

Still We Rise:

Report from WNC Focus Groups to inform the Cross-Government Consultation “*Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls*”

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Executive Summary

On 9 March 2009, the Home Office launched a cross-government consultation in England on how to end violence against women and girls: *Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls: A Consultation Paper* (2009).

To inform this consultation, the Home Office commissioned the Women's National Commission (WNC) to organise focus groups across England to gather women's and girls' views on what would make them feel and be safer, and on proposals to prevent violence against women and girls. The focus groups were designed around the themes used in the cross-government consultation: prevention, provision and protection.

Between 16 March – 2 June 2009, the WNC organised twenty-four focus groups and consulted with 300 women and girls across England. These include women who identified as Black and minority ethnic (BME) women; Traveller women; older women; girls and young women; disabled women; transgender women; lesbians; bisexual women; asylum seeking women and refugee women; women trafficked into the UK; women offenders including women in prison; women in the sex industry and in prostitution; 'vulnerable' women (survivors of abuse, homeless women, women with mental health and substance misuse problems); women from rural areas; women night-shift and retail workers; women survivors of rape and sexual violence, and women survivors of female genital mutilation

Reports on all the individual focus groups have been delivered to the Home Office, together with interim reports from the groups, summarising women's and girls' views and their recommendations for change. Appendix G lists the recommendations made by different groups of women we consulted with.

Key recommendations

- The definition of violence against women and girls needs to be located within an equality and human rights framework that recognises violence as a cause and consequence of gender inequality, and should also include violence disproportionately experienced by women at work.
- A common definition of violence against women and girls should be used across government and by all public services and partnerships, accompanied by accurate data collection on different forms of violence experienced by different groups of women.

Prevention

- Prevention work needs to be undertaken on a societal, institutional, community and individual level that also addresses the multiple forms of inequality different groups of women experience because of their ethnicity, age, sexuality, disability, gender identity, religion or belief.
- The media has a key role in preventing violence against women and girls, and sanctions should be imposed for irresponsible media reporting that perpetuates myths and woman-blaming attitudes.
- Government needs to invest in a sustained national high profile multi-media awareness campaign to educate the public on what constitutes violence against women and girls and the help available, to challenge perpetrators' attitudes to, and use of, violence and to reduce social tolerance of violence against women and girls.

- Publicity campaigns need to be accessible, to target specific communities and groups, and to address all forms of violence against women and girls. Specialist women's services should be involved in the development of campaign materials.
- Statutory services (health, justice system, local government, and local strategic partnerships) should address all forms of violence against women and girls through effective leadership, training, policy and performance standards, as part of their statutory duty to comply with public sector equality duties. Their work on the prevention of violence against women and girls should be measured in terms of increasing women's safety, empowerment, and access to specialist women's support services.
- Approaches to community cohesion and engagement should include supporting communities to develop strategies to prevent violence against women and girls, and strengthening community leadership and raising awareness to change attitudes and responses.
- Local authorities and public sector commissioners should use service agreements with faith and other community groups to ensure they receive training on, and provide information and help in response to violence against women and girls.
- Men need to be engaged to speak out against violence against women and girls and to take an active part in the prevention of violence against women and girls.
- The promotion of healthy relationships and skills development to prevent violence against women and girls should be included in community education programmes, parenting education, and work in schools and youth services that also challenge associations between masculinity and gender based violence.
- Schools should be required to introduce a 'whole school' approach to preventing violence against women and girls which includes implementing policies to address violence, gender bullying and sexual harassment, and the compulsory teaching of violence against women prevention within a gender equality framework, from a very early age.
- Every school should have a lead professional responsible for policy and training on violence against women and girls prevention, and disseminating information to others about training, guidance and services available.
- Perpetrators of violence need access to community programmes and individual interventions to challenge their attitudes and behaviour and prevent further violence occurring. This work must complement, and not be developed at the expense of resources for specialist services for survivors of violence.

Provision

- All statutory services require a culture change where women and girls are not disbelieved or seen as to blame for violence perpetrated against them. Women are as concerned with how a service is delivered as what is being delivered, and want to be treated with dignity and respect whoever they came into contact with.
- Existing legislation, strategies, policies and action plans developed to address different forms of violence against women and girls need to be effectively and consistently co-ordinated, implemented and monitored across the country.
- All services and partnerships should be required to prioritise the safety of women and girls at all stages of intervention, and to provide effective, co-ordinated and well-resourced approaches to ending violence against women and girls.

- Women's services that are independent of statutory provision and that specialise in responding to violence against women need to be available in every area. These services need to be accessible for the most marginalised and vulnerable women, and provide timely, safe services that respond to complex and multiple needs, which focus on women's safety and empowerment without labelling or judging women or limiting the service to times of crisis or high risk.
- Statutory agencies, partnerships and service commissioners need to recognise the crucial role of specialist women's services and BME women's services in providing longer-term therapeutic and group support for women and girls, which in turn promotes women's self-esteem and empowerment as a means of preventing violence in the short and longer term.
- High profile publicity to raise awareness of the support services available needs to be rolled out in every area, targeting places women already go.
- Health services (such as health visitors, GPs, practice nurses, A&E consultants, midwives, dentists, opticians, sexual health and psychiatric services), social services, community mental health and drug and alcohol rehabilitation services should be required to routinely ask about violence as part of existing procedures and be trained to respond effectively on disclosure, referring to specialist support services where necessary.
- Health professionals should be trained to identify girls at risk of FGM and to respond sensitively and appropriately to women who have undergone FGM. Health services should employ professionals who can speak community languages to avoid the use of interpreters.
- Agencies should only share information with women's consent.
- GP surgeries need to play a greater role in identifying and responding to violence against women and girls, including the on-site provision of information and support for survivors provided by specialist women's services.
- The Department of Health should run a national public health campaign on identifying and preventing all forms of violence against women and girls.
- Government needs to promote the business case for ending violence against women to businesses and employers, as part of a national campaign between the Department of Health and trade unions on women's safety and the workplace.
- Women and girls who experience child sexual abuse need access to support as children and as adults, to aid their recovery and to minimise its devastating impact in later life. All professionals who work with children and young people should be trained in identifying and responding appropriately to violence against women and girls, particularly childhood sexual abuse.
- Social services should adopt a believing stance on disclosure of violence and provide support to women in response. For those women who are mothers social services should focus on the mother's safety as a means of safeguarding and protecting children and young people from harm.
- Statutory services should be subject to a 'kite mark' or accreditation to demonstrate their level of excellence in responding to violence against women and girls, for example through Comprehensive Area Assessment frameworks.
- Women should be supported to achieve economic independence, as access to financial resources was seen by many women as inextricably linked to women's access to safety.

- Employers and trade unions need to play a significant role in promoting gender inequality and preventing violence against women in the workplace. Employers should also be required to provide safe transport home for women night-shift workers.
- Violence against women should be designated as a hate crime.
- Designated parking, taxi and public transport marshals and better street lighting were all suggested as ways to address women's fear of crime.

Protection

- The criminal, civil and family justice system needs to develop an integrated response to violence against women and girls, focussing on the effective and consistent implementation of legislation, policy and guidance. Policy and practice should be regularly monitored and reviewed to ensure compliance with equality duties and that women and girls' safety is being maximised throughout the system.
- Specialist police officers and prosecutors trained on all forms of violence against women should be available in every area, and systems also need to be introduced to enable anonymous third party reporting in neighbourhoods and communities.
- State funded community-led education initiatives that raise awareness that FGM is illegal and unacceptable should be targeted at communities at risk.
- There needs to be more effective access to protection after women report violence to the police, through the introduction of removal orders, and by effective implementation and enforcement of bail conditions, restraining orders and injunctions, particularly in response to allegations of stalking and harassment by women. There also needs to be better monitoring and enforcement of a breach of non-molestation orders as a criminal offence.
- Court services needs to ensure consistent access to safety mechanisms and special measures to help women and girls give evidence in cases of violence and abuse. Women need to be regularly updated about the progress of their case, and cases of rape and sexual violence should be fast-tracked.
- The justice system should develop a centralised intelligence register to track perpetrators of violence against women and girls, including for traffickers who are repeat offenders.
- The Criminal Injuries Compensation Board rules should be more transparent in how decisions are made, and a review of the points deduction system should be undertaken so that behaviours being assessed are far more clearly linked to the crime for which the compensation is being sought, rather than being based on a wider character assessment of the victim.
- Probation and prison officers in women's prisons need to be trained on violence against women and girls, to enable them to ask women about experiences of abuse on entry to the prison; to deliver discussion groups on violence prevention and the help available, and publicise services available on their release into the community.
- Local Strategic Partnerships need to develop specialist women's health and support services for women in prostitution, including women-only drug rehabilitation services, and safe exit routes for women in the sex-industry. Anti-Social Behaviour Orders should not be used to deny women access to health and support services in local authority areas.

- The family justice system and Children and Young People's Trusts need to ensure safe supervised contact facilities are available in every area, and there should be an end to the assumption that contact between children and violent fathers is in the best interests of the child.
- The justice system needs to respond to crimes of violence against women, not to women's immigration status.
- The immigration system needs to be more gender-sensitive; immigration officers need training in all forms of violence against women and girls; and the UK Borders Agency needs to ensure full and consistent implementation of the Asylum Gender Guidelines, which should be regularly monitored and reviewed.
- Weekly, in person signing procedures for asylum seekers should be replaced by less regular (e.g. monthly) procedures for women asylum seekers, and women who have experienced violence, including trafficked women, should not be placed in detention.
- Women asylum seekers should be allowed to work or access education whilst waiting for their application to be resolved. There should also be a speedier resolution to asylum cases, whilst balancing the need for women to have time to safely disclose their experiences of violence.
- There should be increased outreach services including access to healthcare and sexual health services for women trafficked into prostitution, and professionals (police and health services) should be trained to identify trafficked women. Safe routes for men who buy sex to report suspected trafficked women should also be established.
- A co-ordinated response is needed between statutory and voluntary agencies so that all women who experience violence but who have no recourse to public funds have equal access to protection and can access safety, support and living expenses to minimise their dependence on their abusers.
- Men should be required to disclose criminal records to prospective female partners from abroad, and a system should be introduced to monitor men who apply to bring more than one woman from abroad in to the UK.
- Information should be made available, in different languages, for women on departure from their country of origin, and on entry into the UK, which sets out information about women's rights, violence against women and the services available should they be needed. State agencies should also conduct follow-up safety and well-being checks on women who enter the UK.

Finally, any strategy on violence against women and girls needs to establish and implement a comprehensive legislative, policy and service framework to prevent violence against women and girls, and be underpinned by clear responsibilities, targets, and review mechanisms, and sustainable resources for national and local specialist services for women and children experiencing violence and abuse.

Introduction

On 9 March 2009, the Home Office published a cross-government consultation on how to end violence against women and girls,¹ the first of its kind in England. As part of this consultation, the Home Office commissioned the Women's National Commission (WNC) to speak directly to women and girls about what would make them feel and be safer, and also to talk to them about how they felt violence against women and girls could be prevented.

About the WNC

The WNC is the independent advisory body on women's issues to government. The WNC partnership includes over 500 stakeholders from across the UK women's sector and from organisations working to promote women's equality throughout England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which in turn represents around 8 million women.

The WNC is ideally placed to facilitate a consultation on violence against women and girls given it has a long-established body of expertise on violence against women, and has a UK-wide Violence Against Women Working Group whose remit to develop a powerful and effective voice to UK Governments on action needed to tackle violence against women. In 2003, the Home Office commissioned the WNC to run consultation workshops throughout England and Wales with women survivors of domestic violence, to inform policy and legislative proposals prior to the introduction of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 ('Unlocking the Secret', 2003, available at www.thewnc.org.uk). This is still used today as a training resource for statutory services to understand what women who are affected by domestic violence need from local services.

Context for a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

Like all Government departments and public services, the Home Office has obligations under the Gender Equality Duty (introduced in April 2007) to eliminate unlawful sex discrimination and promote equality of opportunity between women and men as part of policy and programme development. All public authorities must also provide evidence that they have consulted widely with relevant service users and stakeholders in the development and delivery of policies and services.

The UK Government has also signed up to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), an international 'bill of rights' for women, adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly. The UK was examined by the UN CEDAW Committee on the 5th and 6th Periodic Report in July 2008 and the Concluding Observations by the CEDAW Committee specifically called upon the UK to introduce a co-ordinated strategy to address all forms of violence against women. An integrated violence against women strategy, which focuses on prevention, was also identified as the top priority for the Ministers for Women in July 2007.²

The United Nations Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action with the Beijing +5 Outcomes document 2001 originally outlined the responsibility of all Governments, in consultation with all relevant institutions and non-governmental institutions, to develop violence against women strategies by 1996. The UK also has commitments through international institutions such as the EU (and in particular, targets within the EU RoadMap on Equality between women and men 2006-2010), the Council of Europe Taskforce on addressing Violence Against Women, and the UN Secretary General's Report on tackling these issues include commitments to 2015.

¹ Home Office (2009) 'Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls: A Consultation Paper'.

² Women's National Commission (2007) 'WNC Consultation on the Priorities for the Ministers for Women – Summary Report July – September 2007', available at www.thewnc.org.uk.

About the focus groups

We were asked by the Home Office to run a series of women-only focus groups across England, in recognition of the importance of women's participation in the development of a strategy to end violence against women and girls. Our remit was to responsibly record the views of women and girls on the cross-government consultation, whether this was positive or negative feedback, and to ensure this was clearly and accurately presented to the Home Office and other government departments.

Our aim was to involve women who are usually under-represented within government consultation exercises, but whose voices would contribute an important and new dimension to this agenda. Between 16 March and 2 June 2009 we organised and co-facilitated twenty-four women-only focus groups across England, consulting with **300 women and girls**, including women who identified as:

- Black and minority ethnic (BME) women
- Traveller women
- Older women
- Girls and young women³
- Disabled women
- Transgender women
- Lesbians
- Bisexual women
- Asylum seeking and refugee women
- Women trafficked into the UK
- Women offenders including women in prison
- Women in the sex industry and in prostitution
- 'Vulnerable' women (survivors of abuse, homeless women, women with mental health and substance misuse problems)
- Women from rural areas
- Women night-shift and retail workers
- Women survivors of rape and sexual violence
- Women survivors of female genital mutilation (FGM)⁴

Of the 300 women and girls who chose to complete the equalities monitoring form questions⁵

- 7% were aged 12-16; 18% were aged 16-24; 26% were aged 25-34; 21% were aged 35-44; 17% were aged 45-54; 6% were aged 55-64, and 3% were aged over 65.
- 17% women identified as being disabled.
- 10% women identified as lesbian, 4% as bisexual, 60 % heterosexual and 4% as 'other'
- 42% women identified as Black, Asian or other minority ethnic group; 3% identified as mixed parentage, and 55% identified as white.
- 18% women stated they were not religious; 5% identified as Buddhist, 2% Hindu, 11% Muslim, 2% Sikh; 32% identified as Christian; and 1% as Jewish.

³ We held a focus group with 12-16 year old girls, in partnership with the YWCA. The NCB also conducted a consultation with young people through focus groups and an online survey: NCB (May 2009) 'Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls – Young People's consultation response collated by NCB'.

⁴ FGM is defined by the World Health Organisation as the range of procedures which involve "the partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or any other non-therapeutic reason".

⁵ Note that numbers don't add up to 100 as not all questions were answered.

This final report provides a record of discussions held with 300 women and girls across twenty-four focus groups.

We made a commitment to the women we consulted to feedback their views and experiences to Government. The concerns and opinions from this comprehensive range of women and women's organisations will touch on aspects of policy and delivery across all Government Departments. This consultation will also inform Ministers to enable the effective development of a comprehensive and integrated Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

This also provides the Home Office with a body of work to respond to the CEDAW Committee's concluding observations by enabling it to fulfil its obligations under CEDAW.

Consultation feedback

Definitions and data

The definition of violence against women and girls set out in the cross-government consultation was adopted from the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) definition, which is “violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman, or that affects women disproportionately”, that is:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.⁶

The consultation clarified that ‘women’ includes girls, and that this violence may occur in public spaces or in the home, and includes domestic violence;⁷ female genital mutilation; forced marriage; crimes committed in the name of ‘honour’; sexual violence, abuse and exploitation; stalking, and trafficking.

All the women we spoke to supported the definition of violence against women and girls used, and welcomed the definition being located within an equality and human rights framework because they felt that such violence is about exerting power and control over women and girls and thus reinforces gender inequality. However, some women also spoke of the need for a definition to include violence women experience at work from colleagues and the public, which they said included actual and threatened physical violence, verbal abuse and sexual harassment.

“Any definition of violence against women needs to include violence against women at work, like sexual harassment and violence from customers and from employers. Working in retail and working shifts means we’re exposed to very high levels of violence and abuse, because we are women; men don’t experience this level of violence at work because they’re more in management positions.” (FG17)

“Young lads messing around with condoms and trying to humiliate a young female sales assistant, shouting verbal abuse, sexually harassing women working in the shop, threatening women for not serving them, all this is abuse just as much as other types, but we class it as nothing, we see it all the time. And if I reported it, I’d have to have the time to talk to the police, so I’d be penalised.” (FG17)

Some women noted that government tends to over-emphasise the violence experienced by BME women as ‘honour’ based violence, which they felt can segregate BME women’s needs and experiences from other women’s experiences of violence. Women felt that the segregation of ‘honour’-based violence from other forms of violence women experience also serves to marginalise BME women from wider debates on violence against women, and can encourage statutory agencies to find different solutions. We were told for instance of the

⁶ Home Office (2009) ‘Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls’, p.11. This is based on the United Nation’s definitions as outlined in General Recommendation 19 of CEDAW and the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

⁷ Whilst domestic violence is best understood as a pattern of behaviour designed to achieve power and control rather than as a single incident or even a series of incidents, the government definition of domestic violence, for monitoring purposes, is: ‘Any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality.’ This includes violence between intimate partners and family members over 18 years (family members are defined as mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister, and grandparents, whether directly related, in laws or stepfamily); and also includes forced marriage, so-called ‘honour crimes’ and female genital mutilation.

inappropriate promotion of informal mediation within communities, when this would not be provided in other communities.

“Southall Black Sisters turned the whole concept of shame on its head; that the shame belongs to men as well, they campaigned outside the perpetrators houses. We need to challenge the view that the family honour rests on women’s heads; it should be shameful that men are beating and raping and abusing women. Violence against women is excused by concepts of honour, as a way of making violence against BME women a separate issue. Agencies then use the excuse that they don’t know how to deal with it or that communities should deal with it ourselves; but we have rights to protection too.” (FG15)

“Crimes in the names of honour are like mental torture, women get the blame in Pakistani culture. The men that bring us over have the same traditional culture as in Pakistan, we can’t protect our own honour, it is out of our hands. This is wrong and needs to be changed. Violence is violence whatever the reason men give for it.” (FG10)

“My friend was forced into a marriage, she didn’t want to have sex with her partner so he beat her up and told her dad, and then her dad beat her up too, it was awful. In our culture there is a real pressure on women, domestic violence isn’t allowed but men think it’s ok to control us, and if you don’t do what your husband wants or if you leave, you supposedly bring shame on the family, there’s a real pressure on women to maintain the family honour. It shouldn’t just be on women, it shouldn’t be tolerated, why isn’t everybody responsible for the family honour? Why is this used as an excuse for violence?” (FG12)

Women also felt that any strategy to end violence against women should not reinforce the tendency by agencies and by the justice system to view physical violence as more serious than other forms of violence. Evidence from survivors disputes this view: many women stated that the psychological effects of violence have a more profound effect on their lives, even where there has been life threatening or disabling physical violence. In particular, women wanted agencies to recognise that in nearly all cases of domestic violence between partners, there will be sexual violence occurring, and cases of forced marriage inevitably include rape.

“After 6 months of being with him I wasn’t allowed to go out on my own without him, I wasn’t allowed to see friends, or to wear make up, I was forced to have sex, but the police don’t take any of that abuse into account, then if you finally lash out at him they think it’s just you, that you’ve got an anger problem.” (FG12)

“The emotional abuse or sexual abuse is not acknowledged, because you can’t see it, nobody believes its happening. I’ve been called a slut and verbally abused for having two different genders of partners, but this kind of abuse often gets missed. It’s also the worst to get over and recover from.” (FG19)

“Trans people have to put up with constant low-level verbal abuse. This constant abuse is demoralising, and intimidating; this mental and emotional abuse is worse and more difficult to recover from than physical violence. This kind of psychological violence must be recognised and challenged.” (FG20)

“We also need more understanding of what a violent relationship is, that it includes controlling, emotional and verbal abuse – and agencies need to take action when this happens instead of waiting for women to be hit. And there seems to be a distinction between proper rape and date rape, which is ridiculous. We need more clarification about what violence against women actually is in any kind of national strategy, and this message needs to get out there to agencies and to women, like with rape, currently doubt still exists amongst women about whether they’ve been

raped or not - 'well I had had a bit to drink, and I did know him – does it count?' ” (FG16)

“I was living with my abuser, I didn't realise I was in an abusive relationship for a while, because it was emotional and financial abuse, and still until today I wasn't really sure. I thought domestic violence only related to one incident, which was physical and happened the day I left, but it went on for 9 months before. If I had known this when I was trying to leave her and find housing, it would have been easier.” (FG20)

“It's important to make people aware of what type of violence women go through, it's not just physical, it can be emotional, you might not have physical scars but it can be very damaging. More awareness about the psychological abuse and its impact is needed.” (FG4)

“There is a lot of emotional and mental abuse that some women experience. Women need to be told that is abuse, often it is the emotional 'wearing down' of a woman that goes on for years before the physical violence starts, and then it's hard to get out, your confidence is so low. Any strategy needs to deal with this too.” (FG6)

“People don't realise what violence is, it's also financial abuse, controlling behaviour, looking through your phone. I've realised I've been in abusive relationships without even knowing it, without naming it as that. The emotional abuse is what is hardest to break out of and the public are least aware of it. The problem with control in relationships is that the rules always change.” (FG19)

Women welcomed the opportunity the strategy would present to raise awareness of different forms of violence; especially for women who may not name their experience as abuse because the violence is not physical.

Women also wanted the strategy to address violence against women perpetrated by other women, including violence in same-sex relationships. Some women (particularly BME women, disabled women, girls, lesbians, bisexual women, trafficked women and sex workers) told us they also experienced abuse from female family members and other women.

“If someone's not out at work or got a family, someone can abuse you and get away with it, particularly if it's between two women. People cannot believe that women could sexually abuse or rape each other, so when it does happen it's impossible to get help.” (FG19)

“There is also a fear of violence [against trans women] from other women, when using female facilities like changing rooms or toilets. This is a big issue for me. I'm a lesbian and same-sex domestic violence is a big issue that needs to be addressed when we talk of violence against women, whether it's between trans women or not.” (FG20)

“It's not just the classic image of a male perpetrator we need to worry about. It's the mother in law; it's the uncle from down the street. We need to educate our communities so they are aware that what they are doing is wrong and it won't be tolerated, violence against women is an offence and you will be punished.” (FG9)

“I'm a bi person and if I experience violence from a male partner then there's an option to get help, if the partner is female you go unsupported. My experience is that attempting to access support from these services before hasn't been met with success; services didn't know how to deal with my case when my abuser was female.” (FG19)

Some women also highlighted the need for agencies to gather more credible data on different forms of violence experienced by different groups of women.

“Is there any research or data about how many times lesbians, bi or trans women, or within that how many Black lesbians get threatened, beaten up and harassed? I only know about this anecdotally, there’s not much information out there about this, about how often it happens and what help there is.” (FG5)

“Not many services and partnerships collect data on different forms of violence against women and girls, and even less know for example, the extent of violence against sex workers, or BME women, or disabled women, or lesbians, and so on. If we’re going to prevent violence, agencies need common definitions and accurate data across health, the justice system, education and women’s services.” (FG6)

Prevention

Violence against women and girls has largely been addressed and understood through responding to its aftermath. Many women’s organisations recognise that violence against women and girls is perpetuated by historical and cultural norms and practices; the promotion of socially prescribed gender roles; women’s economic and political inequality, and social policy and legislation. As a result many have developed prevention initiatives and campaigns to change attitudes to violence against women, empower women and girls, and challenge these underlying structures that perpetuate women’s inequality. However the predominant focus of the state and agencies has been at the level of provision and protection, and not on prevention through education and awareness in order to change societal, institutional, community and individual attitudes and responses to violence against women and girls.

Media and public awareness

Sexualisation of women and girls

An overwhelming majority of the women who attended the focus groups said they believed the media had a role to play in ending violence against women. Women felt that many sexualised images of women in the media encouraged men to treat women like objects rather than people and promoted the belief that women were always sexually available. Women said that this reinforced women’s and girls’ inequality compared with men and boys, and this created a culture that justified and perpetuated violence against women and girls.

“There is this clash in popular culture between the sexualisation of girls in the media and the huge demonisation of women who do sleep around, and called terms like ‘slag’ ‘slut’... images of women as objects or in submissive poses normalises it [violence against women] and men associate these images with women walking down the street.” (FG16)

“There’s no point in teaching about self esteem if it’s not consistent with broader culture. Society teaches us that women are submissive, a commodity, you only have to look at the pictures of women in newspapers. Schools are the first place that should be challenging this, bring Page Three into the classroom and question the messages it is sending out. Changing popular culture is too big a task – it’s as much about offering alternatives as challenging it. Women’s magazines are a joke. There should be more magazines that empower women and focus on women’s rights, not only on their appearance.” (FG16)

“People make judgements about your behaviour based on what they see in the media, there is a fine line between being boring and being a slut, it’s hard to know as a young woman how to navigate where you’re supposed to stand in terms of this spectrum. Some people are reclaiming words like ‘slut’, and trying to use it positively – ‘this is my right as a person’. But ideally you shouldn’t be applying judgements to women’s sexual relationships, whatever they are.” (FG16)”

“The sexual revolution has had bad effects; a more sexualised media hasn’t been great for women. Having more provocative, more sexualised media hasn’t necessarily been a good thing. We are still labelling what we are or aren’t, can’t we just do what we like with our bodies and it’s our business, without being labelled? Labelling and stereotypes is linked to our inequality” (FG16)

Most women felt that the media tends to focus attention on stranger attacks; blames victims for what has happened to them, and reports on the low conviction rate for sexual assault. In doing so, women felt the media contributes to women feeling unsafe at night and to the lack of confidence women have in the justice system, for example, women said media reports made them feel they would be judged or disbelieved, or that the case would not progress to court.

“If you look at all the media reflections of this, one of the reasons why girls might feel so unsafe at night is that that’s the violence that gets reported, that’s what all the big news stories are about, ‘I was on my way home, and I’d had a bit to drink.’ The stuff that doesn’t get into the news at all is the stuff that goes on behind closed doors, so no wonder girls feel so worried walking home, because they assume that’s where it all happens, and yet they could be even more at risk walking through their front door and that’s such a reflection of how appalling the coverage is, how biased it is.” (FG16)

“The media perpetuates so many myths about violence against women, and they don’t face any duty of care, they perpetuate cultural attitudes of secrecy. There are subliminal messages in the reporting of violence against women, such as ‘they were mugs for not leaving earlier’. Women take these on board; blame themselves. The press don’t have any understanding of how hard it is to leave a violent relationship.” (FG22)

“You hear about rape cases which demonise the woman, and you hear so much about low conviction rates...I don’t feel like if I went to the police I’d have a very good chance of getting any success, because you just hear so many horror stories about women who were treated badly or just aren’t getting the outcome from the case that you’d hope for.” (FG16)

Multi-media awareness campaign

There was consensus amongst all women and girls that government needs to invest in a national high-profile multi-media awareness campaign to educate the public on preventing violence against women and girls; to raise awareness of what constitutes violence (e.g. that it includes emotional and financial abuse) and the help available; to challenge perpetrators’ perceived sense of entitlement to use violence against women and girls; to dispel myths and stereotypes in order to minimise barriers to help-seeking, and to challenge public attitudes and social tolerance of violence and abuse.

“It’s not just working class uneducated women on council estates. People need to know it can happen to upper class professionals as well, there’s a need to challenge the image of what survivors look like.” (FG16)

“I get enraged at the advice given to women all the time about what they should do, repeatedly telling them what they should wear, what they should do...I complained

about a Home Office ad I saw, it said 'You are more likely to be raped if you are drunk', what kind of a message does this send out? What do you expect me to do with that? Not get drunk? And it's not even true. And it's not saying 'we are helping to catch rapists'...it's such a huge problem people thinking that women are asking for it." (FG16)

"The emphasis is always on women to change their behaviour. Girls' magazines give advice on how to avoid stranger rape, but there's never anything about the signs to look for to avert rape in your own home. I'm sick of being told what to do, how to change my behaviour, to avoid being attacked or raped. Why can't these messages be given to violent boys and men?" (FG16)

"Magazines try to empower women by telling you all the things you can do to avoid rape, but by telling them all the things you can do, you're actually taking away the power of choice, about what you can wear. Because there should be no reason why you can't walk down your own street in heels at whatever time of day – you've just as much right to be there as anyone else." (FG16)

"It angers me that women are blamed for being raped. It's horrendous the attitudes that exist, like that lesbians can't be raped, that prostitutes can't be raped, if you're bi you're asking for it because you're greedy. These are replicated in attitudes held by services. Like when social services keep blaming women, saying 'don't put yourself in that position', when you experience violence." (FG19)

"The Scottish rape crisis campaign⁸ is a good message and should be promoted across the UK – it challenges the myth that women ask for it by the clothes they wear or by their behaviour. Most victims of sexual violence are not attacked from behind by a stranger and beaten to within an inch of their life, they usually know the attacker, its often a family member, partner, colleague or friend." (FG23)

"It is ingrained in women from a very young age that by walking around at night you're putting yourself at risk, somehow doing something wrong. Why aren't we allowed to walk around in public and to feel safe? Ad campaigns should be targeted at men for a change. All this stuff is aimed at women, whereas if you want to tackle it at the cause you have to talk to men, get them to change their behaviour to prevent them from getting in a situation where they're going to end up committing the crime." (FG16)

"There should be media campaigns that focus on changing the behaviour of the perpetrator; at the moment campaigns are always directed at women. It's men that need to change their behaviour." (FG22)

Women wanted to see advertising on preventing violence against women and girls being promoted in the same way as the drink-driving campaign, which was particularly highlighted by some groups of women (women in rural areas, lesbians) because they said they had less access to services and depended more on access to information through the local and national media or through media targeting different communities. In particular, they wanted a multi-media campaign on preventing violence against women and girls to challenge myths and stereotypes and to publicise the help available.

"We have ads about tax returns, taxing your car, but nothing about domestic violence and other kinds of violence against women. We need a campaign like the drink and drive one, an up front campaign on violence against women, with adverts on the telly." (FG3)

⁸ Information about this campaign - This Is Not An Invitation To Rape Me' (originally from Los Angeles) is at <http://www.thisisnotaninvitationtorapeme.co.uk>

“Violence against women campaigns need the profile of drink-driving campaigns, but also these campaigns shouldn’t be limited to the mainstream; it needs to aim towards lesbian-targeted media and programmes too.” (FG5)

“A lot of women live in relationships that aren’t healthy relationships and don’t realise it. Women need to know what those are, and the best way to do this is through a national advertising campaign. We need to make women realise it’s not their fault and to know what their rights are; that if you behave in a certain way or dress in a certain way, you don’t deserve to be raped, and if you are being hit or abused emotionally, it’s not your fault.” (FG3)

“Diverse images in the media are really important. If you show a lesbian couple, don’t show a stereotypical couple of butch/femme stereotypes, or just have able bodied or just ‘white’ images in campaigns. The media also needs to target lesbian press and adverts. Any media campaigns need to use all media available, lesbians need to be as visible as heterosexual relationships, wherever you look there should be a lesbian there.” (FG5)

Many BME women also wanted targeted awareness-raising campaigns amongst BME communities on preventing violence against women and girls. Asylum-seeking women also called for a national media campaign that widely advertises the rights of asylum seekers and support services available to them; and dispels the myth that asylum-seekers are illegal immigrants, which women felt was a widely held view by the public.

“Asylum is not the same as immigration – the two are confused by the general public, and the Home Office conflate the two for political purposes. We are not illegal migrants.” (FG18)

“Some BME communities see violence as the norm but it is no different or any more acceptable than other crimes. We need to send this message out clearly that BME women deserve the same treatment and respect as anyone else. There was one case in an Asian family where the mother in law was the perpetrator and she was sentenced and that sent a really strong message to the Asian community that it wasn’t acceptable and there is a sentence attached. Violence shouldn’t be condoned by the extended family. More of this publicity that violence by extended families is wrong needs to be done, especially in BME communities.” (FG6)

Women also said they wanted media campaigns in various languages targeting BME communities, publicising the fact that violence against women and girls (in particular FGM and forced marriage) is unacceptable, illegal, and will not be tolerated. Women wanted specialist women’s services, including BME services, to be consulted in the development of campaign materials.

Media sanctions

There was overwhelming concern about the way the press reports on violence against women, in a way that reinforces myths and women-blaming attitudes, without any sanctions. Many women advocated that the media should be sanctioned for irresponsible reporting.

“The reporting of the John Worboys [convicted serial rapist] case was so unfair, it was all focused on ‘was she drunk, was she wearing a short skirt, she forgot herself and fell asleep’, instead of focusing on the fact that a crime had been committed against these women. The media needs to be trained on gender sensitivity; they should be scored on how they report women’s issues, like they are on how green they are. If they report inappropriately they should face sanctions.” (FG22)

Educating professionals

In addition to providing services, women felt public sector agencies like local authorities, health services and the justice system also have a responsibility for establishing and reinforcing standards for behaviour and community values, and therefore should play a key role in introducing policy and practices to prevent violence against women employees, service users and community members.

Training and standards

Women were united in the view that transforming institutional norms and cultures through leadership, training, policy and performance standards is an essential prerequisite to preventing violence against women and girls.

“There is a big gap between local and national government, where are the bridges between these things, the government is doing stuff about violence against women – the law’s in place, campaigns are in place, which is great, but nothing seems to be filtering down and actually having an impact on local services and on whether locally women can get help.” (FG16)

“You need a lead from powerful organisations in society like the statutory sector. They need to take a lead on this, they influence many people’s attitudes and behaviours, staff and service users, so there needs to be some form of redress where there are inappropriate attitudes displayed by public service employees, for example. We need to make it a statutory duty to respond to violence against women effectively.” (FG23)

Women wanted of the promotion of attitudes and skills to respond to and prevent violence against women and girls, beginning with health services, the justice system, education and social services. Many felt that women who had experienced violence, and women’s services that hold expertise in supporting survivors, should be central to the development of training and standards within those services.

“Across public services like health, the police, social services and schools there needs to be some kind of universal routine enquiry made compulsory, using common information gathering tools, and all agencies need to have workplace policies on violence against women.” (FG23)

“It’s not just the justice system women don’t have any confidence in. Social Services, Victim Support and Police all need to be trained – they all need to be more professional in the way they treat women – it seems they’re after gory details, discussing cases with one another in this way. Training is imperative to prevent this. Experts who work in the women’s sexual violence sector who understand the issues should be involved in this training.” (FG22)

“Police and other agencies like housing and social services should be trained by ex drug users, by women who have been sex workers, and by rape victims, so that they can see it from the other side.” (FG21)

“Professionals being trained in law schools, medical schools, and other professional qualifications for housing, health, social work, psychology, and criminal justice agencies, all need to include violence against women and girls, how to identify it and how to respond. This training should also be compulsory for agencies that do continuing professional development, like for judges and magistrates, lawyers, health professionals, and for human resources departments.” (FG23)

Promoting equality

Women felt strongly that statutory services should be leading the way in promoting diversity and tolerance in society yet they have a limited understanding of equality issues and of preventing violence against women. Many women observed that the persistence of violence against women and girls, the (lack of) services available and the (lack of) action being taking to stop abusers is inextricably linked to gender inequality and to what they considered to be institutional sexism, which for BME women also intersects with racism.

“In GPs, hospitals, in the police, there is a lot of underlying judgement and prejudice against women, which goes unspoken so which we can’t challenge and address. Women pick this up – they know they are being judged, and that powers are being enforced that are not in women’s best interest. And if people aren’t saying it, you can’t challenge it...Many of the jobs that are there to listen to children and to women are occupied by women, who themselves are in relatively low paid jobs and have no work-life balance and have little investment by employers in their training and skills development. This also needs to be addressed if we’re serious about preventing violence against women and girls.” (FG5)

“Equality laws need to make changes for trans people too, if someone is consistently racist or sexist or anti-trans they should be punished. People know though that they can verbally abuse trans women and get away with it. Any violence directed at anyone should have consequences and the police should use these powers.” (FG20)

“There is a great deal of prejudice against Irish Traveller women, it’s not voiced but you can feel it and you can see it in the way services treat us. If this was happening to another ethnic group it would be far more high profile, we need to start tackling racism against Irish Traveller women. We live with it everyday.” (FG8)

Women recommended that public bodies should take action on violence against women as a central part of their compliance with statutory equality duties, and their success should be measured in terms of women and girls’ safety, well-being, empowerment and access to support services.

Educating communities

Community cohesion and engagement

Women we spoke to consistently said that violence against *individual* women and girls has a detrimental impact on the lives of *all* women and girls, and achieves its intent of increasing women’s and girls’ fear of violence in local communities, particularly of sexual violence.

