



MAYOR OF LONDON

OFFICE FOR POLICING AND CRIME

Survivors' Experiences of Crime, the Justice System and Support Services

Report of consultation findings

Opinion Research Services

March 2022



Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC): Survivors' Experiences of Crime, the Justice System and Support Services

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Foreword

The justice system is not designed for victims. They are the most important commodity we have for securing convictions and helping to keep the public safe, yet they are routinely treated as passive bystanders in the justice process. Without victim testimony and cooperation, successful cases would be minimal; perpetrators would be free to repeat their crimes and inflict further harm. But too often, victims are treated as an afterthought.

Having been through the justice system myself, and having met with countless victims over many years, I have seen first-hand how apathetic and re-traumatising the system can be. I have lost count of the times that victims have expressed to me that the impact of the justice process has been more damaging than the crime itself.


This is particularly true for women and girls, who regularly find themselves treated with scepticism and mistrust by the justice system. Robust research, including my 2019 and 2021 London Rape Reviews, have confirmed that women have their concerns minimised and are subjected to outdated myths and stereotypes. This dynamic is intensified for women from marginalised communities or from minority ethnicities. Many of these women do not come forward to report at all, out of legitimate fear for how they will be treated. We can and must do better.

I firmly believe the best way to improve the justice system is to listen to victims. They have had to live

and breathe the challenges, have had to face the barriers head on. They know how they were failed, and they have good ideas about what would have helped them and could help others. Their lived experiences makes them the experts.

Which is why, when the Mayor announced plans to refresh his strategy for tackling violence against women and girls, I offered to lead a survivor consultation. I wanted to ensure the strategy would be rooted in real life experiences. This report is a summary of that consultation – a series of focus groups with women and girls who have experienced crime in London. Some of them never reported to the police, while others had made it all the way to court. Whilst some had positive experiences, too many were failed.

I am grateful to every survivor who took time to share their deeply personal and often traumatic experiences. Their testimony has directly helped to shape policy proposals in the strategy which will go on to help countless other women and girls in London. This report is a small piece of a much larger puzzle, but it upholds and affirms the principle that victims voices must be listened to.



Claire Waxman
Independent Victims' Commissioner for London



Acknowledgements

Opinion Research Services (ORS) is pleased to have worked with Claire Waxman (the Victims' Commissioner for London) and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) on the important consultation reported here.

We are grateful to survivors who took part in the various strands of research. All engaged with MOPAC, with the issues under consideration and, in the focus groups, with each other in readily discussing their experiences and ideas.

We thank MOPAC for commissioning the project as part of its review of the Mayor's Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy. We particularly thank Claire Waxman and Poppy Terry for their invaluable assistance throughout the project. We would also like to thank the organisations that assisted MOPAC in promoting the research and recruiting participants for the research.

At all stages of the project, ORS' status as an independent organisation engaging with survivors as objectively as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for the trust, and we hope this report will contribute usefully to thinking about the planning for future services for female victims and survivors across London.

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Executive Summary

Summary of main findings

The commission and consultation

The Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime (MOPAC) is headed by the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, who is accountable for the performance of policing in London. The Mayor has developed a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, which is due to be refreshed: this study will help inform this new Strategy. He is also required by law to produce a 'Police and Crime Plan' that explains how the police, community safety partners and other criminal justice agencies will work together to reduce crime. A new Plan is currently being developed, and the findings from this study will be used to inform it.

As part of this process, the Mayor asked the London Victims' Commissioner, Claire Waxman, to hear directly from survivors about their experiences. The Commissioner's role is to identify and examine any issues or barriers facing victims/survivors, work to resolve them, and to help victims/survivors access justice, cope and recover. Her work puts victims' and survivors' voices and experiences at the centre of policy making and this study will ensure that the new strategy reflects their views.

MOPAC asked Opinion Research Services (ORS), an independent research company with significant experience of research with victims and survivors, to undertake focus groups and interviews with victims/survivors about their views and experiences of reporting a crime or crimes (including any barriers to doing so); how the police and other criminal justice system agencies responded to their report(s); and any support services used.

This section reports the key findings from the focus groups and interviews. Readers are encouraged to consult the full chapters that follow for a comprehensive account of the views expressed by survivors.

Main findings

Recognising abuse

Domestic abuse in the form of coercive control is particularly hard to recognise

A common issue for those who had experienced domestic abuse, coercive control in particular, is that unless they grew up in a similar environment, it can take some time to recognise that what they are suffering is abuse. Indeed, this recognition often only happens when the abuse turns physical.

There are also some cultural barriers to recognition. An older survivor of familial domestic abuse said that while she always felt that what she had suffered was wrong, her family and some of the Indian community within which she was raised (in India and the UK) did not: growing up, people would encourage her to accept the abuse as part of her culture.

For some, it is only when an 'outsider' offers their view on the situation that the realisation dawns that their circumstances are not "*the norm*" - and others said they only recognised the seriousness and long-term nature of their situation when they had to call the police due to an escalation of violence, or had matters taken out of their hands by the authorities.

Moreover, the unique circumstances of domestic abuse, whereby someone is hurt by someone they love and who they believe loves them, means that even after they have left their situation, some feel regret or find themselves making excuses for the perpetrator. This, it was said, prolongs their trauma.

Other crime types can also be hard to recognise and accept at first

A survivor of stalking and harassment said they had not fully acknowledged what was happening to them at first, and again that it took a conversation with friends and the escalation of the situation for them to recognise the seriousness of it. Similarly, sexual abuse, especially at a young age, was said to be difficult to recognise and acknowledge – and something that often remains unidentified in the minds of survivors until adulthood. Furthermore, abuse by someone known to the survivor can also be hard to identify as such, especially if the perpetrator does not fit the survivor's own definition of an abuser.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is typically undertaken at a very young age and so is not recognised as 'wrong' until many years later

All survivors of FGM had undergone the procedure at a very young age; some were as young as two and so could not recall having done so, whereas others were around six to eight and said they could. Those who could remember described traumatic experiences.

One survivor did not recognise criminality or abuse at first as she had 'chosen' to be a sex worker and was unable to research her rights because of language barriers

While working as a sex worker, the survivor has been controlled by her 'boss/landlord': she has endured violence and verbal aggression from this man and some clients. She also said that her boss had concealed information about her finances and her rights to work within the UK and threatened her with deportation should she 'step out of line'. When asked whether she considered these actions to be criminal or abusive, the survivor said that while she does now, at the time she did not as it had been her choice to undertake sex work. She also explained that her lack of English had prevented her from learning more about her situation: that is, had she been able to easily research her rights, she may have acknowledged the abuse earlier.

Disclosing Abuse

Most survivors who disclosed did so initially to family members or friends

Those who disclosed what was happening to them prior to calling the police typically did so informally to family members or friends, who encouraged them to formally report the abuse or incident/s.

The exception to this was disclosure of FGM. Many survivors reported that their FGM had been picked up during childbirth and routine medical procedures such as smear tests. This, they said, had triggered unnecessary counselling referrals – and had led them to feel less like victims, and more like potential criminals who might perpetuate the practice. Indeed, the assumption that those who had undergone FGM in the past are more likely to subject their children to FGM, was said to be both typical and incorrect – and one that can deter survivors from seeking essential medical care and screening. Considering this, education was thought to be required to ensure medical practitioners handle FGM as sensitively and with as much understanding as possible.

Survivors of honour-based violence (HBV) find it particularly hard to disclose

Survivors of honour-based violence (HBV) described being wholly controlled by a partner and/or their family. In such circumstances, even if they did recognise what they were experiencing as abuse, their enforced isolation made it extremely difficult for them to disclose or report it. Moreover, even on disclosing to relatives, a couple of survivors said they had been encouraged by them to stay. Most said they had been 'forced' to report when the violence became life-threatening.

Survivors suggested that medical professionals such as GPs should be more alert to the possibility of HBV and make provisions for women to see a doctor independently of their partner. This, it was felt, could encourage disclosure. One survivor, who had come to the UK as a student with her partner, said she would have appreciated a welfare check after she was eventually prevented by her partner from attending lectures. She felt this might have given her an opportunity to disclose what was happening to her.

Reporting Abuse

There are many 'general' barriers to reporting to the police

Aside from not recognising their experiences as abuse, one of the participants' main reasons for not wishing to report to the police was fear of the criminal justice system and having no knowledge of any support available to them to navigate it. Specifically, they worried about the anticipated intrusiveness of the process and the prospect of victim-blaming. Several survivors were also concerned about how seriously officers would take their report, and whether they would be believed. Such views had mainly formed due to adverse past dealings with the police.

There are also some cultural barriers to reporting

There were said to be some cultural barriers to reporting. For example, Asian survivors explained that they had remained within abusive marriages for fear of being stigmatised within their families and communities, and a Black survivor said they were raised to never discuss family issues outside the domestic environment. Furthermore, one Asian survivor of domestic abuse explained that not only were they ashamed to admit that they were under coercive control due to their outward appearance of success (and because said control had the desired effect of cutting them off from friends and family and believing they were inferior), but also because their cultural upbringing had resulted in a deep mistrust of authority. A wider and better understanding of how abuse is viewed and managed within different cultures was thus thought to be essential in understanding and overcoming the reluctance to report.

Barriers specific to survivors of domestic abuse

Those experiencing domestic abuse said that they and others in their circumstances do not report it to the police for several reasons, mostly not knowing coercive control is a reportable offence, and continued manipulation on the part of the perpetrator (i.e., stating that they will take their own life should their victim file a report). For an older survivor of familial domestic abuse, the fact the abuse was perpetrated within the family home was also a barrier for the survivor, who sought to protect her family's reputation and did not wish to 'parade' what was happening for all to see.

Barriers specific to survivors of FGM

FGM is a 'normalised' practice in many countries and communities

FGM is a 'normalised' practice in some countries and within certain communities, so is not seen as abuse. While participating survivors unanimously agreed that the practice is wrong, they felt it is not typically done with malicious intent, but because it is expected within families and has been for generations. For this reason, perpetrators (who are normally close family members) are rarely reported to the authorities.

Several survivors reported struggling to reconcile the 'demonisation' of FGM in the UK and the cultural environment in which they were raised. Even after being educated on and recognising the dangers of FGM, it remains difficult for survivors to see those who perpetrated it as abusers, particularly when considering the pressure within families to conform to the practice.

In light of this, participants unanimously agreed that any laws, policies and processes and the language used within them should recognise that FGM is not a 'black and white area', but one with many nuances and 'grey areas' – most notably that the perpetrators are often loving and much-loved family members who are following the practices with which they were raised. Indeed, one survivor suggested that it was the black and white nature of the current legislation that deterred her from reporting her FGM, for it did not sufficiently recognise that the perpetrators were loving family members following cultural traditions.

In the absence of survivors being inclined to report FGM, education is essential from an early age

Although participants were reluctant to see or describe FGM as a crime, and especially one that should be reported to the authorities, all had been educated to recognise it as a dangerous practice and, as a result, were committed to ensuring that their own and other children are not subjected to it. In light of this, the importance of educating young people in the dangers of FGM was stressed, as was the need for as much community-based engagement as possible.

Encouragingly, there was a definite sense that school - and community-based education (with all community members, including men) - is having a positive impact on adults' willingness to practise FGM and young people's willingness to stand up against it and to report it. Particularly impactful are the testimonies of those with lived experience, and education delivered by trusted community members and organisations.

On a related note, participants strongly agreed that early intervention and information provision is key to identifying potential perpetrators and preventing criminal acts of FGM. Indeed, this preventative work was generally considered to be much more important than punitive action. Moreover, it was said that such information should be delivered in a way such that potential perpetrators know that FGM is not only damaging for its victims, but also has severe legal implications for those who facilitate it and undertake it. Publicising successful prosecutions could also, it was felt, act as a deterrent for those contemplating subjecting family members to FGM.

Education should be targeted at those coming to the UK from countries that practice FGM

Participants also considered it imperative that education and information be targeted at those coming to the UK from countries and cultures that still practice FGM and consider it 'the norm' – either through providing leaflets on arrival, or policymakers working with their counterparts in practising countries to ensure their citizens are aware that the practice is illegal in the UK and elsewhere.

Barriers specific to survivors of HBV

Fear of and not knowing how to contact the police are barriers to formal reporting

One HBV survivor said that while she had wanted to escape her situation, she would have been fearful of contacting the police even with the opportunity, having been told by their partner that it would achieve nothing. Only when she attended hospital with injuries was she encouraged to do so. Others said they were afraid of contacting the authorities as they were unfamiliar with UK laws and processes, or that they would not have known how to do so, even in an emergency.

And of course, the very nature of the control survivors were subject to meant they were afraid and did not have opportunities to report the abuse, as their abusers kept watchful eyes on them at all times.

Barriers specific to sex workers

Fear of revenge and retribution are significant reporting barriers for sex workers

The survivor did not report any incidents of abuse/violence to the police at the time, nor did she feel she would be inclined to do so now, mainly due to the threat of retribution and malicious action from those involved in her move to the UK and her subsequent sex work. Indeed, she repeated how her boss/landlord constantly told her not to speak to the police, threatening her with deportation if she did. The client abuse also went un-reported for fear of clients being contacted by the police and seeking revenge on her as they know where she lives and works.

The police, it was felt, should demonstrate understanding of sex workers' circumstances

Although she had never reported anything to them, the survivor did highlight a negative experience of the police, when they raided a property where she was staying with a few other sex workers. She felt they dealt with the situation in an unnecessarily aggressive and forceful manner, treating her and the other women as criminals and causing them a great deal of embarrassment and shame. The survivor felt that the encounter may have been more positive had female officers been present – though she still felt she would not have spoken to the police about her situation given her language difficulties and also the presence of a fellow sex worker who would likely have informed their landlord/boss.

This experience has led the survivor to view the police negatively, particularly their unprofessional approach and the “derogatory” way they treated her and her co-workers. Moreover, she felt they demonstrated a lack of understanding of the implications of their actions, for the house then had to be ‘burned’ (i.e., abandoned) and the girls moved to another address from where they could continue working.

Anonymous reporting mechanisms are preferable

When asked what might encourage sex workers to report criminality or abuse, the participant suggested an anonymous website or helpline– with a translation facility for those with little or no English.

Some survivors reported positive experiences of reporting their abuse to the police

Many participants commended the police for responding quickly, taking them seriously, their empathy, sensitivity and patience, offering practical support, and for referring them to specialist organisations that could help further.

One HBV survivor also praised the safeguarding measures put in place to protect her when her husband was released from custody. While disappointed to be asked to move home, she understood that the request was made for her safety, and she was impressed with and grateful for the steps taken to ensure

she was protected and cared for. Importantly, also, in light of some survivors' fear of authority figures, some officers modified their behaviour – by attending to them in civil uniform for example.

Other experiences of reporting were poor

Many experiences of reporting a crime or abuse to the police were said to be poor. Survivors, especially those in the sessions for Black and Asian survivors, mainly complained of the following issues:

- Lengthy waits for a response or to speak to an officer (even in an emergency situation);
- Receiving no explanations of the process and what might happen next;
- The unexpected and retraumatising intrusiveness of the questioning;
- Not feeling believed or having their experiences and feelings minimised;
- A lack of support and empathy;
- Officers not looking beyond the surface of an incident (to identify coercive control for example);
- The discomfort of having to report to a male officer.

Participants also suggested that culture and environment can influence the response, actions and attitudes of police officers. One survivor told of making a report while living on an estate “*where there's a majority of black people*” and believed that this had impacted on the way they were viewed and treated. Another participant (attending on behalf of her daughter) said they continually wonder whether the slow response to her daughter's report was as a result of racial bias. Whilst acknowledging that that they were speculating on this without any evidence, the fact that they think this way highlights the perception of the Metropolitan Police within Black communities.

One survivor recounted her “*horrible*” experience of feeling placed under undue pressure by the police to take further action following a report of HBV. She made the report only to have the abuse formally recorded, and without the intention of taking it any further, only to be told that her parents would be arrested. It was only after mentioning HBV that the officer de-escalated the situation, but the survivor felt that the police should have been alert to the possibility of this from the outset and sensitive to the implications of arresting their parents. On the other hand, another survivor, while satisfied overall with her treatment by the police, felt that the initial attending officer had not considered the possibility of HBV, taking the word of her husband that there was nothing untoward happening, and failing to look beyond surface appearances.

Moreover, a few accounts from domestic abuse survivors demonstrate the difficult and dangerous position in which they find themselves when they report to the police and no resulting action is taken. This is especially problematic when survivors do not have settled status or even a visa, as they usually have nowhere else to go.

Making a statement

Making a statement was a traumatic experience

While explanations were given for why it was necessary, survivors described giving evidence by video as “*difficult*”, “*uncomfortable*” and “*isolating*”. There was also a sense that some officers did not fully understand the impact of trauma on memory, expecting survivors to have perfect recall of events.

One survivor said she was pressured into making a statement at home and continued to be pressured even after she had told the Officer in Charge that this would be impossible as she was living with her family. Moreover, when agreed that she could give her statement at the police station, she was made to feel like an inconvenience and there was little attempt made to find a mutually convenient day and time. This led her on several occasions to consider withdrawing from the process.

Police investigations

Timeliness and good communication during investigations is essential, but is often said to be lacking

Those who commended the investigation of their cases tended to praise the police's timeliness and communication. One older survivor, for example, felt that the police had done everything they could, working in a timely manner and keeping her informed at each stage.

The most common negative issue raised regarding police investigations, though, was apparently infrequent and poor communication. Specific complaints were around officers demonstrating a lack of compassion or empathy and taking lengthy or frequent periods of annual leave with no cover for someone to provide updates during their absence. This angered one survivor so much that they dropped their case.

Survivors can accept an unfavourable outcome if they feel all evidence has been considered, but are highly critical of the police if they feel it has not

Several participants spoke of their evidence being ignored by investigating officers, and it was clear from all the discussions that if survivors feel any evidence has been ignored or that insufficient effort has gone into finding it, their satisfaction levels with the police tend to plummet. This suggests that the outcome of a case is less important than being reassured that everything possible was done with the available evidence.

Having their mobile phone data accessed is traumatic for survivors

Having their mobile phone taken for evidence collection was particularly troubling for survivors, especially if they had not been warned in advance, or had not been told why it was necessary. Essentially, it was viewed as an often-unnecessary invasion of privacy, and proof that the police had not believed their version of events.

The court process

Survivors had mixed experiences of the court process

A participant attending on behalf of her daughter described how her daughter had been through the court process a few years ago and had received excellent support and communication from the Witness Care Unit. The pre-trial courtroom visit and the special measures provided were especially helpful (as they were, too, for one of the older survivors whose case went to court). However, the participant's daughter is due to attend court in early 2022 for a separate offence, and she is "dreading" this for fear of having to relive the details of the incident. This time, the support offered was said to have been poor. Moreover, by the time the case is heard in court, it will be two years since the incident, and the participant is worried that her daughter will withdraw from the process as she is beginning to 'get her life back' and is reluctant to set herself back by reliving her trauma.

