

**VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN & GIRLS IS  
AN URGENT SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE.**

**SUMMARY REPORT  
29TH NOVEMBER 2023**

**CAN YOU  
HEAR US?**

## CAN YOU HEAR US?

On 29th November 2023, Sheffield WAVES Forum hosted 'Can You Hear Us?', a listening event to highlight the urgent action needed to tackle the pressing issue of violence against women and girls [VAWG].

'Can You Hear Us?' brought together survivors of violence and abuse with key senior stakeholders and partners to discuss the systemic issues that negatively impact women's experience and safety. Round table discussions were facilitated by members of the WAVES Forum, with stakeholders and 'experts by experience' working together to consider tangible actions that can be taken forward to tackle the issues locally.

Women and girls are subjected to epidemic levels of violence and abuse, compounded by intersecting social issues such as discrimination, housing, mental ill health, injustice and the cost-of-living crisis. We know that there are many examples of great practice across the city but, from our work with survivors, there are still areas that need urgent action and improvement.

Thanks to all the experts by experience, WAVES members and senior stakeholder who participated, including speakers ACC Sarah Poolman [SY Police] and Jessica Privilege [the Office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner].





# HOUSING

Facilitated by Sheffield Women's Aid & Shelter

## THE PROBLEM

- Housing policies overlook needs of women and their children.
- Pressure to accept unsuitable housing under threat of lost priority.
- Policies feel impersonal, lacking compassion for abuse survivors.
- Victim-blaming language and inadequate support from housing services.

### **Lack of appreciation of varying needs of women and children.**

Post-separation abuse remains a significant issue for women, with housing policies often failing to accommodate their needs, such as the proper size of property, if their children are not yet living with them, or additional needs for children, resulting in reduced safety and security for children. Women who own their homes or have shared mortgages also face financial challenges.

### **Threat of losing priority access to housing.**

Women face pressure to accept unsuitable housing options under threat of losing their priority status. They feel forced into choices that undermine their stability and safety. Their voices are not heard, this enables the abusers.

### **Impersonal and lacking compassion.**

Housing policies are perceived as rigid and impersonal, lacking understanding and compassion for women fleeing domestic abuse, with many women feeling treated like numbers rather than individuals.

### **Victim blaming language**

Women often encounter victim-blaming language and a lack of appropriate support or inquiry into their experiences of abuse, highlighting the need for better training and advocacy within housing services.

## THE SOLUTION

- 1 Adapt housing policies and pathways for women and children's needs.**
- 2 Compassionate support and advocacy from specialist domestic abuse workers.**
- 3 Train staff on supportive, empathetic domestic abuse response.**
- 4 Flexibility and choice to empower women and provide security to children.**

"I felt so empowered at the WAVES session being able to tell my story to 'important people' in the room, as they had to listen. I enjoyed having another survivor there [from Shelter] and hearing she experienced the same sorts of issues – it made me feel less alone. What I want though is for it to make a difference please."



# CHILDREN

Facilitated by Haven

## THE PROBLEM

- Children's voices often go unheard with marginalised children further disadvantaged.
- Support for abused children is inconsistent and under-resourced.
- Short-term support insufficient; trust-building requires long-term involvement.
- Abuse impacts education, mental health, and development.

### Unheard Voices and Marginalised Groups

Children and young people, particularly from marginalized groups, often do not have their voices heard regarding domestic abuse. Effective participation requires a trauma-informed and creative approach, recognising each child's unique experiences and needs.

### Inconsistent Support and Mental Health Challenges

Although children are legally recognised as victims of domestic abuse, the support available is inconsistent. Mental health services are stretched, and children may struggle to access necessary support through schools, CAMHS, or voluntary services. Recognising children within their support networks is crucial, but individual needs must be addressed.

### Short-term vs. Long-term Support

Many support services for children are short-term, which may not suffice for those who need longer involvement. Building trust and positive relationships is essential for effective support, particularly for children with a history of abuse and with multiple professionals in their lives. A child-centred, long-term approach is often necessary.

### Impact on Daily Life and Development

Domestic abuse impacts children's education, including challenges in learning, school attendance, and relationships with safe adults. Court-ordered contact with abusers and informal contact arrangements can be distressing. Play and forming positive memories are vital for development and recovery, providing essential support and reducing isolation.

## THE SOLUTION

- 1 More resources to support children and young people impacted by domestic abuse.
- 2 Trauma-informed support for child domestic abuse victims.
- 3 Long-term support for building trusted relationships.
- 4 Raise professional awareness of abuse, post-separation abuse and safeguarding children.



## **BLACK, ASIAN AND MINORITISED ETHNIC (GLOBAL MAJORITY) SURVIVORS**

Facilitated by Ashiana

### **THE PROBLEM**

#### **Housing:**

Survivors being rehomed in unsafe areas where they are subject to racism; lack of interpreters; inadequate tenancy support.

