

MAYOR OF LONDON

Survivors' Consultation

LISTENING TO WOMEN AND GIRLS
AFFECTED BY GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

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Greater London Authority
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1. Foreword – Claire Waxman, Victims' Commissioner for London

Since being appointed Victims' Commissioner, I have been clear that in order to commission and run services well, and serve the people of London, we need to listen to victims' voices and understand their experiences.

The Survivors' Consultation which took place as part of the development of the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy is a key way of ensuring that victims' views were front and centre when developing the strategy.

In total, 15 focus groups and 19 one-to-one interviews were held with 133 survivors of violence and abuse. Additionally, 87 survivors took part in the online survey. The survivors were generous enough to share their experiences with us in order that we could set out clear recommendations which could be considered as part of the strategy.

While the VAWG strategy may not be able to take forward all the survivors' recommendations, I – as independent Victims' Commissioner – will continue to advocate for the voice of victims to be heard and in particular campaign and push for what came out of the survivors' consultation.

Many of the recommendations involve better training and working practices for a number of agencies. While MOPAC can do much to bring together these organisations as part of their convening role there is a job for all agencies to do in looking at their own approach to victims.

I would like to thank Imkaan for reaching out to survivors to begin these discussions and for the research that went into this consultation document.

However, the biggest thank you goes to the women and girls for having the courage to share their stories, some with very fresh experiences of escaping the cycle of violence. Their ability to communicate what needs to improve, while still recovering from their ordeals, goes to show the strength of feeling they have to make sure the services for women who come after them are appropriate, and help them cope, recover and survive

Ultimately all these women shared one universal desire – to be free. As Victims' Commissioner for London, I want to ensure victims have every opportunity to realise that wish.

Claire Waxman
Victims' Commissioner for London

2. ABOUT THE SURVIVORS' CONSULTATION

“My father was abusing me from when I was a little girl, I was 5 years old. I told my mother and the priest but nobody believed me. When I left home I thought I would be OK, and then I got married and he started hurting me over the smallest thing, you know. That’s when I started drinking and it all got too much. Now I know why and I understand what’s happened.

Every day is a struggle.”

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, is fully committed to tackling all forms of violence against women and girls. In his Police and Crime Plan published in March 2017 he committed to refreshing the London wide strategy to ensure a renewed focus was placed on the issue.

In preparation for the drafting of this strategy, MOPAC commissioned Imkaan to undertake widespread consultation with survivors to hear directly their experiences of violence and abuse and their journey to seek, and receive, help.

Between August and September 2017, survivors of violence and abuse were invited to attend focus groups across London. Conducted by Imkaan and attended by Claire Waxman, Victims' Commissioner, these focus groups gave a real opportunity for views to be aired on a range of issues – from the nature of VAWG itself, through challenges for specific groups of women, to the help they received.

In addition to the focus groups, an online survey was conducted to further gather the views of survivors across the capital.

In total, 15 focus groups and 19 one-to-one interviews were held with 133 survivors of VAWG and 87 took part in the online survey. The majority of women who took part were aged 25-32 (28%), followed by those aged 33-40 (23%) and 41-48 (22%). Smaller numbers were aged 49-56 (12%), 16-24 (10%), 57-63 (2%) and 64-70 (2%).

88% of women identified as heterosexual, 6% identified as bisexual and 3% identified as lesbian. 35% of women identified as having a disability or chronic health issue and 80% of women were BME.

Throughout the survivors' consultation, a number of points came up time and again. These points were crafted into recommendations which informed the development of the Mayor's strategy to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls.

The recommendations are an amalgamation of the conversations had across the months of consultation. In order to further test them, Claire Waxman, the Victims' Commissioner had a final survivors' roundtable on 8th November 2017 to present their recommendations to the women who had taken part, ensuring the feedback had been captured appropriately and the recommendations reflected the experiences the women so generously shared with us.

Above all, the women wanted to ensure that their voices and experiences remain central to prevention, protection and provision of support services in London. It reflects survivors' overwhelming desire for ongoing consultation and engagement to ensure their views – as service users - are valued and used to educate, advise and inform services and agencies to improving them.

THE WOMEN WE SPOKE TO

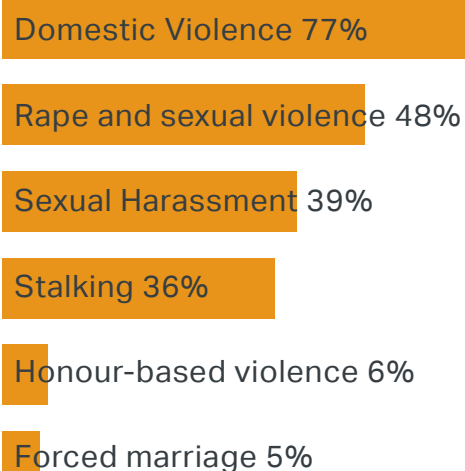
Experiences of VAWG

There was no single, shared story of the violence and abuse experienced by survivors or their use of services. There were, however, many shared experiences in respect to the challenges they faced in accessing support needed.

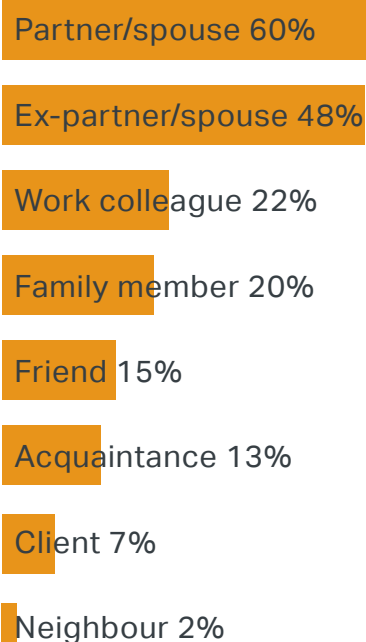
Of the many depressing truths that came from the consultation and survey about the survivors' experience of VAWG itself, central was the nature of the violence they suffered. Repeated victimisation, domestic and sexual violence and stalking from partners, ex-partners on a daily basis came out strongly through the consultation and survey.

The women and girls participating in this consultation shared difficult and painful memories of the violence and abuse they had suffered. This highlighted both the complexities and multiple forms of VAWG they had experienced as well as the on-going impact of violence on their emotional and physical health and well-being.

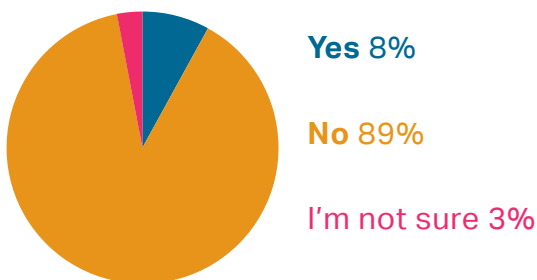
WHAT TYPE OF VAWG HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED?



HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED VAWG FROM:



WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF VAWG A ONE-OFF INCIDENT?



HOW FREQUENTLY HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED VAWG?

Daily or almost daily 34%

On a weekly basis 26%

Once in several weeks 14%

About once a month 7%

Once in several months 10%

Once a year 7%

Less than once a year 2%

HAVE YOU BEEN TARGETED BY THE SAME PERPETRATOR MORE THAN ONCE?