“If a trans woman is attacked in an area then it makes us all a bit nervous about being attacked and worried about our own safety.” (FG20)

Many women who have experienced violence say they are more likely to turn to friends, family and social or community networks than to public services or the criminal justice system. Approaches to community cohesion and community engagement therefore need to focus on supporting communities to develop strategies to prevent violence against women and girls, including building community leadership and awareness in order to change attitudes.

An increase in public and community awareness will inevitably increase demand for specialist services, which women said must also be acknowledged and addressed.

“But if there is more advertising, there will need to be more funds for services so that there’s the capacity to help those coming forward for help – you can’t risk knocking their confidence again by not being able to respond to demand.” (FG23)

Faith groups and religious leaders

Many women said they wanted faith groups and religious leaders to do more to raise awareness of and to prevent violence against women. In particular, women recommended that local authorities should use service agreements and spot checks with faith community groups and venues to ensure they provide information and help, and receive training, on violence against women and girls.

“There should be a zero tolerance to forced marriage; it is not acceptable; the government is too worried about causing offence.” (FG9)

“Community leaders and religious leaders need to be taking a stand on violence against women as well; they need to be saying in their sermons that violence against women isn’t acceptable, in any religion.” (FG15)

“There should be advertising in public places. Men must know that women are protected by the law, whether a woman has papers or not. We need more community awareness, neighbourhood watch, information in churches, mosques, bus stops, fliers in different places, places where women go.”(FG1)

“There should be an awareness campaign in the media that there are laws against FGM and forced marriage and that it isn’t acceptable. This message should go out into all BME communities and be promoted by faith leaders.” (FG9)

“Church and other religious leaders all stress the family as the most important unit, yet it’s in the family that the majority of abuse takes place. The importance of the individual should be stressed over the family unit. Stressing the importance of the family covers up the abuse that keeps many families together; a lot of families deserve to fall apart.” (FG13)

“Religious places of worship should be places to advertise services for women who are suffering violence, but religious communities are very resistant. Local authorities should use their power to make sure that all community places and religious groups provide help and information, it should be a condition of their funding and there should be checks on them to make sure they are doing what they are supposed to, to raise awareness of violence against women.” (FG9)

“Local authorities should use funding to implement change in certain organisations, if they had their funding withdrawn they would think twice about being resistant to change. They should be monitored so they have to provide evidence of what they are doing to prevent violence against women.” (FG9)

Community attitudes to FGM

There were differences of opinion amongst the women we consulted who had experienced FGM. Some women held the view that FGM was an acceptable practice and called for safer FGM practices and better healthcare responses, which do not damage women.

“I am a member of the old mothers, and all girls are to be cut. They are to be cut so the man does not reject her, so she has to be closed. We do FGM so that she is pretty and gets married. If a man finds she has the ‘goods’ [clitoris] the man will divorce her. She will be shamed; married yesterday and divorced today. I heard that a man found out his wife was not cut and he divorced her there and then.” (FG24)

“So the woman is not disliked by men; her ‘goods’ are taken care of very well by us. When the man looks and sees there is nothing there he is happy and knows that she

is a clean woman. Then we call the Doctor and open her for the wedding night.” (FG24)

Amongst others however, women understood that FGM constituted violence against women and girls; that it should be stopped and that, as well as being a crime in the UK, it also contravened human rights. In order to challenge community acceptance of FGM, they advocated that education and prevention needs to take place within communities, not be imposed from outside.

“There was a celebration when we were circumcised, it was made out as a good thing to us, we were bought gold, had a party. We didn’t understand what was happening; now we know it was wrong and slowly this will change. People have to talk to us, the people in the UK need to understand the whole story of FGM.” (FG24)

“The government should support the community groups within the Somalian community and then they can take the lead in re-educating people that FGM is wrong. Because when someone is working with the community about FGM they need to be from the practising community and able to understand the whole story.” (FG24)

“We need to talk to our men about FGM, the reason it’s being done is for them. Men should be educated about FGM so they no longer want women to be like that. I used to live in Europe and over there they [men] respected us, they were aware of FGM and they asked us what they could do to help stop it. I’m shocked at what it is like in the UK.” (FG24)

“Preventing FGM is about education and publicity; it is about women saying I will not circumcise my children and men saying they don’t care if women are circumcised.” (FG24)

“Educating communities about FGM should be widespread, it should include stuff about the health complications, about how it’s not part of our religion, about how it’s against the law; education should be about every aspect of FGM.” (FG24)

Educating individuals

All women spoke of the importance of promoting non-violent relationships between adults and children, which they felt involves parenting education to promote healthy relationships within families; compulsory programmes in schools from a young age that build skills to prevent violence; and interventions to challenge associations between masculinity and the prevalence of violence.

Role of schools in preventing violence

Women and girls felt strongly that schools should be required to take firm action against violence and abuse at school: many women and girls spoke of their experience of schools failing them through their inaction against abuse by other pupils and by teachers. All women we spoke to wanted schools to be required to introduce policies to address violence against women and girls, in parallel to their child protection frameworks.

“I was with a violent ex at school recently; the school did nothing, they told me it was my fault. They were the same when I was younger, when seven lads abused me, called me a dyke, so I went to see staff to complain and they didn’t do anything. I tried to kill myself 6 times in one year at school; no one got me any help. I was getting so much abuse from my peers, teachers would tell them off and they would start again.” (FG19)

“There is an issue about transition into secondary school. It’s a bigger cohort of kids. [A young girl] was gang raped in a classroom by 5 boys and all that happened was that the boys were suspended.” (FG3)

“I got bullied by the staff more than the pupils...I was out and confident but the staff there completely broke my spirit...They (teachers) actually segregated me because of my sexuality, put me in a special needs unit, they thought there was something wrong with me. They used to make me stand in an after school detention and repeat ‘I am straight’ over and over again. So I left.” (FG19)

As part of this whole school approach to preventing violence against women and girls, women recommended that schools should have a lead person on violence against women who has responsibility for policy, practice and disseminating information to other education professionals about training, guidance and services available.

“Schools, and their education welfare officers, SENCOs, catering staff and learning support assistants, all need to know how to access the services that are available for supporting survivors of violence. Each school needs a lead person on violence against women, like they have with child protection, and this person in each school needs to be responsible for channeling the information to them, so that when a case comes along or a child discloses they know how to respond and the information the child gives is acted upon.” (FG23)

Teaching gender equality and healthy relationships

Women wanted all children to be taught about gender equality and about how to develop healthy relationship skills, which involves not only changing attitudes but developing resources that promote new behavioural skills and challenging gender norms in terms of attitudes and behaviour.

“Awareness of violence against women and girls needs to start as soon as gender norms begin to be taught, soon after birth, and into nurseries, then into school. It needs to be taught to all ages from very young in an age appropriate way. Challenging gender roles need to be part of this education, so there should be an acknowledgement that girls being ‘boyish’ are OK. So many girls are bullied because of not conforming to gender stereotypes. There was no acceptance of how I was, when I didn’t conform to being typically feminine. I was just bullied for it.” (FG5)

All women and girls wanted teachers to explore the idea of what a healthy relationship is with children and young people, from a very young age.

“Children need to be told it’s wrong, but teaching should focus on what a healthy relationship looks like. Children want the chance to talk about experiences and support from other children. Educating all children creates a peer support network for those affected by abuse.” (FG5)

“Schools have a really important role in supporting LGBT kids. In some schools its fine to be lesbian, gay or bi. In others they pretend same sex relationships don’t happen. My niece is going through school now and they don’t broach LGBT issues at all, she’s asked questions about lesbian sex and teachers don’t know how to answer them.” (FG19)

“There is not enough information about healthy relationships if you are a lesbian at school. You don’t know what’s right or wrong, and don’t understand the implications of different behaviour. It’s not explored at schools. It’s really difficult for you, unless you join a specific group for lesbian young girls and share information about what’s ok behaviour and what’s not.” (FG5)

“Teachers don’t know how to have a discussion about lesbians, what a lesbian looks like, bisexuals, what trans people are. Adults working with young people aren’t comfortable talking about different relationships. Young people end up very vulnerable and isolated. They might only hear about it from a sexual health clinic, and the focus then is only on what can go wrong in a same sex relationship, not what healthy relationships look like. I feel very concerned about this.” (FG5)

“You can’t rely on parents to teach girls about healthy relationships, because they don’t necessarily know themselves. You need to teach parents what a healthy relationship is, and base this teaching on research. I grew up in a culture that you didn’t communicate, you just got hit, and you didn’t even ask why. Research and studies show what healthy relationships are, and this can be taught regardless of different cultures and religions, to counter a lot of doctrine that’s going along, particularly in faith schools.” (FG5)

Trans women in particular spoke about the harassment, violence and abuse they routinely experienced from children and young people walking to or from school, and women felt that if schools addressed LGBT issues and raised awareness of diversity within local communities from an early age, this abuse could be prevented. Although there were isolated examples of good practice, very few women spoke of schools routinely addressing LGBT and gender-based abuse in schools.

“I had lessons on LGBT issues at primary school, it was really good. I’ve been to three schools...in the first two we had sex education that included LGBT issues when I was about 7 or 8, they broached it openly and honestly.” (FG19)

“The amount of verbal abuse I’ve had [trans woman] is worse by far from school kids who are the single biggest problem for me. I live near a comprehensive school, a Roman Catholic school, and I won’t leave the flat until they’re in school, I’m too scared to go out. There’s no gender identity training there.” (FG20)

“I accidentally got on a school bus once, it was horrendous, all the school children surrounded me and were pointing and laughing, there was nothing else I could have done except get off at the next stop. I don’t know why the bus driver let me on. Schools should be teaching about trans issues as these kids clearly didn’t have any awareness of transgender issues.” (FG20)

Compulsory education in schools on gender-based violence

All women and girls wanted education about gender-based violence to be compulsory within the school curriculum, for example, in PSHE. Women felt it was important that all teachers receive mandatory training on identifying and responding to signs of violence and abuse, and that from a very young age children should have greater awareness of what violence is, what kind of behaviour is acceptable, and what help is available.

“There needs to be more teaching on violence against women in school. Start young teaching kids zero tolerance, and challenging myths and stereotypes, building self-esteem, safe touch, and that calling a girl a ‘twat’ or a ‘whore’ isn’t acceptable. We work with young girls who felt unable to say no, they took on the blame themselves, and boys who think its ok to be forceful with women if they’ve given them a few vodkas.” (FG23)

“Children need to be taught about sexual violence as well as domestic violence. Children should be taught that certain types of touching are wrong, and also where to go if this does happen to them. This needs to happen even though you want children to keep their innocence but it’s unfortunate because you have to tell them. They have to be educated so that they can’t be led to believe that they’re the only one. Children who are experiencing sexual abuse need to feel safe to disclose what is happening;

if someone had told me at school that what was happening to me was wrong I might have told someone.” (FG23)

“Violence against women needs to be on the curriculum, boys need to know that violence against women and girls is not acceptable and they need to be responsible for their own behaviour. We can’t allow this to be a single gender issue.” (FG22)

Teenage girls in particular highlighted the lack of education on violence against women and girls in schools and said they wanted more information about violence in relationships to be taught from a young age. They wanted all schools to provide ongoing teaching (ideally through drama, filmmaking and peer mentoring models) on what to do about bullying and sexual harassment; on healthy relationships and how to keep safe from a young age; and on the help available for girls and young women. In particular they wanted specialist women’s services from outside to come into schools to offer support.

“I would like information in school about keeping safe and on relationships and what a bad one looks like, and where I can get help. It’s scary going through domestic violence. We don’t get anything on domestic violence, bullying or sexual harassment.” (FG7)

“Prevention should start with education before young women even have boyfriends, and women should be taught to protect themselves against men’s undermining tactics. Teaching children how to say no is very important, particularly as there is a lot of conditioning of children which takes place in British culture to do things that they don’t want to, like families saying you must give your aunty or uncle a kiss before we go. The education system should teach them to say no early on.” (FG13)

Women thought that all schools should be more proactive in educating children from a very young age, particularly about forced marriage and about FGM, because many teenage girls may not have equal access to education and sex education. BME women in particular told us they feared that some schools would be reluctant to address these issues, particularly if governors or local male community leaders object. Women wanted all aspects of sex education to be made compulsory in schools to counter the tendency of parents from some communities to withdraw girls from the social aspects of PSHE.

“Young Traveller girls don’t stay in school, they’re taken from school when they reach puberty, then they get married very young. We need education – we need to bring the education to the Travellers, so it doesn’t have to be in a formal school setting and it can be linked to something they are interested in.”(FG8)

“Traveller women believe it is their husband’s right to have sex with her whenever they want, many of the women in my family don’t understand what rape in marriage is. It shouldn’t be like this, we need education and awareness campaigns at an early age. Children need to know from an early age that violence at home is not normal, it’s wrong. Then you can prevent little boys growing up to be like their fathers. But it’s also about teaching young girls to respect themselves and their bodies and have ownership over their own bodies.” (FG8)

“I was at a faith school and received no sex education whatsoever, let alone anything about relationships, respect or self esteem.” (FG16)

“FGM should be part of sex education in schools, so all young people are aware of it, it should just be taught generally. The government should also support the community groups within the Somalian community and then they can take the lead in re-educating people.” (FG24)

Women also stressed the importance of all schools and youth services proactively delivering education for all children and young people on preventing violence against women and girls

within a human rights and equality framework, which challenges social, cultural and religious views and practices, that justify and encourage violence against women and girls. Women wanted this work to be a requirement in all schools, youth and educational settings.

“Gender bullying happens all the time. My eight year old, she won’t get changed because they get changed together for PE and they [boys] make fun of the girls. If children are being sexually abused and then they have to undress in front of boys, it must be awful.” (FG3)

“There needs to be more training, especially around challenging cultural attitudes; schools need to take a forceful line on violence, no religion tolerates violence against women.” (FG15)

Re-educating men

Women we consulted recognised the importance of work in schools and in youth services to engage young men in the prevention of violence against women, but also spoke of the need to engage adult perpetrators in prevention work.

“We shouldn’t only teach boys and girls about respect, young people need to learn how to respect themselves. There should also be specific education for men about relationships, what a healthy relationship is, how to identify as physically strong and male but with the right ways to treat women, not the wrong ones.” (FG16)

“Men need to help us raise awareness of the view that violence against women is wrong, they need to speak out too. It’s really powerful if we can get men on our side to challenge other men who support violence or are being violent to women they know, in their family and amongst their friends.” (FG15)

“We must get through to men that it isn’t manly to abuse women...that their behaviour is abuse not manliness. Work with men and boys needs to challenge assumptions about masculinity, about what it is to be a ‘real’ man, because this is used by men to justify their use of violence to women.” (FG13)

Women also recognised that as men are the majority of perpetrators that are held to account through the criminal justice system, women wanted greater access to community programmes and individual intervention with perpetrators in order to challenge attitudes and assumptions and prevent future violence; enabling them to either self-refer to such programmes or be referred by family courts, children’s services, health and other agencies.⁹

“We’ve got domestic violence programmes for men, but more work needs to be done to develop these to deal with men’s use of sexual violence, or of prostitution, and other forms of violence.” (FG13)

⁹ Currently there are programmes available for sex offenders and domestic violence perpetrators delivered as criminal justice programmes (which take mandated referrals from the criminal courts as part of a sentence on conviction), and some community based domestic violence and sex offender programmes (which take referrals from agencies and self-referrals). Accreditation through RESPECT, the UK membership association for domestic violence perpetrator programmes and associated support services, requires domestic violence programmes to have parallel support services for partners and ex-partners of participants.

Provision

Offering support: access to services

The role of statutory and voluntary services, including their role in responding to signs of violence and offering support, was discussed at every focus group.

The women we spoke to felt strongly that it should be the responsibility of the community and state institutions, not the abused woman, to reduce and prevent violence. However, they said that whilst local statutory services, like health, housing and social services, had a key role to play in responding to early signs of violence and in offering support to women and girls, they felt that statutory services systematically failed them.

Trust and confidence in statutory services

Almost all women we spoke to had little trust or confidence in statutory services: they consistently said they felt excluded, isolated and rejected from services, and recounted numerous examples of being told their experiences didn't 'count', of not being believed, and of being made to feel that they didn't matter. Particular groups of women also talked of services 'labelling' them (e.g. disabled, sex-worker, offender, traveller, drug-user, asylum-seeker), which they felt exacerbated the poor response they received and further hampered their help-seeking.

"I think a large part of the problem is that you feel like you're being judged by these services that are supposed to be there to support you." (FG6)

"We want statutory services to engage with us directly, instead of making assumptions about what we need. They should respond to the immediate incident of violence and to women's current needs, instead of judging women on their past experience or lifestyle." (FG13)

"It's hard enough trying to get your voice heard at the best of times. When you've used drugs or when you've worked on the streets, it's impossible. Once you're labelled that's it. It's difficult for us to escape this, even if you change. Users often don't know anybody who's clean, apart from our support workers. We're in no-man's land, constantly being judged. People in services are so judgemental, they ask us 'what do you do' – what do I say? I'm a crack-head, smack-head prostitute, what would you think? You wouldn't talk to me. And how do I get any other job? I've got a criminal record; I've been 5 years in prison, what's out there for me? I'm still young, but what help am I going to get now to get my life back on track? Nothing." (FG14)

"Services make assumptions about what is needed; they don't actually ask women what they need. Then if it doesn't work the women are blamed for being difficult or anti social." (FG21)

"It's hard for lesbians to come to terms with violence now or in the past. It's hard to say as a lesbian that someone's been violent to me, whether it's a woman or a man, because of ingrained prejudice by others – agencies think 'well, you are a lesbian and you deserve it'. Lesbian relationships often aren't allowed to deal with the complexity of relationships and to get professional help, everything needs to be seen as working ok." (FG5)

"I told social services and other statutory services but nobody believed me, or helped me. My husband was very clever. He told them what they wanted to hear. They didn't speak to me. I just needed an ear, someone to listen and support me. But nothing got done; nothing went any further, when all I want is to move forward with my life." (FG8)

"I don't feel safe anywhere in my life. I've experienced violence from partners; I've been raped and I didn't report it; I've worked on the streets, I was vulnerable and on drugs. I don't have any faith in the system. I feel like I constantly have to prove myself, although I've turned my life around now the police and other services just look at what I was in the past, they don't see what is happening now and deal with that situation, they just judge me on what I was." (FG21)

"Statutory services must be made more accessible for women who have English as their second language, including BSL [British Sign Language] users. Often Deaf parents and ethnic minorities are excluded from statutory services based on having to make a phone call to access that service. Services should use simple technological solutions to increase accessibility, such as installing web cams, using remote interpreters. It is not acceptable that Deaf women are denied access to mainstream statutory service if they experience violence." (FG13)

"It is very hard to access services when you don't read and write. The structure of services and the way they're delivered at the moment don't fit the needs of Traveller communities; services need to be more flexible with so that they meet the needs of Travellers." (FG8)

"I've had a lot of difficulty accessing services, a lot of this is around having evidence of what has happened, it is very difficult to provide evidence of what has happened, and sometimes it's not 'classic' domestic violence, it can often be violence from the extended family. It's really complex because it's not just violence from a partner and statutory services don't often realise that." (FG15)

Similarly, how services respond to a range of equality issues (e.g. LGBT or BME issues) and not only to violence against women, affects levels of trust and confidence in that service and whether women feel able to safely report violence and seek help or not.

"We are not appreciated in this country. Services don't like us or support us, they are racist and discriminate against Black women. We can't get benefits, we can't work, we are labelled and judged, how can we think about leaving our husbands? How can we then contact these same agencies for help?" (FG10)

"The cops bust us even when we're not doing anything, even if we're hanging around waiting for a friend, just because they know our history. A punter attacked me recently but I wouldn't report to the police because of the way they treat us. He tried to strangle me half way through and I know he's doing it to other girls round here; I burnt him with my lighter and ran away, so he's got a burn on his hand." (FG21)

"There is a deep distrust between the LGBT community and the police, and some have been on the wrong side of the justice system because of their identities, which has to be addressed before we talk about increasing confidence in the system for women who experience violence." (FG19)

"There are many lesbians working in the field of violence against women so it's very complex for lesbians to get help if something happens to you. If I was on the street and got attacked, I wouldn't go to the police; I'd go to friends, because I know how they [police] operate, how they talk about women and how they treat women unequally." (FG5)

Additional barriers to seeking help

Many women also spoke of feeling trapped in experiences of violence which further impedes their help-seeking, for example through having no recourse to 'public funds' or other access to money; having no access to learning English; losing children from forcible adoptions; and through drug dependency.

"There is family stigma attached to speaking out about domestic violence, especially for those from ethnic minorities in which a wife goes and lives with her husband's family – everyone blames the wife. That she gets things wrong when trying to fit into the new home is used as an excuse to beat her. Or they may pick on her because of how she's dressed, how she cooks. She doesn't know anything about the new country she lives in, she has no recourse to funds or to safety, she is trapped." (FG18)

"There is no service where women can go and be taken seriously. We both felt that we weren't taken seriously or listened to as a woman. So many women are so silent, some have never learned English. There are so many women who have been raped but you would never tell anyone, women are too ashamed; these women stay because they can't speak the language." (FG6)

"If I haven't got my children, if social services go and take them away without consulting me or without supporting me, I may as well go back to him, what else have I got in my life?" (FG12)

"I'm trying to get clean and am on a waiting list for detox, I'm trying not to use but I don't have anything to get clean for, I haven't got anything to do except work on the streets, or I stay in bed for up to 4 days, really depressed. There's a woman's group at the drugs project and at probation, which have waiting lists. If I could go somewhere and do some art or pottery or learn to use a computer, get some skills, but there's nothing to do. I just put up with the violence and try to get through each day." (FG14)

"The focus of services should be what they can offer to increase women's and girls' safety, not to judge women's behaviour and what she is doing or not doing in response to experiencing violence." (FG13)

Teenage girls were especially clear that they did not want services that were inaccessible, unsafe, judgemental and unfriendly. They also did not want others to know why they were going there, and they said they would like the option of being able to go with a friend.

"I wouldn't use it if it's far – such as more than two bus rides – and if it doesn't open when you need it, because you can't take time off school to get to it." (FG7)

"If they don't listen to you properly I wouldn't use the service, especially if they tell you you're stupid for still being with him after all he's done to you." (FG7)

"Fear would stop me using a service, or if he stops me from going out, sometimes he won't let me out. Also, if other people knew why I was going there. If someone could come with me, because this would increase my confidence – it would help get me there." (FG7)

"Although it's a good counselling service for young people, it's not safe to walk up to the building, so I don't like going there because of that 'creep alley'. There's always blokes hanging around outside in gangs, lads there laugh at you when you walk in. So even though the service and staff may be good, the outside is off-putting. It stopped me going." (FG7)

"If an adult woman in a relationship can't get the help that she needs, how does a girl of 16 get the help she needs? There need to be clear consistent steps to getting help

that all girls know about, rather than constantly being re-directed around services that aren't helpful. Women's Centres for younger women could be a bit more like Youth Groups, bright, colourful, and welcoming. This would make them more approachable for teenagers and young women." (FG16)

Awareness of services available

Awareness of the availability of support services was low across all groups, as was any knowledge of how to get help if women experienced violence or abuse, and knowledge of what services could offer if they sought help.

"I got attacked over many years, I had a broken nose, I phoned the police they told me I had to find somewhere to go, not him. I went back because I didn't know where else to go. I eventually went to a refuge, I left everything, they were great, I got support, I got listened to, I was safe. Women need to know they can get help, because I didn't know." (FG4)

"We didn't know about the national helpline, I'm vaguely aware of the refuges; I don't really know much about rape crisis. There should be more information in probation and in prisons about services, we talk about getting off drugs but we don't talk about violence we've been through or what help there is available. It would be good to know what services are out there and who can help if you experience violence, when we leave this place [prison]." (FG12)

"We need more awareness of what's out there in terms of support services, we don't know about these services or of the help women can get, and we're in our early 20's. It would be good to know where refuges and other support services are, and how to contact them, so that you could go there first, get the support you need when you're feeling at your most vulnerable, and then report to the police, instead of the other way round. They should be better advertised, maybe in the Yellow Pages, and especially in schools, colleges and universities." (FG16)

Women who had experienced abuse from other women were particularly unsure what services were available for them, because they said many agencies often assume perpetrators of violence are men. Although in many instances women spoke of first seeking assistance from family members and friends, some groups spoke of their difficulty with accessing support from family members and from local community support networks.

"Bi women aren't seen as having a community or identity outside our relationships or sexual behaviour; you can be sexualised when you're seeking help, and stigmatised when you're seeking community. Where can you go if your community doesn't understand your relationships?" (FG19)

"LGBT kids grow up without expecting help or understanding, we get this message from institutions, and from our families, and we internalise this. The worst abuse we have in younger years happens at home or at school. Families and so-called friends are often the most abusive. We learn not to trust any institutions, not to trust anyone." (FG19)

Publicising services

Women said they wanted high-profile publicity about what services offer in response to violence against women, targeting places women already go to.

"You could have more information in the Doctor's surgery or supermarkets, we all go there." (FG3)

“In an ideal world I'd like to see advertising about women's services splashed across double decker buses and big billboards, advertising that we're here, we exist. It's an improvement that the [rape crisis] leaflet was in the local library, but it wasn't in the general health and information – it was at the bottom. It was good it was there but it was tucked away, almost like we're a bit embarrassed about this. And I'm thinking why should we feel embarrassed? It's happened, and yes we don't want the world to know about it, but it would be nice to have that information advertised. I don't care if the general public feel uncomfortable, that it's as big and bold as some silly advertising campaign for silly face cream or a can of lager. It should be out there.” (FG23)

“We need to know we can get information and help from doctor's surgeries, supermarkets, schools, Boots, Parent Teachers' Associations, places where women feel safe and they are not recognised as special places. We need to work through established organisations that are already in place, use these services to promote support for survivors of violence.” (FG6)

“You need to do a two-pronged attack – we send information and posters to GP services repeatedly but they refuse to put it up. There needs to be a push behind this, nationally, regionally and locally to raise awareness, particularly around sexual violence. Domestic violence has been slightly luckier in the sense that it has had a higher profile, and it has become less acceptable, whereas sexual violence still gets tarred with taboos.” (FG23)

“We should have information in local shops or posted through everyone's door advertising services where you can get help, yeah, the government should use the postal service, information about violence against women and the help available, in several languages, should be dropped through everyone's door, because some women aren't allowed out of the house.” (FG12)

“What about putting information in libraries, phone boxes, post offices, schools and swimming pools, because he can't come with you into the changing rooms? It also needs to be on TV and radio because a lot of men don't allow you to go out.” (FG3)

Rural areas

Women in rural areas described a tremendous sense of isolation coupled with a significant lack of access to specialist services, which made it very difficult to escape their situation. Women spoke of the potential for accessing support services from churches and other faith or community leaders, but in practice women had failed to get help in this way.

“There is a different climate in small villages. One or two families who knock their families about, they are kept at arm's length. People accept it. There is a totally different feeling about small places. People think it's a community, but people have no idea. It's very isolating. If you are not allowed out you are basically alone.” (FG3)

“I was told by my church I should try harder. The Church asked me why I didn't go to counselling with him, but I couldn't do that, I wouldn't feel safe because he'd be there too.” (FG3)

There was a consensus by women living in rural areas that there needed to be more violence against women outreach services in rural areas, including well-funded, accessible help-lines; accompanied by greater and more imaginative publicity to raise awareness of these services.

“I phoned the domestic violence helpline and it was busy. He nearly killed me one and a half years ago. I could have got out but it was busy. I couldn't get through. It's hard for women in isolated places.” (FG3)

“I joined WAITS [BME women’s service] because I felt isolated. Many women experience domestic violence in rural areas. They are not even allowed to go to the supermarket.” (FG6)

Expectations of services

It was evident that women did not have high expectations of services: women and girls consistently said that their ideal service is one that listens to and believes them; that treats them with dignity and respect; that helps them be safe; and that is accessible and available when women need support. This supports findings from earlier research with survivors¹⁰, which found that survivors want to be taken seriously, to be treated respectfully and to be believed, and that women are as concerned with *how* a service is delivered as they are with *what* is delivered.

“The type of service I want as a lesbian is a safe, non-judgemental one, someone who takes me for who I am. If I’m a lesbian I may just want to be seen as me, dealing with an issue. If I disclose something I don’t want to be judged, or not believed – this applies to all services not women-only services.” (FG5)

“An ideal service would be all in one place, with a lot of help there for you so that you don’t have to go from place to place, one link-worker supporting you with a degree of choice of who that is. A service should offer you stability; we need a service that’s safe and that’s quick to access, someone who will be there when you need it, whatever time of day, with no waiting lists, and who understand about violence and know about rehab, about other things we’re going through.” (FG14)

“Services need to support women in response to where a woman’s at in her life, they need to give women choices and recognise what women already have done to cope with the violence and to keep themselves safe. Women’s safety must be the over-riding priority for services.” (FG16)

Health services

All women thought that the NHS (such as health visitors, GPs, practice nurses, A&E consultants, midwives, dentists, opticians, sexual health and psychiatric services) have a vital role in early identification and response to violence - particularly for those who are isolated and therefore more vulnerable - and also should have a key role in supporting and safeguarding women and girls. Women were not generally aware that some NHS services (e.g. midwifery, mental health services) should be routinely asking women about domestic violence, and many in receipt of these services reported they had not been asked about violence. Women felt that health services should allow enough time to ask women about violence and to respond effectively. They stressed they felt unable or afraid to reveal the abuse to NHS staff if their abuser was with them, and said that health services should do much more to ensure women were seen separately from partners and family members, so that the question could be asked and abuse could be disclosed in a safe environment.

Early identification and routine enquiry

¹⁰ ‘Domestic violence and housing: Local authority responses to women and children escaping violence in the home’ E. Malos & G. Hague, 1993

Women were strongly in favour of *all* health professionals being required to prioritise early identification of violence against women and girls, in particular, for health professionals to be trained to routinely ask women and girls about experiences of violence and abuse as part of existing procedures; to respond to disclosure with support and sensitivity; and to refer to specialist support services where necessary.

“All health and education professionals should have basic training in violence against women; they all have child protection training, what about violence against women? They should be aware of the signs and what you can do and where to signpost.” (FG6)

“When I went to hospital, he would always come with me. The only time he left me was in X-ray. Can’t the nurses see he is not leaving me? Can’t they be trained to spot this? Why can’t they take me into another room and ask this?” (FG3)

“How do I know I’m safe here? I don’t know the language, the area, how can I leave him? I always feel anxious and wonder if they are going to lock me up and take me elsewhere. There is the language barrier and I can’t express myself, when I need treatment he takes me to hospital and tells them a story, I can’t tell them what really happened. I’m trapped.”(FG10)

“The ways health services are structured are in direct conflict to the support that women need if they experience violence: agencies need time to identify it, women need time to disclose violence, and to recover from it. But the way agencies, particularly the NHS, are set up is about limiting time, which is in conflict with women’s needs. In a recent workshop I did with health visitors, none were asking questions about domestic violence and one of the reasons they said for not doing so was having no time to ask and no time for the answer.” (FG5)

“My friend was in hospital after her husband beat her up really badly, she had really serious injuries, but for the first six years of their relationship, he was wonderful, charming, so when she tried to seek help from her friends and family she was disbelieved, he had fooled everyone, said it was an accident. Eighteen months ago she tried to get help again and the mental health service told her she had recreated the memory, so she went back. She’s now in and out of [a local mental health hospital], he’s done her in, I’ve never seen a woman that broken before.” (FG19)

“When my baby son had to be admitted to hospital – they’ve now diagnosed it as failure to thrive syndrome caused by the abuse he saw - they asked him [abusive partner] if Social Services were involved. He said ‘no’ of course. Why ask him? I couldn’t tell them, he never left me. Why didn’t they ask me on my own?” (FG3)

“It takes an awful lot for women to say someone’s been violent to them. Agencies asking the right questions at the right time in the right way is what’s needed. Get away from calling it screening and medicalising it, professionals should be taught how to ask the questions and how to respond. GPs and dentists should have a greater role. If you live in a country that promotes non-violence, then GPs and dentists should be asking about injuries, should collate information and be logging it.” (FG5)

“I went to my doctor for help from violence; he didn’t refer us anywhere. Doctors just don’t listen. Hospitals and doctors never ever help, they don’t let you talk, they didn’t examine me or ask me anything after he’d been violent, they just gave me pills.” (FG7)

Particular groups of women said that health services did not take into account their specific needs in the development and delivery of their services, and questioned how effectively the gender equality duty was being implemented within the NHS to inform service design and

provision. BME women in particular spoke about health services stigmatising and judging them for disclosing abuse.

“The NHS is totally insensitive to gender needs, mental health wards are often mixed; we’ve spoken to many women who are getting sexually assaulted on these wards.” (FG22)

“Trans people in a violent situation need mental health support. You lose the mental health support you might have locally, if you’re going down the Charing Cross treatment route. So where can you go locally for mental health support if you experience violence or abuse?” (FG20)

“Health services need to be more trusting, there is lots of distrust of women, especially ethnic minorities, we are often accused of having mental health problems, it’s not recognised that ethnic minorities might deal with trauma differently.” (FG22)

“They need to offer us proper support, like counselling, not just tablets. Tablets don’t solve the problem. Traveller women need access to counselling, because we don’t have support networks to talk about violence; you talk to one Traveller woman and everyone knows your business.” (FG8)

“Mental health problems make accessing services even more difficult for BME women. I had mental health issues and all the doctor prescribed me was pills that made me want to sleep. It’s only since coming off the pills that I feel alive again and I can look back and know how much danger I was in. I don’t trust health services any more.” (FG15)

“The biggest attitude amongst health services I’d like to be changed is that lesbians aren’t allowed to have anything to do with safe sex. If you’re a woman and declare your partner is another woman, any conversation about condoms, contraception, dental dams, is forgotten about. The assumption is that lesbians don’t need anything. GUM clinics and health professionals don’t want to know. It’s appalling.” (FG5)

“There’s a sexual health crisis at the moment, so when girls have to go along and get tested, perhaps self-esteem should be brought into it, rather than just treatment and cure. These services should address why you’re having unsafe sex, whether you’ve been forced to have sex. Like GPs are meant to talk to you about that kind of thing when they give out the morning after pill but they don’t.” (FG16)

“Health services often don’t meet women’s needs, particularly mental health services, what happened to the women’s mental health strategy? That was never implemented. And who’s monitoring how well health services use the gender equality duty as part of their service provision?” (FG5)

Health responses to FGM survivors

Women who had experienced FGM said they received a particularly poor response from GPs, hospitals and midwifery services.

“In GPs and hospitals you never get a good service, you never get the specific treatment you need for it [FGM]. It’s hard to get an appointment when you need it, the doctor doesn’t listen. Doctors never have time, whatever your illness is, you will always be given the same - pain killers. You could be suffering for years and never be referred to the hospital.” (FG24)

“Women that have had FGM need special help and someone that knows what they are doing. But sometimes nurses and doctors insult us, telling us to go back to whoever did that to us.” (FG24)

“When they see women that has had FGM, and because we the Somali community are such a small community, when doctors see a girl or women that has had FGM, they call everyone to come have a look at our genitalia, it’s very shameful.” (FG24)

Women who had experienced FGM wanted health professionals to be required to have training so they can respond sensitively and appropriately to women who have undergone FGM. Women also wanted to be able to access community support workers and interpreters where necessary, within maternity services and after giving birth.

“When I had my first child 6 months ago, they didn’t help, they said to me ‘you people, you’ll be back here next year anyway, I don’t know why you are complaining.’ I had to fight for the midwife to check me, they refused to give me any painkillers, it was really traumatic.” (FG24)

“Midwives should make an effort to talk to us nicely; I am already in so much pain. I received no aftercare after the birth of my children, now I can’t even sit down properly.” (FG24)

“In hospitals, when you are in labour, the midwife doesn’t try to communicate with you because of the language barrier; they just assume they know what is best for you. Especially when a woman is circumcised, they need more attention. They should have more training because many health professionals don’t know how to deal with this.” (FG24)

“I was circumcised and she was giving me all the wrong advice, telling me not to push. If the government wants to help us then we need somebody in the labour ward who understands and can help us.” (FG24)

“On the maternity wards and in the labour room there should be a Somali worker. Not an interpreter that has to be called and takes hours but one that is employed and is there to support the women that come in who have had FGM. If there was someone there all the time it would stop the midwives being abusive to us.” (FG24)

Women who had experienced FGM also spoke of the role health services should have of identifying young women at risk of FGM and educating parents about the dangers involved, although there was disagreement over the suggestion that girls at risk of FGM should be subjected to vaginal examinations.

“If children are going back home they will need to be immunized, that would be an opportunity when the GP could say something, and explain the consequences of FGM. Education of the parents so they are aware of the consequences of FGM is really important.” (FG24)

“Any woman who is pregnant and who has undergone FGM should be educated about the laws against FGM; the community midwife could talk to her about it, just like they are educated about healthy eating. A more gentle approach should be used initially but if she refuses to listen and says that it is her culture then the police should intervene.” (FG24)

“You can educate, but people are still doing it, I want to know how we can find out about it without waiting until that young girl becomes a woman and is having issues with her pregnancy. You would let your child be examined if you thought she had cancer. What is the difference with being examined to see if she has been mutilated?” (FG24)

“I couldn’t accept my child being examined, she is innocent in all of this, why should I put her through that? I don’t want girls examined, and no mother would want that.” (FG24)

“When the family come back from being abroad, the mother should be asked about FGM, you can tell from the body language, so it’s not always necessary to examine the child.” (FG24)

Health responses to rape and sexual violence survivors

Sexual violence survivors also spoke of receiving very poor responses from health services.