Similarly, another survivor's case is due to be heard in court in the new year, and she admitted to feeling "petrified" at the thought of it, not least as she has allegedly not been allowed to re-read her initial statement (which she fears may contain some inconsistencies given that she was in a "daze" when it was taken). A lack of support from any quarter is apparently compounding this survivor's fears.

One case had been heard virtually during the pandemic (in both criminal and family court). The survivor described the re-traumatisation they experienced while watching the suspect on the screen and criticised the authorities for not recognising this potential harm. Furthermore, the attitude of the judge allegedly demonstrated a lack of knowledge of both domestic abuse in general, and of the religious and cultural implications of making the decision to leave within south-east Asian communities. The judge made the survivor feel disbelieved, which left them "more traumatised" than anything that had come before. The survivor did, though, positively acknowledge the service received from the Witness Service at the Family Court for informing her of the pre-court support available, and for simply treating her with respect.

The older survivor's case was also heard during the Covid-19 pandemic, which the survivor felt had affected communications and timeliness. For example, court dates were moved, but she was not informed of these changes until she contacted Witness Care herself. The survivor was also not informed of the court outcome until she contacted the police officer involved in the case. She understood the officer's reason for the miscommunication but was, nonetheless, frustrated that no-one had been in touch.

Accessing support

Survivors had mixed experiences of being referred to a support service by the police

While many participants had been referred to a support service by the police, others could not recall being given information about available support, stating that they had been forced to seek out it out themselves. Moreover, some of those who did remember a referral did not consider it especially effective, for (they said) giving victims of crime a leaflet or card at a moment of high emotional trauma is not conducive to them processing its importance, and subsequently following up the support offer.

Support services are generally very well-regarded

Most participating survivors had accessed some form of support from organisations outside the criminal justice system – specialist counselling and psychotherapy, peer support, creative therapy, advocacy and practical advice, financial support, housing, and educational courses, for example. Almost all were positive about the impact of support on their ability to cope and recover from their experiences.

However, there were some complaints from Black and Asian survivors of long waiting times for specialist services, and that support was time-limited to a certain number of sessions. As such, more and longer specialist support was considered crucial in ensuring as many survivors as possible are able to access the right support at the right time.

Participants also considered it crucial that survivors are aware that they can access support when it is of most benefit to them and that this may not necessarily be when they expect to need it. For example, one survivor had attended therapy for abuse while they were at "breaking point", which was the wrong time for them as they kept having panic attacks and found it extremely hard to "stay grounded". Support accessed some time after the abuse was thus much more effective in identifying ways to cope and recover.

Issues specific to survivors of FGM

Several survivors did not access support until adulthood, and benefitted from doing so

Delays in accessing support are evidently common for FGM survivors given that most are very young when subjected to the process. As such, several survivors said they had not accessed support for many years, either because they considered it unnecessary or potentially irrelevant – or for fear of being identified as a victim when they did not consider themselves to have been victimised.

Participating survivors unanimously agreed that the support they received had been invaluable in helping them to cope and recover from their delayed trauma. Especially important was the culturally appropriate support delivered by someone with lived experience of FGM and its impacts who was able to offer expertise, a non-judgemental environment and knowledge of available sources of help and information – and help survivors navigate the complexities and internal conflicts they experienced.

Issues specific to survivors of HBV

The support accessed has been invaluable in helping survivors cope and recover from violence and abuse

Most of the participating survivors were either living in or had lived in housing provided by the Ashiana Network, receiving practical, financial, legal, and emotional support. This has helped them feel safe and secure, developed their confidence and independence, and mitigated their sense of isolation.

Survivors would have welcomed more information about how to contact the police and support services on arrival in the UK

Participating survivors reported being unaware of the emergency 999 number on arrival in the UK, and the very nature of honour-based violence and control means that they remained ignorant of it for a long time. As such, participants suggested incorporating details into an information pack for women moving to the UK from abroad on how to contact the emergency services (from personal and public telephones), as well as more public service announcements on contacting the police at locations such as railway stations, and clearer instructions on mobile phones on how to make an emergency call.

Survivors also said that women require information on how to identify honour-based violence, particularly when it involves coercive control

It was said that victims of honour-based violence – especially involving coercive control – are often unable to recognise what is happening to them. Education on this issue was thus thought to be essential, starting at school, to inform and empower younger generations and enact future change.

GP services could be more proactive in offering support

One participant suggested that GPs could make proactive contact with anyone coming to the UK on a spousal visa after, say, four to six months of their arrival. This, it was felt, could provide a means of disclosure for someone experiencing HBV.

Support with immigration issues is essential in enabling survivors of HBV to recover from their experiences

A few survivors said that they cannot fully recover from their trauma until their immigration issues have been resolved and when they are secure in knowing that they can stay in the UK. One survivor is nervously waiting for the outcome of an asylum application; another is waiting for her renewed proof of ID, without which she feels “insecure”, and another said she feels “ashamed” of her current status as an asylum seeker having been waiting one and a half years for a Home Office decision.

Issues specific to sex workers

The support received by the survivor has been welcome, but her language difficulties have prevented her from accessing further help

The Survivor was given information by her GP about National Ugly Mugs (NUM), from whom she received financial support during the first national Covid-19 lockdown. Although this support was positive, she felt she has missed out on further help due to language barriers.

This survivor suggested other support that would benefit her (if translation could be offered). She felt that online peer groups would offer emotional support and, more practically, she wanted information about sex workers' rights, lists of accommodation agencies and individuals most likely to rent to sex workers, and signposting to alternative employment opportunities. In addition, the survivor felt that more opportunities to learn English would benefit women in her position – and that these should ideally be available in the daytime to account for sex workers' working patterns.

The ClientEye app is an important source of information for sex workers

The survivor also highlighted the importance of the ClientEye app, a service that allows sex workers to add unpleasant and potentially dangerous clients to a database as a warning to others. She checks this service whenever she has a new client.

Making a complaint

Responses to survivors' complaints have typically been poor

A few participants in the Black and Asian survivors' sessions had made official complaints about certain aspects of their cases to the police and had not received satisfactory responses. The main reported issues were around the length of time taken to respond to the complaint, and a lack of ownership of poor performance.

Improving the victim/survivor experience of the criminal justice system

More frequent and better communication from the police is essential in ensuring survivors feel informed and cared for

Some survivors received no or very little communication while their case was ongoing; for others it was irregular and/or inaccurate. Participants reasoned that even in the absence of specific updates, the police should make the effort to undertake regular 'welfare checks' and reassure survivors that their case is still being investigated. Clarity and transparency were also considered essential in managing victim/survivor expectations and mitigating any disappointment arising from unrealistic hopes.

Advocates could be based at police stations to support victims/survivors

Police station-based advocates could, it was felt, be helpful in supporting victims to make reports and give statements, signposting them toward available support, and generally aiding their understanding of what to expect on the journey through the criminal justice system.

'Safe spaces' that offer information, advice and opportunities for survivors to discuss their experiences and options would be beneficial

A couple of survivors suggested the provision of 'safe spaces' that offer information and advice and opportunities for survivors to discuss their experiences and options prior to reporting formally. This suggestion was welcomed by others. Such a 'safe space' would be especially important for those seeking to verify that what they are experiencing is abuse (those under coercive control for example). Online as well as in-person 'safe spaces' or victim/survivor portals were also recommended, providing a wide range of cultural organisations are able to input into its design and development to ensure it is fully accessible and appropriate for as wide a range of survivors as possible.

More and better support referrals, more specialist (female) police officers, and more police officers from diverse backgrounds were said to be needed

Ensuring all survivors are offered support, and explicitly talked through how to access it, was considered essential in ensuring they are able to cope and recover. Important also was improving officers' knowledge of the culturally appropriate services available in particular areas, so that survivors can receive support appropriate to their language and culture.

Participants felt that more specialist female officers were needed to provide a more empathetic and informed response to women reporting domestic and sexual abuse. There was also a strong sense that a more ethnically diverse police force would deliver a better response to victims and survivors from different backgrounds.

More interpretation services are needed to ensure survivors' voices can be heard in their own languages

Several survivors for whom English is a second language said they had encountered difficulties at various points in their 'journeys' due to language barriers. Survivors also said that interpreters are often refused to some because they speak English, but that *"... because it's not her mother tongue there is a barrier to really truly expressing what she is saying"*. In circumstances such as these, specialist support services say they are having to use their scarce resources for interpreters to help survivors to express themselves in their preferred language, which was considered unacceptable.

Poor experiences with the criminal justice system lead to a reluctance to report future incidents

The repercussions of statutory agencies not serving or supporting survivors sufficiently during the criminal justice process are significant. Perceptions of poor experience not only affect survivors' mental health and decrease their satisfaction with those agencies, but also reduce the likelihood of survivors reporting future incidents and encouraging others to do so.

When asked whether they would be likely to report any incidents in future, some reactions from survivors were: *"I wouldn't" ... 'I feel like they wouldn't believe me' ... 'I understand why women don't report, it shouldn't be that way"*. Those who felt they had been treated well (by the police in particular) said they would be inclined to report in future though – further demonstrating the correlation between positive experiences and likelihood to engage further with the criminal justice system.

In particular, survivors of HBV said that an effective, empathetic and supportive police response was crucially important as many of them have come to the UK with no support network or knowledge of 'how things work' – and whose lives are controlled to such a degree that they are unable to gather that

knowledge. Generally speaking, participating survivors felt they had received this: they were happy they had reported their abuse to the police, feeling a sense of relief and, for some, that their decision to do so had saved their life.

The police were said to need a 'rebrand' to regain the confidence and trust of women and girls

Finally, several survivors in the groups for Black and Asian survivors suggested that the Metropolitan Police need to 'reset and rebrand' to regain the trust of women and girls, particularly in the aftermath of the Sarah Everard and other recent cases. This was thought to be especially important in encouraging trust and confidence among females in minority communities.

In particular, more and better domestic abuse and sexual violence training was advocated for all police officers (and indeed anyone who is likely to encounter such abuse in their work) so they are better able to recognise and understand the nuances of survivors' situations and help them to recognise what is happening to them as abuse, even when they do not see it themselves.

The Consultation Process

Background and commission

The Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime (MOPAC) is headed by the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, who is accountable for the performance of policing in London. The Mayor has developed a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, which is due to be refreshed: this study will help inform this new Strategy. He is also required by law to produce a 'Police and Crime Plan' that explains how the police, community safety partners and other criminal justice agencies will work together to reduce crime. A new Plan is currently being developed, and the findings from this study will be used to inform it.

As part of this process, the Mayor asked the London Victims' Commissioner, Claire Waxman, to hear directly from victims and survivors about their experiences. The Commissioner's role is to identify and examine any issues or barriers facing victims/survivors, work to resolve them, and to help victims/survivors access justice, cope and recover. Her work puts victims' and survivors' voices and experiences at the centre of policy making and this study will ensure that the new strategy reflects their views.

MOPAC asked Opinion Research Services (ORS), an independent research company with significant experience of research with victims and survivors, to undertake focus groups and interviews with female victims/survivors about their views and experiences of reporting a crime or crimes (including any barriers to doing so); how the police and other criminal justice system agencies responded to their report(s); and any support services used.

Qualitative engagement

The Victims' Commissioner's Office undertook extensive consultation with survivors of Violence against Women and Girls while developing the first strategy and during subsequent pieces of work. It was thus decided at the outset that the consultation would seek the views of specific groups of lesser heard survivors: female Black and Asian survivors; survivors of honour-based violence (HBV); survivors of female genital mutilation (FGM); older female survivors; and sex workers. A qualitative methodology (focus groups and interviews) was considered the most appropriate approach in order to gain a deep understanding of the specific issues faced by survivors of particular crimes/abuse.

The Victims' Commissioner's Office engaged with relevant support organisations across London to recruit participants, who were provided with an information sheet, privacy notice and consent form to complete and return either to the support agency or directly to ORS.

The Black and Asian survivors, survivors of HBV and survivors of FGM were invited to attend small and informal focus groups, which were held and attended as overleaf. The groups lasted around two hours and were undertaken by ORS' experienced qualitative research team. Interviewees were assured of complete confidentiality and that they were free to be as open and as honest as they wished insofar as they would not be named in this report. Indeed, names, specific organisations and identifying comments have been removed from the verbatim comments that follow to ensure anonymity.

Focus groups (date and number of attendees)

	Date	Number of Attendees
Black and Asian Survivors (1)	28 th September 2021	5
Black and Asian Survivors (2)	30 th September 2021	4
Black and Asian Survivors (3)	12 th October 2021	3
Survivors of HBV	2 nd November 2021	6 (plus two follow-up interviews)
Survivors of FGM	4 th November 2021	8

Fewer older survivors and sex workers agreed to take part, so discussions were undertaken via individual interviews. Three were undertaken with older survivors and only one with a sex worker (one other sex worker had agreed to take part, but subsequently withdrew from the process).

All groups were undertaken on the online platform Zoom and as standard good practice, and the in-depth interviews either via the telephone or on Zoom/ Microsoft Teams. As standard practice, each participant was recompensed with a £40 e-voucher for giving up their time to take part and to ensure they knew their input was valued.

As an in-depth qualitative evaluation, the intention of this project was to gather the experiences of as broad a range of survivors as possible within a relatively small sample size. As such, the issues reported here, while comprehensive, cannot be certified as statistically representative of the views of survivors of the particular crimes/abuse in question.

Discussion agenda

ORS worked in collaboration with the Victims' Commissioner's office to agree a suitable agenda and informative stimulus material for the in-depth interviews and the focus groups. The agenda was based largely on the quantitative questionnaire and covered the following broad topics: recognising and disclosing crime/abuse; motivations for and experiences of reporting to the Police – and any reasons for/barriers to not reporting; experiences of the rest of the Criminal Justice System and engaging with victim support services; and suggestions as to how victims and survivors could be better supported.

Support and safeguarding

ORS, the Victims' Commissioner and MOPAC were aware that taking part in a group or interview of this nature could potentially be retraumatising and/or triggering for survivors. Therefore, to protect and support them as much as possible, the following measures were put in place:

A family member, friend or support worker was allowed to attend the group/interview in a supportive capacity, either to sit in or provide post-session support (while being clear that they should not contribute unless explicitly asked to);

Participants were offered regular breaks and continually reminded that they did not have to answer any questions they didn't feel comfortable with throughout the interview; and

It was ensured that follow-up, post-interview support was available – either with the participant's support worker or in the form of contact details for relevant support organisations.

The report

This is an independent report of the focus groups and interviews, complete with a short overall summary of the main issues raised. ORS' role is to report participants' experiences and opinions as accurately as we can – without judging them or arbitrating between different points of view – so the chapters that follow detail the outcomes.

The views expressed by participants may or may not be supported by available evidence; that is, they may or may not be fully accurate accounts of the facts. ORS cannot arbitrate on the correctness or otherwise of people's views in reporting them, and this should be borne in mind when considering the findings.

Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of views. ORS does not endorse the opinions in question but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. While quotations are used, the report is obviously not a verbatim transcript of the groups and interviews, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions.

Black and Asian Survivors

Main findings from three focus groups

Introduction

This chapter reports the views from three online focus groups with a total of 12 Black and Asian survivors. The events took place in late September and early October 2021. Survivors had experienced a range of crime types, most frequently domestic abuse, but also rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse and stalking/harassment.

The focus groups were independently facilitated by ORS. Each session had two co-hosts: a main facilitator and a secondary host who was able to observe the session and address any technical issues arising from the online format. All meetings were also observed by the Victims' Commissioner for London and a member of staff from the Commissioner's office.

The meeting format followed a pre-determined topic guide which allowed space for a general discussion of the key questions under discussion. However, participants were encouraged to tell their stories in their own way and in their own time.

Main Findings

Recognising abuse

Domestic abuse in the form of coercive control is particularly hard to recognise

A common issue for those who had experienced domestic abuse (the majority), and coercive control in particular, is that unless they grew up in a similar environment, it can take a significant amount of time to recognise that what they are suffering is abuse. Indeed, this recognition often only happens when the abuse turns physical.

"I had grown up in a domestic abuse environment ... so I'd known what was going on was wrong"

"When the [violent] incident happened ... I started thinking about certain behaviours of his, 'Oh my God, I was literally in an abusive relationship.' ... Moaning when I was going to work, and constantly pestering me about when was I coming home or going through my phone, when there was absolutely no need to. Constantly gaslighting ..."

"For me, it took a bit of time, and I didn't actually realise. Sometimes when you are in a certain situation you don't see it. Put it this way, there was a lot of coercive control and psychological abuse and the penny dropped when he physically injured me ... that's when I started thinking back and things started to make sense"

For some, it is only when an ‘outsider’ offers their view on the situation that the realisation dawns that their circumstances are not “*the norm*”.

“I think it took a bit of time to realise ... What was happening around me for so many years, it felt like the norm ... and it wasn’t until [my neighbour] got involved that she actually made me aware of what was happening. She recommended that I take some counselling, and that is when it actually hit me what was going on”

And others said they only recognised the seriousness and long-term nature of their situation when they either had to call the police due to an escalation of violence, or had matters taken out of their hands by the authorities.

“Reporting to the police was a very big shock, but it made me aware of what was happening to me ...”

“I was a victim of crime a lot further down the line before I realised I was. I experience domestic violence ... I only really realised it when social services tried taking my son ... they were afraid that the abuse could go to him”

It is also worth noting that the unique circumstances of domestic abuse, whereby someone is hurt by someone they love and who they believe loves them, means that even after they have left the situation, some feel regret or find themselves making excuses for the perpetrator for a long time. This, it was said, prolongs their trauma.

“To try and recover from that was really difficult. I still struggle sometimes, not knowing if its right or wrong, not knowing if it should be like that”

“I wanted to secure the family, to secure him and the marriage and everything ... even now it’s sometimes like I’m dreaming ... I ask myself, ‘Was it me?’ ... I was thinking that life was very difficult for us, and I still say that I know that he was struggling ... that is why he was misbehaving and putting us in a very uncomfortable situation”

Other crime types can also be hard to recognise and accept at first

One survivor of stalking and harassment also said they had not fully acknowledged what was happening to them at first, and again that it took a conversation with friends and the escalation of the situation for them to recognise the seriousness of it.

