

Domestic abuse in The Archers: putting the storyline into context



*The eked out tale of the abusive relationship between the Titcheners in the long running BBC Radio 4 soap, *The Archers*, culminated on Sunday evening with a knife attack by the long suffering Helen on her psychologically controlling husband Rob. Here, **Jennifer Brown** puts the storyline in context, offering a forensic psychology perspective and outlining the frequency of similar cases in the UK alongside the recent legal provisions to legislate against such behaviour.*

*Please note: a **follow-up article** is available [here](#), which discusses in more detail the psychology of the perpetrator and the fall-out from domestic violence on the abused, both mentally and in court.*

In the UK 2013/2014 the Crown Prosecution Service **prosecuted** 58,276 defendants in domestic violence cases, of whom 94% were men. The conviction rate was 74.6%. The domestic abuse storyline in *The Archers* has been painful listening as Rob progressively undermines Helen with comments about her looks, what she wears, and exaggerating domestic mishaps so as to incrementally isolate her from her work, family and friends. This has been a textbook case of controlling coercive behaviour which has served to highlight this form of domestic abuse and **prompted** over £100,000 pounds in charitable donations.

The short daily episodes allowed the script writers to reveal the slow burn, insidious nature of Rob's behaviour, made all the more realistic by virtue of the listener's privileged position of eavesdropping on their domestic life, invisible to other characters in the show. Helen's parents were won over by Rob's apparent solicitous attitude towards their vulnerable daughter, who has a history of anorexia and previous tragedy of the suicide of a former partner. Over about eighteen months, Helen was transformed from a feisty, autonomous, attractive, business woman, to a dowdy, isolated, self-doubting wreck.

During the period of this storyline provisions were published in the **Serious Crime Act 2015**. This created a new offence whereby someone commits an offence when "repeatedly or continuously engages in behaviour towards another person that is controlling or coercive" when the parties are "personally connected" and where the impact is "serious", having substantial effect to adversely affect daily activities or cause the victim to fear violence.

The World Health Organisation **defines** emotional psychological abuse as insults, belittling, constant humiliation, intimidations, and threats of harm, threats to take away children and controlling behaviours as isolating from friends and family, monitoring of movements, and restricting access to financial resources, employment or medical care. The *Archers* script writers have deployed examples of many of these e.g. Rob's insistence on a home birth for the pregnant Helen despite her prior history of pre-eclampsia, taking away her car keys after a minor accident, monitoring her mobile phone, alienating her from close friends and taking over her role in the family business.

The World Health Organisation **also found from a multi-site survey** of 24,000 women in ten countries, a prevalence rate of between 20-75% of a partner experiencing an emotionally abusive episode. It was her recent meeting with her husband's former wife that confirmed the problem lay with Rob, not Helen, and it was the fact he was not going to change which prompted her to leave. It was this attempt that led to the knife attack and Helen's arrest for wounding, although the exact details remain unclear.

In the UK, **figures from the Office for National Statistics** suggest that domestic homicide is not an unusual occurrence, although more frequently it is the woman who is killed. In 2013/14, 23 men were killed by their partners (mostly with a sharp instrument) compared to 85 women. **Elizabeth Gilchrist talks about** "intimate terrorism" where the abuse is perpetrated by men on their partners and that this is a ubiquitous phenomenon crossing all social classes and groups. Perpetrators often suffer a narcissistic personality disorder, are emotionally volatile and have early attachment problems inhibiting their ability to form loving and healthy adult relationships. Dysfunctional attachment in childhood may be carried over into adult life and replicated in conflictual and abusive intimate relationships. Beliefs that support men's coercive control, include their right to discipline a woman for inappropriate conduct (Rob's claim he intervened to moderate Helen's looks because she was 'flaunting' herself); sexual intercourse is his right in marriage (Rob insisting on sex when Helen signaled she did not want this); sexual activity being a marker of masculinity (Rob's ideas about forceful sex).

Frustrated listeners might think: why not just leave? **Research suggests** that women don't do so because of fear of retaliation, concern for their children (Rob's threat to send Helen young son Henry to his old school), hope that the partner will change. Helen's apparent recourse to violent resistance is a "**distinct female response**", according to Gilchrist and colleague Mark Kebell. But is this what happened? The ambiguity of the episode might suggest another phenomenon, that of family annihilation or familicide. This is an extreme form of domestic violence where a partner murders their whole family. Helen appears to have reacted after Rob threatens Henry. The paramedic indicated that the knife wounds "were the business" and Rob had tried to persuade Helen to kill herself. Did Rob self-inflict some of his injuries as his own suicide attempt? **Risk factors for familicide** include prior domestic abuse, a step-child in the home, threat of estrangement and availability of a weapon, all present in the Archers scenario.

Helen's options, **as described by legal experts**, best lie with self-defence, hopefully resulting in an acquittal. With the recent revelation of Rob's survival he may yet be charged with the new controlling or coercive behaviour offence and if convicted serve up to a five year custodial prison sentence. In either scenario there will be need for a forensic psychologist expert report as predictability the accounts of both parties will be contradictory. Helen will find it difficult to evidence her abuse, not least because of Rob's apparent charm and concern: potential jurors will need to be swayed by her answers to the question on why didn't she leave if such abuse did take place. As a **recent report** by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary demonstrates, the police do not have a good record in responding to domestic violence and often officers lack the skills and knowledge to engage confidently and competently with victims. Therefore, this story still has a long way to go yet.

About the Author

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