victim of domestic abuse can be significant, including depression and [thoughts of suicide](#). The fact that at least of third of the victims are men being abused by a female partner is only recently coming to light, despite [opposition](#), thanks to organisations such as the [ManKind Initiative](#) and academics such as [Professor Nicola Graham-Kevan](#).

Nicola Graham-Kevan is a professor of criminal justice psychology at the [University of Central Lancashire](#) (UCLan), England, specialising in domestic violence for almost 20 years. She is giving a keynote at the British Psychological Society's Male Psychology Section conference at UCLan on 20-21st June.

John Barry (JB): What are the key issues in the field of domestic abuse that academics and the public need to know?

Nicola Graham-Kevan (NG-K): It can happen to anyone. It cuts across all demographics. There are people who are more at risk due to life experience, mental health, substance abuse, but there is no clear differentiation, ethnicities, socioeconomic status... there are trends in the latter two but nothing that has clear policy implications. I think what is different is the awareness in terms of who is a victim, who can be a perpetrator, even that bidirectional domestic abuse is quite common, probably about 50% of couples. It happens in lesbian relationships as often – if not more – than hetero relationships, and therefore it should not be framed under violence against women and girls, because it is not an offence. The offence is within that remit which can effect men and boys exactly the same way. Therefore it's indefensible to have it framed as a woman and girls issue.

JB: Why are people surprised to learn there are such high levels of violence against men by women?

NG-K: There are several reasons. From an evolutionary perspective, men are stronger than women. They have more physicality, much more muscle mass, even in socialisation they have more contact sports. Boys do naturally more rough & tumble play. So boys have greater expertise in physicality, so you would be completely right if you were going to look at a man and a woman just in terms of two body types, and say the biggest strongest person would hurt the smaller person. But what we know about men and women is that men are socialised, and have been for probably our whole evolutionary history, to not aggress against women. And certainly to protect their own kin, their own women, because any man who didn't protect their own female, the chances of their children actually growing up was diminished. Therefore the evolutionary process is that men

who cared and protected women were the men whose genes were passed on.

Ann Campbell did some fantastic work looking in the historical records, parish records and all sorts, which parent was more crucial for the survival of their young children, and found that if mums die the child is far more likely to die than if dad died. So that evolutionary pressure has selected for male chivalry, and the protection of women. Other people say 'social norms', as if social norms just drop out of the sky. In my understanding they come from evolutionary pressure, selection pressure.

“There is social power, there is structural power, and there is physical power. What women have in our society is the power of the state behind them, and men do not. Men only have that physical power, and most men don't want to use it”

So you've got men and women who are differently able to hurt each other, all things being equal, but ...most men are chivalrous, most would never hit their wife or girlfriend. It is socially disapproved in a massive way, they are one step up from sex offenders in the prison population. It's seen as an awful crime. So there are all these reasons that men are not motivated to attack a female. It's not just size and strength, because there's a counter pressure. And then on top of that, chivalry essentially has been weaponised so that concern for women has been weaponised into something that women who are motivated coerce their partner can actually use that against them. So men may have more physicality, but women, by the nature of how society views men and women, have the power of the state. There is social power, there is structural power, and there is physical power. What women have in our society is the power of the state behind them, and men do not. Men only have that physical power, and most men don't want to use it, as they are socialised and selected not to.

JB: Interesting. So there are different types of power that people can use in good ways or bad ways. The power you often hear about in terms of domestic violence is patriarchy, as if patriarchy explains everything.



Picture: outside the European Union (EU) Parliament in Brussels. L-R Dr John Barry, Marta Iglesias Julios, Prof Joaquim Soares, Prof Nicola Graham-Kevan, Eduardo Zugasti.

NG-K: There are patriarchal cultures, nations, although interestingly the DV figures seem pretty similar [to Western countries]. We saw this at the talk in [Brussels](#) with Prof Joaquim Soares [Mid Sweden University]. Some religions too. But in terms of Western European nations, we don't have a presumption of patriarchy. We socialise our men and women with that idea of gender equality across the board. So 'the patriarchy' is a feminist concept and maybe it has some weight in some areas, but certainly not something we should be designing public policy on, or [identifying] who is a victim or perpetrator, on some ideologically driven notion. [It doesn't fit the data.](#)

“When I looked at the power and control wheel I was ‘Oh my goodness – that’s it! That’s what I’ve been searching for’... But then when you actually do empirical research you find that men and women are equally controlling.”

