

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

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June 2022



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 842854.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Our heartfelt gratitude and admiration go to the brave women who shared their stories with us, and we hope that we have done justice to their accounts. It would be a fitting tribute to them if the lessons learnt from their struggles and successes make the process easier for those who follow their path, and if the changes they made the case for come to fruition in the months and years ahead.

This research could not have been undertaken without funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action, grant agreement No 842854.

We would like to thank the domestic violence service, EDAN Lincs, for supporting Iwona Zielinska's placement which yielded invaluable insights into frontline practice—and in particular, Celia Madden and Lu Webb for their practical and emotional support throughout the project.

Ongoing conversations and insights provided by Vesta, a Polish 'by and for' domestic violence service have informed the process of data collection and analysis and the dissemination of the findings, including organising a final conference in Manchester. Ewa Wilcock and Agnieszka Tenteroba from Vesta have been our co-travellers in this research journey.

We would also like to thank Elisabeth Kardynal, the manager of the European Welfare Association CIC for providing a broader picture of the issues faced by Polish diaspora that impact the problem of domestic violence and abuse. Amy Gillard provided invaluable technical support for the dissemination of our findings, for which we are grateful.

## **Executive summary**

This report presents the findings of the first research project 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.

## 1.0 Introduction

This is the first-ever study of domestic violence and abuse amongst Polish migrant women living in the UK or any EU country<sup>1</sup>. The need for this study arose from a realisation that despite the high numbers of Polish migrants in the UK, the numbers of Polish women who were seeking the support of domestic violence services seem to be low. There was no research which could help us understand Polish women's experiences of domestic violence and abuse in the UK, the barriers they may face in seeking support and their experience of receiving such support. The aim of this 21-month study (August 2020-May 2022) was therefore to develop a robust evidence base that improves support for Polish migrant women in the UK and beyond. The research took place in the context of the 2016 Brexit vote and official withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union on 31 January 2020.

Anecdotal evidence from EDAN Lincs and other UK domestic violence services—including those in areas with relatively dense Polish populations—suggests a disproportionately low number of enquiries, referrals and use by Polish women. Several projects and services specifically for Polish victims of domestic abuse have been launched in the UK (for example Vesta and Opoka), often by survivors in response to an unmet need. However, they are very small scale and operate within insecure fundings regimes, and often rely on volunteers to support their frontline work. They also have little capacity to conduct research that might gather the evidence they need to inform the practice of other statutory and voluntary services. Searches of gender resource bases (WAVE, ILGA) reveal no previous research on domestic abuse amongst Polish diaspora in European countries with high Polish in-migration (Germany, Ireland, Norway, Sweden).

The few published studies on domestic violence in Eastern and Central Europe do not consider experiences of almost 1.2 million Polish-born women who live outside Poland (Fabian 2017). Research on Polish families living in the UK and other EU countries (Burell 2009; Kleinepier and van Gaalen 2015; Ryndyk 2020) does not discuss domestic violence, although relevant contextual factors are highlighted, including the strongly transnational nature of understandings of family and gender, with influences from the Catholic church, political discourses and media representations. Within these more general migration studies, there is often a focus on family and community life, experiences of migration and settlement and employment experiences. Other studies on what is referred to as 'migration and integration research' draw upon perspectives of either migrant groups or practitioners who support this settlement process (Pyrhonen et al. 2017). There is little research that explores, even in the passing, Polish migrant women's experiences of domestic violence and abuse and practitioner perspectives on supporting them.

This lack of research is problematic because although domestic violence affects women across all social classes and ethnicities, research on South Asian women in the UK and Latino communities in the USA indicates that migration often exacerbates the risk of domestic violence and abuse (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005) and increases barriers to seeking and receiving support (Anitha et al. 2018). This report seeks to show how these issues apply to Polish women

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term domestic violence and abuse to recognise the various forms of harm including physical violence, economic, psychological and sexual abuse as well as coercive control. At times, we may also use the domestic violence or domestic abuse, depending on the context. This study focuses on the violence and abuse perpetrated by the intimate partner.



living in the UK, who have a different cultural background and migration path compared to other groups of migrant women. As the first study of domestic violence among Polish migrant women, our research highlights vulnerabilities associated with being an EU migrant (European Commission 2016). This report presents findings pertaining to 1) the nature of domestic abuse experienced by Polish migrant women in the UK; and 2) the barriers to and enablers of help-seeking, leaving and recovering from abusive relationships. It also presents recommendations about how we can better respond to the specific needs of Polish migrant women through appropriate policies and services in the UK.

## **2.0 Domestic violence in Poland and in the Polish community in the UK**

### **2.1 Domestic violence in Poland**

Domestic violence is a serious problem in Poland, where approximately 30% of women have experienced domestic violence (Miedzik, Godlewska-Szurkowska 2014) and the percentage is likely to be much higher due to under-reporting and low understanding of domestic violence within Polish society. According to a large study commissioned by the Polish government in 2019, as many as 63% of women say they have experienced some kind of domestic violence in their lives (Kantar 2019). Despite criticism by the media and the Polish Commissioner of Human Rights, the report has not been published on government websites. Annual reports on the implementation of the National Program for Preventing Domestic Violence stopped being published since 2016. This illustrates the unwillingness by the ruling Law and Order Party to deal with the issue of domestic violence and abuse. Since coming to power in 2015, Poland's government, supported by the influential Catholic church, has been considering withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on Violence against Women, attacking it for trying to push a so-called 'gender ideology' that it claims is threatening Polish identity, traditional values and the almost mythical sanctity of family. Such public and official hostility to recognising and addressing domestic violence serves to limit social awareness of the problem (Bielecka, 2017). Renata Durda, the director of Blue Line, the largest domestic abuse service in Poland, says bluntly: "At the state level, we do not have any policy on preventing domestic violence. [...] Domestic violence is constantly neglected in Poland" (Durda 2021).

Women's rights in Poland have been grossly neglected by the right-wing government. In 2015, the ruling Law and Order Party cut funding to organisations helping women victims of domestic violence, claiming that they discriminated men from their services. This reflects general unwillingness of the government and the Polish Catholic Church to recognise domestic abuse as primarily an issue of gender inequalities. In 2020, despite mass protests, the government introduced a near-total ban on abortion. Women activists in Poland and abroad have mobilised in response and offered almost guerrilla Gender Based Violence services, (e.g. Friends-Neighbours, Untangled) as well as abortion services (e.g. Abortion Dream Team, Untie Basia from Berlin).

Research shows that there is little recognition of types of abuse other than physical violence in Poland. There is no equivalent of the term 'coercive control' in Polish law and Polish language, post-separation abuse is hardly recognised, and terms as 'Violence against women and girls' or "gender-based violence" are rarely used in public discourses. On the other hand, the well-known Polish proverb "If a man does not beat his wife, her liver rots" is often quoted as a joke. These linguistic peculiarities reveal much about a general attitude towards these issues.

The latest GREVIO (2021) report, an evaluation of Istanbul Convention in Poland, criticises the lack of recognition in Polish law of women's heightened exposure to domestic abuse that is shaped by their specific needs and unequal power relations between men and women. It urges Poland to change the legal definition of rape to include all non-consensual acts. The current definition in Polish law emphasises the need to actively object to unwanted sexual behaviour to be recognised in law as rape. Last but not the least, GREVIO highlights the urgent need to increase specialist support services for women and awareness raising campaigns to address different forms of violence against women (GREVIO 2021).

## **2.2 Polish community in the UK**

The Polish community in the UK grew rapidly after Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 and in 2017 it became the largest non-UK born population in the UK, reaching over one million people. Since then, the number of Poles living in the UK has fallen following Brexit but it is still almost 700,000 (ONS 2021), and over one million according to recent data from the Home Office Settlement Scheme (Home Office 2021), the eligibility for which includes children of Polish migrants who were born in the UK (and hence do not appear in the data on non-UK born migrants).

Polish migration to the UK has occurred in three distinctive waves. The first wave was predominantly refugees after the Second World War, the second migration phase occurred during the state socialist era in the 1980s and the last and the largest one began after Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004. It is estimated that 800,000 people moved from Poland to the UK in the first decade after the EU accession (Burrell 2016), far outnumbering all the other migration from Central and East European countries. There are slightly more Polish migrant women than men in the UK (53% and 46% respectively) (National Polish Bank 2018). The majority of Polish migrants are young people (up to 34 years old) who have been active participants in the UK labour market. Polish migrants, in common with EU-8 migrants, had the highest employment rates in the UK (80% for women, 90% for men) of all migrant populations, and higher than UK-born (75% for women, 78% for men) (Fernández-Reino and Rienzo 2022: 6). In 2018, 25% of Polish migrants worked as managers and professionals while the majority worked in semi-skilled and manual occupations in industry, hospitality, and agriculture (National Polish Bank 2018). Polish people are dispersed across the UK, with higher concentrations in London and the South East. Many Polish migrants in the UK are compelled to accept work in lower-paid jobs and seek to save funds, with implications for the size, quality and location of housing (White 2016). Evidence indicates that the Brexit referendum led to an increase in hate crime against Polish and other Eastern European population groups (Burnett 2017; Rzepnikowska 2019), akin to the experience of other racially minoritised people<sup>2</sup> in the UK.

## **2.3 Domestic violence and abuse in the Polish diaspora in the UK**

Very little is known about domestic violence and abuse within Polish communities in the UK. This lack of data on the prevalence rates among Polish women in the UK is because the Crime Survey data does not disaggregate by country of birth and the UK census category of 'White Other' that is utilised in the crime surveys includes a broad range of nationalities. Domestic violence services often do not keep records on the nationality or country of birth of their clients, but even if they did, it would not represent the scale of the abuse, as there are many barriers that Polish women face in seeking help.

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<sup>2</sup> We use the term 'racially minoritised', which derives from a social constructionist approach, to denote that people are actively minoritised by others on the basis of the social construction of race rather than because they are in fact part of a minority, which the terms 'racial minorities' or 'ethnic minorities' imply. Particularly in the run up to and in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, there was widespread xenophobia and racist 'othering' of Polish and other East European migrants in the UK. Given this context, we also use the term 'racially minoritised' for Polish migrants to reflect these emerging forms of racism in the UK. Recognising these issues does not mean equating these expressions of racism and xenophobia against Polish migrants in the UK with the the historical and structurally rooted experiences of other racially minoritised communities in the UK. Racism can take diverse forms and expressions.

Statistics from a 10-year overview of femicide between 2009-2018 (Long et al. 2020) shows that Polish women constitute 15% of non-UK born victims. Two thirds of all the killings are in the context of domestic violence, which is similar to the broader patterns of female femicide in the UK and worldwide. Over this decade, 19% of the 1,419 femicide victims were born outside the UK. Compared to the 13% of the UK population who are born outside the UK, this indicates that migrant women are at higher risk of femicide. In relation to Polish-born women, this data also shows that Polish-born victims were second in number only to UK-born victims and constituted 1.7% (24 women) of all victims. This is higher than their 1.2% proportion of the UK population over this decade. The disproportionate numbers of Polish-born women in the femicide statistics may indicate higher prevalence levels of domestic abuse or greater barriers to leaving, hence a longer period spent within the abusive relationship thereby escalating risk of serious harm and death.

### 3.0 Research Methods

A range of qualitative methods were used to gather in-depth data, due to the complex and sensitive nature of the subject matter. The overall project conducted analysis of Polish media reports about domestic violence and abuse, life history interviews with survivors and semi-structured interviews with practitioners from a range of statutory and voluntary services, with a special focus on domestic violence services. This report draws on the data from survivors and practitioners to root findings in the lived experiences of those seeking and providing support. All interviews were conducted between April 2021 and January 2022.

**Life history interviews with 28 Polish women who experienced domestic abuse whilst living in the UK.** These are a vital part of the research where survivors relayed the context and nature of the abusive relationship, and their experiences of help-seeking and services. Women were recruited in different ways: from practitioners and organisations as well as through word-of-mouth and Facebook groups for Polish women. Based on women's preference, eight interviews were conducted in English and 20 in Polish. The English-language interviews were conducted jointly by Iwona Zielinska and Sundari Anitha to allow for debriefing that informed protocols for subsequent interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic almost all interviews were conducted on Zoom in line with women's preferences, while two were conducted face-to-face during periods when Covid restrictions had been lifted. Research participants found the online format comfortable and convenient. Life history interviews enable participants to give an in-depth and full accounts of their lives and relationships and generated rich data. The interviews lasted between 2 to 4 hours, with several interviews completed in two and one in three sittings as we ran out of the allocated time, but the women wanted to share more of their story.

**Interviews were conducted with 18 frontline professionals** with direct experience of supporting Polish families in the UK on the issue of domestic violence and abuse. Practitioners represented organisations including domestic abuse outreach services, refuges, specialist 'by and for' Polish domestic violence services, Polish community organisations, police, health and legal services. Research participants were recruited through different practitioner networks and snowballing across the UK.

**Data analysis:** all interview data was transcribed and where necessary translated into English, including checking of the quality of translation by Iwona Zielinska. An inductive process was utilised to identify key themes emerging from the interviews, which were coded using NVivo software. The initial coding of interviews was verified by a second team member to ensure the thoroughness of the data analysis. The team members met regularly through the process to refine the codes on the basis of the emerging data.

**Ethics:** ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Lincoln Research Ethics Committee. Survivors who shared their life histories were not in an abusive relationship at the time of the interview. No concerns about women's wellbeing arose during interviews and researchers did not need to signpost women to the available support. The names of all survivors, their family members and friends have been changed to pseudonyms, while practitioners and organisations are identified with a descriptor of the organisation.

**Limitations:** it proved difficult to recruit staff from local authority and health services, which can be partly attributed to the immense pressure these services were facing during the pandemic. Women shared very valuable experiences of these services with us, but direct practitioner perspectives from statutory services about opportunities for detecting abuse and delivering support are under-represented in the dataset.

## 4.0 Research findings

All but two of the women we interviewed migrated to the UK after 2004 following the EU Treaty of Accession. They varied in terms of whether they came to the UK with their partner or met their partner here. All the women we interviewed left the abusive relationship between 7 months and 13 years back. It is interesting that a majority of the women we interviewed had completed a tertiary education programme several years ago, a rate that is higher than is the average for women in Poland even today (OECD 2019), which reflects the higher levels of education that migrants often have. However, given the near universal enrolment of 15–19-year-olds in education in Poland (OECD 2019), the fact that three women out of 28 did not attend high school reflects that among our sample, there were a few women who were from particularly deprived backgrounds. All the women identified as Catholic, though the levels of religiosity varied across our sample, and for individual women it also varied across their life-course. Though our sample of survivors is small, it captures the diversity of Polish migrant women’s experiences in the UK, in terms of educational background, religiosity, English language skills at the point of migration and now, reasons for migration (push or pull, including connections to partners), period and place of settlement in the UK.

		Number of women	Percentage
Age	33-39	7	25%
	40-49	20	76%
	50 and more	1	3%
Education	Completed tertiary education (university or college degree, technical or vocational training programme)	16	57%
	Completed high school/started but did not complete tertiary education	9	32%
	Did not attend high school	3	11%
Children	None	1	3%
	1	5	18%
	2	16	57%
	3	3	11%
	4	3	11%
Partner nationality	Polish	24	86%
	Other	4	14%
Type of abuse	Coercive control	25	90%
	Physical abuse	24	86%
	Economic	22	79%
	Sexual	12	43%

The following sections draw upon the narratives of the Polish women we interviewed and the practitioners who work to support them to understand: the nature and patterns of domestic violence and abuse the experienced; the barriers women faced in making a disclosure and seeking help; the help they sought and received from informal and formal sources of support; and their journey to end the abusive relationships.

#### **4.1 Nature of domestic violence and abuse experienced by Polish women in the UK**

Women's narratives recounted their experiences of multiple forms of domestic violence and abuse perpetrated by their intimate partners and in some cases condoned or exacerbated by their families.

##### **Coercive control**

The most common form of domestic violence and abuse which featured in twenty-five women's accounts was a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour, which was commonly present as an ominous and pervasive aspect of the abusive relationship. Perpetrators closed women's 'space for action' (Kelly 2003) through systematic and persistent strategies of humiliation, isolation, control over their everyday life, behaviour and presentation which, as seen in other literature, together served to erode women's sense of selves and capacity for independent thinking and action (Stark, 2007).

Isolation was often one of the earliest tactics used by perpetrators to implement their dominance without being observed or challenged by women's family and friends. Initially, the strategies some men used to isolate women from potential sources of support were camouflaged as a concern for her welfare or as an excess of love/jealousy. While some women recounted how this made the beginning of the abusive behaviour sometimes hard to discern, others remembered a sense of discomfort at these early signs of control.

“Why do we meet this person so much, why do you call this person here [home]”. And he started to impose his contacts on me, for example, our neighbour was a lady from Somalia [his country of origin], a very nice lady. But my husband also expected me to be friends with her. You can't force friendship. [...] For him it was like "Well what do you mean no?", "Well why not?!" Well, no, just no. I can talk to her, we can have a laugh, but there is no such thing as a bond between us which would lead to a real friendship. [...] Whereas when I had some acquaintances here, well, no! There was always some reason that it was not good. And he wouldn't want me to keep in touch with these people at all. [...] So, this gave me food for thought. And so, step by step, more and more of these things appeared. (Iwona)

Like Iwona, other women also recalled how they tried to resist these initial attempts to control them. However, many women also recounted how these patterns eventually became implicit or explicit 'rules' that they learnt not to break, for fear of the consequences.

For Sofia, who met her partner online while still in Poland and moved to the UK with her two children from a previous relationship to join him, the 'rules' took the form of a 15-point contract that she read out to us: "These are my conditions [...] I want them to be fulfilled willingly by you, because otherwise you will feel like you are in prison, and I don't want that." The conditions, which had to agree to, 'willingly', included stipulations about handing over her wages to him, controlling and punishing her children for behaviour such as burping, 'taking care of the work, home, kids and me', 'treating me like someone special' and losing weight.

Viola, who recalled how she was renowned for her confident outlook during her school years—the one who was sent by her classmates to the teacher to negotiate the cancellation of a dreaded exam—was reduced to a 'quiet mouse' by her husband who “changed me so much,



manipulated everything. He literally manufactured me, I could say.” She described his techniques of coercive control:

He very cleverly pushed me away from my family. He used to say, "Look how this aunt is behaving... they don't care about you at all! [...] When was the last time you heard from your [Polish] friends?" [...] He did it so cleverly that I didn't suspect at all that something was wrong here. Eventually, she recalled how “There was only my child, cooking, the house, taking care of him. [...] I didn't even have friends, not even neighbours, anybody. I was locked in there, I was so programmed by him ...] I became the quiet mouse sitting at home from a girl who [...] wasn't afraid of anything.” (Viola)

Viola’s narrative charted her shrinking space for action that is an outcome, indeed the purpose, of coercive control. For many Polish women, the migration experience shaped the dynamics and opportunities for such isolation as well as exacerbated its impact.

When we asked Weronika about the difference that migration made to her experiences, she responded thus:

Separation, separation from people who care about me. I couldn’t call anybody, I couldn’t send them email—he was checking my phones, he was checking my email. He controlled me one hundred percent of time; I couldn’t move without his knowledge. Once I went to the shop just to go for a walk because I was unemployed at the time, and I left the phone in the house. He called me thirteen or fourteen times and I didn’t pick up the phone call, so what he did was, he called our neighbour, his drunkard friend, and he [friend] went around to the house to try to find me. So, I was like a slave and I was like in jail; I couldn’t, I couldn’t do anything. [...] I didn’t have my passport ID because he hid it. (Weronika)

A majority of the Polish women we interviewed were active participants in the UK labour market, apart from a few weeks or months after childbirth, a situation that reflects the broader experience of Polish migrants in the UK (Fernández-Reino and Rienzo 2022: 6). For many migrant women, employment was a route to circumventing their isolation and eventually finding sources of support. However, their isolation was compounded for those who were unable to work.

Upon migration to the UK, Laura came to rely upon her husband as the bridge to her new post-migration world as she was not fluent in English, a situation he perpetuated by dissuading her from joining an English language course though she was very keen to do so. He cited her domestic responsibilities—they had four children, the oldest of whom was disabled—as the reason why she could not spare the time to attend classes.

Zuzanna, who came to the UK to join her husband several years after he migrated to find work here, recalled her husband’s attempts to isolate her from any potential sources of support:

It was as if he wanted to lock me up in a cage, that you know, um, I could not, freely talk with my girlfriends, we couldn’t meet because he would constantly fear that I would cheat on him. [...When] My mum was in the hospital he [husband] would say, “don’t visit your mum, right?” Because she, you know, because she was an alcoholic. So, you know I would visit her under cover, in secret, so that he didn’t find out. (Zuzanna)

But not all women lived by the rules; despite the risks of retaliatory violence associated with trying to reclaim a semblance of agency, Zuzanna, like several other women who spoke to us, sought to find ways to circumvent the control and create small spaces where she could resist the control that was being imposed on her.

Isolation was accompanied by coercive and controlling behaviour, which served to establish the abuser's dominion over their home and over her body, her mobility and behaviour. As Julia recalled:

We came to England, and it was like [...] everything was in his name, the phone contracts were in his name, when I started work, I gave him my e-mail address, because [he said] "what do I need an e-mail for?" And you don't really pay attention to such things, do you? [...] When I wanted to go out with my friends, just you know, the Polish lady who worked with us invited me to her place and wanted to take me to an English pub, to see what it was like. So, he gave her this lecture that I can go to her place but we absolutely can't go to the pub. (Julia)

Several women recounted such control over the dimensions of their everyday life and over their behaviour—while Julia was 'allowed' to socialise with her Polish friends, he controlled the ways and the spaces in which any such socialisation took place. While Julia initially categorised this as a 'protective' behaviour, in keeping with his characterisation of English pubs as unsafe spaces for women, her friend was quick to call out his behaviour as 'not normal'. However, in these initial months following migration, Julia wanted to give their new life and dreams a chance.

For some women, living together and sharing a home was when the facets of control first became evident. Joanna remembered how the dinner that she and her then boyfriend hosted in the first week when they moved in together created the pretext for abuse, as he sought to control how she presented herself, how she interacted with his friends.

