

## 'Home game': domestic abuse and football

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*Published in:*  
Journal of Gender-Based Violence

*DOI:*  
[10.1332/239868018X15155986580769](https://doi.org/10.1332/239868018X15155986580769)

*Publication date:*  
2018

*Document Version*  
Author accepted manuscript

[Link to publication in ResearchOnline](#)

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*  
Brooks-Hay, O & Lombard, N 2018, 'Home game': domestic abuse and football', *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 93-108. <https://doi.org/10.1332/239868018X15155986580769>

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# Journal of Gender-Based Violence

## 'Home Game': Domestic Abuse and Football

--Manuscript Draft--

<b>Manuscript Number:</b>	JGBV-D-17-00026R2
<b>Article Type:</b>	Academic article
<b>Full Title:</b>	'Home Game': Domestic Abuse and Football
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<b>Abstract:</b>	Increased reports of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) following football matches have been documented, within both quantitative studies and the media, leading to questions about the policy and practice responses required. However, qualitative research facilitating understanding of the apparent link between football and DVA is lacking. Drawing upon research with key stakeholders across England and Scotland, this paper provides a rare insight into their understanding of the contested and complex relationship between football and DVA, including the role of contributory and confounding factors such as alcohol, match expectations, masculinity, entitlement and permissions. It is argued that while football may provide a potential platform for challenging DVA, focusing on football (or other specific factors or events) as causative risks re-incidentalisising DVA and detaching it from feminist frameworks that have established DVA as a sustained behaviour grounded in gendered inequalities. This paper concludes by considering the broader conceptual implications of these findings for future research, policy and practice.
<b>Keywords:</b>	domestic violence and abuse; football; gender; prevention; sport.
<b>Additional Information:</b>	
<b>Question</b>	<b>Response</b>
<b>Key Messages</b>  Please enter 2-3 single sentence bullet points describing the key messages of the paper.	The relationship between football and DVA is complex, contested and over-simplified by existing quantitative research.  Feminist understandings of DVA, as underpinned by gender inequality rather than caused by specific events, remain important.  Football as a predominantly male sport may provide a platform for challenging DVA.
<b>Word Count</b>  Academic articles should be between 5000 and 7000 words in length.  Policy and Practice articles should be between 2000 and 4000 words in length.  Open Space pieces should be between 2000 and 4000 words in length.	7018
<b>Special issue</b>	

Is this a submission for a special issue? If so please give details of the special issue, including the Editor if known.		
<b>Funding Information:</b>	Sir Halley Stewart Trust	Not applicable
<b>Manuscript Classifications:</b>	Criminology; Domestic violence/abuse; Gender; Qualitative interview; Social Policy	
<b>Manuscript Region of Origin:</b>	UNITED KINGDOM	
<b>Author Comments:</b>	Please note that Emma Williamson requested that her name was removed from this paper due to a conflict of interest.	
<b>Response to Reviewers:</b>	The final manuscript has been prepared as requested.	

## Introduction

This paper is concerned with the apparent links between domestic violence and abuse (DVA) and football, and the implications of research on this issue for policy and practice. In the UK, the narrative surrounding this apparent link has been taken forward by local and national media (Café 2012, Duell, 2014, Cambridge, 2016), and a number of research studies have recently attempted to determine whether a link actually exists. Existing research evidence on football and DVA is primarily quantitative in nature, and it points to a correlation between football matches and DVA (Brimicombe and Café, 2012; Dickinson et al., 2012; Kirby et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2013). In addition to this body of research, anecdotal evidence and reports from the police and specialist DVA services across the UK (Williamson et al., 2015) have raised the question of whether DVA increases, or is triggered, by major football tournaments and what they might mean for both local and national policy and practice.

However, there are theoretical and methodological difficulties in identifying causal links between specific factors or events (such as football) and DVA; even where correlations are found to exist there is little evidence of why these correlations exist, or indeed which direction they operate in. Following a review of national and international literature on football and DVA commissioned by the Scottish Government, Crowley et al. (2015: 12-13) concluded that the absence of qualitative research exploring the perspectives of victims, perpetrators or practitioners was a 'significant omission' in existing research evidence. The study that forms the basis of this paper therefore sought to establish how the potential links between football and DVA can be understood and addressed by gathering the views of key stakeholders across England and Scotland. In adopting a qualitative approach with the aim of understanding the nature and implications of the apparent relationship between football and DVA, this study makes an important contribution to existing research evidence and policy on this issue.