YES

89%

NO

5%

Survivors spoke of physical abuse, coercive control, stalking and sexual violence whilst others talked about their experiences of child abuse, female genital mutilation and forced marriage. Often, women were experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of violence and abuse. Some survivors disclosed having suffered ongoing VAWG in several relationships, and of needing to be supported for years of cumulative abuse.

Many survivors spoke of not always recognising their experiences as abusive or being able to name their abuse, which often made them reluctant or unable to seek help.

When survivors eventually did seek help, they found specialist women's services like refuges, advocacy, counselling and peer support services helpful in supporting them to name their experiences as abusive.

Most survivors said that naming the abuse and recognising their experiences as abusive was vital to enable them to begin recovering and moving on, and that this often took some time. Once they recognised their experiences were abusive and they had decided to seek help the response of the agency they disclosed to had a huge impact on their next steps.

“I didn’t know a husband could rape you. He told me I don’t have any rights to say no, he’s my husband and he can do what he wanted. It wasn’t until I came here that I knew my rights and I now know what rape means.”

Experiences reporting VAWG

When survivors do finally gain the courage to leave the situation they are in, there is another immediate hurdle to get over – that of reporting. Throughout our conversations, many survivors gave examples of being disbelieved, judged or let down by professionals in public services when reporting their abuse.

Survivors wanted agencies to understand the abuse they experience, and recognise its impact and the links between different forms of violence against women and girls, including domestic violence and sexual violence.

By understanding these different forms of abuse, there was an expectation that the authorities may then be able to respond better to them. A particular case in point was around coercive control which has only recently been recognised as a form of VAWG.

“I was totally isolated. He broke me with mental and sexual abuse, I’m left with no self-esteem, no self-worth, no confidence. I felt like I couldn’t survive without him. I still feel he has total control over me now even though I’ve left, I know he can kill me anytime he wants to.”

The nature of coercive control - and the fear it causes - played a big part in survivors' ability to seek help, access services and therefore to recover and move on from the abuse. Survivors who participated in the focus groups spoke about their every movement being controlled and having very little space for action or help seeking.

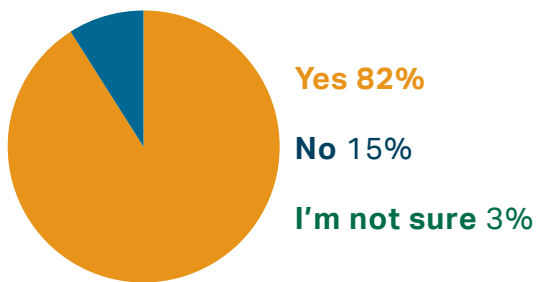
Often survivors felt that services would minimise their abuse, or not respond appropriately to the fear and coercive control they lived with. From the services and agencies accessed by these women, there wasn't an understanding that coercive and controlling behaviour was actually VAWG – as such a clear recommendation that came out of the consultation was around educating authorities and services on this form of VAWG.

“There’s a big misunderstanding about why women don’t report, the police and council asked me why I’d not reported sooner... That just knocks you back, it felt to me like they were blaming me for something I’d not done, just like the abuse all over again. They need to understand the emotional manipulation and the control going on.”

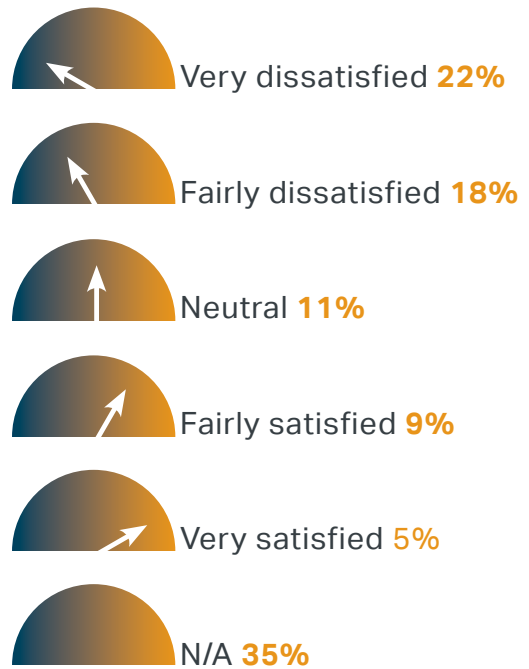
Having said that, many women spoke about how they were denied independent access to even the most basic of healthcare, as part of the abuse, and that therefore no amount of training or awareness raising would have made a difference to enabling disclosure. Any training or awareness around VAWG therefore needs to be sensitive to this.

“Women who engage with services are the tip of the iceberg, all those women living with this who aren’t engaging because of fear. You’re not going to go to mental health services or social services because he’s told you they’ll section you or take your kids from you. He tells you you’re a bad mother so you can’t get help because you’re worried about that. So, you sit alone not knowing where to go, until you’re at breaking point.”

ARE THERE ANY OTHER EXPERIENCES OF VAWG YOU HAVE NOT REPORTED TO THE POLICE?



Thinking about the most recent time you reported your experiences of VAWG, how satisfied were you with the responses and/or help you received from the **Police**?



Thinking about the most recent time you reported your experiences of VAWG, how satisfied were you with the responses and/or help you received from the **Local Authority?**

Very dissatisfied 12%

Fairly dissatisfied 8%

Neutral 12%

Fairly satisfied 6%

Very satisfied 2%

N/A 60%

Thinking about the most recent time you reported your experiences of VAWG, how satisfied were you with the responses and/or help you received from an **organisation offering help to survivors of VAWG ?**

Very dissatisfied 7%

Fairly dissatisfied 7%

Neutral 7%

Fairly satisfied 19%

Very satisfied 26%

N/A 33%

3. SURVIVORS' RECOMMENDATIONS

SERVICES

1. Commission sustainable accessible local services for VAWG survivors which:-
 - i. Promote equal access to safety, support, protection and justice e.g. organisations led 'by and for' BME women and girls, LBT, young women and disabled women, those with insecure immigration status and refugee and asylum seekers.
 - ii. Are responsive to the specific needs of each survivor group.
 - iii. Are independently regulated and accountable with a clear and transparent complaints process.
 - iv. Provide dedicated and specialist services for the different survivors' groups including children and young people impacted by or experiencing domestic abuse, sexual violence, FGM, forced marriage, trafficking, sexual exploitation, stalking or harassment.
 - v. Provide dedicated and specialist support across the different forms of VAWG, where possible in one place. e.g. rape crisis centres, refuge accommodation, community outreach, legal and welfare advice, therapeutic support and housing support.
2. Provide timely and effective counselling and therapeutic support for survivors.
3. Support independent, women's groups and peer support that reduce isolation and increase confidence, esteem, and empowerment.
4. Ensure there is a commitment from all commissioned services on improvement and ongoing training on all aspects of VAWG which are informed by survivors' experiences.

INFORMATION

5. Improve awareness of VAWG and access to information for survivors by:
 - i. Leading on a London-wide media and publicity campaign which raises awareness about different forms of VAWG – so those who may not immediately label what is happening to them as VAWG, understand what VAWG is - and where survivors can get support.
 - ii. Providing a one stop shop – such as a website – where information such as where to get help, hear from other survivors, their options should they leave and on their rights and entitlements when navigating the criminal justice service, as well as signposting to support services is available.
 - iii. Ensuring there are robust and sustainable training programmes for professionals to ensure service levels, and understanding of specific issues VAWG survivors may face, remains high.