So it was three stranger guys for me, and me cooking dinner. The three of them they were heavy drunkards [...] and after all this party what my partner did, he started to point things which I'd done wrong during that meeting, this dinner: "You should say this, you should protect me before them, you should be more calm, you should be more nice, you should smile more." He started to call me names, bad names. So my first night after that situation was like my brain didn't work properly, I lost all my confidence [...] I thought my gosh, maybe I'm really bad, stupid, idiot, whatever he said. After that, for a few days he was romantic, nice, perfect, like nothing, nothing ever happened; he never said 'I'm sorry'. (Joanna)

Iwona too, recalled her surprise and sense of unease that she felt when she and her husband moved to the UK and set up their first home away from her family, who had been an active presence when they lived in Poland.

It started out that he became very, very controlling [...] I don't know what else to call it. He wanted to have everything under control, he wanted to decide everything in such a way that even important things, some decisions that [...] for me it was logical that we should make them together. Like moving to another neighbourhood, another flat or changing job, that these things should be discussed, right? And he was putting me down. And it just started to happen non-stop, non-stop. On the other hand, he required me to

consult him on the most ridiculous, petty decisions. Things concerning just such nonsense, some, I don't know, small purchases. Full control. We lived in a studio flat and he always carried the keys to the mailbox with him and later, when a letter came to me from the bank, he opened the letter that was addressed solely to me. And that was one of the first things that made me think that, boy, that's not how it's done. Because there was no such thing in my family, [...], no such thing as opening someone else's correspondence alone, without permission. (Iwona)

For Krystyna, the success she made of her professional and social life following migration as a couple came at a heavy price. In the context of his sporadic periods of unemployment, she was expected to work to provide for the family but was resented for doing so:

Despite all that [the abuse], I was still able to find the strength and motivation to do something, to change my life. And that's probably what frustrated him the most, that I did something [...] Coming [to the UK], like him I didn't know the language, everything the same, right? And I, you know, gradually got out of it and then, you know, I got a job, he didn't, I had more friends, he didn't, I already, you know... How to say it? I was getting back on my feet and he was always, you know, all over the place. (Krystyna)

As Krystyna's professional career flourished and he remained confined to odd jobs, he compensated for his perceived loss of masculinity through an ever-escalating regime of control and violence. Migrants commonly experience a deskilling within the labour market, whereby the only jobs available to them may be mismatched to their qualification. Joanna too recalled the impact of the dislocation in her partner's status upon migration, as he was confined to a low-paid, low-status job:

When he was in Poland he was a soldier in army [...] it was permanent job, and when he came to UK he was porter in the hospital. So he was embarrassed that he was such a great person in Poland, "I was soldier and it was huge, and I came to UK, I couldn't find a job and I have to be porter." [...] So he'd pretend in Poland that he's not a porter, he'd just make up some stories that he had a better job. [...] And it was small money, so he felt embarrassed that I earned more being a cleaner. [...] cos in his head and in his tradition, the man should earn more, the man should be more important, it is only the man who has a voice, a woman shouldn't say anything, you can't decide, it, it's my decision, you should be quiet. So when his aunt visited us I couldn't say a word, I couldn't discuss anything with them, "You should be quiet, go to the kitchen." (Joanna)

Such control commonly extended to household decisions and the use of the household resources and was intended to establish the man's position as the master of the house, and her subservient position within the household.

Maria came to the UK with her partner and son from her previous (abusive) relationship. Maria recalled how the abuse escalated once they moved to the UK, and was often targeted at both her and her son:

We didn't have a TV set, he had a computer—I had my own laptop because my son had his games there and so on—I remember he didn't like it, so he smashed the computer. My little one was crying because he was watching cartoons on that. He had a desktop computer, I remember once, the movie was on the computer—I was sitting behind the table [...] and he was sitting in front of this computer. And when I looked at the

computer, he said to me, in these words, I'll quote, I'll curse too—"don't look, you whore, if I count to three, and I see you looking, you'll get fucked". And when he turned his head to me, I turned my head down so he wouldn't see that I was watching the movie, because what was I supposed to do with my time. When he noticed that I was looking, he would say count to three. Later, when I heard one, two, three, I was like, "after the third one I'll get..." (Maria)

While a few women reported that the regime of coercive control was imposed very soon after the start of the relationship, for a majority, the control gradually escalated alongside the tightening of the ties that bound them through joint migration, marriage or pregnancy.

And when I opened my eyes to all this, it was simply too late to run away from him. I didn't have the strength, I was pregnant, I was here in England with my second son. And now I couldn't go to Poland, because he is the child's father after all! He can keep me, even though the child hasn't been born yet. He manipulated me in a very skilful way. He showed me his knowledge of the law over a dinnertime conversation. He gave me, I suspect, some invented cases where a woman was pregnant and ran away with the baby, then got arrested and so on. I am also an intelligent person, well I consider myself as such [...] but when I got such a dose of information every day and to such a very large extent.... (Aniela)

Just as the control became evident and intolerable to her, Aniela believed herself to lack any options. Due to his manipulation around her lack of knowledge about the UK law, her pregnancy became a tool in his arsenal of control. Stark (2007) argues that the regime of coercive control often operates in the realm of women's feminine roles and reasserts hierarchical gendered norms in relation to cooking, caring and housework, a pattern of control that Maria and Sofia encountered:

The house had to be cleaned every day, it had to be clean, the bathroom had to be cleaned. I remember once I made scrambled eggs for breakfast, the scrambled eggs ended up on the wall, together with the plate. He threw it away, because I didn't mix up the eggs properly, he didn't like those egg whites. I remember him showing me how to scramble eggs. [...] And he said, "Don't do it like that, you have to do it like this", in a different way. Same thing happened with potatoes when I made them in the oven. (Maria)

He would leave for work in the afternoon and was back in the evening. But then everything had to be tip-top, dinner waiting, everything—like I said—had to be perfect in the house. [...] He was controlling all the time, questioning all the time, saying all the time that everything is wrong. To the point that when he came back from the evening shift, it didn't matter it was 10-11 in the night, I was still hoovering the carpet, doing dusting, removing the fingerprints of my kids and footprints from the carpet, because he was so angry if the kids made a mess and left toys around. So, I had to cover and clean before he stepped to the house. Everything had to be spotless, everything had to be tidy. (Sofia)

Women subjected to coercive control often have to conduct everyday activities such as cooking or cleaning in specifically controlled ways, which results in women having to negotiate "normal" life events within a "twisted reality of the abuser's making" (Williamson 2010) where any diversion from his 'ideal way' will bring repercussions for them.

Ania also described how religious and cultural differences between herself and her partner, who was of a different religion to her (Muslim) were a source of tension and a context for control in relation to her sons' circumcision:

He was pestering me for days, I was crying, begging, arguing with him to not circumcise my children. He made me, he persuaded me to circumcise my children. I was fighting about that, [...] I said that everybody has a right to decide about the body. And he could circumcise himself if he wishes, when he's an adult [...]. Each time I was crying for days and eventually I gave in. (Ania)

Several women's narratives affirm existing research findings on the escalation of domestic violence and abuse during pregnancy and in the immediate aftermath of childbirth (Cook and Bewley 2008; Finnbogadóttir and Dykes 2016), when women's vulnerability may be exacerbated. For many women, this control related to women's performance of childcare and was sometimes aimed at disrupting the mother-baby bond which was both perceived as a threat by the perpetrator ("he was jealous of his own baby") as well as a potential source of comfort and love for the new mother. Marta recounted a heightened regime of control after she gave birth to their first child as a new migrant living in a country where she had no other sources of support.

After I got out of the hospital, I had stitches, everything, you know. He took a week or two of paternity leave, so during that leave he played on the console. I didn't eat dinner. [...] He didn't care that I was feeding his child, that I needed to eat. He didn't do anything for me, nothing. He didn't even give me tea, water, anything. [later] He took the baby away from me. He said I would only be called to feed [the baby], that I should get the fuck out of the living room. [...] Because he bought the corner sofa; I'm not supposed to sit on it, I can sit on the floor. (Marta)

For a few women, it was only upon leaving that some of these dimensions of control over their body, appearance and behaviour became apparent in the face of a life, free of such constraints.

This is like I'm living again. This is a simple thing—look at my nails, I've always had my nails done. I was not allowed to have my nails done—he threw away all my nail varnishes, all of them. I wasn't allowed to have [...] I could only have—when we met, I had red hair, because most of my life I had red hair, so I wasn't allowed to colour my hair unless it was red, so I've gone brown—straight when I kicked him out of the house. (Mirka)

Alongside isolation and control, a third dimension of coercive control is emotional or psychological abuse that operates through techniques of humiliation or degradation, designed to erode the sense of self-esteem and capacity of those subjected to such behaviour.

Some of this humiliation was targeted at women's bodies, often around pregnancy and childbirth when men would mock women for putting on weight, call them ugly, or pass degrading comments on their 'saggy breasts.' Childbirth was one of the times when women felt undermined by their partner's lack of support and indeed, techniques of humiliation, during a very difficult process. Other women recounted the ways in which their partners belittled them.

There was also physical violence here, but there was much, much more psychological. Because it was mocking, like "What are you talking about? You don't know anything.

What do you know?". Questioning my every move, mocking me. Also making fun of my beliefs or making such a fool of me. (Marta)

Men also undermined women by denigrating their work, which was often a source of pride and sense of identity for them. Ania derived a sense of purpose from the caring work that she undertook in a nursing home, even though the pay was low.

I remember I had already given birth to my fourth child. And this person [husband] said, "What have you really achieved? All that you do is wiping people's assholes, shitholes"—this is the word he used. "What have you achieved?"—and for days he was kind of pestering me, you know, "you have to do something, you have to bring income, you're earning peanuts"—that's what he told me, [...] he said "you and your saggy pussy [...]"—it was the most painful thing somebody could say to a woman, it was horrible. (Ania)

Maria recalled how her husband disregarded her personhood and subjected her to degrading behaviour, treating her as if she was of no substance:

I remember when I was sitting on the toilet in the bathroom—he came in and he wanted to pee. And I was sitting on the toilet. So he just urinated on me. He peed on me, because when he wanted to pee, I was on the toilet. And he didn't care. He just peed on me. And that was a couple of times. (Maria)

Another very specific form of humiliation, that Mirka experienced, was her husband's boasts about his sexual encounters with other women, intended to play on her insecurities.

He was cheating on me with his work friends. His favourite torture was coming home late at night and I had to wait for him of course, to open him the door—and then he wouldn't let me go to sleep, he would talk to me about what he was doing with that woman and I had to listen to that. (Mirka)

Perpetrators' persistent tactics of name-calling, humiliation and degradation were intended to undermine women's sense of self, and several women indeed remembered how they had begun to question their own capability and mental capacity in the face of the psychological abuse they experienced. This then became an additional dimension of the abuse, as Mirka recounted:

He always said to me that he will take away my daughter, he will make me look like crazy and I will go to mental hospital and I will never see her [daughter] again or that he will send her to Romania. (Mirka)

Such coercive and controlling behaviour is intended to chip away at the woman's 'space for action'—her capacity for thought and action within existing constraints of living in an abusive household gender regime. Kelly et al (2014) document how this space for action narrows as women adapt their thinking and behaviour to cope with the violence and to survive within the constraints imposed upon them. Stark (2007) characterises the project of the abuser as one of 'find and destroy'—the mission to find every potential factor that could lead to a widening of women's space for action and the steps taken to destroy it and reassert control. Julia experienced this process of 'find and destroy' a few years after she migrated to the UK with her boyfriend. In the face of his controlling behaviour, Julia began to take steps to leave him. With hindsight, she recounted how every time her 'space for action' expanded, he moved to close it:

I started thinking about leaving him for the first time after four years of this kind of, you know, blaming, shaming, name calling, you, you name it, controlling behaviour [...] I was starting to question that. I'm like, it's gonna be tough but I can do it, I can do it, you know. And he knew I was planning to leave him. We went to Poland and he proposed to me in the public place, in the cinema, in a room full of people, you know? He invited my whole family. Even though I wanted to say no, I couldn't say no. How can I say no when there are so many people here, my family? You can't say no because he's gonna be ashamed [...] Well, you're just in such a state of shock that you say "Yes"! (Julia)

A few years later, there was a similar situation when she took steps to leave:

I wanted to leave and, and, and he was like "You know I'm gonna stop drinking, when you gonna give me son? Cos I always wanted to have a child and if you give me son I'm gonna have a purpose to, to stop drinking, to have this happy family, cos I've always wanted to have a son, plus, you know, you're gonna be thirty next year and it's about time to have your first child." And I believed, and I believed that [...] so, so I got pregnant. (Julia)

There were also reports of direct emotional violence towards children. Pola described a scenario involving herself, her abusive partner and their teenage daughter:

I was telling him [partner] that I'm almost sure that she [daughter] came back under the influence of something, and I said, "I have no power how to deal with [her]." And he was like "Oh you are stupid, it's such an easy, just order some test, drug test from the internet." [...] He ordered the drug test, and she came home on one day and I could, I could smell cannabis on her [...] And the drug test went positive. He came down, downstairs, he started shouting, screaming at her, and I was like "There is no point to talk about it right now, she's under the influence, so let's leave the discussion for another day." He was like, he was so aggressive, and he said: "Oh you are not my daughter any longer." He used such words towards her. (Pola)

Pola went on to describe the deterioration of her own relationship with her daughter:

[...] she lost totally respect for me, she wasn't listening, she was doing whatever she wanted to, she was smoking cannabis in the house, she was inviting her friends and drinking our alcohol, and I was prisoner in my own home. [...] he started to saying that for our own safety we should sign, we should sign Section 20. [...] So he made me sign the Section 20. It's voluntary, voluntary giving the child under the care of Social Services. [Pola gets upset] [...] When I wanted to contact her, he said "Just forget." He was constantly repeating "We don't have a child anymore." [...] she [daughter] turned so aggressive towards me, so she was blaming me for everything. (Pola)

Pola was left with an enduring sense of guilt due to the way in which her partner blamed her for not being a good mother and gave up on their daughter.

Through his concept of coercive control, Stark (2007) foregrounds the intent, impacts, dynamics and nature of domestic violence. The consequence of the exercise of coercive control with little respite is that the victim/survivor's worldview narrows as she attempts to 'negotiate

the unreality of coercive control' (Williamson 2010: 1412). It is through living in this 'unreality' that a woman's 'space for action' (Kelly 2003)—her capacity to think and act — is restricted, as she adapts her behaviour in an attempt to survive the abuse.

## **Economic abuse**

One dimension of domestic violence and abuse that has come to the focus of academic, media and policy attention relatively recently in the UK, is economic abuse, which was recognised within the UK's Domestic Abuse Bill 2021 (Sharp-Jeffs 2021). Economic abuse encompasses behaviours that control "a woman's ability to acquire, use and maintain financial resources" (Adams et al 2008: 564), including her productive labour, and also includes behaviours through which men benefit from women's reproductive labour through the use of control, abuse, and exploitation (Anitha 2019). There are dimensions of coercive control in this form of abuse, however it is increasingly being recognised as a distinct form of domestic violence and abuse. Twenty-two women reported common forms of financial abuse including financial control, financial exploitation, and financial sabotage.

Financial control refers to the strategies through which the abuser achieves control over the family finances. Stark (2007: 272) notes it is among the most prevalent forms of coercive control, occurring in "more than half" of cases; a pattern that was replicated among 22 out of 28 women we interviewed.

He was very controlling with the money. He took over all the finances, he had everything on his mobile phone. So every month he would take all my income to his account and he would just allocate me certain amount of money for grocery shopping. [...] (S1, Ania, 38)

While women were held responsible for feeding the family, as seen elsewhere, (Howard and Skipp, 2015; Sharp-Jeffs, 2015), they were often left without adequate financial resources to meet their and their children's needs:

He would drive me to Lidl or Aldi or Tesco—and say, you can spend 17 pounds. And I remember that shopping was the most stressful, awful, because I had to just buy everything, you know, but if I spent 2-3 more pounds over, he would yell and scream at me in this car [...] So often I remember I used to leave a lot of shopping by the counter—I was apologising, I was so stressed, I was shaking, I was sweating, you know. (S1, Ania, 38)

When [daughter] was born I stopped working, I didn't work anymore, only he worked, so he had money, right? He had power, because he had money. We had such a system that we would go to the shop once a weekend, Saturday or Sunday. And I was supposed to write a shopping list, what I needed, what we needed for the house. And when we entered the shop, and I just remembered something that wasn't on the list, I couldn't buy it. I couldn't add anything to the basket that wasn't on the list. And if I actually forgot something and added it, he would take it from the basket and yell "Fuck, that wasn't on the list!" And he would put it back. (Weronika)

Men's control over family finances also entailed hiding financial information from women while spending money on themselves or their own family, all the while claiming that there was not enough money to go around:



There was not enough money, he seemed to work a lot, some overtime. But there was never enough money to put aside for a bigger deposit and to start looking for a bigger flat. [...] At the same time, when I started thinking about it a bit more intensively, something happened. While I was preparing his work clothes, a piece of paper fell out of his pocket. It was a transfer by Western Union to his family. The amount on this transfer was more than we spent on ourselves, on our lives, for a whole month. Well! And then it became clear to me that [...] my husband sends all the surplus money in secret from me! (Iwona)

The economic abuse perpetrated on the women led to radically different standards of living for different members of the same household, which has been termed the “feminisation of poverty within relationships” (Branigan 2004: ii).

Oh we didn't have too much food because he drank a lot and it cost a lot of money, so sometimes it was just dinner for him and I was hungry. [...] And sometimes if he was not happy with the meal which I prepared for him from scratch, whatever I was able to do because there was not much in the fridge, he would throw it away to the bin. He didn't eat, I didn't eat, and then he would go outside [to get a take-away for himself]. (Joanna)

I had to cover the bills for electricity, rent and everything, pay for the nanny, so sometimes I had to juggle what I should buy—his bloody whiskey, he wanted a standard whiskey, not any whiskey—and quality food. So I had to—this is my regret and my heart is crying—but I let myself do that, I know I was in an abusive relationship. I was happy to eat pasta with sugar, me and the kids, because he had to have the meat in his meal, every day. (Sofia)

Abusive men commonly consumed better food, demanded luxuries and spent freely on alcohol for themselves, had separate shelves in the fridge for their food that no one else was allowed to eat, while women and children managed on far less, inferior food.

As reported elsewhere (Howard and Skipp, 2015; Sharp-Jeffs, 2015), other common patterns of economic abuse included taking money from women's purses or bank accounts where women were engaged in paid work.

I'm one of those absent-minded people, so I was always thinking to myself, you know, that something didn't add-up, right? [...] I had some savings. Well, I noticed that, you know, when over £300 disappears from the account, you see, in one moment, right? I was supposed to pay the rent, and here, you know, I haven't got that money, right? [...] He'd use the moments when, for example, I was having my bath. During that time, he was able to go to the bank, take money out of my account with the card he had taken, you know, out of my handbag, out of my wallet. (Krystyna)

Where women were not engaged in paid work, often because they were caring for children, men expected women to contribute financially while disregarding the economic value of their unpaid reproductive work.

I was already sleeping in the other room on the mattress, he was sleeping on the bed, you know. I had to pay him rent for the house, right? For my space. He took that money and expected me to, I don't know, provide money from God knows where, because I wasn't

working. He lied that I couldn't have child benefits on me because I wasn't working. All the finances, he said, he would be the one to keep because I wasn't able to do it. (Ewa)

Similar to Ewa's experience, Paulina also recounted how her husband claimed benefits, including the child benefit which should have come to her as she was the primary and full-time carer for the children.

We got a housing benefit, the child benefit. And there was also something from tax, it was the biggest one. They were all for him. And I remember that I wanted to become a bit more independent and I said "Let's at least transfer this child benefit, the smaller one, to me, because I don't work and it will count towards my pension if it's transferred to me". But no. (Paulina).

Unlike Paulina, a few other women managed to negotiate the payment of child benefit into their account. However, the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) risks increasing a perpetrator's ability to further control and abuse, as UC is paid to only one person in the household on a monthly basis. The process of obtaining a 'split payment' can be highly dangerous for survivors. There are clear risks if a perpetrator finds out about a request and/or notices their income decreases if split payments are taken forward. Whilst the government have made changes to 'nudge' the main carer in a household to receive UC payments directly, it is not being monitored, is likely to be manipulated by perpetrators and provides no solution for survivors without children.

As documented elsewhere (Littwin 2012), another common form of economic abuse is the perpetrator incurring debts either deceptively or coercively in the women's name, which often had long-term consequences their financial capacity and credit ratings, thereby impeding their capacity to make an independent living long after they had left the abusive relationship:

Every time I asked what our bills were, what amount it was, the answer was: "You don't give a shit, I work, I pay, so don't bother". That was the answer every time. Honestly. I didn't pry too much because I thought all the bills, everything was paid. It seems they weren't. [...] He took out this credit then. And in December, I remember some gentleman came to us, beautifully dressed, in a suit. And my husband told me that this is the gentleman who deals with bankruptcy. And I say "But what bankruptcy?", "Bankruptcy. You have to sign the papers because you have a debt of £25 000". [...] There had been credit cards in my name, Vera, Studio, Argos. Charged with various things. So I had a total debt of £25 000. Without my knowledge. He told me that this was the only way out because I was an unemployed person, so I would never pay it back and in this country, you go to jail for debt. So, I obediently signed the documents. And believe me, the man who was there didn't exchange a word with me. He only showed me where to sign the documents and my husband discussed everything. (Agata)

Several years later, Agata was still paying monthly instalments on this debt that he incurred using her name.

As has previously been documented in the literature (Kelly et al. 2014), control over women's education and less commonly, disrupting their (capacity to) work were also patterns of economic abuse that served to reinforce women's financial dependence on the perpetrator and impeded their capacity to leave the abusive relationship and their process of recovery.

