***Understanding the links between violence, abuse, and mental health problems: A Concept Note for the UKRI Violence, Abuse and Mental Health Network (VAMHN)***

**The purpose**

Preventing and responding to mental health difficulties requires an understanding of the impacts of violence and abuse on victims and survivors, the causal pathways between violence and abuse and mental health problems, and what forms effective support should take.

People with mental health problems are particularly likely to have experienced childhood abuse, to have witnessed parental violence, and, as adults, to have experienced domestic and sexual violence. Pathways, mechanisms, and protective factors are unclear, and this Network aims to address these uncertainties. We include the consequences of technology on risk of violence and abuse, their impacts on mental health, and how can these be minimised.

More needs to be done to understand what effective support looks like from the perspective of survivors and how it can best be implemented. Victims and perpetrators of domestic violence and homicide often have a history of contact with mental health services. Mental disorders in older adults are also associated with being a victim of domestic abuse. There have been calls for mental health and other services to improve support for service users (including survivors of child and adulthood abuse) by implementing trauma-informed approaches, but the guidance on how best to do this is limited. Evidence on enabling access to criminal justice for domestic and sexual violence survivors with mental health problems, and reducing the current attrition rates, is also essential but currently lacking.  More broadly, there is a need to identify how survivors define and understand justice. Primary and secondary prevention requires institutional reforms in health, culture, media, technology, and schools as well as strategic planning and specialised support to victims.

This work must draw on multiple academic disciplines including, psychology, psychiatry, epidemiology, primary care, public health, criminology and the social sciences (e.g. anthropology, geography, history, law, linguistics, politics, sociology).  Involvement of professionals, practitioners, and policy makers is needed, as is the co-production of knowledge, engagement, and leadership of survivors.

**The main questions**

1. What are common sources of harm in the interconnected systems encountered by victims and survivors of violence and abuse?
2. What are the pathways to experiencing – and/or using - violence and abuse, and their relationship with mental health problems?
3. What factors are protective against violence, abuse, and mental health problems across the life course, disaggregated by gender, and which could be potential targets for interventions?

**Key issues for future research**

* What are the pathways to experiencing – and/or using – violence and abuse?
* What are the associations between the type, severity and impact of violence and subsequent mental health problems?
* What is the impact of victim blaming and cultures of disbelief on associations between violence and mental health problems?
* What is the impact of additional forms of discrimination and marginalisation on the associations between violence and mental health problems?
* What are survivor-generated definitions of abuse and how can they shape new approaches?
* How can survivors be supported to recognise that what they have experienced or may be experiencing is abuse?
* How can the risk of isolation be reduced for people who have been or are being abused?
* Where are potential sites and sources of healing, and how is healing enabled by professional and system responses?
* Identifying gaps in the field and where the evidence lies.
* What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and/or related social restrictions on the associations between violence, abuse and mental health?

**Activities**

The following activities are planned within the Network to contribute to the understanding stream.

A webinar on ‘understanding violence, abuse and mental health’ took place on the 12th May 2020. The webinar is available to view in full on our website [here](https://www.vamhn.co.uk/webinars.html) and welcomed speakers Nicole Jacobs (Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales), Prof. Joanna Bourke (Birkbeck, University of London), Akiko Hart (National Survivor User Network) and Laura Fischer (Artist, Activist and Researcher). The webinar explored how gender-based violence and links to mental health can be understood across different sectors and disciplines.

A webinar on [VAWG, intersectionality and COVID-19](https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/violence-against-women-and-girls-intersectionality-and-covid-19-tickets-110956383530) is scheduled for 21st July 2020. The webinar will welcome speakers Sumanta Roy (Imkaan), Baljit Banga (Imkaan), Akima Thomas (Women and Girls Network) and Eleanor Lisney (Sister of Frieda) and Ravi Thiara (University of Warwick). The full recording of this webinar will be uploaded to the VAMHN website [here](https://www.vamhn.co.uk/webinars.html).

A network meeting in October. These meetings are typically run twice annually and are open for all members of the network to attend. This year’s network meetings will be centred around the theme of understanding. Details of this event are to be confirmed but will be shared through the VAMHN monthly newsletter (sign up [here](https://www.vamhn.co.uk/join-the-network.html)) and on the VAMHN website [here](https://www.vamhn.co.uk/network-meetings.html) once available.

**Grant funding for small research projects**

The Network has funds to support small research projects to advance this stream of work. A call will be launched on 15th July 2020 and will run until 5pm on 11th December 2020.

The topics include those listed under ‘key issues for future research'. All

methodologies are acceptable, from systematic reviews of evidence to primary

analysis of quantitative and/or qualitative data.

We anticipate funding 3-5 proposals of up to £25,000, each lasting up to a year. Those successful will be expected to publish their findings and make presentations to a future network meeting.

We expect the meaningful involvement of survivors and third sector organisations within all applications and for their time to be appropriately costed. For guidance on minimum fee and expenses payments for survivors and third sector organisations, please refer to the guidance [here](https://www.invo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CCF_Public_Payment_Guide.pdf).

All applications should address how the project may proceed using remote methods should social distancing measures still be in place at the time the project commences.

**Links**

* Violence, Abuse and Mental Health Network:<https://www.vamhn.co.uk/>
* The VAMHN Survivor’s priority themes and questions for research: consultation report, available at: <https://www.vamhn.co.uk/uploads/1/2/2/7/122741688/consultation_report_on_website.pdf>
* Podcast: Engaging with the voluntary and community sector - Emerging Minds available at: <https://emergingminds.org.uk/podcast-engaging-with-the-voluntary-and-community-sector/>
* Turning Pain into Power: A Charter for Organisations Engaging Abuse Survivors in Projects, Research and Service Development available at <http://survivorsvoices.org/charter/>
* NIHR Central Commissioning Facility Reward and recognition for public contributors: A guide to the payment of fees and expenses available at:  <https://www.invo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CCF_Public_Payment_Guide.pdf>

**Recent reviews of interest:**

Khalifeh, H., Oram, S., Osborn, D., Howard, L.M. and Johnson, S. (2016). Recent physical and sexual violence against adults with severe mental illness: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 28(5), pp.433–451.

Oram, S., Khalifeh, H. and Howard, L.M. (2017). Violence against women and mental health. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 4(2), pp.159–170.

Seena Fazel, University of Oxford: VAMHN Lead on Understanding