If patriarchy was a theory that could explain domestic abuse, then it would have explained it in the 1960s when it was becoming a feminist cause. It

didn't explain it then. It evolved over time to say 'well it's not just whom hit whom', but 'men are more likely to harm a woman'. And it's changed again to 'men are more likely to harm a woman than [women harm a man](#), but that's a smaller subsample of the whole dataset, and it's explained through the physical differences between men and women'. Then the narrative shifted to 'it's not just about physical aggression – the patriarchy tells us that that aggression is being used to coerce women, to control her whole life, make her essential not a free citizen'. This is the start of Michael Johnson's work, which was my PhD, which I fully supported, which is why I went into a PhD in the first place, to prove [Michael Johnson's theory](#) that though men and women both use aggression, men are the ones who are coercively controlling, and that's the bit that's so damaging. And I came to that from my own lived experience of it. When I looked at the power and control wheel I was 'Oh my goodness – that's it! That's what I've been searching for'. So I wanted to learn more than to help society understand itself. But then when you actually do empirical research you find that [men and women are equally controlling](#).

"They don't say this out loud – 'we won't argue on numbers because we can't win. We won't argue on levels of coercion, because it's not winnable either, so now we're going to say that women are far more likely to be impacted [by fear]'. This is a savvy move, because ... women evolved to feel fear more than men do"

[But] 20 years of really good data *may be* starting to shift the patriarchy narrative. There's a concern from those who want to sit behind that narrative and they see a need to actually respond to it with something more than 'that's not good science'. So they eventually had to address the issue. So it went from acts of physical aggression – and once it became completely unsustainable to say that women don't use aggression against men, or it's all self-defence (which took about 30 years) – then it moved to 'only men are coercive'. And that's where my research came in, and Johnson, and Stark. But there's a massive body of research to show that men and women are equally coercive. Where we are currently in the UK is 'its about impact'. So it's not now about the individual acts of coercion, because there is enough to show that men and women are equally coercive, but now it's about 'Yes but for women it ruins their lives, it makes

them afraid, unhappy, impacts their wellbeing'. And it does. It happened to me. It massively changed my life. But it doesn't impact me like that now. So the latest narrative that people trying to hold onto this approach, is that – they don't say this out loud – *'we won't argue on numbers because we can't win. We won't argue on levels of coercion, because it's not winnable either, so now we're going to say that women are far more likely to be impacted [by fear]'*. This is a savvy move, because men and women talk about and process fear differently, so if I want to find a sex difference, I would pick fear. Women identify fear, for blood, spiders, heights violence, you name it. They are more fear primed. Ann Campbell found that women evolved to [feel fear more than men do](#) because if they don't feel fear, they die and their gene line stops. So women feel more fear, phobias, PTSD, anxiety. Every doctor's waiting room has far more women. Women attend earlier, sooner, more frequently. Men literally need to have a leg hanging off first before contacting a doctor. Probably married men live longer because their wives push them into it. So fear is a great one to pick if you want to prove that women are more impacted. Just the fact that the processing of fear and articulating emotions is something men and women are different at, and then on top of that women are told [they are victims].



Picture: Professor Nicola Graham-Kevan giving her keynote speech on 'The impact on children of witnessing parental violence' at the 2019 Male Psychology Conference

When they go to the pub toilet and they shut the toilet door and there's a poster saying '*This is domestic abuse*'. Coercive control is always framed around women, so women are aware of this. So you have an innate difference in the likelihood of expressing fear and help-seeking, plus on top of that there is a societal narrative which is saying domestic abuse is something that happens to women. So [for men] even if you felt unhappy and you did need help you wouldn't know how to ask for it because you don't have a label for what it is you are experiencing.

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JB: Amazing. It seems almost abusive: women are already prone to fear and then it is ramped up through campaigns on toilet doors. But for men, if you don't have a label for it, it's harder to see what is happening to you, and there are no campaigns to help you understand.

NG-K: It's the normalisation of female coercion in heterosexual relationships. It's very common for lads to have a laugh on a night out to say '*where is so and so?*' '*His wife won't let him out*'. But if that was a group of women, and we were told one of us wasn't allowed out, we would be piling in with interventions. We would be concerned. Often when a man is being coercively controlled, it's a female relative or friend who points it out, who says it's abusive. But the guy has no concept of it, in relation to themselves.

JB: Do you think campaigning to raise men's awareness would help?

NG-K: I think so. The reason we did it for women was because they didn't recognise abuse as abuse. We also trained the judiciary, social workers, the police – the whole infrastructure to see female victimisation. So if we want to influence this, we need to tell men, for example, to look out for their friend who is not allowed out. But you also have to get the College of Policing on board, because as I understand it, they aren't interested in changing the

narrative. The judiciary has been trained to see that, so when a man does come forward – it's all very well to encourage men to come forward – but they won't be believed. They will be seen as potential perpetrators, making accusations, so it could even be counterproductive. There are so many cases. It's not just about educating men. Until you educate professionals, you might even say 'what's the point in educating men'?

