“It really was a roller-coaster”
the impact of domestic violence on the adult friends and relatives of survivors

Background
- Domestic violence is experienced by 1 in 4 women in the UK and has a range of health consequences for survivors.
- Most women who experience abuse will choose to seek informal support from friends, relatives and colleagues.
- This has potential to buffer against effects on physical & mental health, and to protect against future abuse.
- There has been an absence of discussion about the knock-on consequences for the health and wellbeing of network members; we simply haven’t known what the toll on network members.

Methods
- Semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews with adults in a close relationship with a DV survivor.
- Findings from a systematic literature review formed the basis of the topic guide for the interviews.
- Varied recruitment strategy using: websites, social media, local radio, and posters in community spaces.
- 23 Interviews carried out (face-to-face, telephone and Skype).
- Coding and thematic analysis was carried out.

Findings
- Psychological impacts
  - It was really, really heartbreaking...it just fills me with sorrow (Zakia, Friend)
  - There’s just feeling an overwhelming sense of anger at him (Gwen, Sister)
- Practical impacts
  - He had destroyed all of her clothes... there were four of us in our team, so I went round to each of them and said, “Give me a towel, Polly and I have to go and buy clothes” (Vicky, Colleague)
  - The next step was to move... which we did (Mark, Husband)
- Relationship impacts
  - That kind of drove a massive wedge between us (Jenna, Sister)
  - I’m much more wary when I meet people about whether I trust them. My personal side, I haven’t been in relationship for about five years now (Vicky, Colleague)
- Direct perpetrator impacts
  - ... he just ran towards me, rabbit punched me in the gut (Mark, Husband)
  - ...he went physically to hit me (Eve, Mum)
- Physical health impacts
  - It’s actually made me quite fit (Eric, Dad)
  - I lost a lot of weight cos I wasn’t eating (Emily, Mum)

Meta-themes
- Coercive control – control over friends and relatives as an extension of the survivor.
- Moderators and mediators of impact:
  - Gender of network member
  - Closeness of the relationship between survivor and network member (both in terms of intimacy and proximity)
  - The severity of the domestic violence the survivor has experienced
  - Whether or not the survivor has children.
- Mirroring of the survivor’s experience - degree of overlap regarding impact:

Recommendations for policy & practice
- Formal recognition of survivors’ social support networks within domestic violence policies.
- Mechanisms for third parties to log concern with the police and social services.
- Consideration of informal supporters by professionals who work with survivors; reflection upon who might be experiencing impact, and provision of opportunities for disclosure and legitimisation of concerns, experiences and feelings.
- Campaign and publicity materials directly targeting network members to open the way for those providing informal support to recognise the impact that the abusive relationship is having on them personally.
- Extension of specialist services to incorporate the needs of informal supporters, equipping them with skills and knowledge, and providing them with emotional support.
- More inspired commissioning models for DV services; rethinking the support of survivors within communities.

Future plans
- Knowledge mobilisation - working with Women’s Aid to develop:
  - a training module for DV courses, to address the impact on network members
  - guidance for helpline staff regarding the impacts on informal supporters
  - information for family and friends on the helpline site
  - input into policy work regarding the role of friends and family in supporting survivors.
- Research to develop and test a support intervention directly aimed at people in the survivor’s informal support network.

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