Responding to the Needs of Sexual Assault and Abuse Victims from Black and Ethnic Minority Communities in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent

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Project Outline

Project Aim & Objectives

The aim of this research and consultation project was to identify the unique needs of ethnically diverse communities in Staffordshire in relation to sexual offence service provision, to provide a robust evidence base to inform and influence local policy, service delivery and future service provision.

The objectives were:

- To undertake a systematic review of national and international literature to identify the various barriers that impact victims/survivors of sexual assault when seeking support and how local policy and service delivery influences these barriers.
- To undertake a series of qualitative data collection events to document the specific needs and barriers that influence victims/survivors' decision to access support from sexual assault and abuse services. These events would also elicit recommendations from participants as to how to ensure support services are more accessible and responsive to the needs of hidden cohorts.
- To develop appropriate evidence-based training materials and disseminate these in a series of training sessions to raise awareness of the needs of victims/survivors from under-represented communities. This training would also identify approaches that front-line practitioners from statutory and voluntary sectors can adopt to improve their responses to empower, protect and support those experiencing sexual assault regionally.

Note

Throughout this report, different terminology relating to ethnicity is utilised to reflect terminology used in the various official publications (including BAME or BME). The authors have used the term 'ethnically diverse' to ensure victims from any under-represented ethnic group are included. Agreed terminology may have changed post-publication of this report, and the authors are happy for the findings of this research to be reported using the up-to-date approved terminology for individuals from under-represented ethnic groups.

Contextual Information

In England and Wales, sexual offences recorded by the police were at the highest level recorded within a 12-month period (196,889 offences) in the year ending June 2022 (ONS, 2022). In the year 2021, 1,377 counts of sexual violence (included 753 rapes and 624 sexual assaults) were perpetrated against females of varying age ranges in the county of Staffordshire (Ault and Moody, 2022). In Hanley Park and Shelton, over two thousand instances of sexual violence and other sexual offences are reported to have taken place between 2019-2022. According to CrimeRate, who aggregate open police force data, social media signals and file FOI requests with local police departments, the most common crime type in Staffordshire in 2021 was violence and sexual offences, with Stoke-on-Trent, Burton-upon-Trent, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Horninglow and Eton and Stapenhill being recognised as the 'most dangerous' locations for these types of crime (CrimeRate, 2022).

A review and needs assessment of Sexual Offending and Abuse in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent in 2021 identified that victims of sexual assault and abuse from under-represented ethnic communities were a hidden cohort. At a national level, the 'Strategic Direction for Sexual Assault and Abuse Services, Lifelong Care for Victims and Survivors, 2018-2023' (Health and Justice, Armed Forces and Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) Team, 2018) identified black and minority ethnic (BME) communities as a group who may find it more difficult to report, and seek support for, sexual assault and abuse, and that these communities should be a key focus area for prevention efforts.

Researchers' investigating the experiences of BME victims/survivors of sexual violence, and their support needs, have highlighted that these groups' experiences are virtually invisible and require urgent attention to ensure that suitable support services and responses from the criminal justice system are appropriate (McGlyn and Westmarland, 2019). There is also a tendency to pool together data on different groups of the same demographic measure (i.e., ethnicity), thereby treating everyone as a

homogenous group, rather than as a specific group with their own individual needs. This further perpetuates the 'hidden' nature of a specific group of individuals.

There is an established problem in terms of capturing the prevalence of sexual violence amongst marginalised victims/survivors of sexual violence. Home Office police recorded crime data is not available broken down by ethnicity of victims, meaning that it is not currently possible to accurately identify how many people from hard-to-reach communities might have experienced sexual violence or sexual assault on an annual basis (Livesey and Bradbury, 2017; Dosdale and Skarparis, 2020; Walker, S.-J et al., 2021; McMullan, 2021).