This paper firstly highlights current knowledge and theoretical understandings of DVA. Contemporary research evidence on DVA and football is then reviewed before reporting on key themes from the study findings. Finally, conclusions and recommendations for future research, policy and practice are presented. It is argued that this paper contributes to

1 broader conceptual debates on DVA by highlighting key issues in relation to other contested  
2 'causes' of DVA; namely, the need to avoid 're-incidentalising' DVA by ensuring that future  
3 research and practice is grounded within a feminist theoretical framework characterised by  
4 an appreciation of the gendered social and cultural dynamics underpinning DVA.  
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## 8 9 **Understanding DVA**

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11 DVA is recognised as a phenomenon that cuts across the boundaries of age, class, ethnicity  
12 (dis)ability and sexual orientation (McCue, 2008; Westmarland, 2015). It is also known to be  
13 a persistent and prevalent problem that impacts significantly upon both the lives of  
14 individuals and society more broadly (Pain, 2012; Stark, 2007). In England and Wales, it is  
15 estimated that 27% of women have experienced DVA since the age of 16 years (ONS, 2016),  
16 while in Scotland it is estimated that 18% of women have experienced abuse from a partner  
17 or ex-partner since the age of 16 years (SCJS, 2014). In stark contrast with official figures  
18 which indicate a steady decline in violent crime in recent years, violent crime against  
19 women has followed an upwards trajectory (Walby et al., 2015).  
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30 Within the UK, there are differing definitions of DVA. In Scotland, the term covers  
31 behaviours between partners and ex-partners; in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, all  
32 family members are included. Significantly, the Scottish Government associates domestic  
33 abuse with broader-gender inequality 'whereby societies have given greater status, wealth,  
34 influence, control and power to men' (Scottish Executive 2000: 5). Elsewhere in the UK, a  
35 gender neutral definition is adopted. Common to the definition used across the UK,  
36 however, is the inclusion of physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Moreover, all jurisdictions  
37 in the UK have moved towards an understanding and legal definition of DVA as a pattern of  
38 abusive behaviours rather than discrete incidents (Burman and Brooks-Hay, 2017). This is in  
39 keeping with feminist conceptualisations of DVA as a form of 'coercive control' (Stark, 2007)  
40 embedded within an ongoing pattern of power and control that permeates a relationship.  
41 Hence, DVA is understood to be an ongoing and sustained process whereby perpetrators  
42 may use a range of tactics cumulating in actions that frighten and confuse the victim,  
43 creating uncertainty and ultimately compliance with the perpetrator (Pain, 2012;  
44 Williamson, 2010).  
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1 While theoretical understandings, research, and policy in relation to DVA has developed  
2 significantly over the past four decades, Westmarland and Kelly (2016: 32) have recently  
3 argued that we are currently at ‘a point of confusion’ in terms of how DVA is understood  
4 and addressed. From a feminist perspective, DVA is understood as both a cause and  
5 consequence of gender inequality (McFeely et al., 2013). Framing DVA within the context of  
6 gender inequality situates it within women’s status in society, taking into account norms,  
7 social structures and gender roles, which greatly influence their vulnerability to violence  
8 (Kelly, 1987; Fried, 2003). There is a broad consensus within DVA research, irrespective of  
9 the theoretical lens adopted, that interpersonal violence is multifactorial (Hagemann-White  
10 et. al., 2010). However, there is a lack of agreement about how different factors interact to  
11 result in violence and across a range of empirical studies, the definitions of variables and  
12 explanatory concepts are contested. While a significant body of feminist research has  
13 established gendered inequalities as a fundamental cause and consequence of DVA  
14 (Jakobson, 2014; McFeely at al., 2013; Stark, 2007), a wide range of alternative ‘causes’ have  
15 been proffered over the years. These include biological, genetic, psychological, social,  
16 economic, cultural and family dynamics. More recently, and of particular relevance here, it  
17 has been suggested within the media and in some of the research discussed below, that  
18 football is a cause or trigger for DVA.  
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### 36 **Current evidence about the relationship between football and DVA**