So did he encourage me [to learn English, go out]? No, he just, it's just that he kept telling me that I had too many 'classes' [work] at home. The fact is, there was a lot of work at home. But I don't know, it seems to me that he didn't really want me to go out. [...] He was always trying to keep me on the side lines so that I could take care of the house. (Laura)

He was working full time, I couldn't find full time work, because he wouldn't stay home with the kids, because he earns more than me! So I'm the one who has to stay at home with the kids, I'm looking for about 10-15 hours to do something, to leave the house, right? Because I can't stand the kids any more, I want at least these few hours away from home, with adults, right? Because I want to, because I want to, because I fucking have to. And for the last 12 years I've been sitting here thinking that he's the one who earns money, he works, he has nice money. I'm the one who has to make the sacrifices. It's never been said directly, but it comes out that way every time. (Pola)

Our interviews revealed extensive experience of economic abuse. This ranged from controlling her access to education and employment, controlling access to household resources and money, controlling benefits, direct theft and incurring debts in the woman's name.

### **Physical violence**

Incidents of physical violence have long been regarded as the dominant form of domestic violence in some research, policy definitions, practice responses, and particularly popular and media discourses. Kelly and Westmarland (2016) argue that this discourse of 'incidentalism'—the construction of domestic violence as discrete incidents rather than as a pattern of behaviour—supports and maintains how men themselves talk about their use of violence and in turn has implications for our responses to the problem. The following section unpacks women's narratives about the physical violence they experienced, to understand the meaning and purpose behind men's use of violence, and the impact of this violence upon women.

Twenty-four women reported experiencing physical violence, which in all cases was a part of a broader pattern of behaviour. For a majority of women, the abuse escalated over time from other forms of domestic abuse and threats of violence to the infliction of physical violence.

The first time he raised his hand, he grabbed me by my neck. He [previously] used to threaten me with objects like a phone or remote control, like this [shows how he would make a hitting motion to scare her]. And he pushed me on a cooker [which had the flame on], in front of the children. [...] Later, we had an argument and he pushed me to the radiator, so I had a bruise on my hip. And then [later] he grabbed my dumbbell and he hit me forcefully on my knee. (Ania)

Ania recalled a regime of terror that gradually escalated into repeated acts of physical violence which intensified over time and where the gaps between each incident became smaller.

There were several cases where the physical violence resulted in injuries that required medical treatment including hospitalisation and had a medium to long term impact on physical health. Marta recalled how, on her way back from a party where her boyfriend had consumed excessive amounts of alcohol and used cocaine, they had an argument and he turned on her:

He was yelling aggressively [...] he pushed me so that I just fell down on the pavement. I said to him "What did you do? Why are you pushing me?" and that's where it started. He hit me terribly, kicked me, pulled me up by my hair and fisted me in the face. There was a passer-by that saved me. Really [...] the angels watched over me. Because if it hadn't been for that guy, I would have either ended up at intensive care or I simply wouldn't have survived. He didn't stop at all! He pulled so much hair out of my head [...] I almost had a bald spot. He kicked me. I just covered my face so he wouldn't knock my teeth out, right? He kicked me everywhere. And all the time he was pulling me up by my hair and he was hitting me with his fists. Well, I've never been [...] well, I've experienced violence, but I haven't, I haven't experienced anything like that [...] the kidney pain [...] it only stopped hurting completely after several months. My jaw, I couldn't eat [solids] for a long time, for about one and half months. (Marta)

On this occasion, Marta attributed his behaviour to a 'loss of control' brought on by alcohol and drug abuse. Several other women attributed the cause of the violence and abuse they experienced to their partner's alcohol abuse, and less commonly drug abuse, though in almost all of these cases, physical violence was also inflicted by the perpetrator when he was sober. Though the violence that was used to 'punish' the breaking of the 'rules' was inflicted when he was commonly (though not always) drunk, the rules themselves had been established when he was sober. As documented elsewhere (Javaid 2015), this characterisation of alcohol, rather than the domestic violence and abuse as the problem was common discourse that often prevented women from recognising their experiences as violence/abuse.

Children commonly witnessed acts of physical violence and abuse, and were also the target of physical violence and other forms of abuse. Ania described how she found direct evidence of physical violence to her young son:

I think the first incident was when I came back from something. I had a baby and a toddler and he stayed with those children—and I remember a mark on my son's face. He slapped my son's face and he admitted that. His excuse was because he was smacking John, who was a baby. And I think that Jacob must have been about 18 months old. (Ania)

Ania described the impact of the abuse on the mental health of one of her sons, and the physically violent reaction of her partner, to his divulging his feelings:

My eldest son who was eight at that time, one day my eldest son came to me and said he doesn't want to live anymore. He admitted he doesn't want to live anymore. And I said to his father, I shared that as you would with the father of the child [...] And his father said "What? You don't want to live anymore? What do you want, you have everything. Come here, come to the kitchen". So the father, he took a kitchen knife, took his little hands and put this knife on his little hands and he said "I'll show you, do you want me to cut that hand off?". And this is [...] I can tell you something, I blacked out, I don't remember what I've done, whether I protected him or argued. I blacked out. (Ania)

A few women recalled how their partners inflicted violence on them systematically and purposefully to exert control over them and to subdue them. This often entailed the use of techniques where the physical violence and injury was intertwined with tactics of humiliation and degradation:

On one of the occasions, he was really, really angry with me [...] He took me to the bathroom, he took the belt and he said "undress yourself". [...] So, I was standing here as he asked me, undressed, completely naked—and he was hitting me with a leather belt to the point where I was bleeding from all over my back and stomach. And this pain went on, he was still beating me everywhere, until I said sorry [...] we were arguing about something. It was just nothing really, that was his way of punishing me. (Sofia)

Sofia endured severe and persistent physical violence within a broader context of extreme coercion and controlling behaviour, which pervaded every aspect of her day-to-day life, relationships and capacity for decision-making.

Some women reported that coercive control, over particular aspects of their life and behaviours, was often the pretext for physical violence. Many women reported how control over their domestic work of cooking and cleaning was often the pretext—and how the men would sometimes look for a reason to ‘punish’ them, by actively going over the house, room to room, trying to find a flaw in her cleaning or find fault with her cooking after leaving her with no money to buy the ingredients.

I remember, we were sitting, I was eating dinner, something [about the dinner] didn't suit him, and he tried to poke me with a fork. It's a good thing I had just moved my hand, because I would have had a fork stuck in my hand. He threw a chair at me—I moved away and the chair hit the wall. There were various such cases. The pork was done wrong [...] (Maria)

This violence was also exercised in the course of men's assertion of their proprietary rights over ‘their’ women, men's policing of women's behaviour to assert their ‘ownership’ entitlement and surveillance of women to impose a jealous control over them:

I was getting ready for bed. Because I was supposed to go to work the next day. And suddenly he walked in, right? He asked me what I was doing, who I was texting, why I had my phone. I was setting my alarm clock to get up for work. And that's when he threw me out of my bed, stepped on my head with his shoe. And then I started screaming, I had enough! I just screamed with all my might. And I wanted to leave the house, but he took my phone. (Emilia)

Women problematised this jealous control when it manifested itself through physical violence, as in Maria's case:

Hardly a month passed since I moved in with him. I was standing in the bathroom by the mirror. I was putting mascara on. My little one was sitting next to me and was playing with a toy car. Suddenly he stood up, saw that I am putting makeup on, and I got punched, I don't even know what direction it came from because I fell over on my kid. It was the first time I got punched by a man, because no man has ever laid a hand on me. [...] I didn't even feel the pain because of the shock—I was wondering what is happening, what is going on. I stood up, my little one had started crying so I picked him up, I calmed him down. I asked him “What was it? What's in your head?” He replied that I did my makeup like a whore, that I only go to a shop and yet do my makeup like a whore. (Maria)

However, romantic jealousy that was expressed early on in the relationship was often constructed as an innate, even inevitable aspect of romantic love—in keeping with dominant

culturally specific constructions of romantic love in the West. This commonly meant that women did not always recognise some forms of controlling behaviour during the early stages of their relationships, as noted elsewhere (Towns and Scott 2013).

Non-fatal strangulation was another commonly used form of violence which not only poses an immediate risk to health and life but also represents an extreme form of controlling behaviour rather than a failed homicide (Stansfield and Williams 2018). Non-fatal strangulation is utilised by men as ‘an exceptionally effective way to gain and maintain control’ as it shows that perpetrators literally hold victims’ lives in their hands (Thomas et al. 2014: 29). The risks it poses and the difficulty of prosecuting it led to calls for the creation of a specific offence related to non-fatal strangulation in several jurisdictions including the UK (Bonham and Ktena 2019), which was heeded in the UK’s Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

He never generally hit me. It wasn't that he hit me. He would choke me. [...] When we came back [from the hospital after the birth of her first child], I was hanging out the laundry and he started throwing the laundry at me, he kicked the basket with the laundry and pushed me onto the corner sofa. He started choking me. He just started choking me, he grabbed my neck, he choked me. And he put me in a dressing gown outside the door, into the corridor, and closed the door in front of my nose. It was heavy. (Marta)

During the earlier stages of her abusive relationship, Marta was reluctant to characterise her boyfriend’s actions as physical violence, which she equated with ‘hitting’. She did not perceive choking as violence, but rather as a performative act to induce fear rather than physical harm. However, most women recounted a sense of panic and a very real fear of death.

He grabbed me by the face, like this [the respondent shows the grip around the throat to the camera at this point] [...] he squeezed me. And he walked with me [half lifting, half dragging her] through the whole kitchen, he pushed me. And then he told me that he was going to ‘sort me out’ one day. I was so terrified because I had never suffered physical, mental, emotional, financial abuse in my family home. I was so terrified that my mouth closed and I didn't want to tell anyone ever again whether he was good or bad. (Aniela)

Research indicates the very gendered nature of non-fatal strangulation which is a tool persistently used by abusive men to maintain their control over women (Stansfield and Williams 2018). For Aniela, her survival strategy became staying quiet because she was ashamed of what was happening, but also because she feared that there was no possibility of escape.

Men were often very careful in their use of physical violence to avoid leaving any evidence, in the form of bruises, on women’s bodies. Acts of violence like non-fatal strangulation can frequently leave no physical traces and can thus be hard to prove or prosecute. Men also used a range of other techniques to avoid detection:

Once I got punched, it was more frequent thereafter. He didn’t like something or whatever... I usually didn’t get punched in the face but in the head, with his fist. Not in the face—so that there wouldn’t be any signs, bruises. (Maria)

[...] he was hitting me all the time, but he was using such techniques that other people would not see that I was hit. So, everything he did to me was below, under the clothes, yeah. So he knew it, how to do it that other people wouldn’t recognise that I’m physically abused. He would hit me even during the pregnancy... I had to sleep on the floor when

heavily pregnant because I didn't have access to bed. ... Later, there were episodes when he hit me in my face and blood came gushing from my nose when my newborn baby was downstairs. (Joanna)

A few men inflicted physical harm in deliberate ways that could nonetheless be explained away as accidents:

It wasn't the typical physical violence, where a guy would just come up and hit you, it was just like, oh, he'd walk past me—he'd nudge me or push me away in this uncool way. (Iwona)

I noticed that when I started to fight back, he also used more and more sophisticated methods. He could, for example, sit on my lap, I was sitting in an armchair, he, a hundred kilos guy, sat on my lap. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't move. (Paulina)

Two women recounted actions that indicated an intention to kill them:

One time, he accused me of cheating on him while he was in prison. So, he tied me up and said that he would kill me. It was terrible. But my mother reacted in time, the police came, they took him away. (Jola)

I was at home when he left me at home with the gas pipe cut. By chance, my son came home early from school and smelled gas in the house. (Krystyna)

For both Krystyna and Jola, these incidents catalysed their decision to leave the abusive relationship. However, men's use of physical violence also commonly served to reinforce their control over women and to signal to them that any attempt to leave would result in an escalation of the violence.

Our analysis of Polish women's accounts of the physical violence they suffered clearly indicates how such violence is always intentional and embedded within a pattern of conduct. Men's use of physical violence was intrinsically connected to their enforcement of gender regimes and hierarchies within relationships and cannot be disconnected from power and control.

## **Sexual violence**

Despite sexual violence within relationships commonly co-occurring alongside other forms of domestic violence and abuse, it has received substantially less attention than physical violence in relationships or sexual violence, in general. It remains a common yet hidden form of domestic violence against women. Kelly's influential study on sexual violence (1988) drew attention to the domination and appropriation of women's bodies by men and emphasised the link between different forms of sexual violence experienced by women. A central contribution of this scholarship was the concept of the continuum of sexual violence, which analysed the ways in which coercive and consensual sexual relations were not distinct categories but should instead be conceptualised as connected and lying at two ends of a continuum of gendered power and control in heterosexual relations.

Data on sexual assault by rape or penetration (including attempts) in England and Wales indicates that nearly half of the victims had experienced repeat victimisation, and more than four in ten (44%) were victimised by their partner or ex-partner (ONS 2020). Twelve women

reported sexual violence by their partner, though given how many women's disclosures were the first time they had told anyone about it, this is likely to be an underestimate.

He was pushing me to have sex with him, yes. I didn't want it at all. I just wanted to leave him and have my own life, but yes, he's a big guy, I didn't... I couldn't physically stop it, and I was shouting and there was a lot of screaming. At that time, I was living in a shared house, we were on the first floor, my neighbours downstairs, it was a Polish girl with her husband, they heard us but they were scared about his reaction because he was abusive to other people as well, he was very violent. (Joanna)

Sexual violence within intimate relationships is often constructed as a hidden crime, but in this case, despite Joanna's screams no one intervened then or tried to offer support to her later. Apart from their fear of the consequences, it is likely that dominant constructions of intimate partner sexual violence as a private matter shaped their lack of response (Weitzman et al. 2020).

He would wake up in the night, take the baby out of bed, and say, "Either you're going to sleep with me, or I'm going to fucking kidnap him and you're never going to see him." Yeah! And you know he's capable of that, right? Because he's got everything, he's got the money, he can fucking handle it, and I've got nothing. And you stop calling [for help], even though you can, you stop calling. You're just looking for that fucking solution all the time, how to do it [...]" (Julia)

At a point in her life when she had a small baby to look after, and no source of income, Julia's partner used explicit threats to coerce her into sex. For others, the threats may have been absent, but the coercion was explicit:

There was no physical violence. It was mostly psychological abuse. At some point, I was so withdrawn that, as far as a sex life was concerned, I didn't want to have sex or anything. And that's where another aspect came in—the sexual violence: "You're my wife, you have to do it". And actually [...] I thank God that there is [daughter], but [...] I have practically never said this, but in fact [daughter] was born [...] I don't know, you could even call it [...] I don't know, maybe not exactly rape, right? But I was forced to have sex. I was forced to have sex and I got pregnant as result. So, during the pregnancy period I was happy to be pregnant because I knew I wouldn't be forced to have sex. So I survived that period. The moment she was born [...] you know what, I didn't realise it at the time, but now, after a long period, I know that I was depressed. It was a terrible depression. (Agata)

Agata hesitates to term what happened to her as 'rape', even though she is clear that there was no consent. It has been nearly three decades since husbands' exemption to prosecution for marital rape was ended in England and Wales and in all 50 U.S. states (Williamson 2017; Seyller et al. 2016). However, dominant constructions of 'real rape', and the presumption of women's irrevocable consent to sexual relations upon marriage mitigate victims' understandings of their experiences of sexual violence, as Malwina recounted:

The rape. That was the worst. And, then the fact that [daughter] was in the room. When I disclosed the information about the rape [to a domestic violence service], well I didn't name it that. Right. Because I didn't know it was rape or I wouldn't classify as a rape. But I learnt that it was rape. I didn't give my consent to it, he dragged me upstairs and done what he'd done, but, but just before he'd done it, he said, "you are my wife, and this is what husband and wife do". (Malwina)



Several participants invoked biologically determinist narratives about men's innate drive for sex and men's inability to control their sexual desire once aroused, which combined with social expectations upon women to meet their men's sexual needs. Within the context of these gendered socio-cultural norms, several women felt unable to say no, lest *they* be blamed for their partner's sexual infidelity or seen as 'bad women'.

I had quite a lot of female [intimate] operations in my life, here in UK, so here I am, after the operation, with the stitches, bruises [...] After the operation, just back from hospital, he simply had sex with me in no proper way [anal sex]. Men obviously they want sex and this is attractive to them—but how much do women have to suffer? They don't have any idea. But I didn't object so not to lose the man. I wanted to be a good woman, I couldn't say 'no', because I was afraid, he would turn to another woman. [...] Many times after he finished the sex I was just left on the floor just crying, full of not pleasant emotions. (Sofia)

Intimate partner sexual violence commonly encompasses a range of behaviours, including rape and sexual assault, and also more subtle behaviours including the use of coercion and blackmail, or the social expectations around men's sexual access to 'their' women, to obtain sex (Tarzia 2021).

It started two weeks before [...] Two weeks before the birth there was this situation. [...] I can tell you about it, only it's really severe because it is associated with rape I experienced. He knew perfectly that I was raped, how it all looked. And at that moment he told me to get completely [...] shouted at me and told me to get completely undressed. And it was like he was ordering me, I don't know what to say it, should I just use the term? I was supposed to give him a blow job. Yes, exactly. And he knew that this was traumatic for me because during the rape I was forced to do such a thing, it's hard for me. I was in such shock. That he just did it and he ordered me to do it. But, of course after a while [after she had done what he demanded] he said "No way, what are you doing? I'm just joking" and he started hugging me, "I'm sorry, I was just joking" (Marta)

Within the context of an abusive relationship, women often had little space to withhold consent to sex, and the threat of violence played a central role in their diminished space for action.

They granted me this flat in the same neighbourhood, so he found me again in this neighbourhood and he was there again. He started touching me everywhere.

*Q: Without your permission?*

Yes, yes. It was supposed to be in the form of a joke of course, because I'm Polish, I don't understand how to joke here in the UK. He would pat my face and say "Good girl" to me when he touched me somewhere, in intimate places. Praising me that I didn't push him away. At that point the violence was already strong enough, and I was already so afraid of him, that we started sleeping together again. He did not force me into bed, he put so much pressure on me that I knew I simply had to. He did not say to me "You must", I just knew that I had to. Then, after an hour he would come downstairs, pat me on the face again and say to me "Good girl". (Aniela)

Aniela had tried to leave the abusive relationship but he found her. Aniela's narrative lays bare the ways in which the very real fear of violence created a coercive context whereby going along with his expectation of sexual access to her became a survival strategy for her.

Women's narratives about intimate partner sexual violence indicate the many ways in which such violence enacted men's sense of entitlement to women's bodies and was an expression of power and control. Dominant gendered discourses about sexual subjectivities which construct men's sexual desires as insatiable and uncontrollable and women as responsible for meeting men's sexual needs often shaped women's understanding of sexual violence within their relationships. It was only after they managed to leave the abusive relationship that many women were able to name what they experienced as rape or sexual violence.

## **Conclusion**

The life histories of the twenty-eight women we interviewed help us understand the ways in which different forms and manifestations of domestic violence and abuse together constrained their lives. Physical violence was always part of a pattern of behaviour and never an isolated incident perpetrated by their partner; additionally, it was also embedded in a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour and accompanied by economic abuse, psychological abuse and sexual violence. While there are many commonalities between Polish women's experiences of domestic violence and abuse and what research indicates about domestic violence experienced by diverse categories of women, there were also specificities to their experiences that are important to understand and respond to. Despite and within the constraints created by men's violence and abuse, women utilised a range of strategies to protect themselves and their children, while trying to survive within the narrowing space for action.

### Case study: Sofia

Sofia was brought up by her mum and her step-father, who was emotionally very abusive towards her and her mother. Sofia was a divorced single mum with two young children when she met Artur online. Artur was Polish but he had been living and working in the UK. After just one meeting in Poland, she packed her belongings and moved to join him, hoping to provide a better life for her children. Soon after her arrival, she found some cleaning jobs, because she didn't know any English. From the very beginning, Artur expected her to take care of the home—cleaning, cooking, shopping—on top of her own work and taking care of the children. Everything had to be spotless. She remembers Hoovering at 10pm just before he came back home, because the kids had left some crumbs on the carpet and she knew he would be mad about that. Artur never cared about Sofia's boys, he couldn't stand them in fact, which was very painful for her. Sofia had to pay Artur for rent and bills and had to do the shopping from her own wages. One of Artur's many requirements was to be provided daily with meat for dinner and good whiskey. Because she didn't have enough money, she would often feed the children and herself plain pasta so that she could put meat and whiskey on Artur's table. "If I didn't bring these from the shop for him", says Sofia, "there would be a fight. So, to have a quiet house I did whatever he asked". On the other hand, Artur spent his money on expensive clothes and a car, that she and the children were not allowed in. She would carry all the shopping from the supermarket on her bike because the car was only for his personal use. His violent outbursts became more frequent and severe. He grabbed her several times by the throat, frequently hit her and once made her undress and beat her severely, with a belt, until she was bleeding all over. He forced painful sex on her just after she came back from the hospital after a gynaecological operation. He also drafted a 15-point contract for her to sign in which he outlined the regime of total subservience that he expected from her. She called the police only once, after one such incident. The police came and told them to sort things out between themselves. So, she knew not to expect any help from the police in the future. Sofia made six attempts to leave this relationship but each time he either expressed love and remorse or threatened her to destroy her if she left, so she kept returning. At one of these points, her sister contacted her ex-husband who came to the UK and reported her to social services. But the social services had a positive opinion about Sofia's parental skills and her efforts to protect the children as best as she could. After a further two and a half years, she managed to leave with the support of a Polish friend, who offered her and her children a place in her home. Sofia then moved to her own place. Following a referral from her children's new school, who noticed the adverse ongoing impact of the domestic violence on her children, Sofia and the children received counselling and other support, which helped her to recover from the abusive relationship.

## **4.2 Women's responses to domestic violence and abuse: Barriers to disclosure, strategies for resistance and the decision to leave**

The interview narratives, both from women and the practitioners highlighted the complexity of the many influences on women's behaviour around seeking help. Both barriers and facilitators to disclosure of their abuse, even to close friends and family members, and initiating engagement with services were revealed, aiding our understanding of the powerful socio-cultural, political and economic determinants at play.

### **Naming it as domestic violence and abuse**

One of the first barriers women faced in the process of help-seeking was the complex journey towards recognising and naming what they were experiencing as 'domestic violence and abuse'. In relation to sexual violence, researchers have long noted how dominant social constructions of sexual violence create certain patterns of naming and silencing (Kelly 1988; Pande 2013). Kelly and Radford (1990) explored what women meant when they said "nothing really happened." Despite their perception of harm and violation, women's experiences were not defined as sexual violence in the mainstream, thereby normalising and minimising it. Similarly for domestic violence and abuse, when women are unable to name what has happened to them as violence, they can also struggle to allocate the responsibility squarely upon the perpetrator and to seek help.

