

What about the Children?

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Background in the Silenced Voices study, women living with HIV were interviewed about their experience of domestic abuse. Recruitment took place in a busy HIV clinic in a large teaching hospital in the North West of England. Previous research has established the high incidence of domestic abuse among women living with HIV, but there has been no in-depth qualitative research of this kind that looks at the experiences of the women.

Methods 14 women were interviewed using in depth narrative interviews. 12 of 14 participants were mothers. All women interviewed were Black, 13 were Black African. There were 28 children across the participants. Women were interviewed once, and interviews lasted between 30 minutes to two hours. Transcripts were analysed thematically across all interviews and individual interviews were analysed using the Listening Guide, a voice relational method of analysis that has four stages of data analysis. The two approaches supported in depth analysis of the rich data. There were robust safeguarding protocols surrounding the study.

Results Experience of abuse was wide ranging, many participants endured decades of abuse from multiple abusers. Coercive control was common, and incidences of trafficking, domestic servitude and honour-based abuse were discussed. The clinic was seen as a place of safety. Intersecting oppressions meant that the women often lived at the margins of society and were frequently refused help and support. Immigration control was a significant factor in their lives. To date there have been no studies that look at the impact of domestic abuse on women living with HIV which consider their children. There were considerable impacts on their children. Some of the children were themselves assaulted and controlled. Control of access to health appointments, health care and medication meant pregnant women could be at risk of transmitting HIV to their unborn children. Some participants had lost contact with their children. Several had Social Services involvement. Participants were doing their best in exceptionally difficult situations. Having children often prompted women to leave abusive situations.

Conclusion. This is an important study that gives new insight into the lives of children whose mothers are living with HIV and experiencing domestic abuse. There are many and significant impacts for these children. There needs to be further study in this area.