“The NHS is terrible at dealing with clients who have experienced sexual abuse. One of our clients has bad physical injuries and was having flashbacks of when she was attacked, but her GP didn’t know how to deal with it at all and panicked herself, she wasn’t prepared, she didn’t have the appropriate information, didn’t know how to deal with flashbacks, she made inappropriate comments about the size of this woman when she was there to have an internal, so our client had to go somewhere completely different.” (FG23)

“When I saw my GP after being raped he said ‘well have you gone to the police?’, I said yes, and he said that he didn’t know what to do and said he would try and find out and get back in touch with me, but I didn’t hear anything ever again. Good practice tends to come if GPs have a personal interest or know somebody affected by sexual abuse, otherwise they haven’t got a clue, it doesn’t come into their training or their formal practices or processes at all.” (FG23)

“When I had to go and have a smear I was absolutely terrified because I’d previously been sexually abused, so I sat down with my counsellor and wrote a brief, confidential letter to my GP before making the appointment explaining why I would find it extremely difficult, and outlined how she could make it easier, like allowing a friend to come in with me, explaining exactly what would happen, showing me instruments etc. When I arrived, the letter had been opened in the general mail and read by the nurse. The nurse wouldn’t let my friend come in with me to hold my hand, the doctor was late and treated me like I wasn’t there, obviously hadn’t read the letter and dismissed how I was feeling as nonsense, saying ‘don’t worry about it it’s nothing’. When I asked the nurse if she’d support me in making an official complaint, she said no as she has to work with the doctor every day. I had disclosed something very personal and the system failed me.” (FG23)

“My GP just seems concerned with time and getting me out before the next appointment, he just wanted to put me on anti depressants instead of trying to get to the root of the problem [sexual abuse], I was just given ant-depressants and told ‘come back and see me in 6 months’.” (FG23)

“My GP was really good, set me up with counselling and everything, but at the session when I disclosed quite a lot, I was told by the counsellor that I was now over the rape attack that had happened to me. I clearly wasn’t. How do they know? There’s a huge lack of sensitivity.” (FG23)

“We [sexual violence service] find engaging with the health services incredibly difficult at all levels, whether it be the PCT or sexual health clinics or the local GPs who won’t put up our leaflets. We find them incredibly resistant to addressing violence against women. We’ve been working in sexual health for 30 years, we have a mine of information, we know who needs to be pinpointed to improve healthcare responses, but we can’t get any funding to do this work.” (FG23)

Confidentiality and information sharing

Concerns about confidentiality and information sharing were significant across all groups, although the more disadvantaged, marginalised and 'high-risk' women were, the more concerns they had about confidentiality being breached which impeded them from seeking help. Women had particular concerns about health services automatically sharing information without their consent, with the police or other agencies, because health services were considered to be one of the statutory agencies women said they would most likely disclose violence and abuse to. All women felt that *consensual* information sharing was necessary for the provision of a safe and effective response to violence by the health service, and the majority of women said they would give consent for information to be shared if this would help increase their safety.

"It would be disempowering to women if agencies shared information without their permission, it could increase their isolation; women should be able to make the decision to report themselves. Forcing health professionals or housing officers to tell the police will remove options for safe spaces for women. What we need is sensitivity to these issues from the services women engage with. Women should be asked to fill in forms saying which agencies can speak to each other and which can't." (FG19)

"It's important to ensure confidentiality; not everyone wants to report to the police first, we should have someone to speak to first to explore the options. I'm not sure if LGBT liaison officers are obliged to tell the police or will it be confidential. I wouldn't report because I don't know what the consequences would be." (FG20)

"Domestic violence should be confidential if you tell the doctor but it isn't – it goes on your computer records and can be seen by lots of people, even at the reception desk. And so women who might fear losing their children wouldn't tell a doctor. But you should have a right to expect health services to keep things confidential and for them to tell you which agencies they'll share information with. You should be able to trust them. You're frightened of other people making opinions about you, they don't get the full picture from the medical record. Medical records shouldn't be shared. In a situation of domestic violence trust is key, you need to know who you can trust." (FG17)

"If a woman is being controlled every day, and you manage to get to the Doctor, you might want information about community organisations, but you shouldn't force women to then report to the police if they have chosen not to." (FG19)

BME women in particular raised concerns about confidentiality being maintained by GPs within their communities.

"Women should easily and confidentially be able to access another GP if they need to; sometimes your GP knows the family and community so it's not safe to talk about violence you're experiencing." (FG9)

"Services need to be more equipped with interpreters, be able to deal with poor literacy and just a bit more sensitivity to the issues involved. For example, doctors need to be aware that some of these women will have been raped and they might not want to disclose. We have also had cases of Asian doctors colluding with families and there has been some really bad practice so that needs to change as well. There shouldn't be these breaches of confidentiality by professionals happening." (FG15)

Role of GP surgeries

Many women said that GP surgeries should play a greater role in identifying and responding to violence against women, by providing a point of information for women experiencing

violence as well as a place where a support services for survivors of violence should be available.

“GPs should know how to identify violence and abuse, and also need to be able to signpost women and help them make a safety plan.” (FG9)

“GPs should know where to refer people so they get the help and support they need, and work in partnership with agencies like CRASAC [Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre], who could go in person to GP surgeries and introduce themselves and what they do, and maybe hold support sessions there. This would take time and money, but it would improve the take-up of services and women’s access to support.” (FG23)

“There should be a room at the doctors’ surgery for women who need to talk, who have needs more complex than a doctor can address in 8 minutes, some kind of follow up support if you need it.” (FG6)

“GP evidence is essential for women’s applications for indefinite leave to remain on the grounds of domestic violence, so all GPs need to be aware of how they can help women with no recourse to public funds apply for emergency leave to remain, and they should take proper records.” (FG9)

“There should be a service at the GP where you can talk to someone and follow up any issues you have, maybe a psychologist or a nurse or a violence against women service, available at the same time as going and getting checked - doctors often don’t have the time to discuss things properly with you, they make it obvious to you that they only have 10 minutes. Doctors are often male, which also wouldn’t really invite that sort of openness you need to discuss abuse issues – you wouldn’t feel able to talk to them, sometimes you feel like you’re being judged, even if you’re just being very health conscious.” (FG16)

Women also wanted the Department of Health to take a lead on violence against women prevention by ensuring that violence against women and girls should be the subject of a national public health campaign.

“The government through the Department of Health is leafleting every household in the country about swine flu after just two cases in Scotland. Why is every household not being leafleted about violence against women and girls when it affects so many more? The Department of Health should have a public health campaign highlighting the dangers of violence against women and girls and the help available. This should be sent to every household in the country.” (FG13)

Social Services - Children and Young People’s services

Responsibilities for adults and children’s services within top tier local authorities have split from ‘social services’¹¹ to become two new departments, one for adults (safeguarding vulnerable adults) and the other for children (children and young people’s services).

Safeguarding and supporting children and young people

¹¹ The term ‘social services’ is used to apply to social services for both adults and children unless this is specified, because women did not distinguish between the two.

Of 300 women consulted, all those who had been in contact with local social services departments said they had experienced negative and unhelpful responses. Women expressed strong views about social services' failure to safeguard and support children and young people who have been affected by violence and they told us that support for children affected by violence was almost non-existent. In particular, women said there is insufficient support available to recover from child sexual abuse, and little access to counselling or child therapy, which they felt should be routinely available for as long as children need it.

"It took me three years to get counselling for my kids. It was only for 24 weeks. My son was ready to open up on the 23rd week but there wasn't enough time." (FG6)

"My daughter disclosed sexual abuse had been going on for a few years, but they couldn't find enough evidence, except for her word, to show that it was him doing it so he didn't get convicted. He got away with it. What message does that give to my daughter? He still hassles her, he hangs around the school, she's still so scared of him, and she gets no support." (FG4)

Supporting mothers to protect children

Women wanted far more effective responses from social services: to be asked about violence; to be believed and supported on disclosure; and for social services to focus on the safety of the mother as a means of protecting children. In contrast, there were strong feelings amongst women that mothers lacked support from social services and were often blamed for experiencing the violence and for the behaviour of the perpetrator.

"Social Services told me last week, as I'm in a violent relationship again, they told me that I shouldn't have put myself in that situation, I should be aware of the signs of domestic violence now." (FG19)

"When I left my husband Social Services weren't helpful at all, they threatened to take my daughter off me unless I made sure my violent husband stayed away, how can I do that? They should work to keep the abusive parent away instead of putting it all on me." (FG18)

"Social Services don't seem like they are linked in to protect women. When I reported domestic violence, social services wrote to me and just threatened to take the kids off me and put them into care. Now I can't call the police in case they punish me by taking my kids away. And men also punish you, they're very good at manipulating you – it's your fault, it's your depression that's causing this. Men punish you and agencies punish you, we can't win either way." (FG4)

Some of the women for whom English was not their first language also expressed concern about the tendency of social services professionals to engage with perpetrators or extended families instead of women themselves.

"I got married and came over from Pakistan, I came from a village and I didn't receive any education when I was growing up. All through my ten year marriage there was a lot of violence, not just from my partner but from the mother in law as well. I wanted to go to my mother's funeral in Pakistan and they refused. This really depressed me. I was locked up and fed on bread and water. My husband had a heart attack and life became worse, my mother in law tried to turn my children against me. My children are still with my mother in law. What I really want is my own place so that I can have my children with me, they can't live with me where I am it's too crowded. I wish social services had asked me independently what was happening to me, they listened more to the family than me, they never tried to speak to me without them." (FG15)

“Social workers and health professionals think ‘why should I try and communicate with you when I can talk to your family who speak very good English, and they are charming’. They don’t see what is really going on. The family who were abusing me threatened me that if I said anything to anyone I would lose the children; I never ever said anything to the health visitor because I was too scared. Women need someone to talk to in their own language; we need to know we won’t lose our children.” (FG15)

Women wanted all professionals who work with children to be trained to enable them to identify and respond early to violence against women and girls; to conduct routine enquiry; to identify and manage risk; to respond to disclosure with support, access to safety and referral to specialist services for children and young people. Many women noted that this training should specifically address improving practice and challenging prejudices that exist towards minority groups, such as BME women, disabled women and lesbians.

“Children are often not believed when there’s been violence and they try to talk about it. Children’s voices are often lost. Equipping those who come into contact with children, such as teachers, nursery nurses, youth offending teams, to listen to children and deal with what they hear is so important.” (FG5)

“Anyone working with children should be trained on identifying and preventing violence against women and girls, and there needs to be something about self harm in all its guises, like anorexia, bulimia, cutting, and so on. School nurses should be properly trained to deal with this. They should have champions for violence against women and girls, which links to their work on child protection.” (FG5)

“Social services must under no circumstance make any assumptions about Deaf women and their relationship to their children unless an interpreter is present – there is an issue of cultural conflict in ‘reading’ her expressions, assumptions must not be made especially in cases of violence and abuse, and this should be part of their training.” (FG13)

Fear of children being removed

One of the biggest concerns for women with children living with them was the judgemental nature of any social services intervention, which resulted in woman-blaming responses that exacerbated women’s fear of losing their children if they disclosed violence or abuse. In the case of domestic violence, this fear is often played upon by abusive partners, and women felt very strongly that social services need to send a clear message to women experiencing violence that they will not usually lose their children if they seek help. Instead women wanted support to help them protect themselves and their children, and greater attention given to challenging the behaviour of the abusers.

“Violent men are never held to account for being bad parents, or challenged for the impact their behaviour has on their children. Social services should be made to engage with perpetrators before they judge and punish women who’ve experienced violence and take any legal action to remove their children.” (FG13)

“Women need to know they will not lose their children if they flee violence. That is a big fear for many women and the government need to make it clear that this won’t happen, and they will be supported, not punished.” (FG15)

“Women won’t report violent crime because they are too scared of losing their children to social services. There is a fear that if you tell midwives or health visitors that you are being beaten up when you are pregnant they will take the baby straight off you.” (FG12)

“I now never say anything about what’s going on and what he’s doing to me because I’m scared of losing my kids, of getting into trouble. Social services said to me if this

carries on then it's a choice between him and your kids because you're not protecting your kids. Even though I was doing everything I could possibly do to protect them." (FG4)

"They should look at how you are with your child and not judge you, they view you a certain way, you've been in care you have previous convictions, it's like we don't have the same rights. First time I met my social worker she said to me, 'let's get one thing straight, I'm not here for you, or for your partner, I'm here for the child.'" (FG12)

Women in prostitution and women offenders particularly spoke of social services labelling them and of how they had lost their children through forcible adoptions as a result. Women were distressed by how they felt they had fulfilled imposed conditions, only to have their children removed anyway.

"Women like us [sex workers] are paranoid to access services in case they take your kids. Because I've got a habit and relapsed after rehab, they had to notify social services, so they took my daughter away. I got clean for five and a half months to get her back, it got to the final hearing and they still put my daughter up for adoption. After being 5 and a half months clean, if that's anything to go by, you can understand why women won't get help, why would you? My daughter's being adopted today. I'd never get help again." (FG14)

"Women are afraid to approach social services for help as doing so runs the risk of their children being taken away. They can take away your children even if you've been clean for months. And it's the way they do it too, it's done so casually, like it's routine. It's cruel the way they think they can treat women." (FG14)

"There was no evidence of violence, my partner wasn't violent but they still said they were going to take my child off me as soon as she was born." (FG12)

"Social Services never gave me the option of 'leave him or we will take your child into care', they just went straight in and took him. It's totally target based, they don't treat you as an individual. Social Services can put your child up for adoption without consulting with you, don't we have rights?" (FG12)

"I'd be too scared to go to social services again. I was in a violent relationship and my son got hurt. There was nothing I could do; but they said I was a bad mother. The last time I saw him was when he was driving away with them in the back of a car. That was 8 years ago. I may as well use again, they've taken my kids away, what else have I got to live for?" (FG14)

Childhood sexual abuse

A large number of women we spoke to, particularly disabled women and street sex-workers, had childhoods characterised by sexual abuse without access to support, which they said had a devastating impact on their adult lives. They spoke of how statutory services had failed to identify sexual abuse, and to provide safety and support to recover from the abuse, and recommended that support and counselling should be available to all children who have been sexually abused.

"There's a problem with perception, as violent men who come over as being very nice still get believed over women, who are blamed. We need far more awareness training to take place, so that children's behaviour is recognised as symptomatic of sexual abuse, and that people know what to do once this is recognised. I was under professionals for 15 years and none of them recognised it – it's amazing that this can happen. We're still nowhere near making sure that kids are protected." (FG13)

"I experienced sexual abuse as a child, and was passed around family members. Victims of sexual abuse by family members are often painted as liars and blamed by

extended family networks, meaning that we victims have to be moved all around the country to escape the perpetrators. In such scenarios the law should make the family protecting the perpetrators liable.” (FG13)

“A boy sexually abused me when I was young, my mum didn’t know, I didn’t tell anyone when I was 5. But the signs were there; I was stealing, misbehaving, attention seeking, no adult asked me or tried to find out what was going on. No-one asked me until I was 16, in a leaving-care review, which was too late.” (FG14)

“Abuse in childhood was what got me where I am now. I was put in care, into foster care, children’s homes, a secure unit, everything changed for me then when I was 8.” (FG14)

“If someone had come up to me and tried to talk to me, I would have got help, maybe I wouldn’t be doing what I am doing now. I would have taken those men to court if I could have, it f**ked my whole life up.” (FG14)

“My mum’s boyfriend did that [sexual abuse] to me too, but because I got one date wrong, no-one believed me, nothing happened to him, it was my word against them. Social services didn’t listen to me. For a case to go to court you have to get every single detail right, which is unrealistic – I forgot dates. It still happened. They made out I was lying so I ran away. I’ve had no help to deal with it, maybe that’s why I’m an addict and working on the streets.” (FG14)

“This [sexual abuse] has happened to every one of us. We are a product, sitting in this room, of what men have done to us as children. I don’t know what the answer is, but it’s got to stop.” (FG14)

Some women, particularly women in the sex industry and women offenders, spoke of their experience of the care system and of how social workers failed them as children, and of the lack of support and protection available to them to recover from the child abuse they had experienced.

“I was in care; both of my parents are addicts. It was the care system that failed me. My social worker smoked crack with me.” (FG21)

“My foster carer beat me up, fed me out of a dog bowl, a life in care isn’t necessarily better than leaving a child with the parents.” (FG12)

“The care system just contains the situation; it doesn’t actually help you if you’ve been abused. I didn’t get help then and I don’t get help from anyone now. An addict is an addict for life, it’s only by my own sheer determination that I’m not back on the drugs.” (FG21)

“I’ve been in secure units, I got the worse ridicule and abuse by those people who worked there who were locking me up and supposed to be protecting me, but I also got beaten by some girls there, and the staff did nothing.” (FG19)

Girls and young women we consulted with also criticised the care system and spoke of how it had failed young women they knew.

“We need to invest more services into girls in care who are at risk of sexual exploitation. There’s so much sexual exploitation of girls in care, but it’s something most people don’t know about, it’s not picked up on because the papers aren’t interested because they’re not from nice backgrounds. The care system fails girls. Then once girls hit 16 the police and social services wash their hands of them. There’s no obvious crime being committed but the girls don’t realise that they’re

being pimped out by their 40-year-old boyfriends. This is something that needs to be addressed in terms of protection.” (FG16)

“It’s girls in care that are most vulnerable – they have a higher rate of truancy and absence than others – so even if a good educational policy was in place, they miss out on the messages being delivered about violence against women being re-iterated to them. How does this information and knowledge about the help available get to girls in care?” (FG16)

Role of schools in supporting children

Women recommended that schools should play a greater role in identifying and raising awareness of child sexual abuse and in creating a safe space where victims of abuse feel comfortable to disclose.

“Sexual abuse should be made more public. We are helping abusers by keeping it really secretive; it should be out there so children feel they can tell someone if it is happening to them, if someone had told me at school what was happening to me was wrong I might have told someone.” (FG23)

Many of the women also thought schools should work more closely with other children’s services and with mothers to provide information on violence and the help available, and to play a more active role in identifying and preventing violence against women. BME women in particular said that schools did not do enough work to raise awareness of, and identify and prevent forced marriage.

“We should give schools more of a role in detecting and preventing violence. Instead of just ‘we’re going to report you to social services’ it should be that women feel they can go to professionals in a school and be signposted and supported if they are experiencing violence. You want education professionals to be on your side, not policing you.” (FG6)

“Schools and colleges should actively advertise services and help that is available to women suffering violence, particularly around forced marriage. Schools don’t do enough on forced marriage and on preventing it. Girls need to know there is help out there. I managed to get away but I have got sisters who are being forced to marry men back home.” (FG9)

Social Services - Adult Social Care Services

Adult social services incorporate services for older people, for disabled people, services for vulnerable adults, mental health and substance misuse services, and nursing and residential care services to meet physical or mental health needs.

Carers

Some women we consulted with spoke of their experience of being abused by carers and wanted to be able to access support quickly so that they weren’t fearful of reporting abuse and subsequently being left without care. At present women said there was too much reliance on carers who might be abusers, which made it harder for them to report violence for fear of losing their children. Disabled women also said they would like a more joined-up approach between adult and children’s social services so that they can get more support for disabled parents to allow them to care for their children themselves.

“Some women’s carers have sexually assaulted them and they are totally helpless because they are totally reliant on their carers to survive.” (FG22)

“The problem of carers who are also perpetrators is a huge issue. We need to educate women who experience violence, that any violence whatsoever is unacceptable. Women excuse carer violence and don’t report it to the police or to social services.” (FG13)

“There is a real problem of perpetrators acting within statutory systems, such as working as carers for social services. What screening do social services do, to make sure they don’t employ perpetrators and that women are safe when they’re in the care of statutory services?” (FG13)

“If a carer is abusing a disabled woman this often goes unreported as the disabled woman fears losing their ability to live day to day without the carer, and if they’re a parent, they also risk losing their children as they are unable to look after them alone. There are no benefits available for disabled women to be parents of children, so they depend on carers – or the abuser. There should be support made available for disabled women as parents in order to remove the fear of the consequences of losing their children if they report an abuser.” (FG13)

Women-centred provision

Some groups of women we spoke to, particularly women sex workers, wanted mental health services and community drug and alcohol rehabilitation services to respond more effectively to women’s needs, and to be trained in identifying and responding to violence and abuse alongside any drug, alcohol or mental health intervention. For example, women wanted access to more women-only spaces in drugs services, and more support to help them get off the drugs with the view of getting their children back if they have been removed. They also wanted more joined-up support between services, so that women can access safety in a place where counsellors visit and key workers understand their situation.

“Women need more women-only drugs services. When you’ve made your mind up to get clean, women’s rehab services should be available at that point, not in 6 months time. What we want is somewhere like a safe home just for women, so you don’t have to go to loads of places, where there are counsellors that come to you, you have a key-worker that supports you, they understand what you’ve been through and help you get off drugs and off working on the streets.” (FG14)

“There should be residential drug treatment places specifically for women. There aren’t enough women-specific services, drugs services and help around violence and abuse to get out of this lifestyle. We need one service that does all this, that caters to our needs so we don’t have to go around 10 different agencies to get help. Is that so difficult?” (FG14)

Some women who were trying to exit prostitution wanted community support services that provide activities, education, training, rehab and support to get back into employment. Women also said they wanted services that empower them and build self-esteem so that they can make other lifestyle choices and realise what they feel they are capable of.

“Services need to offer a range of options, who know about rehab, about working girls, who can do community care assessments, who offer options about going into rehab, someone more proactive. There should be one key worker who does community care assessments, someone who understands about working girls, instead of always having to go to different agencies to find out what we can do, what help we can get right now.” (FG14)

“There are not enough women only services for users to help them to exit the lifestyle. How many of us in this room want our kids back but haven’t got the facilities and the help to do it. If I had a chance of getting my son back, I’d give up this lifestyle. Just because we’re working girls it doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have any chance to sort our lives out and get our kids back. If you have a child you should get help to get a furnished flat, to try and exit the lifestyle, and to try and keep them with you rather than in care.” (FG14)

“We need a here and now service, something that’s more immediate and accessible, would break down the barriers. The problem is that a woman in crisis is made to wait a month, by the time they can get the service they’ve already coped for a whole month and won’t use it. And appointments are pointless, because you’re busy or you forget, and then you have to wait another whole month, but in another month you could be dead.” (FG14)

Women wanted an end to the inconsistent responses by statutory social services across the country, and many groups spoke of government developing some kind of kite-mark or level of accreditation that social services had to achieve to demonstrate their level of excellence in responding to violence against women and girls.

“Organisations like social services should have a violence against women kite-mark, like they do to advertise that they are accessible and accommodating for disabled people, like the two ticks.” (FG20)

Improving responses through training

Women wanted adult social services to be trained to identify and respond more effectively to violence against women as part of pre- and post- qualifying training, and also wanted this to be accompanied by statutory guidance on the procedures to be followed and data to be recorded and reported when identifying and responding to violence against women. For example, women wanted greater clarification about the support available to young disabled women experiencing violence, because often they fall through the gaps of adult and child services.

“Social workers need to be trained on violence against women as part of their qualifications for becoming a social worker and this should carry on during their career, so that they all have compulsory procedures to follow and have to collect data on violence against women.” (FG13)

Women also wanted social services and other agencies to be trained to deliver support services and to provide separate information to Deaf women with hearing partners when they access services, which they said is particularly important if the hearing partner is also the abuser.

“There is currently no counselling support available in BSL in adult mental health services in my area. There should also be more specific programmes of counselling available for victims of violence within mental health services. It’s not just a money issue; it’s about a lack of creativity and flexibility in the provision of existing resources and services within health services. It can be done, it just isn’t.” (FG13)

Housing services

Many of the women who attended the focus groups reported difficulty engaging with local housing services (run by local authorities and registered social landlords) after experiencing violence from within or outside the home.

Staying safely in the home

Many of the women we spoke to were keen to see more investment in housing services that allowed women to stay safely in their own homes after experiencing domestic violence, which was not dependent on calling the police.

“Why not have places where men have to leave? Women have to uproot their lives, their children, their schooling. Why not have places for perpetrators, with injunctions to keep them away, so you don’t lose your friends, your support, and so you and your kids didn’t have to move.” (FG4)

“Housing can’t help, they tell you go to the police to report it for a crime number, before they can help. A lot of women don’t know about Sanctuary Schemes, but to get help in this way you have to go to the police, you have no choice, which means a lot of women who are too afraid to involve the police can’t get help from housing services to stay safely in their own homes.” (FG19)

Access to safe housing

Women wanted housing services to treat violence against women and girls as a priority in its own right. Women spoke of their need to access safe and secure housing when being forced to escape violence and they thought this should be addressed outside the HomeMove and bidding system.

“I’ve begged the council to help, to change their policies on housing, this is women’s lives they’re dealing with, this kind of treatment can push you over the edge. Why can’t they swap our houses around? I’m bidding for housing against people who need an extra room, yet my life is in danger.” (FG4)

“I was abused by my son, he kicked me and my husband out of our own house when my husband had cancer; we went to housing and they had nowhere suitable for the elderly, so we had to spend our last six weeks together in a house with drug addicts. We didn’t know how to complain or where else to go.” (FG11)

“Housing for victims of violence should be a priority; violence against women should be treated separately from Home Move, and the bidding system. My life was in serious danger, he was kicking me in the head when I was unconscious on the floor, I could have died. I went to court. Yet I was down the council housing office begging for my life, I have no shame anymore. I was told by my housing officer that I had to find my own accommodation if I wanted to get out.” (FG4)

Women said that housing services labelled them as a ‘problem’ because they had experienced violence, and some groups, (like trans women, BME women especially Irish Travellers) also said they felt they had experienced discrimination from housing services because of their identity. Women thought that training for housing professionals on identifying and responding to violence would improve housing services responses to women.

“Accessing safe housing after being raped or sexually abused is very difficult, there is no training within housing services on this issue. One woman we worked with had been placed in a room with four men after fleeing her house because she was raped by her flatmate.” (FG22)

“When I was in temporary accommodation it was really tough, there were fights every night, I felt very unsafe. I had to share washing facilities, which is difficult for trans people. I only dared using the bathroom if I got up at 5am. I complained to the

council and they gave me a quieter place but again there were shared washing facilities, and I got verbal abuse from another resident. I had to make two complaints before being moved. This should automatically have been taken into consideration when they considered where to place me.” (FG20)

“Housing services are the worst for discriminating against Travellers. I’ve spent ten years in temporary accommodation, they just keep me in temporary accommodation, moving me from one place to another when it suits them, once it’s done up, as soon as its looking nice and ready to live in, I know I’ll be out.” (FG8)

Women also said they wanted housing services to take women’s allegations of threats, harassment and attacks from other tenants seriously, and recommended that an effective complaints system should be in place to enable women who are abused by other tenants to voice their concerns.

“I was attacked in my home by my neighbour and the housing service has been really unhelpful, he broke my fingers and my hand is now damaged. I raised concerns about him long before it happened but they just ignored it. He has mental health issues so they think I should just put up with it. He has attacked me three times; they told me I had to report it to the police before they could do anything about it. I have done this now and they’re still not doing anything. They tell me I’m confused, just because I’m older they think they can say that to me.” (FG21)

Women said they wanted a more flexible housing system, which was more responsive to survivors’ needs by offering them appropriate accommodation options and support. In particular, women across all groups spoke of the poor response by housing services to single women who experienced violence, which they felt did not consider single women to be a priority for accessing safe housing.

“This [homelessness] doesn’t need to happen, all we want is a safe place to heal after leaving a violent relationship, I couldn’t go to a refuge because my son is 17 and I refused to split the family up. Instead I’ve lost my home, my work, my business, all my possessions, I’ve lost everything, and I’m still not safe and I’m on anti-depressants, my life is in tatters.” (FG4)

“In my culture, his family will abuse you too. I left and went to housing but I was offered housing round the corner from them, which I couldn’t take. You need somewhere away from it all, services need to understand we need to be safe.” (FG6)

“Single women suffer quite badly in the housing system. With a bit of will and commitment more could be done to improve their safety, for example through the Sanctuary Schemes and by prioritising them in the rehousing system, because of the risks they face.” (FG22)

“There are no female beds for homeless women; we’re put into places with men. Hostels around here are just crowd control; women can’t get the support they need.”(FG21)

“The women without children are the ones I really worry about, they aren’t a priority for health, housing or social services and there is so little support for them. We need responsive services that actually respond to women’s needs whether or not they’ve got children. This is where it gets difficult, and women who need interpreters or who have different cultural needs get let down.” (FG15)

Employment and benefits services

Lack of economic empowerment was recognised by women as a key stumbling block to staying safe. Many of the women who attended the focus groups highlighted the importance of employment and access to independent income as a way of empowering women and giving them independence.

“Getting an education and learning to read and write is not really seen as an option in Traveller communities, there is shame in getting a job, it’s not seen as part of the culture, especially for girls. There should be a place for women to go if they have left violent relationships, where they can get an education and determine their own future.”(FG8)

“More work needs to be done to empower women financially as well as emotionally. If you have your own job, then you’re out of the house; you have more independence and feel liberated by having your own wage. You’d be more confident, have more skills and would also feel less dependent on your partner and their family.” (FG15)

It was generally agreed that women who worked or had access to an independent income felt more empowered because they were more financially independent, which made it easier to escape from an abuser, yet many women faced barriers accessing such independence.

“Women’s confidence needs to be built up, they’re afraid or too depressed to tell anyone or get help. Many women don’t have the luxury to buy their way out of their situation, to buy their safety. It would be helpful if the benefits office gave us information about what we can get if we had to leave, and what help there was available. Many women don’t have their own money; they just don’t know where to turn.” (FG4)

“We need education – we need to bring the education to the Travellers, so it doesn’t have to be in a formal school setting and it can be something they are interested in, so that they can support themselves. The government has changed how they fund adult education courses – they no longer fund courses that do not work towards a qualification; these were the kind of courses used by Traveller women. That’s why many Traveller women go back to their abusers; they have no financial independence.” (FG8)

Women also spoke of the problems they experienced when trying to claim benefits, and benefit offices were also mentioned as a place women could go and simultaneously access information about help and support available.

“The process of claiming for benefits should be different so that when she applies, the situation she has left is taken into account. There should be more training for staff and more facilitation so they can deal with her claim sensitively. There should be one person who deals with her claim, so she doesn’t have to repeatedly explain her situation to 60 different people.” (FG22)

“Women are so controlled by their husbands. I never get the chance to go out. There needs to be more safe places where we can access information, like libraries supermarkets, benefits offices, or schools, where we have to go anyway – anywhere I can take the children I can usually get away with.” (FG4)

“When my husband died, I had to come out of retirement and get a job to support myself, but I was still claiming benefits. I didn’t know this was wrong; nobody at the benefits office helped me to sort this out. They took me to court and treated me like a criminal; I felt dirty, I was afraid, I thought they were going to send me to prison.” (FG11)

Women's services

The value of independent advocacy services

The majority of women who felt they had been excluded from statutory services spoke of the importance of independent specialised women's services that should be available in every local area for women experiencing violence and abuse. Women valued advocacy services and wanted to have their options carefully and realistically explained within the context of their specific circumstances.

"[Every survivor] needs one specialist caseworker or advocacy service. At the moment you get pushed around from pillar to post without knowing your rights. We need advocacy for people who have identities that mean they're excluded from statutory provision." (FG19)

"I think it's really important that specialist violence against women services for victims are located in the voluntary sector because 90% of our clients choose not to report to statutory services. If they go through the statutory sector there are other pressures on them to do things they aren't comfortable with and they don't feel safe." (FG23)

"It shouldn't be just the police who support [sexual violence] survivors who decide to prosecute, there should be someone independent who is there to support and advocate for the woman." (FG22)

"I needed support when I was going to court; there was no sexual violence service in my area. I had a volunteer victim support worker and I know she was giving me really bad advice, and she also told me the defence would be nice to me and I didn't need to worry, so I was totally unprepared for my experience in court. I understand they are volunteers but they need to be properly trained; giving someone bad advice right before they go into a courtroom can potentially jeopardise the case. That's why we need specially trained ISVAs [Independent Sexual Violence Advisors] in every area." (FG23)

Long-term advocacy and support

Women felt strongly that crisis support services are not enough. Some women spoke of taking on average one to two years after the violence to get their life back on track, whilst other women needed much longer to recover from the abuse they had experienced and valued the opportunity that women's services gave them to recover from emotional abuse, which many women told us they felt was more devastating and difficult to get over.

"If I didn't have here [rape crisis] to come to, I don't think I would have been strong enough to go to court, and I don't think I'd be sitting here today because I used to be very suicidal. Organisations like this that provide counselling and support are saving lives, they rehabilitated me." (FG23)

There was unanimous support for independent violence against women advocacy services to be available at the point of reporting violence and abuse, or for self referrals, which was *not* dependent on the level of risk women are judged to be in *nor* on whether women report to the criminal justice system, and which did not withdraw support once the court case finished.

"Although the police help you initially, with writing your statement, telling you the court date, it is the support services that pick up the pieces as the case goes to court and especially afterwards, that are really vital. Women need ongoing support long

after the court case ends. For the police, they have so many cases; it's just another case." (FG23)

"I recently supported a woman of 80 who came forward about her father abusing her when she was a child; sometimes it takes time to come to terms with what has happened, the emotional trauma is debilitating, and many women need help years after being abused." (FG22)

"I was abused by my stepfather for seven years from the age of nine. I left home aged 16 and felt very bitter and alone except for my little girl to look after; I was a single parent as well. After support from here [rape crisis] I felt able to report it, after 19 years, but it was really hard. I waited 6 months for the case to go to court, and the police didn't really contact me during this time – I was waiting for them to call me every day - it was here that supported me through this time." (FG23)

Women-only provision

Most women valued women-only services where they existed. Although women generally cared about the 'what' and 'how' of a service rather than 'who', all those women who had used women's services greatly valued the support they had been offered. In particular, they valued being supported by a woman in a safe women-only environment that was independent of statutory services and did not require them to report to the police. Women also appreciated their holistic approach, in the way they responded to complex and multiple needs, and focussed on their safety and empowerment without labelling or judging them, or limiting the service to times of crisis.

"It's all about self esteem; valuing yourself, you need services to pull you up when things are low. The Women's Centre has been essential to me, its good to sit with other women, offer support to each other, women who come in needing support are then able to offer support to others." (FG11)

"Services need to be welcoming and comfortable, and have beanbag chairs. You need to feel safe and relaxed. Staff need to be friendly, someone who's been there or knows what they're talking about, it's best if it's a woman, someone close to you in age. There also needs to be clean and colourful surroundings." (FG7)

"There should be guaranteed local funding for women's support services, they are all fighting for funding when they are providing so many good services, not just for women but for the family and the community." (FG22)

Specifically, women told us they wanted women's services that are accessible for the most vulnerable groups and for women without English as a first language, that are available out of hours, that are holistic and provide a safe space to talk with other women to share experiences and get mutual support; a place to access health, advice and support services under one roof, such as counselling, advocacy, housing and legal advice, activities and workshops.

"I have found it harder to deal with as I have got older. You try and grasp hold of all of your memories because they're fading, which brings back the bad memories too. It wasn't until I was in my 20's I could begin to deal with what had happened to me as a child, to build up the trust to go and talk to someone, we need to de-stigmatise victims of sexual abuse." (FG22)

"We all need help, we don't have much self-worth or we wouldn't put up with violence in the first place, we have no self-worth working on the streets, we just need something to realise how we can be, what we can do. There should be women's services with art classes and other things to do, as the days are long and empty and that's when problems [with drugs] start or get worse. We need a programme that

would build self-worth, help girls to realise how special they are – self defence, art, hair, make-up...that kind of thing.” (FG14)

“Services should involve young women and be designed by them – like www.swipe.co.uk - which was made by and for young people, who go to four local schools, and it offers advice on young people’s issues. This is somewhere young women could get help and information from.” (FG7)

Trans women in particular spoke of their frustration with agencies assuming LGBT services met their needs. They said they valued safe women-only spaces but felt that sometimes they were denied access to these services.

“I [trans woman] have been attacked by lesbians and gays, and raped twice by gay men. Just because we [LGBT people] are all lumped together in one acronym it doesn’t mean we’re going to get on. In an ideal world we need women-only areas, a woman-only safe space, for women whether they’re trans women or not.” (FG20)

“You can’t have a one-size fits all approach for LGBT people. Women’s refuges need to be available for trans women as opposed to having LGBT housing all lumped together.” (FG20)

BME women’s services

Women told us that specialist BME women’s groups have played a key role in supporting, advocating for, and empowering BME women and children, and have also developed an expertise in responding to forced marriage, so-called ‘honour’ based violence, and female genital mutilation (FGM). All of the BME women we consulted with spoke highly of the BME women’s services they had been supported by, and greatly valued receiving support in their own language and from services that understood their own culture.