“It took a while to realise ... when I was having conversations with my friends they were saying it wasn’t normal for someone to be sending me pictures of my car in the middle of the afternoon or making reference to clothing that I was wearing on days I hadn’t seen them, or appearing in places miles away from where they lived, and close to my place of residence ... at the time it wasn’t doing anything to harm me. I know it sounds stupid, but so what if this person wants to show up at my place of work? He wasn’t doing anything to me, but when it did start to get closer to home ... that’s when I reported it to the police”

Similarly, sexual abuse, especially at a young age, was said to be difficult to recognise and acknowledge – and something that often remains unidentified in the minds of survivors until adulthood. Furthermore, abuse by someone known to the survivor can also be hard to identify as such, especially if the perpetrator does not fit the survivor’s own definition of an abuser.

“When I was sexually assaulted as a teenager, I didn’t have anybody I could share it with ... I thought it was my fault, that I’d allowed them to do what they did to me. It wasn’t until much later in life as a young adult and being around other people and being exposed to the education side of abuse that I actually recognised it ... ”

“It took time. I have some sort of relationship with all three of them ... so it was easy to have that detachment from the strong word of abuser. An abuser is a monster, and I’m seeing them with all their facets and sides and it’s difficult to recognise ... For me I had a definition in my mind [of what an abuser was] and it didn’t fit that ... ”

Disclosure and reporting

Most survivors who disclosed did so initially to family members or friends

Those who disclosed what was happening to them prior to calling the police did so informally to family members or friends, who encouraged them to formally report the abuse or incident/s.

“I first told my friend, and she was the one that re-emphasised that this was a crime and I need to tell the police”

“When it first happened, I did tell a close friend of mine who was incredibly supportive and encouraged me to report it to the police”

“... [my daughter] called my son ... she didn’t think to call the police. She was that shocked at what had happened ... he had tried to strangle her ... I said you need to come off the phone and call and get this reported to the police straight away. I think it was at that point that it really struck her what had happened ...”

There are, however, many barriers to survivors reporting to the police

Aside from not recognising what they were experiencing as abuse, one of the participants’ main reasons for not wishing to report to the police was fear of the criminal justice system and being unaware of the support that might be available to them to navigate it. Specifically, they worried about the anticipated intrusiveness of the process and the prospect of victim-blaming.

“I didn’t want to report it to the police ... I thought they weren’t really going to offer support because I didn’t really know what kind of support could be given. At the time my concentration was on supporting myself. It seemed that reporting it to the police was more about the crime and getting the person arrested”

“There were quite a few reservations. The first thing was knowing that I’d have to go into deep detail about everything and that wasn’t something I felt comfortable doing. Then, when I did talk to them, it was knowing that there would be things like video tapes. It was just the whole process ... hearing about it put me a lot on edge”

“Absolutely not. No way in hell ... I just felt like it would be intrusive ... that they would ask about me. That was the fear to be honest with you ... Going into my past, even though there was nothing there ... Watching films and having studied law, it’s the questioning of the woman about, ‘Did you lead him on’ and stuff, I think that came to the fore ...”

Several participants also said they were sceptical about how seriously the police would take their report, and whether they would be believed. These views had mainly formed as a result of adverse past dealings with the police.

“There was an incident where I was nearly raped ... and I’d told the police and my mum and none of them believed me. That killed me inside, and I understand why women don’t speak up now ...”

“I lacked trust in any services [when I was younger] and so didn’t report to the police. My faith in services has been restored as an adult ... but as a young person that was made to feel on occasions when I’d run away ... that I was wasting police time, [that] acted as a barrier to go to the police”

Those experiencing domestic abuse said that they and others in their circumstances do not report it to the police for several reasons: not knowing coercive control was a reportable offence; and continued manipulation on the part of the perpetrator (i.e., stating that they will take their own life should their victim file a report).

"I didn't know I could report the coercive control to the police ..."

"It took a really long time to recognise that I actually was experiencing domestic abuse ... it wasn't until a serious physical attack and my daughter witnessing the incident. I didn't realise until that point and even after that I didn't report to the police because he said he was going to take his own life"

"He would do something wrong and then come back with a big gesture or manipulate me into staying with him and giving him another chance ... At the time ... I believed it and in my head it was, 'I can't have that on my conscience if he does anything to himself'. It was all part of it, but I didn't see it until after"

There were said to be some cultural barriers to reporting. For example, Asian survivors explained that they had remained within abusive marriages for fear of being stigmatised within their families and communities, and a Black survivor said they were raised to never discuss family issues outside the domestic environment.

"The main reason I did stick it out for so long is because in my culture being a single mother is frowned upon ..."

"... I married outside of the culture and ... I anticipated that if I said, 'This isn't working' that there was then going to be stigma, not just cultural but religious stigma as well. In fact, I did get told, 'You chose to marry him, so you go back and make it work' ... I tried to forget about him [but] my mother was putting a lot of pressure on me emotionally about how I was going to survive and there was also the emotional blackmail of, 'Your father's going to die if he finds out' ..."

"In the black community ... you are raised in a certain way, and you don't talk about your business outside of the home. These are family issues and there's that fear that you are going to unsettle the family and it will be divided from you sharing the information ..."

Furthermore, one Asian survivor of domestic abuse explained in the lengthy quotation overleaf that not only were they ashamed to admit that they were under coercive control due to their outward appearance of success (and, of course, because the coercive control had the desired effect of cutting them off from friends and family and making them believe they were inferior), but also because their cultural upbringing had resulted in a deep mistrust of authority.

“It’s a really complicated question because there are so many layers, and the reality is that I was somebody who was confident. I did all the things I was supposed to. I went to school; I went to university and had a great job ... I thought I understood what abuse was ... when somebody hit you and beat you up ... I was ashamed because I saw myself as somebody who was successful, who was confident, was capable, was financially independent, and I found myself from that to being in a position where I wasn’t allowed to work. I was controlled and out of contact with friends and I was slowly being cut off. I was constantly walking on eggshells and pleasing this man and bowing down to him. Nothing I ever did was good enough. I was being told that I was stupid and ugly and all of these things ... and I started to believe them. I truly believed that I was the problem and that it was me and so I spent a lot of time trying to please him ...

... I’d never had any encounters with the law and was somewhat frightened of being entangled or involved in anything with the police or even social services ... Culturally I am south east Asian, and we were raised in an environment that ... you feel that you don’t trust social services because they could essentially make errors that won’t go in your favour and mess things up for you. Because of that I didn’t speak out to authority”

A wider and better understanding of how abuse is viewed and managed within different cultures was thus thought to be essential in understanding and overcoming the reluctance to report.

“So, it’s understanding how culturally we interpret abuse and how we fear our relationships breaking down as a result of that”

Moreover, it was said that there is a great deal of multi-generational mistrust of the police within some communities, which can be a significant barrier to reaching out to them.

“In the past I have worked on issues relating to policing and disproportionality ... There was a lot of distrust and a lot of it is intergenerational and what you hear from parents and ... friends. ‘What’s the point of the police? They are not a service for us’”

“I have two [young] daughters ... and a couple of weeks ago we were strolling around ... and my eldest was like, ‘The police are bad’ ... I know I was not passing that onto my kids, and I can’t ever remember having a conversation with them about the police, but when my six-year-old said that I corrected her immediately, again so I can foster that trust from being young ... but I was really curious where would they have got this from ... it’s never come from me ... It must be cultural”

The following quotation encapsulates the views of many of the participating survivors, who spoke of mistrust, a fear of inaction and being believed, and a potential lack of cultural awareness and understanding on the part of those assigned to their cases.

“I was thinking about what it took for me to reach out to the police. It was not an instantaneous decision. I really had to think, ‘Are they going to do anything? Are they going to believe me? Should I trust them?’, and it really shouldn’t be like that. They should be the first people you go to and call when you ... are in danger, but thinking, ‘Who is it I’m going to be dealt with? If it will be a man, would he really understand what I am going through? Is it someone who is going to look like me, sounds like me, comes from somewhere like me?’ Possibly not ... Even for someone like me who, having gone to the police and put my trust in them, what happens next time? Who do I go to then? I don’t know”

For some survivors, reporting to the police was a positive experience

One survivor commended a police officer for the sensitivity with which they treated them while responding to their report. They felt they would always remember the kindness shown and how it made them feel at the time.

“There was two police officers that came to my house initially. I remember the one ... he told me ... ‘Don’t worry, you haven’t done anything wrong. Well done for reporting this.’ I still remember that. There were lots of emotions and I was wondering maybe I did this to myself. I remember that discussion with the police officer, he had a sense of sensitivity toward me ...”

Another was grateful for the simple act of receiving a swift response to their call for help, something they said was not guaranteed, or even expected, in their native country.

“I think for me, something as basic as ... I called and they came. Especially for me coming from Jamaica and the other violence I’d experienced; I’d never had interaction with the police”

However, most experiences of reporting were poor

Most experiences of reporting a crime or abuse to the police were said to be poor, however. Survivors mainly complained of the following issues, with some typical comments illustrating them below:

Lengthy waits for a response or to speak to an officer (even in an emergency situation);

Receiving no explanations of the process and what might happen next;

The unexpected and retraumatising intrusiveness of the questioning;

Not feeling believed or having their experiences and feelings minimised;

A lack of support and empathy;

Officers not looking beyond the surface of an incident (to identify coercive control for example); and

The discomfort of having to report to a male officer.

“I went to my local police station ... I sat there for the best part of five hours. It was just ridiculous, and when I got to the counter to speak to the officer, it was just a constant feeling of not being believed ...”

“It was a horrendous experience. Imagine you have a [young child] dialling 999 ... and the police are not taking it seriously and they don’t turn up [for hours] ... I got these two useless police officers that came; one didn’t care and the other one kept messing up my statement. Literally no empathy whatsoever. They didn’t take any photographs of my injuries, nothing ...”

“... Being at the police station and no-one explaining what the process was and what was going to happen ... To have such anxiety and to feel that I wasn’t in a safe place ... it felt uncomfortable”

“I think in my case ... I felt it was minimalised ... They didn’t see me or see my pain ...or understand [the control] ... I felt that the police didn’t see this”

“... at the station I go into a room with an officer and he’s talking really fast and I can’t really understand his accent. He’s telling me what the process is, and he begins to start asking me questions. I give half-hearted answers and he says, ‘you’re going to have to tell us everything’. At that moment it felt like I was being ripped open. When you’re in this process you expect people to put two and two together. I guess I wasn’t really aware of that; I wasn’t told it could be invasive and you relive your trauma ... This re-emphasises why I didn’t want to report to the police in the first place. I didn’t want to go through the process of feeling intruded upon”

“There were three of them that came when I initially reported it and I didn’t get any emotional or practical support from any of them. They just did their bit and then off they went. I then got a fourth police officer when I went to the police station and gave an add on to a statement; he just also did his job and got on with it. It was gone ten at night and I had a new-born and was penniless. I didn’t know where I was going and there was no, ‘How are you getting home and will you be ok?’”

“There was an incident ... where a neighbour called the police. When the police came, they ... did not pick up that I was scared. I tried to downplay the incident, because that was the first time in my life I’d come face-to-face with any officers ... I didn’t feel safe or comfortable. There were these two intimidating men who basically were just doing their job, but it didn’t seem like they really cared to find out what was really going on ...”

“... They didn’t really ask me any questions. They didn’t ask me about abuse. The investigating officer concluded that there was no coercion and control. I didn’t actually know what coercion and control was until I lived in the refuge, and three months later someone mentioned it and were talking about what they had lived through, and I thought, ‘Oh that’s what I lived through’”

“Because the officer was male, that was the most uncomfortable thing I could go through, to sit and share the violence that happened to me ...”

Participants also suggested that culture and environment can influence the response, actions, and attitudes of police officers, as the following quotation demonstrates. One survivor told of making a report while living on an estate *“where there’s a majority of black people”* and was certainly of the view that the environment had impacted on the way they were viewed and treated.

“... Sometimes there’s a certain perception of lifestyle on that estate, and I felt that [the officer] treated us like we didn’t matter, and the environment that we were in played a part. Within that environment was black poor lifestyle. I felt like we were treated like nothing”

Another participant (attending on behalf of her daughter) said they continually wonder whether the slow response to her daughter’s report was as a result of racial bias. They acknowledged that they are speculating, without any evidence that this was the case, but the mere fact that they think this way highlights the perception issue that the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) faces within Black communities.

“... we got a call to say that my daughter had been assaulted ... We live [hours away] and were able to get to my daughter before the Met police ... I question if they could hear from the diction or tone of her voice that, ‘Oh this is a black girl’ ... If she was a white female would their response have been different? ... It sounds really paranoid, but these are questions I ask myself constantly ...”

One survivor recounted her *“horrible”* experience of feeling placed under undue pressure by the police to take further action following a report of honour-based abuse. She made the report only to have the abuse formally recorded, and without the intention of taking it any further, only to be told that her parents would be arrested. It was only after mentioning honour-based abuse that the officer de-escalated the situation, but the survivor felt that the police should have been alert to the possibility of this from the outset and sensitive to the implications of arresting the parents.

“My whole experience of reporting to the police is something that I’m not going to forget because it wasn’t what I was expecting. To go on report against your parents, coming from an Asian background, it’s a very sensitive situation ... it was an absolutely horrible experience [and] if I knew that was going to be the reaction from the police, I don’t think I would have reported it ... So, I think with myself it wasn’t so much around being believed. I felt it was more that they wanted to do something about it. I felt like they wanted to take action without listening ...”

“... I think with a lot of women, when they go to report something, they shouldn’t have to mention something like honour-based violence just for the police officer to stop and think. They should consider it with anyone who walks in who’s a victim. They should research a bit more about other cultures to see what can be dangerous”

Moreover, a few accounts from domestic abuse survivors demonstrate the difficult and dangerous position they find themselves in when they report to the police, but no action is taken as a result. This is especially problematic if they do not have settled status or even a visa, as they usually have nowhere else to go.

“It caused more damage than everything else. At the time it made me feel like I’d completely lost faith. I’d used my back up card and got nothing from it. It also gave [the perpetrator] more power because they knew the police wouldn’t do anything about it. The violence continued ... What was the point?”

“I was having headaches from the stress ... so I called the GP for advice, and they referred me to social services [who] called me and started an investigation ... and it was after then that the police came because ... they had been told [my husband was having sex with me] against my consent ... they said forcing me into a situation without my consent is rape ... They came in to arrest him and I refused ... it would have been [a disaster] for me if I had called the police to arrest him for rape ... because I was still [under] this man’s roof ... I called the police because I was afraid, [hoping they would] get him somewhere else, and it didn’t work because he said he had nowhere to go ... I still lived with him until my visa application went through ... before then, because my visa application was not granted, it was like no help was coming from anywhere”

A couple of survivors suggested that the youthfulness of the attending officers was detrimental to their understanding of the nuances of their incidents. Indeed, one said that only when encountering older, more experienced officers did they feel properly cared for and confident in their understanding of the situation.

“In terms of my daughter’s experience, in terms of the officers who came out ... they were really young officers and I just think that sometimes there’s a lack of life experience and relatability ... that real understanding of, ‘there’s more to this that needs to be explored and investigated’”

“I had a lady who was [older], and it was her first day as a police officer. This lady felt to me that she was a person who cared. Her accompanying officer seemed like he was far more experienced, and they treated me like a human being. They took their time, and they didn’t rush, and they were there for almost three hours. I felt like, out of the whole experience, that was the only time that ... there was anyone who seriously cared and took any interest in me as an individual ...”

Making a statement

Making a statement was a traumatic experience

While explanations were given for why it was necessary, survivors described the process of giving evidence by video as “difficult”, “uncomfortable” and “isolating”. There was also a sense that some officers were not fully cognisant of the impact of trauma on memory, expecting survivors to have perfect recall of events.

“That was very difficult ... knowing there’s a camera in the room made it very uncomfortable. You always think at the back of your mind, ‘who’s going to see this?’”

“Having to go into detail about specifics, that was really uncomfortable. I had to go into really intimate details about what actually happened. When I did it, there was a female officer in the room and then a male officer at the back that was watching the video. That was really uncomfortable too. If he had questions he wanted to ask he would call or contact her. The whole thing felt kind of isolating”

“The fear and everything I went through, I’m not going to remember all the details, do you know what I mean?”

One survivor said she was pressured into making a statement at home and continued to be even after she told the Officer in Charge that this would be impossible as she was living with her family. Moreover, when it was agreed that she could give her statement at the police station, she was made to feel like an inconvenience and there was little attempt to find a mutually convenient day and time. This led her to consider withdrawing from the process several times.

“An issue I had about making a statement [was] the officers wanting to visit my home address. At the time I was living with family and the police were persistent. Even when I said I would come into the station, felt like I was an inconvenience. It was more about what time and day worked for him and not me ... I kept reiterating that that wouldn’t work for me and that I was happy to come into the station, but ... we couldn’t even agree on a date and time ... It always felt like I could have just given in at the time and been like, ‘Oh, you know what? Forget about it! I don’t want to do this’. In the end I remember having to go to the station one evening, late and again feeling like I was once again inconveniencing the officer and having to thank him and everything, but in retrospect it should have been when it was mutually beneficial ...”

The investigation

Good communication during investigations is essential, but often said to be lacking

The most common issue raised in relation to police investigations was apparently infrequent and poor communication. Specific complaints were around officers demonstrating a lack of compassion or empathy and taking lengthy or frequent periods of annual leave without arranging for someone else to provide updates. This angered one survivor so much that they dropped their case.

“I wasn’t communicated to after giving my report. I think even if there was an officer calling every week/every other week I would have felt like something was happening. I felt like I was coming from a vulnerable place, and nothing was being done. I think if someone would have contacted me at the time with an update, that would have encouraged me to carry on with the process. When they hadn’t contacted me for a few weeks because someone was on holiday, it really triggered me ... It’s like, ‘You must take me for a fool. You must not see how traumatic it was for me to report’. It’s like my case is not important; they had to go on holiday first. To me, it’s like, ‘If you guys can’t take this case as important, I’m not going to keep putting myself in an uncomfortable situation’ ... so I went straight to the station and dropped the case. They should ensure that whatever part they’re playing, they let victims know”

“I just felt like there was no compassion or empathy. They didn’t want to understand your point of view. I understand they’re trying to do their job and collect evidence but it’s not always black and white. I feel like they could try harder”

“... the police were called, and that report wasn’t taken seriously ... [My husband] then had numerous people indirectly contacting me ... I told the police officer who completely ignored me from January until April using up his annual leave ... He would ignore me, and I would also cc his sergeant into the email, and would call them over and over and no-one would respond to me ... The whole way through, the police have done a really lazy job, no follow up ...”

“... A serious incident is still going through the system [and] the follow-up of my daughter from then until now has been horrific ... Aftercare has been poor; on occasions my daughter may get an email from them, but it’s all pretty much going through the motions. It’s not a case of any real empathy or any real care ...”

Another survivor highlighted a lack of communication following their suspect’s court appearance. They were not informed of the outcome for 24 hours, during which time they feared for their safety.

