



## Helping the Telegraph with some domestic abuse stats

[\(Cross-posted with permission from Safe Lives\)](#)

When I tell my friends that I work for SafeLives, their reaction is often one of surprise. They don't go so far as to say "But you're a man" or "Isn't domestic violence a women's issue?" but you can sometimes see the question in their eyes.

I work for a domestic abuse charity because, even though the majority of victims are female, it is not just a 'women's issue'. As the slogan goes, stopping domestic violence is everyone's business. That includes all forms of violence and abuse – physical, sexual, psychological, and financial too. It's therefore disheartening to see Neil Lyndon [playing down the prevalence of female homicide and rape](#) in the Telegraph today.

It's true that the stats around violence against women and girls are extraordinary. To turn Carl Sagan's famous paradigm on its head, they are the extraordinary evidence that back up extraordinary claims. That's why organisations like the UN, the UK's Office for National Statistics, and yes, even SafeLives, spend time and resources getting their data right – even though we know that many victims are understandably worried about telling others about their experiences.

So you would expect Neil to provide some extraordinary counter-evidence to give substance to his extraordinary counter-claims. No such luck. Neil's argument boils down to two main points:

1. He doesn't know any women who have been murdered or raped
2. Britain's annual sexual assault rates are low, which means the UN stats are wrong

Let's start with that first point. Neil suggests that because he's never known a woman who's been murdered, it can't be a leading cause of global premature female deaths. I am glad you do not know anyone who has been murdered, Neil – but hundreds of families in the UK aren't that lucky, and still feel the loss of a loved one every day.

The point is this: anecdotes don't mean anything by themselves. Neil also applies this anecdotal approach to sexual violence, arguing that he's only ever met two women claiming to have been sexually assaulted. In his own words:

Both of them were disbelieved by their own women friends who reckoned the soi-disant victims were making up stories that couldn't be verified to dramatise their lives.

Neil, I'm not surprised more women haven't told you or others in your social circle about sexual assaults they've experienced, if this is the reaction they can expect.

The second point in Neil's argument is so flawed that I can see why he had to include the anecdotes.



Neil's concern is with the UN's claim that one third of women worldwide experience sexual violence during their lifetime. He argues that 2.5% of women in Britain are recorded as being victims of sexual assault in the past 12 months and - because the experience of British women must be representative of one-third of the world's population - that would mean every woman in the other two-thirds of the world had been sexually assaulted, which couldn't be true.

Let's allow Neil's claim that Britain could be representative of one third of the world (even though the Europe, North America and the Australian continents only make up 20% of the global population). Let's ignore the fact that the 2.5% figure is a conservative estimate, given the problem of under-reporting. Neil has still missed a key point: **the UN stat is measured over women's lifetimes, not just the past 12 months.**

If 2.5% of women are sexually assaulted each year, the number who have been assaulted at some point in their lives will be far higher. In the UK, [20% of women aged 16-59 have been victims of some kind of sexual assault in their lifetimes](#). Given higher rates of sexual assault abroad and the use of [rape as a weapon of war](#) in conflict zones, the one-in-three stat is clearly plausible.

In short, Neil's suggestion that the UN stat is "a claim which disintegrates in your hands like wet tissue paper the moment you subject it to scrutiny" is laughable.

But we're dismayed that this denial of the widespread reality of abuse – and lack of empathy for victims – is still published on a mainstream newspaper website. Accurate statistics about domestic abuse, and violence against women more widely, are hard to come by, and sometimes harder to understand.

But measuring and understanding domestic abuse is something SafeLives is expert at. So Neil, the next time you would like to write a piece on domestic abuse in the UK, give us a call and we'll help you out. Or you could just visit our brand new [stats pages](#), for the latest numbers from the UK's largest database of domestic abuse cases.

Maybe then you'll write a piece that'll help victims speak up, and get help – rather than one that tells them they should be disbelieved.