Trapped
How barriers to escaping an abusive relationship should be addressed by policy and practice

Executive Summary
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Domestic abuse (DA) is a broad concept incorporating many forms of abuse, including psychological, physical, sexual, economic and emotional. DA also includes controlling and coercive behaviour, stalking and harassment, honour-based abuse, forced marriage and female genital mutilation.¹

The scale of domestic abuse is shocking and extensive: two million adults aged 16 to 59 experienced DA in 2017/18 in England and Wales, an estimated 7.9% of women and 4.2% of men.²

“I was bruised most of the time, I was in pain most of the time and had suicidal thoughts all the time. Well, I tried it a few times, because I’d have rather been dead than carry on in the relationship that I was in. Which isn’t a nice feeling when you’ve got kids and even that couldn’t stop you wanting to kill yourself.”

Lucy

Despite the severe impact of abuse on survivors, in many ways this is still a hidden crime as the majority of incidents are not reported to the police. The latest available estimates from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) showed that around four in five survivors (79%) of partner abuse did not report the abuse to the police.\(^3\)

To assist in the decision-making process on appropriate levels of intervention based on professional assessment, the risk level of each survivor is categorised as either high, medium or standard. However, differences and similarities between these groups in barriers to escaping an abusive relationship have hardly been studied.

This research was designed to explore the barriers experienced by survivors of intimate partner abuse to engagement with services. And to identify differences between those categorised as standard, medium or high risk. This report also makes recommendations for changes in policy and practice to address these barriers.

The research is based on two main sources:

1. In-depth interviews with 34 survivors of DA from all regions in England and Wales
2. An online survey with 196 Victim Support (VS) caseworkers and Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs) who work in VS’s DA specialist services and multi-crime services.

**Barriers to escaping an abusive relationship: Required changes**

We identified eight barriers to escaping an abusive relationship. These are the obstacles and difficulties that survivors face before and after they seek help from support services and the police. For each of the barriers, we make recommendations for policy and practice that should be taken by the Government, support services and the criminal justice system (CJS). If implemented, the changes could reduce the barriers and improve survivors’ ability to escape abusive relationships.

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Almost all the survivors who took part in the research described fear of the perpetrator and retaliation as a barrier to escaping an abusive relationship and seeking help. Practitioners also most commonly identified this barrier.

Survivors told us about the horrible intimidation they suffered from the abuser and the intensity of the fear they still feel years after they managed to leave the relationship. Many survivors also shared how terrified they were of the consequences of seeking help or trying to escape and reprisal if the perpetrator found out. The participants mostly talked about this fear in the context of reporting the abuse to the police.

“I guess in that way it’s a big fear, because you’re worried that he’s gonna see you or, you know, like someone tells him, ‘Oh, I saw [survivor’s name] with this lady today!’ So I suppose it’s not the fear of accessing it [support], it’s the fear of everything else around it... I couldn’t just call the police because he said, ‘Oh, you wait...!’”

Tina
**Recommendation: Ensure survivors are safe**

- Improve risk assessment and safety planning.
- Deal more robustly with the perpetrator through the creation of a new, stronger domestic abuse protection order, a breach of which would be a criminal offence.
- The police should update survivors on developments involving the perpetrator and the progress of their case in a timely, comprehensive and accurate manner.
- Make more services available for survivors to store evidence securely and confidentially.
- The police must gather all necessary evidence to build an evidential case after a report of domestic abuse.
- All survivors, male and female, who require support and protection from a refuge should have access to this service.
2. Controlling abuse and isolation – Break down the control

Nearly all the survivors in the research discussed controlling abuse and isolation. However, a smaller number (9.2%) of practitioners identified these factors as a barrier. This could indicate the hidden nature of this barrier, which makes it harder for practitioners to identify.

Participants discussed several types of controlling behaviour. Partners monitored survivors’ personal communications; accompanied survivors to medical appointments and visits to social services; regulated survivors’ everyday activities using location tracking apps; and prohibited them from working and earning money. All of these behaviours limited survivors’ interactions with other people and prevented them from becoming financially independent. Using a variety of tactics, partners also gradually isolated survivors from family, friends and social networks.

