Rehabilitating people who have been violent towards their parents: A mother's experience

Thien-Trang Nguyen-Phan, PhD student at Anglia Ruskin University, outlines some findings from her research into parents who have experienced violence and abuse from their now adult children.

I think there's a big gap in the system. There's a big gap between the victim and the offender. [...] I don't think there is that system where they can repair the damage, if that's the right word, and I think it's the big part that's missing. They need to be repairing damage ...

Lizzy, 68, had picked me up at her local train station and driven me to the lounge of her favourite hotel, where for more than four hours we sat in a discreet corner while Lizzy told me her story. Andy was her 28-year-old son.

When we met, Andy had recently been convicted, following a guilty plea, of ABH (assault occasioning actual bodily harm) against Lizzy. From what Lizzy understood, he had been sentenced to a two-year suspended sentence order, which included 1-year supervision with probation. He had returned to live with her following his conviction, and 'nothing had changed'.

The 'system' to which Lizzy referred encompassed more than probation, of course. Andy had a known drug problem and so was expected to engage with his local substance misuse service. Lizzy was often compelled to press her panic alarm for assistance with Andy's aggression, therefore coming into regular contact with the police. However, it was her experience of probation that inspired Lizzy's comments. And as her comments made clear, it was an experience of disconnect: both as a victim of Andy's violence and as his mother (and main carer), Lizzy felt overlooked by the very professionals mandated to repair the damage of Andy's wrongdoing and prevent his further offending.

Lizzy was the first interview participant in my doctoral research project which started in September 2018. It was the first study of its kind which specifically investigates the abuse of parents (and mothers in particular) by their adult children in England and Wales. I was interested

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in how mothers articulated their experiences of abuse in its various forms and manifestations, how they had sought help (if any) and the barriers they faced in doing so, as well as what they perceived as effective support.

My research project was motivated by over 12 years of experience working in the field of domestic abuse and violence against women, over the course of which I had become increasingly troubled by the lack of research into the abuse of parents by their adult children, despite it being considered a form of domestic abuse in England and Wales (Westmarland, 2015; Sharp-Jeffs & Kelly, 2016). While limited, research on older people's experiences of domestic abuse (Wydall, Zerk & Newman, 2015; SafeLives, 2016) and findings from services for older victims of domestic abuse (Solace Women's Aid, 2016) have drawn attention to the fact that the most common type of perpetrator in domestic abuse against older people is not an intimate partner but an adult child (primarily a son). Emerging research into domestic homicides and domestic homicide reviews also indicates that when a domestic homicide involving family members occurs, it is most often the murder of a parent (Chantler et al., 2019; Montique, 2019; Bates et al., 2021).

In my most recent role as Criminal Justice Project Officer at [Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse](#) (Standing Together), helping coordinate the [Specialist Domestic Abuse Courts](#) (SDACs) in West London, I observed a significant number of cases involving adult children offending against their parents (most often mothers). Like Andy, many were living in the family home with their parents and struggling with problematic substance use or mental health difficulties. I got to speak to parents and heard the same frustration that Lizzy expressed about the lack of available support for their children. Like Lizzy, they were desperate for a system that would repair the damage, not just of their children's offending, but also of their children's unmet needs. Yet, due to the lack of available support, these parents (and mothers in particular) would often be taken for granted by professionals as their children's default safety net, which in turn made it even harder for them to contemplate actions against their children.

Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, for most mothers in the research project, calling the police was often a drastic, last-resort option. When they sought help, it was first and foremost for their children. Those who called the police hoped for 'help', not arrest or charge. The very few, like Lizzy, who did engage with criminal justice processes beyond police interventions shared the same belief in a system that rehabilitates instead of punishing, which holds their children to account just as it restores them. Such a belief was anchored in care and relationships.

Consequently, Lizzy's vision of probation's work as 'repairing the damage' was centred around this commitment to relationship:

It's not just a case of working with Andy. I think, I think most parents, I would, I would say, "You know what, if you want me to go to these meetings, I'll go with you! I'll join in. I'll tell, tell you what, you know how I'm feeling and what I'm doing." If they want me to go to something- I would have, but they don't, they, they sort of ignore ...

Lizzy's wish was in sharp contrast with her reality: it was Lizzy herself who sought to engage with Andy's probation officer in order to find out 'what they're doing with *my son*', because no one had talked to her.

While it might be argued that Andy's probation officer could not possibly invite her to their supervision meetings, the desire Lizzy expressed was in fact quite simple: all she wanted was to be acknowledged both as the victim of Andy's abuse and his mother. Her vision of collaborative working was also poignant in its common-sense approach: how would probation, the service designed to rehabilitate Andy, assess and manage Andy's risk to Lizzy without seeing and hearing her? How could it purport to 'repair the damage' without addressing Andy's most fundamental relationship (not least because he lived at Lizzy's home)? And how could it do so without Lizzy's participation (as his main support network)?

Initially assigned to the Community Rehabilitation Company, Andy was subsequently 'moved up' to the National Probation Service. When we met for the interview, the transfer had only happened recently, and Lizzy appeared slightly more hopeful. However, no actual work had started because since his sentencing Andy had had 'three different probation officers'. Thus, Lizzy's experience of probation took place against the backdrop of the 'irredeemably flawed' Transforming Rehabilitation agenda (HMIP, 2019) which exacerbated her sense of fragmentation and disconnect.

Yet, Lizzy's frustrated wish for a probation service which would involve her instead of ignoring her in its rehabilitation efforts with Andy was not merely hampered by organisational issues and resource constraints. It required a change in the way probation - and any other professionals - approach a case like Andy's in its complexity: as Lizzy said, it's not just a case of working solely with the supervised individual.

We have repeatedly learned from domestic homicides of parents by their adult children that parents who were intimately involved in their children's care were rarely consulted by professionals working with their children, while the risk to them was completely ignored (due to assumptions made about the nature of the relationship) (Montique, 2019). Older mothers were only seen as the default safety net for their adult children with serious mental health and substance abuse issues (Montique, 2019; Smith, 2020). What mothers like Lizzy told me in my research project was therefore not new. And while it applied to a range of agencies, Lizzy's specific experience of probation was all the more poignant due to the severity of Andy's offence, Lizzy's long journey through the criminal justice system, and her indefatigable efforts to help her son, to finally be seen and heard by a 'system' that could repair the damage.

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