

Wednesday 14th October 2020

8.7 MILLION PEOPLE REPORT EXPERIENCING ECONOMIC ABUSE – AND 1.6 MILLION SAW THIS BEGIN AS A RESULT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

- The Co-operative Bank and Refuge, the UK's largest national domestic abuse charity release "Know Economic Abuse" report – five years on from launching landmark campaign to tackle economic abuse
- Approximately 16% of all UK adults identify as having experienced economic abuse in their current or former relationship – but the numbers may be higher as more than twice as many have experienced economically abusive behaviours
- 1.6 million adults (3%) saw their economic abuse begin during the Covid-19 pandemic
- Report [include link] makes new recommendations for change, following successful 2015 report which led to the introduction of the UK finance industry's Financial Abuse Code of Practice

Nearly two out of five UK adults (39%) – approximately 20m people¹ – have experienced economically abusive behaviour in a current or former relationship, according to a new report launched today by The Co-operative Bank and Refuge, the UK's largest national domestic abuse charity. Despite this, only 16 per cent of people describe, or recognise, their experiences as abuse.

The "Know Economic Abuse" campaign aims to raise awareness of the true scale of economic abuse in the UK. Economic Abuse – sometimes called financial abuse – occurs when someone attempts to control another's ability to acquire, maintain access to, or use money or other economic resources on a sustained basis. This can include behaviour such as stopping someone from working, taking someone's money, preventing someone from accessing their own or joint bank accounts, or putting debts in their name nearly a million people (10% of all who have experienced economic abuse) are currently in relationships with people who are abusing them economically.

The report combines a study of over 4,000 adults and qualitative research interviews undertaken with 14 survivors of domestic abuse who have accessed Refuge's specialist services. This report continues Refuge and The Co-operative Bank's landmark research from 2015, which launched the campaign which successfully called for the introduction of the Financial Abuse Code of Practice. The Financial Abuse Code of Practice is a set of voluntary guidelines to help the financial services industry better identify and address the needs of someone experiencing economic abuse

What is the scale of Economic Abuse in the UK in 2020?

The findings show that 16 per cent of adults in the UK self-identify as being a survivor of economic abuse. While survivors span gender, age and income groups, economic abuse is rarely perpetrated in isolation with 85% of people who experienced economic abuse in their current or former relationship also reported other forms of domestic abuse, including physical, sexual and psychological abuse.

Economic abuse most commonly begins early on in a relationship (18%), but other key milestones can trigger it – such as moving in together (16%), getting married (12%), or at the point a couple formally joins their finances (8%). A large number of people also experience economically abusive behaviour from former partners during and after separation, such as damage or theft of property, or spending money from a joint account without consent (24%).

Some of the most common economically abusive behaviours, include:

- **The restriction of a person's income:** this can include taking control of someone's income (14%), removing access to someone's personal bank account (11%), or not allowing them to have a bank account at all (11%). Other ways of limiting someone's income capability includes interfering with their ability to work (11%) or forcing someone to work without pay (9%).
- **Misuse of joint or personal funds:** this can include significant financial decisions being made (e.g. purchase of a car or home) without someone's consent (13%), theft of money (12%), theft of valuables or assets (13%), using an individual's bank card without permission (11%)
- **Control of spending:** this can include limiting someone's ability to make purchases beyond basic essentials (12%), placing an authorised spending cap on a partner's bank account (10%), or demanding to monitor or track someone's personal spending (11%).
- **Incurring debts on a person's behalf without consent or under duress:** this can include someone having a debt placed in their name under duress (11%), debts placed in someone's name fraudulently (10%) or applying for an overdraft in someone's name when they are afraid to say no (9%).

The impact of Covid-19

For 3% of all UK adults (1.6 million) economic abuse began relatively recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic. This correlates with a broader increase in other forms of domestic abuse that came about as a result of lockdown. This correlates with the large spike in demand Refuge saw to its National Domestic Abuse Helpline during lockdown.

For more than one in three (35%) of those who first experienced economic abuse during the Covid-19 crisis, their partner first became abusive when their pay decreased as a result of the lockdown. This has raised concerns that the impact of the recession, the end of the furlough scheme and an expectation of widespread redundancies across the UK could give perpetrators of abuse more opportunities to economically abuse and control in relationships.

Awareness and reporting

A third of people who experience economic abuse do not confide in others about their experiences (31%). In the instances that people do feel comfortable sharing their situation, they will most commonly share their experiences with a friend or family member (45%). Only 15% of people who experience economic abuse report the abuse to their bank or financial services provider. One in four people (24%) felt unable to report this to their bank, primarily because they worried that their bank would not have adequate measures in place to protect them (15%). Despite many banks having adopted the Financial Abuse Code of Practice, which guides and supports customer-services in how to spot and address signs of economic abuse.

