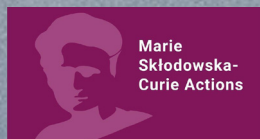


# Polish women's experiences of domestic violence and abuse in the United Kingdom

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# Executive summary

This report presents the findings of the first research project (2020-2022) to investigate Polish women’s experiences of domestic violence and abuse, and service responses to Polish women in the UK. It seeks to understand why domestic abuse services receive few referrals from Polish women despite the Polish community constituting the second largest foreign-born group in the UK with over 700,000 residents. Migration is well-known to exacerbate the risk of domestic abuse and increase barriers to accessing support.

**Context:** domestic abuse is poorly recognised in Poland. The Polish government is critical of domestic abuse and women’s rights campaigns as undermining traditional values, the sanctity of marriage and Polish identity. There is limited recognition of non-physical forms of abuse in Polish law and overall neglect of domestic abuse in state policy with funding cuts for services and the threat to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women. It is difficult to measure the prevalence of domestic abuse amongst Polish women in the UK because crime survey data do not disaggregate by country of birth. Polish women are over-represented in femicide statistics in the UK.

**Methods:** the report draws on data from 28 life history interviews with Polish survivors of domestic violence and 18 semi-structured interviews with practitioners from domestic abuse, statutory and voluntary services across the UK. Interviews were mostly online due to the COVID-19 pandemic and all transcripts were coded and analysed by two team members. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Lincoln Research Ethics Committee.

**Nature of abuse:** women had to contend with multiple forms of abuse, with coercive and controlling behaviour being most common, but always accompanied by other forms (physical, psychological, economic, sexual). Women’s understandings of abuse and possible options were shaped by their migration experience (personal identity, social isolation, practical concerns) along with discourses in Poland around the family and alcohol.

**Women’s responses to abuse:** recognising that abuse was taking place was a complex, gradual process that often required outside intervention from friends, family or services. Socio-cultural and Polish Catholic Church norms about women’s roles within families and the shame and stigma of divorce and failed relationships further constrained women’s disclosures of violence. Limited space for action was created by perpetrators’ controlling behaviour and the need to balance employment, finances, childcare and housing alongside a fear of formal services due to possible

repercussions by the perpetrator and persistent worries about children being taken into care. State policies around benefit entitlements, housing and no recourse to public funds was also a barrier reported by practitioners.

**Informal sources of support:** family, friends and social networks, including those made through work, often played an important role in enabling women to recognise abuse and in giving emotional and practical support. Yet, these networks could side with the perpetrator, shame women for ‘breaking up’ the family and ignore the abuse, meaning that women ended up trapped in the relationship for longer.

**Help seeking from services:** Polish women are often unfamiliar with service provision, legislative frameworks and practice processes in the UK, including Legal Aid, social housing, child protection and police injunctions. Multiple information flows and referral paths are therefore invaluable to provide a strong safety net. Service responses are only effective if they address the complex dynamics of abuse, including emotional dimensions. ‘By and for’ domestic abuse services were praised for understanding women’s background, migration patterns and specific barriers to action.

**Surviving domestic abuse:** rebuilding life after leaving abuse was a long process that often featured post-separation abuse, protracted civil/criminal court proceedings, and adversarial family justice proceedings over child custody. Women required ongoing support and information in navigating these systems, and they showed great bravery, determination and hard work to create a successful future for themselves in the UK.

# Key recommendations for practitioners

· Recognise how women’s understandings and experiences of abuse are shaped by their Polish background, migration history and settlement in the UK.

· Provide information and support to help Polish women navigate the UK societal, legislative and practice landscapes in relation to domestic abuse.

· Widely distribute information about domestic abuse support to outlets specifically aimed at the Polish community (shops, services, churches, community centres, embassies and consulates) as well as more general venues in order to increase referrals by friends, family, community members and professionals.

· Provide Polish women with information about different options for supporting them to end abusive relationships (forms of protection and non-molestation orders, home safety and rapid police response schemes, refuges).

· Recognise the pressures leading Polish women to not disclose abuse.

· Understand that migration history is a risk factor for domestic abuse.

· Adjust interview techniques for women speaking in English and understand that Polish women may require reassurance to feel confident about their English levels.

· Provide translation services for Polish women who need it; and make the availability of such services known within any awareness raising materials and leaflets about services;

· Provide outreach support for victims of domestic violence who may not yet be ready to take the decision to leave.

· Support survivors through group work and peer support networks.

· Understand how Polish women’s fears about contact with official services and having children removed shape their interaction with professionals and disclosure of abuse.

· Recognise that Polish women may make great efforts to hide abuse, especially if children are involved or the partner is present during appointments with professionals.

· Encourage staff to sensitively discuss home life and highlight the availability of services for domestic abuse and family support to Polish women.

· Encourage networking and sharing of good practice in addressing domestic abuse between the range of services working with Polish women.

# Policy recommendations

· Revise policy and practice frameworks to recognise migration as a key factor shaping experiences of domestic abuse for women from different backgrounds.

· Provide long-term ring-fenced funding for domestic violence services, including specialist ‘by and for’ services for Polish and other groups of minoritised women.

· Disaggregate the crime survey data not just by census categories, but also by country of birth to understand (any) differential patterns of victimisation of Polish migrants in the UK.

# Recommendations for research

· Include Polish and East European communities in discussions about inequalities in welfare, violence and service responses in the UK driven by racialisation and othering.

· Expand research to consider factors and interventions that can work with perpetrators of domestic abuse within the Polish community.

· Seek to understand the experiences and service responses to cases of domestic abuse faced by Polish women arriving after the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union.

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*It’s harder for us because of the language, it’s harder for us because [...] well, what will others say, if it’s a domestic violence? It is harder for us because we do not know the system and we do not know what we are entitled to.*

*I had that fear that a lot of women fear, you know, the social workers, the police [...] I didn’t trust them, because when I tried to leave the relationship my ex used to threaten me that ‘I’ll have full custody of the children, because I have a good salary, I will take you to social workers, I will be reporting you’, which he did.*

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For full report and researcher contacts, see: <https://dvsupport.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/research/>