37 There are relatively few UK studies that specifically address the relationship of football to  
38 DVA. Those that exist primarily compare prevalence (as recorded either by police, other  
39 emergency services, or hospital accident and emergency departments) on the days that  
40 football games take place with various comparators. All of these studies consistently show  
41 what appears to be a link between DVA and football though, as identified by Crowley et al.  
42 (2014), there are notable limitations of these studies.  
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51 Existing studies within the Scottish context are all quantitative analyses, based upon  
52 incidents reported to the police (Dickinson et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2013; Strathclyde  
53 Police, 2011; Scottish Government Analytical Services, 2011). These studies have a  
54 predominant focus on ‘Old Firm’ matches (fixtures between Celtic and Rangers) and their  
55 findings indicate that relative to various comparators, there was an increase in recorded  
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1 domestic abuse incidents on the day that 'Old Firm' fixtures were played. This was reported  
2 as being between 13% and 138.8%, depending on a number of variables: the day of the  
3 week the match took place; the comparator day/event; and the salience/outcome of a  
4 match. Studies that used other (non-old firm) football matches as a comparator found  
5 examples of apparent relationships between recorded domestic abuse incidents and the  
6 existence of the football match. However, these were generally less pronounced patterns,  
7 and smaller increases (Crowley et al., 2014).  
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14 Crowley et al. (2014) identified limitations of these studies on the basis that the nature and  
15 characteristics of DVA offences recorded or how they came to the attention of the police  
16 were not known. Moreover, the potential impact of different recording practices between  
17 police forces, or different policing practices on the days of football matches were not taken  
18 into account; this is a significant issue given the likelihood of increased policing around  
19 certain football matches and the growing prioritisation of DVA within Police Scotland.  
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27 Studies conducted in England have broadly similar findings and limitations. Studies by Kirby  
28 et al. (2013) and Brimicombe and Café (2012) both identified an increase in DVA incidents  
29 reported to the police on the days when England played in the 2010 World Cup, with the  
30 largest increases recorded following a loss by England which led to their exit from the  
31 tournament. Similarly, Goodall et al. (2006) observed increases of between 17.7% - 31.4%  
32 on days when England played in the 2006 World Cup. These studies however, like those in  
33 Scotland, were unable to account for the influence of other situational variables such as  
34 other high-profile events or matches taking place at this time nor were they able to explain  
35 *why* these increases in DVA were observed.  
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45 While there is a relative lack of literature that explains the nature of the relationship  
46 between football and DVA, a body of literature illuminates their shared association with  
47 particular forms of masculinity, violence and sexism. It has been argued that the orthodox  
48 masculinity which is constructed within sport helps to reproduce patriarchy through the  
49 sexist, anti-feminine attitudes which are displayed in its practices and language (see  
50 Anderson, 2008; Spandler and McKeown, 2012; Sabo et al., 2000; Crossett, 2012). Research  
51 that has explored the theoretical relationship between football, DVA and masculinity has  
52 looked at the concept of 'permissions' whereby a failure by those in authority to condemn  
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1 violence effectively sanctions or permits the violence to take place (see Radford and  
2 Hudson, 2005; Hall, 2000; Flint and Powell, 2011). It is also important to acknowledge,  
3 however, that increases in reported levels of DVA have been associated with other male-  
4 dominated sports such as rugby in the UK (Alcohol Concern Cymru, 2010) and American  
5 Football in the US (White et al., 1992; Sachs and Chu, 2000; Card and Dahl, 2011; Gantz,  
6 2006). Hence the specific relationship between DVA and football remains contested.  
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## 16 **Methodology**

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18 The study that forms the basis of this paper aimed to establish how we can better  
19 understand, measure, and respond to the potential links between football and DVA, and to  
20 assess the feasibility of conducting further research on this issue. This dual focus enabled us  
21 to take stakeholders' views (including any reservations that they may have) about future  
22 research into account while also generating valuable data. Given the contested and sensitive  
23 nature of the research, and the differing approaches to policy and practice in Scotland and  
24 in England, we worked in partnership with DVA support organisations in both jurisdictions to  
25 design the study and identify key stakeholders. These stakeholders included: football  
26 authorities and organisations; national specialist DVA organisations; the police; government  
27 policy makers; supporters' organisations; and survivors of DVA. Focus groups and one-to-  
28 one interviews were conducted with a total of 26 individual participants. The choice of  
29 participating in either an individual or a group interview was determined by the needs and  
30 preferences of each stakeholder. With regard to the gender of participants and the  
31 organisation that they represented, all groups were mixed with the exception of those  
32 conducted with football authorities where participants were exclusively male. The interview  
33 schedule was designed to structure discussions in keeping with the study aims outlined  
34 above and ensure that comparable data was collected across the two sites (England and  
35 Scotland). However, adopting a qualitative approach, the interview schedule was also  
36 designed to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the concerns of participants in addition  
37 to those of the researchers.  
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57 Two survivors of DVA were also interviewed with regard to their experiences, and in  
58 particular, any association that this may have had with football. These survivors were  
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1 recruited through an existing DVA project advisory group. While the number of survivors  
2 interviewed is small, these interviews provided valuable insight into the experiences of a  
3 group who are both difficult to reach and frequently marginalised. Audio files from all  
4 interviews were transcribed, anonymised, and subsequently analysed using a thematic  
5 approach. In viewing the findings presented below, it should be noted that they are  
6 generated primarily from the perspective of organisational stakeholders rather than from  
7 survivors or perpetrators. This reflects exploratory nature of the study, designed to assess  
8 the feasibility of further research, though it is acknowledged that this may be viewed as a  
9 study limitation.  
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## 18 **Findings**