“... When he was arrested, he was remanded in custody to appear in court the next day, and I think it was the day after that I finally found out what the actual outcome in court was. Instead of someone getting back to me straight away and telling me, I was literally a bag of nerves with 24 hours of not knowing what had happened ... is he out? Is he not? Has he got conditions?”

Survivors can accept an unfavourable outcome if they feel all evidence has been considered, but are highly critical of the police if they feel it has not

Several participants spoke of their evidence being ignored by investigating officers, with one domestic abuse survivor even claiming that their partner was able to charm the officers to the extent that they discarded recorded footage of his physical violence towards her.

“I was desperate for the investigating officer to take me seriously and I said, ‘I have so much evidence that you’ve not collated, and I give you this because I think it’s really valuable for you to look at’. He pooh poohed me. He ignored me and he didn’t respond to my emails ...”

“... the last incident ... where he physically hurt me ... and he threatened to kill me, and everybody in the property and himself ... I had an audio recording, because nobody would believe me ... and I had another recording of another incident ... I told the police about all of this ... they started off professionally and towards the end they were practically high fiving the guy because he was able to befriend the officers and charm them”

What was clear from all the discussions was that if survivors feel that any evidence has been ignored or that insufficient effort has gone into finding it, their satisfaction levels with the police will plummet. This suggests that the outcome of a case is less important than being reassured that everything possible was done with the available evidence.

Having their mobile phone data accessed is traumatic for survivors

Having their mobile phone taken for evidence collection was particularly troubling for survivors, especially if they had not been warned in advance that this would happen or had not been told why it was necessary. Essentially, it was viewed as an often-unnecessary invasion of privacy, and proof that the police had not believed their version of events.

“When my phone was taken, I felt that what I had stated wasn’t enough; that they had to go back and look at messages ... I felt quite annoyed that I had gone through the vulnerable process of going down to my underwear, discussing what was I wearing. I’ve gone through all of these things and my phone’s still taken ...”

“They took her phone and went through her phone forensically. What they were looking for only God knows. This person was not known to my daughter”

The court process

The prospect of going to court is frightening for survivors

The participant attending on behalf of her daughter described how her daughter had been through the court process a few years previously and had received excellent support and communication from the Witness Care Unit. The pre-trial courtroom visit and special measures she received were especially helpful.

“The first incident did go to court and the perpetrator was convicted. The liaison from the female police officer was fantastic, and my daughter was kept in the loop throughout the whole experience ... We had the opportunity to visit a court ... Her brief was a female, and she was very good and very supportive ... My daughter is very nervous, but she was kept behind a screen ...”

However, the participant’s daughter is due to attend court for a separate offence in early 2022, and she is “dreading” it for fear of having to relive the details of the incident. This time, the support offered was said to have been poor.

“I think this court case ... is going to be the one that emotionally, and from a mental health point of view ... could go either way for her ... This was a complete stranger to my daughter ... [who] took it upon himself to violate her in the worst way possible, and she is really dreading to go to court to relive all that. The support from the police has been mediocre ...”

Moreover, by the time the case is heard in court, it will have been two years since the incident happened, and the participant is worried that her daughter will withdraw from the process as she is beginning to ‘get her life back’ and is reluctant to set herself back by reliving her trauma.

“I’m not surprised that a lot of victims of rape and sexual assault say that they don’t want to go through with it because they have moved on since then: ‘I don’t want to relive it. I am trying to get my life back together’. That’s how my daughter was sounding, so there was an element of panic on my part thinking that come next year she’s not going to go through with this and is not going to speak about it ...”

Similarly, another survivor's case is due to be heard in court in the new year, and she admitted to feeling "petrified" at the thought of it, not least as she has allegedly not been allowed to re-read her initial statement (which she fears may contain some inconsistencies as she was in a "daze" when she gave it). A lack of support from any quarter apparently compounds the survivor's fears.

"... Because I don't have access to my first statement, I don't know what's going to happen at the trial. I might be ripped to shreds and be accused of making the whole thing up ... I feel like there are going to be so many discrepancies in my statement and I literally feel like I am going to be thrown to the wolves on the witness stand. I'm petrified to go to court ... and the way it's coming across to me is that basically, if I fold and decide not to turn up in court, they are telling me that I could be arrested ... what if I find on the day I can't go through with it? I don't feel ready at all. I feel like as it's coming closer and closer, I am getting more and more scared ... It doesn't help when someone is already feeling scared and not getting the right support"

One survivor's case had been heard virtually during the pandemic (in both criminal and family courts): the survivor described experiencing re-traumatisation while watching the suspect on the screen and criticised the authorities for not recognising the potential for this.

"At court, because it was virtual due to the pandemic, I had to look at my ex while he was sat there in a real intimidating fashion [on] a huge screen ... I could see him looking at me and that was terrifying. When we got to Family Court, I was assured that there would be privacy screens ... but he decided not to show up to the background hearing. Because he didn't show up, I was sat there in the dock being cross-examined and the TV screen where he was virtual, was directly opposite me. The past abuse that I lived through wasn't always physical ... a lot of it was ... just the way he would look at me ... He was there on a [huge] screen ... I was triggered for a number of weeks ... Just the sight of him terrifies me, and the fact the judge didn't think there was anything wrong with that, and that they didn't consider that ..."

Furthermore, the attitude of the judge allegedly demonstrated a lack of knowledge of both domestic abuse in general, and of the religious and cultural implications of making the decision to leave within south-east Asian communities. They made the survivor feel disbelieved, which left them "more traumatised" than anything that came before.

"When I went to the criminal court this year ... the judge asked me why I didn't simply leave ... Questioned my motives in documenting evidence ... I wasn't taken seriously ... have been treated as a liar, and that has retraumatised me dramatically ... I tried to explain to him the religious and cultural stigma and he clearly did not understand. I was shocked that he was sitting at a court in a geographical location where the vast majority of inhabitants are southeast Asian ... it seemed that he definitely lacked an understanding of what domestic violence is and didn't have any cultural sensitivity ..."

... it felt so wrong that that has left me more traumatised than everything else. I know I will spend the rest of my life recovering from the trauma, from the physical abuse, and all the emotional abuse, and not feeling believed even with so much evidence submitted. That to me is shocking and I don't know how to come to terms with that"

The survivor did, though, positively acknowledge the service received from the Witness Service at the Family Court in informing her of the pre-court support available, and for simply treating her with respect.

"I didn't have anyone ... like an IDVA to do like a walkthrough of the court or anything like that. However, the Witness Liaison lady was amazing. She pushed to get me in touch with someone to simply get me into the court to familiarise myself with which way I would come in and where I would be sitting and things like that. That was the only person who really, for me, provided a service where she treated me as a human being and treated me with respect"

Making a complaint

Responses to survivors' complaints have typically been poor

A few survivors had made official complaints about certain aspects of their cases to the police and had not received satisfactory responses. The main reported issues were around the length of time taken to respond to the complaint, and a lack of ownership of poor performance.

"I put in an official complaint to the Met about how long it took to get to me and how it was handled when they were there ... how my statement was taken ... Their response to the complaint was laughable ... All I got was a phone call about four weeks later from the police officer who attended the call and he just said sorry and tried to give a load of half-arsed excuses ..."

Furthermore, on contacting Victim Support and mentioning her intention to complain, one survivor (of stalking/harassment) said she was actively discouraged from doing so on the grounds that nothing would come of it.

"I was contacted by some sort of Victim Support service that the Met had referred me to, and it wasn't a great experience. I was angered at the time ... and I wanted to make a complaint, and had explained to this person that I was thinking of [doing so] and she was like, 'Why are you investing any more into the system?' I thought that she would encourage me, but she did the complete opposite and put me off. She said, 'There are women who have died at the hands of their stalkers and their families are still seeking justice for them. Why do you think your case would go any further?' and I was like, 'You know what? You are actually right'"

Accessing support

Few survivors had been (or could recall having been) referred to a support service by the police

Few participants could recall being given information about available support by the police, stating that it was something they had been forced to seek out themselves.

“A lot of us got it ourselves. We went asking for it, we didn’t get referred”

Even those who did remember a referral did not consider it especially effective, for giving victims of crime a leaflet or card at a moment of high emotional trauma is not conducive to them processing its importance, and subsequently following up the support offer.

“They may give it to victims However, in that emotional moment, the victim may not process and throw it away ... it’s not raised to victims’ attention that it’s got valuable contact details ... it’s not been done in a correct way”

“I didn’t know about any support services when I reached out ... I didn’t know who to call or anything like that, and so after I fled the police said there was a number on the back of the incident thing they had gave me ... but I wasn’t in the right headspace to take it in ...”

Furthermore, the generic nature of the support on offer (from Victim Support) was not attractive to one survivor, who also said they did not wish to associate themselves with anything accessed via the police as a result of their lack of confidence and disillusionment with them.

“When I got back the letter, something didn’t gravitate toward me. It was generic. I also wasn’t confident in the police, so when they referred me, I didn’t want to be associated with it. Anything they suggested, I threw it in the bin because I didn’t want to be associated with it ...”

The support accessed by survivors has been essential to their recovery, but some have had to wait long periods for it

Participating survivors have variously accessed support from the Aanchal, Asian Women's Refuge, The Lioness Circle, Refuge and Solace. Some have also received counselling via their university or workplace.

There was general agreement that the support received has been crucial to survivors’ being able to cope and recover from their experiences, and also begin to help others do so. Specialist counselling (especially that offered by survivors themselves), peer support, creative therapy and practical assistance were said to have been especially helpful. Some typical comments are below.

“You think you don’t need support; you’ve got friends and family. But it’s completely different when you’ve got a councillor. It takes you in the right direction. You go on your own self-healing journey. It’s led me down a path that I’m happy going down ... I don’t know what I’d do without my ladies. We all support each other. The network is powerful. When you’ve got people telling their stories, its empowering”

“What I have learned is that only people who have lived through it or have been touched by domestic violence just get it and understand it. It’s like there is a look in someone’s eye and you don’t feel like you need to explain yourself. There is a difference when someone doesn’t get it and you feel like, ‘They think I’m lying, and I need to prove to them that I’m not’”

“One of the most helpful things was the compassion from my therapist and her level of knowledge and understanding. I didn’t have to explain certain things because she understood. I did struggle with race and culture because she didn’t look like me, so I thought she wouldn’t understand certain things. Somehow, she managed to understand and get through to me ... I felt the impact of her support”

“When I was given therapy, it wasn’t for sexual assault, and it didn’t help me. When I went to someone that was dealing with sexual assault, it changed everything”

“I’m glad that I found myself in a refuge ... it’s an unfortunate situation but they also helped me. I appreciate their services so much ... I went through counselling - 12-weekly sessions on abuse - and that started to build some confidence in me while creating that awareness in me”

“I think it’s made me a stronger person ... I’m able to support other victims. Things I looked for myself and couldn’t get, I’m able to give them. Having someone there to listen to me and make me realise I’m not the only one. That’s what really helped”

“When I left the refuge, I was thankfully put in touch with Refuge the charity, and they were amazing ... for emotional and practical support. They were able to obtain the property I am in now and it’s not fantastic, but it’s home and it fits the basic criteria that I needed at the time. So, that person did amazingly and the support I got from Refuge the charity was wonderful. I then was put in touch with Aanchal and ... I have found for the first time in all of this, a place where I belong. I’ve felt like through this whole experience that I have been on the outskirts, and I feel like I’m in some sort of hole and I’m not a normal person anymore. It was through engaging with other people and talking about their lived experiences that I feel like I’m not completely isolated and I’m not completely alone ...”

“It ... was also creative therapy and types of Yoga, which was really helpful if I didn’t want to talk. Being able to access creative therapy helped a lot”

“I had never used the benefit system before. I had always worked and didn’t know how to do any of the paperwork. I didn’t even know what I would be entitled to. So, it was really that ... someone had done the housing benefit for me and applied for child benefit for me and ... they took me to the job centre so that I could apply for universal credit and get an option to have an advance ... the practical paperwork – there was definitely support for that”

Moreover, the importance of support in understanding the reasons for past experiences and so breaking the cycle of abuse was highlighted by one survivor as below.

“... social services put me on the Freedom Programme ... Within those groups you learn about sexual and domestic violence over the years, abuse and mental trauma from parents and other family members. I gathered that the reason I went down the path I did was because I suffered years before that ... I was sexually abused a lot throughout my younger years ... They started to teach me about the influence of alcohol and drugs and ability to consent to sex ... they fed me drugs and drink, and they would get their way. To me, because I was partially aware, I thought it was my fault ... Eventually, I realised I was taken advantage of, a lot”

There were, though, some complaints of long waiting times for services, as well as time-limited support in the form of receiving a limited number of sessions. As such, more and longer specialist support was considered crucial to ensure that as many survivors as possible are able to access the right support at the right time.

“The waiting process was really long ... my counselling was specialist for sexual assault so there was a waiting list”

“You’re given X amount of sessions. You can always re-refer yourself but it’s a long process. It’s not easy to get specialist type of therapy”

“One of the things I’m keen to see is more specialist support for sexual abuse survivors. Once you’ve experienced sexual abuse, especially penetration, it can affect how you feel sexually, your perception of sex itself. How you feel about yourself and the person involved. There’s so much to it that can impact the victim identity. That’s what I’d love to see more of ...”

In relation to timing, it was considered crucial that survivors know that they can access support when they will most benefit from it, and that this may not necessarily be when they expect to need it. For example, one survivor had attended therapy for abuse while they were at *“breaking point”*, which was the wrong time for them as they kept having panic attacks and found it extremely hard to *“stay grounded”*. Support accessed some time after the abuse was thus much more effective in identifying ways to cope and recover.

“Can we do something about messaging with regards to when women are accessing support; that’s it’s absolutely ok for them if they don’t want that support right then, that the door is open?”

“... When I accessed [therapy] through my employer, it wasn’t necessarily for my abuse. We thought it was employment issues I was finding difficult to manage but it all linked back to my trauma. I was then in a better place where I was able to explore events that had happened and how they impacted me”

Improvements were also suggested to the support offered by GPs, who were accused of ‘gatekeeping’ access to therapy services and expecting survivors to relate their experiences over and over again.

“... I went into the GP, and they said I wasn’t a priority [for therapy]. I felt my story was minimalised”

“Another thing with the GP is that you don’t want to keep repeating everything that’s happened. You expect them to have the knowledge and information already. It doesn’t work like that. They didn’t have half of my file. That was horrendous”

Finally in terms of support, one survivor desired more help for domestic abuse survivors in seeking a divorce, and another suggested that an information pack be given to all female school and/or university leavers on the types of abuse they might encounter in the workplace or in relationships, be it sexual, physical, or psychological.

“... trying to get a divorce as a survivor of domestic violence is horrific because there are no solicitors who want to touch a legally-aided case ... I wish I had been able to plan things differently. Perhaps if I had had support; if I’d had some sort of legal advice beforehand to help me in preparing, that would have been helpful”

“... maybe it’s something they can have ready for work to help them recognise the types of abuses that can happen within different spaces ... Maybe the top ten red flags to look for if your relationship is this way, or if a particular colleague is behaving in this way ...”

Improving the victim/survivor experience of the criminal justice system

More frequent and better communication from the police is essential to ensure survivors feel informed and cared for

As reported earlier, some survivors received no or very little communication while their case was ongoing, whereas for others it was irregular and/or inaccurate. Participants reasoned that even in the absence of specific updates, the police should make the effort to undertake regular ‘welfare checks’ and reassure survivors that their cases are still being investigated.

“They need to listen and let us know that we’ve been heard. They also need to let us know about the case and educate us about what’s happening to us”

“Officers should follow up afterwards and check in to see if everything’s ok. Where I’ve heard people have this, it sounds quite profound. We know it can take some time to identify our trauma and know what our needs are”

“Respect the victims of crime and communication and keeping victims of crime in the loop and not just ticking the box. Not feeling like it’s something you have to do. With my daughter it’s guaranteed that they will be in contact every few weeks and true to form, it’s almost a cut and paste text message half the time with no personality or humanity behind it ... It’s that lack of respect in ... seeing her as a victim of crime who is deserving of personality ... It’s just cut and paste with a few changed words here and there”

Clarity and transparency were also considered essential in managing victim/survivor expectations and mitigating any disappointment arising from unrealistic hopes.

“Clarity and transparency from the outset. What charge is the officer hoping to secure? What are the lines of enquiry? Statutory time limits etc. Not to be shut out basically. There’s a disconnect between what’s supposed to happen and what actually does”

Advocates could be based at police stations to support victims/survivors

Police station-based advocates could, it was felt, be helpful in supporting victims to make reports and give statements, signposting them toward available support, and generally aiding their understanding of what to expect as they journey through the criminal justice system.

“I think maybe having an advocate or something like that ... someone in the station who’s informed and can help you in the process ... This would make us feel more comfortable”

“The investigating officer; we’d only spoken on the phone until meeting him at court in March. There was no follow-up, no support for me, you know, ‘What support are you getting?’ None of that. If there was something in place for, ‘There’s this charity and this is what they do. There’s this specialist, and this is where you can get some emotional support’ ... even like a buddy system where someone who can guide you through the support that is emotional and practical, and the support to advocate for you as well, because this has been such a wild rollercoaster”

“... there may be things the advocate picks up on that you or the police might not pick up on ... there’s emotional trauma that is not going to let you think clearly. If there was someone there that was an outsider that could analyse the situation better ...”

‘Safe spaces’ that offer information, advice and opportunities for survivors to discuss their experiences and options would be beneficial

The provision of ‘safe spaces’ that not only offer information and advice, but also opportunities for survivors to discuss their experiences and options prior to reporting formally, was suggested by a couple of survivors, and welcomed by all. Such provision would, it was felt, be especially important for those seeking to verify that what they are experiencing is abuse (those under coercive control for example).

“At one point I literally thought I was losing my mind ... he literally made me think I was going crazy ... so yes, if I had access to somewhere to recognise that myself. Even when I was going to the therapist, she didn’t actually help me in recognising what was going on. It was just like a space for me to let off steam. There was never talk about domestic abuse or coercive control, or psychological abuse or anything like that ...”

“My awareness has been raised by finding spaces that have been able to support and educate me. If there is a way where we could elevate that process, like a bridge between reporting and experiencing the harm, I think that would be massively helpful. Women generally get support from an IDVA once it’s gone through the process, but I think that if there’s a safe space that they could go to and speak confidentially and feel supported and have help through that process, before it gets to that stage; or just to double check if what they have experienced could be confirmed as abuse. As we know, coercive control is a very unseen type of abuse ... and there needs to be getting more awareness round that. Having open conversations somewhere where they feel safe would be massively impactful”

Furthermore, one survivor had met her abuser online, and for cultural reasons was unable to discuss her experiences with her family – which she would ordinarily do. She would thus have valued a safe space where she could talk about what had happened free from judgement.