“The Panaghar refuge [Asian women’s service] is amazing, the staff are so supportive so helpful, they have been fantastic. There are other Asian girls there as well who know my situation, know what it’s like which is really important. It’s so supportive to be in a refuge with women who have come from a similar background and have an understanding of your situation.” (FG9)

“I was inspired by WAITS [Women Acting In Today’s Society], by their openness and the way they wanted to support women. The service that WAITS offers around domestic violence is great, it works with women from where they are at, some women might not be ready to leave, but WAITS works with women, building their confidence and empowering them until they are ready to do what’s best for them. Through WAITS, I learned about coping on my own and getting my life back, it empowers you to learn. It also prevents violence, because hearing from other women prevented me going into another abusive relationship, it builds confidence and awareness.” (FG6)

“More BME refuges need to be available for women; some women will stay in violent situations rather than go to a generic service. BME women’s services are really important; you need someone who understands your culture who is female.” (FG9)

“Other services don’t cover all the languages and it can be a real problem. Posters, documents and other information need to be in your own language. That’s why BME women’s services are really important.” (FG6)

“We need a choice of service for BME lesbian women for those that don’t speak English as a first language. When you are speaking about traumatic stuff, it’s not easy to talk about it in a second language.” (FG5)

“Two years ago I wouldn’t be here talking like this, I would be a blithering idiot in the corner, a wreck. Going to WAITS training days about empowerment and mixing with other black women in similar situations has transformed me and transformed my children’s lives because I feel stronger now.”(FG6)

Women wanted the importance of BME women services, which understand women’s culture and language needs, to be recognised nationally and locally, and felt that resources should be prioritised for grassroots BME women’s organisations that support and empower women; that build women’s confidence, and that prevent violence in the longer term. Women said that counselling services for BME women and children should also be more accessible, and be available in the long term instead of being crisis-focused. Women told us they wanted more domestic violence services to respond appropriately to support women in specific BME communities through outreach work, and to support women at risk of or having experienced forced marriage. Women also felt that in every region of the country, there should be specialist women’s services for survivors of FGM.

“We need outreach support from Travellers themselves, who could work with young people to prevent it happening in the future and to support survivors, women who are living with violence now. We also need awareness campaigns, to stop violence in the home being so normal. It’s not normal. Men in Traveller families need to be told or made to stop being violent.” (FG8)

“We need to have health and support services for women who have experienced FGM in every area where these women might live. A service available when women go into labour is also important, we need someone there who knows about FGM and who can interpret.” (FG24)

“I have been working with one young Traveller woman who has completely turned her life around, she was in a refuge for a year after experiencing abuse, and she has gone to college and learnt to read and write, she has got a part time job and the reason she couldn’t be here today is that she has taken herself off on holiday. She would never have done that a year ago. She is an example of how important outreach support with survivors is after they leave the refuge; it needs to continue.” (FG8)

Irish Traveller women spoke highly of Solace Women’s Aid which runs a service to help Traveller women who are unable to read and write to pass the theory part of their driving test at the local library each week, because they know that cars are an important safety resource for Traveller women.

“Travellers are at risk of being snatched from the street by other Travellers, refuges are safe but what about taking the kids to school, going to the GP, doing the shopping. Traveller women are much safer in a car; freedom for us comes with having a car. You can have your documents and your clothes in a car and you can just leave if you have to.” (FG8)

BME women also said they wanted more investment in ESOL (English language) classes, because they felt learning English was a contributory factor to empowering women, and made it easier for them to seek help, to leave a violent partner, and to prevent violence in future.

“Women who come to the UK need to learn the (English) language and not be isolated. You need easier access to English language classes; there should be compulsory lessons, so that women are encouraged to become more independent. If the man is their only contact, he is their world. It would be helpful if someone goes in to ask if she is going to classes. Often the husband is their interpreter, if she learns the language independently then the husband will know as well that she is not silent and he cannot treat her really badly and get away with it.” (FG6)

The need for accessible women's services

Many women we spoke to recognised that women's services have limited resources to provide accessible services to all women and children who need support.¹²

"There are more and more women without recourse, more and more asylum seekers who need translators, and we can't get funding to provide this. There's no money to reach 'hard to reach' groups like disabled women or sex workers; they are just not a government priority and there's no funding for us to meet their needs. There's also no funding available for any development or research work, stuff that's going to take us forward and do prevention work and allow us to enter places like schools, only for front-line service provision." (FG23)

"There needs to be more funding for ethnic minority communities to deal with for example FGM in Somali communities, or for immigrant deaf women suffering violence, who only have access to support in their community, and may face very negative cultural values and stereotypes in communities which at the same time harbour and protect the perpetrators. BME women's services that are accessible for disabled BME women are vital so that these women get the support they need." (FG13)

"Sustainable, specialised violence against women services should be available for all women, in all areas of the country; and specialist services should have LGBT training to provide effective responses to lesbians experiencing violence." (FG5)

Women's services also provide services to children but this is often not acknowledged by statutory services or by funders.

"In order to get one hour of therapy time with a child living with domestic violence, our children's therapist put in seventeen hours behind-the-scenes work for that therapy session to happen, working with the family, with the mum and referring agencies. It took a long time to get the child to that space for one hour's support but it was worth it and it's now ongoing. That effort and work isn't visible – or funded - but the outcome is incredibly valuable." (FG5)

Despite the importance of women's services to women who have experienced violence and abuse, many women we consulted with spoke of the barriers they faced when trying to access specialist women's services. For example, women mentioned that refuge support services should be available for all women, including Traveller women, women with alcohol or substance misuse problems, women who have older male children, and for women at risk of forced marriage.

"Services are not accessible for women who can't read and write, you go for help and you can't get it. There are also quite a few refuges who won't accept Irish Travellers, Women's Aid refuges. Every single day we deal with cases of Traveller women being refused accommodation in women's refuges. We have reported it, it was completely unacceptable the open discrimination she experienced. From Women's Aid, a national organisation should do something about how local services discriminate. Anti Traveller racism still exists, it's the last acceptable prejudice." (FG8)

"[A Traveller woman] in her early 20's was looking for a bed in a refuge, I was with her when she called, and they said they were full. We called again, she put on her

¹² This was also recognised by the CEDAW Committee (2008) which stated in its concluding observations on the UK government: "The Committee also recommends the establishment of additional counselling and other support services for victims of violence, including shelters, and requests the State party to enhance its cooperation with and support, in particular adequate and sustained funding, for non-government organisations working in the area of violence against women."

best English accent and she had a bed in the same refuge at 4pm that afternoon.” (FG8)

“Access to information is very important for disabled women, especially if you’re Deaf and you can’t just call up a specialist helpline – there should be more minicom, more text services. Similarly, women’s refuges are currently inaccessible linguistically or physically to disabled women, and victim support services are not available for Deaf women. Specialist violence against women services need to make more effort to be accessible.” (FG13)

“There are good services out there, but they just aren’t accessible to Deaf women. Having advocates is well and good, but if they can’t sign, they’re of no use for Deaf women. Services should employ people fluent in BSL so that Deaf women do not have to wait for an interpreter when they need a service.” (FG13)

“There was nowhere for me to go when I walked out because my son was 14 so the refuge wouldn’t take us, so I went back, got a hiding. The next day I said I was going shopping and me and my son went down to the motorway and hitched. I was homeless, we slept rough, I don’t know how we survived, but it worked though.” (FG9)

“There should be some provision for women escaping forced marriage so that they and their partners can be housed, women can often find a bed in a refuge but they refuse to house her partner.” (FG15)

“A woman I know was trying to find refuge and was asked if she was drunk and had a dog. The refuge didn’t want her because she was drunk and they didn’t have a place for her dog. She still has a right to be looked after even if she is drunk. Services should be aware that she might have a drink problem, but they need to ask why she has the drink problem. Those who drink alcohol should be looked after more and services need to ask, well why are they drinking?” (FG9)

Some women wanted an effective and holistic response to violence against women from existing specialist helplines.

“The National Domestic Violence Helpline should be a violence against women helpline; it should be broader to cover other forms of violence like sexual violence and rape. It should be advertised, like ChildLine is.” (FG22)

“I called Rainbow the lesbian and gay helpline number; they gave me no help. They just told me there weren’t enough lesbian and gay services. I phoned Women’s Aid and they referred me to Brighton, to the refuge project, and when I came here I had loads of support. I had to leave my home and go all the way to Brighton to get help: I got no support in X. I left the refuge here a year and a half ago and had the best support I could have had here. I’m still going into the drop-in and aftercare group. That’s still important for me a year after leaving.” (FG5)

In particular, women said that women’s services need to be more flexible to the needs of women in prostitution, who may also use drugs, and that services should be available when women need support including evenings and weekends.

“There are no services over the weekend; if anything happens over the weekend you are stuck. A 24-hour crisis service is needed with free legal advice so women know what their rights are; we have nowhere to go if anything happens over the weekend.” (FG4)

“Most refuges don’t touch us [sex workers] unless we’re three months clean of substance use. Women who are on too much methadone also don’t get the places at

refuges they need. What should we do to get to a place of safety? We need a wet service provision. Just because you use drugs doesn't mean you want to stay in a violent relationship, but the lack of provision means you have to go home to your violent partner who's abusing you. And putting women in B&Bs because the refuge won't take them is inadequate. There need to be safe houses for women to go to so they get the support they need to get out of the situation they're in. They need help to get clean – there needs to be more joined up support and more structure, a key worker who sees you at least twice a week.” (FG14)

“A few weeks ago I got really badly attacked by my partner, and I didn't want to go home, I went to BDP [Bristol Drugs Project] to get help, but they couldn't get any women's refuges to take me, so I went back and got beaten up again, then they put me in a dirty B&B with no curtains and a filthy bed, which I couldn't stay in, so had to go home again to another beating. Just because we're on drugs doesn't mean we don't deserve safety.” (FG14)

Trans women also reported barriers to accessing help and support from some women's services, although there were notable examples of good practice.

“Organisations that support women suffering domestic violence often don't support trans women, so we feel excluded; we need a trans specific service because it happens so often.” (FG20)

“It needs to be made clear that women's services are accessible for trans women, otherwise I would feel excluded and not comfortable going there. One-stop shops would be good where you can access counselling, advice and talk to other women experiencing the same thing, and advertise that trans women are welcome. Trans-friendly advisors within organisations who have specialist knowledge of trans issues would also be helpful.” (FG20)

“The local women's domestic violence service, RISE, is doing their utmost to be accessible and to help and support trans women. We're about to sign off a leaflet to raise awareness, they provide places where trans women can go to get help, its not as well known as it should be but this should improve in the near future.” (FG20)

“Trans women need to have confidence to know that we can access and use women's services. They should make it known they're inclusive and won't be judged by whoever's on the reception, when you turn up there.” (FG20)

“Women's services could have a trans friendly logo and put it on their advertising. Although it's all very well having a tag mark saying trans people are welcome, but we also need to educate people working in these organisations so that they are aware of trans issues.” (FG20)

Prevention, empowerment and self-defence

All women stressed the importance of women's empowerment as a means to preventing violence. Women consistently spoke of the crucial role of women's services in preventing violence against women and girls, by empowering them to aid recovery from abuse and to regain control of their lives.

“I wasn't very confident. The agency (WAITS) took me to the job centre, the courts. I did the skills test and I am now in level 4. Two years ago, I couldn't talk like this. I was always crying. I am now a careers adviser. Women's organisations are so important. It's a shared experience.” (FG6)

There was also overwhelming support for the idea of self-defence classes being offered to all women and girls at different stages in their lives, as a way of empowering women and increasing self-esteem.

“Self-defence classes should be available in every area. They are also about recognising personal space, body space, and early warning signs. There needs to be money available for the right age groups. The learning and skills council withdrew funding for it locally. Girls will say things to me as a self defence instructor, they won't say to their own teachers.” (FG3)

“It would be great if all girls could have free self-defence classes as part of the Olympic legacy. It should be incorporated into PE at schools as a standard part of your education.” (FG16)

Women's safety in public, at night, on transport, and at work

Although the vast majority of violence against women and girls is perpetrated by known men - family members, neighbours, friends or colleagues - women and girls also spoke of their experience of violence and abuse perpetrated by strangers. All the women who spoke to us told us that actual and threatened violence and abuse constrained their choices and limited their behaviour in everyday life, and stressed that personal safety was a priority for them when making routine decisions (for example about routes home or to work; what clothes to wear; where to meet friends; whether to respond to comments by strangers). Many women and girls we spoke to felt strongly that they had no access to safe places in their lives, and that they were not able use public space with the same freedom as men and boys.

Violence against women in public spaces

Particular groups of women had experienced high levels of abuse in public from strangers which they perceived to be because of their gender, ethnicity and sexual identity.

“Safety is a massive issue for me as a trans woman. People see you and judge you – it's like fear plus for trans women when we walk around, because we can expect to get a lot of abuse from strangers whether its day or night.” (FG20)

“Walking around at night here doesn't feel safe. It depends where you go, some parts of the city are fine for trans women, some are more dodgy. But it's also not safe in the day. I was spat at on the bus the other day, out of the blue. We are easy targets and a lot of the abuse we get comes from children.” (FG20)

“The fear of violence out on the streets is used by the abuser to control and curtail women's behaviour even more. I worked with a woman who tried to get on the bus with her children recently and got so much racist abuse that she walked for an hour and a half to take the children to school. Then she got into trouble at home from her abusive partner.” (FG15)

“I know women are less at risk at night than men. But, against my better judgement, fear of violence and abuse still stops me going out or walking home alone at night. And my partner will not hold my hand in public at any time, out of fear of violence towards us, which is very real. She has been verbally and physically abused in the past.” (FG5)

“It's very common that lesbians walking home alone or with a partner, we get a lot of verbal abuse, which we don't talk about or call it violence against women. We learn to ignore the constant irritation of verbal abuse wherever we go. We don't talk about it but it has a very real impact on our lives. We get abuse in the face; it's a real

irritation. We are 4th class citizens. This happens in Brighton as much as anywhere else.” (FG5)

“If I go out with a feminine partner, I tend to get the abuse not her; the assumption is I’m manipulating her into a lesbian relationship. There’s the male attraction to the feminine woman and hate towards the more masculine woman, this abuse and harassment goes unreported on a daily basis. It’s all unreported. We don’t hold hands walking down the road, something other people take for granted. We deal with this abuse on a daily basis. It’s not even from adults; it’s from little kids, little boys. They don’t even have to be adults to be abusive.” (FG5)

“Society’s attitudes and messages say ‘well you deserved it, you should have known not to hold her hand’ ... it’s like wearing a short skirt or high heels – the implication is you provoked it, ‘you asked for it’ when you are a lesbian.” (FG5)

“A man in his 50s shouted verbal abuse at us walking down the road, his perception of two women with short haircuts walking down the streets, was that he had the right to shout abuse at us and invade our space. We weren’t even holding hands. That man was so rude. I was really angry; I thought ‘what have I done wrong’ and it affected me for the rest of the day.” (FG5)

“Women are viewed as public property, and told to look a certain way or to smile by men they don’t know. Why is our role to look a certain way for men?” (FG5)

Most of the teenage girls we spoke to also said their movements were restricted by the sexual harassment they experienced from men when out in public, which increased their fear of being abused; in particular they said older men would follow them, try to ‘chat them up’ or try to buy them for sex because they assumed they were prostitutes. Most young women also said that they felt unsafe walking around alone and after dark, particularly because of their fear of knife crime.

“I don’t really go out after night anymore; I’m scared in my own street. There’s loads of drug dealers and punters driving around my area, trying to pick girls up thinking you’re a prostitute. I’d feel safer with a weapon – like a knife.” (FG7)

“I hate going out on my own, I get followed by freaks and perverts, there’s always a load of old men of around 30 following me, trying to chat me up. It’s horrible.” (FG7)

“I don’t come into town anymore ‘cause of knife crime, a year 8 stabbed a year 10 the other week in my area. I don’t go out after dark, there’s loads of noise and knife crime then. I also never go on buses if I have to go upstairs. Never go upstairs on a bus – it’s not safe. There’s always people at the back of busses taking drugs, you don’t know what they’ll do.” (FG7)

“It would be good if there was an emergency button on your phone so you didn’t have to get it out in public to call for help. I’d also feel safer with lighting and lots of people around. There’s safety in numbers. Sometimes I’ll take a really long way home ‘cause a shortcut might not be safe. We need free rape alarms for everyone. You’re safe only if you’ve got money.” (FG7)

BME women who spoke to us, for example, also expressed concerns about knife crime and feared for their own safety and the safety of their children when out during the day or night:

“Over here [in the UK], people just pass you by if you are a victim of violence, you don’t know when you go out in the morning if you will come home safe at night. But now the most important thing is knives being used. You can be in the street and no-one will help you if you are getting attacked.” (FG24)

“Safety on the streets here is terrible. Teenagers are stabbing each other, violating each other. There is no focus on prevention; it is all on protection, after something has already happened. You get worried if you hear sirens, you think it might be your son or daughter.” (FG24)

“We need to educate society and government agencies need to reassure us that they can keep us safe. I saw a group of young people beating up a child. I tried to protect the child, but the police didn’t care, they just walked off. If the police won’t defend us who will? I felt totally let down.” (FG24)

“A burglar came into my home and beat me, I ran after him down the road and nobody offered to help me. People are scared to help you, the government should advertise that if you help someone it’s ok, you won’t get into trouble and it’s a good idea to support each other.” (FG24)

The majority of women we spoke to told us how violence and abuse from strangers, including stranger rape, achieves the intention, as with all hate crime, of increasing fear of crime in the targeted community, and many women advocated that crimes of male violence against women should be identified as hate crimes.

“There’s no reference to gender or transgender in hate crime legislation, which is a huge hole in the system. Although the CPS has sentencing guidelines, it should be there in law alongside religion and race and so on, recognising that violence on the basis of gender is a hate crime.” (FG20)

“They go on about race being a hate crime. If racism is unacceptable, sexism should be too.” (FG3)

“There is a link between violence against disabled women and the violence suffered by disabled people more generally, in that the police treat it as a vulnerability crime, whereas violence against disabled women should be treated as a hate crime.” (FG13)

Disabled women also spoke of a significant amount of verbal and other forms of abuse against them when out in public, summed up as follows:

“Disabled women still live in fear of abuse on the street from strangers, it still happens – I’ve been pushed and abused and told in the street by strangers that I shouldn’t be allowed out, shouldn’t be allowed to leave the house because I’m disabled. There is a huge amount of discrimination against us and a lot of work to do to prevent violence against disabled women in public places.” (FG13)

Transport and safety at night

Although overall there was a low level of interest in discussing safety at night in the focus groups, given the extent of violence and abuse present in other aspects of their lives, when women did discuss this issue, most women said they felt unsafe out at night. It was noted by women for example, that the reduction of street lighting in towns and rural areas had a direct consequence of limiting women’s movement and freedom, and women felt their need for safety was not being prioritised. Better street lighting, particularly in rural areas, and more street presence were some of the suggested ways of making women feel safer at night.

“We were told we couldn’t have lighting in this really dark alley the students had to use, because the astronomy group wouldn’t like it. Women students campaigned for years.” (FG3)

“I won't even put my rubbish out at night. We need more lighting in rural areas. We have no streetlights where we live; it may be good for the environment but it's not good for women.” (FG3)

Many women also reported feeling unsafe waiting for and using public transport or using car parks. Some women said that in their area the council had recently cut women-only transport services because they mistakenly considered this to be discriminatory under the gender duty. Women said that more staff at stations, taxi ranks, on public transport, and designated parking for women would make them feel safer when out at night.

“We need women-designated parking that is next to the entrance and by a street...I wouldn't even use a taxi in Cambridge...because drunks come and push in front. There should be taxi marshals...There used to be a women-only bus at night where they would take you to your door for a £1. It was great.” (FG3)

“The 'Pink Ladies' taxi service which has women drivers only was really good, but the council wouldn't let them operate anymore.” (FG17)

“If you don't have a car and have to use public transport this is where a lot of the abuse happens, at stations, waiting at bus stops. I'd rather there were more staff about to stop it, not depend on CCTV images afterwards. Female-only train carriages and waiting rooms would make me feel safer.” (FG20)

“Car parks are frightening – they need to be better lit. Maybe there should be women only parking bays at nights?” (FG17)

However, women's fear of violence was not only connected with moving around their neighbourhood at night or on transport, but was also employment-related. Women spoke of high levels of fear travelling to and from work and recommended that all employers should have a duty of care towards women shift workers who finish work after 10pm, by providing them with taxis home if necessary. We also spoke to one woman for example who said that she had stopped using her car because of the congestion charge in London, but that meant she was more fearful returning home in the early hours of the morning after working nightshifts as a nurse.

“Employers should give the opportunity to move cars [to a safe location] if you have to work late.” (FG17)

“The problems with buses are their frequency, and where the bus stops are – they're often in dimly lit areas, or they're surrounded by trees. My employer has a duty of care to get you to work, but not to get you home again. They won't get you a taxi home if you work in the retail industry, even if you're asked to work late, unlike the catering and nightclub industries.” (FG17)

Violence against women in the workplace

Women also spoke of their experience of violence in the workplace and a perceived lack of a duty of care by retail employers, who failed to support survivors of violence and also put customers and profits before women's safety at work. Women wanted employers and trade unions to have a stronger role in promoting gender equality and in responding to and reducing violence against women in the work place.

Women said that employers need to actively support women experiencing violence instead of disciplining them for absences or asking them to leave. They wanted employers to operate a zero tolerance policy on abuse towards their staff and clearly advertise this policy to customers. Women also wanted employers to support employees in bringing prosecutions instead of actively discouraging them, as reporting violence was considered by

employers as 'bad for business'. Employers also need to clearly advertise to their staff that they will not be penalised for reporting violence against them.

"Women don't report violence to the police or at work, because they're initially disbelieved or judged. Employers don't see absence relating to violence as anything to do with them – and indeed discipline women for absences when instead they should support women suffering violence. If women are on the edge and do open up to employers, they ask 'why don't you leave'. We need to remove the blame and the women's own feeling of shame. Employers must take responsibility, by giving the women time off and supporting them." (FG17)

"The 'freedom from fear' campaign at work is about educating the public that violence is not acceptable. But who do you go to if you do suffer violence? The union is fine if it's a small workplace, but if it's not you don't know the rep and won't want to open up to them. HR and occupational health just take the employer's side." (FG17)

"In retail a certain level of violence and verbal abuse has become so high that it wouldn't occur to you to even report it to your employers, let alone the police. Employees from one-parent families can't jeopardise their jobs – they can't stick their neck out, and risk management bullying such as arbitrarily changing their working hours. It'd be great if the government were to recognise that unions play a big role in signposting women who've suffered violence. There needs to be more information on ways to get help other than phoning the police if you suffer violence." (FG17)

"Employers' primary concern is their business, over and above concerns for employees. Employers have policies that look good in the handbook, but they don't actually promote them. Car jackings taking place on cars of disabled and female members of staff was only acted upon by the company when a customer was stabbed in the thigh." (FG17)

"Companies often do have provisions in place such as counsellors and doctors, but they don't see it as their role to deal with violence outside the workplace." (FG17)

Women felt that existing licensing laws had a detrimental impact on women working in retail.

"Licensing laws need reforming, as how they are at the moment leaves retail staff particularly vulnerable to assault by drunk men trying to buy more alcohol at 1am. Underage laws also need reforming, as they result in physical and verbal abuse against sales assistants." (FG17)

"The amount of violence in retail is appalling, baseball bats, that's the level of violence you're talking about. It disproportionately affects women, as it is women who tend to be in more customer-facing roles. Men tend to be more in the background; in management-type roles. Violence is very underreported because it's not in the store's interest. Retailers often have very good policies, but the problem is that their policies are not followed through. And because workers are frightened of being singled out, they don't challenge the abusive customers – anything that damages custom is discouraged because it's not in the shop's interest. Managers discourage sales assistants from going to the police." (FG17)

"Young people in the shop get violent and abusive because they can't endure waiting five minutes. It's older female sales assistants that are the targets of abuse, not young male assistants. Abuse and violence against women at work has become far more acceptable than it was." (FG17)

Women wanted the government to invest more in promoting the business case of ending violence against women in the retail sector and amongst public and private sector employers, and to produce national publicity that could be displayed in the workplace.

“The Government needs to do more to promote the business case of preventing violence against women. Facilities and services that provide help for women experiencing violence need to be promoted more widely, somewhere private where you wouldn’t be embarrassed to look at it so that you can note down the details, like in the ladies toilets at work and not only on the union notice board, it’s too public. Something printed by the local council wouldn’t be allowed to be put up as it’s not ‘work-related’.” (FG17)

Protection

Criminal justice system

Most women we spoke to had little confidence in the justice system. The overwhelming majority of women who attended the focus groups believed that there are enough laws in place to deal with violence against women. Instead women felt that the problem lies with its implementation and with inconsistent responses to violence against women and girls by all agencies in the justice system.

Police responses

Many of the women consulted said they would not report an incident of violence to the police and would be fearful of supporting cases through the court process. Women also felt disillusioned about the level of protection and response they received from the police and many said they felt they had unequal access to the justice system.

“Women and girls have lost faith in the criminal justice system, because of the failings of the police and the lack of effective and consistent sentencing. Sentences are reduced and then people are let out early for good behaviour. The criminal procedures and what women have to go through and the time it takes are too hard and so it’s understandable that many women want to withdraw or not report. It takes too long and it’s not safe. I wouldn’t call the police to report a crime of violence against me. Working alongside them and that system as I do, I wouldn’t have faith to report a crime, I’d deal with it myself.” (FG5)

“We [sex workers] stand near the cameras to feel safer. But the police don’t use camera footage even where women have been picked up and something bad has happened to them. They don’t check the footage. The cameras are meant to make women feel safer, but they don’t, because they don’t make any difference. I got attacked in the graveyard about a month ago, by a disabled man, he punched me in the face, there was blood everywhere, but what could I do, he just walked away, there was no-one there. When you’re out there and you need money, you don’t want to go through all the reporting process, go to court and all that.” (FG14)

“There is a real problem of communication; the criminal justice system needs to learn how to communicate effectively and sensitively with the victim. Often, the police come across as very flippant when it comes to domestic abuse, saying ‘why bother, she’ll just go back to her partner’.” (FG22)

“A friend of mine tried to report rape within a marriage, and they told her it would be very difficult to prosecute, so why did she bother?” (FG22)

“The police don’t factor in that disabled women are more vulnerable than other women, in the way they investigate cases brought by disabled women. For example,

the police didn't get back to me when I reported my wheelchair missing, and without it I can't leave the house." (FG13)

"More and more Deaf women now have hearing partners, which causes problems in the criminal justice system because there is a lack of information available in sign language and a lack of interpreters to enable those working in the system to communicate with Deaf women who've been abused. Improved justice system accessibility is pivotal for Deaf women in cases where the perpetrator is the hearing partner, and who may also have raped a hearing daughter, for example." (FG13)

Some BME women we spoke to had also not had positive responses from the police. Some felt that the police should only be called as a last resort if they experienced domestic violence, and that the community should deal with domestic violence themselves, which indicated that greater awareness is needed in communities of the nature of domestic violence and its associated risks, and also of the dangers of community mediation for women living with domestic violence.

"I am Somali and domestic violence happens, but when you call the police they are heavy-handed. If there is violence in the home, the police come and remove the man. In our culture you would try mediation, to try and resolve the situation and avoid family breakdown. Why has the council not considered creating a community support network for women that are affected by domestic violence and that can address the issue within the community setting, and if the police have to be involved then they should be called by the community group." (FG24)

However, the majority of BME women disagreed. They said they women wanted the police to respond more effectively to BME women's experience of violence and abuse, to forced marriage and to violence perpetrated by extended family members; and recognised that community mediation between girls, women and family members should be challenged, not condoned.

"If there is domestic violence, if a woman is injured, then the police should be called and a community group will not help. If a man beats his wife, trying to mediate between them will only allow him to continue. You should let the police take care of it." (FG24)

"Girls are affected by FGM and then by forced marriage as young as 14 years old. They need support there and then. There was a girl I knew who reported to her school about a forced marriage. Her school called the police who mediated with the family. They encouraged her to go home and they killed her. The police didn't believe the severity of what was happening to her." (FG6)

Women who had experienced FGM told us what they thought about involving the police and prosecuting those who carried out FGM. Women felt that FGM being a crime was symbolic and could be used by communities to educate others about it being no longer acceptable. Some women expressed frustration that the practice was still so prevalent. There was a consensus that education to prevent FGM was a priority, and women felt that education should be supported by the state but led and delivered by communities themselves.

"What I want to know is that the law says you will be imprisoned for 14 years if you carry out FGM. But there are still people going out [of the UK] for FGM, what I want to know is how can we or how are we going to stop these people?" (FG24)

"Prosecution is not the way to deal with FGM, if the police unexpectedly knock at your door the neighbours would talk; it wouldn't help. Education is the key, not prosecution. It's better to ask how are we going to educate the people." (FG24)

“People have more understanding that it is wrong and it is abuse but it is hard because it is tied up with our culture. Our religion does not allow it (FGM). Government needs to control it. The best way is to educate the parents. It is a tradition, men wanted women to be like that, but it is changing, people are slowly changing, although some men still want women to be circumcised.” (FG24)

Irish Traveller women, who spoke of the prevalence of forced marriage and of rape within marriage, told us of their deep distrust of the police, who they said they would only contact as a last resort.

“If women report violence he just gets released and then he punishes her, there is no punishment for him. He won’t get locked up and the beatings will only be worse, Irish travellers don’t go to the police. There is a deep distrust between the Traveller community and the police.” (FG8)

“I went to the police station with my kids to report violence, and had to wait for social services to turn up. They took my children away, they put them in a van and said they could take them for 72 hours. It’s because we are Travellers and they are Traveller children, it’s prejudice. My children have never been in trouble and I am a good mother, but they have these low expectations of us. I just wanted help.” (FG8)

“Rape in marriage is not taken as seriously as stranger rape. If you live with a man who is beating you up, he’s probably raping you as well. But if you report this, the police will not take it seriously. Having self-respect could change this; shame is a part of not reporting rape. Traveller women would never report rape, it’s seen as shame on the family so it remains hidden.” (FG8)

“Forced marriage still goes on but a lot less than it used to. There is awareness that it’s not acceptable, but marriage is seen as a way of preserving a culture that is getting eroded. If marriages were happening later then it would be more freely chosen.” (FG8)

“It is seen as scandal if a Traveller woman reported rape, she wouldn’t be believed. It’s all about saving face in the community. Traveller women won’t confide in anyone if they are raped. They won’t even tell friends because everyone tells everyone else their business. They might confess to a nun or a priest but certainly not to any other kind of professional.” (FG8)

Women told us that disbelieving and judgemental attitudes by the police made them feel guilty and responsible for the violence they had experienced, and they lacked confidence in the criminal justice system as a result.

“There are so many barriers at each level, the police, the CPS, the judges and the juries are all susceptible to stereotypes and social attitudes.”(FG23)

“My friend was raped by her boyfriend, she called the police and the first thing they said was, ‘are you sure it was rape? Are you sure you didn’t consent to it? You know how you women are,’ this is the first contact she had with the criminal justice system; no wonder nobody has any faith. I know so many people who would rather talk to me than call the police. And I wouldn’t go to the police – I’d rather just cope with it myself.” (FG22)

“When my friend tried to bring charges against a man who assaulted her, the first police officers who were sent round – a man and a woman – were really lovely. But the second lot who came round were two big blokes who conformed to the worst stereotypes, and one told her ‘you do realise you’re going to destroy a family if you press charges don’t you.’ ” (FG23)

“The police must be more proactive in acting in cases of domestic abuse. In a local case where a woman killed her husband after suffering five years of rape and abuse, of which the police were made aware not just by her but by friends and neighbours, the police didn’t believe her and didn’t act until she killed him and got a murder charge. She got off after just three months when all the records were uncovered, but it should not have been allowed to get to that stage in the first place. The police corporately should be tried for homicide, murder by negligence, or there should at least be some repercussions for them.” (FG13)

Women across all focus groups spoke of police failure to respond to incidents because of an apparent lack of ‘proof’, particularly where emotional violence, threats, harassment and stalking had occurred. Often this involved women being told ‘we can’t do anything until something happens’ which women saw as dismissive and invalidating of their experience of being stalked. Very few women across all focus groups had been told about the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, yet all thought that would have made a difference in their case had this Act been used against their abuser.

“The police want us to provide proof, it is very hard to prove that violence has occurred unless you’ve got visible injuries; but they always want proof and witnesses.” (FG2)

“The police can’t do nothing to help you. They don’t keep records do they? The police were supposed to take a statement from me but then they had no record of the incident. I called them for assault against me; they lost my records and then couldn’t find my statement.” (FG7)

“It’s always women that have to prove everything twice over or more; we have to prove that we’ve been violated. Women’s bodies are public space, like rape is only rape if we say no, and then how can we prove that’s what we said?” (FG5)

“When I finished with my ex I was harassed every day by phone calls, threatening letters, even a gun sent to me to get me to kill myself. I had my kids taken away to protect them but who was protecting me? Every time I called the police they said he hasn’t hit you, he hasn’t destroyed your property, yet I was getting continuous threatening phone calls, bricks through my window. Nothing was done about it. Eventually he got into my home and he raped me, and when it did go to court, he was let off – for not enough evidence! This man has moved on and my life has been destroyed, I lost my kids, I’ve lost my home. There was no justice for me.” (FG4)

“There is a problem with providing evidence. I know a lady who had been brought over to the UK as a second wife to a guy, and he locked her up when she was pregnant and hardly fed her, she was treated like a slave, she had to bang on the window and escape with the help of a passer-by. She went to the police but had no evidence of the violence she had suffered; it was her word against his and his family all supported him.” (FG10)

“I’d only call them if it was serious, like if my boyfriend was really, really violent and there was proof I’d be injured badly. Otherwise what’s the point?” (FG7)

“He phones me at the hostel I’m staying at, to keep checking up on me. He’s still saying to me ‘if this or that happens I’m going to kill you’ I record it and it’s with my solicitor but there’s nothing anyone can do. The police just say ‘you were arguing there’s nothing we can do’. They’re waiting for me to get shot. It’ll be too late then – and I know he’ll do it, and that scares me.” (FG4)

“Most crimes against trans women are done by groups rather than individuals, it’s very intimidating as a trans woman. I was attacked by a gang; but although they

must have had clear CCTV images, unless I could identify this gang who wore hoodies, which I couldn't, the police said they couldn't do anything." (FG20)

"My husband deliberately tried to push me over the edge, towards suicide, I've been to the police and to doctors, to all sorts of people, but there's no proof, it's so subtle, I can't get help anywhere. I have been abused psychologically which is very difficult to prove; sometimes I wish he would attack me so I could have physical proof of the abuse to get help. The emotional and mental scars can often take longer to heal but there is no help available if there is no proof." (FG4)

"I called the police on numerous occasions to ask if they could get a violent ex partner out of my building, for a breach of a restraining order, and they refused. They told me they couldn't do anything until he harms me or someone else in the household, he was banging down my front door." (FG19)

"Threats should be taken seriously by the police, if not it will be too late. The police are waiting for blood. They'll read about it in the papers tomorrow – Is that what it's going to take, for women to get killed, before agencies, before government, change their policies and change what they do in response to violence against women." (FG4)

Women in the sex industry and women offenders, in particular, felt that when they reported violence to the police, they failed to get a timely and effective response, which they attributed to the police knowing their circumstances and making a judgement about their need for protection. They recommended that specialist trained officers should be available for sex workers to report violence against them.

"We always have to wait a long time for the police to arrive. Especially when you're being attacked – they take even longer to arrive. You start to wonder if it's personal. Call them too often and they don't even bother to turn up any more, because they start to recognise your number. The police circle constantly when you don't want them there because you're trying to attract punters, but then when you need them and call them out when you're being attacked, they take hours to come." (FG14)

"I've been attacked by men in my flat, I've called the police, if it comes up that they've been there before, they take ages, 40 minutes, an hour. I've been screaming down the phone 'please help me', but they don't turn up, I could be lying dead in that flat but no-one comes." (FG14)

"There should be a safe police office to go to, open 24 hours, with a couple of officers always there. Women should be able to go to certain offices or to specialist police officers, to give statements to them. They need to be trained by women who have been there, who've worked in the sex industry and who understand what we go through." (FG14)

"The police should do more to protect girls, girls are too afraid to report violence because they know they will go home to another beating. They take ages to come when you call them as well, the police just take too long, it's because we're known, we have a record, they don't take us seriously. And perpetrators get away with it because police don't take us seriously, they don't bother to take photos for domestic violence injuries. It's up to the police to provide better evidence to get men to court." (FG12)

Women seeking help for being victims of violence also spoke of being arrested by the police themselves, and wanted to police to more effectively identify who the primary perpetrator is, when domestic violence is reported.

“My ex was very violent; one time he was arguing with me I accidentally poked him in the face. So he slapped me across the face really hard in front of my daughter, she was three at the time. I phoned the police and he denied hitting me, I told them the truth and they took me out in handcuffs in front of my babies and I got a caution for common assault! Since then, he gets away with it, he’s punched me in the back of the head, he tried to push me down stairs a few weeks ago. I’ve got no confidence in the police now. He’s got away with it and I’ve got a criminal record.” (FG4)

“I spent Christmas day in jail, my ex-girlfriend beat me up, I called the police and I got arrested. They saw a young ‘girlie’ girl and me. Although I made the call and I was beaten, they saw my tattoos; they didn’t believe me, so they arrested me. It wasn’t until they listened to the 999 call I’d made, they let me out.” (FG5)

Bail conditions

Women frequently said that even when bail conditions are imposed, women’s fear that the abuser will pay no attention drives their reluctance to report violence to the police. Women also said they felt that contacting the police impacted on their safety and well-being and increased their chances of re-victimisation, and with bail unlikely to be refused, women tended to make the rational assessment that engaging with the justice system will decrease their safety rather than provide protection.