21 Stakeholders who participated in the study were asked about their knowledge of the  
22 existing evidence on football and DVA, what their main concerns in relation to this issue  
23 were, and how this should inform future research and policy. All respondents believed that  
24 there was a potential link or association between DVA and football though their knowledge  
25 and understanding of this link varied. There was a generally positive view of conducting  
26 further research on football and DVA, but within a number of specific caveats. Whilst some  
27 within football were interested in whether evidence showed a causal link between DVA and  
28 football, others thought the issue was too complex and multi-layered to allow for casual  
29 explanations. Crucially, participants highlighted concerns about the existing evidence base  
30 and the need to view DVA as a pattern of ongoing behaviour, which cannot be reduced to  
31 an incident associated with a particular event such as a football match.  
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43 ... what we know about domestic abuse is that it's a pattern of behaviour, so if you  
44 only rely on a particular incident, you're not capturing the whole story anyway. So,  
45 this is only like a piece of an entire puzzle ... One of our major concerns is that it's  
46 not fully understanding about the pattern of behaviour that constitutes domestic  
47 abuse (Policy maker).  
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54 Further analysis of participants' views revealed the following key themes: features and  
55 conditions of the game; entitlement, masculinity and football culture; football as a  
56 scapegoat; and social responsibilities and social change. Each of these four themes are  
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2 discussed in detail below. While there were areas of consensus amongst stakeholders, there  
3 were also some notable differences.  
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### 5 **The features and conditions of the game**

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7 Participants understanding of the potential underlying reasons for a link between football  
8 and DVA comprised of factors relating firstly to features of football games (e.g. their  
9 importance, timing and outcome), and secondly to broader conditions surrounding football  
10 (e.g. alcohol consumption and the weather). Features of games related primarily to the  
11 importance, timing and outcome of games. Meanwhile, broader conditions of the game  
12 incorporated factors such as alcohol consumption and the weather. With regard to features  
13 of the game, some respondents believed that there were specific links to international and  
14 FA cup games due to the perceived importance of these games:  
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24 I know that instances of domestic abuse go up during large tournaments like  
25 international ... like <the> World Cup and international matches and things like the  
26 FA Cup (Football organisation).  
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31 However, other respondents observed that the significance of the game was related, not  
32 necessarily to the status of the tournament, but to supporter's strength of affiliation with  
33 'their' team.  
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38 In relation to football, it depends on who the teams are. So if you're in a <large  
39 city> ... in the last couple of seasons it's probably more ... you know both of them  
40 are sort of doing better and then those three points become really important ... for  
41 their supporters as well ... so you will see an increase [in DVA]. (Police).  
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47 Expectations of winning or losing were also considered contributory factors to heightened  
48 emotional tension and DVA; this was linked to an understanding that emotional investment  
49 in the outcome of a game was a normal part of the football experience, but one which could  
50 then become problematic for some supporters. One stakeholder noted, "You know  
51 anecdotally, I know of friends whose husbands don't even speak if the team lose" (Police).  
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57 When one of the survivors interviewed was asked about her experience when teams won or  
58 lost, an issue also discussed in the wider quantitative literature, she reported that she was  
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1 more likely to experience physical abuse if a team lost, and sexual abuse if the team won.  
2 This survivor reported that these experiences meant that she didn't like to listen to the  
3 football on the radio as it made her fearful of what was going to happen when her partner  
4 returned home.  
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8 I would say not the violent side, but maybe the sexual side abuse did ... I'd say that  
9 went up. But not the violent side, but that's still abuse and it's still wrong  
10 behaviour. I'd say if it was winning it would be that ... so it'd be sexual abuse  
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14 (Survivor)  
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17 With regard to the conditions that may surround a football game, other notable factors  
18 highlighted by stakeholders included alcohol, mentioned repeatedly by participants  
19 although with varying concerns about alcohol being used as an excuse by perpetrators; and  
20 the weather, potentially linked to increased alcohol consumption if the weather is good.  
21 However, many of the stakeholders were keen to dispute the strength of associations  
22 between DVA and football, or DVA and other trigger factors such as alcohol, by recognising  
23 that explanations of violence are generally more complex.  
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31 But again, there's a degree of scapegoating there because you don't abuse just  
32 because you've had a drink – you abuse because you're an abusive man who's had a  
33 drink (Policy maker).  
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39 It was also noteworthy that alcohol did not actually feature in the survivor's account of an  
40 abusive man using football as a trigger from abuse: "He wasn't much of a drinker". This  
41 concurs with observations from stakeholders within support organisations highlighting the  
42 perpetration of DVA irrespective of alcohol consumption. Consistent throughout the study  
43 was recognition that whatever the link between DVA, football and other factors such as  
44 alcohol, the individual perpetrator was ultimately responsible for their abusive actions.  
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51 Well what we're taught in the Freedom Programme<sup>i</sup> is that alcohol doesn't create  
52 an abuser, it just releases one... And I think you could argue that football does the  
53 same (Survivor).  
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## Entitlement, masculinity and football culture