CULTURAL CHANGE

6. Put a greater emphasis on preventing VAWG from happening in the first place, through work in schools and the community and by increasing awareness of the issues – particularly those on social media - and help available.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE, CIVIL COURT AND STATUTORY PARTNERS PROCESSES

7. Work with the CJS to ensure they make tangible improvements in the processes around criminal, civil and family court practice, CAFCASS and safe child contact for children in cases of VAWG.
8. Work with the MPS and CJS to improve their understanding about VAWG, to amend their responses and processes for cases which deal with VAWG and in particular how they deal with survivors.
9. Work in partnership with statutory services including local authority, social services and housing, health service providers and others such as Job Centres to improve their responses to survivors of VAWG.

PERPETRATORS

10. Work with the police, CJS and other partners to stop perpetrators' repeat behaviour.

4. MAKING THE CASE FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

“First, he terrorises you and then the system terrorises you. It was only when I came here that I felt someone listened. There were days I couldn’t speak about it anymore but the ISVA was there and she spoke to them for me.”

4.1. SERVICES

Services – provided by the police, local authorities or other organisations - are the front door for women to access the resources, skills and support they need to move on and out of the cycle of violence and intimidation they are in.

It is not surprising, then, that throughout our consultation, services and the support they provide was a core topic of conversation. The picture on provision was mixed – with many women finding it difficult to access services and being dissatisfied with the services when they did. Many felt this may be down to the funding and resources the services had rather than the individuals they interacted with on a daily basis.

Having said that, what was identified through conversations was a clear need for a transparent complaints process for the women who use these services, should they need to raise concerns. Indeed, a way to independently regulate services such as refuges and verify services they are providing would go some way to assure vulnerable women of the quality and professionalism of the services they are trusting to help them exit their situation.

Throughout the consultation, survivors were keen that services listen to them to improve their offerings. That includes being less homogenous and more tailored to the client groups with differing and complex needs that they serve.

HAVE YOU SOUGHT ONGOING SUPPORT FROM ANY OF THE FOLLOWING?

An organisation offering help to survivors of VAWG **91%**



Police **15%**



Other organisation **15%**



Local authority **12%**



How easy was it for you to access support from the Police?

Fairly hard 40%

Fairly easy 40%

Very easy 20%

How easy was it for you to access support for the Local Authority?

Very hard 50%

Fairly hard 50%

How easy was it for you to access support from an organisation offering help to survivors of VAWG?

Very hard 10%

Fairly hard 26%

Neutral 13%

Fairly easy 35%

Very easy 16%

Have you been refused access to services before?

Yes 17%

No 72%

I'm not sure 11%

“They don’t judge me. They let me talk. They support me and we work through what can help.”

How satisfied were you with how long it took to start receiving support?

Very dissatisfied 13%

Fairly dissatisfied 4%

Neutral 26%

Fairly satisfied 30%

Very satisfied 28%

How satisfied were you with the support you received?

Very dissatisfied 13%

Fairly dissatisfied 2%

Neutral 10%

Fairly satisfied 33%

Very satisfied 42%

Was there anything missing from the support you received that you think would have been helpful?

Yes 44%

No 24%

I'm not sure 31%

SUSTAINABLE, ACCESSIBLE, LOCAL SERVICES

Survivors spoke movingly of the role of specialist "ending VAWG" services and the support they had received. It had helped them move towards independence, autonomy and a life free from violence and abuse. Many of the survivors spoke of these services as a lifeline, a last hope and the reason they were still alive or with their children.

In particular, women spoke of the importance of having someone who understood their experience but also who could advocate on their behalf when necessary. Some survivors also talked about the importance of simply being listened to and how counselling was helping them.

Whilst many survivors recounted positive experiences of specialist services they were aware that these services were not always well regarded by other service providers e.g. police and the courts. Many survivors wanted to see these specialist services given professional recognition by other agencies for the services they provide and the expertise that they bring to this area of work.

In each of the focus groups and the telephone interview fears were expressed by many of the survivors about the impact of austerity measures and cuts to services which may result in the loss of these services and other sources of invaluable help and advice. Some survivors were concerned that funding cuts would mean the severing of a vital lifeline for them and being forced back into the abusive cycle.

EQUAL ACCESS

Survivors spoke of how different life experiences and different identities should not act as barriers to seeking help. Many felt strongly that agencies labelled some groups as 'hard to reach' which meant in reality that services were not meeting their needs, or that services were not set up to go and help women on an equal basis.

Several issues were identified by survivors as additional barriers to accessing help and support, these were based on their identities or life experience – for example BME women, LBT, young and disabled women, older women, those with insecure immigration status such as refugee and asylum seekers.

Regardless of the survivor's background, there was a clear recommendation that equal access to services and a clear push towards equal experience of these services should be sought.

RECOMMENDATION 1a)

Commission sustainable accessible local services for VAWG survivors which promote equal access to safety, support, protection and justice e.g. organisations led 'by and for' BME women and girls, LBT, young women and disabled women, those with insecure immigration status and refugee and asylum seekers.

“BY AND FOR”

Looking at how services were provided, again the different groups suggested that those who knew them best were those who were from a similar background. For example, commissioning BME-led organisations, to work with BME women a) ensured diversity of provision and b) was more likely to provide a culturally appropriate service for women using their services.

Survivors highlighted the importance of being able to access support from BME led ‘by and for’ “ending VAWG” organisations that understood the myriad of issues they faced. This was not simply about the ‘community’, ‘family’ or ‘religious’ contexts. Women spoke about feeling safer and more trusting of BME-led women’s organisations with, for example, information about their immigration context and/or sharing their individual experiences of racism including increasing incidents of racism and islamophobia in the context of Brexit. BME-led ‘by and for’ organisations provide a space where women felt ‘safe’, heard and understood.

“By and For” services are able to respond to the complex, intersecting needs of survivors which women and girls experience within a broader context of structural inequality.

This is true of LBT, disabled women, those experiencing FGM, honour based violence or those with insecure immigration status – as well as many others.

Being able to access services that understand the context in which the abuse takes place and the ‘cultural’ nuances that can be part of the abusive pattern enables women to disclose in the knowledge that they are understood and believed.

“The women in this service saved my life. I couldn’t cope and they gave me my life back. I was living in an unreal situation and they understood. They made me feel less isolated and helped me find myself again.”

RECOMMENDATION 1b)

Commission sustainable accessible local services for VAWG survivors which are responsive to the specific needs of each survivor group.

RESPONSIVE TO THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF EACH SURVIVOR GROUP

We spoke to women from a number of survivor groups to understand their particular needs and what worked, or didn't work, about their experiences with specialist "ending VAWG" services.

These specific conversations with BME Women, non-UK born BME women, older women, children and young women, women experiencing familial abuse, disabled women, LBT women, women involved in prostitution and trafficking, women with multiple and intersecting needs and women with insecure immigration status have been laid out in appendix 5.

The main points were as follows:-

- Each specific named survivor group felt that their particular and specific needs weren't even identified, let alone met.