“I know the support is out there but when you’re scared, there’s going to be another way around trying to get that support without having to do it by email or phone call. Because he read my emails, he had them transferred to his account. He read my messages, he had access to my phone, so it was a bit difficult. He had people looking out for me, spying on me. If you’ve got a controlling partner it’s really hard to get access [to support] because he would have found out.”

Lucy

Recommendation: Break down the control

- Services for survivors need to be flexible in their location and provide a range of ways that survivors can access help when they are being restricted in their movements and their communications are closely monitored.

- The definition of domestic abuse should be broadened to include economic abuse.

- The welfare system needs to effectively provide financial support to women escaping abuse to address financial constraints.

- Guidance and support for families and friends should be easily available. Families and friends need help to understand coercive control and how to discuss concerns about the isolation of a friend or family member.

- The Government should introduce Ask and Act across England (it is already in place in Wales) to increase the identification of DA.

- Health and social services professionals should try to find ways of seeing patients on their own when they suspect they are victims of DA or when a patient has disclosed DA.
Executive summary

3. Lack of awareness of what DA constitutes –
High-quality sex and relationship education in schools

Lack of awareness of what DA constitutes was the second most identified barrier by the practitioners. Numerous survivors also described how they did not recognise what was happening to them as abusive behaviour. Some, due to past experiences or sociocultural beliefs, perceived it as normal male behaviour in a relationship. Others felt something was wrong, but did not identify the behaviour as abusive. The findings demonstrate how it was harder for survivors to recognise they were in an abusive relationship when the abuse was not the common depiction of DA, namely physical violence. Furthermore, the findings highlight the challenges faced by younger survivors to realise they are in an abusive relationship.

“I struggled for four years understanding that what was happening to me was abuse. I knew it wasn’t right and that I didn’t like it, but I didn’t know it was anything I could do something about... I went to the caseworker and I told her the full story, everything about what had happened to me. And it was very reassuring to hear that it’s typical abusive behaviour. So that it’s not in my head like he kept saying it was... And not only was it real but that the abuse was no different, you know, the textbook typical. So all the time he had me doubting myself, he was absolutely doing the very textbook thing. And I didn’t know that because I’ve never been a victim of domestic abuse before.”
Charlotte

Recommendation: High-quality sex and relationship education in schools

- High-quality sex and relationship education is essential.
- Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education in schools must include recognising the signs and characteristics of unhealthy relationships as well as positive ones.
- Education and PSHE in schools should include information and/or handouts on where pupils affected by DA should turn for advice and support.
- More campaigns are needed to raise awareness about healthy relationships and domestic abuse.

4. Fear of involvement with statutory agencies –
Improve training and additional co-locating of IDVA services

This barrier consists of fear of social services' involvement and distrust in the police. Almost one in five (19.7%) of the practitioners named fear as a barrier to escaping an abusive relationship and engaging with support services. Many survivors shared how they were concerned that if they disclosed the abuse, social services would be brought into the picture and their children taken from them. This possibility prevented them from seeking help and escaping the relationship.
"I ended up [trying to escape] after about two years of putting up with him hitting me... I tried to get away from him and I did call the police, because he was hitting me again. When the police came up, I didn't want to tell what he'd done. So I have done that twice. I nearly told them but I didn't want to tell them because I was frightened that they were gonna tell social services because of my kids. I just told them that I wanted him out [of] the house; 'cause I was too scared to tell them because of social services... I didn't want social services involved [with] my children because as soon as social services comes up, you think, 'God, they're gonna take my kids away from me.' ‘They’re gonna remove my children, I’m not gonna have my children anymore,’ and that’s the thing that stops a lot of women accessing support.”

Olivia

Another issue we found regarding fear of involvement with statutory agencies is distrust in the police. Survivors shared their distrust and fear of the police. They had several reasons: they were scared of the police; they were worried about not being believed; they had previously had a bad experience; or the police had failed to protect them in the past.

**Recommendation: Improve training and additional co-locating of IDVA services**

- Social services practitioners should participate in training on DA to develop a better understanding of coercive control, increase their awareness of the ways fear of engaging with social services hinders survivors from escaping, and reflect on prejudices and assumptions around survivors of DA.

- Introduce co-located IDVA services within Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) to provide social workers with valuable knowledge that should be considered where DA is suspected.

- All frontline police officers should undertake training on DA delivered by specialists, such as SafeLives’ Domestic Abuse Matters training.