“When my partner was arrested for raping me, he was actually bailed by the police back to my house, I rang the police and asked what were they thinking of, why don’t the police check this kind of thing out? He raped me, he’s taken to the police station and charged, and is bailed back to the house where he was arrested. That just tells him he has every right to walk back to my house and threaten me.” (FG 4)

“The first time somebody reports being assaulted by your boyfriend you should be given an alarm, and he should be made to stay away from you. Bail conditions should be used more to keep them away, they just don’t work, men take no notice and neither do the police when they’re broken. We all know he’s going to come back and give you a hiding for calling them.” (FG12)

“When I reported the violence to the police he left, they didn’t go after him, and he came back angrier than before and I had no protection. If I had to do it again I wouldn’t report; it didn’t help me, it made me feel unsafe.” (FG21)

“My friend has a brick through her window recently, by an ex partner, the police turned up and told him to move along, he was drunk and they moved him around the corner, and as soon as they left he came back and threw another brick. There’s no enforcement of the law.” (FG19)

Removal orders

Women wanted more effective access to protection after reporting incidents of violence to the police and there was widespread support amongst women for the police to immediately remove perpetrators when attending an incident (Go orders, as described in the consultation paper).

“If it happens on a Friday you can’t get an injunction until a Monday. We need emergency 24-hour courts. There should be more powers for the police to take perpetrators out of the situation when they turn up, and at the same time women should get support while he’s away and not harassing her. The amount of times the police have come around my house, and are supposed to check if the kids are all right, and don’t really do it. They shouldn’t leave him there with us after he’s been violent.” (FG4)

“The problem with injunctions is that you have to go to court and face them. There should be an injunction put on them as soon as they are arrested. I never called the police in 23 years because he said he would kill me. If there had been an instant injunction I’d have called the police. That’s why I never reported it.” (FG3)

“My ex is still harassing me and pestering me for sex. He keeps breaking a restraining order and I can’t stop him. They need to take it out of the victim’s hands, they should press charges and keep violent men away from victims, automatically.” (FG4)

Register of offenders

Women had mixed feelings about the proposal to introduce a register of offenders. Whilst in principle women generally felt a register was a good idea, the majority said there were too many practical problems to make it work. Some women said, for example, that they would ignore being informed that a new partner was violent in the past, and said they would believe or hope he would be different with them. Also if they had left a violent partner, women generally did not want information about that relationship being shared with others.

“I don’t know if a register is a good thing. How would the government know when he’s started a new relationship? If I was told my new boyfriend had been violent to a previous girlfriend, I wouldn’t believe them. And there are so few convictions, how would it work unless we put everyone on there?” (FG4)

“I’m not sure that if I left a violent relationship that I’d want information about my relationship being shared with someone else. And I wouldn’t listen if someone told me he’d been on a register, I would think he would be different with me and it’s just a jealous ex.” (FG12)

“Agencies need to know who is violent. But if women knew (he had abused before) and then they get hit, if they had been warned, they might get blamed.” (FG6)

“All these things cost money. Women need agencies to go to. I would feel safer going to them; we wouldn’t need to go anywhere else. If all the money that is ploughed into the justice system was given to grassroots organisations that actually support women it would be much better.” (FG6)

Bisexual women articulated the concerns that many women had about the proposal of an offenders register.

“A register seems like a shortcut, a simple answer to a complex problem. It would be better to look at the gaps in the criminal justice system instead and making the system work better particularly for women, for LGBT people and for Black people.” (FG19)

“If you had a register, and stayed with someone who was on there, then tried to get help, wouldn’t you then get blamed for staying and not be given help? Like when social services said to me recently, you should have seen the signs, it’s your own fault. A register is likely to discriminate against women, like us, women who are less likely to report to police in the first place.” (F19)

“I wouldn’t be happy others knowing that I’d been a victim of domestic violence from my ex. I’m also not sure I’d believe it if I was told by the police my new partner had been abusive in the past. How would they know I’d started going out with him anyway?” (FG19)

“A register should only be available to the courts, or for the police to share information. Maybe it should only be for convictions. But most perpetrators aren’t

convicted, so would it extend to allegations? If so it's a bit like vigilante justice, which is worrying." (FG19)

"When my abusing partner was abusing me, she said I was being really violent to her. If a register includes allegations of domestic violence, that would mean I'd have been on the register even though I was the one being abused." (FG19)

However, women felt strongly that the police should know whether there was a history of violence when they were called to an incident, and also felt there should be a register of injunctions so that police around the country knew if an active injunction was in place against perpetrators, even if they moved between police force areas. Women preferred the idea of a centralised intelligence system, a register for professionals in the justice system to use.

"The main thing is that police need to share information with each other so they know where he is, if he's got a history of violence and moves around the country with new partners." (FG4)

"Women come to us [Poppy Project] describing the same people and it's us who have gone to the police and said these incidences are linked, women are reporting intelligence to different police forces but they're not linked up, information is being missed. We need a centralised intelligence system to gather information on traffickers who are repeat offenders (FG2).

Some BME women called for the police to work closely with the government to minimise the risk of forced marriage. Some BME women also wanted government to monitor and track abusive men bringing women in to the UK, and greater restrictions on men being granted permission to sponsor a marriage with a woman from abroad.

"When girls and young women who are UK nationals leave the UK, the British Embassy should text them contact details so that they know where to go if they need help or are concerned about being forced into marriage." (FG9)

"I feel like perpetrators are never punished for bringing girls here from abroad and beating them. What about the repeat perpetrators who bring more than one woman into the UK? Many men bring numerous girls to Britain and beat them all up, one after another. The Home Office should know about this, they need to stop this; they should have a system in place that monitors these men." (FG9)

"The Home Office need to open their eyes to forced marriage when men bring women into the UK, they must know sometimes when this is happening, and when they see it they should question it. These men should be tracked. I know a girl of 24 who is married to a 65-year-old man, she is effectively a slave for him and his family. It's obviously not a love marriage. She has been forced by her family, for financial reasons, to marry him." (FG9)

Good practice responses by the police

Unlike other statutory services, some women had examples of good practice from police forces, and spoke of how invaluable a good police and criminal justice system response had been in their case:

"My friend was suffering from domestic violence, she reported it and he got charged but he still came round to the house. She had an alarm and as soon as she pressed it, the police came, this is a good idea." (FG12)

"I've been arrested by Worthing police, who actually have fantastic facilities for trans women and trans men. They have trans women police officers and trans-friendly

cells without cameras, they keep you separate, and they also understand the difficulties of trans people. They have two of the best police officers you can find.” (FG20)

“I’ve had some positive experiences of the police. My confidence in the Old Bill has been knocked a few times, I’ve been beaten up for the way I am and they’ve not done anything about it, but there are also a few decent coppers out there who have taken the time to listen to me. Cops have come round my flat to check I’m ok, there are some really good PCSOs out there who listen to my complaints and problems and I feel safe in their company, even some normal coppers are ok who take the time to listen to you. But some are awful at their job and action needs to be taken against them.” (FG19)

“If you tell the police then it’s out of your hands, which really does make a difference, a lot of women fear what will happen if you report and then press charges, but the police did what they had to do. Then they came round almost daily to my house to check I was safe, which meant he (the perpetrator) was kept away. If you can also put an order on them straight away to keep away, it gives you time to get yourself sorted.” (FG6)

“I had the same when I reported. The police came three times a week to check the property was safe. It really helped, and it stopped me going back to my partner, with the police coming round I knew I would almost be embarrassed if he was back there!” (FG6)

“I got in touch with the Forced Marriage Unit in the police locally and they were brilliant. They kept coming to my house, my parents forced me to write to the police to tell them to stop but they didn’t, they never gave up on me. The DI locally wrote to my parents and told them they would not give up until I was free. I wanted to go with them but I was too scared, I even asked them if they could make it look like they were forcing me to go with them, but they said they couldn’t, I had to leave of my own free will and one day I had the courage to go with them and go to a refuge.”(FG9)

“Leicestershire police are really good in responding to forced marriage; they have their own unit and they have a good understanding of the issues, but this isn’t the case everywhere. What women need is consistency in service and in implementing policies and in enforcing the law, because some police are great, some are awful.” (FG9)

Encouraging women to report

There were a number of suggestions made for increasing women’s confidence in the justice system and for encouraging women to report violence to the police.

“To increase women’s confidence in the criminal justice system, we just need police to do their jobs; this would be a good start.” (FG19)

“PCSOs should have training in violence against women because they’re much more diverse and representative of the local community than police officers. This reinforces the fact that lesbians are less likely to report to the police; they still reinforce discrimination against women by the lack of representation of women and lesbians in the police force.” (FG5)

“The criminal justice system is really intimidating, women might want to report, but we might also need time to deal with what has happened before they prosecute. We need to know what to expect, and to know that it won’t be taken any further if women don’t want it to. We need somewhere to go and talk it over with a service

independent of the police, and a leaflet telling women what will happen if we report, almost like a flow chart, to inform our decision, so that we know what we're getting into, this would be really helpful." (FG22)

"Police need to recognise and respond to bi-phobia if bi women are to have more confidence in the criminal justice system. When I've called the police there's a big difference if you use different pronouns, so when I've reported violence and used 'he' they listen, when I've used 'she' they looked at me like I was a slut, and didn't recognise bisexuality existed, they looked down on me and didn't take me seriously at all." (FG19)

"The criminal justice system should sign up to a particular ethos, which shows a commitment to being more victim-focussed, despite the time-element – 'you've come forward now, what can we do for you?' Knowing what to expect from the system would help women to come forward." (FG22)

"The police should focus on how to respond sensitively at the crime scene and not on providing ongoing support, that's not their role. It's crucial that they act appropriately at this point as this is often women's first encounter with the criminal justice system and if she has a bad experience it might put her off engaging with the system again. Alongside a good police response, specialist independent support for victims immediately after the point of reporting should be offered to all women." (FG22)

"More reporting of actual rape conviction rates of those that get to court – how many know this is 57%? – this would increase women's faith in the criminal justice system, instead of giving us percentages of total rapes, because a lot of rapes are never prosecuted." (FG22)

"It's always negative news that hits the headlines, it's always 'she's lying' 'she was wearing a short skirt and a low cut top' instead of 'he was convicted', it hardly gives you confidence in the justice system. The positive outcomes of cases need to be highlighted much more to give women confidence, like the conviction rates of those that get to court; if we always see negative things we're not going to come forward, because we think nothing will happen in court or that's what people are going to think about me." (FG23)

"I went to court and prosecuted the guy – before me five other women dropped the charges – he went to court, he went to prison, he now can't come near a mile of me, so I think it would be a good idea for women like myself who have had good experiences of the police, CPS and the courts to speak to women in refuges, to publicise good experiences of prosecution. He kept getting away with it, then eventually the courts took it seriously and he went to prison, now he'll think twice about doing anything like that again. He's not come near me since. More women need to know there is help out there and they [the police and courts] can be really good." (FG4)

"We need good news stories. If women only see that things have failed in the press they won't phone and get help because they think it's pointless. We need more stories about it going right. Women need to know that often the police are great. I have a friend in X, the police have her number, she has an alarm and doesn't have to speak, and they just come if she presses the alarm." (FG3)

Third party reporting

Many women spoke of the need to set up systems for third-party and anonymous reporting of violence and abuse. In particular, trans women and BME women said they wanted

somewhere anonymous they could report incidents of violence to the police, but which also enabled them to access help and support, without being forced to proceed to court.

“If there was a website to help us report, like www.reportit.net where you don’t have to see anyone, this sort of thing should be available nationally. If people report that they have been a victim of crime on a website like this they should also be sent information about support services relevant to them.” (FG20)

“It would be good if police took evidence of domestic violence incidents, so that if a woman isn’t ready to leave the perpetrator yet or press charges, they can still build up a log of incidents and evidence so that if she eventually has the courage to leave there is evidence for a prosecution.” (FG6)

“There should be a scheme where neighbours make phone calls to report abuse. Women could give permission for neighbours to do that. Women sit in the house often hoping someone will phone the police when it all kicks off, but neighbours need to be aware of the consequences, so if they have permission to do this, it’s much better.” (FG10)

Courts

Many women we consulted with had not been through the court system, despite having experienced violence and abuse. Where women had experience of the courts, they often criticised the way their case was handled.

“It took two years to get to court from the time I reported the sexual abuse I had experienced. The CID officer told me if I went for counselling during this time it would interfere with my case. That was the time I really needed it, confronting these things on my own was really hard. I now know this isn’t true but I was clearly given misinformation and told that if I got support it would jeopardise the case. You believe people in authority, the police; you don’t think to question them.” (FG23)

“I was seriously assaulted, it took 18 months to get to court, during which time I was severely harassed, he broke his bail conditions, he was arrested and released repeatedly, my windows got bricked with me and my children in the house. Although he received two and a half years custody sentence – he was released for a week before he was sentenced – and he only served six months. Meanwhile I’ve been homeless for eight months with my two children, my house is sitting empty, I’ve been calling the council to take my house back and put me somewhere else – it’s not unsafe for anyone else to live there, just me.” (FG4)

“The length of time it takes to bring a prosecution to trial really puts women off. There is a lack of communication between agencies and the process is so slow, with many delays – for, say, four weeks just spent asking for reports – which could be a woman’s life on the line, something drastic can happen in that time. And the police aren’t going to keep coming round, so there’s all the more need for independent support from specialist violence against women services who are in regular contact and know what risks women face.” (FG23)

Women also said they had not been kept informed about any developments as the case progressed through court, which in turn they felt had compromised their safety. In particular, women said that victims of stranger violence need to be kept informed throughout the court process and notified in advance if perpetrators are due to be released from custody or prison. Women also felt disbelieved when decisions were made to drop the case.

“When I took my partner to court recently, the criminal justice system didn’t keep me informed at all of the outcome. They sent me a letter after he had been released. Then it was too late.” (FG6)

“He’s been to court and he’s in a hospital prison but will be out soon and even more angry. There’s no communication throughout the whole court process; no-one has even told me when he will be released. I’m afraid what he’ll do when he comes out because he still lives there. I don’t know what I’d do without being able to come here a few evenings just to chat to other women; it makes me feel I have support.” (FG21)

“It is incredibly important for women to feel that justice has been served. There should be better induction for those in the legal system taking these cases forward into the needs of disabled women and how they experience different forms of violence. There should be checks to ensure that legal advisors and judges aren’t themselves perpetrators. And how do they let Deaf women know for example, if their violent partner is going to be released?” (FG13)

“The smallest things can change a woman’s mind to not support prosecution, those who work in the justice system need to be sensitive to this. I bumped into my abuser in court even though they promised I wouldn’t, they took me into the back entrance to avoid him and he was out there having a fag.” (FG23)

“If the CPS pulls out on the basis of insufficient evidence, it is very demoralising for women, they feel disbelieved. The CPS needs to scrutinise rape cases, not formally but to help pick up on the cases of good practice and the cases of bad practice. But I want to look at the cases they turn down, because so many cases they turn down, it devastates the victim, who’s gone through often six months waiting or longer, just to be told that the CPS aren’t pursuing it, and they’ve re-lived the whole thing again during this time. We managed to set up a meeting for the CPS lawyer to meet with the victim, but only managed twice, which was poor, really poor.” (FG23)

Women who had been to court said that they wanted more consistent responses by the court service across the country, so that women don’t have to rely on living in a certain area to access specialist courts or a sympathetic judge. In particular, women said that access to ‘special measures’ and safety at court was inconsistent between areas.

“If you have special measures in law, such as allowing a woman to have somebody sitting next to her in court, or giving evidence in the video link room, the court services need to make sure this happens. Time after time ISVAs [Independent Sexual Violence Advisors] are prevented from advocating for this and women are denied special measures because we’re told ‘it’s at the judge’s discretion’. And despite trying for five months, I’m not getting anywhere with getting a meeting with senior court officials to thrash this out so that I know who to raise this grievance with.” (FG23)

Women also said they wanted stronger and more consistent sentencing for crimes of violence against women and girls, and for magistrates to have training on violence against women and equality issues. In particular, trans women, BME women, sex workers and survivors of domestic and sexual violence recommended that professionals within the criminal justice system, especially judges and magistrates, should be trained on violence against women by survivors themselves, to minimise decision-making based on prejudice.

“Tougher sentencing for perpetrators is needed. Men can beat a woman really badly and get hardly any time behind bars, if they do even get put behind bars. Tougher sentencing would send a strong message to all men that violence against women is not right.” (FG10)

“One of the problems is that lay magistrates often act on their own personal prejudices. My partner, she’s trans, and she was attacked with a spirit level by a builder, it went to court. CPS and Victim Support were very good and we had lots of

support. But the court was the problem; he was just fined £200. It's a joke; it wasn't taken seriously at all." (FG20)

"My boyfriend beat me up and raped me, but he walked because I have a previous record and convictions, the prosecution picked up on that and that's all they were interested in." (FG12)

"There needs to be more work with the judicial system as judgements are so varied depending on where you live. We need to address violence as the complex issue that it is...Too many men get really small sentences, they come out and go into another relationship and do it again." (FG6)

"If a man forces a woman to have sex and they are in a relationship the police and the courts don't see it as rape. It's the same with sex workers, I know a woman who was raped, it went to trial but he got off. It's all because she is a sex worker. The reports in the paper afterwards focused on her as a prostitute, actually she was a woman, and she was a mum. She had a nine-year-old boy." (FG10)

"I accompanied a friend who went through the criminal justice system trying to prosecute her husband who had been violent to her, she got asked the same questions week after week after week, and the defence was that, well you were married to him for years, you had children by him, he hit you for years, why are you doing anything about it now? That's why it failed in the end, because the jury were, like, yeah, why put up with it for that amount of years then only do something now. Even though she gave the reasons for it. It was societal attitudes held by the jury and used by the defence that lost her the case." (FG23)

Confidentiality and anonymity in rape cases was considered of great importance by women who had experienced rape and sexual violence:

"The services involved in the criminal justice system, especially the courts, need to understand what confidentiality and anonymity mean. One woman I worked with who'd been raped asked for anonymity and they published her name. These women are incredibly vulnerable and the criminal justice system makes them fight every step of the way, when you are going through the criminal justice system it feels like you are fighting against it, it doesn't feel like it's there to support you." (FG22)

"The press shouldn't be allowed in the courts, it adds to the intimidating atmosphere. There are instances where women have been identified because of this. And the reporting is often very antagonistic, for the victim reading those things about herself can be like being emotionally raped all over again." (FG22)

"I've heard journalists at court taking bets on the outcomes of rape cases...volunteers and service users have been door-stepped by journalists in the past, it's not acceptable." (FG22)

Women who had previous convictions complained that the current system for criminal injuries compensation did not entitle them to be awarded compensation if they had been raped and supported the prosecution through court, in contrast with other victims of crime.¹³

"A guy raped me and three other women, we went to court, I stood an hour and half in the witness box, and he got 10 years. But I tried to get compensation but because I have a criminal record I didn't get anything. Rape victims who have a criminal

¹³ Currently, the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (CICA) may refuse or reduce an award because of the applicant's behaviour before, during or after the incident; criminal record; failure to cooperate with the police, or delay in informing the police or others of the incident. The CICA use a points based system; so women who have been convicted of multiple offences will accrue 'points' and will no longer be eligible for any compensation.

record are not awarded compensation. This is unfair and needs to be changed.” (FG14)

Perpetrator programmes

Many women wanted some form of preventative intervention with violent men within local communities. Women attending the focus groups had not had much experience of violent partners being court-ordered to attend programmes for men who are convicted of domestic violence related offences, or of community domestic violence perpetrator programmes. However many women thought that these are important interventions to protect women from further abuse, and wanted women to be able to access safe separate support services alongside the delivery of programmes in all areas.

“We need to help the men to get to the root of the problem; prison and the short sentences they get isn’t a deterrent for them. There should be perpetrator groups locally, or if they get to prison they should also have to work on their violence when they’re inside. Programmes are needed locally and in prison that make men attend and make it clear to them it’s not ok to be violent to women.” (FG12)

Prison services

Women offenders felt they were given a poor service from agencies such as the police and social services because of their previous convictions or their involvement in prostitution. None of the women in prison we spoke to knew of the availability of specialist violence against women services, so women wanted women’s prisons, in particular, to ensure that as a minimum, women’s prisons have posters displayed on violence against women and the national helpline numbers, and information about other help available..

Women also wanted all probation and prison officers in women’s prisons to have training on identifying and responding to violence against women and girls, and recommended that each women’s prison should have information available on violence against women services (e.g. the national directory of local domestic violence services¹⁴ and similar directories). Women also wanted women’s prisons to ask about experiences of violence when they come into prison; to hold support groups and discussion groups on different forms of violence so that women had access to information and support whatever the length of their sentence; and to give information to women about local violence against women services on their release.

“I have been in prison for the last 11 months, I got counselling whilst I was inside, which was good.” (FG21)

“There should be programmes in place for women in prison that identify what’s happened to you and ways to help you change the situation. Asking about violence against women could be part of the information we’re asked when we come in to prison; the main focus then is on drugs and coming off them.” (FG12)

“We should have posters up in these group rooms with helpline numbers on, and have support to talk about it when we’re in prison, if we’re in here long enough. I’ve been in and out so many times on short sentences, but never got any information about getting help from violence.” (FG12)

“Prison staff should be trained on violence against women so that they can tell us about services for when we get out.” (FG12)

¹⁴ ‘The Gold Book’, the national directory of domestic violence services, is available from Women’s Aid www.womensaid.org.uk

Civil justice system

Legal Aid

Women spoke of the difficulty in accessing legal aid to apply for injunctions, particularly in rural areas, and women said they wanted faster processing of legal aid claims in cases of violence against women.

“Legal aid seems harder to get. It really has an impact. If it’s a small town only one lawyer will be doing it (legal aid) and he was using him.”(FG3)

“Legal aid takes forever to be processed – two and a half months it took to be sorted out in my cases. My solicitors asked for £4000 deposit to take my case. For two and a half months I was powerless to do anything as I didn’t have any money.” (FG4)

Women also told us of the concerns they had about restrictions to legal aid for immigration work, which means many women are unable to find publicly funded immigration solicitors in their local area.

“Immigration advice is now restricted to a few hours because of public funded regulations, these restrictions can lead to poor or no representation for the most vulnerable women, and in some cases to unnecessary detention or destitution.” (FG5)

“Once you’ve got legal aid, and if you’re an asylum seeker and then your case is being fast tracked, lawyers have very little time to interview you and prepare applications or appeals – if you’re a woman who’s been abused you need time to feel comfortable to disclose details of the violence you’ve experienced to lawyers you’ve hardly met. How else can they make a good application on your behalf?” (FG5)

Injunctions

Women questioned the effectiveness of injunctions, and the majority did not know that a breach of a non-molestation order was now a criminal offence, despite many having experience of injunctions being breached. Women said they wanted better enforcement of a breach of injunctions accompanied by more publicity of their availability and that their breach was now a criminal offence.

“There should be severe punishment for perpetrators who breach injunctions. At the moment men just seem to be getting away with it, its just a piece of paper. What happens to men who break these injunctions – there should be more monitoring and more publicity about this to show women how injunctions can protect them.” (FG16)

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders

Particular groups of women (e.g. sex workers, homeless women) also spoke about how statutory services used Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) against them, which exacerbated the dangers they faced. Women said they wanted local authorities to provide support and safety for women sex workers instead of taking out ASBOs to remove them from the area, because this denies them access to health and support services, which further endangers women.

“My ASBO is taking everything away from me, I’m homeless, I don’t have a doctor, no support services, nothing ... They don’t want to deal with it they just want rid of us... its all about enforcement and not helping women out of their situation...they are only concerned about voting figures.” (FG21)

“I lost my tenancy because the domestic violence that was happening was seen as ‘anti social behaviour’.” (FG8)

Child contact

All of the women with children who had experienced domestic violence had serious concerns about child contact between current or former violent partners, and told us that men continue to use the family court system to maintain control over women and to carry on the abuse before, during and after contact with children.¹⁵ Many women we spoke to wanted to see tighter regulations for family courts around child contact, a system that prioritises safe, supervised contact and an end to the presumption of contact, so that violent men cannot use family court systems as a way to continue the abuse against women and children. In particular, women wanted a robust, fast-tracked, multi agency response to men who they felt were playing the system to continue the abuse.

“We need a change in the way we manage child contact in this country. There is so much evidence against him but they keep letting him take me back (to court) over custody. He gets legal aid to take me back. He does it to torment me and my daughter. Every single day for four years. I’ve walked through the front door; I look for the solicitor’s letter. I can’t move on. I have never had another relationship. They control the system; this should be picked up early and stopped.” (FG3)

“My lowest point was almost killing myself, but my kids saved me. I try not to let him push me to the brink, but it’s so hard. The family courts take forever to sort out custody. I can’t predict what he’s going to do, he is totally unpredictable, - you read stories where men kill children and themselves - I fear he will harm me or take the kids and harm them, he uses them as tools against me.” (FG4)

“They [violent men] have lost that right to have contact with their children when they hit you and hit you in front of the child. He would punch cushions and say to her ‘that’s your mum’s face’. My daughter still has nightmares about it. She’s terrified of him. She still says: ‘I saw daddy pull you down the stairs by the hair.’ ” (FG3)

“I took photos of my injuries, I thought it would help in the family court, but three years on, nothing has happened. He is representing himself, he denies he was ever violent, he talks nonsense and the judge listens to him. It’s such a waste of money. He has nothing to lose and I can’t move on. My children are scared of him. It’s so frustrating. There should be more domestic violence courts to deal with family matters, which have specially trained judges.” (FG6)

Women spoke of their fears of men using contact to continue to abuse children. A particular concern raised by some women was that child contact was being awarded in cases where allegations of child sexual abuse had been made, but charges had not been brought.

“We’re still in a situation where a child who has been sexually abused – the parents are divorced – but the man who abused her and her children still gets unsupervised access to that child. X is in a position where she’s going straight from picking her child up to take her to the hospital to get irrefutable proof of sexual abuse. When you have that kind of situation those people are not being brought before the courts, and they’re actually walking away from this with a suspended sentence, or six months probation, and still get contact with children.” (FG13)

“My ex partner is applying for contact with my other child, even though he sexually abused my other daughter. He’s been on a sex offender’s programme for a year although he’s not on a register because he hasn’t been prosecuted. Now I’m waiting to see if they decide he’s a risk to my youngest daughter. He’s asking for two hours a

¹⁵ WNC, *Unlocking The Secret*, 2003: 24.

day and two overnight stays with my youngest daughter. There's no way I'm going to allow him to have my youngest daughter after what he's done to my other daughter. I'm waiting for them to decide if he's a risk or not. But he's already done it once." (FG4)

The volume of concern expressed on this issue by women we spoke to illustrates the continuing concern women have about the family justice system and its failure to recognise and respond to the impact of domestic violence on children.

Asylum and immigration system

Asylum seeking

Asylum seeking women all spoke of their experience of the asylum, benefit, housing and justice systems as working separately and, in many cases, against each other. We heard little evidence that the welfare or wellbeing of asylum seeking women and their children was factored into the way these systems and processes are structured. Consequently these women felt abandoned, isolated, confused, and felt that their basic human rights were being denied, despite the existence of the gender equality duty and immigration guidelines on gender. We noticed a significant disparity between women's experiences of violence and of going through the criminal justice system and that of women asylum seekers going through the asylum process.¹⁶

"If the UK is part of the CEDAW convention, protect us. We are women in the UK too. But because we are asylum seekers we are seen as nothing, we need to be treated as humans and offered protection, these are our human rights." (FG18)

"Black women suffer discrimination. I'm not illegal, but I'm still treated as if I am, even though I'm waiting a decision on my asylum claim." (FG1)

"We are the product of mistakes. First mistake, we were born in a poor country, second mistake we were born to a poor family, third mistake we were born women." (FG18)

Women asylum seekers told us of their experiences of the systems set up to 'deal' with asylum seeking women, for example, of their treatment by officials during detention and removal, and of government policies which they said made them particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, exploitation and prostitution.

"Asylum seeking women are here to protect themselves, like I am fleeing from a violent husband and his family in my home country. But we are not getting protection from the state. We are always disbelieved; our reasons for being here are not treated seriously, yet we deserve protection as much as the men who are here seeking asylum." (FG18)

"What we asylum seekers are going through as women is nothing less than state-sanctioned violence. Women are being abused over and over again, we are denied protection from violence suffered back home, and we are also being abused by the system in the UK, through detention or through becoming destitute and forced to sell our bodies to survive." (FG18)

¹⁶ This supports the response to the consultation submitted by Asylum Aid, which argues that there is an urgent need for the asylum system to learn the lessons from the criminal justice system and undergo a similar cultural shift: "*Government's commitment to tackling violence against women can only be taken seriously if a clear signal is sent to refugee and asylum seeking women that their experiences of violence will be treated as seriously as those of other women.*" (Asylum Aid, *Asylum Aid's Response to HMG Consultation Paper*, 2009)

“The Home Office shouldn’t be allowed to send women with daughters back to countries where FGM is practised. I went through it and now the Home Office want to send us back and make my daughter go through the same thing. She should not be forced to have FGM. We will be persecuted and our lives will be at risk if we go back. I have nowhere else to turn.” (FG18)

Women also spoke of the detrimental impact the asylum determination system had on their physical and mental health, which they said induced them into a state of constant fear of destitution, detention and deportation:

“It feels like the immigration services are trying to kill us slowly. The asylum system causes constant stress, which can make you unwell; I have high blood pressure because of it. Women who’ve been through the asylum system start looking different, they look haggard because of the constant stress. Women asylum seekers have a haunted look on their face, you can spot them in the crowd.” (FG18)

“I came to the UK because I thought I’d be safe and happy and able to practice Christianity safely. I was running from physical torture, now I’m subjected to mental torture. The Home Office should start addressing violence against women with asylum seekers, as we’re terrified.” (FG1)

“Most asylum seeking women are afraid to go out, even to the supermarket or the doctors, we are afraid of being followed, of being picked up and thrown into detention, and having our lives put in further danger. Every woman should have the right to feel protected.” (FG18)

“These are the things we suffer in silence. Our lives are spent in constant fear of stop and search, of being put in detention, which is a sort of torture in itself.” (FG1)

“I didn’t know about signing NHS exemptions – social services hadn’t told me I was exempt. So I suffered for weeks from an incredibly painful wisdom tooth. I even went to hospital, but they said they couldn’t help me. Maybe it’s because I’m an older woman? My social worker told me that asylum seekers ask for too much help from them. But I need help – I sleep badly and am on anti-depressants, and worry constantly, so I can’t hold information on things like bus routes in my head. I’m under mental torture.” (FG1)

Some women spoke of the trauma of having been placed in detention, particularly if they had already experienced rape and torture in their country of origin. In particular they told us how they felt unsafe in detention and removal centres, of concerns they had about not having access to female staff, and of the impact of detention on their children.

“The Home Office should treat asylum seekers like they treat their own women. Detention officers treat us inhumanely. Even the act of detention is state violence against women.” (FG18)

“You need to look at the children because when the mother is distressed there are effects on the children, like when women are put in detention. Children are traumatised by detention officers coming to take the mother into detention. Especially in the way in which the mothers are treated.” (FG1)

“Deportation nominally takes place ‘with dignity’ but I see no evidence of this. Its things like not being given the right sanitary pads, or the right creams, so you suffer discomfort. You’re treated inhumanly.” (FG1)

“When women are detained or arrested they’re treated sub-humanly. They’re put on the plane, taken off again. It’s constant fear – you never know when they’re coming

for you. This is a developed country – why can they not just write to you, to tell you that your application has failed, instead of putting you in detention without telling you what’s going on? Because they’re afraid you’ll run and hide. This treatment is deliberate: they don’t want us here. A white British person would never be treated like this.” (FG1)

Women asylum seekers and refugees all spoke of the humiliation and degradation they felt when they had to sign-in weekly, which they described as unnecessarily cruel and traumatic. Women spoke of the terror the weekly sign-ins triggered because they lived week by week not knowing if they would be deported or not. All of these women called for reform to this process, and advocated that monthly in-person signing-in should be introduced.

“When you go to sign in, you’re immediately treated like a criminal. The Home Office’s sign-in requirements – every week, every month – pique women’s fears, women never know when they’re going to be deported.” (FG1).

“Asylum seekers have to queue outside reporting centres very early in the morning in order to get in, and wait outside in the rain. And there are male security guards – there should be a woman security guard. They made my young daughter wait outside in the rain for hours on her own.” (FG18)

“One woman who was seven months pregnant had to walk miles there every week to report. It took a phone call to sort out reporting somewhere closer to her house, but asylum seekers are often not aware of their rights.” (FG18)

Women asylum applicants found it traumatic to have to keep repeating the story of the violence they had experienced, particularly in front of their children. They also spoke of being interviewed with male relatives, which made them delay disclosing their experiences of abuse. These women wanted to be interviewed in a separate, safe, women-only environment; access to female caseworkers; crèche facilities, and to have independent support and advocacy so that women’s experiences of violence and resultant needs could be better identified and met.

“Women asylum seekers mustn’t be interviewed with their husbands. If a woman has experienced gender-based violence, there should be a bottom line to how they are treated; they should be guaranteed certain procedures in terms of interviewing and how they are treated in the asylum process generally. They [UK Borders Agency] need to be more sensitive.” (FG18)

“Children should not be in the room when their parents are interviewed, as this can be very distressing for them – as well as their parents – there are personal things about what’s happened to you that shouldn’t be said in front of a child.” (FG1)

“In one case, a 15 year old Sudanese girl who had been trafficked, ended up in prison, and then with a foster carer; the authorities did not identify her needs at all.” (FG18)

Although recent changes to asylum guidelines¹⁷ means that some of these practices should not be happening, it was evident that amongst the women we spoke to, they felt that Gender Guidelines were not being implemented and that they were being discriminated against because they are women. It is imperative therefore that UKBA ensures the full and consistent implementation of the Gender Guidelines and their regular monitoring and review,

¹⁷ Asylum applicants should now be asked at screening whether they would prefer a male or female interviewer and interpreter (Asylum Instruction on *Gender Issues in the Asylum Claim*, 2006.). Also from October 2009 childcare provision should be provided for asylum interviews so that women do not have to tell their experiences in front of their children (UKBA *Code of Practice on Keeping Children Safe From Harm* which is a mandatory Code issued under Section 21 of the UK Borders Act 2007.)

which is consistent with the recommendations made by the 2008 CEDAW Committee, which called upon UK Governments to “...pay specific attention to the vulnerability of women asylum-seekers while their claims are under examination and to ensure the full implementation of the Asylum Gender Guidelines.”

Women were also dissatisfied with the dispersal system, and gave examples of how accommodation arrangements did not meet their needs but instead increased their isolation and vulnerability to violence:

“NASS [National Asylum Support Service] don’t give you the services you deserve because of your status. They put me [woman in a wheelchair] in a first floor flat for 11 months with my baby! To get out of the flat I had to throw my chair down the stairs and crawl down after it with my child. Coming back I was dependent on a taxi driver carrying my chair upstairs, and then I had to drag myself up again. All this with a small child. It’s a miracle I’m still alive.” (FG18)

“Housing providers treat asylum seekers like animals, putting us in shared accommodation with men of different nationalities. This is not safe; we’re fleeing violence, abuse, torture, yet we’re treated so badly because we’re asylum seekers.” (FG18)

Women asylum applicants called for speedier resolutions to asylum cases whilst recognising there needs to be a balance between timely decisions and women having time to develop trust and confidence to speak about their experiences of violence in order to inform their application. Nevertheless, most women said they were forced to wait many years before receiving a decision on their case. All women felt they were being treated inhumanely because of the length of time it takes for a decision to be made, during which women said they were not kept informed or updated about their case, and lived in constant fear of being forced into destitution or of being deported.

“I don’t get anything to live on each week. My solicitor wrote to the Home Office, saying that my life is on hold and has been for 10 years. The solicitor was told that I am illegal – don’t even write about me. It’s impossible to live on nothing...I can’t even have a relationship because of my lack of papers – and it’s been 10 years!” (FG1)

“I’m 18 and I have experienced so many things I shouldn’t have. I live with my baby in an underground flat, there is no light and there is the constant fear of the Home Office. They come in the middle of the night and take my neighbours away. They should allow us to work. They keep us waiting for four years...” (FG18)

“The time decisions takes can ruin our lives. A law that has recently been introduced prevents asylum seekers from getting married. This is a real problem for those from communities where the age at which a woman is considered marriageable coincides with the period she spends in England as an asylum seeker – especially when asylum cases go on for so many years. Whatever your asylum status, life has to be allowed to go on – you fall in love...” (FG18)

During this time, the government’s policy of not allowing asylum applicants or refused asylum seekers to work, results in many women becoming destitute. All the women we spoke to wanted to make a positive contribution and were keen to work or study. Women said they wanted to be allowed work permits and access to education in order to increase their self-esteem whilst they wait for the outcome of their case, and recognised this should result in cost savings to health and other support services.