- The groups felt that organisations and authorities provided a homogenous service which they should be grateful to receive. There was no feedback loop to make any of the services more culturally or socially relevant to them.
- The groups thought that there was an inbuilt prejudice in many of the services towards their particular situation – such BME women, LBT women, older women or women involved in prostitution.
- For those with additionally complex situations, such as children, those with insecure immigration statuses or those with transnational issues arise from VAWG, there was a clear feeling of being left alone on VAWG issues and being judged or put through the system.

The recommendation that came out of these conversations was for authorities and service providers to be more responsive to the individual and situation, rather than drive someone along a pathway they may not fit.

RECOMMENDATION 1c)

Commission sustainable accessible local services for VAWG survivors which are independently regulated and accountable with a clear and transparent complaints process.

INDEPENDENTLY REGULATED AND ACCOUNTABLE

The majority of women were complimentary about the services they accessed when exiting their situation. There were, however, some women who felt that the level of service they received when they accessed particular services exacerbated an already stressful situation. This led to this particular recommendation around regulation and complaints.

Services should be independently regulated and accountable for their actions. This would provide women who use them with a level of confidence in the service they will receive, the organisation's sustainability and their ability to help women in a vulnerable position.

Where services do get it wrong, there should be a clear and transparent complaints procedure. Currently, there is not. This leaves vulnerable women with little to no recourse on subpar services provided to them at an acute time of their lives.

This is not something that is going to happen overnight, but it should be something that a commissioner of a service should be able to look at holistically.

“I was at [xx]refuge and there was a problem with the electrics in the building. It was terrible: the building was unsafe and so we ended up, me and many other women and children sleeping on the ground floor, which was flooded, no electricity, rats, mice and cockroaches.

“It was disgusting and [xx] didn’t want to do anything about it. They said that it would be fixed but it wasn’t, so we got together and contacted the council and that caused bad feeling with [xx]”

RECOMMENDATION 1d)

Commission sustainable, accessible local services for VAWG survivors.

Provide dedicated and specialist services for each survivor group including children and young people impacted by, or experiencing, domestic abuse, sexual violence, FGM, forced marriage, trafficking, sexual exploitation, stalking or harassment.

DEDICATED AND SPECIALIST SERVICES FOR EACH SURVIVOR GROUP

Similar to recommendation 1b) this recommendation is about specifically ensuring that sustainable specialist services are commissioned which work with specific survivor groups. There was an acknowledgement that specialist services by their very nature would not get the footfall to become large scale providers of help and support but that didn't make them any less valuable. Particularly to those using the service.

A small sustainable – for sustainable, read 'sustainably funded over a period of time' – service which provided specialist care to a small group of survivors was inherently valuable to those clients although the service themselves may not have the resource to empirically quantify their value.

RECOMMENDATION 1e)

Commission sustainable accessible local services for VAWG survivors where possible in one place.

The nature of where services were provided was something that came up strongly with the survivors we spoke to, both in the roundtables and in the surveys. Survivors wanted to know that there were local services available to them. They didn't want to travel far to get help. They wanted the least possible disruption to their lives and those of their children.

Additionally, they suggested that if services were somehow grouped together in one place it would be easier to access and use them.

This does not jar with previous recommendations of specialist services – specialist services remain specialist. It simply suggests that when it comes to the experience of receiving services some consideration be given to how and where services are provided. Commissioners of these services could leverage their position to encourage bids which show a constructive working together of local, specialist services who put the pathway of the client at the front of their design rather than the administrative running of the service.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Provide timely and effective counselling and therapeutic support for survivors.

TIMELY AND EFFECTIVE

All survivors said they wanted services to listen to them and offer support based on their circumstances and needs. For some, it was simply a case of wanting an opportunity to disclose. For others, it was to ensure their entire situation – including cultural nuances – were taken into account when they were being helped. Survivors stated that services were not always available when they needed the support. For example, accessing refuges and other services is a particular problem for women who work; counselling services have such long waiting lists that many found it impossible to access therapeutic support; and there are significant delays with accessing ID documents.

“If you work you can’t access any help. Groups are held in the day and services close at 5. There’s just no help during the evenings or on weekend. You can’t go into a refuge and pay the rent if you work either, it’s just too expensive.”

RECOMMENDATION 3

Support independent, women's groups and peer support that reduce isolation and increase confidence, esteem, and empowerment.

“I wasn’t allowed friendships and the children weren’t allowed friendships. So the women I got to know through groups are so important to me now, I’ve made really strong friendships which I wasn’t allowed to do before.”

INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S GROUPS AND PEER SUPPORT

Meeting other survivors who had also experienced VAWG helped survivors recognise that their experience was not unique and reduced a sense of isolation. Many survivors spoke of how much they valued the peer support they received from accessing specialist “ending VAWG” services, individually or in groups.

Survivors recognised the need for peer support to increase women's awareness of specific VAWG issues such as FGM. For example, one woman became an FGM champion and campaigner to raise awareness among other women who were unaware of their rights. Two young women told us that although they were very appreciative of the support they had received from the women's organisations and groups that they were part of, they wanted groups that catered for them.

For others, groups were inaccessible or considered unhelpful, unless women were ready to talk to others.

Many survivors told us about how important drop-in centres, women's centres and places where they could meet other survivors could be to helping those who have experienced violence and abuse recover. They were places where survivors felt they learnt vital skills that gave them confidence and the ability to find work.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Ensure there is a commitment from all commissioned services on improvement and ongoing training on all aspects of VAWG which are informed by survivors' experiences.

IMPROVE TRAINING ON VAWG FOR ORGANISATIONS AND AGENCIES

Training for all service providers (including police, social services, health and education professionals) was a recurring theme throughout the consultation process. Many survivors stated that women's voluntary sector organisations would also benefit from additional training to understand the needs of specific groups of survivors including BME women, LBT women, young women and disabled women.

Survivors were concerned that agencies did not understand or were not aware of the dynamics and impact of violence and abuse. This affected the services they delivered to survivors but also agencies' ability to work together as they were approaching cases from different perspectives.

Many women also stated that training and improved understanding of the types of violence and abuse they suffer would enable services to better engage with survivors and improve service delivery.

“Professionals don't always know how to deal with disclosures, and aren't engaging with women who try to seek help.”

“Women only tell someone who they feel comfortable with, most professionals get minimal training on this.”

4.2. INFORMATION AND CULTURAL CHANGE

RECOMMENDATION 5

Improve awareness of VAWG and access to information for survivors:-

1. Leading on a London-wide media and publicity campaign which raises awareness about different forms of VAWG – so those who may not immediately label what is happening to them as VAWG, understand what VAWG is - and where survivors can get support.
2. Providing a one stop shop – such as a website – where information such as where to get help, hear from other survivors, their options should they leave and on their rights and entitlements when navigating the criminal justice service, as well as signposting to support services is available.

“Information about the help there is should be everywhere women go, like supermarkets, pharmacists, on radio, in local community halls and in every GP surgery...It should just be everywhere. The local school, shop, everywhere should have posters. It should be in your face all the time.”

LONDON-WIDE CAMPAIGN

Despite many years of raising awareness about violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, survivors in each of the focus groups said much more needed to be done to raise awareness of the different forms of abuse and where to seek advice. Some survivors said that as they were not suffering physical violence they did not recognise their own experiences in the images of domestic abuse victims.