The Crime Survey for England and Wales captures ethnicity data of victims/survivors who have reported being sexually assaulted. Data for the year ending March 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2021) indicates that certain ethnically diverse groups were significantly more likely to become victims of sexual assault when compared to their white counterparts. The prevalence of sexual assault for different ethnic groups was reported to be 3.5% of people from mixed heritage, 3% of Black ethnicity, 2% of White ethnicity and 1.5% for Asian or Asian British ethnicity. However, it needs to be acknowledged that these statistics represent victims who have felt able to come forward and report their experience. Certain ethnically diverse communities find it exceptionally difficult to report sexual offences to authorities, meaning these figures underrepresent the true picture (Harrison and Gill, 2018).

Previous research into barriers to reporting faced by victim/survivors from ethnically diverse communities has identified some key themes, including:

- Discrimination and harmful stereotypes leading to social and physical isolation of those communities, resulting in a lack of reporting or, for those that do report, very poor treatment, i.e., Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller Communities (Limeculture, 2022), Hispanic and Black women (Hakimi et al., 2018).
- Lack of recognition that specific behaviours are abuse as they have been normalised in certain communities (Limeculture, 2022).
- Where the behaviour is recognised as being abusive, its perception of being a taboo subject so not openly discussed (Harrison and Gill, 2018).
- A community wide code of 'honour' relating to sexual behaviours (including being a victim of rape) resulting in a belief that an individual will bring shame on to themselves or their family/community if they breach this honour code. This can result in significant repercussions for the individual, ranging from isolation or deportation to honour based violence or abuse (Crown Prosecution Service, 2021).
- Lack of diversity of staff in service providers deterring people from accessing services as they perceive a lack of cultural understanding (Love et al., 2017; Walker, S.-J et al., 2021). This lack of diversity is also linked to an increase in unconscious bias, and, in some cases, racism being experienced (Taylor, 2012; Vacchelli et al., 2015; Livesey and Bradbury, 2017; Cancoro and McFeely, 2019; Ali et al., 2021).
- Negative perceptions relating to police services, including a mistrust in the police, a belief that the police won't be able to resolve the situation and a fear of having to report to a male officer (Harrison and Gill, 2018; Taylor and Shrive, 2021).
- Language barriers experienced by victims/survivors whose first language is not English (Banga and Gill, 2008; Gill and Banga, 2008).

Data Collection

In order to identify the specific needs and barriers that influence a victims/survivor's decision to access support from sexual assault and abuse services, several different data collection approaches were adopted (Bryman, 2012). These were all conducted in accordance with Staffordshire University's Ethical standards and procedures for research, recognising the specific challenge of generating meaningful data on a difficult and sensitive subject whilst attempting to avoid unintentional harms and re-victimisation of participants.

Based on the 2011 Census data (Office for National Statistics, 2012) and on previously published research on underreporting of sexual offences, the target demographics for this research were Asian, Black, Eastern European and Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller groups.

Semi-structured data collection events, in the form of focus groups (Bryman, 2012; Mason, 2018) were conducted with victim/survivors and professionals from local (Staffordshire-based) and regional (Midlands) specialist sexual assault services, councils, volunteer networks, community organisations and ethnically diverse community groups.

Individual semi-structured interviews were also conducted (either in person or online) as an alternative to focus groups.

An online questionnaire (created using Qualtrics and distributed via social media and email communications) was also developed to enable victims/survivors to engage with the research without having to attend an in-person event.

All of these approaches focussed on gathering participant data on:

- Reasons for not accessing support services
- Recommendations for making support services more inclusive and responsive.

Data was collected in either written or audio recorded format, depending on the research approach. Thematic analysis was undertaken on the transcripts and questionnaire data.

This data was then used to create a number of training materials, including an online webinar and scripts that captured the perceived and real barriers discouraging specific ethnically diverse groups (Black, Southeast Asian, Eastern European and Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller) from accessing support.

Results

Data was captured from 37 victim/survivor responses to the online questionnaire, 4 professional organisations taking part in focus groups/interviews and 1 victim/survivor interview. Responses were received from diverse ethnicities (Asian – Southeast and Indian subcontinent, Black – Caribbean and African, Arab and Eastern European) but some ethnicities had very low representation or no representation (including the Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller community).

