



Ashiana Sheffield Written Evidence submitted to the Sheffield Race Equality Commission

September 2020

This paper was developed in order to provide evidence of racial inequality in Sheffield, particularly in the area of women from Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BAMER) communities whose lives are affected by Domestic Violence, Abuse and other harmful practices. Ashiana believes that Sheffield Local Authority Commissioning strategies ultimately fail to meet the needs of the most vulnerable groups in society. This paper provides reference to supporting evidence and contains:

- an overview of Ashiana experience and relevant expertise
- an overview of BAMER women and children's experiences and need for specialist services
- the current picture in Sheffield for BAMER women's specialist services
- the impact of Covid-19 on BAMER women and children affected by Domestic Abuse
- recommendations for action which Ashiana would like the Race Equality Commission to consider

Specialist domestic abuse services for BAMER women began to emerge in the late 1970s and 1980s in response to the gap left by mainstream refuge services. The specialist services were set up as autonomous organisations by BAMER women to provide holistic support to BAMER women in safe, confidential, non-judgmental spaces, and empower them to move forward from abuse and assist their journey towards independent living. While there were about 40 specialist refuges in England in the mid-2000's, this number has considerably reduced over recent years, with them, Sheffield's own BAMER women's refuge run by Ashiana Sheffield.

Ashiana Sheffield

Ashiana Sheffield has nearly 40 years' experience working with BAMER women, children and young people to escape violence and abuse. We specialise in those areas of abuse which are most prevalent within BAMER communities such as domestic and sexual abuse, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, human trafficking, gang violence and 'honour' based violence. The aim of our work is to increase life opportunities to enable those that are vulnerable to move away from the risk of violence and into safe, stable and happier futures.

Ashiana also provides accommodation for women and children who have experienced trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation and domestic servitude. We support victims of human trafficking across the UK covering Yorkshire and Humber, the North East, the North West and East Midlands.

We provide a number of training and awareness raising packages tailored to cross sector front line organisations as well as the communities affected, and people within those communities.

Our increased reputation and profile have established Ashiana as a lead organisation within the UK specialising in these areas, leading to successful recognition of these issues and additional needs; achieving significant policy and practice influence through local networks such as the Domestic Abuse Provider Forum, Equality Hub Network and various Statutory and Voluntary Sector Forums, leading to developments such as the co-produced Sheffield FGM Strategy, regional police responses and awareness raising activities and establishing the South Yorkshire Modern Slavery Partnership. Nationally we are key members of the Home Office Forced Marriage and FGM Partnerships, Anti Trafficking Monitoring Group, Human Trafficking Foundation and Labour Exploitation Advisory Group. Recently, Ashiana were recognised for work delivering a European project that helped form the recent National Referral Mechanism (NRM) review and upcoming Home Office victim care contract for Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery.

Ashiana networks also extend to the CMI Race Equality Networks and Belong Network nationally, where we are contributing to debates around issues such as appropriate language to use for the future generations of BAMER groups, which is being further evaluated as a result of the Black Lives Matter agenda, which is at the heart of Ashiana debates.

BAMER Women and Domestic Abuse Services

The specific and different needs of BAMER women and children affected by domestic abuse are well documented (e.g. Ashiana, 2017; Imkaan et al, 2014; Southall Black Sisters, 2020; Sisters for Change, 2017; Women's Aid, 2019). BAMER women and girls who experience gender based violence are often less likely to access support. This is borne of a lived experience in which factors such as race, ethnicity, language, family structures, social exclusion, income and immigration status cause multiple or intersectional discrimination which has a direct impact on BAMER victims' experience of violence and will inform their response to it (Sisters for Change, 2017).

BAMER women also face cultural and social barriers of honour, shame and stigma attached to leaving abusive relationships. Combined with personal feelings of guilt and responsibility and often the uncertainty of insecure immigration status, they may endure abuse for longer periods, and to be experiencing severe abuse and extreme isolation by the time they seek help. BAMER women require high levels of support to reduce risk of significant harm and homicide by planning and implementing safety plans based on understanding the specific pressures and threats that they face from intimate partners, families and communities.

BAMER women are less likely to seek help from services they perceive as insensitive to their values and needs which reinforces their marginalisation (Sen, 1997) and are further marginalised by the social and economic inequalities they face and they were more likely to experience financial exclusion compared to BAMER men and the general society, for example, with some women not having bank accounts.