Across the UK, a third of all UK adults (31%) have heard of economic abuse. The research indicates that more needs to be done to enhance people's understanding, so they can recognise whether they are experiencing economic abuse and know how to address this with relevant parties (e.g. banks and financial services providers)

Recommendations from the Know Economic Abuse report

Along with the publication of its report, which fully details the study's methodology and findings, the Co-operative Bank and Refuge have built on the Code of Practice that was implemented in 2018 to develop a five-point plan of action to further address the issue of economic abuse:

1. Banks and other financial services institutions to build on the support they offer to survivors of economic abuse by:
 - a. The creation of clear processes for customers who are in debt as a result of economic abuse to inform the bank of their circumstances, be supported by well-trained staff and have that debt burden reduced wherever possible
 - b. The provision of information about economic abuse and where customers can seek help when customers apply for any joint financial product
2. Credit reference agencies to take a greater role, protecting survivors of economic abuse through the creation of a preferential 'credit rating repair' system. This would then be implemented by both banks and credit reference agencies
3. The creation of a cross-government fund for survivors to assist them with the costs of leaving a perpetrator and accessing a safe place to stay
4. Reform of welfare benefits systems to benefit survivors and current victims of economic abuse. This should include
 - a. Automatic separate payments of Universal Credit
 - b. Universal Credit advances for those fleeing abusive partners, paid as grants rather than loans
5. Banks, other financial services institutions, and specialist domestic abuse organisations to conduct a review of the impact of online and digital banking on survivors of economic abuse and produce recommendations for change in 2021

Maria Cearns, managing director, People & Customer, The Co-operative Bank, comments: "We are very proud of our long partnership with Refuge to help highlight and address the substantial issue of financial abuse in the UK, and we hear many stories of the difference our first campaign together and the establishment of the Financial Abuse Code of Practice has made to vulnerable individuals. However, five years on we are operating in a significantly changed world with the rise of online banking altering how abusers exert financial control and the current economic backdrop causing real concern around rising levels of abuse. As our 2020 report highlights, substantive action from banks, government and other duty bearers has never been more pressing to ensure individuals receive the help they require when facing or recovering from the long lasting ramifications of abuse.

"Throughout our history our goal has always been to use our position to work towards a better and fairer world and, as we move into a recession, we need to make sure we are doing all we can to support people who are vulnerable to this kind of money-focused coercive control. Our message to customers who might be experiencing economic abuse is we are here to help you and over the coming months we will be using the insight generated from our research with Refuge to build on the principles of the code and push for further changes. Addressing the underlying issues is vital to help survivors build stronger financial futures."

Lisa King, director of communications and external relations at Refuge, says: "This research confirms that economic abuse isn't going away, and it needs to be challenged now more than ever. Each and every day, Refuge staff support women who have had their economic independence taken away from them by abusive partners. The impact on their finances continues for many years, often long after the relationship has ended. Economic abuse rarely occurs in isolation, and is frequently experienced alongside physical, sexual, or psychological abuse. Refuge is greatly concerned that such a low percentage of people recognise the signs of economic abuse, meaning there are people who simply don't realise it is happening to them. This campaign is critical in raising awareness of this

form of abuse, helping to spot the signs, and ensuring policymakers sit up and pay attention. Refuge wants women who are experiencing domestic abuse to know they are not alone. Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline is free to call and available 24/7." ***To view the full research report from Refuge and The Co-operative Bank visit: [Click here](#)***

Spokespeople are available for comment and interviews. Case studies are also available on request.

- ENDS -

Notes to editors

- The Know Economic Abuse report has been made up of two elements; a nationally representative survey among 4,009 adults in the UK, conducted by Opinium between 03 and 07 February 2020, and qualitative research interviews undertaken with 14 survivors of intimate partner violence whom had accessed Refuge's specialist services. As the results of the first survey were being analysed the Covid-19 pandemic hit the UK. We commissioned a second nationally representative survey, again carried out by Opinium. This survey repeated the key questions from the first survey on experience of economic abuse, including when the abuse started and whether any help was sought. This second survey contained additional options related to the Covid-19 pandemic, including whether economic abuse started when the survivor lost their job, saw their income reduce or were furloughed due to Covid-19. This second survey was conducted in June 2020 and was completed by 4,008 adults in the UK

Media Contacts

Nicki Parry
The Co-operative Bank
Tel: 0161 201 1590 Email: nicki.parry@co-operativebank.co.uk

Lewis Wilks
Lansons
Tel: 0790 3260 560 Email: lewisw@lansons.com

Refuge
Refuge media office
Tel: 0207 395 7731 Email: press@refuge.org.uk

The Co-operative Bank

The Co-operative Bank plc provides a full range of banking products and services to retail and SME (Small and Medium Sized Enterprises) customers and is committed to values and ethics in line with the principles of the co-operative movement.

The Co-operative Bank is the only high street bank with a customer-led ethical policy which gives customers a say in how their money is used. Launched in 1992, the Policy has been updated on five occasions, with new commitments added in January 2015 to cover how the Bank operates its business, products and services, workplace and culture, relationships with suppliers and other stakeholders and campaigning

About Refuge

Refuge opened the world's first refuge in Chiswick, West London, in 1971. Since then it has grown to become the country's largest single provider of specialist support to women and children escaping domestic abuse and other forms of gender based violence. On any given day, Refuge supports more than 6,500 women and children.

Refuge's national network of specialist services include: safe emergency accommodation through refuges in secret locations across the country; community-based outreach services; culturally specific services for women from South Asian, African and Caribbean, Middle Eastern, Eastern European and Vietnamese backgrounds; a modern slavery service; independent advocacy services for women at the highest risk of serious injury and homicide; a range of single point of access services for women, children and men across entire regions; and the Freephone 24 Hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline.

Refuge also runs award-winning public awareness campaigns, advises Governments and was voted 'Charity of the Year' 2016 at The Charity Times Awards.

For more information, please visit www.refuge.org.uk or follow Refuge's work on www.facebook.com/RefugeCharity and Twitter @RefugeCharity