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2 Recognising that DVA is primarily about gendered power and control within a pattern of  
3 abusive behaviours, concerns about male entitlement and specific notions of masculinity  
4 were raised by a number of stakeholders. This included both the centrality of football to  
5 some masculine identities and the predominantly masculine culture of football. For one of  
6 the survivors in particular, football was a key area of disagreement within her previously  
7 abusive relationship due to the precedence that football took over other aspects of family  
8 life.  
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17 Because how would he manage the football. That takes priority - which is hurtful.

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19 But yeah, no, football takes priority, his life runs around football, not anything else.

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21 If it meant don't see the children, he won't see his children (Survivor).  
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24 Linked to notions of masculinity and entitlement, other stakeholders with experience of  
25 supporting survivors questioned what actions women might feel it was necessary to take in  
26 order to stay safe and keep the peace following emotional upsets after a football game.  
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30 ... I think that is to do with masculinity as an entitlement, but it's also to do with  
31 women making choices in terms of their safety that might involve them having sex  
32 when they don't want to. So if he comes back from a match and he's in a foul  
33 mood, the easiest thing might be to have sex. (DVA sector).  
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40 In addition to gendered norms and associated expectations of male and female behaviour,  
41 for some stakeholders, issues of abuse could not be disentangled from wider  
42 representations of women within footballing culture.  
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46 This isn't specific to domestic abuse but it's around the culture of violence that  
47 encompasses all of that around ... and gendered stuff... you hear about footballers  
48 going out drinking and then sort of sex parties afterwards. And it's just it's there in  
49 that culture of you know women are there to be had sex with in a hotel room with  
50 my footballing mate next to me ... (Football organisation).  
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58 Concerns were also raised about football culture more broadly in terms of violent and  
59 aggressive behaviours witnessed, and permitted, within this domain.  
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Now for better or worse, the allowed behaviours within football culture include a level of aggression, racial yelling, violence, you know historically it's got that. So in a sense you put a man into a football environment and he feels allowed or entitled to behave perhaps in a way that he would not do in any other scenario. And that is ... that possibly is a key, cos somebody who's a perpetrator it's all about what they allow themselves to do, what they give themselves permission to do if you like. ... we go and watch a football match, suddenly it's okay that we're racially chanting or it's okay that we're talking about violence ... because in that context it's become normalised that's that what you do, so that's what they do. And of course that's a dangerous murky area for a perpetrator because all they need is to be feeling like they've been put into a situation where they've got permission to let go of these impulses and they're going to do it (Survivor).

While sexist and homophobic language was something that the majority of respondents had personally witnessed at football matches, some thought that this was now less problematic, but nevertheless was still used to perpetuate certain negative perceptions of football fans. It was also recognised, however, that the stereotypical view of football as a traditionally male domain is changing, with some stakeholders highlighting a shift in the demographic profile of fans with more women attending games.

... one of the things that's generally happened I think is that more women going to watch games has had a very positive effect on fans' behaviour at the games (Football organisation).