- Increase the number of co-located IDVA services in police stations to ensure survivors receive appropriate support.

- All survivors should have access to support that is independent of statutory services.

5. **Lack of information on existing services and how to access them – Increase services’ visibility and collaboration with health services**

Several survivors said that they did not know what help was available or how to make the initial contact, particularly when they did not wish to report the abuse to the police. They also told us that if they had been aware of the services available, they might have sought help earlier. They emphasised the need for support services and the help they offer to be more visible.
“The nurse from the hospital got me in contact with Victim Support... But I think Victim Support could be more visible. Because if I know where to go, there is no point for me to wait until something actually happens. If I had got in contact before, maybe some things would not have happened. The earlier, the better. Later, I saw some kind of a leaflet in a building and I thought: ‘Okay, it [Victim Support] is in here.’”

Kimberly

Survivors often rely on professionals to provide them with information on support available and how to seek help. Health professionals play a key role, as they can often meet survivors in a safe and confidential setting. However, many survivors who took part in the research were disappointed by the information and treatment provided by GPs when they disclosed abuse.

Recommendation: Increase services’ visibility and collaboration with health services

- Services for survivors should seek opportunities to market the local services available and how to access them.
- GPs and other health clinicians should be encouraged to enquire about DA and be provided with training on the appropriate response and referral pathways.
- The number of IDVAs in health settings should be increased across England and Wales to ensure the early identification of, and provision of support to, survivors of domestic abuse.

6. Emotional manipulation – Increase education and awareness of the many faces of DA

Survivors shared how a variety of negative self-directed emotions such as self-blame, shame and low self-esteem had an effect on their ability to escape the relationship and ask for help. The participants told us how they had blamed themselves for the abuse and felt ashamed. These feelings are in many ways the result of the emotional abuse by the abuser. Survivors also described how reporting emotional or psychological abuse can be more difficult than reporting physical abuse.

“You’ve got no self-esteem, you think it’s you that’s done it. Is it you that’s upset the situation? Is it your fault? Like, I’d been told for 27 years everything was my fault.”

Louise

Recommendation: Increase education and awareness of the many faces of DA

- Increase education and awareness in society of emotional and psychological abuse by reflecting the variety of ways survivors are abused, for example on TV programmes, so that society can better recognise and call out abusive relationships.
- Improve police understanding and recording of emotional and psychological abuse. Frontline police officers should receive better training on the full range of DA behaviour, including emotional and psychological abuse. This will improve reports of emotional and psychological abuse and make them more robust. It will also increase police officers’ ability to assess the level of risk to survivors.
7. Pressure from the community and minority status
   – Ensure all survivors have access to services and safety regardless of their life experiences, identities, backgrounds or migrant status

This barrier reflects the additional difficulties experienced by survivors in minority communities in escaping abusive relationships. Survivors described the pressure they experienced from their communities to stay quiet and not seek help, in particular about reporting the abuse to the police.

Migrant women who have come to live with their partners in the UK have other unique barriers. Survivors told us about concerns related to immigration status and the risk of deportation that prevented them from engaging with the police and the legal system. Perpetrators also exploit their victim’s immigration status and fears about seeking support from the police, by using threats of deportation and deceptive information to maintain control. Furthermore, survivors acknowledged that limited ability to speak English was also a barrier to reporting abuse and seeking help.

“He [the police officer] came back and told me that [this] is rape and in the UK this is [a] very serious crime. That’s when I really realised how bad it was, because I didn’t know even that I have my rights, because my husband always told me because I was a foreigner... he always made me think that I didn’t have proper rights in this country. That was one of the reasons that I never went to the police before.”

Lydia

Recommendation: Ensure all survivors have access to services and safety regardless of their life experiences, identities, backgrounds or migrant status

- The Government should ensure that all survivors can access support services regardless of their immigration status or background.
- Design services so that they are tailored to the needs of everyone, including those facing additional barriers because of their background, immigration status or limited English language skills.
- DA services should reflect the communities in which they operate – staff should be recruited from a variety of cultures and backgrounds and support should be available in a variety of languages.
- Information on DA services, how to access them and the rights of migrant survivors should be available in different languages.
8. Challenges in contacting survivors –
Improve information provided by the police

DA survivors are entitled to an enhanced service from service providers under the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (the Victims Code). The Code places an obligation on the police to pass on details to support services, subject to the victim’s consent. Nevertheless, this report highlights that the police do not always meet its obligations to survivors under the Victims Code. The police do not refer all cases and, when they do, may provide insufficient or incorrect information to support services.