“For me one of the most difficult things was talking about it ... Because I’d met this person online, culturally I couldn’t have that discussion with my mum. I couldn’t quite explain it to her because I’d met this person through an online dating app ... I had to hide a lot of what was happening to me at the time. [A safe space] would’ve been helpful. It is somewhat humiliating to disclose that to people and having that fear of judgement eliminated would be helpful”

Online as well as in-person 'safe spaces' or victim/survivor portals were also recommended, providing a wide range of cultural organisations are able to input into its design and development to ensure it is fully accessible and appropriate for as wide a range of survivors as possible.

"... getting people together and behind a portal would be massively helpful in ensuring that it is utilised ... you might find that one cultural space would maybe be able to change the language of it because you want to make it accessible and some people may want to create some videos or something around using a tool like that so I think that reaching out to localised services and community spaces and just getting them behind it would be a good direction to go down and to consider"

Specific support is required for those fleeing domestic abuse

Formalised systematic support was thought to be required for those leaving a domestic abuse situation, the importance of which is highlighted by the experiences of the second survivor quoted below.

"There needs to be a system created, maybe a 12-month plan of what happens after domestic abuse ... There needs to be a systematic programme in place where there is handover, and these people understand and are educated ..."

"... I didn't have any support network. I was terrified; I didn't know what I was doing. They simply said, 'Go to the homeless [office] and call the Domestic Helpline' ... I ended up in a mixed sex hostel with a new-born ... there were men who were approaching me and making sexual comments. I had to leave my new-born daughter in my room ... I returned to the [homeless] office the next day and tried to explain to them that this was not a safe environment for me and my daughter and I was seen as being hoity-toity and that I was being demanding of the environment I was in ..."

More and better support referrals, more specialist (female) police officers, and more police officers from diverse backgrounds are needed

Ensuring all survivors are offered support, and explicitly talked through how to access it, was considered essential in ensuring they are able to cope and recover. Important also is improving officers' knowledge of the culturally appropriate services available in particular areas, so that survivors can receive support from someone who understands their language and culture.

"They need to inform us where we can get support. They should take victims through the process of informing then and letting them know where to find support"

"You're going through so much. The pressure on you to get help when you're suffering, you don't want to talk, never mind go find it yourself"

“Referring people to specialist organisations, not just generic. Just for them to feel understood in their own language or someone that understands culture”

More specialist female officers were also thought to be needed to provide a more empathetic and informed response to women reporting domestic and sexual abuse – and there was a strong sense that more ethnic diversity among police officers would ensure a better response to victims and survivors from different backgrounds

“What would have helped me initially is if I had had a female police officer attend, because the two guys who came, it’s almost like they didn’t care. And having two male officers after going through a domestic incident with a man wasn’t great ... There was just no empathy there whatsoever. They just wanted to take my statement and go”

“She was a young officer and was an Asian female and maybe had an element of empathy ... She definitely had a personal touch when she spoke to my daughter and was very polite to me ... [she] was absolutely fantastic from start to finish and was almost apologetic for her colleagues about how slack their behaviour was ...”

More interpretation services are needed to ensure survivors’ voices can be heard in their own languages

One survivor was unable to attend any of the sessions but requested that her thoughts on the need for more interpretation services for survivors be included in these findings. She said that interpreters are often refused for those who speak English, but that:

“... because it’s not her mother tongue there is a barrier to really truly expressing what she is saying”

In circumstances such as these, specialist support services say they are having to use their scarce resources for interpreters to help survivors to express themselves in their preferred language, which was considered unacceptable.

“... services like mine shouldn’t be filling that gap ... I shouldn’t be ... using my small pot of funds to fund half a day with an interpreter to create a statement ... That’s just not acceptable. If we could do something around supporting women for who English isn’t their first language and making sure ... everybody is giving them access to have their voice heard but in their own language”

Poor experiences with the criminal justice system leads to a reluctance to report future incidents

The repercussions of statutory agencies not serving or supporting survivors sufficiently during the criminal justice process are significant. Perceptions of poor experience not only affect survivors' mental health and decrease their satisfaction with those agencies, but also reduce the likelihood of survivors reporting future incidents and encouraging others to do so.

When asked whether they would be likely to report any further incidents in future, some reactions from survivors were:

"Never, not with the police ... I wouldn't [have done] it if I knew it would be as difficult as it was"

"I wouldn't ... I feel like they wouldn't believe me ... I understand why women don't report, it shouldn't be that way"

"I was initially hesitant to report [but] I had hoped that something was going to happen, and it was the right thing to do. I ended up being disappointed. It proved to me that it was waste of time"

Indeed, this lengthy example (given by a survivor of stalking) illustrates the impact of perceived poor treatment, which in this case took the form of an officer not taking the situation sufficiently seriously, even when shown evidence of the harassment that the survivor was experiencing - and inaction resulting in statutory time limits being breached.

"... I had to tell him how to police ... the person was showing up [everywhere] ... and they were still not doing anything, so I took [footage] ... and shared this with the officer. Nothing happened ... Then he assaulted me and, again, I reported it to the police, and nothing happened for months and months and months. Almost a year later, from when I first reported it, the person was arrested ... Long story short, by the time it was passed onto the CPS, there's a statutory time limit and it had run out ... because [the police] didn't pass it over in time ... When the officer had called me to tell me what the CPS decision was ... I was like, 'Well, I want to appeal the decision and I want to make a complaint'. And it is that blame culture ... he said, 'well you have to go and speak to the CPS ...' There wasn't a sense of accountability ... it just makes you feel like you are being thrown between people ... We touched earlier on trust and confidence and that was my first ever time accessing the police as a victim of crime ... why would I trust the system and why would I trust them again?"

Those who felt they had been treated well (by the police in particular) said they would be inclined to report in future— further demonstrating the correlation between positive experiences and likelihood to engage further with the criminal justice system.

“Although they weren’t able to ascertain it was actually him, I found that they were supportive and made me feel like they believed me. I hope I never have to report again, but yes, I would because I think that it’s really important that we know that support is available. The more we become more comfortable about doing it, I think the better that communication will be with police and also the community. It works both ways”

Moreover, one survivor said they were determined to use their negative experiences to “change the system” via engagement with the police.

“When you’re impacted you go one way or another; you’ll never do it or try and change the system. I’m doing that now; I’m pushing community engagement with the police. These negative experiences have pushed me in that place where I want to change things”

The police were said to need a ‘rebrand’ to regain the confidence and trust of women and girls

Finally, several survivors suggested that the Metropolitan Police need to ‘reset and rebrand’ to regain the trust of women and girls, particularly in the aftermath of the Sarah Everard and other recent cases. This was thought to be especially important in encouraging trust and confidence among females in minority communities.

“The police need to do a good rebranding and PR job in being welcoming and open to women and girls, the vulnerable, the marginalised, minority communities. There needs to be a brand reset”

In particular, more and better domestic abuse and sexual violence training was advocated for all police officers (and indeed anyone who is likely to encounter such abuse in their work) so they are better able to recognise and understand the nuances of survivors’ situations and help survivors to recognise what is happening to them as abuse even when they do not see it themselves.

“All the different professionals that the victim is having to come across throughout the criminal justice system, they need to be informed and have domestic abuse training. Too often we’re ... not understood. Sometimes it’s hard to talk about it [and if] you don’t have people that are trained to tease the information out of you, they might miss something and make an uninformed decision. They need to have unbiased training on domestic abuse and sexual violence ...”

“I wonder how many CPD courses there are about domestic violence and I wonder how many courses and refreshers need to be done annually by individuals who are in direct contact with domestic violence survivors ... I would really like to see if there was any way that the judges, police officers, barristers could complete the Freedom Programme because ... not one of the professionals I have come into contact with, aside from those two police officers ... know what domestic violence is? What if they watch this short, five-minute clip that they show at the end of the Freedom Programme session? ... It’s only a cartoon, but they would have enough of an insight that I think it would have a huge impact on the support system ... even an educational package of some sort to be sent to judges as a requirement before they sit before domestic violence cases that they need to have completed and have a better understanding ... Something needs to change in terms of education”

“I didn’t recognise what abuse was. I thought that professionals that come into daily contact would be able to identify what real abuse looks like. That’s been the most shocking part for me – the systematic failure ... whether it’s been investigating officers or the police officer more recently [who] told me it was in my head because of what I had lived through, or whether it’s been the judges ...”

Indeed, the following example shows the difference such training can make to survivors’ experiences.

“... the police officer ... had actually received domestic abuse training. The difference you see in how they handle the case is amazing. They’re sympathetic and take statements from the victim. It’s important to make the victim feel supported and not the perpetrator”

Survivors of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Main findings from one focus group

Introduction

This chapter reports the views from an online focus group with eight survivors of female genital mutilation (FGM). The event took place in early November 2021.

The focus group was independently facilitated by ORS. Each session had two co-hosts: a main facilitator and a secondary host who was able to observe the session as well as address any technical issues arising from the online format. All meetings were also observed by the Victims' Commissioner for London and a member of staff from the Commissioner's office.

The meeting format followed a pre-determined topic guide which allowed space for a general discussion of the key questions under discussion. However, participants were encouraged to tell their stories in their own way and in their own time.

Main Findings

Recognising abuse

FGM is typically undertaken at a very young age and so is not recognised as 'wrong' until many years later

All participants had undergone FGM at a very young age; some were as young as two and so could not recall the procedure, whereas others were around six to eight and said they could. Those who could remember described traumatic experiences, some of which are outlined below.

"I experienced FGM when I was little ... maybe when I was two years old. I don't remember actually what happened ... but I have been told that I had FGM ... from my Mum. She told me that she didn't want to, but ... my grandmother did it"

"I had it when I was six years old ... all the girls [were] doing it. But the ways they used to do it ... it's not in the hospital ... they [are] doing it at home ... the lady when she come[s], I don't know if she is clean ... she doesn't wear gloves or all this stuff, for the health and safety ... I remember everything because I was big enough to understand"

"I had FGM when I was six years old. I had a bad experience, and it was a tough time in my life ..."

“I had FGM when I was eight years old, maybe less than that, mainly because of the pressure from my community on my dad ... My dad remarried and his new wife wanted us to have it ... My dad refused but there’s a lady who does the FGM where we were, and when my dad saw she was not qualified, he decided to take us to the hospital ... we do remember, and I think I must be quite traumatised about how it happened [but] that’s how it is”

Disclosure

The reaction to FGM from medical practitioners is ‘stigmatising’

Although not active disclosure, many survivors reported that their FGM had been picked up during childbirth and routine medical procedures such as smear tests. This, they said, had triggered unnecessary counselling referrals – and had led them to feel less like victims, and more like potential criminals who might perpetuate the practice.

“You are so pressured to go for counselling and how you are not going to do it with your daughter ... I’m not stupid and I now have to go through counselling ...”

“I’m well educated enough to know this is harmful ... but when I had my daughter ... everyone was talking about legislation [and] you have to be referred. To be honest, you are already traumatised and ashamed of your body you know? And I feel the authority was putting more pressure on me”

“I’ve got two daughters and I’m not [doing] it to them [but] I have been attacked verbally. You go to the midwife and, ‘You’ve got FGM ... I’ve got to send you to this clinic because ...’ and then they have to give you a lesson and then you go to the midwife, and she will say, ‘Oh you do have to do that and how do you feel about this ... do you know this is illegal?’ I know all these things ...”

“My neighbour ... had to have a smear test done and she went to the GP ... The doctor who saw her said to her ... ‘Oh, would you get your daughter to do it?’ and she said, ‘No I wouldn’t because I went through that experience and went through a lot of pain ...’ Then that doctor referred her to Social Services ... So, even though you are a victim of FGM, you are seen as you would do it again. They wouldn’t see you as a victim but as someone who is capable of doing it and making that decision to do it to your child because it’s happened to you ... which is wrong”

Indeed, the assumption that those who had undergone FGM in the past are more likely to ensure their children will in future was said to be both typical and incorrect – and one that can deter survivors from seeking essential medical care and screening.

“We women who are survivors, sometimes we seem like people who will do it again, which I don’t like ... I would never do it to my children”

"I have worked with a lot of females ... a lot of my community won't get their smear tests done, because [they are] embarrassed ... The fact that they are going to go in and someone is going to actually see that something is wrong down there"

"... One of the difficulties I had was the cervical smear screening ... I avoided this ... It was just the experience of 'I know what is going to happen and I just don't want to deal with that' ..."

Considering this, education was thought to be required to ensure medical practitioners handle FGM as sensitively and with as much understanding as possible.

"A lot more work needs to be done, so educating GPs and all of the health service about how to tackle this sensitively ... the process and the protocols that should be [in place] once the GP sees FGM done. There has to be a process about how to handle it in a sensitive manner"

Reporting

FGM is a 'normalised' practice in many countries and communities

A couple of the quotations above also highlight the fact that FGM is a 'normalised' practice in some countries and within certain communities, and so is not seen as abuse. While participating survivors unanimously agreed that the practice is wrong, they felt it is not typically done with malicious intent, but because it is expected within families and has been for generations. For this reason, perpetrators (who are more often than not close family members) are rarely reported to the authorities.

"It's multiple layers of generations who have been subjected to this and so it's no longer abuse; it's normalised ..."

"At the time, FGM was something that was celebrated. It wasn't done out of a criminal concept or a criminal mind. It was something that was coming between the age groups of four and eight. It had to be done. It was more or less that if you haven't done it, you're not part of the community and you're seen as an outsider"

"If I was [in my homeland] then my ideology would probably not be the same. I would have had community pressure, and the family you marry into would be also influencing your decision ... Even though, back home, we see ourselves as strong and independent women, your kids belong to the family, and they have a say about what's happening. Probably they would persuade you ... I saved my kids by being understanding and in a more informed way [but] ... if you were [in your home country] the pressure would make you to do it for your own kids. You are thinking you are doing good things if the ideology is there ..."

"I can't report my Dad to the authorities ... he thought he was doing me good and no harm ..."

“When I had FGM, it was cultural thing, everyone was having it in the community so I didn’t think about reporting [it] or that [it] was abuse, but later on in life people in the community gave advice about FGM [and] that’s when I understood more about [it] ... but FGM carries a number of cultural reasons, social reasons and some families and communities believe FGM benefits girls in some way ...”

Several survivors reported struggling to reconcile the ‘demonisation’ of FGM in the UK and the cultural environment in which they were raised. That is, even after being educated on and usually recognising the dangers of FGM, it remains difficult for survivors to see those who perpetrated it as abusers when considering the pressure within families to conform with the practice.

“... from my experience and other people who have come from that experience, it’s a very sticky one. It’s so difficult calling it abuse ... it’s complicated”

“... When you come from this context and me having to navigate living my life in the UK and also my upbringing, my cultural background and my cultural home, it’s a very difficult place to navigate ... it’s not just, ‘Oh, they did something really bad and I need to report you guys’, you know, it’s still a very painful thing”

“... I guess the problem I’ve had growing up and realising what it was, was ... the language around it ... of course it’s a bad thing but we have sort of demonised it ... not just the practice, but also the families around it. And that’s what I couldn’t relate to ... So, when you said about reporting it to the police; that’s never occurred to me because I’ve had a very loving experience with my family and the way I was brought up ... It was just something that happened because of the pressure that overcame my Mum from her family”

Although most participants had not reported, nor did they think most of those who have undergone FGM would be inclined to do so, one felt that more education and guidance is required on how to do so for those who wish to take the step.

“... I believe that there still needs to be a lot more awareness within practicing communities ... about if you come across someone who is actually doing it and they are your family member or they are your friends, how to actually put your feelings to one side and report them. Conversations like that need to be continued and carried by organisations who have the funding and the resources to do so ...”

In the absence of survivors being inclined to report FGM, education is essential from an early age

As reported above, although participants were reluctant to see or describe FGM as a crime, and especially one that should be reported to the authorities, all had been educated to recognise it as a dangerous practice and, as a result, were committed to ensuring that their own and other children are not subjected to it in future.

“When you look back into my youth ... you wouldn’t think, ‘Ok, that was a crime’ ... it was just like, ‘Ok, it needs to be done’ ... It’s a milestone of your life and something that should happen ... So, I haven’t visualised it as criminal at the time, but now, a lot more education has been about ... People are more aware of it. Parents who have gone through it would never let their kids go through the same thing”

“When I had FGM ... in my country, [it was] seen like a religious thing ... But when I was in year five in school, they had been telling us about it. They said that FGM is abuse and is no good for women. That’s when I realised I had been through abuse, but I didn’t report it ... From then I started thinking differently because before I saw it as normal practice, but then I understood that this is wrong, and now, from what I know, my kids will never experience the same thing ...”

As one survivor put it:

“We don’t see ourselves as victims, but I see myself as saving my future generation and their future generation”

In light of this, the importance of educating young people in the dangers of FGM was stressed, as was the need for as much community-based engagement as possible.

“Education is vital. Education opens up people’s eyes and awareness, so we really should go into the community ... building the relationship first and finding that trusted member, individuals, or organisations to go to for support”

Encouragingly, there was a definite sense that both school- and community-based education is having a positive impact on both adults’ desire to practice FGM and young people’s willingness to stand up against it and report it. Particularly impactful are the testimonies of those with lived experience, and education delivered by trusted community members and organisations.

“... the child itself is not going to be quiet in this new generation. I’ve got young kids and their first question would be, ‘Where are you taking me?’ and when they come back, they will go to school and [say], ‘This is what happened to me’ ... I think the school at a young age is how they identify victims”

“I think education is great, but I think the way it’s delivered and who delivers it is also really important. So, just looking at the way we communicate to women and families ... within these communities there are those conversations happening ... and they are really powerful because they are able to actually listen to each other a lot more when it comes from someone who is like you. In the same way, by empowering the communities to have these conversations and empowering individuals to seek these counselling services ... it goes a long way ...”

“I believe a lot of the people who do this ... are not thinking that they are causing harm to their daughters, but if they understood the harm it would do to their social life, their future life, their motherhood. It affects every aspect of their lives ... So, if a perpetrator was in this conversation today, I don't think they would contemplate it because they would have heard so many women here in this group who have literally just talked about the [effect] this has had on them and how it has literally had an impact on their whole life. This alone could make someone's mind change. It's hearing those conversations and that education aspect of it”

“People in my community have come a long way from actually celebrating FGM as something that is loving. People actually see the harmful effect. Individuals ... have realised that this is something ... that is wrong and should not be practiced and they are the victims who should advocate about FGM”

The education being undertaken by Somali-led organisations was highlighted as a particularly good example of successful engagement with all community members, including men, who are thought to be an important but sometimes forgotten audience.

“In the Somali community ... They among themselves have conversations and they've got their own little network and they educate the others informally, so people understand the implications of it and also people understand the importance of actually reporting FGM or if people are thinking about it ... They have also overcome a barrier which was a lack of English and so the fact that they deliver it and translate it into Somali has made a huge difference. ... it's almost like a trust built between the organisation, the trust that it was coming from their own community, and a trust that it wasn't coming from an organisation saying, 'You need to report this. ...' It was like, 'Ok, what can we do to move forward from this? How can we educate individuals?’”