JB: That's a good point. Before our time runs out, can you tell me about interventions that are based on the [Duluth model](#)?

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NG-K: Internationally there have been RCTs, systematic reviews, and there is [no evidence that Duluth-like models work](#). If you pair CBT with Duluth, you find the CBT stops working too. Clinically it's not surprising, because someone is going to a behaviour change programme not based on their need. There's no point in putting someone with depression into a phobia group. If you don't do a proper unbiased assessment of what drove someone's violent behaviour, then how on Earth can you decide the treatment? So I have got a problem with the whole way that domestic abuse is looked at, because it needs to be the [RNR model – Risk Need Responsivity](#). You need to know what risk this person is, but responsivity is about giving them something that is clinically proven. Nothing about the Duluth approach – of confrontation, imposing a narrative upon people – is remotely responsive. I would say that most of the treatment needs on the IDAP [Integrated Domestic Abuse Program], which was a programme that was heavily influenced by Duluth. Most of the programmes that followed are still influenced by the gendered narrative, very much anti-therapeutic – actually at odds with what we know about what drives family violence. What drives it is [borderline personality](#) organisation, dysregulated affect – the opposite of cold-calculating patriarchal violence. It's actually, adverse [childhood](#) experiences [ACEs] leading to dysregulated affect, and then when you are in a family, which is where your early difficult experiences –

your theatre of war if you will – then back into your own relationships as you go into adulthood... that's what you have – someone who can't manage these massive [surges of feelings]. They have very fast emotions, so they get very high very quickly. So it's not cold-blooded, it's the absolute opposite. So you give someone a group, an intervention, but one that in no way was designed for that person's needs. It's crazy. I've literally been in the Home Office, presenting this to people, and they've someone there from the feminist perspective, and they say there's no point doing behaviour change programmes with male perpetrators because they don't work. So I have explained: *'they don't work because they are based on your model, which isn't therapeutic'*. There is no understanding of the RNR model. The criminal justice approach comes from the 1970s '[what works' model](#) which says that putting people on treatment programmes that don't meet their needs doesn't work and could make them worse. But domestic abuse exists on an island, immune to all theories other than patriarchy. It's so outlandishly out of step with all other criminal justice approaches.

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JB: Is there any way this can be changed?

NG-K: Individually, we can call out female friends and looking after male friends, asking are you ok. Women don't see that they're wrong. A lot of women are so socialised that men are dumb, stupid men, women are right, women are the experts in emotions. This idea that women are right, and the deviation from that is wrong. If the guy doesn't agree with you – on any number of issues in the house – then he is wrong and you are correct. That's damaging for girls and women, because when you are right, and people are deliberately not behaving in the way they should, because you are correct, then naturally you get righteously annoyed, and try to coerce them and cajole them into doing what is right. What a burden on women – we've got to be right all the time. It's got to be our way. I don't think it's fair

on women, that women feel they have to manage their partner, or they have a right to. Take that job off the women, and let the guys manage themselves more, and everyone will be happier. Women don't need to control other people's lives and please don't tell us that's our job because it's too much to ask us to do.

Final thoughts

Professor Nicola Graham-Kevan's work has, over the years, increased our understanding of the needs of victims of domestic violence, whether men, women or children. She has also helped to identify what works in terms of interventions to help people to stop offending. However the wider culture needs help too: those in the legal industry need help to recognise that men can be victims too; therapists need to learn that interventions based on patriarchy theory are not viable; and women need to learn that it's ok for them not to be in charge of their male partner. It's important that men learn to recognise when they are in an abusive relationship, but before that happens it's crucial that the legal industry, therapists and helpline workers recognise that male victims are a reality. Without this recognition male victims will find it extremely difficult to find help when they reach out for it.

Biography

[Nicola Graham-Kevan](#) is professor of criminal justice psychology at [UCLan](#), UK and professor of [clinical psychology](#) at the [Mid Sweden University](#). She researches [aggression](#), [domestic violence](#), stalking, victimisation, psychological trauma and post-traumatic growth. She is Director of [TRAC Psychological Limited](#), developing and delivering therapy, training and evaluations. She also works clinically designing interventions for offenders.

Further information

If you are a man experiencing domestic abuse, you can call the [ManKind Initiative](#) helpline weekdays 10am to 4pm on 01823 334244.

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Dr John Barry is a Psychologist, researcher, clinical hypnotherapist & co-founder of the Male Psychology Network, **BPS Male Psychology Section**, and **The Centre for Male Psychology**. Also co-editor of the **Palgrave Handbook of Male Psychology & Mental Health**, and co-author of the **new book Perspectives in Male Psychology: An Introduction (Wiley)**.