#### **Mental Health:**

Stigma in ethnic communities; lack of culturally competent counsellors.

#### **Children's Services:**

Language barriers; No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) issues; lack of information and support.

#### **Adult Social Care:**

Exclusions, lack of onward referrals leading to increased risk of homelessness.

#### **Health:**

Being denied NHS treatment resulting in health neglect and survivors facing discrimination.

#### **Police:**

Limited domestic abuse expertise and lacking in cultural sensitivity.





## **BLACK, ASIAN AND MINORITISED ETHNIC (GLOBAL MAJORITY) SURVIVORS**

**Facilitated by Ashiana**

### **Housing:**

Survivors are often rehoused in areas where they face racial abuse, referred to as 'no go areas'. Language barriers and lack of confidence lead to isolation. It is crucial to rehouse survivors in diverse communities where they can feel safe and integrated. This year, Ashiana helped three clients experiencing racial harassment after fleeing domestic abuse and being rehoused. Housing services often fail to provide interpreters, pressuring survivors with limited English into accepting unsuitable properties. Tenancy Support Officers offer limited help, such as with utilities and rent.

### **Mental Health:**

Mental health stigma is prevalent in many ethnic minority communities. Survivors feel professionals lack understanding of the unique challenges and shame attached to mental health within these communities. There is a shortage of counsellors from ethnic minority backgrounds who understand cultural dynamics and speak community languages.

### **Children's Services:**

Survivors with language barriers feel unheard and poorly informed about processes, lacking knowledge of their rights. Those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) do not receive accommodation or financial assistance, leaving children with perpetrators. Ashiana supported one survivor under the Support for Migrant Victims project, but it took eight weeks for her children to be returned to her care. Financially, this benefits Children's Social Care as they avoid accommodation and living costs. Two NRPF survivors felt unsupported by social workers due to language barriers and NRPF status.

"Every service let me down because of my status. I did not have that piece of paper which gives me the permission to be treated equally, with dignity, with respect, my basic human rights should be met"

### **Adult Social Care:**

Vulnerable clients fleeing domestic abuse or sexual exploitation often do not receive support unless on spousal visas. Without signposting to other providers, victims face further risks such as homelessness and sexual assault.

### **Health:**

NRPF survivors feel vulnerable accessing medical support. They face questioning in A&E about registration and eligibility for free NHS treatment, leading to neglect of health conditions. One survivor now has life-changing conditions due to this neglect. Overall, survivors experience discrimination and racism from service providers due to language, cultural barriers, and unsettled status.

### **Police:**

Survivors' experiences with the police are mixed. Negative experiences involve officers lacking experience in handling domestic abuse cases. Positive experiences involve officers handling matters sensitively and meeting survivors' needs.



## **BLACK, ASIAN AND MINORITISED ETHNIC (GLOBAL MAJORITY) SURVIVORS**

Facilitated by Ashiana

“Organisations need to hear our voice and change their ways in order to support women from different communities. Being from an ethnic minority I should receive the same service. I had a bad experience and faced discrimination and I hope Social Care listened to us today”

### **THE SOLUTION**

- 1** Training for service providers to meet racial minority survivors' diverse needs considering intersecting oppressions.
- 2** Housing assessments should meet individual housing needs comprehensively.
- 3** Ensure easy access to Tenancy Support Workers or provide additional resources for by and for services.
- 4** Rehouse survivors in racially diverse areas for safety and community inclusion.
- 5** Streamline Homeless Assessments for individuals whose status is known.
- 6** Provide interpreters, ensuring language and cultural understanding for minoritised survivors.
- 7** Educate practitioners on rules affecting women with No Recourse to Public Funds
- 8** Extend Adult Social Care support to vulnerable women with unsettled immigration status.
- 9** Enhance cultural awareness in Children's Social Care to support survivors effectively.
- 10** Empower survivors and hear their voices as experts by experience.



# LONG-TERM RECOVERY & MENTAL HEALTH

Facilitated by Saffron & Vida Sheffield

## THE PROBLEM

- Mental health services lack the resources to meet the demand.
- Voluntary sector and specialist services role in mental health support provision is undervalued.
- Support services vary in quality and flexibility.
- Limited availability of trauma-informed mental health support.

### Under resourced

Survivors face delays of up to two years for mental health support as services are stretched by increasing demand. Services report waiting lists of up to 800.

### Role of Voluntary Sector and Specialist Services

At the time of this event, Vida Sheffield was at risk of closing at the end of January 2024. Lottery funded has extended this to October 2024, however they still face closure. More than half of Vida's referrals are from health practitioners, and they save the NHS £50k a month. Survivors are at risk of losing a valued evidence-based women's service.

### Quality & Flexibility

The availability, flexibility and quality of services varies, and it is challenging for survivors to navigate what support is available. Services should be evidence based, accredited and in line with NICE guidelines. Survivors report having to fit in with the way services are delivered rather than support meeting their needs.