These issues were raised repeatedly throughout the interviews. Women often only associated abuse with physical evidence—such as bruising of their skin or severe acts of violence, as Julia indicated: "It wasn't some case where he, you know, cut my throat or strangled me." This was confirmed by practitioners who described an equation of domestic violence with only physical violence. Marta explained how she felt that she "had nothing to complain about because she was not beaten like other women" and she had never ended up in hospital or suffered physical wounds and so she felt that her situation was too weak to seek help for. Similarly, Agnieszka equated domestic violence as explicit punches, and not other forms of intentional physical harm:

I'd never admit it in my life, see? Because it's good, it's great at home. "Well, he likes a drink, he likes a drink" "But did he hit you?", "No, absolutely not! He never hit me!", Never mind the long sleeves, because he tugged me around, and I'd say "No, no, I'm just always cold". In fact, the person herself is lost in this lie. (Agnieszka)

Women who experienced coercive control or economic abuse also struggled to name their experiences as domestic violence.

You know, like he's not a cruel guy! When it's my birthday, man, he comes with a bouquet of flowers, a cake! At home, you know, a stressful job, so he has to drink. [...] Because he never hit me, so what's this [...] You know, it was even hard for me to understand that this is violence, right? (Julia)

This was particularly the case where women attributed the abuse or controlling behaviour to their partner's alcohol problem, rather than perceiving it as an inherent feature of their relationship.

You know, ever since I met him, I've noticed that he has a problem with alcohol, but at the beginning you fall in love. [...] Only when we started to be together... And he could

have a break [from drinking] even for a year, you know, he went to therapy and all that, that's why this relationship lasted so long, because there were some attempts on his part to end drinking. And you know! Also, the fact that somewhere... maybe if there is no physical violence, you don't notice the psychological violence from the beginning. It kind of drags on longer, because you know, sometimes women say "Ah, if he'd just hit me once, right? I would have left him straight away!" (Maja)

This was also the case in relation to sexual violence. Julia described how "he would force himself on me" but she didn't identify as a victim of domestic violence as he "only" beat her occasionally and didn't leave bruises. Malwina did not name her experience as rape until this was pointed out to her by practitioners.

Indeed, it commonly took a conversation with a third party, sometimes a family member, or a health professional, to help women to come to the realisation that the harm they had been subjected to was recognised within our constructions of domestic violence. In Joanna's case, it was a casual conversation with another parent on the school playground that instigated her phone call to a Polish domestic abuse helpline:

Even in that moment when I was talking with her, I still didn't think I'm a victim of domestic abuse. I knew it that he treated me very badly, I knew it that I don't want him to treat my kids like that, but the definition in my head was still not connected with domestic abuse; it's weird, it's weird, it's hard to explain, this is how my brain worked at that time, probably survival mode. (Joanna).

Agata described the circumstances around her realisation that her son, who himself was receiving help from a mental health service, was also a direct victim of physical violence, which she had not previously recognised:

In November we had our first visit to CAMHS just with [son], about his behaviour. And there, let me tell you, another nightmare began, because my heart broke. At the interview with the psychologist, my child said for the first time in his life that they had been beaten and insulted by their father.

*Q: And you didn't know about it?*

No. No. I was in total shock. And the psychologist asked me to leave, that she wanted to talk to [son]. After the interview, I went back to the room where she presented the situation to me, she even played me a piece of footage where [son] says that they [he and his brother] were thrown on the floor, they were thrown against the wall, they were called retards, everything. And they were bullied. As she explained to me, [son's] self-harm and aggression is associated with it. That their father told them that if they tell anything to anyone, Social Work would come and take them to a children's home, to a care home and they would never see their mother again in their lives. This was violence used against [both sons]. [...] As soon as I left the place, crying, I went straight to the police. I reported it to the police and the procedure was initiated. (Agata)

Viola and Mirka only recognised their own abuse once their psychologist referred them to a domestic abuse service. As Viola explained:

After that therapy my eyes were opened for the first time. They made me aware of this scheme that was going on at home, that there was this triangle. I really noticed it and all the puzzles in my head started to come together. (Viola)

For Mirka, it took a conversation with a policeman before she recognised, she was experiencing abuse, which still came as a shock to her:

Police said to me that I'm domestic violence victim and I should not only worry about my daughter, but I should also worry about myself. [...] When I had that interview with the police, when they came here and they wrote down everything and I was reading that, I couldn't believe that it was actually my life. And I cried for 20 minutes—they let me cry, the police officers. And I looked at them and said—that was my life. And I was so shocked, that it was the only thing I could say to them. And they said yes, that was your life. (Mirka)

Other researchers also reiterate the ways in which minimising the abuse may enable some women to cope with the domestic violence and survive, though this may delay the provision of appropriate services (Francis et al. 2017). Even when victims did start to recognise that they were victims of abuse, they described how they still found it hard to admit to themselves and others, and the feelings of shame that still prevented them from seeking help or speaking about it to anyone. This is demonstrated by Agnieszka's conversation with a friend:

"I'm asking you a question like, has your husband ever hit you besides today?" and I just [...] my brain isn't functioning, I just don't know what to say, I don't know if I'm ready to say that to anybody. With so much going on. And I'm standing, and I'm not answering anything. "Do you understand the question?", "Yes, I understand", "Then answer me", and I was silent, I was not able to answer! And he says "I thought you wouldn't answer, so I will ask you the same question a second time, but I will add one important aspect. Your older son said that it happens very often that dad hits mum. So, I ask you that question again, has he ever hit you?" "Well, yes" and he says, "And that's where you side with the kids and stick to that, and we'll talk about everything else later". And then it hit me! That's when it dawned on me that it was time to say it all, to just get it all out and say it, right? (Agnieszka)

Lack of recognition of the extent of abuse had implications for reporting behaviour and a sense that only 'serious' episodes of violence could or should be reported as demonstrated by Marta who said: "Well, the fact is that I didn't report it anywhere, I didn't report that he hit me, that he jostled me, that he pushed me out of bed with a kick, that he slapped my face, right?" Interestingly Marta also indicated that if it wasn't witnessed by a third party (often a family member, including children) then it need not be formally reported: "I didn't report it because my daughter didn't see it, she wasn't aware of it at all, because she didn't see it. It was happening but she didn't know the whole time. She was in her room." (Marta)

Where men had an ongoing problem of alcohol abuse, women—and often their family and friends—attributed the domestic violence and abuse to alcohol, which often served to absolve men of their responsibility for their behaviour. This was the case even where the patterns of coercive control, economic abuse and sexual abuse preceded and outlived the occasional acts of alcohol-fuelled physical violence or verbal abuse. Julia explained how she hung on to the hope that she could "save him" and she attributed his abusive behaviour to alcohol because "when he was sober, he was this nice, loving, caring, charming person he was at the very beginning [of the relationship]." She convinced herself that if she could stop him drinking, she was "gonna have my fairy-tale and then [...] then we're gonna be fine." Ania also explained that constant promises from her partner about how he was going to change for the better [give

up drinking], prevented her from leaving. Dominant constructions of men's alcohol abuse served to obscure the gendered power and control in these relationships and impeded the naming of the problem as domestic violence and abuse rather than alcohol abuse.

Despite these barriers, women made tentative disclosures and sought out information to help them to frame and understand their own experiences, for example using the internet to find experiences they could identify with. Oliwia, for example, explained how, when she came to England, she:

[...] started looking on the internet, on YouTube, listening to various things. And then I started to, as it were [...] secretly, right? I started reading, listening and it all became more apparent to me then, as it were. But maybe I didn't quite want to believe yet. (Oliwia)

Indeed, needing a close friend or family member to help the victim recognise her abuse was very common in the transcripts and the views of an independent party also helped women to realise that the fault did not lie with them—it was common in the transcripts for women to look to themselves for the reason behind the way they were being treated:

It turned out, that the psychologist told me that it was about my husband, right? And so, all the time I thought it was something with me. If I improve myself, then maybe the other person will change too. So I thought. (Oliwia)

Many women recalled feelings of empowerment at the moment when they realised that their experience was domestic violence and how this recognition also heralded a readiness to work towards recovery/survivorship. Joanna said: “During my counselling sessions I said loudly “I’m victim of domestic abuse” and this was the game changer.” Zuzanna reported that how beginning to address her experiences directly with her abuser helped: “I began talking about it out loud, about how he behaves, um it is as if, I completely went out of this victim role. And this made the difference.

### **Socio-cultural and religious norms: Shame, stigma and gendered conceptions of the family**

Gendered notions of shame and stigma as well as broader socio-cultural norms about women's roles within families and constructions of the ideal family worked together to constrain women's disclosures about the violence and abuse they were suffering.

Jola described how the shame she felt prevented her from seeking help and led to increased social isolation: “I practically never went out either. I locked myself in a cage because, you know, I was ashamed [...] I didn't want anyone to come here because I didn't want anyone to know what was going on here”. Social isolation was a common theme in the transcripts, often a feature of their migration history and absence of extensive networks of family and friends in the UK. Julia recalled how he would hammer home the message that she had “nowhere else to go, right? Well, because I only had him!” This was re-iterated by practitioners who explained that women often say they have no local family or friends, or when friends do exist, abusive partners use tactics to keep women isolated socially.

Some women felt unable to seek help even from their closest family members and there were a number of reasons for this, with feelings of fear, guilt and shame featuring very strongly

throughout the data. Laura explained that it was simply not the norm, particularly in Poland to talk about such 'personal' and 'private' matters. The shame and stigma associated with discussing these concerns with friends and extended family members, let alone practitioners, was pervasive:

We didn't talk about such topics, I had a friend visit me a couple of times, from Poland, but I never went into such topics with her, you know? I blamed myself all the time, really. And I was afraid to talk to anyone at all, because I was afraid, because I felt alone. [...] And it's really hard to get out of that kind of thinking. (Laura)

It leaves a terrible stigma on women like me. [...] Because In Poland, people do not speak, and I do not hear about such things. I can't imagine going to Poland and telling people, for example [...] I doubt that people there would understand, because they look at you like it's your fault [...] because "maybe he did not have a job". I do not understand that, society justifies the torturers. (Mirka)

The issues were summarised by a Polish practitioner who worked in a Polish community support service:

There are cultural barriers, and these are our barriers that we took with us [from Poland]. It's a lack of trust when it comes to the police, for example. It's a belief that what goes on at home goes on at home, so as not to wash the dirt [in public]. And I think that's persistent. And also, the belief about what it means to be a good wife, to be a good mother. Also, such stereotypes that are very easy to [...] well it's easy to manipulate victims of domestic violence. (Practitioner 12: Polish community support service)

There was a broad understanding among the interviewees that family and friends in Poland would have difficulty relating to the situation and therefore be unlikely to support women seeking help or endeavouring to leave an abusive relationship. Agnieszka explained that Polish women: "certainly won't get help from [Polish] people, from friends, from relatives". This was understood to be due to deeply set cultural difference between Poland and the UK as expressed by Paulina who said: "Well, this isn't Poland, where you have to be beaten until you are unconscious, and only then does anyone get interested."

Joanna made interesting comparisons about how her Polish and Scottish friends might view her situation:

[In Poland] It's like, "no, he's your partner, he's your husband but, you know, it's better together, how will you grow your children without him?" There's no place for single parenting, there's no place for being not in the, in the marriage: I was the black sheep, I was the black sheep, because I, I was trying to run away from a 'perfect' marriage'. So for me it was a huge pressure because I tried to do something which was not appreciated by my family in general [...] and it was hard to explain the situation to my [UK] colleagues and friends here because they don't know the background of the Polish culture. Definitely, I will say in, in words what happened, they will be scared, oh my gosh, really, but they will not understand why I'm still there, why I'm still with this guy. I didn't want to be with this stigma that I'm a stupid woman who stays with kids in this abusive house. [...] This culture impact was keeping me in this box, you should be quiet. (Joanna)



While Joanna felt unable to leave the abusive relationship at that point, she also felt that any possible support from her Scottish friends was not accessible because of their possible judgement about her inability to leave.

Maria explained that she could not disclose the abuse to her own mother because: “My mum would blame me, saying it was my fault.” while Aniela explained that her reticence to seek help from her family was due to a notion that she “had no escape. That even if I told, my family would urge me to go back as soon as possible,” which may have been influenced by the importance of the family unit in Poland.

Sometimes reticence also stemmed from a history of violence through the family, and an expectation that women should tolerate the abuse to keep the family together. Ewa had experienced family break-up as a child and did not want to repeat this pattern for her own family: “You're building a house, right? I come from a broken family, so I wanted to merge, not break, no?” Pressures created by the history of family violence also influenced Joanna:

I feel embarrassed to tell anybody in Poland what happened, and because in my home family there was a tradition or taboo that the man is always, whoa, like violent; you should be calm, just hide, just go away, like my mum did, she just ran away with us and waited until dad would become sober. (Joanna)

Unlike the long-standing constructions of domestic violence against the mother as harm to the children in the UK, at least theoretically through the Children Act 1989, one Polish lawyer noted the somewhat different construction of the problem in Poland:

The problem is also connected to a widespread belief that the abuser is, could be a good father, despite being abusive towards the women. Many women make this distinction between ‘good father’ and ‘bad husband,’ he may not be good enough for his wife, but he is good enough for his children. (Practitioner 16: lawyer in a Polish law firm)

Across many cultural contexts, the social norm that, what happens within marriage is considered private and should not be shared outside the home, may mean that disclosing domestic violence is what is perceived as shameful, rather than the abuse itself (Alsaker, et al. 2016; Beaulaurier et al. 2005; Petersen et al. 2005). Central to these notions of shame were also gendered conceptions of self and identity that, for many women, are entangled with the responsibility for making family relationships work. When their relationships did not meet this ideal, the sense of personal failure and deficiency these women felt, elicited feelings of shame that were so powerful, they encouraged the women to keep the abuse hidden, rather than have their perceived deficiencies exposed. Based on the role of shame in the narratives of women affected by intimate partner violence in New Zealand, Thaggard and Montayre (2019) argue that countering the corrosive effects of shame upon those who experience such violence and abuse could usefully target some of those beliefs that lead many women to define their sense of self in relation to ideals about family life and relationships.

Beyond an individualised notion of shame, that is nonetheless shaped by broader gendered norms, the concept of shame may also take broader familial dimensions in some cultural contexts (Sandhu and Barrett 2020; Viridi 2013), where the shame of leaving an abusive relationship attaches to the wider family. These issues were also raised by practitioners who had direct experience of supporting Polish women in the UK. For example:

There's also the issue of the girl's own family, that the girl brought shame on the family by for example, divorce, separation and so on. The husband's family, of course, because the perpetrator's family, is like, “Well, how could she leave him like that? After all, it is the woman who is responsible for the home, for everything that goes on there, for the family.” And also, the issue of community, because there were situations when a girl had support among her friends, and there were situations when she didn't! (Practitioner 10, Polish community support service).

The notion of shame is also exacerbated for migrant women living in a foreign country context, where the migration may be associated with new beginnings and a better life, and so the sense of failure, in acknowledging the domestic violence, may be compounded (Tonsing and Barn 2017). As Tonsing and Barn (2017, p. 632) write, ‘to understand shame is to understand denial, silence and secrecy.’

Other barriers were reported more at a societal/cultural level—including the expectations of a very religious (Catholic) country. Joanna explained: “In Poland it’s taboo, it’s taboo subject, and there is not much to do from, from church side that they can support you; they teach you to forgive and to love, even if it’s situation like that.” (Joanna).

Other pressures came from societal and religious norms, including the central importance of family:

There's this Catholic side where you, you know, that's one, that's a religious side. And then it's the, uh, our community and generally how we are and how we see, a family unit, it's a husband and wife, husband is a head and he's been generally allowed, to do anything. And you as a wife, you need to just listen, provide food, make sure that, you know, everything is clean. And so, your husband and, you know, he's looked after, but are you looked after? You do not even think about it. You do not, in our mentality, I think it's like more, we do not even consider ourselves to, you know, to not look after ourselves. (Malwina)

Such attitudes have been documented in faith-based communities, including an over emphasis on doctrines of forgiveness, acceptance and endurance on part of women and in relation to men’s behaviour (Levitt and Ware 2006; Truong et al. 2020). In the context of their support for hierarchical gendered roles, this research also documents how such norms shape responses to domestic violence that include silence, denial and victim-blaming. However, research also argues that immigrant faith leaders can provide support and change community attitudes (Choi et al. 2016).

### **Shrinking space for action created by the perpetrator**

Several women recounted barriers created by men through their coercive and controlling behaviour which reduced women’s capacity to think and act, as they redirected their energies towards surviving in the face of the violence and abuse (Stark, 2007). Men commonly utilised direct threats and taunts about the consequences women would face after leaving, and these commonly related to custody of the children, or her being alone, left with nothing and being ‘good for nothing’ and ‘unable to manage’. Ania said:

I was constantly begging him, I don't want to be in this relationship, I don't want you—he tried to persuade me or he would threaten me that he will have the children. Or he

would threaten me he will make my life a living hell [...] I remember I felt so helpless [...] He was laughing in my face—"you'll never leave, you'll be nobody without me". There were moments [...] I was going crazy, he was making me crazy [...] and there were children, how will I cope as a single mother, you know, with four sons, what will I tell the children? (Ania)

Where women remained at home caring for the children or where men had a better command of the English language and familiarity with UK support systems, as documented elsewhere (Anitha, 2011), they weaponised these resources to threaten, manipulate and intimidate women. Aniela explained:

That's how I was intimidated by him, that "As soon as you speak out, say anything [...] all the time he brought up this subject that "What are you going to do with the children? They'll take them away from you after all. They'll take your children away from you!" and I said "On what grounds?", "Because you're a bad mother. I am going to report you". (Aniela)

Imbalances in earning potential were also the basis of threats: "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," as Ania described.

A practitioner recounted her experience supporting women and their reticence to leave, views that were often shaped by emotional abuse from their partner:

It was in every age group actually [...] I used to meet girls in their twenties, and they were also afraid to be alone. I mean, you know, that's one of the methods of manipulation during domestic violence, that you tell the victim that "Who else would want you? I'm doing you a favour that I'm with you," well, and that person starts to believe it. (Practitioner 10, Polish community support service)

Women also reported evidence of physical barriers being put in their way—such as restricting access to sources of information (the internet) or monitoring her phone and emails. Joanna explained: "I couldn't send them email; he was checking my phones, he was checking my email." For others, it was the fear of actually being caught searching for information that deterred them from seeking help. Pauline explained how she "wasn't looking for anything [...] I didn't want to, because I knew that he would find out. [...] Sooner or later, he's going to come across it in some way. And that it would turn against me."

Fear of not being believed was further re-enforced by emotional abuse from the partner as Agata demonstrated:

If you report something anywhere, nobody will believe you anyway. "You're too stupid, you don't work, nobody will believe you. What are you even talking about? What kind of psychological violence? What are you even talking about? Girl! You are abnormal, you should get psychiatric treatment, you should be in a mental institution! You are a nobody!". So, I didn't seek that help anywhere. (Agata)

Julia described how she learned to live with the abuse as a survival strategy:

You know, after a few years, and you're in the same situation or even worse, you don't have anyone to go to, you don't even know how to look for that help, because you're in a foreign country. Actually, you work in the same place, you live in the same apartment, you go on vacation together, everything is just so [...] you're in this, you know, golden cage, right? That you supposedly have this freedom, and you have this freedom, but you don't really. At some point it was already such that I just learned to sit quietly [...] It's just, you learn! You learn patterns, you learn behaviour, and you act like a robot. You act like a robot. (Julia)

The concepts of silence and privacy were powerful, as was a fear of consequences, as Julia stated: "If he finds out, he'll kill you. And you know, people just start to believe in all this, right? I think that this is also our Polish way, you know, what happens within four walls, stays within four walls."

A range of complex barriers prevented women from disclosing the violence and abuse and seeking support, including the manipulations and control exerted by the perpetrator to limit their options. While many of these barriers are commonly experienced by victims of domestic violence and abuse in diverse contexts, there were also specificities relating to the migrant experience that exacerbated the factors which impeded disclosure.

### **Economic barriers**

Women described the many economic barriers they faced in seeking help, and the complexity and interplay between employment and educational status, childcare, and family relations. Practitioners also spoke of their experiences of supporting women, including navigating the complex benefits and other support systems available to them.

Women's employment status often interplayed with their role as a new mother, or a mother of a small child/children and being the main caregiver at home whilst the partner was able to gain paid employment. For some women, this situation was temporary (they intended to seek employment once the children were older), though for some, full time work was not feasible or desirable due to their caring responsibilities, in some cases for children complex needs. Julia described her not untypical difficulties:

How am I supposed to leave if I don't have a job? I mean, I'm on maternity. [...] I'm only going to go back part-time, so I'm automatically going to earn a lot less, I'm a mother with a small child, so there's no way that I'm going to rent anything by myself, absolutely! If I couldn't do it with my sister, I couldn't do it alone! (Julia)

The need and expense of childcare, and inadequacy of child-benefit allowances combined with limited employment opportunities and access to carers, and prevented women becoming financially independent. Many described how the exorbitant costs of childcare in the UK, and the complexities around accessing it, delayed their return to employment to such a time when their children reached a certain age. This in turn led to further social and financial isolation for the mother. Others, such as Paulina, could not have coped without additional family help around childcare:

We knew we had no choice, and at first it was only three hours, because there was no room in the kindergarten, but then it became available. And once he [son] was in [nursery] for as many hours as she [daughter] was in school, it was ok. [...] And it was only then

that I could start working part-time. And if it wasn't for mom's help, I couldn't have rented an apartment. It's just unreal! (Paulina)

Others worked strategically to plan the best time to seek help/move away from the relationship. Paulina demonstrates the positives of accessing childcare in freeing the participant up to seek employment. However, it also shows how she had to delay her departure until it was financially viable (through gaining employment) for her to leave:

I had to wait until that time when he went to kindergarten and I could go to work. And I didn't want to try to leave and have to go back to him later or have problems. I already wanted to be sure that if I left, I would leave and that I could handle it, right? Without him. [...] So I just figured I could handle it, survive until he [son] goes to day care and I go to work and start earning some money of my own. (Paulina)

A further key economic barrier to seeking help was the cost of services, including seeking legal advice, as Julia recalled: “So when I heard it [legal advice] was going to cost me £6,000, I was blown away! The bare minimum, no! Where am I going to get that kind of money?” A lawyer from a Polish law firm explained how finances could constitute a barrier to persevering through the courts:

If she is getting universal credit, she is entitled to it [Legal Aid]. But they also check accounts, possessions and for example if someone has savings, they can have a one-time fee imposed on them, sometimes 200 and sometimes even 1200 pounds. But everything else is paid for. And women often withdraw from the case, when it turns out that they have to pay for legal aid, that nothing is for free. (Practitioner 16, lawyer in a Polish law firm)

Practitioners described financial limitations on a much more immediate and practical level—such as not being able to afford travel costs, either for attending services or actually leaving the house (which further exacerbated their social isolation): “Just the financial violence, the financial control, that they don't have any resources. They don't even have enough money for the bus to leave the house anymore sometimes.” (Practitioner 13, ‘by and for’ domestic violence service). Also on a practical level, the application process for many forms of financial and housing support are dependent on the women being able to provide evidence of their financial status, often in the form of bank statements etc. Again, this becomes complex when the partner controls the finances and she may not have her own bank account, and indeed access to the evidence as she might not be able to log-in to the bank account, as he might be controlling her internet access/checking her phone.