“Giving us anti-depressants and sticking us in mental hospitals is a waste of money – just let us work. I have lived here for seven years, and don’t receive any money. I want to learn, to go to college, to work, but have just been waiting for seven years, unable to do anything – I can’t get learning or work.” (FG1)

“The government need to look at us positively; we can make a positive contribution to society, at the moment we are viewed so negatively. We need to be allowed to work, we don’t want to live off the system, we want to work and support ourselves but we are not allowed.” (FG18)

“Women need to work - it’s a sort of therapy. This would mean they wouldn’t have to go on the NHS for drugs for depression. Women also need to work for their own income, not to depend on a male for their income because that puts them at risk of exploitation.” (FG1)

“Why bring in doctors to work in the UK when we’re already here – there are doctors and lawyers and teachers amongst asylum seekers. We’re already here, already know the system, but they bring in strangers. Seeking asylum is not a crime, we don’t want benefits we want to work and contribute to society.” (FG18)

“Coming to the UK was a huge mistake. Asylum seekers were people before they came to the UK. All women like to make themselves presentable; it’s hard to become beggars, to be destitute. As a woman you need to feel beautiful, especially as an asylum seeker - no one else will tell you you’re beautiful. If we lose our self-esteem, we lose everything.” (FG18)

“In England if there’s an emergency, like a bomb, everyone affected gets counselling. But the women like us who come here with all sorts of horrific experiences seeking protection from the state get nothing. The waiting list for counselling is over a year, by which point you’ve had to learn to cope already. Or, if you have an illness by the time you’re off the waiting list, the thing is beyond repair. Why not train asylum seekers in providing counselling to other asylum seekers? That would help so many women.” (FG18)

“Women want to be educated and to work, but can’t because of a lack of papers. I tried to enrol on a course at college. I was rejected because I have a child and there was no childcare facilities, and because I have no ID, and no electricity bill or gas bill to prove who I am.” (FG1)

As a consequence of having to depend on vouchers or indeed having nothing at all to live on, women told us they had to resort to prostitution. Together with their lack of access to other forms of support, this meant that many of the asylum-seeking women were isolated, vulnerable to exploitation and often trapped in violent relationships.

“Nearly 80% of women coming to X [peer support group] are destitute or on vouchers. The idea that you can survive on almost nothing is ridiculous. Women get no money for food or accommodation and don’t have money even for bus fares. We’re hugely vulnerable. We need to support these women and stop these women becoming isolated and at risk of further abuse.” (FG18)

“Destitute women are forced into impossible situations, such as being locked in, or getting made a slave – you have no choice or you’re shown the door. As a woman you have no choice. I was offered a place on the sofa of a family I met at my church, but I am not allowed to use anything in the house, the kitchen, the hot water, the bathroom, I can’t even clean myself or wash clothes. I do it at night, which is hard as I am proud; I have my dignity. But I am so tired, they stay up until 2, 3 in the morning, so I can’t get to sleep on the sofa. I am locked in the house when they go out. I am so afraid but dare not say anything; at least I’m not sleeping on the street.” (FG18)

“People’s human rights are generally respected in England, except asylum seekers’ rights. Asylum seekers want to live better lives. We are forced to sell our bodies.

Prostitution involves health risks. But we are not citizens; we are excluded from services, treated as objects and only as statistics.” (FG1)

“Women asylum seekers should never be made destitute, it puts us at such a risk and it’s bad for the British public too, as a lot of us have HIV and we’re forced into prostitution through the lack of alternatives available to us, we feel forced to do things we don’t want to do.” (FG18)

“The money we’re given to live on - £30 per week – is far too little, and I have to cover everything for myself – food, clothes, everything...So I have to use my body to earn more – sleeping with people for money to eat, because I have to cover everything myself.” (FG1)

Women asylum seekers who were placed in accommodation and those who were destitute spoke of violence and rape they had experienced, but would not report this to the police for fear of the police response and of deportation. All the women asylum seekers we spoke to felt they had no right to safety and protection because of their status, and we heard numerous examples from refugees and asylum seekers of police responding more to women’s immigration status, not crimes of violence against them.

“The police ask you for your documents when you call them. All they are interested in is your immigration status. You’re scared to speak out when staying with a boyfriend or friend, scared to call the police, as you may have no right to be in that house anyway.” (FG18)

“Women who are new to this country and have come without a passport feel that they can’t talk, can’t ask for help, don’t have any rights. Women [asylum seekers] are far more vulnerable than other women. I too was hit on the bus, but couldn’t answer back because I have no papers. Police, social services and health services should respond to reported crimes and needs, rather than a woman’s immigration status. If there was more trust of the police, that the police would deal with this [being beaten] and not their immigration status, then women would seek help more.” (FG1)

“When called, the police must come immediately. Things can happen within minutes. We need to know the police are there for us. And asylum-seeking women must be guaranteed to be allowed to walk free, not fear being taken in by the police because of their status. The first question police ask is about your immigration status; if they think the women aren’t going to be around more than a few months, they don’t bother taking the women’s case forward, they don’t take it seriously.” (FG18)

“Single women asylum seekers, who have no protection, no one to help, can be very scared of where they are living – when we call, the police don’t come for two or three days. If the police hear a foreign accent, they don’t take you seriously, and social services are the same. They don’t provide protection; they’re not doing their job.” (FG18)

Women asylum seekers do not know their rights or what services there are available to them if they have experienced violence, which puts them at increased risk of further violence. Statutory agencies also do not know enough about what services women are entitled to depending on their immigration status.

“The government needs to raise awareness amongst asylum seeking women of their rights – like by giving us information when we get to the UK, through the media, in newspapers – they need to explain to the women how they can get help and what their rights are.” (FG18)

“I have a friend who put up with domestic violence for four years because of not feeling able to make a report, before leaving and sleeping two nights rough in a

railway station before luckily being found by chance by a refuge worker. All because of not knowing her rights, she thought she had no option but to stay with the violence.” (FG18)

Women also called for professionals working in the asylum and immigration system to have training on violence against women and girls.

“There is a huge need for more training for those working in the asylum system, like the judge who said to a woman that it’s her husband’s right not to send her daughter to school because they’re from an Islamic country. And GP’s lack of understanding of the trauma of an asylum seeker’s child, saying ‘she’ll get over it, all children have nightmares’. (FG18)

Women spoke of the invaluable support provided by women’s groups like Women Asylum Seekers Together (WAST) and similar peer support groups, which some women came across by chance, and which now offers them a lifeline.

“WAST is great because unlike other services you don’t feel you have to explain or justify yourself. It’s a safe place for women, where women understand what you’re going through. WAST needs more funding because it is struggling and it is vital for us. We get support, advice, help with our claims, food, it’s somewhere to come with your children, there are women here to talk to, it’s empowering, we support each other. I wouldn’t be here now without WAST.”(FG18)

Trafficking

Most of the trafficked women we spoke to had had relatively little contact with a range of external agencies, except for the police, immigration services, and specialist women’s support services like the Poppy Project. They spoke of how hard it had been for them to escape and how few opportunities they had to seek help.

“I don’t think you can do anything, I went straight from the airport to a house to be treated like a slave; you are behind closed doors, no access to services. When I did go out my aunt told me if I reported her to the police she would send me straight back to Nigeria, where I had already been treated very badly, so I was afraid of escaping to get help, and afraid of being forced to go back.” (FG2)

“Lots of trafficked women stay inside, they don’t go into public places. They don’t feel protected by the police; in the past they have been disbelieved so they just don’t go out, they are scared of getting help.” (FG2)

Women therefore stressed the importance of the police and other agencies providing an effective and supportive response at the first point of women seeking help. Yet most women said they did not feel protected by the police, when they managed to approach them for help. Although there were isolated examples of good practice, it was evident that practice was inconsistent between police forces. One woman spoke of the significantly different response she experienced by two neighbouring police forces.

“When I first went to the police they were so good to me, they supported me and put me in a hotel for two days and kept me safe, and then they took me to the police over here (in London) but they shouted at me, and locked me in a cell with no food or water. I was crying. They just said they were going to take me back to my country. It was only the lawyer from Poppy, thank god for Poppy, who helped me through. The police need training on how to treat people. Not all the police, but some of the bad police need training.” (FG2)

Like asylum-seeking women, trafficked women felt that government departments and state agencies were disbelieving and more concerned about their immigration status and about pursuing a prosecution, than they were about the woman's safety and wellbeing.

"The police need to create a trusting atmosphere, so that trafficked women who go to the police can feel protected, supported and understood, instead of focusing on their immigration status." (FG2)

"There is such a pressure for women to prove what has happened and identify places; the police seem to be working out whether it is a provable case in the first few hours rather than addressing the needs of the woman." (FG2)

"When I was interviewed by the police they shouted at me, I'm supposed to be the victim and they were shouting at me because I didn't remember all the details, it's hard for me, in this new country, the streets all look the same; it's hard for me to remember details of where things happened." (FG2)

"We need government to help us, recognise that we have been emotionally and physically abused, we are just trying to cope and be ourselves, we need help so we can stand up for ourselves in the future. We want agencies to be able to listen to us, not just asking about whether we have proof." (FG2)

"In the courts it seemed like they don't want to know what you've been through, because you are illegal they just want to get rid of you. The judge seemed like he was always on the side of the immigration officials." (FG2)

Women wanted greater recognition by agencies of what trafficked women have been through. In particular, women wanted the immigration system; police, and other agencies to ensure women have a choice of accessing a female caseworker or officer, so that they can disclose their experiences in a safe environment.

"They should stop giving us male caseworkers, there are some things you don't want to tell a man or talk about." (FG2)

"It's important to have women-only services for women who have been abused and raped. The Poppy Project makes sure that if we have to go for interviews, it is with women. If it is a man, sometimes you feel shy or there are things we don't want to tell them." (FG2)

Women felt that if they have experienced violence and abuse, they should not be placed in detention. Many spoke of the trauma they experienced by being placed in detention, which made them feel like they were being punished and imprisoned for having suffered violence and abuse at the hands of their traffickers.

"I had a very bad experience with my caseworker when I was detained. My caseworker came to the detention centre to interview me, I was scared and very new here, I didn't know what was happening. They asked me 315 questions, I had no food, I missed lunch, they asked me the questions over and over again and in different ways and if I made any mistakes I knew they would judge my case on those mistakes, it wasn't fair, I was confused and upset and just wanted help to be safe." (FG2)

"They don't seem to consider how you feel or what you are going through – it's straight to the detention centre, all they care about is the fact you are an illegal immigrant." (FG2)

"For women like ourselves who have suffered violence, we need the government to be by our side. I went to the Home Office thinking they would protect me; instead

they detained me. We need to be believed and understood, we need to be able to talk to someone who understands and listens, some women have been tortured, raped, why would we lie about this?" (FG2)

"Consider us and what we have been through – my parents were killed in front of my eyes, I was genitally mutilated, I was trafficked into the UK and forced to work as a sex worker – I escaped and went to the Home Office for help and they imprisoned me." (FG2)

Women also discussed the importance of agencies identifying trafficked women who were trapped or imprisoned and unable to seek help, and of reporting their concerns to the police. They felt that if women had access to sexual health services and GPs, these services could play a key role in reporting concerns about women's safety to the police. Women said they had been denied access to healthcare services and they felt these professionals should be more proactive in targeting brothels where trafficked women are likely to end up. Women also wanted these agencies to receive compulsory training so that they would be better placed to recognise signs of trafficking and report it if they suspect a person has been trafficked.

"Doctors could help; if they treat you and see bruises they should be the ones to report your case to the police." (FG2)

"More could be done by sexual health outreach services – I know they have to be careful not to jeopardise their relationship with certain premises but I think there are opportunities that are missed there." (FG2)

"Healthcare for trafficked women is very, very important, most women have no one to speak to, the Poppy project has really helped us, they get us registered for the GP, so we can get a check up and so on. I did not see a GP or health worker until I got to Poppy." (FG2)

Women who had been trafficked into prostitution also spoke of the potential role men who buy sex had in identifying women who had been trafficked, although some feared that if men could be prosecuted for using brothels this might discourage them reporting any concerns to the police. Women suggested that there should be a national trafficking awareness campaign targeting men who buy sex, together with the introduction of a safe way for men to report suspected trafficking in the sex industry.

"It's so difficult if you are in a house and you can't go out and you have no access to services, you can't even read the newspaper, it's so difficult. Some of the conditions women were working in, men must have been aware of what was going on, so educating men to report brothels might have some effect." (FG2)

"The only people who we saw were customers – they could help us but they are not going to help you, they don't want to get caught themselves, especially if it is illegal." (FG2)

Women also said that those who are trafficked by family members could be identified if women who enter the UK were subject to follow-up visits by state agencies, to check-up on women's well-being and access to services.

"Remember that trafficking happens in the family as well - it's not just about people being locked up for sex. Checks at the airport should be followed up once in a while by going to visit a woman, see how they are doing, see if they are safe or are being kept against their will." (FG2)

Some women suggested that having information available for all women at airports at the point of entry would help, and that women perceived to be at risk of trafficking should be

spoken to on their own, although they acknowledged this would be difficult to enforce. Women felt that traffickers played the system and seemed to get away with it. They all agreed that a centralised intelligence system is needed to gather information on traffickers who are repeat offenders.

“They are clever, the people who traffick, they know the system, they have different names and identities, the person who brought me here still hasn’t been found. It’s very difficult.” (FG2)

“They need to be stopping people at the airports, making the security tighter, I’m not sure how to do it, but it needs to happen at the airports.” (FG2)

“The man who brought me here, he is well known, he seems to have friends, it didn’t seem hard. They didn’t search us or ask us questions, I didn’t even see my passport, we just walked straight through.” (FG2)

“The problem with receiving information at the airport is that you don’t know your situation until its too late. The person who is with you will intervene and say you don’t understand English or whatever; they will speak on your behalf.” (FG2)

Women spoke of the importance of being able to access women-only support services. In particular they said that more counselling and support services like those provided by the Poppy Project were needed around the country. Specifically, they said that these services offered them protection, safety and support and so played a key role in their empowerment and in preventing them to keep out of prostitution in future.

“Counselling services for women are also important, we go to counselling at Poppy but they have so many people to see, they are there for us but they can’t be there all the time for all of us. More provision for counselling services for trafficked women is needed.”(FG2)

“The police can’t protect me. Being helped to move forward and gain some self-esteem and forget the past would feel like protection; I would feel protected if I could walk anywhere and not be scared.” (FG2)

Like asylum seeking women, trafficked women who had accessed a place of safety also wanted to access education and to work so that they could earn enough money to live, instead of being forced to turn to prostitution to survive. They felt that state support to enable them to access safety, to get out of poverty and of prostitution, was lacking.

“Safe housing where we can also get support is really important, we are lucky we can stay with Poppy and we get a bit of money but other women aren’t so lucky.” (FG2)

“If we can’t work and we don’t get some money and can’t get safe housing so that we can help ourselves, how can you tell other women to leave their situations if you’re not going to support them? The only option they have is that they’re forced back to prostitution.” (FG2)

“There is this attitude that these women came from poor situations, they didn’t have a choice, so that somehow what happens to them doesn’t matter. Especially around prostitution, there is a perception that ‘what else will these women do?’ The men who buy sex are aware of this too, that we have very little choice, even here in the UK, so they use us in that way.” (FG2)

Whilst women spoke of the need to prevent trafficking in the countries of origin, they felt that in many countries, prevention education was futile unless it was also accompanied by interventions to eradicate poverty. Some women, especially women from European countries, said that although they had been provided with some education in their own

country about the dangers of trafficking and had seen media campaigns, they did not realise until it was too late that they were being trafficked themselves, into slavery or prostitution.

“Wherever there is poverty and people are desperate, there will still be trafficking. It’s very hard to stop trafficking because of poverty out there, unless poverty is eradicated it will carry on, it’s not easy.” (FG2)

“How can you stop traffickers? Unless you educate everyone really well back home. But it’s not just men that traffic, its women, it’s your family.” (FG2)

“Women don’t realise – you are suffering in your country, and men make promises to take you to the UK with them, it seems like a dream. They treat you well; they don’t ask for anything, they seem like a boyfriend or uncle or godfather, they’re like a saviour and obviously you go with them. Some of us have been educated, we know what trafficking is, but traffickers don’t explain their intentions – they don’t tell you what they are going to do to you.” (FG2)

“I knew about trafficking, but I didn’t believe that my own family would do that to me.” (FG2)

Women wanted agencies and the public to understand that traffickers were not all male strangers; some women had also been trafficked by male and female family members. They recommended the need for more comprehensive education in schools on violence against women to include awareness of trafficking, and that girls in this country can also be trafficked internally, in the sex industry. Women said there should be a national public awareness campaign to change social attitudes, so that people are aware of the reality of trafficking and understand that women who are trafficked are not to blame for their situation.

“Violence against women is wrong; information about trafficking that doesn’t rely on stereotypes should be taught in schools from a very young age. Teaching about preventing violence against women in schools could help students because they have friends and if they know about violence they can tell their friends and help them too.” (FG2)

“We need something to address the social attitudes towards trafficked women, so that people understand we didn’t choose our situation, our hands were tied, we were forced, they shouldn’t judge us – like when people think that just because we were dressed a certain way, we deserved to be raped, it’s not fair.” (FG2)

Insecure immigration status

Many of the women we consulted with, particularly in the BME women’s focus groups, expressed concern about the lack of access to protection and support for women who experience violence and who have insecure immigration status.

The domestic violence immigration rule¹⁸ enables some women who enter the UK and who then experience domestic violence to apply for leave to remain within the probationary two-year period. However these women also have to comply with the ‘no recourse to public funds’ requirement,¹⁹ which means they often cannot leave their abuser to access safe, emergency housing. Protection under this rule also does not extend to all women with insecure immigration status who need protection from abuse and exploitation, including trafficked women and migrant workers.

¹⁸ This rule, which was incorporated into immigration rules in 2002, enables women who arrive in the UK to join a settled spouse or partner, to apply for leave to remain in the UK indefinitely, if their relationship breaks down due to domestic violence. To be eligible to apply under this rule, the applicant must demonstrate that she is a victim of violence by providing evidence in the required form.

¹⁹ This requirement is one of the conditions of entry into the UK, which means that spouses or partners cannot claim specified benefits or housing - ‘public funds’ - until their immigration status is secure.

Women we spoke to were particularly concerned about the lack of support available for women within the two year probationary period, and for women with no recourse to public funds because of their immigration status. BME women in particular spoke at some length about the problems they face because of this, for example, women spoke of the lack of state protection from abuse and of their inability to return to their home country due to fear of rejection or persecution by their family and community for leaving their husband.

“My friend has one child already and then she was raped by her husband and is pregnant again. She can't claim benefits, she has no recourse, her husband gets the child benefit, she has no options; she has to stay in a violent relationship because there simply is no help for her.” (FG9)

“There is a massive problem for women with no recourse [to public funds]; there is no way out for them until they have leave to remain in the UK. Often the man is using their immigration status against them and not applying for them, and they can't just go home. I tried to go back but my family told me to die here, they can't support me, they don't want me back home to bring shame on the family. There is no way out for me until I have indefinite leave to remain, until then I have to live with the abuse and get support where I can. We need more safety nets in place for women like me to get help.” (FG9)

“Women who decide to flee a violent situation have to think about the fact that they have to leave the only support they have, they have no financial independence, they don't speak the language, they will be completely on their own in an alien country. It's hardly surprising women decide to stay. There should be more systems in place to make this decision to leave easier.” (FG15)

BME women wanted increased awareness amongst immigration officials and a greater flexibility in the immigration rules that take into account the experience of women who delay making applications for leave to remain. Women told us that the system is used by abusers and their families to continue the abuse, for example by family members failing to support an application or preventing women from applying, in order to keep women reliant on them for support and prevent them from leaving.

“I have been an over-stayer for 2 years. My husband refused to support my application; his family said that as soon as I had status I would run away. His family keep threatening to report me. I live with this mental torture and with the beatings every day.” (FG10)

“Immigration laws are really taking a toll on BME women's rights. The two-year rule has become a control rule. Your partner threatens you, tells you have no rights, so you stay with the violence. I took it for years, then they all started on me in his family; I couldn't take it. So I had to leave without my children, and custody of my children is dependent on me finding a place, which is really difficult as my status is insecure. At the moment my kids are still with my mother in law. I'm worried for their safety. But I need to get somewhere to live before I can get them back.” (FG15)

Women felt strongly that statutory services and violence against women support services need to work more effectively together to create an environment to enable women with insecure immigration status to feel able to access help, so that when they do, they are believed based on their own testimony, and receive a co-ordinated response from services that meets their complex needs. BME women also wanted men to be forced to disclose criminal records to prospective female partners from abroad, so that women know in advance if they have been convicted of violence; and also wanted a system that monitors men who are repeat perpetrators and apply to bring in more than one woman from abroad.

“We [sexual violence service] had a client who was pregnant, with no recourse to public funds, who had been very violently attacked by her partner. She was told there was nowhere for her to go if she left, because all the refuges couldn’t house her because they couldn’t access funds, so she was left at home and tried to commit suicide. But the hospital was trying to get her to come here in a taxi, but we couldn’t help her, we’re not set up for that kind of thing. So we were phoning the domestic violence agencies but they wouldn’t touch her, they told us to put her back in a taxi to the hospital. We felt so impotent; there was nothing we could do to help support her. Part of the problem was about not having good partnership working where we could go to the right agency and say what’s our protocol on this, but the problem is women need access to funds if they need to escape to a place of safety.” (FG23)

Women told us about the physical violence, rape and emotional abuse they experienced from partners and from extended family members, and also spoke of self harm, depression and suicide attempts as a result of being imprisoned and treated as slaves, and being denied contact with anyone outside the immediate family.

“There is no support from the government for women who have experienced violence like myself and who have no recourse to funds, sometimes I feel I will kill myself if this continues, I want people to know how badly I have been treated. I didn’t have a clue about the services that were available until I contacted Panaghar [Asian women’s service]. It is still so difficult to get through every day but they help.” (FG9)

“The level of domestic violence amongst asylum seekers is very high, because it’s usually the man who’s the principal applicant, a woman fears protesting because she’s afraid of being sent home without her children. You need to be able to walk around without being in a state of constant fear.” (FG18)

“When domestic violence is happening, there needs to be some kind of a fund for women so they can support themselves, at the moment they are going back to violent and potentially life threatening situations simply because they have no other way of supporting themselves. These women didn’t know their marriages were going to break down; it’s not their fault they are in these situations.” (FG9)

Although unlike asylum seeking women and trafficked women, these women are entitled to work (unless they are students on temporary visas or overstayers), women are often unable to work because they do not know their rights; they have been denied access to learning English, they do not have access to childcare, and they have no support from which to recover from the trauma of experiencing abuse. Women also told us that their abusive partners often withheld their passports and other documentation, which meant they could not prove their status.

To minimise the control husbands, partners and families had over women, many women recommended the need for statutory agencies to conduct regular safety checks on women who have newly arrived in the UK, and also recommended that BME women’s services should support women to get through the citizenship test as a means to enabling them to access support services.

“The police should check up on women who are newly arrived, to check they are being allowed out and are not in any danger, that they aren’t being treated like slaves and locked up...there should be a law that allows you to learn English as soon as you get to the UK.” (FG10)

“Many women can’t leave their home, and often no-one knows if women are in the house except for their abusive family. Health visitors could be trained to pick up on signs of violence. It’s difficult though, because these women often live with extended family that have been in the UK for years, the men speak the language, they are

charming, wealthy, there is no attempt to try and speak directly and independently to the woman.” (FG15)

“There should be spot checks for new arrivals to the UK, the police should go round after a few months and check how women are doing and whether they are safe. Sometimes women are just locked in a house. Knowing that this would happen would also act as a warning and as a deterrent to perpetrators.” (FG9)

“We [BME women’s centre] have seen more and more women subject to 21st century domestic slavery. The citizenship test has helped BME women actually, it has meant women have been coming to the centre and we have been able to help them. They really are living as slaves, not allowed out and being beaten daily, their husband will have relationships with other women, and their children will be brought up by the extended family. We have encountered women who have literally not been over the threshold of the house for 5, 10, 15 years or more.” (FG15)

All of the women we consulted with who had insecure immigration status or who had come to the UK from abroad, or had been trafficked, told us they had no information about their rights and of services available in the UK, and felt abusers often exploit this lack of knowledge.

“In our community women are often threatened with deportation, if you leave your partner your family will not want you, you have no options, there should be more provision of services and awareness of women’s rights so that men know that if they don’t treat their wives well then she will leave and be safe somewhere else.” (FG10)

“Most of the women who come from Pakistan suffer, they are at risk, they don’t know the language or their rights. There is a difference between the women who are born here in the UK and the women from abroad; women from abroad are expected to behave differently from women who are born here. We are not allowed to be as free and we are not allowed to go out and about as we would like to, it’s frowned upon. We are labelled; we are expected to live like we still lived in Pakistan. We have no support and don’t know our rights.” (FG10)

Women spoke of the need for the state to inform women in their own language, at the point of departure from their country and entry to the UK, of their right to live free of violence and of services available in the UK.

“There should be information on the point of entering the UK, these are our laws and these are your rights so women know they have access to support if they need it.” (FG9)

Women also wanted statutory and voluntary agencies to have training so that they knew what help they were eligible for, because women seemed to be being denied access to services by untrained frontline staff.

“Women who have just entered the UK don’t have a clue what their rights are and what the rules are in Britain, they just get told by men which is often just lies. We need to know what our rights are and what help is out there if we need it. Posters, documents and other information need to be in your own language.” (FG9)

“Police and Social Services often don’t seem to have the right information; Social Services thought one woman had ‘no recourse’ to funds so they didn’t help her when actually she already had leave to remain. It’s not enough to have status; you have to know what your rights are as well, so that you can get help.” (FG18)

“Sometimes it’s a matter of training, there are ways round it and often you can help women with no recourse, but staff aren’t aware of this so they just say no. We saw this with a woman who had been trafficked, she was at risk from her trafficker and

had been a victim of violence and the refuge just said no, and weren't aware they could get some funding to help her." (FG18)

"There needs to be more training of staff so that they know that there are ways of supporting women with no recourse to public funds, sometimes services just say no they can't help, they don't realise what rights women have or can't be bothered to find out about funding that is out there." (FG15)

Of all the groups of women we spoke to, it was women asylum seekers, trafficked women and women with insecure immigration status who most felt they had no realisation of their basic human rights to safety and protection.

Consulting women: suggested good practice

Consulting women and girls on how to reduce and prevent violence against women is essential for government, partnerships and agencies to gain an understanding of what works in providing effective services and interventions to increase safety and protection, and in reducing and preventing violence in the short and longer term.

Our aim in this section is to outline the methods we used throughout this consultation process. We hope this will prove valuable as guidance for good practice for other government departments, partnerships and services wishing to actively consult with women who are most marginalised and excluded from statutory services in order to get their feedback on violence prevention and, crucially, on what works to increase their safety.

Focus group aim and outline

It was important to have a clear aim for the consultation, which was to enable women to have a voice and to influence the developments on work being undertaken across government to reduce and prevent violence against women and girls. In particular, we wanted to obtain the views of women, who have recently accessed services, to record:

- Women's feedback on Government proposals and where they felt the gaps in these proposals were;
- Women's experience of using or not using services, and what needs to be improved;
- What women thought needed to be done to increase safety and to end violence against women and girls.

Each focus group, which was held for up to 2 ½ hours, was broadly structured around the following questions, which summarise those contained in the government consultation:

Protection

- How can we improve women's confidence that the justice system is working to protect them?
- How can we keep track of the most serious offenders and reduce the risk they pose?
- Are we doing enough to protect and support children affected by adult violence?

Provision

- What kind of services (health, housing, social services and others) should you expect to receive if you were a victim of violence?
- What would make your journey at night safer?
- Would it benefit you if some services worked together more closely?

Prevention

- How should schools encourage young men to treat women and girls with respect, and not to resort to violent behaviour?
- How do social attitudes towards girls and women affect the problem of violence against women and girls?
- How can we all better pick up on, and respond to, early signs of violence?

Whilst being guided by the questions outlined in the consultation, facilitators nevertheless aimed to ensure group discussions were sufficiently flexible to enable the priorities women identified to be discussed. It is worth noting that in some groups, the level of distress and the prominence of violence in women's lives meant that the above structure was not adhered to, and depending on women's circumstances, some of the questions were less relevant than others. For example women in some groups were not interested in discussing safety in car-parks or at night.

Methodology

Role of focus group co-facilitators and consultation team

The primary role of facilitators was to guide the process and ensure women were able to effectively contribute to the consultation. Every group was co-facilitated by the WNC and Home Office by facilitators experienced in working with survivors of violence against women. Eleri Butler and Davina James Hanman, who are seconded to the Women's National Commission and to the Home Office respectively, both have a long track record of working in the voluntary sector and have acquired extensive experience of working nationally, regionally and locally on violence against women, which includes supporting survivors, developing and managing services, training, researching, campaigning, co-ordinating and advising on strategy, policy and practice. Their expertise and experience of supporting survivors, and their perceived independence from state institutions, was invaluable to enable women and girls to discuss their experiences and views openly and honestly in as supportive an environment as possible.

A WNC Policy Advisor worked full-time to ensure the smooth logistical running of each of the groups and liaised with services and participants before, during and after each group, and was supported by other members of the WNC team to scribe focus group discussions and provide administrative support throughout the process.

Given the often harrowing nature of the discussions, it was important to have two experienced facilitators at each group accompanied by skilled support staff, not only to enable support to be provided to women attending, and also to enable facilitators and staff to offer support to each other.

Identifying women and girls to participate

Our aim was to target women and girls, based on demographics and life experience, who were survivors of violence and who have had recent experience of accessing services but who might not otherwise engage in this consultation process. The experience of women subjected to violence is compounded by the additional discrimination faced by some groups, for example, women from Black and minority communities; refugees and asylum seekers; disabled women; older or younger women; lesbians and bisexual women, transgender women, and by women's life experience, such as women with mental health needs or who have problematic substance use; homeless women; women offenders; women in rural areas; trafficked women and women in prostitution. We recognise that whilst everyone experiencing violence will have different needs that should be taken into account when developing a strategy, belonging to one or more of the aforementioned groups inevitably makes help-seeking and changing circumstances more complex and in many instances, it will reduce the level of protection and the number of services available.

These women and girls are not 'hard to reach' (a label usually attributed to groups who do not use services); they are women who agencies and government departments often find hard to hear, because of the multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage they may have experienced based on their identity and life experience as well as the prevalence of violence and abuse in their lives. These women are often excluded from consultations and are often denied access to mainstream provision or make a logical and rational choice not to use services because they either do not meet women's needs or place them at greater risk of violence and abuse.

Access to women who wanted to take part in the focus groups was gained through WNC partner agencies and through facilitator contacts with local services across England. We also promoted the groups through our UK Violence Against Women Working Group members and through WNC Newsletters, so we also sent out further details and a nomination form to individual women who contacted us wishing to attend particular groups.

We made proactive contact with women interested in participating, and who wanted advance information before their attendance at the group, to give background information to women about the consultation and to answer any questions they might have.

Focus group protocols and paperwork

An introductory letter containing background information about the consultation, together with a focus group protocol and nomination form specific to each group, were sent out to agencies that agreed to make contact with women and encourage their attendance at groups. Nomination forms were returned to the WNC to enable us to ensure women attended the appropriate group based on their demographics and life experience.

Equality monitoring forms were used at the end of each group, asking women to anonymously record information about their age, their ethnicity, their gender identity, their sexuality and their religion and belief.

There was no requirement for women to read or write unless they wished to because a verbal outline of what was contained in the consultation and other paperwork was also provided at each group.

Maximising safety and support

We know that sometimes agencies carry out consultations with women without making any provision for them to cope with any negative feelings that may resurface as a consequence. Women's safety before, during and after the groups was of paramount concern to us.

All the groups were women-only, and ground rules at the start were negotiated to maximise women's feeling of safety in the group. For example, women were encouraged to only use first (or any) names, and there was an opportunity to take time-out from the discussion at any time, if women needed to do so.

Due to the sensitivity of the discussion, some women chose to attend with a woman friend, colleague or support worker. We also ensured that women who attended groups were in contact with or were referred to local support services, should they need support following the group discussion. Facilitators were able to provide some support and information during and after the groups to women attending. We also circulated a list of specialist violence against women services that could offer support if needed after each event.

Additional support was provided to enable women to engage in the groups, including ensuring that interpreters, signers, care and support workers were available where necessary and that childcare arrangements could be accommodated where possible.

Confidentiality boundaries and recording of information

Facilitators made it clear at each group that all contributions would be non-attributable and that feedback would only be reported in an anonymous manner to the Home Office. This was especially important for some groups of women who feared Home Office and state intervention in their lives.

Women attending the group agreed in advance to keep any personal information disclosed confidential to the group. Professional interpreters and carers in attendance were required to abide by the confidentiality ground rules set out in the focus group protocol.

The discussion was recorded in writing and, with prior agreement by attendees, recorded on a digital tape recorder for the purpose of cross-referencing with handwritten notes, to ensure the final report was an accurate reflection of the discussions. As stated in the protocol, all tapes and notes were held securely until their disposal after completion of the report.

Recognition of women's contribution

Often when consultation with women is carried out, the generosity of survivors is rarely reciprocated by remuneration. We therefore built into the process a system of reimbursement for women who participated in a focus group for their time and to cover any incidental expenses they might have incurred, by offering them a token of thanks in the form of high-street vouchers or equivalent.

We also ensured that services which supported us in the organising of these events (for example, by providing venues or refreshments) were reimbursed accordingly so that the financial and administrative burden on their service was minimal.

Location, venue and time

We wanted to ensure an even geographical spread across England. Focus groups were held in every English government region: London, Cambridge, Brighton, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Leicester, Halifax, Wakefield, Bristol, Newcastle, Manchester and Coventry.

We made every effort to ensure all venues used were safe and welcoming; all were accessible, and refreshments and a buffet meal were provided at each group.

Although we were unable to provide a crèche at all group venues, every effort was made to assist with arrangements for childcare in partnership with other services.

Focus groups were held for up to two and a half hours at different times of the day (either in the morning, afternoon or evening) depending on the location and groups being consulted.

Listening to women and girls

There is always a risk with consultations that deal with sensitive issues, that women participating provide deeply personal information about their experiences but receive nothing back in return. We made a commitment to women attending that feedback from each group would be sent back to those who helped organise the group, and that this report would also be circulated to all the women who helped us in this work.

“It will be very important to these women and the other members of WAST that we get the feed back from this day and some explanation of how this might feed (or not) into government policy on violence against women and women's safety” (Women's Service feedback)

We know from experience that survivors are incredibly generous when asked to contribute to consultations, often trawling through their distressing and traumatic experiences to provide help for other women. Many women we spoke to went to great lengths to attend and participate in the focus groups, because they felt it was an important opportunity to have their say on preventing violence against women and girls.

“I've ran out of the house to come here, I've ran here with no shoes and hardly any clothes, look at me, he didn't let me out so I escaped 'cause I wanted to come here to speak about this. Then I'm going to go home, be accused of sleeping with a bloke even if I take these papers with me, I'm going home to a beating. Nothing's going to change. But I want to have my say.” (FG14)

Women who participated in the groups also told us how appreciative they were of being listened to by government. Many said that for the first time they felt their experience and views had been validated, they felt they were worth something and that someone believed

what they had to say. Women also said they benefited from being able to participate in a women's group, from sharing their experiences and views with other women.

"The women felt the day's consultation had been worth their effort and were encouraged to be given the chance they so rarely get to say how it is for them and discuss their experiences and have their voices heard." (Women's Service feedback)

"For me personally, it was wonderful to meet other service users; so often, you never see anyone else except your counsellor or perhaps a volunteer. The opportunity to meet others and have that sense of 'sisterhood' was brilliant." (Woman, focus group).

"For me, it helped me a lot to meet other service users and realise again that I am never alone in my survival and recovery." (Woman, focus group).

"I thought it was a very useful forum and it was great to hear so many people sharing their different experiences yet all speaking about similar ideas for justice reform. I couldn't believe how quickly the time went!" (Woman, focus group).

Most women recommended that survivors of violence should not only be consulted on the development of a strategy, but should also be involved in monitoring, evaluating and reviewing its impact on the prevention of violence against women and girls.

Some women understandably questioned why this consultation would be any different from other consultations, and they wanted to know what government departments would do with their experiences and ideas for increasing safety and for ending violence against women and girls. In particular, women were concerned that nothing would change as a result of the consultation, particularly for women in their circumstances.

"I mean I'm all for this – don't get me wrong – but my concern is that we'll sit here, we'll talk, we'll bare our hearts, we'll say the things that we want to say. This will then go through you, it will then go back to Government, and Government will do jacks**t. You know – I mean, why are we here? I mean, just where do we make the inroad to actually getting something concrete that we can see, that this Government, any Government and the law is actually looking after the rights and beings of women? Where do we see that?" (FG13)

"Is anything going to happen – what's the purpose of you coming here today, what will you do with the feedback? Are we going to see any change or will there be just a load of waffle? There are loads of times I've sat in bollocks like this, giving feedback and nothing's ever come of it, still we get no help, nothing changes." (FG14)

"This is all about getting votes; at the end of the day government doesn't really care. I have very little faith that any government cares about violations against women and children. It's all about what will get them the votes." (FG5)

Lessons learnt

A review of the focus groups provided valuable additional learning. We found that the length of the focus groups (between two and two and a half hours) was found to be about right, based on an average of 8-15 attendees. For some of the groups, we were inundated with interest to attend, and we had to turn some women away, in order to balance numbers with women's effective participation in the discussion. When more women attended than anticipated, we had to split the group discussion into smaller groups, to enable women to have a chance to participate.

At each focus group, we asked women to introduce themselves by a first name, so that they could choose not to identify their own name and were also not being introduced in terms of

their profession. We also asked women to tell us one thing about themselves, and we ensured that different icebreaker questions were used which were sensitive to the group concerned and to women's circumstances, to minimise women feeling excluded or any other unintended consequences. For example, in some groups we asked about a woman's favourite place; in others we asked what their ideal superpower would be (women in prison wanted to fly or to walk through walls).