As well as suggesting that women have influenced the game as fans, the stakeholders also recognised the role of women as players and potential role models in challenging gendered stereotypes and the configuration of football as a male preserve. There were also concerns however that the behaviour of individual male players, and the subsequent media coverage, could undermine the efforts of women in the sport.

### **Football as a scapegoat**

Amongst participants, there was a perception that football is targeted in relation to the behaviour of its fans and players in a way that other sports are not. There was some

1  
2 acknowledgement for example, albeit in the context of weather and alcohol, that an  
3 increase in DVA could be associated with a range of sports and not just football.

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5 So the first thing is I think it's not just football, I think it's if you take any sport and  
6 hot weather and alcohol – you see a real increase in DA. So if it's the English  
7 football team, cricket team or rugby, yeah, it's in summer and there's alcohol  
8 involved, then you will see ... or you do see an increase in DA (Police).

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12 Stakeholders also queried this assumption that rugby is less of a problem than football  
13 despite perceived cultural differences between these (male-dominated) sports.

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16 ...rugby it's always said that it's much ... it's a much nicer game... the sport is much  
17 nicer. I mean it's a sweeping statement and I'd say the demographics within rugby  
18 tends to be ... like a lot of professionals play rugby. But interestingly enough, I think  
19 if you look back to recently in the last Six Nations, the England-Wales game that was  
20 playing on a Friday night in Cardiff, there were instances of violence, ... like I think  
21 the police were called into action a bit more, so someone then said 'Oh it's getting  
22 like football' (laughs) (Football organisation).

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24  
25 As well as identifying possible differences in the culture of different sports, participants also  
26 raised questions about whether there were demographic differences in the make-up of  
27 different bodies of sports fans. This included class, race, ethnicity, and geography.

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30 I think with class stuff, that it would be really interesting to kind of bear in mind any  
31 intersectionalities, I mean obviously there's race and ethnicity issues as well. But  
32 the class stuff for me is really distinct, that kids that do cricket are a really different  
33 group of kids to the kids that do football. And there's a small bit of cross-over  
34 ....there's some kids that do both, but there are some kids that only do football and  
35 they wouldn't dream of doing cricket, in brackets because that's not for the working  
36 classes (DVA sector).

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39 Football was recognised as a primarily, but not exclusively, working class sport. Alongside  
40 class, which was mentioned when referring to differences between rugby and football,  
41 ethnicity was mentioned specifically in relation to cricket fans. Questions were  
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subsequently raised in relation to whether there might be more underreporting of DVA in middle class and ethnic minority communities. The implication here being that in white working class families, more reporting of DVA might occur and that these same families might have strong associations with football clubs. Thus, a disproportionately high level of DVA may be reported within families where football is a key sport.

Because you know, you look at some of the deprived areas where football, the working class game by and large and supporting your local team, you know there's evidence in those areas where it's tough – people are losing their jobs, people's salaries are coming under pressure, inflation's going up, you know there's pressure to pay the bills at home ... you know it's those kind of factors as well, and it'd be interesting to look at the demographic connections as well about where ... you know when domestic abuse is taking place. What does the social kind of landscape look like of the people that are actually involved in it? 'Cos I suspect that there'll be some correlation there as well. (Football organisation)

The demographic issues raised here, their relationship with different sports, and with DVA further highlights the complexity of attempting to understand any specific link between football and DVA.

### **Social responsibilities and social change**

Despite some concerns regarding the 'scapegoating of football' there was recognition by those organisations which govern and influence football that because it attracts large numbers of male supporters it is an ideal, if incidental, venue to engage men in social change. In recent years, footballing authorities and clubs have engaged with a range of social, physical and mental health issues to try to influence positive change. The participant who had experienced abuse linked to football also raised suggestions about how football clubs could do more to challenge men given the influence they have.