 In relation to the online questionnaires, less than 50% of the respondents (11/23) had disclosed or reported the sexual offence, with those participants choosing to disclose to a range of different individuals/organisations (friend n=4; family member n=5; support organisation n=1; teacher n=1) but no participants reporting to the police. The reaction the participant received upon disclosure varied, some experiencing belief and support whilst others experiencing hate and blame. For those who chose not to disclose, the reasons for this included embarrassment, denial, lack of awareness, fear, stigma and not wanting to experience repeat traumatisation. In the majority of cases (11/16), participants stated that sexual offences were not discussed in their communities. Furthermore, when asked why this was the case, responses included religious and cultural reasons, denial of the issue, fear, and the shame or dishonour it would bring to the individual or family. In relation to questions focussing on what could be done to encourage victims/survivors of sexual assault to seek support, responses included communities acknowledging that it was a problem, stopping victim blaming, stopping shaming of individuals and families, addressing stereotypes and damaging perceptions of different ethnic groups and changing mindsets to stop the topic being 'taboo'. Whilst other avenues of support were recognised (friends, family, religious leader), professional support organisations were repeatedly identified as the place victim/survivors would feel comfortable accessing support. However, only 6 of 15 respondents were aware of the specialist support services available. When asked what these support services could do to be more receptive, responses included having more open discussions around these matters, raising awareness of their services, offer appropriate support and protection (including anonymity).

In relation to the interviews and focus groups, the key themes that emerged were:

- The normalisation of unhealthy relationships within families and communities
- The pressure and expectations imposed by mothers, fathers, or in-laws
- The hierarchy within different communities ('permission must be sought'; 'would be unthinkable to access support outside the family'; 'informal community support rather than formal services')
- The lack of awareness that behaviours or acts were a criminal offence
- The need for social capital and autonomy (i.e., education, support networks, opportunities, values) in order to survive and thrive post-offence
- The personal courage and energy required to admit there is an issue, access support and then to manage relationships throughout the process of accessing support
- The immediate risk and threat to individuals from members of their own community
- The requirement to reduce risk and threat to their immediate family members (i.e., children)
- The repercussions of accessing support (stigma, shame, isolation, ostracism, etc.) to the individual, the family, community leaders or the wider community
- The logistical challenges of accessing appropriate support when required
- The language barriers, both in relation to accessibility and equivalent terminologies (especially in relation to accessing, reporting and therapeutic interventions)
- The societal perceptions of the 'perfect victim' deserving support and sympathy not reflecting victims from diverse communities
- The assumptions about ethnically diverse services users all being the same (grouped as BME)
- The lack of diversity and representation in the service professional ('White Knight')
- The potential avenues for accessing community members, especially through schools.

Overall Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from the research team's interviews with victims/survivors and specialist support organisations, as well as discussions held during the training events:

- Provide inclusive training to all staff, using simulation or experiential learning.
- Consider accessibility & flexibility when delivering information, resources, and support (working with communities, not for communities).
- Persevere with support to demonstrate an 'open door' approach.
- Facilitate greater collaboration between agencies through development of an independent VAWG (Violence Against Women & Girls) Hub to enable networking, sharing of best practice and offering opportunities to collaborate around funding, etc.
- Ensure inclusive and diverse organisational workforce recruitment processes, including trustees, volunteers, professionals, etc.
- Raise awareness of healthy relationship practices, targeting receptive audiences using scenarios that depict ethnically diverse lived experiences.
- Mitigate language barriers as a way to encourage uptake of support provision.
- Counteract fears and myths about law enforcement & social services.
- Proactively engage with various media outlets to provide context in sexual offence cases.
- Offer a range of alternative and inclusive therapeutic practice in addition to counselling such as Art therapy.
- Setting up 'pop-up' community centres where there is a large concentration of ethnically diverse groups to enable sharing and coordination of services.

The resources for training purposes, developed as a result of this research, are held by Staffordshire Women's Aid and Staffordshire University. If you would be interested in accessing this training, or finding out any more information about this research, please contact either organisation.

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Recommended Resources

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