The format of the group was important, and impacted on the information obtained. The majority of the focus groups were structured and time-limited; although some groups necessitated being run as drop-ins over a longer period of time, which resulted in discussions with individuals or with smaller groups, for a shorter period of time.

In order to make women feel more at ease discussing violence against women, we were clear that we did not expect them to talk about their own experiences of violence and abuse and there was no pressure to do so. We tried to keep the discussion focused on their use of services. Inevitably, however, women did disclose their experiences which meant that other women felt safe enough to disclose and share their experiences of abuse and of using services. When women did talk of abuse, they overwhelmingly talked about domestic violence (physical, emotional and sexual violence and abuse from partners, ex-partners and family members). Even when facilitators moved the discussion to focus on different forms of violence, and set up specific groups with survivors of stranger rape, rape within a domestic violence context continued to be the primary focus.

"We would like to express our thanks for the group of you who came and carried out the work. It was greatly appreciated that you carried out the consultation in such a sensitive and safe way which resulted, as you saw, in women feeling confident to speak out about what we all know are painful and traumatic things to talk about"
(Women's Service feedback)

The importance of reimbursing survivors for their time and their contribution to the discussion was evident. In nearly all cases, we provided every woman attending with £20 high-street vouchers after the focus group; although they were unaware they would be reimbursed when they attended the group. This also went some way to helping with any other expenses they might have incurred to be there. To ensure transparency and accountability requirements, we ensured a name and signature was recorded on receipt of a voucher. In some instances, the issuing of vouchers was not appropriate and we liaised with support groups for the most appropriate form of equivalent appreciation/recompense e.g. girls were taken out for a meal by their support workers as thanks for their contribution; however with women in prison, we were unable to find a way around prison rules to do this for women who participated in the group. It was also important to ensure that women's services, which helped us set up these groups were reimbursed for any additional costs incurred, for example, this usually took the form of meeting costs for venues, any lunch or refreshments costs, access to childcare services, transport, provision of signers or translators, and additional administration costs incurred. In the main, support groups and local services were extremely helpful and sourced good value for money refreshments and venues for us where they could.

It was important to ensure independent facilitators co-facilitated the focus groups who have experience of working on violence against women and with survivors of violence. Some women raised concerns about speaking to statutory or government officials, and felt reassured when they knew facilitators had experience of working on violence against women in local women's services, and when they knew of the confidentiality boundaries that the groups would abide by. Securing attendance by women at some of the groups also necessitated facilitators making contact with local violence against women services to gain their trust and confidence in the consultation process, and on occasion, attendance at existing local drop-ins for women in advance of the focus groups. Facilitators and the focus groups co-ordinator also spoke to some women beforehand to answer any questions they might have in advance of their attendance at the group.

“It was lovely to be given the opportunity to speak freely; so many forums like that are all about flipchart notes with a facilitator and can become very school-roomy. I felt perfectly comfortable sharing my views and experiences and was happy that others felt comfortable too.” (Woman, focus group).

“I thought the ladies from London were brilliant; their questions were well thought out and led the discussions in the right direction.” (Woman, focus group).

Crèche facilities could not be provided at every venue for each group. However, given the importance of access to childcare to enable women to participate in consultations and group discussions, we made every effort to work with local services to enable women to access childcare provision they might need. Also, where women were able to make their own arrangements for childcare, we offered to reimburse any costs incurred on production of receipts. In some groups, women brought babies and young children with them, and although WNC support staff helped where they could, the presence of children inevitably impacts on the mother’s participation in the discussion. Every effort should be made in future consultations to provide adequate crèche facilities to enable women’s full participation in consultations.

The location of groups and access to support for women before, during and after the group discussion is critical, as is the provision of interpreters. Also, the importance of being clear with local agencies about referral routes for attendance at the group, and the need to register their attendance and gather information about women’s needs in advance of the group, cannot be underestimated. On one occasion, women had received information about the group from their support worker, but neither had registered their attendance with us, which meant we had more participants than expected (twenty-five) and had no prior knowledge of language and support needs. This meant that we conducted the consultation through smaller group discussions and used some support workers in attendance to interpret on our behalf, which was not ideal. Professional interpreters should be used at all groups where women are unable to speak English as a first language. It must be noted that the presence of interpreters has an impact on group dynamics and dialogue, especially if there are mixed needs in the groups. Alternatively, focus groups should either be conducted in the first language of women being consulted, or technology should be used to enable simultaneous translation without hindering dialogue between women.

At all focus groups, women and women’s services stressed the importance of receiving feedback to those who attend the focus groups. It was critically important to them that they could feel that their voice was being heard and not lost. We felt that this element was a spur for the women to talk more candidly about their experiences as they felt that something positive would come from it in the way of change. We agreed with the Home Office in advance of the groups that the notes from each focus group would be provided to the local service(s) that helped us set up the groups, for distribution to those who attended. However, feedback to local services had to be delayed to coincide with the completion of the government response to the consultation. When planning any consultation therefore it is critical to agree in advance what can be fed back to participants and when this is likely to happen.

Inevitably, women will disclose examples of good and bad practice during the discussions, and focus group organisers need to have a clear process for dealing with disclosures of bad practice about professionals, and about receiving information, which presents a current and immediate risk to women, which would not be covered by child protection policies, for example, clarifying when it is necessary to instigate a third party report of a serious violent crime to the police force concerned. This should be clarified in focus group protocols and women should be made aware of this in advance of the group discussions.

Finally, the impact on everyone working on the consultation needs to be taken into account, and the importance of having a space to debrief after focus groups cannot be under-

estimated. Staff working on this project were also offered counselling, because everyone who worked on this project found it to be a profoundly affecting experience and, at times, emotionally draining. At various points, staff felt anger, shock, despair, grief and shame and yet were equally humbled and inspired by the courage, tenacity and selflessness displayed in abundance by the consultees. Others intending to undertake similar consultations should be mindful of the potential for vicarious trauma and ensure that appropriate systems are put in place to minimise this risk to staff.

Conclusion

This report reflects the views and recommendations made by the 300 women and girls we consulted with to inform the cross-government's consultation on ending violence against women and girls.

This material provides a vast and unique body of evidence to inform the development, implementation and review of future strategy and policy to end violence against women and girls. The methodology and lessons learnt also provide a useful tool to inform the development of further national and local government consultations with women and girls.

We consulted with women from different walks of life and with different experiences, yet there were overwhelmingly common threads that bound these experiences together. Our main finding was that women and girls expressed a significant lack of confidence and trust in statutory services like the police, courts, health and local authority services. They told us they were unhappy with the way they are treated by them, and described statutory services as dismissive, judgemental and unhelpful in their responses to women and girls seeking help. Indeed, women said they saw statutory services as yet another barrier to them reaching safety rather than seeing them as sources of support.

Although there was evidence of some good practice, the focus groups starkly illustrate how inadequate many statutory services are in responding to violence against women and girls. We know that legislation, strategies, policies and action plans have been developed to address different forms of violence against women, but the groups' experiences demonstrated how these are neither being effectively co-ordinated, implemented, nor monitored consistently across the country.

So much of what needs doing in response to violence against women and girls does not have long term resource implications. Significantly, women said they are as concerned with how a service is delivered as they are with what is delivered. It became clear that a culture shift is necessary where women and girls are believed and not blamed for the violence perpetrated against them. All women and girls wanted to be treated with dignity and respect whoever they came into contact with, and existing legislation, and in particular the gender equality duty and current Equalities Bill, sets the framework for this to become a reality providing that it is implemented as it should be. Indeed international instruments like the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women for which Government is a signatory, also sets the framework.

Women particularly valued independent women's services that specialised in responding to violence against women, where they existed. They welcomed being supported in a safe women-only environment that was independent of statutory services and that did not require them to report to other agencies. Women said they appreciated a timely, holistic response to their complex and multiple needs, which focussed on their safety and empowerment without labelling or judging them, or limiting the service to times of crisis. Specifically, women told us they wanted services that are accessible for the most vulnerable groups, that are available out of hours, and that provide a safe space to talk with other women to share experiences and get mutual support.

Our findings serve to reinforce the need for all services and approaches to be joined-up, fully funded, intelligent and responsive, and to prioritise the safety of women and girls at all stages of intervention. In particular, their experiences demonstrated a clear need to develop a comprehensive strategy on violence against women and girls. This strategy needs to establish and implement an effective legislative, policy and service framework to prevent violence that is underpinned by clear responsibilities, targets, and review mechanisms, and sustainable resources for national and local specialist services for women and children experiencing violence and abuse.

We know what works from research, experience, and from the informed opinions of survivors, that it is possible to achieve a reduction in violence against women and girls, and we know what has to be done to protect them from this violence and abuse. Evidence indicates that where there is good practice in responding to violence against women, women felt valued, confident and safe, that their human rights were being realised, and that they were able to participate in their community. In turn, children were safer and able to form healthy relationships; crime and vulnerability was reduced as were costs to services and the state. There are obvious benefits for the state from the protection and value it can offer its citizens. If this can be achieved, then increased safety for all women and girls and the prevention of violence in the longer term will inevitably follow.

Appendix A

Letter to agencies

February 2009

Violence Against Women Consultation: Women's Focus Groups Invitation and information for focus group attendees

Dear _____

Thank you for your interest in participating in, or assisting with nominations for, one of the women's focus groups taking place as part of the Government's violence against women and women's safety consultation.

The Women's National Commission has been asked by the Home Office to carry out a series of focus groups with a range of women based on demographics and life experience. These will be held across England between March and May 2009.

Whilst women survivors of violence who have recent experience of accessing services will be the main contributors, we aim to hear the views of women from diverse backgrounds and experiences. In particular we want to hear what women think needs to be done to improve women's safety, and also to get feedback on Government proposals, due to be published in March 2009.

We are particularly pleased therefore that you can help us to enable the voices of women _____ to be heard as part of this consultation process.

Please find attached a summary of the protocol for the day outlining the draft programme, aims and responsibilities, and a nomination form. Please could you complete a copy of the attached nomination form for each of the women who are happy to attend and return it to us as soon as possible prior to the focus group.

Due to the sensitivity of the discussion, women might like to come along in pairs or attend with a friend or advocate in order to provide mutual support. Please note that all contributions will be non-attributable and feedback will only be reported in an anonymous manner to the Home Office, in order to inform a cross-government Violence Against Women Strategy due to be published later this year.

If appropriate, we would also like to send each of the women attending a focus group an information pack such as the one attached, in order for them to have a look through it prior to the workshop. The packs will also include venue information and can be sent via your organisation if individuals prefer.

Please feel free to contact Sophie Howes at the WNC by calling 0207 944 0589 or emailing Sophie.Howes@communities.gsi.gov.uk if you would like any further information.

Thank you for your help with such a challenging and vital task.

Yours sincerely,

Eleri Butler
Policy Manager, Women's National Commission

Appendix B

Focus group nomination form

FOCUS GROUP in for

When:

Where:

Refreshments and lunch will be provided.

Please note that details provided on this form will be kept private and confidential.

They will not be given to any third party.

Name *	
Contact details (phone number, address, email) *	
Venue accessibility requirements, please specify (e.g. wheelchair access required)	
Support needs (e.g. signer or interpreter required)	
Dietary requirements	
Other	
Can we send an invitation pack direct to the above address in advance of the group?	YES / NO If NO – can you pass this on to the above-named? YES/NO

* Name and personal contact details are optional, but please bear in mind that we need to provide you with venue details prior to the workshop.

PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM TO SOPHIE HOWES AT THE WNC

AT LEAST THREE (3) DAYS PRIOR TO THE EVENT YOU WISH TO ATTEND

Sophie.Howes@communities.gsi.gov.uk

Appendix C

Focus group protocol

1. Purpose of the focus group

To responsibly record the views of women who have recently accessed services, and feed this information in to the cross-Government violence against women consultation paper due to be published in Spring 2009. Whilst women survivors of violence who have recent experience of accessing services will be the main contributors, the WNC aims to hear the views of women from diverse backgrounds and experiences. In particular we want to hear what women think needs to be done to improve women's safety; to get feedback on Government proposals, and to find out from them where they feel the gaps in these proposals are.

2. Purpose of this protocol

To provide information on what can be expected from the focus group and to ensure those wishing to attend them are not harmed or endangered in any way as a result.

3. Contacting women to attend the consultation focus groups

The WNC will use its existing contacts with specialist services in order to gather the names of women who have voluntarily expressed an interest in attending any of the consultation focus groups.

The WNC will hold these names in its office and will not, under any circumstances, share these with any other agency or use them for any future consultations, unless express permission is provided from an individual woman. If so, the WNC will only do this in the way that is dictated as safe by that woman.

If women would like to offer their input but feel they are not able to attend any of the focus groups, they are welcome to provide comments directly to the Home Office website that will be established for this purpose. There will also be a 'violence against women bus' travelling around each region across England at which women can also participate in the consultation. The consultation period begins on 9th March 2009 ends on June 25th 2009.

4. Who will be at each consultation event

These are women-only focus groups. At each focus group there will be:

- (Approximately) between 10 - 15 women; and
- Two facilitators, to guide the process and ensure women get a chance to contribute to the consultation; and
- WNC staff members to oversee the logistics of the day and to transcribe proceedings (up to three depending on group numbers);
- Interpreters (as required).

All of these people listed above are committed to and bound by this protocol.

5. Format for the consultation focus groups.

The focus groups will last for approximately 2 - 2.5 hours. Refreshments will be available on arrival and where appropriate a sandwich lunch will also be provided. Each focus group will broadly follow a programme such as that outlined below, although groups will be sufficiently flexible in response to women's needs and circumstances:

Approx. times	
30 minutes	Welcome / introductions / about the consultation
40 minutes	Discussion – feedback on proposals
40 minutes	Discussion – women's safety, use of services
20 minutes	Round-up and close

A verbal outline of what is contained in the consultation paper will be provided. All additional content will also be verbally presented and collected. There will be no requirements for the women to read or write unless they wish to.

Should any of those women who attend the focus groups offer advice on how the programme might work better, the WNC will consider this and alter it where necessary.

The focus groups have not been designed to act as a 'support group' for the women in attendance. However, the WNC has ensured that women who attend are in contact with local support services, should they need support following the group. The facilitators will also have on hand a list of agencies which can offer support and guidance following each event.

6. Access to the consultation.

The WNC will only book venues for the consultation focus groups which are accessible. Signers and interpreters will be provided where necessary.

To assist with the costs that may be incurred, the WNC will be providing women attending the focus groups with some form of reimbursement, for example in the form of supermarket or high-street vouchers as appropriate.

The WNC aims to hear the views of women from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Women attending will be encouraged to complete equality monitoring forms after each event (this will be voluntary) in order for the WNC to make sure we invite all women to attend and participate – not just those who can easily make their voices heard.

7. Recording and storage of material collected at the focus groups.

In order to accurately reflect women's views, the WNC will need to record key issues arising from the focus groups. Information will normally be recorded in written form although if necessary, and only if agreed by all attendees, a back-up in the form of a tape recording may be used. It should be noted that any tapes made of proceedings will only be used to cross-reference any written material. Should any of the women in attendance specifically object to this, written recording only will be used.

There will be ground rules for 'no use of surnames' in order to allow the women to feel more comfortable in sharing their information.

The WNC will use the feedback from the focus groups to inform the cross-Government consultation on a violence against women strategy. A written summary of key issues arising

from each focus group will be provided to the Home Office, based on the written material and tapes produced from the focus groups.

All written material and tapes will be held in a locked filing cabinet in the WNC office. It will not, under any circumstances, be shared with any other agency, nor will it be used for any other purpose than to feed in to the Government's violence against women consultation. The WNC will retain this information until the Home Office accepts feedback from the final focus group. Following this, the material will be destroyed.

8. Use we will make of the consultation material.

The WNC will be producing a report for the Home Office from each focus group containing all key issues raised throughout the process. Women who attend these focus groups will not have the opportunity to comment on each report submitted to the Home Office due to the tight consultation schedule. However they will be informed by the facilitators at each event how they can comment on the consultation via other methods.

The WNC commit to promoting the feedback from these focus groups amongst Ministers and nominated civil service representatives.

Thank you very much for your help.

Please contact the WNC by emailing Sophie.Howes@communities.gsi.gov.uk or Eleri.Butler@communities.gsi.gov.uk, or by calling 0207 944 0585, if you have any questions about the enclosed information.

Appendix D

WNC Equalities Monitoring Form

We would be grateful if you could complete and return this form. The information you have supplied will be kept confidential and will only be used to provide an overall profile analysis of attendance at Women's National Commission events. Please note that this form is entirely voluntary; answer only those questions that you are comfortable with.

Please choose one option from each of the sections listed below and then tick or place an X in the appropriate box.

A. Age

Under 16	
16 – 24	
25 – 34	
35 – 44	
45 – 54	
55 - 64	
65+	

B. Disability

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) protects disabled people. The DDA defines a person as disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long term (i.e. has lasted or is expected to last at least 12 months) and has an adverse effect on the person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

Do you consider yourself to have a disability according to the terms given in the DDA?

Yes	
No	

C. Gender identity

Male	
Female	
Other (please specify)	

Have you ever identified as transgender?

Yes	
No	

D. Sexuality

Bisexual	
Gay man	
Gay woman	
Lesbian	
Heterosexual	
Other (please specify)	

E. Ethnic group

(These are based on the Census 2001 categories, and are listed alphabetically)

Asian, Asian British, Asian English, Asian Scottish, or Asian Welsh

Bangladeshi	
Indian	
Pakistani	
Any other Asian background (specify if you wish)	

Black, Black British, Black English, Black Scottish, or Black Welsh

African	
Caribbean	
Any other Black background (specify if you wish)	

Chinese, Chinese British, Chinese English, Chinese Scottish, or Chinese Welsh, or other ethnic group

Chinese	
Any other ethnic background (specify if you wish)	

Mixed

White and Asian	
White and Black African	
White and Black Caribbean	
White and Chinese	
Any other Mixed background (specify if you wish)	

White

British	
English	
Irish	
Scottish	
Welsh	
Any other White background (specify if you wish)	

F. Religion or belief

Which group below do you most identify with?

No religion	
Baha'i	
Buddhist	
Christian	
Hindu	
Jain	
Jewish	
Muslim	
Sikh	
Any other religion or belief (specify if you wish)	

Appendix E

List of Focus Groups

- FG1: Refugee and asylum seeking women
- FG2: Trafficked women
- FG3: Women in rural areas
- FG4: 'Vulnerable' women
- FG5: Lesbians
- FG6: Black and minority women
- FG7: Girls and young women
- FG8: Traveller women
- FG9: Black and minority women
- FG10: Women offenders and Black and minority women
- FG11: Older women
- FG12: Women in prison
- FG13: Disabled women
- FG14: Women sex workers
- FG15: Black and minority women
- FG16: Young women
- FG17: Women working shifts / in retail
- FG18: Women asylum seekers
- FG19: Bisexual women
- FG20: Transgender women
- FG21: Women in prostitution and 'vulnerable' women
- FG22: Rape and sexual violence survivors
- FG23: rape and sexual violence survivors
- FG24: Women affected by Female Genital Mutilation

Appendix F

Organisations that helped identify women for the Focus Groups

African Well Women's Service
All Sorts Youth Project
Amina Project, Eaves Housing
ASRA Housing Association
Brighton & Hove Partnership Community Safety Team
Brighton Women's Centre
Bristol Disability Equality Forum
Bristol Drugs Project
Cambridge Women's Aid
Cambridge Women's Resource Centre
Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (CRASAC)
Domestic Violence Integrated Response Project (Leicester)
EVOLVE Project, Calderdale Women Centre
Forward
HM Newhall Prison
Imkaan
Oasis
One25 Project
Panaghar
POPPS Neighbourhood Scheme
Rape Crisis England & Wales
Rise (Refuge, Information, Support, Education), Brighton & Hove
Safer Bristol
Solace Women's Aid
Spectrum
Survivors Network
The Anjelou Centre
The Clare Project
The Poppy Project, Eaves Housing
The Refugee Council
The Women's Society (Newcastle University)
Threshold
Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW)
Waltham Forest Somali Women's Association
Women @ the Well
Women Acting in Today's Society (WAITS)
Women Asylum Seekers Together (WAST)
Women's Institute
YWCA

Appendix G

Summary of recommendations from groups

Asylum seekers and refugees: key issues and recommendations made by women

- Human rights should be at the heart of any organisation that is providing services to women. Asylum seeking women and refugee women want to be treated with respect and dignity by statutory services, and want services to respond to their experience of crime and to their needs, not their immigration status.
- Women's services should be advertised as safe for women asylum seekers, and should not be interested in women's asylum status.
- In detention women should be entitled to a women only service (in relation to modesty / menstruation / pregnancy).
- The UK Borders Agency (UKBA) should resolve asylum cases far more quickly,
- Women should be informed of their rights, and the help available to them if they experience violence, at the point of entry into the UK.
- There should be more support groups for asylum seeking and refugee women, that are in receipt of adequate funding. For example support services like WAST need more funding as they offer a vital service to asylum seeking women.
- The number of times women have to repeat the same personal details to professionals should be reduced somehow.
- There should be awareness-raising amongst the public of what it's like to be an asylum seeker, to combat the negative attitudes portrayed in the media.
- Women need to be offered better information on culturally appropriate mental health services, and given greater choice of treatments than the anti-depressants currently on offer to them.
- Addressing violence against women involves addressing racism as well; often women are discriminated against on a number of grounds.
- Services and support for children of asylum seekers needs to be available more readily, particularly when parents of children are arrested or detained.
- Women should not be interviewed by immigration officials in the presence of their children, services should be provided for so that children are cared for during the interview process.
- Social Services must facilitate contact between detained mothers and their children so that women have regular contact with their children during detention.
- Obligatory in-person sign-in to immigration services should be monthly rather than weekly, as the weekly sign in process is very difficult for women with children and those without access to transport.
- There should be more translated information available to women who do not speak English, to ensure that they have information about services available to them.

- Women asylum seekers are often left vulnerable to exploitation due to their lack of economic independence, so women should be given every opportunity to become economically independent to prevent this kind of exploitation happening.
- The considerable skills and knowledge many asylum-seeking women have to offer should be accessed by allowing women asylum seekers to work, train, and access education in the UK.
- Women asylum seekers should be offered sufficient financial support so they are not forced into prostitution in order to survive.
- There needs to be a culture change from the current tendency towards disbelief of women asylum-seekers and refugees.
- Dispersal systems need to take into account the importance of women's social networks to women's health and well-being.
- NASS need to be more flexible with regard to accommodation payments, and allow women to have some choice in their accommodation.
- The UKBA should do outreach work in order to explain the work that they do and to improve relations amongst certain communities, in order to bridge understanding between UKBA and refugees and asylum seekers.
- More work should be done with faith communities around preventing violence against women, in order to reach asylum-seeking women and make sure they know where they can access help if they need it.
- Women want emergency services to respond to 999 calls quicker, and the same kind of service needs to be provided to every caller. Emergency services should not consider it a low priority if they hear a foreign accent or think the caller is an asylum seeker.
- Women want police to respond to the incident and victims' needs, not to a woman's immigration status; an improved police response would encourage women asylum seekers to report VAW.
- Asylum seekers need to know their rights and what support they are entitled to because services can't be relied on to have accurate information; there needs to be a national media campaign widely advertising the rights of asylum seekers and support services available to them.
- Social services need to talk to women directly, instead of relying on the husband (who might be an abuser) to interpret; and should offer support to women who report violence instead of threatening to take their children away.
- Immigration officials should be aware that immigration applications often force women to stay with violent partners, as they are often the principal applicant. An awareness campaign amongst immigration officials about the ways in which the immigration process can be used to continue abuse against women would help.
- Staff who work in the asylum system need training to give them a greater understanding of asylum and gender issues.
- Immigration and family courts should be kept entirely separate; evidence given in one should not be used in another.
- The Home Office should have a policy of not sending women with daughters back to countries where FGM is practised.
- The recent law banning asylum seekers from marrying should be revoked.

- Women want statutory services to provide asylum seekers with the same service as everyone else; women felt services such as health, housing and social services have given asylum seekers sub standard services.
- Counselling and violence support services need more funding so they can support asylum seekers who have often experienced violence, instead of making them wait for months before getting support.
- The government needs to advertise clearly the support available to services that help women with no recourse, at present services are refusing women even though there is some funding available to help women with no recourse.

Trafficked women: key messages and recommendations made by women

- Women wanted a more believing and consistent response from police forces, in particular woman felt there should be less pressure on trafficked women to provide proof of what has happened to them if they go to the police.
- Trafficked women who go to the police want to feel protected, supported and understood, instead of services focusing on their immigration status and treating them like criminals.
- A centralised intelligence system is needed to gather information on traffickers who are repeat offenders.
- Women want access to a safe environment and the option of speaking to female officers or caseworkers (in the police, in health and immigration services), so that they feel more able to disclose experiences of abuse.
- There needs to be greater recognition of what trafficked women have been through; the immigration system needs to be more gender sensitive and immigration officers need training in all forms of violence against women and girls.
- There should be a minimum standard of provision and response for trafficked women going through the immigration process, to allow them a decent standard of living, like access to safe housing and money, so that women are not forced back into prostitution.
- Women want more effective provision of health and sexual health services, and compulsory training on identifying and responding to violence against women and girls for health professionals, such as GPs and sexual health outreach workers, so that they are able to recognise signs of trafficking and report it if they suspect a person has been trafficked.
- There should be more women-only services and greater access to specialist counselling services, including crèches and childcare, for trafficked women who seek help.
- Women want freedom to work and to get an education regardless of their immigration status.
- Tighter security at airports is needed to prevent traffickers who are familiar with the system being able to traffic women into the UK.
- There should be greater links between the UK authorities and authorities in countries of origin to prevent trafficking.
- Violence against women and girls should be taught in all schools from a young age.
- ID cards should be used to prevent trafficking and protect women who have been trafficked.

- Women wanted publicity to change social attitudes, so that people are aware of the reality of trafficking, for example to understand that families are often involved in trafficking, and that women who are trafficked are not to blame for their situations.
- Women wanted a national trafficking awareness campaign amongst men who buy sex and the introduction of a safe way for men to report suspected trafficking in the sex industry.

BME women: key issues and recommendations made by women

- Police should adopt a zero tolerance policy on violence against women, removing perpetrators from the scene (through instant injunctions or bail conditions) so that women feel they will be protected if they report violence.
- Confidentiality is important and services should only share information if it is safe to do so, with women's permission.
- The police and schools need to respond more effectively to FGM and forced marriage, and to violence perpetrated by extended family members; and mediation between girls and family members should be challenged, not condoned.
- Statutory services need to use professional, trained interpreters instead of using family members, when providing a service for women without English as first language.
- Women and girls need somewhere to go to log incidents and evidence before they formally decide to report to the police.
- Better evidence collecting by police is needed at the time of reporting, and police need training so that frontline officers respond to victims of violence more sensitively.
- The police should conduct regular, random visits after a woman reports violence, or after a woman is known to have entered the UK on a temporary or spouse/partner visa, to check the woman is safe.
- There needs to be more consistent criminal justice responses by police and court services across the country, so that women don't have to rely on living in a certain area to access specialist courts or a sympathetic judge.
- A charges or convictions register should be set up for use by agencies working across the justice system, so that agencies could share information about dangerous perpetrators of violence between criminal and civil justice systems.
- Publicity about police good practice and successful prosecutions should be promoted, including for abuse by extended family members, so that women are encouraged to report violence.
- Drop-in services in locations that women already go to, that can offer specialist advice and support to women experiencing violence, should be available in every area.
- More investment in ESOL classes for BME women is needed, because learning English is a significant aspect in empowering women; making it easier for them to leave a violent relationship, and in preventing violence in future.
- The importance of BME women's services that understand women's culture and language needs, should be acknowledged nationally and locally, and resources should be prioritised for grassroots BME women's organisations that support and empower women; that build women's confidence, and that prevent violence in the longer term.

- Counselling services for women and children should be more accessible, and be available in the long term instead of being crisis-focussed; including specialist services for survivors of FGM and those who have experienced or are at risk of forced marriage.
- Refuge support services should be available for all women, including those with specialist needs, like alcohol problems, or those who have older male children.
- Information should be available about violence against women support services in established community services such as schools, libraries, post offices, shops and doctor surgeries.
- Training for all health professionals is needed on identifying, responding to and preventing violence against women and girls, and a room or drop-in service within doctors' surgeries should be available, where women can access further support outside of the doctor's appointment.
- A befriending scheme should be developed for women and children experiencing violence, and second homes should be used as respite housing for families fleeing violence.
- Emergency alarms should be installed in stations and bus stops.
- Schools should play a key role in identifying and preventing violence; violence against women should be on the national curriculum; all children should be taught about what a healthy relationship is; and women should be able to access support and be signposted to services by schools, without fearing they will be reported to social services.
- Media coverage and campaigns are needed that publicise what violence against women is, which should include emotional/financial abuse; which should be directed at everyone, in particular men in the BME community.
- Rape alarms should be freely available for all women.
- There needs to be more awareness of forced marriage of young BME gay men and lesbians; they are being forced into heterosexual marriages with girls and boys from abroad, for the sake of the community.
- When girls and young women who are UK nationals leave the UK the British Embassy should text them contact details so that they know where to go if they need help or are concerned about being forced into marriage.
- Information should be provided to all women entering the UK from abroad, outlining what their rights are and where they can access help and support if they experience violence or abuse.
- Women want men to be forced to disclose criminal records to prospective female partners from abroad, so that women know in advance if they have been convicted of violence; and also want a system that monitors men who are repeat perpetrators and apply to bring in many women from abroad.
- Financial support and access to safe housing is needed for all women with no recourse to public funds who experience violence; because many women have no choice but to stay with a violent partner because they have no way of supporting themselves and no access to benefits or to safety.
- GPs, health and social services should be trained to take proper records on disclosure of violence, in order to provide effective supporting evidence in immigration cases and claims under the domestic violence immigration rule.
- There needs to be a more joined up response from services that work with women experiencing violence so that BME women are adequately supported; BME women's services in particular

need to be properly resourced.

- Women want women-only and BME women's services that are culturally sensitive and can provide support in their own language; women also value a services which is accessible 24-hours; safe and centrally located; responds holistically to their needs; has legal advice available, and is available for as long as they need support. In particular, more provision and access to services for older and disabled women experiencing violence is needed, including access to specialist refuges.
- There needs to be advertising of violence against women support services – in a range of community languages - in schools, in public places and in places of worship; particularly support services for women and girls at risk of or who have experienced forced marriage.
- Faith groups need to do more to raise awareness of and prevent violence against women and local authorities should use service agreements and spot checks with community groups and venues to ensure they provide information and help, and receive training, on violence against women.
- Compulsory training is needed for all health and social work professionals on identifying the signs of violence, asking about experiences of violence, how to provide support on disclosure, and how to signpost women to specialist services if they are victims of violence.
- Women want the choice of accessing another GP if they need to seek help for violence, because sometimes GPs know the family.
- There should be greater investment in 'Sanctuary' schemes so that women are enabled to feel safer in their own homes and are not forced to leave their home.
- Women want more police presence, CCTV cameras, and security in car parks, which would make women feel safer at night.
- Self-defence classes should be available for all women free of charge.
- Perpetrators (partners, extended family members, and others) should receive appropriate sanctions for violence against women and girls, to act as an individual and community deterrent.
- Schools should play a key role in detecting signs of violence, particularly girls at risk of forced marriage, and should know which services to signpost to if they suspect violence against women and girls.
- Awareness of all forms of violence against women and girls and its prevention should be taught at all schools including faith schools, and be compulsory within the curriculum from an early age.
- Media campaigns are needed in various languages targeted at BME communities, publicising the fact that violence against women and girls (in particular FGM and forced marriage) are wrong and will not be tolerated; BME services should be consulted in the development of campaign materials.
- More investment is needed in ESOL language classes for women newly arrived from abroad, because without being able to speak English women feel very reliant on their violent partner.
- Women newly arrived from abroad should be informed of their rights in the UK; men should also be informed of these rights as a deterrent.
- Women who are newly arrived from abroad should be encouraged and supported to work, which would give them some financial independence.

- Perpetrators should be forced to provide financial support to women and children who have had to leave due to violence, and who have no access to benefits or other money.
- Women wanted stricter immigration controls to prevent abusers marrying multiple times and bringing many women into the UK.
- Support services that help women learn English and enter work would give women more independence and therefore give her more options to leave if she is experiencing violence, at present many women are forced to stay with the perpetrator because they have no where to go and no way of supporting themselves.
- There needs to be greater awareness amongst immigration officials that women delay making applications for leave to remain because the system is used by abusers and their families to continue the abuse, by failing to support an application or prevent women from applying, in order to keep women reliant on them for support.
- Women wanted immigration services to be aware of serial abusers who marry numerous women from abroad and abuse one after another, and introduce a system to identify them and stop them doing this, and to protect the women concerned.
- Social services and health professionals need to communicate directly with women instead of relying on partners or extended family to interpret for them.
- Women want more support for migrant women experiencing violence so that they can leave the violent situation, like access to financial support, specialist services that respond to their needs and interpreters so they can access support.
- The justice system needs to collect evidence more effectively in recognition that often violence against women doesn't fit the 'classic' model, because abuse in some BME communities can be from extended family, or is not physical; they need to adapt their evidence collecting to this.
- Statutory agencies need to take responsibility for identifying and responding to violence against women instead of relying on the specialist voluntary sector to do so. They need to respond sensitively and have the services in place, such as interpreters.
- Social services need to send a clear message to women experiencing violence that they will not lose their children if they report violence.
- Women want compulsory training for staff in the statutory and voluntary sector about the help available for women with no recourse to public funds, because at present these women are often being refused help when there are ways in which services can support them.
- Community and religious leaders need to be taking a stand on violence against women and girls.
- Immigration services need to be aware that the two year rule is being used by perpetrators to control women.
- Domestic servitude as a form of violence against women needs to be identified and addressed.
- Doctors need to offer survivors of violence a more sophisticated response than just anti depressants.
- Women want improved access to support and to housing for women experiencing violence who do not have children living with them; single women should also be considered a priority for re-housing.

- Women want specialist support for BME women that responds to their needs, in their own language or through professional interpreters; that focus on BME women's empowerment and helps them into employment which gives them more independence.
- Women want compulsory education on violence against women prevention in schools for boys and girls from an early age, and all schools need to operate a zero tolerance policy on all forms of violence against women regardless of culture, and whether or not they are faith schools.
- Staff on public transport need training on equality issues and on violence against women.
- Women want access to safe accommodation or refuge for women escaping forced marriage with a partner, to allow them to stay together.
- Police and the courts need to take violence reported by Traveller women seriously; they need to offer effective protection through injunctions and bail conditions, which are robustly enforced if breached; accompanied by strong sentencing if the case gets to court.
- The police and the justice system need to respond effectively to rape within marriage, and publicise positive outcomes for women, so that Traveller communities know this is not acceptable and is a crime.
- Social services should improve their responses to Traveller women and children experiencing violence: women want to be believed and not judged when they disclose violence, and want social services to focus on women's safety as an effective form of child protection.
- Housing services need to respond more effectively to Traveller women's needs: secure safe housing needs to be available to Traveller women when they report violence if they can't stay in their own home, and Traveller women should not have to spend years in temporary accommodation.
- Local authorities should not use anti-social behaviour orders against women in cases of domestic violence.
- Counselling needs to be offered to women experiencing violence, instead of health services issuing prescriptions for anti depressants.
- Specialist community outreach support is needed for Traveller women and girls experiencing violence, accompanied by awareness campaigns targeted at Traveller communities, which educates communities about violence against women and girls, about rape in marriage, and about support services available, and challenges the culture that normalises and condones violence against women and girls.
- Anti-Traveller racism within statutory services and specialist support services needs to be tackled: all agencies need to be trained to respond effectively to the needs and experiences of Traveller women experiencing violence, to minimise the prejudice and discrimination they might experience from generic and specialist violence against women services.
- The national network of women's refuges should not discriminate against, and should provide accessible services for, Traveller women and their children, and Women's Aid should raise awareness of the needs of Travellers amongst local services.
- Work to raise awareness of, and to prevent, forced marriage within Traveller communities needs to be developed and delivered by Travellers themselves, who could build trust and confidence amongst women in those communities.
- There needs to be greater effort and investment in educating and empowering Traveller women and girls: schools, outreach and adult education services need to support Traveller women to learn to read and write, and to learn a trade which would give them financial independence.

- Work with Traveller men and boys needs to take place (e.g. by chaplains, in communities, in prisons) to educate them that violence against women and girls is unacceptable.
- Comprehensive PSHE education that includes violence against women awareness and prevention, gender bullying and sex education, should be taught to all children from a young age, before Traveller girls might be withdrawn from school.
- A national campaign on preventing violence against women and girls needs to include advertising on the television, including publicising violence against women support services and helplines on TV.