Survivors wanted to see more advertising on television and radio – not just as part of a short-term campaign – but ongoing so that they could access the information needed without any risks from the perpetrator. Comparisons were made with child abuse campaigns and advertising. Although some survivors recognised that the child abuse advertisements on television were focused on funding and donations they felt that the campaign was still able to convey the different forms of abuse and name an organisation that could help.

INFORMATION

Survivors wanted information to be much more widely available including online – about their rights in court and as victims navigating the Criminal Justice process. However, others highlighted that online information is not sufficient for women who cannot access a computer or do not know how to use a search engine. Survivors stated that information should be available in as many locations as possible. Survivors wanted better information so they knew more about what to expect from different agencies. They also talked about more access to safe and independent spaces where women and girls could go to access face-to-face help, advice, support and guidance on a range of issues including VAWG so they knew their options.

RIGHTS AND ENTITLEMENTS

One of the key things that came up as part of the survey was the clear lack of knowledge or guidance on what rights victims have when it comes to reporting and court procedures. Survivors weren't given basic information by the police or throughout their criminal justice journey which only added to their trauma. This is worrying and something that needs to be addressed in two ways – one, through educating the survivors themselves through the various touchpoints they have, and two, through a process of training of those professionals who come into contact with victims and survivors throughout the criminal justice service.

“There needs to be more out there to help women. Something to tell them this is what the process is, some guidance so you know what to expect. You need to know that you should have an IDVA and what they should do. That the police should contact you regularly and do something. Women need to know what are your rights and this is what should happen if something happens to you.”

VICTIM'S RIGHTS

Survivors were asked to indicate which of the victims entitlements they were informed about or given the opportunity to receive during the police investigation: -

A written acknowledgement that you have reported a crime, including basic details of the offence?

Yes 38%

No 50%

I'm not sure 12%

Be referred to victims' support services?

Yes 41%

No 44%

I'm not sure 15%

Make a Victim's Personal Statement to explain how the crime affected you?

Yes 29%

No 56%

I'm not sure 15%

Be told when someone is arrested, charged, bailed or sentenced ?

Yes 38%

No 50%

I'm not sure 12%

Information about taking part in restorative justice schemes?

No 91%

I'm not sure 9%

Be informed if the suspect is to be prosecuted or not?

Yes 35%

No 59%

I'm not sure 6%

Seek a review of a decision not to investigate or prosecute?

Yes 9%

No 82%

I'm not sure 9%

RECOMMENDATION 6

CULTURAL CHANGE

Put a greater emphasis on preventing VAWG from happening in the first place, through work in schools and the community and by increasing awareness of the issues – particularly those on social media – and help available.

Beyond awareness raising, the survivors spoke of how real change could only be impacted through wholesale cultural change. Interestingly in recent months, the grassroots campaign around #MeToo and the impact it has had in bringing individual women forward to tell their tales of harassment show that cultural change can happen.

For it to be a long-term change, however, it has to be supported centrally and perpetuated through continual prevention and awareness.

While the survivors were clear, this was something that the Mayor could not do alone, it is something he can lead on in congress with others. The obvious place to start is in schools – where conversations can highlight worrying behaviours to both boys and girls early.

This recommendation, therefore, is about working in partnership with schools and in the community to put a greater emphasis on prevention – with all genders - and on promoting how and where to get help.

4.3 CRIMINAL JUSTICE, CIVIL COURT AND STATUTORY PARTNERS PROCESSES

RECOMMENDATIONS

CRIMINAL JUSTICE, CIVIL COURT AND STATUTORY PARTNERS PROCESSES

1. Work with the CJS to ensure they make tangible improvements in the processes around criminal, civil and family court practice, CAFCASS and safe child contact for children in cases of VAWG.
2. Work with the MPS and CJS to improve their understanding about VAWG, so as to amend their responses and processes for cases which deal with VAWG, and in particular how they deal with survivors.
3. Work in partnership with statutory services including local authority, social services and housing, health service providers and others such as Job Centres to improve their responses to survivors of VAWG.

NAVIGATING THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SERVICE

From reporting the abuse through to trial is a lengthy and emotional process. From our consultation it was clear that survivors, still in recovery from their abuse, were not always sure of their rights throughout the process. The support they received through the criminal justice service and via statutory partners was patchy at best – especially when it came to family courts.

While some survivors felt the police had kept them safe and referred them to the appropriate organisations, many survivors had negative experiences of the police and criminal justice services, particularly in terms of their awareness, attitudes and responses towards survivors and perpetrators of VAWG.

The online survey responses showed that women were not always appropriately informed around the CJS processes and the response to the perpetrator. One survivor shared that she had been arrested and spent the night in a cell following a false allegation from the perpetrator as the police were not identifying the coercive control of her perpetrator. Some women felt that the poor treatment they experienced from the police was either related to their identity as BME women or pre-conceived ideas around how a victim should behave.

Many survivors stated that they did not feel safe and were looking for protection. Survivors told us that they continued to feel unsafe even after criminal justice services had taken action against the perpetrators. Court orders, prison sentences and injunctions seemed to have little effect at keeping some of the survivors safe from further abuse. Court was not a safe place for a number of women who spoke about feeling exposed and fearful because of the way the court system treated them and a lack of protective measures. One woman spoke about feeling under pressure to give evidence and how difficult this experience was because of inadequate protection from the perpetrator and as she was not allowed to have her keyworker by her side for additional support.

The recommendations in this section are focused around making the process easier for the survivors to navigate the criminal justice service as a whole. By increasing training for individuals in each of the constituent parts and focusing on the joins between the services, progress can be made on how the "system" feels for the survivor and therefore on their experience of the CJS as a whole.

The survey which ran parallel to the consultation brought up a number of issues around the processes in criminal, civil and family courts as well as how the responses of statutory partners such as the MPS, local authorities, social services, housing and health service in dealing with women affected by VAWG highlight clear training issues.

POLICE RESPONSE

In terms of how supportive and responsive the police were:-

- Most women responding found it easy / fairly easy (40%) or very easy (20%), whilst 40% found it very difficult to access support.
- 40% of women were either very dissatisfied or fairly dissatisfied and 14% were either fairly or very satisfied. For a significant proportion of women, the question was not relevant to their interaction with agencies (35%).
- In relation to police treatment, 36% of women did not feel that they were responded to in a respectful, non-discriminatory, sensitive or professional manner, and 30% felt that they were treated appropriately.
- Following a police report, 38% of women had a written acknowledgement of the crime against them whilst 50% did not and 12% were not sure.
- 38% of women were informed about the arrest, charge, bail or sentencing of the perpetrator while 50% were not.
- 33% knew when the perpetrator would be released, if that offender had been sentenced to a year or more in prison for a violent or sexual offence. 67% were not given this information.

INFORMATION ABOUT VICTIM-SURVIVOR RIGHTS

- When women did report to the police, 53% were not told about their entitlements as a victim/survivor whilst 26% felt informed. 21% were not sure.
- Women were most likely to access this information themselves (52%). Other routes were through the police either via the investigating police officer investigating (30%), when a crime was reported (26%), or through a letter. 9% through information they had received in connection with the court case or when in court (4%).