“There are two organisations which are Somali-led mainly, and they have actually hit the nail on the head. They went into community settings where Somalis were taking part and delivered sessions in really difficult situations, especially with men. Men were quite upset that they were talking about 'that thing' ... but the projects continued ... and it has come alive and flourished into where it is today. The conversations that I have heard have made a difference ... people understand it a lot more; the disadvantages, the health implications, the lack of seeing individuals as victims ...”

“Usually, I hear FGM more about women, but there are other members of the family ... What can be done for the man as well? Because in the practising community, the biggest drive and decisions is made by the man. Even if a single mum decides to do FGM on her child, there are other members and usually other men are involved and saying, 'Yes, we are doing this'. I do know they play key roles in it as well”

Education and information should be targeted at those coming to the UK from countries that still practice FGM

Participants also considered it imperative that education and information be targeted at those coming to the UK from countries and cultures that still practice FGM and consider it as ‘the norm’ – either through the provision of leaflets on arrival, or policymakers working with their counterparts in practicing countries to ensure their citizens are aware that the practice is illegal in the UK and elsewhere.

“... If you are looking at FGM, don’t look at people who are around here, because I’m telling you, nobody is thinking like that. People are moving out and coming back. We should be worrying about those people and what kind of mentality they have ...”

“For people who [are] travelling abroad, what about if they do a leaflet to remind them ... to tell them about the law ... because it’s true, sometimes families go out and they come back, and you never know what they’ve done to the kids. If they could do a leaflet to give them more information and make them aware of the law and the health situation of the kids ...”

“Is there is a way of policy makers working with practising countries and making sure that we know in the UK it is criminal activity and having that relationship from a government perspective ...”

Accessing support

Several survivors did not access support until adulthood

Delays in accessing support are evidently common for FGM survivors given most are very young when subjected to the process. As such, several survivors said they had not accessed support for many years, either because they considered it unnecessary or potentially irrelevant – or for fear of being primarily identified as a victim when they did not consider themselves to have been victimised.

“It wasn’t until my late twenties ... when it started hitting home ... where I realised that [it] had impacted my own emotional health in the way that I viewed myself and I viewed my body ... all of a sudden ...”

“... Primarily, before ... it was something that happened in my life and I just locked it away ... I enjoyed as much freedom as any other girl who grew up in Britain, so there was never a reason to feel that I needed it until later when I was in my twenties”

“What I found problematic is just that whether we are first- or second-generation immigrants, we are just so different already. I had so many identities to juggle – I am Muslim and Black and living in the UK and calling this home – it was just one more thing that was added to me that I didn’t ask for, which made me different but like in a bad way. And there’s where with that victim identity, I just couldn’t accept that. I just felt like, ‘I don’t need to be felt sorry for’. I already have so many obstacles and so many aspects in my identity to navigate and I don’t need this aspect to be added on top of these and that victimises me and makes me disadvantaged to the rest of my peers ... So, that’s why, personally, I found it problematic when the only form of help comes from being victimised ... That’s the part that bothered me a lot, because by being victimised and only being victimised then it also became a part of my identity, and it wasn’t. I didn’t accept this narrative”

For one participant, this fear was fuelled by the tone of some of the activism and policies around FGM when they were growing up – and the same survivor said they had distanced themselves from anything suggested by these early policies (including the importance of accessing support to deal with residual trauma) because they had apparently not taken proper account of the experiences of FGM survivors.

“ ... I didn’t like the way that it victimised women who went through FGM. It made me feel like a victim and I just didn’t like feeling that. I didn’t identify as a victim, and I just felt like, ‘I’m not living my life as a victim. I can’t relate to it”

“I also didn’t like the idea of these policies and a lot of these laws coming from a place [where] the women who have suffered this are not really heard ... it became a whole other thing where it was felt like, ‘You don’t know what my experiences have been. You don’t look like me, and you are telling me that this is what I should do.’ So, I kind of just switched of ... I sort of distanced myself from that narrative”

Once accessed, support (especially specialist support) is considered invaluable in healing trauma

Prior to seeking formal support, several survivors said they had benefited from their own informal research into FGM, its impacts and the support available in dealing with those impacts.

“When I was in uni I wanted to find [out] more, and one day I went to the library [to do] my own research in FGM ... I wanted to go deep to know”

“I did read about it on the internet to learn more – how it was affecting people and how wide is the support for myself and whether I can support others”

Participating survivors unanimously agreed, though, that the formal support they have received has been invaluable in coping with and recovering from their delayed trauma.

“... my journey with [FGM] is since childhood and I would say it’s the common narrative in certain parts of the world. It’s something I experienced when I was eight years old, but I didn’t think it was really something to talk about until probably the last three years – from my late twenties when I started to experience certain things. And thankfully, with actually doing a bit of therapy for the last two years with an organisation here; it’s been really helpful to come to terms with that part of my life and how it’s impacted me, and I’m actually dealing with it”

Especially important to participants was the culturally appropriate support delivered by someone with lived experience of FGM and its impacts, who was able to offer expertise, a non-judgemental environment and knowledge of available sources of help and information.

“... Particularly with a counselling experience ... I found it incredibly transformative for myself and my own journey and especially when it was with an individual who was able to relate to me and I could relate to. It made all the difference ...”

“It was important that it was a woman and someone ... from a minority experience who can relate to this and is able to create an environment of non-judgement ... and is well enough and clued in on all the resources out there and to be able to lead the person to, ‘If you need help with this then this is where you should be able to go”

“I’ve tried counselling and therapy for the last two years. The first time I did it wasn’t very helpful, because my therapist was well-meaning, but it’s very difficult if you can’t relate to the individual and their experiences. And it then is someone just talking at you and telling you how you should process certain things and not appreciating the social complexities of a lot of our experiences. It’s only the last year when I was really fortunate to get a counsellor who is trained in psychotherapy but also in Islamic counselling which managed to capture my own cultural and religious beliefs ... and really related [to] me and walk[ed] me through this. I have been able to find a lot of healing through this and it has actually allowed me to be here, because I have never spoken about this experience. It was only through this experience that I was, ‘Ok I am able to make sense of this’ and appreciate the complexities and different things at play here and how we can start to support other women. All the policy stuff is happening, but how do you incorporate this experience into your life so that you are not just carrying this bag load of trauma around with you?”

“There are all these online therapies and counselling options, so I did that and ... I felt really, really detached because it wasn’t really incorporating other aspects of my identity which are very important to me; my religious and cultural beliefs and all those aspects. So, it was only through a friend’s contact for the Islamic counselling that I was able to find a therapist who was able, through psychotherapy, to help ... I had to go private, and then I was able to get a contact through the Women and Family Health Services ... Access to these resources is really important for women”

This is underlined by the words of the following survivor, who declined an offer of support because of the counsellor’s lack of expertise and subject knowledge.

“I did seek support, but unfortunately I had to decline it, because I didn’t feel like the counsellor understood much about the FGM ... When I remember it, I get hurt ... and when you have the opportunity to open up the page, you don’t get the support that you need from the counsellor themselves, because they are not really educated on the FGM subject ...”

Laws, strategies and policies

Laws, strategies and policies must reflect the inherent complexities of FGM

Participants unanimously agreed that any laws, policies and processes and the language used within them should recognise that FGM is not a straightforward area, but one with many nuances and ‘grey areas’ – most notably that the perpetrators are often loving and much-loved family members who are following the practices with which they were raised.

“... We have reached a point where the polices are there in place and protecting young girls, but now how do we navigate the complexities of this thing that’s been done? It’s calling out that it’s not normal and it’s not just the woman who’s had FGM who needs healing, but it’s also the family and the environment she comes from. Appreciate the current context that we are in and show more sensitivity towards that ... The policies are great, and we are all for it but at the same time it’s a lot more complex. These girls and women are from cultures that are very supportive, but how do we navigate this?”

“It’s not family members who are abusive, but family members who are loving and this is just what they know. It’s very difficult trying to get them to see that as abuse, so I think that language is really important, especially around violence ... If we just vilify in such a way that we are distancing from people, rather than trying to connect with them, then we do a great injustice ... I think there’s opportunity to sit down and have these kinds of conversations and to try and understand what is being communicated ... making room for understanding what violence and all these big words mean in this context”

“... you are hearing from individuals who are practicing FGM and have said that they don’t consider their families to be perpetrators in a harsh context whereby they should be serving prison sentences”

Indeed, one survivor suggested that it was the ‘black and white’ nature of the current legislation that deterred her from reporting her FGM, for it did not sufficiently recognise that perpetrators were loving family members following cultural traditions.

“I do feel very conflicted and hearing the word ‘violence’ ... yes, it is violence and accepting that this is what has happened is to some degree dealing with it. But I think that it brings out the nuance of what we think as being violence ... For me, the law was protecting us against violence, but it was doing it in such a way that it really was pushing me away from wanting to seek the protection it offered because, again, it was that something bad happened and there was a good and bad person, and it was so black and white. But a lot of women have shown that’s not as black and white and it’s your family members”

Ensuring that the necessary policies are backed up with culturally appropriate and specialist support and information was also considered essential in allowing survivors to navigate the complexities and internal conflicts they are likely to experience – and to educate and empower themselves and their families in the fight against FGM.

“I definitely appreciate the complexity in this. On the one hand there is the policy side, and it’s direct and it’s trying to deal with the criminal issue. It is what it is, and I don’t think a lot of us have anything against that, but it is balancing that with the support ... It’s making sure that when we are presenting this, we are also making sure that, ‘look we know how complex this is, and we appreciate it’s not black and white and this is the support that’s in place’. What that support looks like will have to be tried and tested, but I think that having organisations like the WHFS working with local GPs and having a counsellor who works with these communities who is ideally of their background ...”

“The policies seem harsh, and they are very direct, but say, ‘Look, we are able to work with you and we are going to work through this’. If it was balanced and they were offered together, then particularly young women – thinking about myself who were brought up here, and who were born here, who are British – will be able to seek this out for themselves and will be able to empower themselves and also their families. And this is how I think we can nip this at an earlier stage, rather than have a lot of people who slip through the radar, and we are just back to policies again”

“There are all these policies, and everyone is being vilified. ‘It’s really, really bad’, and then [it’s] like, ‘Right, great. It’s really bad – what now? How do I live with this? How do I make sense of this experience that has happened to me in the past?’”

Early intervention is key to prevention

Participants also strongly agreed that early intervention and information provision are key to identifying potential perpetrators and preventing criminal acts of FGM. Indeed, preventative work was generally considered to be much more effective than punitive action.

“I understand where the policy is going; it is a victim, and it is a perpetrator, and it is quite transparent. And I don’t disagree with that [but] before someone is considered as a perpetrator or a victim, there needs to be this education. There has to be early intervention first; let’s talk to this individual ... More organisations need to come out and give this information to individuals who might be perpetrators and you could change individuals’ minds”

“The perpetrator who is thinking about this ... How can they be given the right information, the right resources to make a formal decision before they have done it and are facing prison, or they are in the process of doing it and they are caught? Is there a way for the focus to be off the criminal to more of early intervention and, ‘If you do it this is the implication’, and providing that information early on?”

Moreover, as alluded to above, it was said that such information should be delivered in such a way that potential perpetrators know FGM is not only damaging for its victims, but also has severe legal implications for those who facilitate and undertake it.

“It’s the education of knowing what the law says ... ‘This is the law, and this is how long you can go to prison if you do [it]’. And if they do make that decision then they can’t say they didn’t know. They are aware of it and the information is given to them”

“Isn’t there an opportunity – before it becomes criminal or before they can be reported – to give this formal education to practising communities in the setting that they are in? So ... in colleges, these conversations and this education needs to happen, and be blunt about it so people are more aware that there is a criminal impact, even the one who is thinking about it ... In colleges ... you have statistics of what courses are they are [doing], age and ethnicity. Each local council has provision like family and support services; like children’s centres and stuff like that. Information can be rooted in a formal context and can be delivered in a way that is actually serious, rather than, ‘You know what? It’s criminal so just don’t do it’ ... make individuals understand”

Successful prosecutions should be publicised

Finally, publicising successful prosecutions could also, act as a deterrent for those contemplating subjecting a family member to FGM.

“Since the law being introduced in 2003, how many people have been prosecuted? Because it’s not advertised at all. How would people take it seriously if there are no steps taken? It’s not only education, but awareness and people who have a minute idea in their mind ... They will say, ‘hmm, you know this has happened’ and it will disperse those thoughts before they even take the action”

Survivors of Honour Based Violence (HBV)

Main findings from one focus group and two in-depth interviews

Introduction

This chapter reports the views from an online focus group with six survivors of honour-based violence, and follow-up interviews (again online) with two attendees. The event took place in early November 2021.

The focus group and interviews were independently facilitated by ORS. Each session had two co-hosts: a main facilitator and a secondary host who was able to observe the session/interview as well as address any technical issues arising from the online format. The focus group was also observed by the Victims' Commissioner for London and a member of staff from the Commissioner's office.

The meeting format followed a pre-determined topic guide which allowed space for a general discussion of the key questions under discussion. However, participants were encouraged to tell their stories in their own way and in their own time.

Main Findings

Recognising, disclosing and reporting abuse

Survivors are often under such a high degree of control that abuse is hard to recognise, disclose and report

All participants described being wholly controlled by a partner and/or their family. In such circumstances, even if they recognised that they were experiencing abuse, their enforced isolation made it extremely difficult for them to disclose or report it. Some typical experiences are highlighted below.

"I came to this country as a student with my ex-partner. He was dominating ..."

"When I was living at my in-laws, they tried to control me. They wouldn't let me go out and would shout at me. They made me isolate myself. It was like mental torture for me. It made me want to end my life ..."

"I was so scared. I didn't say anything to my family because he threatened to kill me"

“When I was in India, they were a very nice family; I thought it would be a nice life for me with them. When we came here, they suddenly changed ... They started telling me, ‘Don’t do this, don’t go there’ ... Whenever I tried to talk to my mother-in-law, she would shout at me. My sister-in-law also used to intimidate me. I wasn’t allowed to go out and I tried to apply for jobs online. I got two interviews and I asked them if I could go, and they said I couldn’t have a job. I could hear them talking about how they would control me”

“It was just me and my husband. My husband wanted to control me every day. He doesn’t want me going out shopping ... If I talk to my mother or family, he takes me phone and says, ‘Don’t talk to them’. He also doesn’t let me go to my religious house ... It was very difficult for me. So many times, he tried to beat me and assault me when I tried to talk to my family ... My sisters-in-law also tried to control me. They took my passport and documents. This is very painful for me, when I remember it, I’m crying”

Medical and educational professionals could do more to encourage disclosure

Participants suggested that medical professionals including GPs should be more alert to the possibility of honour-based violence and abuse and make provisions for women to see a doctor independently of their partner. This, it was felt, could encourage disclosure.

“For the first time, I went to my GP, that time my husband accompanied me. The person asked if I was ok to have him accompany me, and I obviously couldn’t say no in front of him. I feel that if I go to the doctor, I should have a chance to speak individually”

“This also happened to me. I had to go to the GP with my husband”

One survivor, who had come to the UK as a student with her partner, said she would have appreciated and benefited from a welfare check after she was prevented from attending lectures. She felt this might have given her an opportunity to disclose what was happening to her.

“I’m thinking of where it would be useful for my experience, and I think in the university. If we don’t turn up, they could get in touch and check why I’m not coming. If I get that one chance away from my partner, I could get help”

Fear of and not knowing how to contact the police are barriers to formal reporting

One survivor said that while she had wanted to escape her situation, she would have been fearful of contacting the police, having been told by her partner that it would achieve nothing. Only when she attended hospital with injuries inflicted upon her was she encouraged to do so.

“I went to the hospital, I told them everything and they helped me. I was really scared because my husband told me ... in this country the police don’t do anything. The hospital told me to go to the police station, so I told them everything ... I was really scared”

Others said they were afraid of contacting the authorities as they were unfamiliar with UK laws and processes, or that they would not have known how to do so, even in an emergency situation.

“When I was with my husband, I didn’t know how to contact the police”

“My friend told me I could go to the police if I want to and I was really scared because I didn’t know anything about this country ...”

Also, the control that survivors were subjected to meant that they were afraid and did not have the opportunities to report their abuse, as their abusers kept watchful eyes on them at all times. Moreover, even on disclosing to relatives in India, a couple of survivors said their relatives had encouraged them to stay with their abusers.

“He told me if I ever told anyone he’d kill me ... He said he had the police in his pocket. I was very scared, that’s why I didn’t even inform my mum and dad”

“I was not allowed to stay at home alone, my mother-in-law made sure there was always someone there”

“I stayed without a phone for 15 to 16 days because he’d taken it; I couldn’t contact anyone. My dad would call, but I couldn’t say what was happening with his brothers and sisters in front of me”

“I told my dad and he said to get on with it because they had paid so much for the wedding. Other people told me my husband was just joking”

“I used to speak with relatives ... they don’t hear me. They said, ‘Ok, people are like this, in-laws are like this, don’t worry it will be fine”

Most said they had been ‘forced’ to report as a result of extreme violence

As alluded to above, survivors said they had been somewhat ‘forced’ to report when the violence they were experiencing became so extreme as to be life-threatening.

“At that time, I wasn’t safe from him; that’s why I did the police report”

“That night my husband was brutal with me, so I decided to call the police and see what will happen”

“I decided to report to the police because it got to the point where I was getting fed up of being beaten up every day. Verbal abuse became a norm for me too. Then, all of a sudden, I reported because it came to life and death. He had a knife, and it was just the two of us in this house. I had to because he pushed me to some extent”

Most reported directly to the police, though one survivor was encouraged by hospital staff to do so when seeking treatment for her injuries. This survivor was pleased with the way she was treated at the hospital, in spite of some language barriers.

“... I went to the hospital and told the doctor. The nurses told me to go to the police and gave me the domestic violence one stop shop number. The mental health doctors also came for a health check. The nurse also helped me a lot. At that time my English language was not so good, maybe they didn’t understand me always”

Experiences of reporting abuse

Some survivors reported positive experiences of reporting their abuse to the police

Several participants commended the police for responding quickly when called, for their empathy and patience, for offering practical support, and for referring them to specialist organisations that could help further. Some typical comments are below.

“I reported him, and the police were there ... It got to the point where it was life or death for me. There was nothing I could do about it. The police had given me different types of help and introduced me to the Network¹ ... I was moved to a safer place ...”