Well if <the manager> told <the fans> to stand up and bounce they'd stand up and bounce, and he'd demonstrate this really happily. But he would do it – whatever this <manager> said ... If he said bounce, these grown men would bounce. You've got to see it (laughs) ... And I wanted to say to <the manager>, could you just say

1 'Please don't go home and do this to your wife.' If he'd respect that yeah, whatever  
2 he <the manager> said was gospel (Survivor).  
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4  
5 Even where survivors had a negative view of football because of their experiences, their  
6 perspectives seemed to link in with the notion that whether football was directly or  
7 indirectly 'linked' with abuse, it was an ideal opportunity for football as our 'national sport'  
8 to challenge behaviours and influence cultural change. This included doing more to sanction  
9 those players who might bring the sport into disrepute. In this sense challenging sexism,  
10 one of the contributing causes of DVA, was considered alongside other high profile  
11 campaigns such as anti-racist and anti-homophobic initiatives.  
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19 ... but they can't just say 'oh we're just football in isolation', because actually they're  
20 letting down everybody, because they're such a major linchpin in our society I think.  
21 And that's speaking as somebody who has no interest in football whatsoever, does  
22 not watch it, and does not particularly like it. But I can quite clearly see how it is  
23 embedded in our culture and how important it is. [.....] I can't think of a better way  
24 to do a cultural shift in this country at all around domestic violence – there just isn't  
25 a better way than through football. Because it's our national game, it's what our  
26 men do if you like (Survivor).  
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36 This excerpt reinforces the views discussed previously in relation to football as an incidental  
37 site, but presents a powerful argument about why football might have a role to play  
38 irrespective of whether an association exists between it and DVA or not. This view was not  
39 limited to those outside of football, though the need to balance the role of football in any  
40 campaigning around DVA was also highlighted.  
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46 Certainly, where we've been involved with football teams, they're quite happy to be  
47 ... you know, it's the kinda positive side they're looking at – that we are against  
48 domestic abuse, we're against violence against women and we're prepared to stand  
49 up and say so. It's slightly different if you're put in the position, where what they're  
50 doing is defending the assumption that they're somehow causing it. I think it  
51 depends on the approach in terms of how they see themselves and the link ... if  
52 they're getting linked in terms of, "We're role models and therefore there's a  
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1 positive image we can portray here,” then that becomes something they’re more  
2 likely to buy into (Policy maker).  
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## 5 **Conclusions and recommendations**