PROSECUTION

- 50% of women were able to meet the CPS to ask questions about the court process whilst 50% did not have this opportunity.
- 33% were kept informed about the progress of the case and 67% were not.
- 35% were informed about the prosecution outcome, 33% were told about the outcome of the trial and the sentence given. 59% were not and 6% were not sure about the prosecution outcome.
- 9% of women sought a review of the CPS decision not to prosecute

COURT EXPERIENCE

- 18% of women had gone to court whilst 79% had not. Of those women who shared experiences of attending court:
 - » 67% were not able to enter the court safely through a separate entrance or sit in a separate waiting area whilst 33% were able to.
 - » In relation to court treatment, 50% of women felt that they were responded to in a respectful, non-discriminatory, sensitive or professional manner, and 34% felt that they were not treated appropriately.
 - » 50% of women had access to victim 'special measures' for vulnerable, intimidated witnesses to support them to give evidence in court whilst 33% didn't.

GIVING EVIDENCE

- 29% of women made a victim personal statement. 50% read their Victim Personal Statement aloud or had it read aloud on their behalf in court whilst the other 50% didn't.
- 33% were told about what to expect when giving evidence and were supported by the Witness Care Unit whilst 67% were not.
- Referral to VAWG support services: 41% were referred to specialist VAWG support services, 44% were not.
- Information about taking part in restorative justice schemes: the majority of women were not informed about restorative justice systems (91%).

One survivor's testimony (opposite) demonstrates some of the issues with the criminal justice service that numerous survivors have spoken of.

"What would be helpful is for him to be kept away and for him to not know where I live ever.

"The police knew him. He was wrong'un and did a lot of bad things. The police had to come with ramrods to get me out one time. I stayed in hospital for a month. He stayed in the cell for three days. Nothing happened to him cos the police said I wouldn't press charges. If a stranger had done this to me would they need me to press charges? If he'd killed me – what then? Who'd press charges then? Would he have got away with murder cos I was dead and couldn't press charges?

"I know it sounds crazy but maybe the police can let me know my options... If the justice system is going to let us down then at least give us the knowledge of where to go, like OK, look here's a card with a number.

"I keep saying I am victim of child abuse and trafficking. Police, social services – nobody is listening. They won't investigate. I am an African girl and he is an African man. Is this why?

"I have been putting in complaints because nobody is telling me what is happening. The police haven't even taken a statement – they just sent me to the Haven ... I want someone from the police to talk to me. I don't know why things aren't being dealt with properly and I am having to cope with so much. I have heard that one of the men who did this to me is out on bail but I'm not sure. I don't know who the other man is and I am very frightened. I keep looking around to see if he's in the area or walking by me. I can't go on like this.

"My general dealings with the police have shown me that when you make any initial complaints about anything they sound and seem to be helpful but as you go along the road nothing happens. I don't trust the police, because my interactions with them about other matters have been dealt extremely badly, they left me in a worse position than I had been, I would have been better off not calling them.

"I went to court. I was scared but I went. I wanted a screen but they said the judge said I couldn't have it. I don't know why after what he did. I had to see him in court and he was staring at me. I was so scared.

"I did the statement [Victim Personal Statement] but he was looking at me in the court. I was so scared.

"When you go to court, the separate measures you get is rubbish, they portray it that way, but let you be sectioned off, so yeah you can see your perpetrator and they can see you, so where's the witness protection? I had an argument with her she made my caseworker feel some type of way.

"If you stand up in court I had to go through my statement so there's no way that I am stable enough as a female go through it. I went through each thing I can sit here and discuss my stuff clearly in front of all of you but not strangers. When I got beaten the shit out of when I was pregnant, when I got dragged down the street. I can't sit there and say that and it's literally a shower curtain. Magistrates court, he's right there, I'm under the pressure, my caseworker was told that she couldn't sit next to me."

SPECIFIC CHALLENGES IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SERVICE FOR WOMEN AFFECTED BY VAWG

1. Accessing legal aid

Many survivors spoke of the difficulties they had in accessing legal aid and the impact this had. In some cases their abuser had been afforded legal aid but not them, leaving them in debt and giving them a sense that while the law may be on their side, the system was not.

“I couldn’t get legal aid because I was working. He wasn’t working so could get help. He is trying to get me financially now too.”

2. Family Courts: Child contact and residence

Survivors shared overwhelmingly negative experiences of family court services and social services. In every focus group survivors spoke of their significant criticisms in relation to child contact proceedings and their overall response to VAWG. Many survivors stated that perpetrators were using the family court system to continue to stalk, abuse and control. Survivors stated that the courts did not recognise domestic abuse, coercive control and stalking and the impact on the non-abusing parent or the children. This lack of recognition resulted in survivors not being able to access the help and support needed and placed them at further risk.

Survivors spoke of a lack of a joined-up approach between criminal and civil and family court cases, where in some cases women felt family courts were not aware there was also a criminal case being investigated. Survivors stated that the courts did not look positively upon involvement of specialist services or other services that know about the violence and abuse, and in one region CAFCASS had prevented domestic abuse services from attending appointments with women. Many survivors stated that CAFCASS officials colluded with the perpetrator and dismissed any claims or evidence of abuse.

Many survivors stated that the abusive parent's rights to see his/her children seemed to override the safety and well-being of themselves and their children. Survivors spoke of the non-abusing parent often being seen as being obstructive or lying to stop contact. Survivors stated that they were having real difficulty proving the abuse to the courts. Many survivors told us about how the family courts were used by their abusive partners as a way of keeping track of them or inflicting financial and emotional harm on them. Stalking and coercive control was used as a means of continuing control by men of women who had left. However, survivors told us this was either not recognised, understood or ignored by the court and related agencies.

“My child is bedwetting, not concentrating, terrified of seeing their father and in a total state before and after the visit, which I have to manage. Yet CAFCASS don't seem concerned about that at all.”

“My child tells CAFCASS they don't want to see their dad, they tell them he frightens them, but they don't listen. Why aren't they speaking up for the children and making the case that this isn't in their best interests, it's harming them?”

3. Response from social, housing and health services

Where women who had accessed local authority support 20% found the response unhelpful. 2% found the response very helpful and 6% fairly helpful.

Social Services

A number of survivors we spoke to told us they were very wary and suspicious of social services and their motives. There was still an accepted view that social services would remove children from non-abusing parents if they did not comply with social services procedures.

Survivors were aware of the impact of the abuse on their relationships with their children and their ability be a parent. Several of the women we spoke to told us about their experiences of parenting courses. Whilst the courses were useful many women said they would have wanted to be able to access these courses much sooner and not only when they were threatened with, or had children taken into care.

In some situations, social services had not responded positively to their attempts at seeking help, and many said they felt judged and blamed for the abuse. Safeguarding training was a particular concern for some survivors. Some told us that the advocacy they received from specialist services helped them keep their children in their care.

“Social services are the worst agency to get involved in domestic abuse, because we know we will end up losing our children. They have so many rules for us to follow and if we don’t follow the rules we will lose our child, they look in the fridge, they ask my daughter what I’m doing, they check if my house is clean. And it’s not us who’s done anything wrong...”

Survivors stated that their safety, and the safety of their children should be paramount in cases of violence and abuse. They felt that this was not the case and that survivors were judged and sometimes asked to mediate with the abuser.