Disabled women: key issues and recommendations made by women

- Police need to be more aware of the consequences of abuse for disabled women, which might be more severe than for other women; women want all professionals within the criminal justice system to be trained to prevent their own personal attitudes interfering with how they respond to disabled women experiencing violence.
- Women want professionals to be educated about Deaf women's needs and the consequences of any decisions which may be different for Deaf people than hearing people.
- Women want all police officers to have training on specific forms of violence such as FGM, so they can respond appropriately, and national and local government should have a clear line on what is and isn't acceptable treatment of women in the UK, particularly for migrant women, refugees and asylum seekers.
- Disabled women want advocates to support them going through court to make it safer and less traumatic for the victim, because women often pull out, especially if there is a re trial.
- Women want more support for disabled parents to allow them to care for their children themselves. At present women feel there is too much reliance on carers, who might be abusers, which in turn increases women's reliance on their abuser and makes it harder for them to report violence, especially if they fear losing their children.
- Violence against women should be a hate crime, and the police should always prosecute violence against disabled people as a hate crime, not as a crime against a 'vulnerable' person.
- Disabled women are denied access to services and that these barriers to services need to be addressed (e.g. Deaf women can be excluded from services accessed by phone or helplines; Deaf women often have to wait for an interpreter to access a service in a time of crisis; refuge provision for disabled women is limited); also that services need to respond to multiple discrimination, for example specialised violence services are needed for migrant Deaf women experiencing violence.
- Services need to provide information to Deaf women with hearing partners when accessing services, which is particularly important if the hearing partner is also the abuser.
- Counselling support for women and children experiencing violence needs to be available in BSL.
- Women want more publicity and clarification about the support available to young women experiencing violence, because often they fall through the gaps of adult and child services.
- Child contact needs to be managed so that perpetrators who have been accused of child sexual abuse don't get unsupervised access to the child.

- Services need to be trained to identify and respond more effectively to abused children, so that they can be safeguarded and supported to help them recover from the abuse.
- Support services for women experiencing violence need to be more clearly advertised and be available in accessible formats, particularly for sexual violence.
- Women want compulsory education on identifying and preventing violence in schools, particularly on healthy relationships for young women, and about their right to say no.
- Women want a national media awareness campaign on violence against women and girls that includes images and messages about disabled women's experiences of violence, the help available, and challenging abusers' behaviour.
- Women want more training for statutory services about the problem of carers abusing disabled people, which can include financial abuse.
- Women want more documentaries and adverts on TV that educate people about violence against women and girls, particularly highlighting disabled women's experiences.

Girls and young women: key issues and recommendations made by girls and young women

- Young women said that a good support service is:
 - Centrally located in a safe place for women and girls.
 - Open outside of normal hours (weekends, evenings).
 - Having welcoming and friendly staff, who are either survivors themselves or peers (did not feel comfortable talking to professionals such as the police).
 - Confidential and safe.
 - Advertised in schools so young people know where to access help.
 - One that involves young women in its development.
- Young women who had reported incidents to the police did not find them helpful. They wanted the police and the criminal justice system to:
 - Respond quickly to 999 calls.
 - Be more approachable and respectful.
 - Speed up the process after initial reporting.
 - Be more effective with gathering evidence (they reported lost statements, records etc).
- Young women wanted the health service and doctors to:
 - Have more consistency of personnel, i.e. see the same doctor/nurse and preferably a woman.
 - Not to have to wait days for an appointment and wait when you are at the doctors (more of a drop in service).
- Most young women reported feeling very unsafe on the street and on public transport, particularly because of poor lighting and being in areas where gangs and older men hung around. They suggested the following to make them feel safer:
 - More of a police presence on the streets.
 - Better street lighting.
 - Emergency buttons on phones to call for help.
 - Rape alarms for women.
 - Challenging men who approach them to buy sex.

- Young women highlighted the lack of education on violence against women and girls in schools and they wanted more information about healthy relationships to be taught in schools. In particular they wanted schools to teach (through drama, filmmaking and peer mentoring models):
 - Healthy relationships and how to keep safe from a young age and this teaching to be ongoing, not a one-off exercise.
 - What to do about bullying and sexual harassment.
 - Information about support services and helplines, and services from outside to come into schools to offer support.
 - Zero tolerance on any violent behaviour from anybody (boys and girls).
- Violence against women should be a compulsory part of the national curriculum; it should be incorporated into PSHE education and should be wide ranging, covering respect and self esteem as well as what violence against women and girls actually is and how to recognise the first signs of violence.
- There should be a consistency in violence against women support services across the UK, which are properly resourced and available in every area.
- A national media campaign is needed that challenge stereotypes of violence against women, which should be backed by the police to make people take them more seriously.
- Women want liaison officers who work with both the police and violence against women support services to ensure that women who report get independent advocacy and the support they need before and after court.
- Women felt domestic violence should be a crime in its own right.
- Women thought that a victim's sexual history should be irrelevant and not discussed in court in cases of sexual assault.
- Social services should ensure that they do not respond to violence against women by taking children into care.
- There should be more awareness and advertising of violence against women support services, targeting girls and young women in particular, as many young women don't know what services are available.
- There should be more severe punishment for perpetrators who break injunctions.
- Teachers should be trained on violence against women so they know how to respond to early signs of violence, and can also address the issue in schools.
- The media (especially women's magazines) should work to challenge stereotypes and promote positive empowering images of women.
- A service at the doctors should be available where you can follow up any other concerns you might have that the doctor doesn't have time for, for example, with a nurse, support worker or counsellor.
- Statutory services need to do more to protect girls leaving the care system to prevent them falling through the gaps in services and being sexually exploited.
- Central government need to ensure that any policies to end violence against women are effectively implemented at a local level.
- There should be more women's centres for young women, which are bright and colourful, like youth centres.

- Good news stories in the media should be encouraged as they would increase confidence in the criminal justice system, instead of reporting stories which deter women from reporting.
- The media should be under some obligation to report the reality of violence against women instead of focusing on stranger attacks which are a minority and only serve to heighten women's fear of being out at night.
- Advertising campaigns aimed at tackling violence against women should be targeted at men instead of focusing on women and asking them to change their behaviour.
- Councils should ensure there is better street lighting, and lights get fixed when they are broken.
- More of a presence on the streets at night was suggested as a way of making women feel safer, from police or marshals (possibly from women's services?).
- Services should publicise what will happen if you report violence, to dispel the myths women are told from their perpetrator, such as you will lose the children, or be sectioned. This would also encourage more women to report.
- Simple strong messages about respecting yourself and others should be ingrained into the school curriculum and delivered in a memorable way.
- Self defence should be taught to girls and young women in school, in university and in later life.

Older women: key issues and recommendations made by women

- Women's empowerment is the key means of preventing violence against women and girls: more funding for women's services is needed, that offer support to women experiencing violence and empower women and build self esteem.
- Women want a change in the way the family court system is managed so that perpetrators aren't allowed to continue the abuse by dominating and manipulating the system.
- Women reporting violence to statutory services should expect to be believed instead of routinely being disbelieved.
- Services that work with women experiencing violence should make sure that processes and options are explained to women so they have a clear understanding of what is happening to them and the decisions being made.
- Statutory services and adult social care services should have policies, training and guidance to ensure staff identify and respond to violence against older women, including abuse perpetrated by children and by carers.
- More emphasis is needed on preventing violence against women and girls in the early years, and on working with whole families so that young children don't learn to mimic violent behaviour.
- A granny-fostering scheme was suggested, that matches women and their children with older women (if they don't have a granny) so that they can get the help and support a granny might be able to offer.
- A more humanist approach to education is needed that focuses on teaching children to respect others and that violence is wrong.

- There should be more empowering stories on TV about women, so that women are not always seen as the powerless victim.

Lesbians: key issues and recommendations made by women

- Women want better evidence collecting by the police so that they don't rely on a woman's statement alone; a speedier court process for all forms of violence; and tougher sentencing, in order to improve women's confidence in the criminal justice system.
- Sustainable, specialised violence against women services should be available for all women, in all areas of the country; and specialist services should have LGBT training to provide effective responses to lesbians experiencing violence.
- There needs to be more support for children who have witnessed or directly experienced violence, such as child therapy.
- Too often services are time-limited, which is in conflict with what women need: statutory and specialist support services should be available to women for however long they need them; and more investment into preventative therapeutic intervention is needed to allow women proper recovery and rehabilitation from their experience of violence.
- Black and minority ethnic lesbians need a choice of service; one that understands their culture and that is provided in their own language; and equal access to safety and support is needed for women without recourse to public funds.
- Health professionals need training in identifying violence against women and girls, and in how to respond effectively to disclosure (particularly GPs and dentists); and safe sex services should address the needs of lesbians.
- All professionals who come into contact with children and young people (teachers, nursery nurses, youth offending teams, social workers, health visitors) should be equipped to listen to children and respond to any signs or disclosure of violence.
- Social services and children's centres should incorporate positive images of lesbian parents within their services.
- Social Services need to be trained in identifying and responding to violence against women and girls, to identify and manage risk, and to make it clear women will not lose their children if they disclose violence; training should also address prejudices that exist towards minority groups, such as lesbians.
- Violence against women and children should be taken into account when managing child contact, and services should ensure women and children's safety in these situations, through the provision of supervised child contact centres.
- LGBT services need to have training on how to identify and respond to violence against women and girls who are lesbians.
- Support services should be well advertised, including having publicity in schools, so that men, children and young people know where they can access help and support.
- More help and support should be available for women experiencing emotional abuse and there needs to be greater recognition from the police and other statutory services that emotional abuse still constitutes violence.

- Schools need to adopt a 'whole school' approach to preventing violence against women; all pupils should be taught about all forms of violence and what a healthy relationship is; and schools should also ensure that gender inequality and stereotyping is tackled from an early age.
- Services and campaigns should recognise that violence against women is inextricably linked to gender inequality and institutional sexism and agencies need to address this alongside any work on LGBT and other equality strands.
- The government (national and local) needs to address levels of violence from strangers on the street directed towards women, particularly minority groups such as lesbians.
- Adequate bus services are needed for women to allow them to move around safely at night, particularly for women who live more rurally or cannot afford other forms of transport.
- A media awareness campaign is needed to tackle social attitudes towards violence against women and girls; and any publicity campaign must feature a diverse range of people and also target a diverse range of groups; publicity needs to particularly target lesbian press and advertising.
- Effective management, support and training should be provided for staff in the statutory sector who work with women and girls who have experienced violence.

Bisexual women: Key issues and recommendations made by women

- Police need to take incidents of violence seriously regardless of whether the perpetrator is a man or a woman, and not just assume that incidents of violence can be sorted out within the community; women also want police to take harassment seriously instead of waiting for 'something to happen'.
- Relations between the LGBT community and police need to be improved and prejudice amongst the police needs to be addressed before bi women's confidence in the justice system can be increased.
- Rape alarms should be made available for all women if they want them.
- Women wanted more support for women experiencing violence from a female partner and more awareness in statutory services about violence in same sex relationships, to dispel myths such as you 'can't be raped by another woman'.
- Schools need to take violence between pupils more seriously, especially homophobic violence.
- Bi women need a safe space to access help; somewhere that offers specialist support and has a good understanding of bi phobia because often bi people are forced to use more generic services that have limited understanding of bi issues.
- More understanding of bisexuality is needed within the LGBT community and also within the wider community to try and tackle some of the abuse and discrimination bi people face.
- Schools need to recognise they have a crucial role in supporting young LGBT people trying to work out their sexuality and give teachers training to help them do this and also to tackle any prejudices teachers themselves might have.
- Support groups such as *All Sorts* in Brighton that supports young LGBT people should be promoted so young people know where to go. Services such as this should also advertise themselves as safe spaces for bi and trans people (not all LGBT services are).

- Any policies to deal with violence against women need to consider the additional inequality that is involved in LGBT violence.
- Women were concerned that non-consensual information sharing between agencies would remove safe spaces where women can confide, like GPs, and wanted guidance to be issued on safe information sharing between agencies if violence is disclosed.
- Women wanted peer to peer programmes to be promoted as a means of supporting bi women who have experienced abuse.
- Services that are well established in the LGBT community should be used to get information out to LGBT women about violence support services.
- The police should receive mandatory training on violence against women and how this intersects with LGBT issues.
- Services should remove barriers to make it as easy as possible for women to report violence; and advocacy services or specialist case workers should be used to liaise with services on women's behalf and explain to women what their rights are.
- The myths and stereotypes that surround violence against women (such as 'she was wearing a short skirt, she deserved it') need to be challenged by national and local publicity campaigns, and include the lesser known forms of abuse, such as financial abuse.
- There should be more support for third sector agencies that understand multiple marginalisation, and they should be resourced to work with statutory agencies to improve their response to women facing multiple marginalisation and discrimination.
- There should be more support services for women going through the early stages of abuse, as present support seems to be concentrated at crisis level.
- Services should be provided with a booklet produced by LGBT people which outlines the needs of LGBT people; this would promote greater understanding of LGBT issues and improve standards of service.
- Violence against women and amongst LGBT communities should be taught in schools from an early age, including child sexual abuse so that children know it's not acceptable. Schools also need to be able to deal with the consequences of disclosure and know where to signpost.

Trans women: Key issues and recommendations made by women

- The police need to recognise violence in the trans community and improve relations with the LGBT community as a whole; and women wanted more consistent police responses to trans women who experience violence.
- Gender based violence, including violence against transgender people, should be treated as a hate crime.
- Professionals within the CJS, especially judges and magistrates, should be trained on transgender issues to minimise decision-making based on prejudice.
- The police need to collect and use evidence more effectively.
- There needs to be more public awareness of what violence against women is, because many trans women don't realise they are in an abusive relationship if the abuse isn't physical.

- Trans women need a trans-friendly violence against women support service; women's services need to advertise that they are trans friendly so trans women have the confidence to use them. This could be done by having a kite mark that organisations could display, together with training for staff and occasional trans specific events.
- Women wanted places where they can log incidences of violence (like www.reportit.net) if they don't want to report to the police; and for follow-up information about local support services to be sent out to these women.
- There should be more women only drop in services that can give reassurance about what will happen in the justice system, offering counselling and a safe space with peer support from other women as necessary.
- Support services should have trans specific advisors with special training on trans issues, and staff generally in these organisations need to have training on trans issues.
- Women and girls giving evidence in court need support during and after the court case, for as long they need it.
- There should be the opportunity for trans women who have had good experiences of the CJS to publicise these experiences, so that other trans women are encouraged to report.
- There should be someone women can speak to confidentially who can explain what will happen if you report and explore the options with you, instead of going directly to the police.
- Trans women feel especially vulnerable out and about, and regularly face abuse from strangers, especially from children. Children need to be educated about diversity in school, as well as gender identity and trans gender issues; and teachers should be provided with training so that they can do this, and to combat any personal prejudices they might have.
- Statutory services have a limited understanding of trans issues, yet they should be leading the way in promoting diversity and tolerance in society.
- The media projects a very negative image of transgender people, which encourages negative attitudes towards transgender people amongst the general public.
- There are pockets of good practice by services who have good policies in place for transgender people, these need mapping and publicising.
- Trans women experiencing violence need safe housing that is sensitive to their needs such as trans specific refuges, and a properly designed pathway to secure long term housing.
- School places need to be made available for children who have had to move as a result of violence.
- More financial support should be made available to women fleeing violent situations.
- Peer support from trans women should be available for trans women experiencing violence.
- Equality legislation needs to be used to protect trans women by ensuring that perpetrators who continually abuse trans women are punished.
- There should be stronger sentencing for perpetrators of violence against women.
- Parents of children who are abusive to trans women should be sent on diversity awareness courses.

- Trans women feel particularly vulnerable using public transport, female only train carriages and waiting rooms would make women feel safer.
- More of a security presence on transport, such as guards or conductors would increase feelings of safety.

Women in prison and women offenders: key issues and recommendations made by women

- Women want a consistent response from statutory services for all women and girls who experience violence; because women felt they were given a poor service from agencies such as the police and social services because of their previous convictions or their involvement in prostitution.
- Women want compulsory education in schools about what violence against women and girls is, and how to recognise the first stages of an abusive relationship, which might not involve physical violence.
- There should be advertising of specialist violence against women support services in public places because many women did not know what help there was available.
- As a minimum, women wanted women's prisons to have posters up on violence against women with national helpline numbers, and information about other help available. Each women's prison should also have information on other violence against women services (e.g. the national directory of local domestic violence services, 'The Gold Book', and similar directories)
- Women want all probation and prison officers in women's prisons to have training on identifying and responding to violence against women and girls.
- Women want women's prisons to ask about experiences of violence when they come into prison; to hold support groups and discussion groups on different forms of violence so that women can access information and support whatever the length of their sentence; and to give information to women about local violence against women services on their release.
- Leaflets about violence against women support services should be regularly dropped through everyone's letterbox.
- Women thought there needs to be better evidence collecting by the police and quicker response times to 999 calls to police from women reporting violence.
- The police should offer protection to women after they report violence, for example through more effective use of bail conditions, and women should also be issued with emergency alarms in case conditions are breached.
- Women felt that imprisonment and short sentences was not a deterrent for violent men, and that there should be more investment in perpetrator programmes in local areas and in prisons, to change men's behaviour and to stop them being violent.
- Women wanted more effective responses by social services to women and girls who are offenders or who are in prostitution and who experience violence; including more support to help them protect themselves and their children; more support to help them try and change the situation instead of just threatening to take children away; and for social services to send a clear message to women that they won't lose their children if they disclose abuse.
- Women would like to see more documentaries on TV which challenge attitudes and stereotypes about violence against women and girls.

- Women want to feel properly protected after reporting violence to the police; women should be issued with emergency alarms that notify the police if she is in danger.
- The police should offer a consistent response to all reports of violence by women, including marginalised groups less likely to call the police, such as women in the sex industry.
- Tougher sentencing is needed for perpetrators who get to court.
- Information about violence and the help available should be advertised in public places such as doctors and libraries, so women know where they can get help and perpetrators are aware there is help and support for women fleeing violence.
- Violence against women awareness and prevention, healthy relationships and respect for others, should be compulsory within the national curriculum.
- Self defence classes should be available for all women.
- There needs to be more help for perpetrators to address the reason why they are abusing women and to help them stop being violent.
- More counselling services are needed for women and children experiencing violence.
- Neighbours should be encouraged to report violence if they suspect or overhear it, possibly through the neighbourhood watch scheme.
- More funding for women's services is needed so that services have well managed support for their staff.
- Services that work with survivors of violence should be open more flexible hours, outside of typical office hours, and should be better publicised in places that women already go to, like shops, cafes, GPs and probation offices.
- The justice system should reduce the time it takes for a prosecution to go through the court process so that more women will support the case going through court.
- Professional attitudes and responses need to change, for example partner rape or rape of women in the sex industry needs to be treated more seriously by statutory services.
- There needs to be more local women's services available for victims of violence, particularly in rural areas.
- Women want to feel safer when travelling at night and want more frequent bus services, particularly in rural areas, for example, greater PCSO presence on the streets at night, guards on public transport, and women-only taxi companies.

Women sex workers: key issues and recommendations made by women

- Women wanted the criminal justice system to use CCTV evidence more effectively, because they reported police not bothering to check CCTV evidence when sex workers have been attacked near cameras.
- Women felt they were no longer seen as a priority if they had called the police numerous times and they had not pressed charges; so women wanted the police to respond more quickly to 999 calls, regardless of whether they have called them in the past.

- Women want access to a safe police station, open 24 hours a day that they could go to, to report violence.
- There should be specialist officers who have had training (from sex workers) so they understand the situation facing women who are street sex workers; women would then feel more comfortable reporting violence to them.
- Women understood that at present rape victims with a criminal record cannot claim compensation, so they wanted the rules on compensation for victims of crime to be changed.
- Women wanted access to safe housing and refuge provision for women who are using drugs or who are sex workers, because they often have to go back to violent partners because there is no safe place for them to go to escape a violent partner.
- Women wanted more joined up support between support services so that women who are in violent relationships and using drugs can access safety and support, where counsellors visit and key workers understand their situation.
- Women wanted access to more women-only spaces in drugs services; more support to help them get off the drugs with the view of getting their children back if they have been removed.
- Women trying to exit prostitution wanted access to services that provide activities, education, training and help and support to get back into employment; and services that help empower them and build self esteem so that they can make other lifestyle choices and realise what they feel they are capable of.
- Women who are trying to exit prostitution and get off drugs want opportunities to meet others who are not involved in that lifestyle.
- Women wanted to access help in one place from one keyworker who can tell them about the range of support services available, instead of having to go to lots of different agencies.
- Women wanted immediate and accessible women's services, where they don't have to wait for months or have to make an appointment.
- All women said the sexual abuse they experienced as children was one of the main reasons for their current drug use and sex-work. They recommended that support and counselling should be available to children who have been sexually abused, to help them deal with what has happened and prevent their lives becoming chaotic when they grow up.
- Women wanted schools to play a key role in detecting and responding to signs of violence in children.
- Women wanted all children to be educated about their rights and where they can access help and support if they need to, if they have experienced violence and abuse.
- Women want local authorities to provide support and safety for women sex workers instead of taking out ASBOs on women in prostitution to remove them from the area, because this denies them access to health and support services, which further endangers women.
- Services need to be more flexible to the needs of women in prostitution, and should be available when women need the service, because they often have a chaotic lifestyle.
- Women want the police and justice system to collect and use evidence more effectively.
- Housing services need to take women's allegations of threats, harassment and attacks from other tenants seriously, and complaints system should be in place to enable tenants to voice their concerns.

- Victims of 'stranger' violence need to be kept informed throughout the court process and notified in advance if perpetrators are due to be released from custody or prison.
- Women want women's services that are accessible for the most vulnerable groups and for women without English as a first language, that are available out of hours, are holistic and provide a safe space to talk with other women to share experiences and get mutual support; a place to access health, advice and support services under one roof, such as counselling, advocacy, housing and legal advice, activities and workshops.
- Statutory services need to engage with women directly, instead of making assumptions about what they need; and women want statutory services to respond to the immediate incident of violence and to women's current needs, instead of judging women on their past experience or lifestyle.
- Women want the police and statutory services to receive training from service users, such as women who have worked in prostitution, so they can have some understanding of what it's like to be on the receiving end of the agency response.
- Women want the care system to support children in care and to identify violence and provide support, instead of just containing the situation until girls are sixteen.
- Rape alarms should be given to all women, especially women in prostitution.
- Women want more designated safe women-only beds or hostels for homeless women that provide support for women as opposed to simply getting them off the streets.
- Counselling services like those provided to women in prison should be available for women who have experienced violence against women.
- Public attitudes towards women and violence against women need to be challenged, it should not be seen as more acceptable to attack a woman wearing a short skirt.
- When incidences of violence against women are reported to the police a male and female police officer should be sent.
- Police need to stop viewing violence against women as a 'disturbance' and arresting both parties; police need training on identifying the primary perpetrator at an incident.
- Police need to offer proper protection to women who report violence against women by ensuring the perpetrator stays away; this would encourage women to report.
- Free self defence classes should be offered to all women.

Women shift/retail workers: key issues and recommendations made by women

- There needs to be better street lighting and the council need to ensure broken street lights are fixed promptly.
- Policing needs to be more visible at night to make women feel safer.
- Women only taxi firms should be promoted and not prevented by the council's misinterpretation of equality legislation.
- Employers need to actively support women experiencing violence instead of disciplining them for absences or asking them to leave.

- There needs to be more women in higher positions in the justice system; this would give women more confidence and encourage them to report.
- There should be a register for violent perpetrators.
- More severe punishment should be given to perpetrators who go through court.
- Licensing laws in the UK need to be reviewed; at present female shop staff are left feeling very vulnerable serving alcohol to inebriated customers late at night.
- There should be a change in the way age laws (for purchase of alcohol/tobacco) are managed; shop staff frequently face abuse when asking for ID.
- Employers need to operate a zero tolerance policy on abuse towards their staff and clearly advertise this policy to customers. They should also support employees in bringing prosecutions instead of actively discouraging them as it's seen by many as 'bad for business'. Employers also need to clearly advertise to their staff that they will not be penalised for reporting violence against them.
- The police should bring prosecutions against perpetrators even in cases where they don't have the cooperation of the victim.
- Professionals working within the justice system need training so they have more understanding of what violence against women actually is, for example that it includes emotional abuse and that you can be raped by your partner.
- Women want an independent support agency that operates within the workplace to give employees experiencing violence the opportunity to speak to someone discretely and seek help.
- Information about support services and signposting should be available in lots of settings (work, community settings) so that women have a choice about where to access information and have options other than just calling the police.
- Services already in place for employees (i.e. company doctor, counselling) should be available to women experiencing violence.
- Women are often concerned about what will happen once they report and fear having to trawl around lots of different agencies; women want this process to be made easier and it should be advertised so that women have a clearer idea of what will happen if they report.
- Women want confidentiality to be ensured if you confide in your doctor or health services, and women felt they should always be consulted if health services are intending to share information about violence they have suffered with other agencies. It is really important that women feel they can trust and confide in their doctor.
- Violence against women support services should be run by women for women and there should be more of them. Women expressed concern that the lack of women at local governance level meant women only services weren't being prioritised.
- Education and training on violence against women prevention should be provided to staff within all support services and the police.
- The value of respect needs to be instilled into the community on every level, starting in schools but including other settings such as the workplace.
- Women want employers in retail to have an obligation to get their staff home safely if they work late, and to allow female employees to move their cars to a nearby location if working late.

- Buses need to be more frequent and bus stops should be in well lit areas. There was support for 'live update' screens which tell you how long the next bus will be.
- There should be women only parking bays in well lit areas.
- There should be more funding put into youth services so that groups of young people aren't hanging around on the streets.
- There should be more local provision of support services that offer counselling and can help people with a range of different issues, a bit like a Citizen's Advice Bureau.
- The TUC and the government (led by the Department of Health) should join forces to run a media campaign on violence against women that employers should be required to advertise.
- The government should invest more in promoting the business case for ending violence against women to businesses.
- Employers should be required to implement and report on their safety at work policies and how they are making a positive impact on addressing violence against women at work.

Vulnerable women: key issues and recommendations made by women

- Compulsory and ongoing police training is needed so that police officers respond sensitively to violence against women when called out (i.e. a believing and fast response to incidents that prioritises women and children's safety, and for police not to arrest the victim reporting a violent partner).
- Women wanted the instant removal of perpetrators by injunctions and effective use of bail conditions (and effective action on any breach) so that perpetrators are kept away from the victim once violence is reported, so that women feel protected and safe if they report.
- More effective police responses and access to support services are needed for women who are experiencing harassment or emotional abuse: many women felt the police would only act to protect them if 'something happened' and said the police want physical proof of abuse before taking any action (women wanted greater use of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997).
- Women want the creation of a centralised intelligence system so police forces and other justice system agencies can share information about perpetrators.
- Women wanted faster processing of legal aid claims in cases of violence against women.
- There should be more publicity of success stories of prosecution, which women felt would help increase women's confidence in the criminal justice system.
- Women want training for and more effective responses from social services – to be asked about violence, to be believed and supported on disclosure, and for social services to focus on women's safety as a means of protecting children and to send out a clear message that women will not lose their children if they disclose violence.
- Women want training for health professionals on identifying and responding to all forms of violence against women and girls, and more effective support on disclosure of violence, particularly by GPs.
- Training and information on violence against women should be available for locksmiths, hairdressers and taxi drivers.

- Housing services should treat violence against women and girls as a priority in its own right; women need access to safe and secure housing when being forced to escape violence so it should be addressed outside the Home Move and bidding system because of its life-threatening nature; there should also be more investment in housing schemes which allow women to stay safely in their own homes.
- Women wanted panic and rape alarms to be more readily available locally.
- Women said they valued women-only services, and wanted independent support to be offered to all women, particularly women going through the criminal justice system and having to give evidence at court.
- Women wanted secure, long-term, independent violence against women advocacy services to allow women to access support outside of office hours and at weekends; beyond a crisis, and for as long as women need it to recover from the abuse.
- Women wanted support services to be located in one place, or an independent specialist service that can liaise with services and advocate on women's behalf, so women don't have to repeat their story again and again.
- More effective publicity is needed about the availability of women's support services and helplines, so that women know where they can access help, for example in public places such as libraries, supermarkets, schools and doctor surgeries.
- Women wanted to be able to call a helpline if they suspected violence was happening to someone they knew, to find out what they could do to help and the support available.
- Women want access to safe and properly supervised child contact facilities, and a change in the way child contact is managed, so that perpetrators can't use the system as a way to continue abuse of children and their mothers.
- There needs to be more investment in independent counselling and support services for children and young people who experience, or who are exposed to, violence.
- There needs to be awareness campaigns in schools about all forms of violence against women and girls, including child sexual abuse, and a re-focus from classic 'stranger danger' awareness to campaigns that recognise abusers are often people children know.
- Schools and all education professionals should have a role in identifying signs of violence against women and girls; and this should be taught in schools from a young age; schools should acknowledge and tackle gender bullying effectively; and violence against women and girls should be a compulsory part of teacher training.
- Media campaigns on all forms of violence against women and girls should be ongoing, to challenge attitudes and stereotypes, to publicise the help available, and should be directed at everyone, especially men ('My strength is not for hurting campaign' in Washington was cited as a good example).

Women in rural areas: key messages and recommendations made by women

- Women need the option of speaking to female officers or support workers in agencies (like the police, housing) when they report violence.
- Women wanted to be believed and to receive a more effective response by health, housing and social services (e.g. routine enquiry in A&E and health services; social workers to focus on women's safety as a means of protecting children).

- Compulsory training is needed for police officers, health professionals (including GPs, dentists, opticians) and other front-line agencies.
- Schools have a key role in changing social attitudes and identifying and responding to signs of violence: education on violence against women should be taught in schools from a young age; schools should acknowledge and tackle gender bullying effectively; and violence against women and girls should be a compulsory part of teacher training.
- Women need instant and effective implementation of powers to remove violent men from the home when they report violence (e.g. injunctions / bail conditions and effective action on breach) to encourage more women to report and to feel safe once they report.
- There should be easier access to, and increased investment in, legal aid and outreach support services for women and children; both are particularly lacking in rural areas.
- A multi-media campaign on preventing violence against women (similar to the 'drink-driving' campaign) to challenge myths and attitudes about violence against women and to publicise the help available.
- Information for migrants about women's rights, and the help available if women experience violence, should be available at the point of entry into the UK.
- Women want greater awareness about 'good news' stories in the press, to encourage more women to report violence.
- Sufficient funding is needed for national specialist helplines so that all calls can be answered; which is particularly important for women in rural areas.
- Changes are needed to the child contact system, so that women and children's safety is prioritised and that abuse cannot be continued through the family court system.
- Women need access to longer-term support and counselling beyond crisis point, for however long they need it.
- There needs to be increased support for children who witness violence, or who experience violence directly, especially in the form of counselling.
- Self-defence classes should be made available in school and to women of all ages.
- Better street lighting is needed, particularly in rural areas.
- Women reported feeling vulnerable waiting for and using public transport and in car parks: women wanted increased presence on the streets (such as taxi marshals), women-only buses and taxis, and designated women only parking spaces near car park entrances, to make women feel safer on transport and at night.
- Employers and trade unions should have a stronger role in promoting gender equality, and therefore responding to and reducing violence against women, in the work place.

Survivors of sexual violence: key messages and recommendations made by women

- Women need to be referred to services that offer separate provision and support from female workers, which take into account their experiences of violence and abuse.
- Perpetrators should receive sentences appropriate to the crime committed.

- All services that work with survivors of sexual violence (social services, victim support, police, health) should have training; this training should involve the sexual violence sector in its delivery.
- Women should be provided with an independent advocate to support them through the criminal justice system; and there should be more engagement between the police and specialist services.
- There should be alternative options for women who don't want to go down the conventional route of prosecution or for women who are too scared to report to the police.
- Social attitudes need to be challenged so that victims of sexual abuse aren't stigmatised; then they are more likely to speak to someone about what has happened and seek help. There should also be media campaigns directed at men, asking them to change their behaviour, instead of always focussing on women's behaviour. The media should face sanctions if they report violence against women inappropriately.
- Healthy relationships and preventing violence against women should be taught in schools to both boys and girls to make young people more emotionally literate.
- There should be information available to women, which explains what happens when a woman reports to the police, so she is aware of the following stages and can make a more informed choice about whether to report. Often women don't report because they don't know what to expect.
- Statutory services need to be more trusting of women instead of routinely disbelieving them; sexist attitudes towards women still exist within the higher levels of services and this kind of culture must be challenged.
- The criminal justice system should sign up to a victim-focussed ethos, which aims to support victims instead of making them feel that they have to fight against the system.
- Methods need to be in place to make the experience of giving evidence less traumatic for the victim, and the press should not be allowed in courts hearing cases of violence against women; this makes it even more distressing for the victim giving evidence.
- Jurors need training on the realities of violence against women so that they are not influenced by myths and stereotypes that dominate the media and social attitudes when making judgements.
- There needs to be more reporting of actual conviction rates of cases that get to court, to increase women's confidence and encourage women to report.
- Women's services that support victims of violence need secure long term funding.
- Women need financial support; the benefits system should be adapted and staff given training so that women can have their claim processed quickly and sensitively.
- Sanctuary housing schemes that allow women to stay in their homes should be extended so that they are more widely available.
- The NHS needs a more gender sensitive approach to care, especially in mental health services.
- Women who are assaulted by carers should be able to access the same kind of care and support quickly so that they aren't fearful of reporting the abuse and subsequently being left helpless.

- There should be more one-stop shops, which offer a holistic service to women experiencing violence.
- The media and government should report successful convictions for rape, instead of subliminally blaming the victim in their reporting or not publicising successful convictions of the cases that get to court.
- There should be a campaign on local and national levels to challenge social attitudes about sexual abuse and the secrecy that surrounds it and bring it into the public domain. This should be supported by widespread advertising of sexual violence support services and secure funding for these support services to deal with an increase in demand.
- There needs to be more partnership between GPs and sexual violence support services so GPs know where to signpost women who have experienced rape and sexual violence.
- The systems and processes within the CPS need to be far more supportive of the victim, and make sure victims are kept informed about the progress of the case.
- Social attitudes and stereotypes of professionals within the criminal justice system and the juries involved in cases of violence against women need to be challenged so that these attitudes do not influence the outcome of cases.
- Campaigns such as 'This is Not an Invitation to Rape Me' should be promoted to challenge myths and stereotypes about violence against women in wider society.
- The police need to work in partnership with sexual violence support services. It is often as a result of the support these services provide that women decide to report, and it is sexual violence support services who continue to support women throughout the case and after the verdict is delivered.
- Victims of violence going to court to give evidence need good quality independent advocacy and support from trained professionals.
- Women who give evidence in court need to be guaranteed special measures, it should not be left to the judge's discretion.
- The justice system needs to invest resources (training etc) into ensuring police respond sensitively to incidences of violence, if women are not treated with dignity when first reporting violence it is unlikely they will continue to support the prosecution.
- Teachers and other staff in schools need training so they know how to respond to signs of violence, where to signpost and how to deal with the consequences of disclosure.
- Children need to be made aware of child sexual abuse and where to go to access help. Schools also need to work to create an environment where children feel able to disclose any abuse they are experiencing.
- Adults need education about violence, the forms it can take, and where to access help. Many women may not realise they are in abusive relationships or may have been abused as children and need support.
- Specialist support should be available to children who have witnessed violence.
- Social services need to ensure they don't persecute the mother for the behaviour of the perpetrator; too often the onus is on the mother when she is a victim herself.
- Sexual Assault Referral Centres should be available locally so women don't have to travel so far to get help after the trauma of sexual assault.

- There is a need for more partnership between local agencies, especially in response to women with 'no recourse to public funds' so services know what support they can or cannot provide.
- There should be more advertising of violence against women support services in different languages and translators should be available to support these women.
- The government need to invest more money into services that are trying to support vulnerable groups of women such as disabled women or sex workers.
- GPs should be required to have training on violence against women so that they offer a more sophisticated response to women than just anti depressants.
- Violence against women should be compulsory in the curriculum. There should be a zero tolerance policy on any forms of violence and myths and stereotypes surrounding violence against women and girls should be challenged and prevented. Any attempt to change social attitudes should be led by the statutory sector.

Survivors of FGM

- Women wanted the government to reassure people that helping others is a positive thing and they will not get into trouble, because there is a lack of community support for women who had experienced FGM, and women are too afraid to help each other.
- There needs to be more of a focus on prevention instead of picking up the pieces once violence against women has already happened.
- The NHS needs to respond to the needs of women and create an environment which is less time restricted and more supportive.
- Health professionals need training on FGM so they can respond sensitively and appropriately to women who have undergone FGM, and women in labour also need access to support workers from their own community, and interpreters where necessary, and proper aftercare after giving birth.
- Schools should act to prevent abuse of Somali children at school and to challenge racist stereotypes and violence between children.
- Women wanted somewhere to confidentially report violence if they did not feel comfortable going to the police.
- All women should receive an equal standard of service from statutory services, regardless of their background.
- The government should support community groups to lead the change in re-educating communities that practise FGM, and FGM should be taught to all children (not just children from FGM practising countries) as part of sex education to make young people aware of FGM.
- Girls should not be physically examined without the consent of their mothers.
- Parents and the community generally, should be educated on the health risks of FGM, and the fact it is against the law and not supported by religion.
- Men should be educated so that they no longer want women to be circumcised, and there should be a clear message sent out to perpetrators of FGM that they will be imprisoned for up to fourteen years.

- Pregnant women and new mothers should be educated about the risks of FGM by their midwives/health visitor to discourage them from circumcising their own children. If they still maintain they want to circumcise their daughter, the police should be involved.
- GPs could identify children who are being immunised in preparation for returning to Africa, and intervene at this point to discuss the health risks of FGM and the fact it is illegal, and when families return to the UK from a trip home they should be asked about FGM and if they suspect FGM has taken place girls could be examined (examination of girls was disputed within the group).
- There should be services in place for young women who have undergone FGM so that they don't have to wait until they are having problems with maternity to access services – women need to be able to access help with FGM at any stage.
- There needs to be more specialised services for women who have undergone FGM or who are at risk of undergoing FGM.