6  
7 The findings presented in this paper provide a rare insight into the perceived link between  
8 DVA and football from the perspective of key stakeholders, including football authorities  
9 and organisations; national specialist DVA organisations; the police; government policy  
10 makers; supporters’ organisations; and survivors. This is an important addition to the  
11 existing quantitative evidence base. Highlighting the complex and contested nature of the  
12 relationship between football and DVA, a diverse range of contributory and confounding  
13 factors were identified in the form of alcohol, the weather, match expectations, team  
14 affiliations, gendered norms, class, ethnicity, masculinity, entitlement and permissions.  
15 Consequently, all stakeholders had concerns about the reliability and implications of data  
16 suggesting a causal link between football and DVA, and what this might mean for policy and  
17 practice, albeit for very different reasons.  
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30 Football authorities expressed underlying concerns about whether football was simply an  
31 incidental site due to the large numbers of men who watch and support the sport.  
32 Meanwhile, specialist DVA service providers were concerned that focusing on football  
33 masks the underlying gendered causes of DVA and potentially offers perpetrators excuses  
34 for their abusive behaviour. Arguably, the focus within existing research on football  
35 matches risks over-simplifying and ‘re-incidentalising’ DVA; replicating a process described  
36 by Hearn (1998) whereby DVA is reduced to an incident or set of discreet incidents through  
37 conventional agency or police responses, rather than facilitating a more nuanced  
38 understanding of DVA as a form of ‘coercive control’ (Stark, 2007) embedded within an  
39 ongoing pattern of behaviour.  
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50 Irrespective of these concerns, however, stakeholders recognised that football as our  
51 ‘national sport’ may still have a social and/or corporate responsibility to help tackle the  
52 problem. The shared acknowledgement that football may provide a platform for  
53 challenging DVA represents a unique opportunity for an ‘unlikely alliance’ in the form of  
54 partnership working between football organisations, specialist DVA service providers and  
55 governments. While this alliance of agencies may not represent a conventional ‘advocacy  
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1 coalition' characterised by shared beliefs (Sabatier, 1988), using football as a platform to  
2 address DVA may facilitate desirable outcomes for each of the partner agencies. The main  
3 difference in views amongst stakeholders appeared in the extent of possible interventions  
4 and how they might be represented. Football authorities, in particular, were keen to  
5 advocate interventions based on football being an incidental site to target men.  
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10 Based on these findings, there are a number of policy recommendations that can be made  
11 with regard to the issue of football and DVA, whilst also recognising the complex and  
12 contested relationship between them. Firstly, governments and other agencies have a role  
13 in making it clear that football, alongside other 'trigger' factors (for example alcohol) are not  
14 an excuse for DVA. Secondly, as an incidental site, football organisations are in a unique  
15 position to present positive masculine role models and by doing so making it clear that DVA  
16 is unacceptable, irrespective of the status of evidence linking DVA and football. Alongside  
17 campaigns to address racism and homophobia in football, governing bodies in the sport  
18 could also ensure that they challenge, at every opportunity, derogatory representations of  
19 women.  
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31 Thirdly, rather than isolate football as the problem and juxtaposing that against other  
32 sports, more could be done by governments, the media, and supporter agencies to look at  
33 positive supporting across sports. At a local level, as exemplified by the Women's Aid  
34 'Football United' campaign, football clubs can highlight the work of local DVA services, and  
35 reinforce messages about 'healthy' non-abusing relationships. This includes using  
36 relationships between players, coaches, and opponents to demonstrate respectful relations.  
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44 Fourthly, underlying all of these recommendations is a wider concern about the way in  
45 which limited representations of masculinity impact on society. Findings presented within  
46 this paper indicate concern over an aggressive masculine culture within football, which  
47 concurs with Flood's (2003: 28) earlier identification of sport as a site for promoting values  
48 associated with dominant masculinity such as 'extreme competitiveness, aggression and  
49 dominance'. More work is needed to understand how this culture links to football and how  
50 it may generate space for abusers to operate. Efforts to challenge this culture are not  
51 without their challenges. As Flood (2003: 27) observes, there is an inherent tension,  
52 'between speaking to men in ways which engage with the realities of their lives, and  
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1 transforming the patriarchal power relations and gendered discourses that are the fabric of  
2 those same lives'. Governments and other relevant agencies, therefore, need to ensure that  
3 (as in all policy development) sports bodies take seriously their gender duty to combat  
4 misogyny, not just in football, but also across sport at all levels. This means recognising the  
5 ways in which limiting gender stereotypes, alongside other identity categories, can be  
6 challenged and perpetuated through sports. There is an opportunity here for work on DVA  
7 to move beyond the conventional location of responses within justice and equalities remits,  
8 and recognise the existence and perpetration of DVA as embedded within everyday social  
9 and cultural practices including sport.  
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11 Finally, this study has broader implications for conducting and using research that focuses  
12 on other contested causes of DVA beyond football and, relatedly, how DVA is theorised and  
13 understood. It must be acknowledged that social science and the research it produces is in  
14 itself 'productive'; that is, it plays a part in building social realities and social worlds (Law  
15 and Urry, 2004). One of the consequences of the increased public and academic attention  
16 given to DVA, is that research which suggests potential links between DVA and particular  
17 factors such as football or alcohol has proliferated, and links between them may be  
18 misinterpreted, misrepresented and misunderstood. For example, while a correlation  
19 between DVA and poor mental health, alcohol and poverty may exist, there are difficulties  
20 in determining whether such problems are a cause or consequence of DVA (Howard et al.,  
21 2010; Gilchrist et al, 2003; Fahmy et al., 2016) and researchers are at pains to make clear  
22 that their research does not suggest a causal link one way or the other. Hence, specific  
23 factors or events may be interpreted as causative, yet the evidence for causation may be  
24 lacking.  
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26 Going forward, this has significant implications for how DVA is understood and responded  
27 to. As discussed, focusing on football or other events as a cause or trigger for DVA risks re-  
28 incidentalising DVA. This would be a retrograde step given that a significant body of feminist  
29 scholarship has established DVA as an ongoing and sustained process (Pain, 2012; Stark,  
30 2007; Williamson, 2010). In conclusion there is a need, not to further measure the potential  
31 link between DVA and football, but to understand how the representation of contested  
32 'causes' of DVA such as football impact on policy and practice, and how this is experienced  
33 by both survivors and perpetrators. This understanding is best located within a feminist  
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1 theoretical framework due to its appreciation of the dynamics of DVA as a both pattern of  
2 behaviours and a product of gendered social and cultural norms rather than a reaction to a  
3 specific factor or event such as a football match.  
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## 10 11 12 13 14 15 **Acknowledgements**

16 This research was funded by a grant from the Sir Stewart Halley Trust and it has benefited  
17 from the work of Emma Williamson who has been involved in this project.  
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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The Freedom Programme is an intervention which helps victims of abuse recognise the different controlling aspects of abusive behaviours, and how to recognise these behaviours in future.

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