

Ann Marie experienced a lot of pain in her life, but felt she had no one to turn to after being let down so many times. We realise what an extraordinary brave, strong and resilient woman she was. Her children lost their Mum, and my beautiful and precious daughter lost her life at a tragically young age when, if only she could have known, she still had so much to live for.



ANN MARIE'S LIFE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Ann Marie was described by her family as adorable and had the most beautiful big smile that literally lit up her face. Ann Marie had no contact with her birth father. Her stepfather came into her life as a young child, and along with his family, they became part of Ann Marie's life. As a young girl, Ann Marie was involved in a serious accident. Her family said they could see a noticeable change in her after this- she became very quiet, and she seemed to no longer care about anything. Later, Ann Marie had a relationship which involved domestic abuse over a number of years. Ann Marie was a mother to 5 children.

ANN MARIE'S DEATH

Ann Marie was in her 30s when she died by suicide.

1 KEY FINDING: LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF THE DYNAMICS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

Ann Marie was a repeat victim of domestic abuse

Ann Marie was subjected to domestic abuse over an extensive period of time. This was both during her relationship with her partner and throughout their separation until her death. The dynamics of this abuse was not recognised and therefore not responded to in that context.

Coercive and controlling behaviour

Coercive and controlling behaviour was particularly evident in relation to Ann Marie's children. Indicators to this include Ann Marie's ex-partner using the children to exert control over Ann Marie and demonstrating an imbalance of power:

- By removing Ann Marie's mobile phone, through which she contacted the children;
- Continually harassing Ann Marie through repeated calls and texts;
- Dictating when and how Ann Marie could have contact with the children.

Professionals should have listened to Ann Marie and responded to address the imbalance of power and the domestic abuse that Ann Marie was being subjected to through coercion and control.

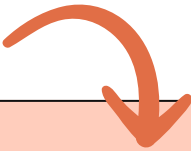
Minimisation of risk

Professionals' response to the domestic abuse was influenced by the fact that Ann Marie and her ex-partner were not living together. The focus of agency involvement was in relation to the impact on the children around Ann Marie's use of alcohol rather than domestic abuse. This was evidenced further in the child protection processes, which emphasised the need for Ann Marie to seek and receive support only, with no direction or work being undertaken with her ex-partner regarding the domestic abuse

At times there was a misconception that the risk to Ann Marie was low because her children were not in her care..

Contributing factors

Whilst a link was established between previous domestic abuse Ann Marie had experienced, being a contributing factor to her poor mental health and alcohol misuse, no link was identified that this was due to any ongoing domestic abuse



Learning

Professionals need to understand what domestic abuse includes and looks like, particularly in relation to coercive control, and use this to inform their practice and aid identification of ongoing abuse and risk factors.

When there are children in a family, professionals need to particularly consider these being used as a mechanism to exert control over the victim. This can include when children are not in the care/or living with the victim.

Professionals need to be aware perpetrators can still continue to exert coercive and controlling behaviours even after a relationship has ended.

2 KEY FINDING:

AN INDIVIDUAL'S PREVIOUS AND CURRENT TRAUMA CAN IMPACT ON AN AGENCY'S ABILITY TO SUSTAIN ENGAGEMENT WITH THEM.

Ann Marie was known to consume alcohol, though there was no evidence that she was. Marie was addicted to alcohol. Ann Marie was referred to, and engaged with, a number of alcohol misuse support services at different times. However, at times, there was a lack of inquisitive questioning in the recorded work with Ann Marie as to what triggered her to consume excess alcohol.

Ann Marie shared various information with professionals. It is clear her living alone, previous trauma and the loss of her children had a big impact on her. The Covid-19 pandemic also restricted Ann Marie's contact with her children and professionals and had a significant impact on agencies' ability to work with and offer services to her. Restrictions that were in place at that time had a significant impact on Ann Marie's health and emotional well-being.

The extent of the abuse Ann Marie was not known to her family, friends, and professionals. Where incidents of domestic abuse were known to professionals, this was seen within the context of the wider family environment, with agencies' focus being on Ann Marie and her partner's parenting, and Ann Marie's alcohol use and the impact that these factors had on the children.



Learning

Professionals need to understand how trauma can impact on an individual's engagement and use this to inform their practice and the support given. All professionals should increase their knowledge and skills in relation to having a trauma informed approach through accessing relevant training and learning.

Professional curiosity is key – fact finding to create a full picture of the needs and risks of that person, beyond what you may initially be told or presented with.

3**KEY FINDING:****THERE IS AN INCREASED RISK OF SUICIDE AMONGST PARENTS WHO HAVE EITHER LOST THE CARE OF THEIR CHILDREN OR HAVE LIMITED CONTACT WITH THEM**

Ann Marie reported three suicide attempts in 12 months and said she had attempted suicide a total of 15/16 times in her life. This level of detail was only known by one agency.

Ann Marie had contacts with health professionals following an overdose of prescribed medication reactive to recently having her children removed from her care, and 'anger management problems'. The risk assessment stated that she 'did not have current plans to harm herself or others, or make any attempt to end her life, displaying no level of current risk'. The plan made with Ann Marie was for her to be discharged into the care of her GP, having been signposted to agencies. There was no mention that this episode was linked to domestic abuse and/or coercive and controlling behaviour.

Ann Marie described having thoughts of suicide to her GP. There was no evidence that these were linked to domestic abuse and/or coercive control. Ann Marie's domestic circumstances could have been explored further, to identify any link with her own threats to harm herself.

Ann Marie was at risk of suicide due to domestic abuse and the loss of access to her children. Research indicates a significant number of domestic abuse victims suffer from suicidal ideation. A study[1] in 2019, estimated that between 20 – 80% of victims of domestic abuse had suicidal ideation. In February 2023, Agenda Alliance published a briefing paper – 'Underexamined and Underreported'[2] – which found that: "Women who experienced abuse from a partner are three times more likely to have made a suicide attempt in the past year compared to those who have not experienced abuse".

Other research shows an increased mortality rate for mothers who lose their children to the care system. There is clear evidence that the loss of her children had a significant impact on Ann Marie. In Ann Marie's case, this was exacerbated further, as her children were in the care of the perpetrator of her abuse. (3&4)

Learning

The impact on Ann Marie on the loss of access to her children should have been fully recognised by services, and particularly the combined effect of her experiencing domestic abuse and the increased risk of suicide she faced.

Professionals should increase their knowledge and understanding of domestic abuse and the risk of suicide. This will enable them to formulate appropriate risk assessments and risk management plans to support victims.

(1) From hoping to help: Identifying and responding to suicidality amongst victims of domestic abuse[1] (Vanessa E. Munro & Ruth Aitken)

[2] https://www.agendaalliance.org/documents/138/Underexamined_and_Underreported_Briefing.pdf

(3) <https://theconversation.com/losing-children-to-foster-care-endangers-mothers-lives-93618>

(4) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0706743717741058>