Housing Services

Housing was a significant issue for many survivors, and concerns ranged from extended lengths of stay in a refuge, accessing affordable housing, issues with private landlords, the quality and suitability of council housing, housing benefit allowances and eligibility, to issues around getting furniture including beds.

Survivors questioned the approach that always resulted in the victim of the abuse and any children having to move. The cost of finding alternative accommodation was a barrier to moving forward. Single women were also concerned about their lack of housing options. Survivors also highlighted problematic attitudes or approaches within statutory services like housing that are put in place to support them.

“Why did I have to leave? They always make the woman move. He gets to stay in the house with everything and he’s the one who has done wrong. There’s no consequences. I’ve lost everything – my belongings, the kids’ toys, everything. It’s not right.”

Health Services

Many survivors told us about health being the one place they may be able to access information safely. A survivor told us how important the information held by her GP had been in taking her abuser to court. However, other survivors had less positive experiences of health professionals. Many stated that the restricted time slots with GPs meant there was not enough time to disclose sensitive information about what was happening to them. Others stated they were worried about family members finding out if they spoke to their GPs as they did not know or think it would remain confidential.

“My GP has been amazing. She has documented all this over the years and now in court it is coming in handy. This is of vital support to women like me to prove that there has been a history of abuse. Also I don't need to keep explaining myself all the time.”

4.4 PERPETRATORS

RECOMMENDATION 9

PERPETRATORS

Work with the police, CJS and other partners to stop perpetrators' repeat behaviour.

During this consultation, we rightly concentrated on the survivors' experience. However, we could not look at that experience holistically without a reference to the perpetrator. In particular, how to stop repeat behaviour and keep women safe.

The core recommendation that came from survivors was that there needs to be far more cross agency working to identify and address the behaviour of the perpetrators. This means better data sharing, better and more available programmes for perpetrators and more information for the women on what is happening with the perpetrator.

In particular, there was several mentions of perpetrator programmes.

- 8% of perpetrators were referred to perpetrator programmes and 75% were not.
- 60% of women were receiving support themselves and 40% were not receiving specialist support whilst the perpetrator was participating in a programme.
- 60% of women did not feel safer as a result of the abuser participating in a perpetrator programme.

Few women knew that men could refer themselves to such programmes. Some women were unaware if their partners had been referred to a perpetrator programme and this had an impact on them. Some survivors talked about continued abuse whilst the perpetrator accessed counselling – which left them question the value of the programme.

Two survivors whose partners had attended a perpetrator programme spoke of the value of the support they received after their partners began the perpetrator programme.

All in all it was a mixed response and underscored the overall recommendation on perpetrators which was around agencies working together to stop the behaviour.

“He didn’t finish it. I don’t know if it helped him but this place [“ending VAWG” service] helped me cos I had support too. They would ring me and check things, check up on me make sure I was OK. This was really important. Helped me build up my confidence and get some help. I’m stronger now and am going to get my children back and have a better life. I have support from my caseworker.”

4.5 INDEPENDENCE AND MOVING FORWARD

In each of the focus groups and interviews, survivors stated that they did not want to be dependent upon services on an ongoing basis. Instead they wanted to be able to access skills, training and employment in order to gain independence and move forward with their lives – free of violence and threat.

They spoke of setting an example for their children and gaining financial independence. In order to do this, they felt they needed specific training and skills, and because of their situation they would rather it be provided by those who understood the additional challenges they faced.

Whilst survivors repeatedly stated a desire to have this longer term support provided by specialist “ending VAWG” services, those services are finding it difficult to provide this transitional support because of funding cuts.

“For most of us mothers here it’s important we can settle children and move into a settled home life again as quickly as possible. A place to live, work, money, a future. So the children see a better life.”

5. APPENDIX

5.1 DEFINITION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

For the purposes of the basis of the strategy and the consultation which fed into the strategy, Imkaan and MOPAC adopt the United Nations declaration on the elimination of violence towards women, which defines violence against women as:

'Any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women [or girls], including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty' (United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence towards Women (1993, Article 1).

VAWG can include but is not limited to:

- domestic violence and abuse, including coercive control
- forced marriage
- honour-based violence
- female genital mutilation
- rape and sexual violence
- sexual exploitation / prostitution
- trafficking
- stalking
- sexual harassment

5.2 METHODOLOGY

The method of consultation consisted of an online survey, focus groups and one-to-one interviews (that were carried out in person and via telephone) with survivors to help ensure survivors' voices are central to the ongoing work to tackle VAWG.

The Imkaan project team carried out fieldwork during August and September, and through this consultation we were able to speak directly to survivors about their experiences and their journeys from violence and abuse to safety and autonomy.

We consulted with former and current service users of voluntary sector and specialist ending VAWG services who have experienced violence and abuse including:

- young women under the age of 18
- women who have experienced domestic and/or sexual violence
- women who have experienced sexual harassment
- women who have experienced stalking
- women who have experienced sexual exploitation
- BME women and girls including those who have experienced forced marriage, honour based violence and/ or female genital mutilation

We also explored any barriers to accessing service provision e.g. disability, sexual identity and age.

The objective of the consultation was to gain the perspectives of women and girls to strengthen our understanding in the following areas:

- service gaps and needs
- map the pathways through which women and girls in London access protection and support
- identify barriers to accessing information, protection and support
- explore and identify preventative measures and how this should be delivered across London
- explore women and girls' experiences of perpetrator programmes
- develop recommendations on effective service models

The online survey was designed to capture information on the areas above but was also structured to capture more detailed feedback on criminal justice service processes and responses as well as feedback on wider support services. Questions were designed to explore women's experiences of interacting with the CJS from reporting to prosecution and the courts.

5.3 ABOUT IMKAAN

Imkaan is a London based Black and 'minority ethnic' (BME) women's charity. We are the only UK based, national second tier women's organisation dedicated to addressing violence against BME women and girls. Our research activities support the ongoing development of a robust evidence base around the needs and aspirations of BME women and girls, as well as promising practice approaches to addressing all forms of violence against women and girls.

5.4 Imkaan acknowledgements

We would like to extend our sincere thanks and deepest gratitude to:

Survivors of violence and abuse across London who could share their experiences with the facilitators and with each other. Their willingness to participate in these focus groups is greatly appreciated and will help inform and shape an improved response to survivors of violence and abuse in the future. Without their time, openness, commitment and inspiration this report would not have been possible. We hope that the final report does justice to what they have shared with us.

The regional and local specialist support services in London for offering a safe and welcoming space and for helping us contact past and recent survivors of violence and abuse to participate in this consultation.

We would also like to extend our thanks to all those who completed the online survey and shared their experiences as part of this survivor consultation.

The organisations that supported delivery of the consultation, engagement with survivors and for sharing their knowledge of the landscape of support available for survivors of violence and abuse in the capital including:

- Ashiana Network
- Asian Women's Resource Centre
- Bromley and Croydon Women's Aid
- Domestic Violence Intervention Project
- EACH Counselling and Support
- Galop
- Jewish Women's Aid
- Kurdish Middle Eastern Women's Organisation
- Latin American Women's Rights Service
- London Black Women's Project

- Midaye Somali Development Network
- The Nia Project
- Solace Women's Aid
- Stay Safe East
- St. Mungo's
- Trust
- Women and Girls Network

We also thank the **Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime** for commissioning this work and their valuable advice and support throughout the process.