Practitioners described the complexities of gaining access to Universal Credit, and the way in which previous employment and marital status impact on the women’s rights and how, either being ineligible, or lacking the knowledge and confidence to navigate formal and complex application processes, served as deterrents for women leaving abusive relationships or securing alternative temporary accommodation. Many complexities around housing were revealed—including cost and access to housing and whether he or she should leave—again tied up with the issue of employment as one practitioner explained:

These women would often say that expectations were put on her, that she should leave him, she should leave her home, because it's her job to make sure that the children are

safe. Only that no one has thought about how she is supposed to do this if she is very often financially dependent on such a man. (Practitioner 5, Polish health visitor).

Maja described the amount of nuanced and forward planning it takes to begin to seek access to services and eventually leave the relationship, particularly when the male partner had previously been in control of the family finances.

I kind of already had that preparation, I knew that this time, when I was going to separate, you know, I never had that ‘we only had a joint account’ or that I didn’t have an account. I always had my own. [...] I’ve also heard that there are women who come out of violent relationships, and they’ve never worked, so they can’t apply for benefits, because the benefits were for the children, for the husband or for the partner. You know, and suddenly they have to do everything from the beginning! They have to set up an account, go somewhere to do some cleaning or whatever, work at least 16 hours to have some financial support. Well, that didn’t happen with me, did it? I knew, I knew my rights there, probably because I’ve been working for a long time. (Maja)

When studying barriers facing women in abusive relationships, researchers often focus on individual or interpersonal factors, such as how the women feel about their partner, their internal feelings of shame, what they (or those they are close to) think is best for their children, what support they have from family and social networks, and whether they have a place to go to. Velonis et al. (2017) argue, that social and structural factors, such as poverty, barriers related to disability are either left out or viewed at their individual-level consequence, such as a woman’s employment status. They argue for a need to go beyond the individual level to examine the larger social and structural forces that impact women’s lives if we are to understand the decisions women make when facing a violent partner (Velonis et al. 2017). They call for greater attention to how gender intersects with other social inequalities such as those arising from disability and class as well larger factors such as insufficient affordable housing or childcare and failed public/social housing or childcare policies that do not meet the needs of women who experience abuse and their children. The experiences of the women we interviewed affirm the need for such an approach to understanding their constraints.

### **Language barriers and awareness of services**

Language constituted a significant barrier both to finding out about services and accessing or fully benefitting from them once contact had been made. Some of these sections are explored in more detail, in relation to women’s encounters with particular services (section 4.4) rather than barriers, which are discussed here.

These experiences were reported by both the women interviewed and the practitioners. Ewa explained how not speaking English “shuts that person down in general to the fact that there are any opportunities. So you know, being in a country where you don’t know the language, it’s like not having arms and legs, for me.” As such, there were pleas throughout the interviews for information and services to be provided in the Polish language, as well as to help raise initial awareness and the quality of interaction once services had been accessed.

Julia and Iwona described their own experiences of learning English, and how their proficiency really helped in seeking and receiving effective help and how being able to engage in sessions in the English language was a significant step forward for them:

You know, I never had with English [...] I learned the language here, right? I knew that I was in a country where I had to speak English. I studied there, then I did the Cambridge certificate, ESOL, you know. Now I get along great [...] that somewhere it gave me this 'freedom', right? (Julia)

Because you know what, it [language proficiency] gives you such comfort though, because whatever happens, you pick up the phone, you call! Or to the police, anywhere! You make a deal, you present your case and that's it! And that person [...] I used to try to imagine "Well, I don't know the language. And now, in such a situation, when something bad happens, what will I do? Gee, I don't know anyone here, I don't have anyone I trust that I can ask for help. What do I do!" Well, that's the problem, isn't it? (Iwona)

Iwona recommended the acquisition of language skills to other women. However, there was also evidence of severe difficulties faced when trying to learn the English Language, particularly those imposed by the abusive partner as in Sofia's experience:

So, I do remember this day I came with my bag, I sat on the floor, opposite him [husband] and I said "I have to tell you something. I just have to tell you something, it's very important. It was summer and I took a one year [language] course"—oh my God, what I got [...] "I know why you don't have money, what you do, where are you going?"—this was a big war because I went to school. This was so painful, because I did this for myself and for my kids, because I have to communicate in school and with the GP, you know, everything. [...] I have to make a life there. This experience was really, really bad, because this was showing, that he really didn't want me to be stronger, independent. (Sofia)

### **Fear of services**

Fear of formal services, including the police, social services and health services constituted a significant barrier to help-seeking. This was reported both by the women we interviewed, who reported their individual experiences and by the partitioners who spoke more generally about many women and families with whom they had worked. The fear and anxiety associated with initiating access to services stemmed from a number of sources, including a mixture of previous direct personal experience and also of hearsay and secondary reported sources of the negative experiences of others. Perpetrators also reinforced these fears to prevent disclosure and help-seeking.

#### ***The police***

Though police can be a crucial point of contact for victims of domestic violence and are often conduits to other services, research indicates that migrant women may face several barriers to contacting the police, including fear of inappropriate responses such as arrest or deportation (Ammar et al. 2013; Reina and Lohman 2015).

Aniela, whose abusive partner was English, described how she had reached the state of readiness to begin to seek help, and had reached out to the Polish Embassy, who had signposted her to a support service and recommended that she involve the police. However, she still encountered feelings of fear which deterred her in taking this step. For Julia however, the reticence stemmed from her fear that involving the police might result in arrest of the

perpetrator which in turn would expose her to other financial or housing vulnerabilities, highlighting the complexity and intersectionality of the many issues at play. Fear also related to subsequent repercussions following release after arrest: “I didn't call the police, because I was afraid! I was honestly afraid that they would take him away, and eventually they would let him go and I would have hell because I still had nowhere to go.” (Julia). Aniela described how, despite now being in contact with the women’s services, she was still too frightened to talk to the police, due to potential repercussions from her abuser. She feared that he would “carry out his plan [to take her life].”

Ania and Agata feared that involving the police might lead to scrutiny of their relationship with the perpetrator and wider implications for the children and questions about the quality of their parenting:

But yes, guilt, I also had something that I feel I'm also guilty of staying in the relationship, as well as sometimes being not on my best behaviour with my children. Because abuse also affects you as a parent. That was my guilt, that I had something *za uszami też, prawda?* I'll say that in Polish, as we say when we're also having our guilt. That was stopping me as well from calling the police. (Ania)

I don't know if I would have dared to report it anywhere! Because I was an addict. (Agata)

Pola reported a negative interaction with the police where she felt pressure “where they tried to force me to make an immediate accusation” against her partner despite her clear fear of him and potential revenge he might take. She alluded to the police working to their own agenda, rather than to hers:

And they [police] try to put that kind of pressure on you, that do it, then we're off the hook. Because then they don't have to go to court, I do! [...] I'm the one who's going to go to court and then I'm the one who's got the problem with it. (Pola)

As reported above, language constitutes a significant barrier to help-seeking. Weronika evidenced the complexities of how this plays out, with not the lack of ability to speak English being the primary barrier, but rather the lack of awareness that translations services would be provided should she have sought help from the police.

I remember, he came into the room and asked for something, again he pulled something out of his memory, some nonsense, as they say, soup too salty<sup>3</sup>. And he trashed our whole room. So much so that everything was lying on the floor and there were holes in the walls. And that I didn't call the police then! [...] if the police had come, if they had seen [daughter] 7 years old, if they had seen that room, they would have taken me out right away. I would then get help, at least a hostel or whatever.

*Q: Yes, yes. And why didn't you call the police?*

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<sup>3</sup> The first social campaign to raise awareness about domestic violence was in the late 1990s in Poland, and used the slogan, "because the soup was too salty". Billboards showed images of beaten women juxtaposed with inscriptions of the 'reasons' for the violence, among others, "because the soup was too salty". The slogan became ironically quoted or filled with new content such as "because the whisky was too warm". The slogan made its way into everyday language, but not in line with the intention of the campaign creators. This campaign also served to reinforce popular associations of domestic violence with physical violence.



Because I didn't know. I didn't know English, I didn't know there was a translator. I didn't know, I didn't know. It was not even that I was afraid. I just did not know [...] that they could help me. (Weronika)

The impact of societal and cultural norms and mores in preventing women seeking help are reported above. Here we evidence the issues practitioners highlighted specifically relating to accessing help from the police service, which relate both to cultural norms within the Polish community: 'And these are the cultural foundations that we have—don't snitch, don't cooperate with the police' (Practitioner 12, Polish community support service) and to previous negative experiences with the police service in Poland, which have resulted in a lack of trust or faith in the police:

She was afraid that there would be nothing here, no help for them. And they often say what kind of reaction they met with in Poland, even from the police! One woman told me that when her husband smashed the windows, the policeman who came said, "No, my grandmother pissed me off, so I smashed the window too." (Practitioner 13, 'by and for' domestic violence service)

The fear of involving the police extended beyond the victims—neighbours and family members were also reticent. Joanna described how her neighbours, despite hearing violence from her flat, did not call the police as they too were frightened of her abuser. In other cases, failure of friends to believe the woman and a sense of loyalty to the friendship with the abuser resulted in lack of police involvement.

There were also examples of when the child was the person who instigated help and intervention, such as in the case of Jola, where her son took control of the situation, ultimately leading to police involvement:

Because [...] he got weird. And [...] he started a fight. And it was the first fight, when I got scared of him. We were arguing downstairs, and I remember him saying, "Go upstairs, because if I fuck you up, no one will help you", something like that. He [son] heard this upstairs, and he called [name of ex], this ex of mine, with whom I used to live. [...] He said "Mom, I called [ex-partner], because I'm afraid he'll kill you". And they [ex-partner with this friend], were here in 2 minutes. (Jola)

There was a sense that some women preferred to cope alone without the involvement (or 'interference') of services, particularly when they felt the separation might not be final and reconciliation might occur. In this case, it even involved Paulina protecting her abuser from the police:

And after the first action, when the police were called and then there were problems, because he had nowhere to sleep, and I had to take the risk of keeping him at our house, I decided that I wouldn't, that I wouldn't call the police again, because it would only cause more problems, interrogation, and agony. And we'll get back together anyway, right? So why should I do it? I have to deal with it myself, I don't want to involve other people who will interfere too much. I want to set the pace at which I will separate from him and whether I will do it at all, right? So, I didn't call the police for a very long time, until the second time, when he was really out of line and I decided that no, that we had to do it, right? (Paulina)

Joanna described a situation in which she desperately needed help, but fear of the consequences prevented her from reaching out. The police were called to their house by a neighbour but failed to detect the nuances of abuse:

We had some, his friends in, my abuser's friends came for dinner, and they were too loud, it was too much alcohol, some neighbours from downstairs called the police. When Police came everything was perfect, there is nothing wrong here, they looked around the house, and I was afraid to say anything, that I'm victim and please help me, take me from here. (Joanna)

Practitioners alluded to the need for more bespoke and tailored training across difference sections within the police force, especially when there is a mismatch between expectations, and actual experiences with the police, as this has the potential for further impact on trust and so future help-seeking:

There are these normal units, they call them uniformed officers [...] they also have rather different levels of training and as such, compassion. So, these experiences of women can sometimes be [...] I mean, the police tell us, for example, that the police react in a certain way, but we have examples that this is not the case at all, and either procedures were violated, or they were not fully observed, or, for example, some evidence from the intervention was not preserved. But when the case enters this domestic abuse unit, well, then it is actually [...] well, it works very well. So, this is our experience, and we see that there is a huge difference. (Practitioner 12, Polish community support service)

On the one hand we hear that the police protect us and we should trust them, that their training is excellent, that their interventions are great. But on the other hand, women's experience is that their rights are not respected, or some bizarre situations occur. So, it's also quite mixed. The things that we hear from the police are just to reassure us or to convince us that they are doing everything perfectly, but we have examples that they are not. So that's also one of the factors that can cause this cooperation with the police to vary'. (Practitioner 12, Polish community support service)

A few women as well as practitioners singled out police officers from specialist domestic violence units as potentially responsive to their needs and pro-active in allaying their fears, as other research reiterates (Johnson and Stylianou 2022; Scott et al. 2013).

### *Social Services*

Fear of UK social services featured very heavily across the data and much of this stemmed from myths or rumours about the negative experience of others and specifically in relation to the role of social services in child protection. There was some recognition that common fears that a primary role of social workers is to remove children from the family home were unfounded or exaggerated, as Agata indicated: "We [the Polish community] in general are very negative about Social Work. Social workers will come and take your children away from you, that's primarily our thinking. Not true!". However, the many excerpts in the transcripts demonstrate the power of myth and misunderstanding around the removal of children, and how this results in active avoidance of engagement with social services. Interestingly the myth is long-standing and well-established and seems to be re-enforced from and within the Polish community and there was also evidence of frustration and cynicism about this:

For a dozen or so years everybody said to me, you know, a bunch of Poles "God forbid, don't tell anyone anything, because they will take your child away from you." (Julia)

I've always wondered where this comes from, this idea that social services take children away? Especially Polish children! That these Polish children are so valuable that they are simply taken like gold. I say: "God, people who don't have any knowledge at all about this subject, but they repeat such a story, they repeat it". And then such a victim of domestic violence wants to seek help, but they won't contact social services, because they're terrified, because yes, because social services like the devil, they're taking the children, aren't they? (Laura)

For many women, being unfamiliar with the UK support systems, there was a tendency to rely on second-hand information from the Polish community, even though it was unverified. The impact of this misunderstanding extended beyond fear of revealing abusive relationships into actual fear of seeking help with health issues such as depression. It also led to a reticence to engage socially with the Polish community—which in turn would exacerbate already existing problems of social isolation and loneliness:

So, I have to be careful what I say, how I say it, so that [...] Well, so I don't bring welfare down on my head, right? God forbid they just take this child away from me, right? And then what happens? My God, they take my baby away! Well, you're in a foreign country, you don't know how the system works here, right? You don't really know! We were not brought up here. When you hang around with Poles, it scares you, because they have this information from somewhere, so probably something like this happened there, right? (Julia)

Yes, but there are non-stop threads like that [that Polish children are great and they [social services] get some money for it]! And the same thing, that if you're depressed, God forbid you talk anywhere about the fact that you're depressed, that you're in treatment, because they'll take your child away too! Another load of rubbish! When you have a problem with your psyche, you are supposed to seek help, you are supposed to show that you want to do something about it, to help yourself, and not to hide it! Well, where do such myths come from? This is why I say, well, I avoid those Polish groups with 'wise' Polish mothers, who are just repeating these kinds of stories, frightening one another. And then such a rumour, such a version lives its life. And people think that this is the truth'. (Laura)

Practitioners described how engaging with social media, despite its many benefits, can also have negative consequences, particularly around the perpetuation of myths relating to social service provision. Many attempts by practitioners, including social workers and health visitors to correct misinformation were documented through the practitioner transcripts.

Fear impacts on women initiating access across a range of services, even when women may otherwise feel ready to seek help. Many transcripts alluded to the time needed to build up the courage to make the initial move towards help-seeking and this delay results in further exposure to violence for victims and their children. Aniela described how it took her months to really engage with the help available to her and she took a 'wait and watch' approach, only feeling ready to flee once the sense of escalation of violence and danger to herself and her children became really apparent. Ania described her regret/mistake at not leaving the relationship sooner, but how she ultimately took the brave step forwards. Even those who had taken the

initial step in seeking help alluded to the fact that some types of abuse (in Krystyna's case sexual) were very difficult to reveal.

In some cases, this fear was indeed precipitated by threats by social workers to remove the children from the home, a threat which was carried out in two cases, as well as implicit victim-blaming for not leaving, as documented elsewhere (Douglas and Walsh 2010; Hester 2011; Keeling and Van Wormer 2012). Keeling and Van Wormer (2012) argue that such forms of coercion employed by social workers mirror tactics deployed by the perpetrators and serve to undermine women's trust in the services. Robbins and Cook (2017: 22) found that "social workers struggle to gain trust within a system that sees domestic abuse and coercive control as hurdles that mothers must overcome, rather than as complex experiences through which they need support."

Though these adverse experiences and fear of child protection responses to domestic violence are evident across diverse contexts, in the case of the Polish women we interviewed, the fear was uncommonly pronounced and a powerful deterrent to disclosure and help-seeking.

### **State policies and practice**

Immigration status was associated with a myriad of complexities, both for victims of abuse and the practitioners supporting those who seek help. Issues ranged across both the formal legal and support mechanisms which often worked against the victim, and the ways in which the knowledge of the inadequacies of these systems was weaponised by the perpetrator.

Many women described the use of threats by the perpetrator relating to his removal of the children to outside the UK/back to Poland. Joanna described constant threats from her partner about taking the children abroad or needing his consent to travel with children, as barriers to her escape. Others mentioned their partner taking away official documents, such as passports, to prevent the victim from leaving.

Mirka described her suspicions around ulterior motives of the UK governments for not wanting to authorise the departure of children born in England despite them having dual citizenship, which in turn prevented her from being able to move back home. One practitioner felt that how well Polish women were treated by those in authority, could depend on engrained xenophobia at the level of the individual practitioner whose racist attitudes might shape their service responses, as documented elsewhere (Schneider and Ingram 2005):

[...] because again I've met, you know, I've met housing officers saying things like "Oh you are coming to this country and you want to have, you want to have a house given by the council two months after you arrived in the country—yeah [...] it's not fair, it's not right" without even checking properly the situation of this specific, you know, family who was asking for help. (Practitioner 2, Polish family worker in a school)

Having no recourse to public funds has serious implications for women, preventing them from leaving the relationship, often for financial reasons or finding themselves in precarious and potentially dangerous housing situations:

Because of this no recourse to public funds for European women, some of them decide to stay with their partner, because they were threatened with homelessness, for example because they had no access to refuge, or because they would have to wait a very long

time. There are still children there as a rule, so this is taken into account [...] or living in some hostel with some even worse people than the perpetrator sometimes. (Practitioner 12, Polish community support service)

The particular difficulties facing migrant women who come to the UK on spousal visas after marrying a British national or resident or who come on other visas (to work, for example), relates to the ‘no recourse to public funds’ stipulations attached to their visa. This means they cannot access welfare and housing benefits. Domestic violence refuges derive most of their rental income from housing benefit, which means that they may refuse to house women with no recourse to public funds. Following campaigning, there has been some concession made for wives of British residents or nationals to enable them to access refuges if they experience domestic violence (Anitha, 2011). However, restrictions remain on who can access this provision—for example, it only applies to women who enter the UK on a spousal (and not work or student) visa and excludes overstayers, even though women may become overstayers because of deliberate omissions (e.g., failure to renew visas) by the perpetrator.

Brexit added an extra layer of complexity and confusion with many women unsure of their settlement status or unaware of the 30 June 2021 deadline to file an application to the EU Settlement Scheme. Others were awaiting the response of the EU settlement scheme, during which time they were unable to submit an application for housing (even temporary accommodation if they were fleeing), and could not apply for Universal Credit. Practitioners talked about how recent legal changes have not only impacted on the rights of migrant women—but also on the confusion surrounding what people are now entitled to and how to access support. This had further implications for staff training, with reports about inaccurate or contradictory information from different practitioners leading to adverse outcomes for women.

Both survivors and practitioners reported on how Brexit had influenced public attitudes (including hate-crime) towards the Polish community and practitioners noted its impact on help-seeking, as well as the withdrawal/reduction of funding for services supporting European immigrants. One Polish practitioner explained that: “So to have this referendum result, it was probably a huge slap on our cheek to realise that actually half of the country doesn’t want us here.” (Practitioner 5, Polish health visitor)

Other difficulties associated with Brexit were more nuanced, increasing anxiety about accessing formal support, as reported by this practitioner:

Also, after Brexit, people face additional bias, which is like hostility from not just people, normal people, but also from, from agencies, there’s more like hostile environment and people, even if it’s not actually, if it does not happen but people feel like that, that they will not be well-received when they go to British agencies and ask for help cos they’re not welcome here anymore, nobody cares about their problems anymore. (Practitioner 3, ‘by and for’ domestic violence service)

Following Brexit, Polish women who have not managed to obtain Settlement Status in the UK and those Polish women who migrate to the UK as spouses or come to the UK on other visas will find their options severely limited as they will have no recourse to public funds and have little protection in case, they face transnational marriage abandonment by their spouse (Anitha et al. 2018). UK government’s lack of protection for migrant women facing domestic violence and abuse, which also prevents our ability to ratify the Istanbul Convention, may leave some

Polish women with the unacceptable option of having to live within an abusive relationship or face destitution or deportation if they chose to leave (Anitha 2011).

Women reported a range of complex and interconnected barriers that operated at the personal and interpersonal level, as well as a range of structural barriers related to poverty, housing provision, fear of service responses and state policies which impeded disclosure and help-seeking. In keeping with the findings of other research, as immigrants, Polish women may perceive higher levels of risk and face additional barriers (Amanor-Boadu et al. 2012) and thus may need tailored services to meet their needs effectively.