Ashiana experience and research shows that mainstream domestic abuse services do not generally meet needs in BAMER women's experiences. BAMER women are by no means a homogeneous group with identical experiences, expectations and needs. These will vary, for example, according to age, country of birth, social class, level of English and help seeking strategies. Nevertheless, there are some common experiences. BAMER women have reported mainstream services to be:

- lacking in language, cultural and religious sensitivity
- lacking in knowledge of the multiple forms of abuse they are subjected to by multiple perpetrators
- lacking in understanding of the specific pressures and threats they face from intimate partners, families and communities
- in some instances, demonstrating of institutional racism and prejudice.

Sheffield BAMER Domestic Abuse Services

Sheffield has domestic abuse services in place to meet the immediate and short term needs of women experiencing domestic abuse, although the local authority are not currently commissioning specialist services for BAMER women affected by violence and abuse and as a result support does not take into account the increased barriers and cultural and socioeconomic needs of those from BAMER backgrounds. There is an identified need for longer term support for women from BAMER communities due to these needs. However, in the face of further central government budget cuts, it is less and less likely that services will be commissioned locally to address the gaps identified, and so voluntary sector partners must seek opportunities to bring external funding into the city to address those needs.

Women accessing these generic services are still approaching Ashiana for support and we continually receive feedback stating reasons that that they feel safe and valued in the women's only space, not only by staff but the other service users and that they feel more comfortable in a BAMER specific service as they felt their needs were truly understood.

Prevalence of domestic abuse and harmful practices among BAMER women in Sheffield

Data and statistics are limited and Ashiana experience and research indicate a concerning level of underreporting of incidents, mainly due to Domestic Abuse being considered the 'norm' in some BAMER communities, although data derived from locally commissioned reports such as the Domestic Abuse Co-ordination Team (DACT, 2017) and other sources (cited) suggest that:

- The estimated number of victims of female Domestic Abuse in Sheffield, year 2017 was 13,232 to 14,466 (7.5% of the population).
- In 2017, the proportion of BME individuals accessing community domestic abuse support services was 30% of the total accessing support and 43% for those accessing a refuge, these proportions are both higher than the 17% Sheffield BME population and the 15% of reported incidents to the police that have a BME victim.
- Sheffield consistently remains one of areas with highest new cases of FGM recorded in the UK, the highest area outside of the London region. (NHS, 2019).

- 142 incidents of possible FM dealt with by the Foreign Office Forced Marriage Unit in 2019 were from Yorkshire and Humberside, the 4th highest prevalence in the UK (Home Office, 2019).
- The BAMER population in Sheffield increased significantly since the 2001 Census, from around 11% to 19% currently and is predicted to continue to increase year on year (Sheffield City Council, 2019).
- The population continues to change and there are significantly increasing numbers of those with dual and multiple heritages.

Note: these figures do not include estimates of those underreported as stated above, therefore are estimated to be significantly higher.

BAMER Women, Domestic Abuse and Covid-19

'Lockdown' restrictions meant that many women and children became at increased risk of experiencing domestic abuse. Home is not likely to be a safe place for those in abusive situations and restrictive measures such as social distancing and self-isolation became a tool to coerce, control and shut down routes to support and safety (Women's Aid, 2020). It is also widely reported that violence instances and domestic homicide increased throughout the period, with National Domestic Abuse helpline received 25% more calls and online requests for support, contacted hundreds of times more than in the preceding weeks and over 66% of those women reporting worsening and increasing instance of violence in the home (Women's Aid, 2020). Ashiana helpline referrals and enquiries have increased by 40% and existing user calls have increased by 50-60% all reporting multiple needs (including immigration, mental health) and fast-escalating risk (due to lack of prevention measures/safety-net breakdown).

BAMER Women and children became caught at the intersection of 2 pandemics- VAWG and Covid-19, with disproportionate impact of both for BAMER women due to racialised discrimination and structural inequalities (Imkaan, 2020). Helpline referrals and enquiries increased by two thirds from BAMER women who cannot access traditionally preferred community/walk-in routes to support. Existing user calls have increased by 50-60% all reporting multiple needs (including immigration, mental health) and fast-escalating risk (Ashiana Sheffield, 2020).

We are seeing a rise in inequitable and inadequate responses from statutory agencies and can cite examples of women forced back to perpetrators due to their immigration status.

Furthermore, since lockdown began, 26 women (and two young children) have been killed and details about the killings of a further seven women are also expected, more than triple in comparison to previous years, 8 of which were from South Yorkshire (Ingala Smith, 2020).

Even outside of the pandemic, BAMER women are disproportionately at risk of abuse and violence (3 times more likely to die on account of abuse); the pandemic has made matters much worse due to distancing from community support networks, inability to seek walk-in referrals at specialist services and state diversion to other priorities which has further excluded minority women and armed their

perpetrators with a sense of impunity.