Claire Waxman the Independent Victims' Commissioner for London, for her participation, support and advice throughout the course of this consultation.

The Imkaan project team:

Yasmin Rehman - Led on project delivery, consultation with survivors and the development of the report.

Amena Zaman - Consultation with survivors.

Support was also provided from different members of the Imkaan team in relation to survivor consultation and report development.

5.4 EXPERIENCES OF SPECIFIC GROUPS OF SURVIVORS

Older women - Older women said it was sometimes difficult to speak about VAWG they had experienced many years ago. Many said they were not comfortable accessing refuge services but were accessing other support services including advocacy or counselling. We also heard from older women who were homeless as a result of the abuse they had suffered. Older women said that they needed to access housing that was more suitable and adapted for their needs, given some of the health issues they were now facing.

Women experiencing familial abuse - Women who experienced violence from adult children also spoke of having nowhere to turn, and of being frightened but also embarrassed because it was their child who was being violent. They felt it was an additional stigma to the one they already have of being a victim of VAWG.

Black and ethnic minority women - BME women spoke of the barriers and challenges they faced when seeking help and support. They highlighted that the onus is too often placed on the survivor to navigate a system that has not been designed to take account of their needs rather than addressing structural barriers that prevent women's access to support.

“Older women just don’t have anywhere to go. I would never go into a refuge at my age. I want to move out but I don’t have anyone practically to help me. A friend I know who is older and is being abused too, she is totally isolated. Financially at my time of life, I can’t start all over again with nothing. So I stay with him.”

Non-UK born Black and ethnic minority

women - In particular, BME survivors not born in the UK had a specific set of needs and fears. Survivors told us that they were forced to endure abuse because of fears of being deported by their husbands and families. In-laws and husbands would use the threat of deportation and insecure immigration as a way of exerting additional control on women and girls by threatening to expose them to police, having them deported and taking their children from them.

Some services too were often reluctant to help victims with insecure immigration status. Not having access to identification papers affected their ability to access services or prove any identity or status was causing huge difficulties in accessing legal help and progressing their cases. Some women faced threats of deportation, which they experienced as secondary abuse by the state.

Disabled women - Services often did not meet the needs of disabled women, both in terms of physical access and in terms of holistic support to deal with experiences of violence alongside disability. Disabled survivors stated that they wanted all services to review how they presented information about the support available that was accessible and open to as many women and girls as possible.

“I went to a mixed refuge at first. Then I came here. Can’t tell you how good this place is. Sometimes you just don’t want to have to keep explaining family, culture, religion – why things happen the way they did. I don’t have to keep explaining everything. Makes you so tired and you just wanna stop talking in the end. That’s what I did in the refuge. I just stopped talking.”

Sexuality - Survivors spoke about a lack of understanding from services about the specific vulnerabilities within a VAWG context for LGBT groups. Survivors spoke about a lack of agency understanding on the experiences of BME LGBT groups and the need for more accessible and specialist service provision.

Women involved in prostitution - Women's experiences of being subjected to violence and abuse from a former or current partner and sexual violence from 'punters'. All of the women interviewed said that the first agency that they approach for help would be "Trust" because of its specialist, dedicated approach as a woman-only environment and as a service for women involved in prostitution.

Outreach services to women involved in prostitution are limited and the women stated that without them it would normally be difficult to access them on their own. For example - when accessing drug and alcohol support services, services are predominantly accessed by men. By accessing those services, women can often encounter men who have purchased sex and who identify them as 'prostitutes'. This creates an unsafe and uncomfortable space for them to get help they need.

“They couldn’t understand that ‘cos I am Black and gay that there are dangers for me from my family and community.”

“My partner was threatening to ‘out’ me. The worker didn’t understand why this was a problem. I didn’t want anyone to know, especially my employer. This was always used against me.”

Transnational issues arising from

VAWG - Some of the women we spoke to were, or had been, involved in child custody cases in more than one jurisdiction. In some cases, women were struggling between two legal systems and processes for years.

Trafficking - During the consultation process we heard accounts of women and children who had been trafficked into the UK and had suffered years of physical and sexual abuse. They told of their struggles to get the help and support they needed. Many survivors spoke of having to prove their experiences of violence and abuse, despite police call-outs and evidence from other agencies, including in some cases where the Home Office issued 'leave to remain' to abusers.

Women with multiple, intersecting needs - During the consultation, we were able to hear from women who had support needs relating to mental health, problematic substance use and homelessness. Survivors talked about their experiences of the care system. They stated that they felt judged by some services that they needed to access and felt they got a worse response than other women who were being abused because of their life experiences.

“Last summer my ex kidnapped my daughter. He took her to Morocco and left her with his family. He said to me ‘I’m never going to give you the child back.”

“So I had to go to the family court in Morocco to the women’s division. The judge there gave me an order to bring my daughter and give them to the police and the police will go with you and take your daughter by force. I called the Home Office here and told them my ex had taken my daughter. I explained that she’s British and not Moroccan and she doesn’t have any other nationalities. They said to me they couldn’t do anything and wouldn’t help me. When they said this I thought right, I’ll try the Moroccan system. Many things have changed there since I lived there. As long as you’re married the woman can get the child back. I took the court order and went with the police to my ex’s family home and took my daughter back. She is living with me now.”

Specific issues for children and young people

Survivors were very concerned about preventing children and other young people from experiencing further violence and abuse in their lives. Several adult survivors told us about their experiences of domestic and sexual violence and that they had later learned that their daughters had also suffered sexual abuse from abusive partners and other relatives. Many survivors repeatedly stated their primary concern was the impact of the violence and abuse on children. Survivors wanted children to be heard and to be able to access specialist support separate and distinct from the support being given to their mothers.

They welcomed any efforts to ensure that all those working with children and young people had access to information that helped them identify abuse and be able to recognise it should it happen and to know where sources of support could be found and accessed if needed. They wanted programmes in school to begin as early as possible and to be available to all boys and girls.

Young women themselves spoke about child abuse, child trafficking, sexual violence, domestic violence and harassment and its impact on their lives. They also spoke of intimidation after disclosing incidents to schools and the police.

Young women highlighted the need for age-appropriate and gender-specific support, delivered in safe spaces outside of the environments - including school - where they have experienced violence. It was critical that confidential services at school to ensure that those who are living with abuse are not identified or singled out.

Survivors stated that therapeutic services for children to help them understand their experiences were either extremely limited or not available at all. Survivors who had engagement with the family courts and child contact proceedings were especially keen to ensure that provision for support for children was made available. Survivors expressed concern at how children were subject to ongoing emotional abuse as a result of child contact issues and that this had a significant impact on both mothers and children.

Survivors were aware of the impact of the abuse on their relationships with their children and their ability be a parent. They used various strategies to address this but spoke of being judged by services. Some survivors also told us about their need to have support for them, when their children have also disclosed or experienced child abuse by the perpetrator, but this had not always been forthcoming.

“It was two boys in school. I told the social worker. I told the school. Nobody really wants to help. The police didn’t do anything as they said there wasn’t enough evidence. But [friends of the boys], they started on me, saying I’m a liar and that I’m going to pay. it’s just.... We need somewhere to come and speak about it. Like this but different - not in school.”

Other formats and languages

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