Furthermore, to ensure the survivor’s safety, support services should leave no trace of contact attempts. This poses another challenge if survivors cannot be contacted on the number they gave to the police.

“They [the police] were supposed to refer me to Victim Support and they didn’t. It was actually the [name of a charity] that referred me when I went through all the investigation and everything. Then they actually referred me. I went three to four months without anything at all.”
Amy

Recommendation: Improve information provided by the police

- The Victims Code must be monitored and enforced to ensure that all survivors who would give consent are automatically referred to support services.

- The police should make every effort to improve contact information received from the survivor when an incident is reported. Complete and reliable information should be forwarded to support services.

- When appropriate, the police should share information on available services with survivors to facilitate their ability to make direct contact with support services.

Are there different barriers for different risk levels?

The findings suggest that survivors classified as high or medium risk have very similar barriers. DA practitioners identified fear of the perpetrator and retaliation and fear of involvement with statutory agencies as two major barriers for survivors who are classified as high or medium risk. However, while lack of awareness of what DA constitutes is also common in survivors classified as medium risk, it is considered less widespread for those classified as high risk.

Survivors who are classified as standard risk face somewhat different barriers. The most common barrier practitioners identified was lack of awareness of what DA constitutes, followed by lack of information on existing services and how to access them. Both barriers were much less prevalent for survivors classified as high or medium risk.
The most common barriers to escaping an abusive relationship and seeking help by risk-level

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>HIGH</th>
<th>MEDIUM</th>
<th>STANDARD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32.3% Fear of the perpetrator and retaliation</td>
<td>21.0% Fear of the perpetrator and retaliation</td>
<td>29.7% Lack of awareness of what DA constitutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>21.9% Fear of involvement with statutory agencies</td>
<td>21.0% Fear of involvement with statutory agencies</td>
<td>18.3% Lack of information on existing services and how to access them</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.5% Lack of awareness of what DA constitutes</td>
<td>21.0% Lack of awareness of what DA constitutes</td>
<td>16.4% Fear of the perpetrator and retaliation</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15.8% Fear of involvement with statutory agencies</td>
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These findings emphasise the unique and distinctive needs of survivors classified as standard risk. While the 2005 introduction of IDVAs has made a major contribution to the support and safety of those categorised as high risk, policy makers and commissioning bodies pay much less attention to those categorised as standard and medium risk. More research on the different needs and experiences of survivors at different risk levels is required to inform service providers, commissioning bodies and policy makers on support and provision gaps. Commissioning bodies, including local authorities and PCCs, should also ensure that services adequately support those who are classified as medium or standard risk, and that they provide wide-ranging and high-quality services for all survivors and families.

“You know what, I came to the conclusion that unless my child was raped, or unless he [the partner] was threatening to kill me, then they won’t intervene.”

Esther

Recommendation: Better attention to the needs of survivors classified as medium and standard risk

- Commissioning bodies should make available a wide provision of services to address the unique needs of survivors classified as medium or standard risk.

- Use a whole-family approach to domestic abuse. This means that the identification of and response to the survivor and other family members are embedded in the day-to-day practice of statutory agencies.

- More research is needed to better understand differences or similarities between survivors who are classified as different risk levels and to inform appropriate support and gaps in provision.

This report shows how policy and services are not only failing to support survivors’ ability to escape, but in many ways are accountable for the challenges that survivors face. As it is rarely one barrier that stops survivors from escaping, but the combined and cumulative effect of multiple barriers, one change alone would not ease all issues. Statutory and non-statutory agencies – including the police, commissioning bodies, health professionals, social services and DA services – should make efforts to improve their response to domestic abuse.
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- calling: Supportline **08 08 16 89 111**
- using Next Generation Text (add **18001** before any of our phone numbers)
- online: [victimsupport.org.uk](http://victimsupport.org.uk)

To find out how you can help us, visit [victimsupport.org.uk/get-involved](http://victimsupport.org.uk/get-involved)

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