The hostile environment and the two pandemics means that migrant women subjected to VAWG including so-called honour-based violence, forced marriage, and trafficking, will continue to experience barriers in access to services as inequalities are exacerbated. Women have reported increased income insecurity, inability to access government schemes due to low earning threshold, loss of employment due to casual employment status etc. Undocumented women have also been left completely at the mercy of unscrupulous employers and those with serious underlying health conditions/critical illness have been unable to access healthcare and have been either scared to seek help for fear of detention and deportation (Latin Women's Rights, 2018) or turned away due to status, despite limited relaxation purportedly allowed for healthcare provision for covid-19 related treatments (Southall Black Sisters, 2020).

The lack of socio economic access to safety during the pandemic is exacerbated by vast digital inequalities such as no safe access to phones, no credit, and no access to the internet compounded by record numbers of women seeking support and refuge has placed huge pressure on the already overstretched domestic abuse sector.

In addition, the pandemic has brought to the fore the gendered nature of care relationships both in formal and informal and in waged and unwaged settings. For example, in the UK as in many other countries women make up the majority of frontline staff as nurses, cleaners and junior doctors in hospitals and other care settings, meaning increased exposure to the virus. Moreover, a disproportionate number of these lower paid female frontline workers are of a BAMER background, the higher numbers of those from BAMER backgrounds affected therefore highlights these structures of inequality. This structural sexism issue adds more difficulties and risk for women experiencing domestic abuse. On top of all of these issues, health inequalities and effects on BAMER communities have been further exposed due to the pandemic; which has been seen in some Sheffield communities (Public Health England, 2020).

The government response to this issue was delayed; its first strategic action plan for addressing domestic abuse wasn't released until two months after lockdown commenced and nearly three weeks into lockdown, the government announced that domestic abuse services would be able to bid for additional funding, but this was not available until almost a month after that (Women's Sector, 2020).

The amount was calculated at £65 million (Women's Aid, 2020), just £37 million was released. On top of this, this funding is allocated for short term (in some cases 5 months) and fears across the sector are that this money is sourced from within the already allocated pot of funding for domestic abuse for the year 2020/21, the sector is openly vulnerable to 'falling from a cliff edge' when it comes to future services (Womens Aid, 2020). Another factor that disproportionately affects BAMER women.

This said, funding released by the government was very different to current commissioning structures, in that it was open and inclusive for all Domestic Abuse Organisations to bid directly (UK Home Office, 2020),

this was less resource intensive, and reduced beurocracy ensured that services, funding and resources were made available in a shorter amount of time. Alongside ring-fenced funding for marginalised services, the approach enabled specialist services, such as BAMER, disability and LGBTQ+, often left out of government funding and commissioned services, able to apply directly to national and local funding pots with success, services such as Ashiana Sheffield are currently able to offer domestic abuse refuge accommodation, something we have been unable to do for almost 8 years. As a result, Ashiana are able to offer increased support and accommodation during the crisis period, but as others in the sector, fear that this will have an impact on long term services.

In response to this, Ashiana developed an awareness raising campaign #ashianaishereforyou targeting women from BAMER communities in creative ways, with language specific information, a contrasting national picture shows a national awareness raising campaign #youarenotalone failed to release information in any languages other than English for many weeks.

Key Asks

The collective knowledge, insight and experience of the BAMER specialist sector built over the last thirty years has been instrumental in highlighting the specific forms of domestic abuse experienced by BAMER women and has served to bring about government change in policy and legal reforms. Despite Domestic Abuse Commissioning cuts, Ashiana has continued to respond flexibly to the fluidity of domestic abuse issues affecting BAMER women and children over time by developing and delivering appropriate service response as well as raising awareness and campaigning for policy and legal reforms to make women's and children's lives safer.

Given this evidence presented, Ashiana asks that the Sheffield Race Equality Commission consider:

- Undertaking a review of the locally commissioned service strategy to ensure vital specialist services are not excluded in favour of larger, generic contracts, and recognise the importance of services provided by specialists, giving BAMER women choice over their recovery and support.
- Ring fence funding for specialist organisations as recently done so by the Home Office during the Covid-19 response.
- Actively seek, promote and include specialist services in consultation, policy development and implementation projects.
- Commission training developed by specialist services, co-produced by survivors, and implement mandatory training programmes for statutory services such as police, local authority services such as housing, social care teams and education establishments.
- Support the development of structured and professional partnerships of the above named agencies with specialist BAMER women's service providers to improve police responses to risks facing BAMER women victims of violence and abuse.
- Review data collection processes to and reporting to offer a more extensive and locally relevant data set.

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