### **Strategies for resistance**

Despite the many and varied constraints, they faced, women shared their experiences of how they found and held on to small spaces for action (through for example managing their own finances or saving money secretly) or used particular coping mechanisms and strategies for self-care. As Hannah explained:

So first we have to recover, because we have to lift ourselves up a bit. [...] It's good to find a hobby. For example, I started dancing, I always wanted to dance but I couldn't, so I went to a dance course, and I learned to dance salsa, baciatta. Now I go to various dance festivals. And it gives me a lot of joy. (Hanna).

Hobbies also involved interaction with other people, which in turn, helped to increase social networks for women who had previously isolated themselves. Marta found solace in spirituality: "...the fact that I had a lot of people [...] some toxic people, they surrounded me. When I started to move in a different direction, towards a more spiritual path, [...] I lost those people."

Others who were unable to pursue hobbies or implement such explicit self-care strategies talked about small tactics which they put in place to protect themselves, such as setting boundaries around what was acceptable behaviour, mechanisms for facing up to their abuser, or hiding their distress from him which helped two women (often drawing on support they had received from mental health professionals in relation to their depression or anxiety). Joanna said: "I rebuilt my confidence and I started to talk back to him, I started to tell him "I'm not afraid of you, I'm not scared of you, I'm independent."

Other short-term mechanisms for managing situations to protect themselves and shield the children from potential outbreaks for violence and abuse simply involved stepping out of the situation to go for a walk and having time to reflect.

Marta explained that attending group support gave her the courage to open up to colleagues in her workplace—talking openly about her home situation, and this in turn made her accessible to other people as a safe person in whom to confide.

Joanna, along with many others, explained how her longer-term strategy and path to escape involved empowering herself through formal education, once she was able to put childcare arrangements in place, and other women started to engage in voluntary work. Indeed, many women later took moves to formally or informally support and advise other victims.

Ania explained how therapy had helped but acknowledged that her road to recovery was a long process—but she knew how to give herself time and space to recover.

When I was not good, you know, I was still programmed to endure abuse, you know. But after almost two years of self-therapy, psychotherapy from my therapist, workshops and extended book reading, meditation and everything. [...] You know, I'm in the process of changing. (Ania)

Other women did mention more negative coping mechanisms/behaviours such as the use of alcohol which they found beneficial as a temporary means of escape.

### **Decision to leave**

Many women detailed accounts of the events that triggered their decision to leave the abusive relationship. For some women, this involved a period of meticulous and secret planning, whilst for others, it was much more spontaneous, sometimes triggered by a specific event.

In two cases, an episode of infidelity was the final boundary breached. For Maria, the decision to leave came at the point of realisation that she just had no positive feelings left for her abuser:

For me there was no choice—for me it was as if, I don't know, I started to hate him, such hatred straight away. When he said those words, I didn't have any feelings, I didn't feel anything. Suddenly there was such an emptiness inside me. And I got such strength, that I threw him out of the house—I locked the door and told him to not come home. And that's when the relationship ended. (Maria)

Several women described how they finally started to find their strength to leave and to focus on surviving, for Agata, through the church and for Ania and Maria, from family and friends, who helped them to realise the gravity of their situations.

The decision to leave was often influenced by the impact on children, who ironically were also a reason for keeping abusive relationships together, at least until a point when the danger to them became imminent. Mirka said:

I did this for my daughter, I have to tell you—I took a lot from him because I wanted her to have a normal home [...], but one day ... I caught him red handed one day. He had a bath with our daughter and after the bath I took her out and I started to wipe her. And I could hear him in the bath, for a couple of times after he had the bath with her, he was straightaway masturbating himself. That's why I called for help, because I don't know what's in his head. I was thinking he would start to do things like he'd done to me to our daughter—I can't let it happen. (Mirka)

For Iwona, the final decision was influenced by her noticing the more gradual impact of the relationship on her daughter. She described the events surrounding the break-up when her partner had moved out for a few days and on coming back to collect his things she said:

I started to look at it very, very carefully. And at some point, all these little things accumulated [...] At that time I was already determined not to continue this marriage, because I could see that it was going in the wrong direction. [...] And the other thing was that [daughter] was already there, because if I had been alone, maybe it would have taken

longer too. But the moment I saw that it was already starting to take its toll on the child, that she was becoming nervous because of the shouting, the arguing [...] that was the deciding point. [...] There was no way I was going to continue in this relationship. And I decided very quickly that it was over. No more marriage, no more relationship, because I'd rather be alone than have my child grow up in such conditions and watch everything, and learn to be treated in such a way, to take it as a model, as a norm, where for her, in her adult life later, it would be normal. (Iwona)

The danger to children was also described by a number of practitioners, for example:

I have an example of a family when a partner used sexual violence over a woman, a very drastic kind of violence [...] and she simply gave in to him, because he told her, "If you scream, you will wake up the children and the police will come or the neighbours will hear and report it to the police, so it's not worth it". And when this sexual violence was against her, the woman felt trapped, she didn't report it to anyone. And it's sad, but she just had to cope somehow, right? The moment she realised her partner was coming into her daughter's room... When she walked into her daughter's room, that was a turning point for her'. (Practitioner 11, 'by and for' domestic violence service)

Julia described how the moment of realisation came to her during a family holiday back in Poland, when she realised how her situation was becoming a repetition of what of her own mother had endured:

I still visited my family home, you know? Where my dad got stoned too and it all came back! You know, it all just came back! And I look at my mother, who's trying to keep it all in check, and really... she's crazy because of him, right?! I'm like, "Fuck, I can't do this!" No! That was the moment that I saw that I had to save myself, because in a few years I'll have what I have now, right? And my child will have the resentment that I have all the time for my mother. (Julia)

Many women had to plan their departure more gradually until they felt sufficiently prepared to make their exit. Marta said:

I was very exhausted because that relationship lasted four years, including three years of serious violence. Well, it was all psychological, all psychological. And that's why, just before I left, I was working very hard, I was planning to leave him all the time because I was afraid. I didn't know how to do it. I didn't know what he would do when I told him I wanted to leave. Would he hurt me? I just didn't know. (Marta)

Joanna also spent years planning her escape: "But since the time when I was pregnant with second pregnancy [...] for my child, I started my plan to run away; it took me six and a half years." (Joanna)

Other women, such as Jola and Kinga, simply decided that they had had enough—and the time had come for them to take control. Jola had to really resist the temptation to giving in:

And finally, at some point I said "Enough!", that I didn't want to be with him anymore. I told him I didn't want to be with him, I told him to move out. I didn't want to see him, because I knew that if I saw him my heart would soften, and I would forgive him again. And so, I said, "Enough is enough", no more contact. I even wanted to open the door once



[when he came knocking], but my son said, "Mom, don't open that door. Don't open that door!" and I didn't open the door. (Jola)

Kinga described how she “just kept going and going and going, until finally... I just couldn't give him any chances anymore because it didn't work for so many years, so... I didn't want to feel like trash all my life either.” Although she had previously hung onto the relationship, with a shadow of hope that he would change, Maja suddenly saw her partner in a different light, and this was the trigger for her to end the relationship:

I went to the airport to pick him up..., I get to the airport and he's sitting there completely stoned. And that was the first time I sort of officially saw him; you know. [...] So when I saw him, I got all "Pffff!" and I just walked past him and went to the toilet. [...] I called my mum later. I'm talking to her, and I say [...] “I'll leave him here. It's over, I can't go on like this. I got in the car and felt as if a hundred kilograms had fallen off me. Such happiness [...] (Maja).

Some women made repeated attempts to leave, or in Ania's case constant promises from her partner about how he was going to change for the better, prevented her from leaving. Others took a strategic approach, for example, Hanna's strategy involved prompting memories of abuse to help her to stay strong and prevent her returning to the relationship:

So, I prepared myself for that moment, I made a list of why I left him and what he did to me. And every time I missed him and wanted to reach out to him, I read it out loud to myself, to the mirror. And that was my method. .... you have to manage somehow during this initial period. I think that the first six months to a year are the worst. (Hanna)

Some women experienced physical and psychological barrier, intentionally put in their way to prevent them leaving, despite their feeling ready to go:

There was a moment when he went too far and I decided to go back to Poland, I don't want to have anything to do with that man. And unfortunately, there was no flight that I could afford, they were so terribly expensive. I managed to find a bus only in a few days, because I wanted to leave as soon as possible. Well, unfortunately, those few days were enough for him to reel me back in. (Paulina)

At that time, when I literally said now, that's it, you know, that's your bags, you go, he took my car, he took my phone. He took the car keys. I couldn't contact my employer [...] I couldn't leave the house. I couldn't do nothing. He was basically trying all of his ways to uh trap me, uh. uhm. Literally lock me up (Malwina)

The decision to leave was a momentous step for most women; but for some women the journey from this moment to the point when they finally ended the abusive relationship was a long one.

## **Conclusion**

The narratives from women and practitioners highlighted the many and complex ways in which Polish women living in the UK responded to the domestic violence and abuse they experienced. Women retold their stories and memories around when they first started to realise that they were being abused. For some women, there was a gradual realisation as the extent and nature of their abuse began to escalate slowly and subtly. Women revealed their reticence in disclosing

their suffering, even to close friends and family and their anxieties around making initial access with more formal services, often influenced by fear of repercussion, especially after contacting the police or social services. Socio-cultural and religious norms often worked against the women, with pressure from society to maintain a family unit, particularly when their children were young. Economic and political barriers were very powerful in preventing women leaving their abuser. Inability to gain employment, pressure exerted by the abusing partner to make them stay at home, and a lack of financial options were common experiences as were restrictions associated with their immigration status, exacerbated by Brexit and the additional layers of complexity and confusion that it introduced. Some women outlined their strategies for coping and resistance, describing the context around their decision to leave the relationship. The role of their family, friends, social networks and formal services in this process is explored in the following sections.

### Case study: Paulina

Paulina met Patryk when she came to the UK to visit a family member. She was a single mum with a daughter of primary school age. It was an immediate infatuation. One month later he came to visit Paulina in Poland. He moved in with her, found a job in Poland and Paulina got pregnant very quickly, and they got married. From the very beginning Patryk was very aggressive and controlling, especially—but not only—after he consumed alcohol. He would threaten her to kick her belly hard so that she'd miscarry if she didn't 'behave well'. She remembers how she felt during this time, "It was like someone kidnapped you and kept you locked up, and you don't know if they're going to kill you or let you go or hurt you". She quickly realised that he wasn't a man she wanted to spend her life with but felt that "it was too late to leave." They moved back to the UK with her daughter and their new-born son. They all lived together for a while, in one room, because they couldn't afford anything bigger. During their first Christmas in the UK, Patryk got drunk and hit Paulina in her face so hard that her jaw dislocated. Paulina urged her daughter to go to the neighbours in the next room and to tell them to call the police. Two days later, a social worker came and helped Paulina and the children move into a hotel. She was ready to leave Patryk. However, because she had no recourse to public funds, they brought her back home after two days. Patryk, who now had a restraining order against him, apologised to her, and begged her to let him come back, because he had nowhere to go. So, she did. In any case, unable to work as she was caring for two small children and was not entitled to benefits, she could not have survived without his income. When the police came to check, she lied and said he wasn't there. After some time, they rented a big house and sublet rooms. Financially their situation was much better, and Paulina was a stay-at-home mum. Patryk was making good money, but the abuse continued and was escalating. Paulina would run to hide at her mum's place, he'd come and get her. This happened several times. At some point Paulina was so desperate with her situation, she took an overdose. Her social worker happened to arrive at this very point to conduct their routine check and called an ambulance. Next day when she recovered and went back home to Patryk, she realised that the social services had taken her children into their care. To get the children back she and Patryk decided to comply with the rules, and he moved out, but they still maintained some contact at his behest. For the first time in many years, as Paulina recalled, "I didn't feel his power over me anymore." She cut contact with him, and then "the war started". He blocked her phone (that was in his name), hacked her email, broke into her apartment (several times) and stole the children's IDs. But Paulina had made up her mind. She started work and began saving money, took parental courses and participated in the Freedom programme, and after six months, managed to get the children back. Since then, she's been rebuilding her life. She now works, has a council flat, and a circle of friends. She is not yet ready to start any new intimate relationships because it's difficult for her to trust anyone again.

### 4.3 Help-seeking from informal sources of support: Family, friends and colleagues

Despite the dominant characterisation of domestic violence and abuse as occurring in private spaces and as hidden, there is now a wide body of scholarship which demonstrates how such violence takes place in specific social contexts formed by family, friends and neighbours (Klein 2012). Most victims/survivors turn to these informal social networks before, alongside or instead of seeking support from formal domestic violence services (Anitha 2022; Rose et al. 2000; Sylaska and Edwards 2014). This section explores the role played by Polish women's family, friends, neighbours and colleagues in relation to the domestic violence and abuse they suffered.

Unlike other categories of migrant women who may find proximity to their natal family impeded by long distances and the inability of their parents to visit the UK (Anitha, 2022), the vast majority of the Polish women we interviewed recounted frequent visits from their parents, especially mothers. Kurczewski and Oklej (2007) document the strong normative expectations in Poland about the role of the grandparents in the care and upbringing of grandchildren. Evidence from a qualitative study of Polish families in North-East of England (Clements 2014) indicates regular provision of care given by grandparents, albeit often in concentrated timeframes of 2-6 months, which in fact exceeded the norm in Poland of around 40% of Polish grandparents providing daily care for their grandchildren aged ten years or younger (Garcia-Morian and Kuehn 2011). Despite the isolation imposed upon the women by their partners, these cultural norms opened up some avenues for support:

My mother started coming to see me more and more, she stayed longer and longer with me because my mother is such a smart woman. [Later] my mum started signalling to me very sharply that things were going wrong here, that it couldn't be like this. So I stood up for him, of course. [...] But my mum kept telling me "Shake it off! Because you are in a trap." [...] One day my mother came to me. She said, "This is over. If you don't report it, I will." [...] And then I got dressed, I went to see Mrs Z on Friday [a head of a Polish Saturday School] I remember. I told her everything. [...] And I went to that police station. I testified to everything. (Aniela)

Several women recounted the active role of their mothers in recognising and naming the domestic violence and in encouraging women to leave the abusive relationship. Other family members also played an active role in facilitating disclosure and access to formal sources of support (Wilcox 2000) and in helping women to leave and in enhancing their emotional well-being and physical safety after they had made the decision to leave (Hyden 2015; Klein 2012).

I have a younger brother who's in Poland, who speaks excellent English, who studied in England. [...] He called me and told me, "Sister, if you want out, I'm packing, I'm flying in tomorrow and I'll do everything I can to help you out of this relationship." [...] And he flew! Fuck, he flew in on the same day that I had my first interview with the police, to tell them what was going on at home. They were just like, "well, okay, we'll take your statement, but you're still alive, right?" [...] So my brother finally says to her [police officer], "Listen! What can you guys do *today*!?" and she says, "Within 72 hours someone will contact you". And my brother at that point says "Listen, I came from Poland today, okay? Because I'm really afraid for their life and health, ok? [...] I'll rent us a hotel for those 72 hours because I'm worried about them!" and she was like "Oh my God! Is that really so serious? [...] He goes "And what has my sister been talking to you about for the last hour!? And she then grabbed the phone. (Julia)

Without the active advocacy provided by her brother, Julia does not think she would have been able to leave. Family members helped women to navigate services and challenged service responses where needed. For those who were not aware of the nature of domestic violence services in the UK, relatives who had been in the UK for longer were a crucial source of support. These networks also played a critical role in providing ongoing emotional and practical support (Goodkind et al. 2003; Rose et al. 2000; Trotter and Allen 2009).

I called my brother's partner. I burst into tears and I said, "I can't stand it anymore!". [...] if it wasn't for my brother and his partner, it would have been hard to just face it all alone. So that's what it is, it's good to have someone like that who pushes you, helps you, because on your own it's so... [drifts off] (Oliwia)

My sister, she's been my rock. If not for her I do not know how that would end. [...] Because of her, through her purse and professional roots she, she knew where to go to. [...] she was the one, you know, who said we need to call the Women's Aid. Police needs to be engaged, I was engaged with all of those services. (Malwina)

In one rare case where prior to their migration to the UK, Viola attempted to leave the abusive relationship, it was her father-in-law who helped her:

I finished the therapy and decided to find a job deliberately [in a different town], to move out! Who helped me then? My father-in-law! My father-in-law helped me find accommodation, he drove me, he helped me with everything! (Viola)

However, this was an exception; most women recounted the active role of their in-laws in condoning their partners' behaviour and in many cases in actively supporting it. Family and social networks can also be a source of victimisation because network members can assume very different roles: as allies of the victim, but also as perpetrators or allies of perpetrators (Klein 2012; Trotter and Allen 2009).

Practically I would say I felt supported and relieved, because maybe then I had an opportunity to go to the gym sometimes when she was there or later to go and continue with my practice placement as a student nurse. But she didn't, you know, she couldn't help me. (Ania)

Ania welcomed her mother's visits to the UK for the temporary and limited respite it provided, but her mother was reluctant to 'interfere' in what she perceived as a private matter. When Ewa made the difficult decision to leave, she found that she and her children were not welcome at her mother's. In other cases, women reported that their family minimised the violence or expected them to adjust to keep the family together or to ensure that the children were not 'deprived' of their father's presence in their lives.

You know what, my mother really spoke to my husband only when it was necessary. But she tried to support me. And it was really she who persuaded me to go to school. [...] My mother was afraid. And you know our Polish mentality. We 'wash the dirty linen at home', right? So she tried to help me with everything. She tried to help me with cooking, cleaning, childcare and so on. So that I could just go and finish school, so that I could go somewhere, so that I could go out to people. But the moment came when she said "Enough". She said "Enough" and said that she didn't care about other people's opinion,

that I should do something about it, that I should report it, that I should stand up and start functioning on my own. (Agata)

Agata recounted how her mother, over several visits to the UK, gradually changed her outlook and eventually became instrumental in her decision to leave the abusive relationship. But other women did not see such a transformation and the fear of their family's reaction meant that they remained reluctant to tell them when they made the decision to leave (Sandberg 2016).

In another unusual case, in the face of severe and unrelenting domestic violence, Sofia's mother and sister reported their concerns about the children's welfare to the social services.

So when I moved out [left abusive partner] my mom came here over the summer to help me with my kids when there wasn't school. One day I said to mom and sister, that I was thinking of moving back to him, because—I probably said I love him. I wanted to give him a chance, whatever. [...] And my sister said—if you go back to him, I will ring your ex-husband [the children's father] and he will take the kids away from you. [...] And she did. They don't have the rights and they don't have the proof, but all the process happened, basically. I didn't talk to my sister and my mom for quite a while. [...] I almost lost my kids, I never wish anybody to be in this position. [...] I was feeding the kids, I was keeping them warm, I borrowed the money—I was doing everything to keep safe. [...] But it happened. So zero support from anybody, quite the opposite—a lot of trouble. (Sofia)

Though Sofia eventually left the abusive relationship following a prolonged engagement with the social services, she did not perceive her family's intervention as helpful.

While similar themes resonated in women's accounts of the role of their friends, the isolation imposed by their partners played an important role in limiting these social networks.

Sometimes on some Facebook groups, where I had a few trusted friends, where we shared more details, sometimes I mentioned something. [...] So somewhere between the lines something might have been said [...] but in person I didn't really have any close friends because he cut me off from my friends. So I didn't even really have anyone to tell. (Iwona)

“They [friends] said something is wrong, because they invited me many times to come with [daughter] and he wouldn't let me go. So one day she [friend] came here and she said she knows that something is wrong. And I just broke down and told her—she wanted to call the police straightaway, but I wasn't ready at that time. So she called me daily, so he [partner] said I couldn't speak on the phone with anyone. And he took my phone away from me—when he was at home I wasn't allowed to speak. He would check my messages to see if I spoke with someone, so I just stopped speaking with people. (Mirka)

Those who were engaged in paid work managed to make friends through work. While some women welcomed the opportunity to befriend non-Polish people and a space to share their stories without facing the judgement that they were 'breaking their family', others felt that the constraints they faced while they remained in the abusive relationship would be incomprehensible to non-Polish friends.

When the kids went to the nursery, then I passed Polish parents in the corridor, we started to talk, we started to be friends, I started to build support. [...] Then I felt stronger because

they were people who could understand me, who I could trust because I told them the story. I felt like I had something, I didn't have my family here, but I had somebody who can help me and my kids. (Joanna)

When Laura finally took the steps to leave the abusive relationship it was her friend who directed her to a refuge. Afraid and unfamiliar with the concept of a refuge, she reached out to this friend for reassurance.

And when I told her... she gave me a leaflet that I could refer to [domestic violence refuge]. [...] They [her family] helped me a lot during this difficult time. I was shocked... Because I was in a hotel before I got here [to the refuge]. [...] I was in fear because I didn't know what was going to happen to me. She helped me mentally, she prepared me for everything. This ignorance of mine, it was such a fear, but I had to give in to it because otherwise... I'd be running away again, I'd be running away again... [referring to repeated short-lived attempts to leave] well, it showed me the way, for example, so that I wouldn't blame myself. She helped me a lot. (Laura)

But as with the family, social networks also played a mixed role by minimising or condoning the abuse and disbelieving women when they made the first tentative disclosures:

I have people who didn't quite believe me, because he [partner] is this, he is that, the great neighbour, and the great friend, and he's so cool, and all that! So, that's it! He makes such an envelope around himself, such a great bubble. And when I say that I'm being hurt, this bubble is pierced and everyone says, "No way! He wouldn't hurt you!". [...] What pisses me off is that I have friends who are like "You'll forgive him in the end anyway and you'll be together because he's such a good person". (Pola)

They [friends] didn't want to believe that he behaves like that because he was such a nice guy, smiling. [...] His ex-partner helped me a lot. [...] I reached out to this woman. [...] She told me that when he goes to work, I should get the suitcases and go to her with my son. That's what I did. She picked me up with her son, we took the suitcases and I moved out with her and we lived with her. [...] She got me a job, night shifts. I started going to work, meanwhile she was taking care of my son. I kind of got back on my feet, earned myself some money, rented a studio flat here in England. (Maria)

In the face of disbelief by their common friends, Maria reached out to his ex-partner who, having experienced abuse from him, validated her and provided her with the help that she needed to leave. Other women also relied on their friends following their initial decision to leave.