“For me, it was really positive ... I called the police, and they were there within two minutes. They arrested him ... The statement was taken by the lady police officer, and she asked if I wanted to stay at my family friend’s house ... I was telling her in detail what happened. She was very patient ... The social services were also very helpful

“The police gave me information about the Network, so I called them and said I had no place to live. They helped me”

“The police put me in touch with Solace Women’s Aid. They referred me and I received a call from the Network”

“The police took me from [my home] and I feel so safe and much more confident. I never think about it now ...”

One survivor also praised the safeguarding measures put in place to protect her when her husband was released from custody. While disappointed to be asked to move home, she understood that this

¹ The Ashiana Network, which provides a range of services benefiting vulnerable women and girls. These include advice, advocacy, counselling, a specialist refuge for women at risk of forced marriage and honour-based violence, and those with no recourse to public funds.

was for her safety, and she was impressed with and grateful for the steps taken to ensure she was protected and cared for.

“I received a call from the police, and they informed me that my husband was going to be released from prison. They asked me to move to a different location because my partner knew this location. That was the only downside I had. When I asked where I was supposed to go because I didn’t know anyone here, they made a few calls and arranged an emergency hostel. All of my luggage and stuff was at my house ... They took me to my house to get my things safely”

Importantly, in light of some participants’ fear of authority figures, some officers modified their behaviour to mitigate this.

“I used to get very scared [of] the police uniform, they said they would come in the civil uniform”

The following quotation shows how important an effective, empathetic, and supportive police response is to survivors of honour-based violence, many of whom have come to the UK with no support network or knowledge of ‘how things work’ – and whose lives are controlled to such a degree that they are unable to gather that knowledge.

“For me, it was good because there was no-one else for me. I don’t have relatives or parents in the UK. So, I called the police, and they took a statement. They called all the refuges and tried to find accommodation for me. After that, they arranged a hotel for me and paid for it and gave me a voucher for food. I had many calls when I was there from people like my solicitor. They helped me because I didn’t know anything about this sort of situation. After that I came to the refuge, and they saved me ... Now I’m very happy and I feel that I’m lucky things are good. I called the police and the police helped me a lot”

The same survivor said her experiences had changed her negative perceptions of the police, formed as a result of interactions with the authorities in her home country, India.

“I was scared of the police. They treated me the opposite of what I thought. The Indian police are not like this. How they co-operated with me and provided everything; it was very good”

There were, though, some negative experiences

The lengthy account that follows highlights not only the difficulties faced by those experiencing extreme control in escaping their situations, but also the implications of an allegedly poor police response. Most notably, the survivor felt that delays in taking her statement prevented officers from

gathering clear physical evidence of violence – and that the lack of contact and constantly having to chase for updates and information is having a detrimental effect on her mental health.

“He never gave me phones to use; I didn’t talk to my family for around three months ... I didn’t even know the emergency number to call ... I eventually was able to call my sister to tell her what was happening to me. She talked to relatives who came to help, and I called the police from their phones ... They took all my details and came to my friends’ home where I escaped to, and they gave me a pamphlet.

After that, I have problems everywhere, especially with the police. They’re constantly changing my crime reference number. I escaped in March and my police statement was taken in May ... By that time, all the bruises and marks on my body had completely cleared so the evidence was lost ... I have a very bad experience with the police. If I’m telling them about my situation they’re telling me, ‘We can’t help with that’. My experience is disappointing ... I’m getting no help ...

... I had to call the Metropolitan Police again and again to find out my reference number, to find out who was the police officer who took my case ... When the police officers came to take my statement, they told me the officer that’s taking my case will contact me within three days, but it never happened. After one week I had to search for the police officer and email her to contact me ... I think they should take rapid action when dealing with things. From my experience, they were taking a lot of time. If I try to reach to the police for anything they don’t reply really fast. I have to wait ... we have to constantly keep on trying and trying and after a while we get a response.

I had a very bad experience with the police. I had to go everywhere to learn about my case. They told me they’d contact me, but I had to find the source and contact them ... I have to deal with everything even though I have a lot of mental pressure. We are not in that mental state to think like a normal person would”

Furthermore, another survivor, while satisfied overall with her treatment by the police, felt that the initial attending officer had not considered the possibility of honour-based violence, taking the word of her husband that there was nothing untoward happening, and failing to look beyond surface appearances.

“I called on the emergency number and told them my address ... I didn’t explain anything because my husband ... could hear me. I just said, ‘Please help me and come as quickly as possible’. I think it was five minutes and the police came. It was really very horrible ... They asked for my husband. They didn’t see me ... They just saw my husband and spoke to him, asked if everything is fine because a lady complained. He said, ‘No, everything is ok’ ... I was on the stairs, and I saw him shut the door and the police left. I was in my room shaking; I was in a more dangerous situation now ... He beat me and it was really a horrible time ...

... he tried to snatch my phone. He slapped me and tried to squeeze my neck. My mother-in-law came too. I had the will power to not give them the phone. I knew it was my last chance ... I went to the bathroom and locked myself in then [things escalated] so I called the police again and they asked where I was, I just said 'Please help me' ... Thank God they came again and saved me. That time I felt safe, before I was so scared"

A few survivors felt that they should have received more information about what to expect after making a report, although one did acknowledge that *'even if I was explained to, my mental state was not in the condition to grasp the information and make use of it'*. One in particular had been granted a non-molestation order against her husband but had not been given any detail on what this meant or what she should do in the event of a breach.

"I went to court ... the court gave me a [non-molestation] order ... I was working, and he knew where this was. He did attempt to come there but I wasn't aware of what to do if he breached the restraining order"

Overall, though, survivors were glad they had reported to the police

Generally speaking, survivors were happy they had reported their abuse to the police, feeling a sense of relief and, for some, that their decision to do so had saved their life.

"When I came from that house I was in relief. There was wind and I enjoyed the wind air, it felt like my freedom ... I was broken inside from what was going on in the house, after that I was not well and the way my mother-in-law treated me"

"I was happy and I'm still happy I made that decision. It was my best decision. It saved my life"

Accessing support

The support accessed by participants has been invaluable in helping them cope and recover from violence and abuse

Most of the participating survivors were either living in or had lived in housing provided by the Ashiana Network, receiving practical, financial, legal, and emotional support. As the comments below show, this has helped them feel safe and secure and developed their confidence and independence.

"I ... was very lucky to find this help and I got the help when it was needed"

"I think my confidence has increased more now than before. I feel more confident because I'm doing lots of courses"

"I came [to the Ashiana Network] because of problems with my husband. I have lots of experience in this house; they're helping me. Before when I lived in my husband's house, I didn't have any independence. I think I'm more independent now. I feel safe in the house because I'm living with other girls"

"I've received support from Ashiana. I'm surprised and very grateful. I can't explain in words how thankful I am. I would definitely like to give back. This country in general has given me a second chance"

"I feel safe here and I'm mentally okay. I'm not the only one"

Moreover, the support provided has been essential in mitigating the isolation felt by survivors of honour-based violence, who often have no family or friends nearby to turn to.

"When I was at my husband's house from the first day to the end, it was like a terrible situation ... It really affected my life and it's still on my mind ... I'm living here so my key workers and everyone is helping me if I'm feeling upset. I live in this refuge, this saved me. It's good for me that I have confidence here. They are giving me money and emotional support. In my life I don't have anyone, but my key worker and everyone is helping me to have a good life and they support me properly"

For those living in one of the Network's refuges, there is a two-year limit on their tenure. While they understood the reason for this limit - promoting independence - there was some trepidation as to what would happen once it is reached.

"I don't want to leave; it's a really good house. But we have to be independent."

Gaps in support

Survivors said they would have welcomed more information about how to contact the police and support services on arrival in the UK

As noted earlier, participating survivors reported being unaware of the emergency 999 number on arrival in the UK, and the very nature of honour-based violence and control means that they remained ignorant of it for a considerable length of time.

"When I first moved here, I didn't realise the emergency number ..."

"I think the main problem is the lack of information. We're not informed about simple things. Like things you can utilise for your safety. As Asians, we come from different countries, and we don't know how things work here. We need to be explained everything"

“When we arrive because we come with our spouse, they try and control us when we come from a different country. Maybe they could try and give us information on where to go. Sometimes you don’t know it’s domestic violence. I didn’t know about this, then I found an emergency number and because there was no-one to help me, I decided to call the police and see what happened”

As such, incorporating details on how to contact the emergency services (from personal and public telephones) into an information pack for women moving to the UK from abroad was suggested. So too were more public service announcements at locations such as railway stations, and clearer instructions on mobile phones on how to make emergency calls.

“I’m thinking when we enter into the UK, they have to give us information about the emergency number ... a leaflet or something. We were confused and didn’t know what help we could have. I didn’t know I could do anything for myself. I don’t know what help I could have”

“I’ve got a few ideas in my mind that I think if I had it, they would be beneficial ... At the railway stations they have the announcements that say if you see something that doesn’t look right, please ring this. So, I think an announcement [like that] ... also when we put the SIM card in the phone, there are the options to check your balance so there should be a section to ring emergency services”

Survivors also said that women require information on how to identify honour-based violence, particularly that involving coercive control

Survivors said that victims of honour-based violence – especially involving coercive control – are often unable to recognise what is happening to them as abuse. Education on this issue was thus thought to be essential, starting at school to inform and empower the younger generations and enact future change.

“I didn’t know it was violence and abuse. I read online everything about what is actually violence ...”

“I didn’t know the real meaning of domestic violence”

“One of my friends ... She doesn’t understand; she thinks she needs to stay with her husband and has nowhere to go. I explained we have lots of help in this country ... One day her husband hit her, and she called the police. I think this kind of thing they have to know; what is domestic violence? I told her about it, but she didn’t know before. She thought that was her life and she had to stay”

“They have to tell us what domestic violence [is] and how we can save ourselves. Mostly you think that if someone hits you that’s domestic violence, but there are lots of types of domestic violence ... all the girls that come here to the UK, they have to know. It’s like prevention”

GP services could be more proactive in offering support

One participant suggested that GPs could make proactive contact with anyone coming to the UK on a spousal visa after, say, four to six months of their arrival. This, it was felt, could provide a means of disclosure for someone experiencing HBV.

Support with immigration issues is essential in enabling survivors of honour-based violence to recover from their experiences

Finally, a few survivors said that they cannot fully recover from their trauma until their immigration issues have been resolved and they have the security of knowing they can stay in the UK. One is nervously waiting for the outcome of an asylum application, another is waiting for her renewed proof of ID, without which she feels “*insecure*”, and another said she feels “*ashamed*” of her current status as an asylum seeker, having been waiting one and a half years for a Home Office decision.

“I applied for an asylum visa through domestic violence. I’m scared to go back to my country in fear that my husband will kill me ... I’m worried about my future because if my immigration isn’t accepted, my life is ruined”

“Sometimes, I feel ashamed to say anything of my status. My relatives sometimes see me and are ashamed to introduce me. If I go anywhere, I feel ashamed that I am a refugee and asylum seeker ... I’ve been waiting one and a half years for my application”

Older Survivors

Main findings from three in-depth interviews

Introduction

This chapter reports the views from three interviews with older female survivors, which took place in November 2021.

The interviews were independently undertaken by ORS. The meeting format followed a pre-determined topic guide which allowed space for a general discussion of the key questions under consideration. However, participants were encouraged to tell their stories in their own way and in their own time.

The survivors had experienced different crimes/abuse: one had suffered domestic abuse in her family home, later also becoming a victim of a mugging and theft; the second survivor had suffered a long history of rape, sexual assault and sexual abuse; and the third had experienced an attempted mugging.

Main Findings

Recognising abuse

The survivor of familial domestic abuse knew it was wrong, but cultural factors prevented her from disclosing and reporting it

The survivor of familial domestic abuse said that she always knew what she had suffered was wrong. However, her family and some of the Indian community within which she was raised (both in India and the UK) did not recognise it as such and growing up, people would encourage her to accept the abuse as part of her culture.

“In India it was just in the house, the way children are beaten. In this country my mother, father and everyone were all in one house. [My father] was threatening the three of us ... stealing from my bank account ... This was going on as well as shouting at me”

*“To the outside world it looked like a family, but inside it was different ... We are put under pressure to say what a lovey dovey Asian f***ing family we are. That is not the case”*

“They were not interested at all; they were saying ‘... suck it up. If you don’t like it, move back to your country’. That is the attitude”

The survivor of sexual abuse recognised it as wrong from a young age, but didn't fully recognise it as abuse until later in life

One survivor had experienced multiple acts of sexual abuse and sexual violence throughout her life. The childhood sexual abuse, perpetrated by older family members and family friends, started from a very young age, and she explained that she knew what was happening to her was wrong, and felt uncomfortable with it.

"I remember very strongly when he asked me to take my clothes off, I went, 'No', because some part of me knew at least that that was completely abnormal"

However, the survivor said that she did not fully recognise that she had been a victim of sexual abuse until later in life, having watched a documentary about women in similar situations to hers.

"I saw the documentary 'Womanhood' and I was really interested to see the consent seminar. They were debating the definition of rape and the guy explained that penetration not with the penis was treated as seriously as a similar offence and I did have a penny dropping moment that shocked me ... What I found extraordinary is you can read and think but, in some way, you need to have it said to you in order to think, 'Yes, and that was my life'. I realised that what had happened to me ... my reactions were really serious; post-traumatic stress from six, triggered at 16, although I realised psychologically, I had not fully understood the gravity of what had happened. I reacted to it, but I hadn't analysed it in that way"

Disclosing and reporting crime/abuse

Disclosures of abuse were made to friends or boyfriends

The two survivors who experienced domestic or sexual abuse eventually disclosed to a trusted friend or boyfriend in adulthood.

"A close friend ... who supported me ... I was in a desperate situation, and she had known the background for a long while"

"I never told anyone until I was 24. It wasn't until I was living with my boyfriend for four years 'til I felt safe"

There were, however, barriers to reporting to the police

The domestic abuse survivor endured ill-treatment throughout her childhood and into adulthood, but never reported it. She feared the police would react in the same way as others and tell her to accept the abuse as part of her culture. She had also been deterred from reporting by others' views.

“I was afraid that the police would say ‘that’s your ... culture, so shut up’”

“All those people I was complaining to, and I was in a desperate situation. They kept saying ‘don’t go to the police, they’re full of racists’”

The fact the abuse was perpetrated within the family home was also a barrier for the survivor, who sought to protect her family’s reputation and did not wish to ‘parade’ what was happening for all to see.

“I want to protect my family; I don’t want to go around parading ... I don’t want to parade my family as horrible”

The other survivor who did not report at the time of her abuse (as it had “not occurred” to her to do so) eventually did so following Operation Yewtree. Even so, it was not the abuse by family members that she reported, but by those outside the family circle.

“The thing that’s interesting to me now retrospectively is that it didn’t occur to me to go to the authorities, and I can see this pattern from my childhood which is endure, put up and absolutely keep the contract of misogyny which is total silence about bad male behaviour ... It took me a long time to deal with these things ... When operation Yewtree came up I went back, and I reported my neighbour ... I think the reason I reported him and not my stepfather was ... because of my family situation ...”

All three survivors eventually reported to the police, and two were glad they had done so

The survivor who was reluctant to report to the police due to their perceptions of them (fuelled by the views of others) was pleasantly surprised at the professional treatment she received from a female officer when she eventually did so for fear of what her father might do to her mother. In light of this, she was “very glad” she had reported.

“When I went to the police, I asked to see a woman. I did see a woman; she was very good with me. I told her what I could in a limited way ... She said I could get back to her if I wanted to. Because she believed me ... it gave me indescribable strength ...”

“I am very glad, because I felt relieved that I’d done all the things I should do. I was surprised that she was so professional. I’m not going to say she was kind; she was just professional. She said, ‘If you want to come back to me, come back’ and she gave me her number. I carried her number for around five years in my back pocket”

The same survivor more recently reported a mugging and was again happy with the response she received from the police.

“I was mugged by three young women ... I went to the police, and they were ... very good ... they were very professional ... The police took me seriously as the gang target older people, especially women”

Another survivor was glad she reported her experience of a mugging, feeling that had she not done so, the perpetrator could have done the same to someone else. She was also pleased with the initial response, as well as the simple fact of being taken seriously, as she had expected not to be.

“When I got in, I thought, ‘Well, it’s pointless calling the police’, but then I thought, ‘If I don’t report it, he’ll do it again’. I assumed I would really just be treated as a statistic ... I had no expectations whatsoever ... I was amazed. I was delighted [that they took it seriously]”

“The person I spoke to was very good. [The call handler] said somebody would be round to me. About two hours later... a handler rang to say, ‘we’re sorry that nobody has been to you yet ... we’re very busy, but we can make an appointment’. This happened on a Monday; the appointment was going to be for Saturday. At that point, I got flustered and she could hear I was still anxious, and she said, ‘Look, we’ll do our best to get somebody there today’. It was probably not more than an hour later that these two young lady police ... officers arrived. They were very youthful looking ... but very attentive. They’d been well trained; they knew what they were doing”

However, one survivor did not have such a positive experience of reporting

One survivor reported an incident many years after the abuse she experienced. Unusually, she was referred to the police after ringing a support helpline provided at the end of a documentary about Jimmy Saville. Although she felt that reporting was important in the context of the wider culture of reporting abuse, she felt that nothing was done to investigate her personal experiences.

“It was one of those lines that said if you have been affected by this programme in any way, ring this line. What I didn’t realise was it was if you need support. I thought they were asking for feedback ... So, they said someone will ring you back and the police rang me ... which I was surprised at ... They might have phoned me back to say they couldn’t find anything, or they might have written to me but ... absolutely nothing happened ...”

“I think in terms of outcome, it’s really unresolved and I don’t know [if] anything was done. I think it was a good thing that I said something because the secrecy in criminal reporting is all part of misogyny and makes it very hard for survivors. For me, it’s very important to just say it and not accept any of that”

The investigation and court process

One survivor did not want a police investigation, but appreciated the option if needed...

The survivor of domestic abuse chose to report her experiences but did not want an investigation into her family. Although there was no formal investigation, the survivor benefitted from reporting as she was able to use the threat of investigation against her father in an attempt to stop the abuse.

"I told my parents that if it got worse, I would take it to the police and take it further. So, in some ways, the very fact that I could report to the police, and the police station is very near my home ..."

The mugging survivor was happy with the police investigation in her case...

The mugging survivor felt that the police did everything they could during the course of the investigation into her case, working in a timely manner and keeping her informed at each stage.

"I was happy with what they did"

...she also went to court, and the process was not wholly negative despite an unfavourable verdict

The same survivor experienced the court process and was pleased to have been offered a pre-court visit to prepare. Although the court location was eventually changed (and the survivor was not offered another pre-visit to the new court), she felt that the initial visit was beneficial in helping her feel less daunted by the prospect of giving evidence.

"The young lady from Victim Support arranged to meet me at ... court maybe a week before the scheduled date. And she walked me through it all. But then it got changed ..."