### Trauma Informed

Ensure that all health practitioners are trauma-informed so that survivors are better supported to find the right solution for their needs.

## THE SOLUTION

- 1 Increase long-term funding for voluntary, specialist services to reduce waiting lists and improve the flexibility and availability of services.
- 2 Training to ensure all health practitioners are trauma informed.
- 3 Research impactful approaches for long-term, flexible mental health support for survivors that deliver value for money.
- 4 Pilot the 'personal health budget' to empower survivors of domestic abuse.

"This is the first time I have shared my story so openly outside of therapy and it made me realise just how far I have come since going into Vida's services. It was great to be able to speak freely and share my journey with some influential figures that could make a difference to services offered in Sheffield."





# FAMILY COURTS

Facilitated by IDAS & Mums In Need

## THE PROBLEM

- Courts prioritise process over survivor's voice and needs, compromising safety.
- Need for recognition of all forms of domestic abuse, including coercive control and post-separation abuse.
- Include children's views early and consider mental health impacts.
- Lack of transparency, accountability, and training

### People-centred judgments:

Court processes often prioritise procedure over people impacted, often compromising fairness and safety for victims and children. Transparency and accountability is often lacking leaving survivors with no recourse if unsafe orders are made.

### Broader understanding of abuse:

Courts need to better recognise and address non-physical forms of abuse like coercive control, which may still be ongoing following separation. Historical abuse should be considered for context in gathering evidence and the impact should not be minimised.

### Child First:

Courts rarely include children's views, sometimes dismissing them as being manipulated. Early inclusion of the child's voice and age-appropriate engagement could improve judgements and ultimately outcomes for children impacted by domestic abuse.

### Impact on mental health:

Victims report negative impacts on mental health during and after court proceedings, with concerns that this impacts judgments regarding child arrangements.

## THE SOLUTION

- 1 Comprehensive domestic abuse training, including coercive control and post-separation abuse.
- 2 Increase transparency and accountability and implement processes for including and responding to survivor voices.
- 3 Advocate for automatic reviews post-court orders to ensure safety.
- 4 Enhance communication and coordination among agencies supporting survivors by setting up a working group.

“It did make a difference to me, and mentally I have thought back and referred to it as an acknowledgment and achievement. I am glad I did it.”



# CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Facilitated by Together Women & SRASAC

## THE PROBLEM

- Timescales from reporting to court hearings are emotionally taxing for survivors.
- Confusion and lack of information about process and victim's rights.
- Survivors fear disbelief and police misconduct eroding trust.
- Inadequate support for survivors and their families after reporting.

### Timescales

The length of time from reporting to the case being heard at court is taking too long. Delays and adjournments take an emotional toll on survivors. This can be distressing and reduces engagement.

### Communication and coordination

First response, continued communication and coordination are vital to ensure survivors are well informed and fully aware of their rights. Survivors sometimes felt dismissed, blamed or intimidated.

### Abuse of Power

Survivors were concerned about reporting and being believed in addition to having concerns about police misconduct undermining trust.

### Impact of reporting

Survivors report limited support available to manage the lasting impact of reporting, including on their children and families.

## THE SOLUTION

- 1 Trauma informed training to deescalate, manage conflict and respond to victims sensitively.
- 2 Rigorous recruitment and vetting.
- 3 Clearer communication with survivors.
- 4 Reduce delays and resource adequate support for survivors.

“There was a mixing pot of experience at my table and although I only provided a snapshot, I felt I was listened to and provided useful insights. I felt supported and encouraged to share my story.”



# CONCLUSIONS

Sheffield WAVES

“I appreciated attending the Waves Forum 'Can you hear us' Event. It made a difference to me, and felt validating and empowering. Gathering professionals and survivors together is a powerful opportunity to raise awareness about systemic failures in order to improve practices.”

- 1** Integrate survivor voices into the development and delivery of services.
- 2** Housing policies, procedures and practices to centre the needs of women and children escaping violence and abuse.
- 3** Invest in longer-term, person-centred support for women and their children to include mental health support.
- 4** Improved understanding of violence against women and girls, embedding a trauma informed and racially sensitive approach across Sheffield through continued training.
- 5** Transparent, clear communication and accountability, putting survivors experience and safeguarding at the heart of all we do.
- 6** Compassionate, flexible support options.



**CAN YOU  
HEAR US?**

**Thank you to all the survivors and lived experience experts  
who made this event possible.**



Sheffield WAVES is a voluntary sector forum for organisations whose main purpose is working to end violence against women and their children, and supporting survivors. WAVES member organisations come together to work collaboratively, with a feminist ethos, to share resources, information and best practice and develop a strong voice in planning and strategic work to tackle domestic and sexual abuse, rape and other forms of male violence, or gender-based violence [i.e. violence and abuse which targets women and girls, or happens disproportionately to them].