I called a [Polish] friend, I told her what the situation was like, I was shaken. She said, "Come on, come to me quickly. You're not going anywhere, not to that house, he'll do something to you. Where are these kids? I'll set you up right away, I've got a mattress, I'll make you some bed so you can sleep. And we'll think what to do next. I got a cab, went to her place. You know, she had already prepared everything for me. The children, one of them was already asleep in my arms, and the other one was so tired, stressed, and so was I, I was all shaken up. I put the kids to sleep, I couldn't sleep at all, absolutely! And she said, "Call the police! Call them, tell them what happened, where and how!". (Viola)

Due to their proximity, neighbours were often the first people who were in a position to find out about the abuse, and their responses to what they heard and saw varied immensely.

I didn't have any friends, but my daughter was friends with this girl from across the street. And one day her mother came to me and said "Paulina, I don't want to interfere in your affairs, your daughter told me that when he was drunk, he [abusive partner] trampled her tablet, broke the whole screen". And then when she told me that, it just made me feel ashamed that strangers know about it, that someone already knows, and I'm just not able to do anything about it. Because if my child was older, right? And I could go to work, then maybe I would have thrown myself into that deep water. And I knew that I had to leave, but that I couldn't yet now, because it wouldn't work. (Paulina)

Though Paulina appreciated her neighbour's efforts in reaching out to her and it validated her sense that something was not quite right, her overwhelming feeling was one of shame. At that stage in life, she felt unable to access the support that was being implicitly offered to her.

When women felt ready to leave, such support was welcomed and, in some cases proved to be a conduit to services.

Where did I get the contact to [domestic violence service]? Oh! A Polish woman lived across the street from me. And this organisation was helping her too. And she talked to me because I said something [about my situation]. We talked. And she just told me. (Kinga)

In one unusual case, Agata's neighbours came together in a collective response to the violence, and she valued the protective support of her neighbours in what was a close-knit community:

I actually have super neighbours, practically all over the neighbourhood. [...] He won't come near the house because the neighbours have made it clear and explicit to him just not to come here (Agata)

However, as in the case of other social networks, neighbours were equally likely to put up a wall of silence in the face of the domestic violence and abuse they were confronted with.

I have such neighbours that I could be murdered here, I could smash my child, throw her against the wall and no one would come, no one would react. [...] No reaction at all. [...] They don't even check if everything's ok. How many times was I afraid that the police would come here right away, that they would knock on my door [...] I was crying here, I was screaming. I was really crying, and you could hear that there was a brawl, that there was a struggle. Nobody! Nobody reacted. (Marta)

Joanna recalled how her neighbours, who lived in the same house that had been informally divided into separate living quarters, ignored her screams for help when she was being raped by her partner. However, a few weeks later, when he had friends over and they became drunk and loud these very neighbours called the police. The perception that domestic violence is a private matter shaped neighbours' constructions of unacceptable behaviour that requires an intervention.

Julia reflected on whether a combination of factors shaped her long-standing neighbours' lack of response:



You know what, we lived there for 11 years. And we had the same neighbours for 11 years. And nobody ever said anything. They heard everything. They were English, and we were Polish, full stop. And the company that used to come to him was... Well you wouldn't want to, you know, get mixed up, I think... you know, 2x2, bald, tattoos, you know, fuck, £100,000 worth of Mercedes, well you think some mafia or something, you don't know the language, you know. You're not going in there, right? (Julia)

A few women found unexpected support from their employers who supported them to leave the abusive relationship.

When I was on the bus [on the way to work], I met my colleague and she asked me how have I been. And then I started crying. And it just broke inside me. And she says "Emilia, but this is abnormal! You should call the police". I went to work, I couldn't start my shift at all, I couldn't concentrate. And my manager took me aside and said he wanted to talk, and I also told him what the situation was. He said he understands, and that there was a situation like this in his family too. And he said that I should call the police. [...] I had a lot of support from him! (Emilia)

My boss at work started to suspect something, because I started to come to work very tired and everything. And nonstop, you know, the phone calls were [from partner], right? So the boss says "Okay, I'll help you!" And the best part was that we worked for the same company and my boss knew his boss! [...] I was just so lucky that my boss was on my side or I wouldn't have made it! (Julia)

I reported him to my previous employer, because we used to work in the same workplace. [...] So I said to her that he stole my money and I need help, because he doesn't want to give my money back and we're not together anymore. So my employer made him to give my money back. (Mirka)

For women who are engaged in paid work, employers can play a crucial role in supporting their workers who experience domestic violence, an issue that has only recently been acknowledged by trade unions (Unison 2017; Wibberley et al. 2018) and workforces (BEIS 2021). Given the high rates of employment for Polish women in the UK, this is a crucial avenue of support that could be developed further in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Family, friends and social networks, including those made through work, often played an important role in enabling women to conceptualise their experiences as abuse, in giving women emotional and practical support and in helping them to leave the abusive relationships. But equally where these networks engaged in victim-blaming, sided with the perpetrator, shamed women for 'breaking up' the family, minimised or ignored the abuse, women ended up trapped in the relationship for longer. These social networks also have a vital role to play in giving women information about formal sources of support, particularly where women may not be able to seek out this information due to the control imposed upon them. It is to their experiences of these formal sources of support that we now turn to.

### Case study: Emilia

Emilia was the only women in our study who didn't have children. Following a divorce, she came to England in search of a better life and work. A few years later she moved to a different part of the UK and met Arek from Poland. They fell in love and moved in together after less than a month of knowing each other. Arek liked his alcohol, but Emilia didn't mind at first; they were drinking and partying together. Arek was very jealous and controlling. He would become particularly aggressive after drinking. Once, he smashed her phone because she was texting a friend and he got jealous. He then threw a chair at her, which narrowly missed her head. Emilia was shocked. She didn't know what to do, she hadn't made any friends in that city yet, and calling the police wasn't an option because she was "blindly in love". A few months later, as she was getting ready to sleep, she reached for her phone to set an alarm. He had just entered the room and he violently threw her out of the bed and stomped on her with his shoes on. She screamed very loudly but none of the neighbours reacted. Next day she went to work but was unable to focus. The manager approached and asked how she felt, and she broke into tears and told him what happened. He persuaded her to call the police and her partner was arrested. He was prosecuted, pleaded guilty and got a penalty of few hundred pounds. "Fortunately, I didn't have to testify because I probably wouldn't have been able to do this. I was in a very bad condition at the time", she says. During this period, she received many abusive calls from his mother for putting her son on trial. The police directed Emilia to support groups and domestic violence organisations, but she didn't use it. She didn't feel she needed it. However, after some time passed, they got together again. It didn't last long as she realised that he had not changed—the old patterns of controlling behaviour, excessive jealousy, violence was still ongoing. Only then did she realise that she needed some support. She had kept the contacts for domestic violence organisations and Victim Support, but she explained why didn't feel she could call them: "I didn't know if I'd want to talk about it in... English. It would be easier for me to get along in Polish when it comes to these problems." She heard about a self-organised support group for Polish women set up by Hanna, another survivor who participated in this study. Talking to the women in that group made Emilia feel that she was not alone. She eventually managed to leave the abusive relationship without any help from formal sources of support.

#### **4.4 Help-seeking from formal sources of support: Women's experiences of support from statutory and voluntary services**

Women's use of services is highly dependent on their knowledge and the information that is accessible about available support and how different systems respond to domestic violence and abuse in the UK. Many of the women that we interviewed lacked knowledge about the service landscape in the UK, meaning that they had less understanding and ability to promote their rights and interests. This section begins with some common themes relating to women's use of formal services, and then outlines issues in relation to specific statutory and voluntary services.

##### **Finding out about services and deciding to seek help**

Women learnt about available services and support for domestic violence and abuse from a diverse range of sources: GPs, police, professional contacts, children's schools, organisations for the Polish community in the UK, shops, family and friends, employers, online searches and referrals from domestic violence and abuse helplines. This points to the key value of wide publicity about available support. Friends and contacts proved to be important sources of information about refuges and domestic violence services. Whether women initiated contact with services on their own, or received information from family and friends, they often held onto information about possible support for quite a long period, being too scared or intimidated to report abuse.

Not all Polish women were aware of the existence of services, whether in English or Polish.

Before he got to the hospital and my plan started to be real, I didn't realise that I can be supported by Polish speakers. So I tried to find and ask English speakers if there's anything that I can do; I didn't know about Woman's Aid even, I didn't know something like that existed. (Joanna)

A number of women reached out to organisations working with the Polish community in the UK, including the Polish Centre in London (POSK) and the Polish Embassy in London. These organisations are a potentially important source of information and non-statutory support, particularly in a context where the Polish community in the UK is well organised through a network of local community groups.

When I started to hear over and over again that he would kill me, that ... all these insults ... First, I went to the Polish House [...] It's kind of like... there's a Polish office where they help with the bills, the language, and so on. I called them and said that I was in this situation, and I was asking for some contact, some contact details of someone who could help me. "Well we don't know, we don't have one". (Aniela)

Aniela went onto explain that she then turned for help to the Polish Embassy, who directed her to a Polish community organisation with experience of supporting domestic abuse victims, where staff advised that she collect evidence and report the abuse to the police. Aniela held on to the information but felt that she "wasn't ready" at that point. That information proved crucial later, when she felt prepared to take the steps to end the abusive relationship.

Information through sources in the wider Polish community proved to be important:

Once when I was in the store, it was the time when the situation was bad already, there was a leaflet [about a 'by and for' domestic violence service] in the store. It was hanging on the glass or on the counter. [...] It said that they helped people with alcohol problems. So, I sent a text message, the [support worker] called me back the next day or three. [...] I told her about how I was afraid of him and everything. I told her the whole story. She said that I should always call the police, that I shouldn't be afraid, that I shouldn't be ashamed, that there are some organisations that help. (Jola)

In this case, Jola was seeking help for her husband's alcohol problem, rather than the domestic violence and abuse. Contacting the service enabled her to come to the realisation that his alcohol abuse was not responsible for the violence and abuse, and that she needed help.

Alternatively, interventions from statutory services—usually from police—can also lead to referrals to services, as in Mirka's case:

Police gave me [the telephone number of] a domestic violence national helpline—they will ask you what nationality you are, and they said that they know I speak very good English, but there's the Polish organisation and I can explain the details as well, so I'll feel better. (Mirka)

Referrals and information sharing between different services proved to be highly useful for women when they were not aware of available support, especially from services specialising in supporting Polish or Eastern European women.

Lawyers, including those assigned to people in police custody, also proved useful for referrals and prompting action in relation to recognising and leaving abusive relationships. Laura had been arrested due to her actions when under the influence of alcohol, but explained that this provided a crucial referral:

I was in custody. The interrogation was done with me and I got an interpreter. [...] And the attorney lady, she's the one who actually referred me here to [a domestic violence service]. She asked me, I was stunned, I didn't know what was really going on until the end. [...] And then this lawyer said that she sees, from what I still remember now, that she sees that this is about domestic violence. And she asked me if I would like to go to a home where there were women with similar situations, that "You'll have a chance to talk to them", and I said "Yes, yes". It was all the same to me. But somewhere I had hopes, somewhere I wanted something like that [...]. And even though I didn't know what was going to happen, I wanted some kind of contact with people who would finally begin to understand me. (Laura).

Overall, the routes to receiving that first intervention were many and varied.

### **Multi-agency interventions**

Multi-agency approaches are widely recognised as crucial for detecting, preventing and offering effective support in cases of domestic abuse (Cleaver et al 2019). The wide range of services that can become involved in domestic violence and abuse cases often surprised the women to whom we spoke, especially those with limited knowledge about the service context in the UK. Support was well-evaluated when person-centred and focused on outcomes:

When he [partner] was at the hospital I found out about Woman's Aid, I had support with, from them, I had support from a health visitor, and [I was like] oh what happened? Police was the best support which I got with my journey, in running away. They told me that the children can be registered on child protection register and then this community which was involved in this, they were in touch with me; so it was school, it was nursery for my daughter at that time, health visitor, Women's Aid. It was a lot of people who were strangers for me, but they were trying to support me. (Joanna)

Barriers to multi-agency working around domestic abuse are well-documented, including discordant organisational priorities, poor communication and information flows, varying levels of understanding about abuse and staff turnover (McAughtrie 2016). The different roles of services in intervening in domestic violence and abuse meant that women sometimes felt 'bounced' between services, especially around the recurring need to turn to the police if there is ongoing risk of abuse or harassment:

I just stopped calling the police and somehow there were these, you know, these organisations that can help you, but really [...] At some point I felt like a ping-pong ball. Because it was like, "Oh, you've already seen them. They're doing the same thing as us, so we can't help you, because you've already been to them", and I said "But they sent me to you, right? They sent me to you!". (Julia)

Once again, it's the case that these institutions are shrugging their shoulders and saying "Well if you have that concern then go back to the police". So I go back to the police, I tell them all about it. And they, well as always, "We'll look into it." (Aniela)

Overlap and repetition in questions from different services was also felt to be an issue when seeking to leave an abusive relationship:

Then they meet with me, where I say "No, listen, I want to leave, you have to help me leave, yes? And now make it so that it's safe for me and for this baby, ok?". So it's just... "Okay, well you contact them, well you contact them..." and you get the same questions everywhere! Fuck! You get the same questions everywhere! "How long has it been going on? How did you guys meet? How is the relationship progressing? What are some of the things that happen? And do you feel threatened? [...] but has he ever hit you?", "Well no", "But has he threatened you?", "Well he has". And such... fuck! How many times can you do the same thing! (Julia)

Women evaluated their experiences positively where agencies communicated well, worked in tandem and gave consistent and supportive responses.

### **Using services: language and national background**

Language as a barrier to initial access to services was examined in section 4.2 above. Here, we explore the issue and its impact on the quality of practitioner interactions with women once they have accessed formal services.

The provision of culturally sensitive domestic abuse support has multiple practice and organisational dimensions (Pokharel et al 2021). Women's experiences of engaging with services were shaped by their identity and national background as Polish residents of the UK. Though language barriers were mentioned by many women, the research participants felt that

they were surmountable and that much depends on professionals' approach to working across them, making the cultural and transnational competence of practitioners highly important (Hulley et al 2022). Several women chose to discuss their experiences with us in English and language was generally regarded as only a barrier for women who had received very few opportunities to develop their English.

English could clearly be a major barrier for some women:

For the people, whose English is not as fluent as mine, I think the language would be a big barrier. Because if—look, if for me it was so hard to speak with my mom in my own language, how hard does it have to be for someone to speak in a different language? So, if your English is not good enough, that would be very hard for you to speak up. For me there was not a difference really, to be honest. So this is not about the language in my case, this is about the people who I have contact with (Mirka)

Yet, there was a lot more at play in being positive about a service than just language, especially around the approach of staff. Many women told us that it was possible to discuss their relationships in English if professionals showed patience and skills in communicating in simple English. Ewa explained how she had been supported to feel comfortable in expressing herself in English during therapy:

I told [the domestic violence support worker], right? That my English is not good, she says to me "It's in your head, your English is good enough, very good. You can come here, and you can sit in silence, you can cry, you can laugh, you can talk, you can sit quietly. This is your space, this is your hour, no?" [...] I thought it was more like a big barrier, but when I saw the way she approached everything, then somewhere in my head that my English wasn't good enough, it just disappeared (Ewa)

One dimension where limited fluency in English could play an important role is in being believed or disregarded by services, which is known to be especially difficult for women from migrant backgrounds (McIlwaine et al 2019). Language abilities featured Sofia's account of police responses she experienced in 2008, which she recognised might nowadays be more supportive.

I'm saying to police, "Please come help me, because I'm frightened", whatever I should say that time, because I didn't speak English well. He speaks English, maybe not very fluent, but communicative. And he on another phone, behind that door, saying that my woman is mad and please come and do something with her. So they came and they didn't support me, they just said, "You make your way, everything is fine there". So zero, zero support. (Sofia)

There was some hesitation about using services operating in English and largely by native English professionals: "I was confident to speak in English and try to find help, but I thought that maybe it's not for me because I'm from Poland, maybe it's just for local people." (Joanna). The same interviewee continued that understanding of the political, social and cultural context of domestic violence and abuse, gender and intimate relationships in Poland was important to feeling supported and understood by services:

Since that time when I had my counselling with Polish organisation and this Polish line, my gosh, it's in my own language, I can express many more things, they understand the

background, because in our culture there is consent, permission for woman being treated like that, we are growing up in families like that, that man is the boss, the woman is nothing. So at that time, I felt that somebody understands me and they [the Polish services] know I feel scared and [this] is serious, yes. So this was game changer for me. (Joanna)

Another woman similarly explained how her experience of staying in a refuge was shaped by national background:

To be honest with you, it was like I was the only Polish person there ... I literally sat down with them and said, "You don't understand my mentality, you don't know my background, I, I can tell you," And I was telling my story, you know, about my childhood and everything. (Julia).

This quote highlights that the specific construction in Polish society about relationships and parenting affect understandings of domestic violence and abuse. It is therefore important to have conversations with users of services about aspects of their background that shape their reflections and reactions to domestic violence and abuse, without assuming a homogeneous set of attitudes and barriers among all Polish women.

Several women highlighted that it is difficult to interact with services when they do not understand the overall framework and system. This lack of knowledge about legal and practice frameworks can exacerbate the distrust of services explored in section 4.2. The lack of familiarity with processes in the UK, along with the sense of isolation that can accompany experiences of migration and abuse, meant that thorough information about practical issues can be very important. We can see this in Julia's experience when thinking about leaving a refuge and potentially returning to her abusive partner:

When I just told the refuge that I wanted to leave, [...] well they called [the local authority], because that's where I'd be going back, and social workers. [...] "When he comes back, there's child protection, that right away the case goes to child protection." What is child protection, listen? No one at the refuge could explain to me what child protection is except that it's very serious. Well ok, well it sounds serious, but what is child protection, what does it entail, yes? Holy cow! So I started going to lawyers myself, reading, doing research, contacting social services, you know what is child protection. (Julia)

### **Use of interpreters**

The use of interpreters was widely documented in the data, both from the perspectives of survivors and practitioners. Positive experiences were recorded, but there was also some reticence about their use, including compromised anonymity, the embarrassment associated with a third party hearing about the abuse, and anxieties that translations were inaccurate, not comprehensive and left out essential information and nuances:

I decided that I prefer to present my case myself, the way I can, at most I'll explain something in a circle, but I prefer to do it myself than through someone [interpreter], because I heard once, completely by accident, at some meeting, I don't know, was it in court? Before the trial I heard a conversation between a Polish woman and her lawyer through an interpreter, and they were sitting next to me at such a distance that I could hear

what the interpreter was saying and the level of interpretation. So I said no, thank you very much, but I don't want this kind of service, because in fact, from what the Polish lady said, the interpreter sort of just picked out a few of the most important things, left out the rest, and that was it, wasn't it? And the job was done! And the client, a Polish woman, is not able to point out to him that something is wrong, because she doesn't know the language, right? So I decided that absolutely no translators. (Iwona)

Oliwia found out that she knew one of the several interpreters appointed to work on her case because he had assisted her when she moved to England and needed support to arrange benefits. "Imagine, when I saw him at that meeting, it was "God, he's here". No, it's so in general... it's so horrible. I just sort of came to the meeting, but I just... well, I don't, I don't want to." (Oliwia). Concerns about anonymity when interpreters are known to the family or from the local community have been reported in relation to domestic violence services in the UK (Baird et al. 2013:1008). Whilst the external provision of interpreting can limit ability to influence the allocation of staff, seeking to ensure consistency in provision is important.

There was evidence of services actively taking measures to help to overcome language barriers and avoid using children as interpreters. We received suggestions about how to improve practice, such as the need for continuity at the individual level (use of the same interpreter each time), and the benefit of face-to-face rather than telephone interpreting (Wang 2018) to capture non-verbal cues to aid full disclosures and elicit information on sensitive matters such as sexual violence. Researchers also argue that beyond language skills, interpreters would benefit from specialised training to build communicative bridges between the victims of domestic violence and services such as police and courts (Pozo-Triviño and Toledano-Buendía 2017).

## **Police interventions**

Police responses to domestic abuse are complex, being shaped by interpersonal interactions, organisational and individual knowledge, communication and information flows, professional judgement (including discretion) and case, resource and broader policing contexts (Johnson et al 2019). This complexity partly explains why women interviewed for this project had very varying experiences of police support. Many had been in regular contact with police, but their outcomes and levels of satisfaction varied. At its best, police assistance was valued for rapid responses to high-risk situations and providing information on available support for domestic abuse. Being believed and supported to act were further positive dimensions about police interventions that many women did not expect.

Jola summarised the support she felt was available from the police and urged other women in abusive relationships to utilise police support. Her description of support suggests that such assistance may not be expected by Polish women:

First of all, don't be afraid to call the police [...] the system is constructed differently here, and it works quickly. The police, if they handle it well, it takes a moment and there is a restraining order. And women get support because they are given phone numbers to these different organisations. And somehow a person is not ashamed to call the police, because they don't treat you that way. They reckon with you so much and you feel important, you feel that they want to do everything to catch him (Jola)

Rapid responses by police and follow-up actions, for example through protection orders, were praised:



So, we called 101 and I said to the police officer “listen, he grabbed me by the neck, he pushed me to the radiator and he hit me with a [...] I just want to lock it off, I don’t want to press the charges, if anything happens again, you know what I mean [...]” And the police officer, I remember, on the phone said “listen, he used the weapon on you and he strangled you—are you sure—it’s a serious offence, I have to speak with my senior” — I think he said something like that. And the DVPO was issued. (Ania)

Even the police were notified that there could be problems so they would be in touch with me, no? I mean, if I pressed just one button on my phone, they would arrive in seconds (Ewa).

Women’s experiences tell the value of having abusive incidents registered with the police as possible evidence and signalling of concerns, which might not always be a consideration for Polish victims of abuse and is important to publicise.