"[The pre-court visit was useful] because I wasn't intimidated ... I'd been in court before ..."

Less positively, the case was heard during the Covid-19 pandemic, which the survivor felt had affected communications and timeliness. For example, court dates were moved, but she was not informed of these changes until she contacted Witness Care herself.

"When I rang, they said it wouldn't be that week, she said it had moved. At that point I was stunned because if I hadn't made that call, when would I have been informed?"

The survivor was also not informed of the court outcome until she contacted the police officer involved in the case. She understood the officer's reason for the miscommunication but was nonetheless frustrated that no-one had been in touch.

"It was only when I rang the policeman involved, he had been on holiday that week and he was very apologetic that nobody had been in touch. The tone of his voice was frustration for him"

"I would have liked to have been notified of the outcome"

Also, in relation to the outcome (a not guilty verdict), the survivor and the witness to the crime were ultimately informed that they did not need to give evidence as their *"statements would stand"*. While at the time she was relieved, the survivor came to regret her decision as she felt that if the jury had been able to see her vulnerability, they might have come to a different conclusion.

"At that point I was frustrated with myself that I hadn't insisted on giving my evidence because I thought if the Jury saw a 70-year-old white haired victim they may have thought different ... at the time I was incredibly relieved I didn't have to. It was only in hindsight I suddenly became very brave"

Accessing support

Two of the survivors were referred to Victim Support by the police

Two survivors were referred to Victim Support by the police. Despite some initial misgivings, the victim of mugging decided to accept the support on offer and was once again pleasantly surprised with how helpful it was. They particularly praised the patience of the volunteer and the seriousness with which they took the incident, and the fact that the survivor could talk about what had happened and its impacts without *"burdening"* her family.

"[They referred me to] Victim Support ... I'd say around six weeks [later] I was contacted by [them]. Yet again I thought it was a box ticking exercise but then I thought, 'Yes, I would like victim support'. Because I was still very shaky over it"

"Prior to the visit to the crown court, I had conversations with the lady from Victim Support and she let me waffle on and on to let me get it out. She was incredibly non-judgemental ... Not once did she make me feel that my case was trivial ... They said that afterwards I might feel bad for a while and not to be afraid to contact them ... I think it met my needs very well. Considering I didn't think it would have any effect at all ... I think it was because I could express my worries and anxiety to the young lady I spoke to and I didn't have to burden family ... You referred to it as informal counselling and that's what it was"

Another survivor was offered Victim Support after she had been targeted for theft on public transport. She also considered it beneficial, appreciating the understanding she was shown.

“They were very good. They understood the physical and mental impact of this.”

“It met my needs completely. They said it happened before and could happen again and were here for you. They were very sorry it happened, and they believed me”

The remaining survivor sought therapy herself

The survivor of sexual abuse sought therapy herself, which improved her mental health drastically and helped her overcome the suicidal thoughts she had battled with for as long as she could remember.

“We talked about all this and ... it was the first time I stopped wanting to die on a daily basis. And it wasn’t until it stopped, I realised that had been the soundtrack of my life since I was sexually abused ... so in the context of just chatting ... I remember one day thinking, ‘Oh my God. That soundtrack has stopped.’ And then I realised how long I’d carried it ... You get out of a situation, and you see how extreme it’s been ...”

When asked about further support survivors should receive, the same participant responded with the following lengthy ‘shopping list’ underpinned by more information and education about the different forms of, and drivers for, violence against women and girls, and strong policies and strategies to combat it.

“My great shopping list is I think there needs to be a cohesive, coherent far-ranging top down, bottom-up approach to male violence. That means we need to look at all the organs of state ... schools ... universities and we have to look at families and we have to have an integrated policy. So, the kind of things that would have made a huge difference ... If somebody had told me about male violence ... the drivers of male violence ...

So, my big idea is we need to stop looking at victims and start looking at the cause and the problem. We need knowledge, we need information. We need to look at all the steps needed to dismantle the drivers. We need education in courts and police ...

What would have made a difference to me is the kind of policies ... that are frank about male violence and sexual violence ... actions that I believe if they had been in place at the time this was happening to me, I would have known that this was wrong ... I would have known who to go to and I might have gone to a police force that wasn’t misogynistic ... and wasn’t buying into male violence themselves ... Also ... when I look at the drivers for male behaviour, I notice the norms for women fit them. So, as violent men are taught to be aggressive, and justify violence in their traditional roles, effectively the subordination of women is fine ...

If I had a society which was frank about the problem, frank about the unacceptability of it, that saw the cost to the NHS, never mind to the women and children ... it would have been an entirely different world; a world in which being violent and sexually abusive towards girls and women would have been so much harder because it would have meant that every person in the country would know that they had invested in stamping out this kind of treatment"

Positively, the survivor said that:

"... this is a good conversation that society is beginning to have, that MOPAC is having ... These are conversations that need to be had for women to identify what has happened to them"

Final thoughts

Two of the three survivors felt they would report again in future

One older survivor said she would probably not report any further abuse in future due to her perceptions of the police as a "group of men" that is as likely to be as misogynistic as any other.

"I'm not sure I would go to the police because I know they're just a group of men and I know that they're as likely to be violent or to be abusive or to be victim blaming as any other group of men ..."

The other two, though, felt that the police did everything they could to support them as victims of violence against women, and that as a result they would report any further criminality or abuse in future.

"I found them helpful, and they did what they were supposed to do"

"What the police tried to achieve; I don't think they could have done any more"

"My experience is that I would still go again if I have a problem now ... I feel encouraged by the general atmosphere of acceptance"

"What the police tried to achieve; I don't think they could have done any more ... I would [report again]. The officers I had contact with, I was relieved to have contact with them ... I wish people with more serious issues would have the experience I had with the police ... generally, I thought I was treated well"

Sex Worker

Main findings from one in-depth interview

Introduction

This chapter reports the views and experiences of a sex worker, who was interviewed in Polish (her first language) in early January 2022. The interview was undertaken by ORS with the assistance of a translator following the same general topic guide as the other interviews and focus groups.

For context, the survivor came to the UK from Poland in her early 20s. She was aware that her move to the UK was for sex work. However, on arriving in the UK she was exposed to both financial and physical abuse.

Main Findings

Recognising abuse

The survivor did not recognise criminality or abuse at first as she had 'chosen' to be a sex worker

The survivor came to the UK around seven years ago: she knew she was travelling to be a sex worker and insisted there were no hidden motives behind her move. On arrival, she was housed in a flat with five other working girls, and after two weeks was moved to a house, where she shared the ground floor with two or three other women. She explained that while working as a sex worker in the UK, she has been controlled by a male who she refers to as her boss/landlord.

As demonstrated in the examples below, the survivor has endured violence and verbal aggression from her boss/landlord and from clients. She also said that her boss would conceal information about her finances and her rights to work within the UK and threaten her with deportation should she 'step out of line'.

"With regard to the landlord, the boss, yes, that would be an experience of violence"

"... the boss actually became quite aggressive towards us. He has taken our money. He ... asked us to pay a deposit but we never received the deposit money back because we ended up running away from him and we had to pack our belongings in black rubbish bags. [We] quickly disappeared from the area within half an hour. We took a taxi ... to a colleague from work who rented us a room to stay"

"With regards to one client, prior to my arrival I sent my services of things that could take place. This client wanted more. I could not agree to that. He became aggressive towards me but not physical; verbal anger and waving hands"

“A second incident was a client who was not happy about the fact that his time ran out, so he was asked to leave. He was so dissatisfied about it that he came back about an hour later and he threw a bucket of paint on my front door ... ”

“The last one, was a verbal one; another example when a client ran out of time and he was extremely unhappy about that so when he left, he shouted really loudly, ‘This is where escort is’ ... That would potentially have been very damaging to me but because if it was a morning time it was when people were at work ... so, thank God people were at work and not able to hear that because if they did that would classify as another burnt address”

When asked whether she considered these actions to be criminal or abusive, the survivor explained that while she does now, at the time she did not as it had been her choice to undertake sex work.

“I was not abused because I knew the reasons why I came to this country, but I did not like the way we were treated”

She also explained that her inability to speak English had prevented her from learning more about her situation: that is, had she been able to easily research her rights, she may have acknowledged the abuse earlier.

“To start with I didn’t think that that was a crime but as I get to know things and see things and understand things, I started to see this as a form of crime and right now, yes, the way I was treated to start with I could agree that was a form of crime”

“Yes, I could agree there was some element of abuse. I mean, I could actually find some more information by myself. However, because of the language barrier I was not quite able to do so”

Once she understood that she had some rights and a degree of control over her situation, she and her sex worker colleagues were able to escape the control of their abusive boss/landlord.

“... we decided, ‘No more’. We decided to work on our own account”

Disclosing and reporting

Fear of revenge and retribution are significant reporting barriers for sex workers

The survivor did not report the above incidents to the police at the time, nor did she feel she would be inclined to do so now, mainly due to the threat of retribution and malicious action from those involved in her move to the UK and her subsequent sex work. Indeed, she once again noted how her boss/landlord had constantly told her not to speak to the police, threatening her with deportation if she did.

“We were living under a constant threat”

“... the man that organised the initial arrangements, he took our original documents. He has our address where I come from in Poland. If he couldn't find us in UK, he could look in Poland and I would only expect a horrible revenge from that, so no”

“He also has our photographs, and he has in the past advertised on the internet our services so we know that he can be repeating that. Also, he has threatened us ... the ex-boss was quite a violent man ... We heard from other girls that some of them also wanted to separate or did whatever to make him angry to a point where he went to their flat and with a baseball bat, he ... destroyed their place. And he threatened us that if we don't come back to him ... he would do that to our address ...”

With specific regard to client abuse, this has also gone un-reported for fear of clients being contacted by the police and seeking their revenge as they know where she lives and works.

“If I report [the] police will investigate further. If they find out they'll probably think it came from me and they know my address and the number of my door; they could come back and do damage or revenge on me. So, I am frightened to report because of that”

The police, it was felt, should demonstrate understanding of sex workers' circumstances

Although she had never reported anything to them, the survivor highlighted a negative experience of the police, who raided a property where she was living with a few other sex workers. She felt they dealt with the situation in an unnecessarily aggressive and forceful manner, treating her and the other women as criminals and causing them a great deal of embarrassment and shame.

“There was a really loud banging on the door. There were seven or eight police officers, all male apart from one female. We did not want to open the door. We were frightened ... they have ... created a confusion and an unnecessary loud entry. If they came in quietly, everything could be dealt with quietly and on a mutual basis ... and talked to us one-to-one, steadily ... they would probably have had better results and gain more information and the whole incident would have not had so much impact on us”

“Definitely [felt treated] as a criminal ... because [of] the way they approached that ... banging on the door so loud that it alerts all the street that something was going on ... After when they left, we still had to live at this address, and it was embarrassing for us even to go and buy a bottle of milk or bread because we felt like we were criminals”

The survivor felt that the encounter may have been more positive had female officers been present – though she still felt she would not have spoken to the police about her situation given her language

difficulties and due to the presence of a fellow sex worker who would likely have informed their landlord/boss.

“If there were policewomen, that would also have been helpful”

“First of all, there was no translator at the time. Secondly, one of the girls that was present at the time was a very close friend to the boss ... and even if I knew how to speak English, I would have not said anything in front of her”

This experience has led the survivor to view the police negatively, because of their unprofessionalism and the “derogatory” way they treated her and her co-workers. Moreover, she felt they demonstrated a lack of understanding of the consequences of their actions, for the house then had to be ‘burned’ (i.e., abandoned) and the girls moved to another address from where they could continue to work.

“They have not been professional and for sure they did not do a good job.”

“... They were not discrete and that prevented us from carrying on work[ing] and to live at this address. It’s not only us. I have a friend who police visited as well, and they did this thing in exactly the same manner and that flat was burnt address”

Anonymous reporting mechanisms are preferred

When asked what might encourage sex workers to report criminality or abuse, the survivor suggested an anonymous website or helpline – with a translation facility for those with little or no English.

“If there was a special website where, for example, you could easily report that kind of incident to the police, then perhaps that would be easier, and I would be more willing to do so. Or a special phonenumber ... It would help I think if it was anonymous; more girls would be willing to report and warn each other. Let’s face it, this is not a profession that anyone is proud of and ... so that would be better”

Accessing support

The support received by the survivor has been welcome, but her language difficulties have prevented her from accessing further help

The Survivor was given information about National Ugly Mugs by her GP, from whom she received financial support during the first national Covid-19 lockdown.

“A friend took me to a clinic that is catered to girls like us and [the doctor] gave me this leaflet and I found it in that leaflet”

“I received a voucher worth £40 which I was able to use in Tesco. It was just at the beginning of pandemic, so I was working but there were no clients.”

Although the support she received through NUM was positive, she felt she has missed out on further help due to language barriers.

“There might be some other help. They are online and I should go and check, but I don’t go very often because it’s all in English so that it is a circle that is closed to me”

In terms of further help (if translation could be offered), the survivor felt that she would prefer online peer groups offering emotional support. More practically, she wanted information about sex workers’ rights, lists of the accommodation agencies and individuals who are most likely to rent to sex workers, and signposting toward alternative employment opportunities.

“If there were groups, yes, I could possibly join but I would only join them online. It’s obvious why I would not see the groups face-to-face ...”

“... if there was a further list of civil rights for girls like us that recognised what we are allowed or what law is behind us ... so we have some kind of reference to this particular profession and that we have some knowledge ... preferably in Polish”

“Another helpful thing for girls like myself, for example, [would be] that NUM ... had a page with a list of agencies that would be more willing to rent rooms or houses to girls like us. Perhaps we could pay them higher rents or higher deposits but if that kind of list could be provided ... whenever we want to rent, there is always a problem, and we end up having to share accommodation and often ... we end up paying a lot of money to that person who is allowing us to live there and to work from there ...”

“I do have another job, which is [a] cleaner. So, I do that early in the morning and the escort part is from afternoon to evening but I am willing to look for more work as a cleaner and if [anyone] could suggest any website even in English, that would offer jobs of cleaning nature or anything”

The survivor agreed that more opportunities to learn English would benefit women in her position – and that these should ideally be available in the daytime to account for sex workers’ working patterns.

“It would be very helpful. I did join a private course, but it didn’t go for long and it also was evening hours and evening hours are important for me with regards to earnings. I would be willing to go on some learning English course if there’s some information on where and how we can access, that would be helpful ...”

The ClientEye app is an important source of information for sex workers

The survivor also highlighted the importance of the ClientEye app, a service that allows sex workers to add unpleasant and potentially dangerous clients to a database as a warning to others. She checks this service whenever she has a new client.

“There have been two or three incidents where I was possibly abused, and I have not reported that to the police, but I have entered on this ... you can enter the telephone number of the client ... It’s like a warning for other ladies ...”

“Client Eye is an application ... I am able to add names and numbers that other girls should be warned of”

However, while ClientEye is beneficial in investigating new clients, the survivor acknowledged that it does not eliminate the dangers posed by existing ones.

“You can never tell, but if I see a report on a certain person which is a new client then I will not have a meeting with that person. But with regards to old clients, you never know what to expect, anyone could become odd or dangerous or violent”

Areas for consideration

Key areas for consideration

Ensuring survivors are able to recognise abuse by...

- Encouraging education within schools on recognising, for example, coercive control and other forms of domestic abuse, sexual abuse/violence, and HBV
- Continuing to engage with trusted individuals and organisations within communities to educate people - especially young people - on the dangers of FGM (and also to ensure potential perpetrators know FGM is a criminal act in the UK)
- Targeting education and information at those coming to the UK from countries and cultures that still practice FGM

Ensuring survivors are more easily able to disclose/report by...

- Ensuring understanding of how abuse is viewed and managed within different cultures in an attempt to understand (and overcome) some survivors' reluctance to report
- Making medical professionals more alert to the possibility of HBV and encouraging them to make provisions for women to see a doctor independently of their partner
- Encouraging GPs to make periodic contact with those coming to the UK on a spousal visa
- Providing anonymous reporting mechanisms for sex workers - with a translation facility for those with little or no English

Improving the reporting process by...

- Putting safeguarding measures in place when required
- Explaining 'next steps' to survivors
- Being mindful of the impact of trauma on recollection
- Modifying behaviours for those who are fearful of authority figures (attending to them in civil uniform for example)

Improving police investigations by...

- Ensuring timely and frequent communication with survivors throughout
- Ensuring survivors feel believed and do not have their experiences minimised
- Ensuring survivors feel that all relevant evidence has been considered, and explaining why if it cannot be
- Warning survivors that their mobile phones are likely to be taken for evidence collection, and offering explanations as to why

Improving the court process by...

- Ensuring timely and frequent communication with survivors throughout
- Offering pre-trial visits and special measures to all survivors
- Educating the judiciary on how abuse is viewed and managed within different cultures in an attempt to understand, for example, survivors' inability to leave abusive relationships
- Informing survivors of trial outcomes as soon as is possible

Improving the support offered to survivors by...

- Ensuring all survivors are offered support by police officers, and explicitly talked through how to access it
- Improving officers' knowledge of the culturally appropriate and abuse-specific services available in particular areas, so that survivors can receive support from someone who understands their language and culture and/or has lived experience
- Ensuring, where possible, timely access to specialist support
- Exploring the provision of in-person and online 'safe spaces' that offer information, advice and opportunities for survivors to discuss their experiences and options
- Educating medical practitioners on how to handle FGM as sensitively and with as much understanding as possible to avoid making survivors feel like criminals
- Offering women moving to the UK from abroad information about laws and processes and how to contact the police, perhaps within a 'welcome' information pack
- Ensuring women have support to deal with immigration issues when required
- Improving knowledge of the ClientEye app among sex workers
- Enabling the provision of information about sex workers' rights, lists of the agencies and individuals who are most likely to rent to them, and signposting toward alternative employment opportunities

Improving the response to complaints by...

- Ensuring a timely response
- Taking ownership for poor performance

Improving the overall victim/survivor experience through...

- Effective, empathetic and supportive response that is free from bias - unconscious or otherwise
- More frequent and better communication (including welfare checks) from the police to ensure they feel informed and cared for
- Considering the provision of police station-based victim advocates
- Providing 'Victim Information Packs' to help people navigate the criminal justice system
- Offering more interpretation services to ensure survivors' voices can be heard in their own languages
- More specialist female officers, who can provide a more empathetic and informed response to women reporting domestic and sexual abuse
- More diversity among police officers to ensure a better response to victims and survivors from different backgrounds
- More and better domestic abuse and sexual violence training for all police officers so they can recognise and understand the nuances of survivors' situations, and help them recognise abuse
- Ensuring police officers always look beyond the 'surface' of an incident (to identify coercive control or HBV, for example)
- Working to build and regain the trust of women and girls, especially those from minority communities