There was praise when the police sought to provide support to change women’s lives. The following interview extract with Agata gives an example of her satisfaction with the police officer from a specialist domestic abuse unit who addressed the overall pattern of abuse she was facing:

Believe me I reported 18 times to the police [in a twelve-month period] [...] He didn't come to the house, he didn't approach me, but he kept sending insults by text messages and emails from all directions. After eighteen reports to the police, I couldn't stand it ... and said that I was filing a complaint with the police because I was reporting ongoing emotional abuse to them. I finally got a super police officer, and the police officer took a testimony from me ... from the domestic violence department. [...] After listening to my story and everything he said that he would collect everything and open a general case, not only for the last 18 reports, for this last year, but involving the very beginning. He took everything. He was the first police officer who took all testimonies from me and filed them with the prosecutor's office. (Agata)

The police’s role in providing information about possible options was very important for women in the research project and links to the importance of multi-agency co-operation in domestic abuse cases (Halford and Smith 2022). Police were praised when they provided details of available support services: “I was given a list of, you know, National Domestic Helpline, Women’s Aid, Refuge, everything [...] I started doing this non-molestation order with the National Domestic Helpline!” (Julia). However, information provision was mixed. Aniela, who faced significant problems in getting the police to recognise the abuse she was facing, explained how her husband was released from detention after a violent incident and she was given very little support:

I didn’t know about my rights at that moment. I did not know that I could go to court myself and file a non-molestation order. I didn't know at all what a non-molestation order or domestic violence meant. I was not aware of anything at all (Aniela).

Women’s lack of awareness about legislative and policy frameworks for domestic abuse in the UK and possible police reactions meant that the police sometimes intervened more directly than women had anticipated. Oliwia had this experience when seeking information by email from the police:

I just wrote an email to the police once, back then [...] what should I do? And it turned out that the police came on the same day. [...] I thought that's how [getting information] worked. And you know, it was lockdown then [...] I taught the kids every day, I did assignments with them. They had already finished, it was already evening, dark. And someone knocks, I look, and it's the police. Oh my God! [...] It just cut my legs off, what have I done! That's how it started, as it were. The police asked what was going on and so on. (Oliwia)

In this example, the police waited outside Oliwia's house for the abuser to return from work. Social services became involved, and she took out a non-molestation order to retain custody of her children. We thus see a police response that led to major changes in her life which she may not have envisaged or wanted at the time, albeit one that did help her to exit the abusive relationship.

Frustrations with the police were generally related to limited responses to reports of abuse, which is an issue connected to police discretion in defining and recording domestic abuse (Myhill and Johnson 2016). The cases we learnt about tended to centre on police claims that there was insufficient evidence to intervene: "the policeman said that he had no grounds to arrest him, because [...] well, he didn't physically assault me" (Aniela). Describing a situation when police intervened with her abusive partner after being called to a violent incident, Jola explained that they were not successful in addressing the overall patterns of abuse:

Somebody [from the police] talked to him on the phone because he couldn't speak English. And that person told him that he couldn't come near here, that I didn't want him to, yet he didn't have any prohibition, nothing. So, he left. He left. My friends stayed a little longer. He left but how much time passed? Five minutes? And he came back again! And he started banging on the door again, calling me names, threatening to kill me. He said all sorts of things, and I was terribly afraid. (Jola)

Such examples show that police officers face significant problems in identifying abuse, especially non-physical forms such as psychological abuse and coercive control (Robinson et al 2018).

Aniela provided another example of limited police intervention when the police officers briefed her manipulative and abusive husband about options to limit her own movements with their children after being called to a violent incident. Her example highlights fears from victims about being believed and the need for full patterns of abuse rather than single incidents to be investigated:

The moment he was arrested and questioned, the policewoman informed him of his rights, she said "You can take the case to court", that he could start a case to ban me from leaving England and my children immediately. I thought, I didn't understand this policewoman fully after this arrest and releasing him already. (Aniela)

Women found that police investigations of domestic abuse could be quite harrowing. Krystyna recollected her police interview in relation to abuse and rape by her partner and that she was not informed about what it would entail:

During the interrogation it only came out that there is a whole book, as you may know, according to which they interrogate you. I was at the interrogation for about seven hours, I remember. You know, when I went there, I didn't know how it would look like. If I had known then what it was like, I probably wouldn't have dared. It was horrible. (Krystyna)

We heard several cases when police efforts to gather evidence and testimony against the abusive partner in order to aid prosecutions were seen as insensitive when coming very soon after a violent incident and when women had not had time to decide if they wanted to press charges against the abuser:

The policeman who was interrogating my daughter comes in, enters my kitchen at that time and says to me "Listen, because even if you don't press charges, we'll press charges for you, because this child called". I say "Okay, I understand, but don't force things on me that I'm not willing to testify now [...] Give me time, at least these 24 hours to calm down, because I need to calm my nerves" [...] I still don't know if I want to make this accusation or not, if it will be better or worse. I want to have all the options laid out on the table. What he will risk after my accusation, what not after mine. And two, what will he do later, if it turns out that it was me who accused him, because I'm afraid of that. (Pola)

Police interest in prosecution was regarded as positive. When discussing her police witness statement, Paulina told us that:

It was tiring because it's long, they asked a lot of details, several times about the same thing [...] there was a translator every time [...] Really one policewoman was, like I reported those burglaries at the time, she was so determined to charge him, but of course I was stupid then, when it came to the case, I dropped the charges against him, right? That's how he talked me down. When I think about it now, I am simply ashamed that so many people did their work to help me. (Paulina)

The data documented several examples of poor practice by police services and how the support of other services was crucial in addressing them. Issues related to limited communication, documents being lost by the police or unsympathetic approaches during investigations and visits. One woman had four different MARAC meetings due to police mistakes and miscommunications. Mirka greatly valued the support she received from a domestic abuse service during her case: "[that organisation] helped me a lot with the police, with the misunderstandings and with [the police] not being communicative enough. Earlier the police patrols didn't know there is a non-molestation order, that we have that paper" (Mirka). Krystyna similarly found support workers from a domestic abuse service to be useful when the police did not provide reports:

It turned out that my case file reference numbers were lost somewhere, so we unravelled it all. Of course, you can't call the police or the detective who conducted the investigation because these are all automatic e-mails and you have to enter the numbers. But there were still so many women who helped me at [a domestic violence service] who recovered the number for me. But they said I had to contact them myself and it wasn't as simple as I'm telling you now. (Krystyna)

At their best, police responses provided women with valuable protection, referrals to services, full information about possible options and actions to address abuse and the presence of abusers in their lives. Criticisms arose when these forms of support were not delivered, and police officers showed limited understanding or sensitivity to abuse.

### **Social services**

Social services were mostly involved in women's cases when there were concerns about the safety and well-being of the children. Our research participants reported mixed experiences of social services, ranging from full support, including addressing poor practice in other services, to significant problems in having their cases understood and needing to file official complaints, often with the support of domestic violence services.

Social services at times were crucial to leaving the abusive relationship:

The doorbell rang, I forgot that the social services lady was supposed to come that day. ... And she knocked. And I then—from the door—said, he's been drunk for days, I can't get my child dressed, he took my keys, he took my phone, I'm without anything, without money. That was it. She immediately said that she would come with me to her office right away. She took me with [son] simply in his slippers, I had nothing. (Paulina)

The strict focus of children's social work on child protection is known to prevent a holistic focus on mother-children interaction and lead to mothers being blamed and held responsible for abuse (Humphreys and Abslerr 2011). Women often felt that children's services did not provide strong support for abusive or post-abuse situations due to a lack of understanding of the complex dynamics of domestic violence and abuse (Douglas and Walsh 2010) and their narrow focus on risk:

They police told me they [social services] would get involved as standard procedure, and they asked me not to mind, because that's how it works, but they explained every step of the procedure to me. They didn't really leave me in the dark. I felt annoyed, because the help wasn't as I expected, so I could also say to these women [other women experiencing domestic violence] "Don't get any ideas in your head what this help will be like. But it works. It just works." (Agnieszka).

I had two or three social workers contacting me and they already discharged me, because they said that I have lots of friends and family, so they don't have time for me. I mean they didn't say that, but that's how I feel, you know. (Mirka)

The fear of losing custody of children in domestic violence and abuse cases discussed in section 4.2 played out strongly in engagements with social services. We heard that responsibility for children could be placed on women without strong provision of support. For example, Joanna felt unhappy at how social workers tried to ensure that the abusive father still had contact with the children:

They took out my kids from child register, they didn't believe me that my ex-partner was alcoholic, and then during the process when my ex-partner started to apply for contacts and go to the courts they supported him. They didn't listen my kids, they didn't; they wanted to do everything just to give them contact; and I've lost trust from the time when I thought oh my gosh, I should try to secure my kids and not expose them to abuse, and

social workers would try to help families—they force my kids to see him, my gosh, because he’s their dad. (Joanna)

Paulina had come to recognise that it had been legitimate for social services to remove her child and even positive because it catalysed the end of her abusive relationship:

At first, I was angry at this social service that they took my child away from me, how could they do this to me? ... they helped me, paradoxically, to get away from that man. By a brutal method, but the goal was achieved, yes? Yeah. So thanks to them I am free now ... I hated [the social workers] at first, right? Because I just felt terrible. But then it got to me ... How do you get a woman to leave a guy? Well, you have to take the kids away from her. And that's fine, because that child can't live like that. I looked at it from such a smarter side. And those ladies, they were really okay afterwards. I was able to look at them in a different way, that they were just doing their job. I looked at myself through their eyes. And I thought to myself "God, I would do the same thing, right? Because a stupid woman, in love with her husband, puts her children at risk. I know it's hard to risk it, to walk away from your husband, but you have to do it, right? Because you're not alone in the world and you have responsibility for your children, right?" So they were okay. They really were! (Paulina)

Mandel (2010) notes that in some cases the risk from the perpetrator remains so high that social services must take action to protect the child. He also suggests that it may be difficult to collaborate with women if they deny, or do not recognise, the risk posed by the perpetrator towards the child.

Some social workers were very helpful, for example in challenging poor practice from other professionals. Mirka explained how support from her social worker helped to change the police officer handling her case because one had been unprofessional and unsupportive:

The officer who I got, he was misogynistic in my opinion and I did report him, for the way he spoke to me and the things he said to me—and three days after I reported him to the social service, I got a different [police] officer—officially that officer went sick, but I don't believe in that. Because when I said to my social worker, she was like, “Oh my God, he really said that to you?” (Mirka)

There were other examples of social workers being very supportive, for example when the abusive ex-partner and his contacts attempted to make multiple reports of potential child neglect or abuse as a form of harassment:

Later I also had social workers come to me very often, because he [ex-partner] kept reporting that the kids were hungry. But later even the social workers called me and said “Agnieszka, listen, you’ve been reported”, and I laughed about it later, because it was like “We’ve received a report, we're just letting you know that it was a report ... we have it on record that it's all right, thank you, but we need to keep you informed” and that's what they explained to me. So that's the three calls I had from them as well, basically. I think I've had 3 or 4 visits and I've had 3-4 phone calls, like, “Agnieszka, we're not even coming, we know everything, right? So have fun,” right? (Agnieszka).

Although women had mixed assessments of the support they received from social services while they were in the abusive relationships, their perceptions of the social service intervention

following their separation were more negative and largely related to custody proceedings (see section 4.5). Good practice involves regular communication and will require a shift from a risk-based child protection approach to one that recognises the danger the woman is in and seeks to support her.

## **Health services**

As with police and other services, the support of GPs and health workers was valued when detecting abuse and providing referrals to available services.

Ewa went to her GP for a mental health consultation following an appointment that her abusive husband had made as a way of undermining her and reinforcing his characterisation of her as ‘crazy’:

I went to the GP and I just burst out, I started crying. I think the doctor saw that something was not right. I came in with the baby in general in such a state of emotional despair. I was numb, I was scared. And I just snapped, and she gave me the number for Women's Aid right away. She wrote me this list, told me more or less what to do. And I applied to Women's Aid. I took all the documents, they told me "Take the documents", I hid the documents at my mom's house, at least that's all she could help me with. They told me "Pack only what you need and just leave." (Ewa)

Women did not always feel comfortable sharing their experiences of abuse with healthcare professionals and this could lead to times where opportunities for disclosure or referrals were missed, even if they might have been welcomed by women:

I went to the GP saying, look, you know, I'm going through the, you know, difficult times. I didn't even say that its domestic violence, like probably, I didn't recognise it myself, fully then. But I just was saying, look, now we've gone through a very, very rough and you know, difficult break up, you know, can you refer my daughter to, you know, counselling services? Because first thing, I was concerned about her, that was my first, you know, main concern then, the GP advised me, uh, read a child, a book about the divorce. (Malwina)

You see, the first doctor, you know, the one who asked him to leave [the consultation room]. It was already, then, a gentle conversation with her about it, you know, that something was wrong. But you know, she... If I was that doctor, you know, I would have been more inquisitive. She was rather evasive. She could see that something was wrong, but she didn't want anything to do with it either. (Krystyna)

Women often make tentative or indirect disclosures about domestic violence and abuse, but opportunities to support Malwina and Krystina were missed.

We also learnt about situations when partners were abusive in healthcare facilities, but professionals did not seem to recognise it. Nadia had to endure her partner's insults in the hospital over bodily fluids during labour that was part of a much wider pattern of intense abuse:

I didn't want him to be in the [maternity] room, however, he didn't get time to run out. So I delivered the baby. As soon as the midwife left I heard "What a shame on you, you just shamed me because you left the bed dirty." And I was just standing there and said

“What do you expect from me, it’s normal for every single woman just to bleed during the delivery of the baby.” ... And he was making fun of it, every time for long time after it he was making fun; whenever we went to friends, he was just “Oh, you know, my wife shamed me during the labour because the bed was so dirty.” (Nadia)

Nadia’s fear of her partner, his unsupportive attitude, the aura of control and her evident distress could potentially have been discerned by the hospital staff. Marta gave us another example of contact with health professionals where the disclosure of abuse was not elicited. She was regularly visited by a health visitor after giving birth and confided to her that she was receiving mental health therapy. Marta did not tell us if the health visitor enquired about abuse, but explained was keen to emphasise to the professional that “I had help, I had support”. She did not mention the abuse to the health visitor and her partner was sometimes present during her visits, which reduced opportunities for disclosure. Maternity, depression and migration are all factors known to increase the risk of abuse (Baird et al 2015) and the health visits would have represented valuable – and arguably rare – contact with professionals for crucial conversations about abuse (Bradbury-Jones 2015). The Polish women were scared and often ashamed to disclose abuse, perhaps shaped by expectations that the responses of health services in Poland to abuse are not useful (Iwanski 2019).

Research indicates the need for health practitioners to adopt proactive questioning techniques to elicit disclosures from women (McCall-Hosenfeld 2014) and to reassure them that any disclosure will be taken seriously and facilitate the provision of support. Increasing the effectiveness of routine questioning will require time, training and shifts in organisational culture within medical services (Henriksen et al 2017). As many GP practices across the UK continue with predominantly telephone consulting even as the pandemic subsides, there is an need for training and creative approaches to create safe and accessible routes for women to disclose experiences of domestic violence and abuse to the health services.

## **Therapy**

Counselling about domestic violence and abuse was very important to women for understanding the nature of the trauma and violence they had faced as well as for emotional support during the process of exiting the relationship.

Yeah, well, I didn't experience a "because the soup was too salty" violence. I didn't. When I went to see a psychologist, I said that I was not beaten in a way women used to be beaten walking with bruises or something like that. It happened during arguments that he jostled me. I didn't take it as some kind of gross violence. I wasn't really aware of it. It was only when a psychologist made me aware that it was violence. (Marta).

A practitioner from a ‘by and for’ domestic violence service noted that Polish women often requested individual psychological therapy, as opposed to discussion-based group programmes focused on awareness and understanding of abuse that are often used in UK domestic abuse services. This interest in individual therapy reflects different understandings of support in Poland, where social psychologists are often accessed for difficulties in a wide range of life areas:

Often women ask for a psychologist... they have a little bit of a different understanding I think, they think it's psychological help in the first place, that's what I've noticed. And of

course, we can help them organise that, especially for women who are not yet sure what decisions they want to make here. (Practitioner 13, 'by and for' domestic violence service)

At times, therapy focused on domestic violence and abuse was positively contrasted from medication or generic mental health support available through the NHS:

Here in [a Polish community support service] I attended therapy with a Polish therapist ... and I can honestly say that she used various methods of therapy. I got on well with her. And a lot of small enlightenments appeared to me. [...] It was only thanks to these two [domestic violence] organisations that I was able to attend therapy at all. Through the NHS, forget it! They'll just give you medication. I said I didn't want it and the GP went on with it. I think they're just having a... I think they're trying to cut costs. (Viola).

Several women explained that encouragement or support could be needed to make use of available therapeutic support:

I didn't know if I was ready for any help. I thought that my friends would help me and that I would be able to cope with everything on my own. And now I can see that it's not all over and I need some support, some help... therapy for sure. (Emilia)

Some women arranged and paid for private-sector therapy for themselves. We also learnt that one research participant was able to access free-of-charge counselling available within a Polish community organisation. As Weronika recalled: "I called them myself. [...] it was 6 or 10 sessions, it was free. I had to send an e-mail with a brief description of what I was not coping with."

The need for therapeutic support to deal with the impact of the abuse and aid the process of recovery was a strong theme that ran through women's accounts, leading to disappointment when such services were not available after they had left abusive relationships. Research highlights the availability of a range of such interventions, though there is mixed evidence on what works (Coker et al. 2012; Hegarty et al. 2016). Women often utilised a diverse range of services, combining free and chargeable support both in the UK and perhaps also in Poland, in order to address therapeutic and psychological needs arising from domestic violence and abuse. They particularly valued therapeutic interventions where they were attached to domestic violence services because it gave them confidence that their experiences would be understood.

### **Domestic violence and abuse services**

Women accessed a range of domestic violence services, including outreach services that catered for all women, 'by and for' outreach services, and refuge services (there being no Polish 'by and for' refuge services in the UK). Overall, domestic violence services accessed by women were regarded as very useful in providing emotional support and practical guidance to move on from abusive relationships and in helping them navigate statutory processes such as child protection, police prosecutions, housing, benefits and custody cases in court.

For many the women we interviewed, domestic abuse services were crucial in helping them leave an abusive relationship and moving to temporary accommodation or a refuge, as recounted by Aniela:



I told them about my situation and they told me that under no circumstances could I go home after such threats. I showed them the evidence. And they told me to pick up the kids right away in the middle of the school day, so I, when I left the house, wasn't prepared for the fact that I couldn't go back to that house anymore. I didn't have any spare socks with me, I didn't have any... I had some documents, because I was still driving at the time. But I didn't have the most necessary documents, I couldn't pack. Just nothing. So, I drove from this Women's Aid, I drove to the children's school, I was in constant contact with the lady from Women's Aid on the phone. I picked up those children and came to Women's Aid. From there I got a bed and breakfast, they placed me in the same town where I lived. (Aniela)

Support and counselling from domestic violence services were central to recognising and understanding that what had happened to them was abuse. Malwina recounted the role that a domestic violence service played in understanding and later reporting the rape that she had faced in her abusive relationship:

Somebody else had to point it to me in the sense of, that it is classified as a rape... [...] You are so ashamed of yourself, you know, you don't really want to speak about it. [...] They had their questionnaires, you know, I had to answer the questions. So it was in that, that yes. You know, obviously that was, you know, rape. They, they, they know that. This is when they sent me to the police, they said, look, you need to go to report to the police. At that time, I wasn't feeling ready for that. Hmm. But [...] I said, okay. (Malwina)

Domestic abuse services also helped women to overcome shame and guilt about the domestic violence and abuse through courses and counselling, and particularly through group work, the benefits of which are documented in research (Goodman et al. 2016). Paulina remembered, "There were these talks, other women were there too, they spoke up. It was very cool, because I still have notes on how to recognise a dominant person, all the symptoms, where it starts, how it affects the children". Laura also remembered:

I was afraid to talk to anyone at all, because I was afraid, because I felt alone. I felt guilty all the time, you know? All the time, until I got here, I felt guilty all the time, that it was my fault [...] It's that it doesn't have to be guilt at all. But it's that understanding, understanding is the most important thing! This [domestic violence service] is cool, I'm glad I was able to go over there. (Laura)

Emotional support provided after ending abusive relationships was greatly valued and often not expected. The assistance extended to addressing lapses in professional practice, miscommunication or poor information flows in other services, notably child protection, Cafcass (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) or the police. Laura had felt intimidated by her social worker's response to her request for an advocate during child protection processes and explained to us that:

I went to [the domestic violence worker] the other day, because I couldn't stand it anymore, you know? I said, well I was scared, you know? ... She pointed out that this is inappropriate behaviour [by the social workers] and she will report it ... I'm really glad that she was there at that time. If it wasn't for [her], they would have just destroyed me, you know? I wouldn't have had a chance, because I would have agreed to everything. (Laura)

Similarly, Agnieszka praised the support she received to galvanise the police when her abusive ex-partner was harassing her and violating his restraining order, including by making false accusations that she was breaching a [fictional] order on herself:

[The domestic abuse support worker] brought it to the police's attention that further interventions should be handled by them and also suggested that they should check in the system, who's under a restraining order. And things went quickly from there, he got plenty of warnings from police to stay away and even my lawyer threatened action if he wouldn't stop (Agnieszka).

Most women felt well-informed and supported by domestic abuse services, but there were times when a few women felt that they had not received full details about all available options, especially around possibilities for ending an abusive relationship. Women did not always learn at an early stage about possibilities to take out an injunction on the abusive partner versus moving to refuge or temporary accommodation. Joanna had been reluctant to follow initial advice about needing to move to a refuge and found that subsequent consultations presented another option:

So when I started my plan to run away from him—it was just the situation with the person, not the institution—it was this person from Woman's Aid who said, "You can't stay in this house, [...] like come to me and I will try to find you bed." [...] I said, no, I will try again, I will call, maybe somebody else will pick up the phone call, maybe I will try another day and they will help me with securing the flat. But there was nothing like that. Then I found another person in Woman's Aid, she was Polish speaker, and she said, "OK, we can do this and he will have bail condition, you will stay in this house." And then the housing association helped me too, with the contract just in my name. But if I had listened to this first person who picked up my phone call I would have believed her that I have to run away, I have to disappear. (Joanna)

Erez and Ibarra (2007) document the somewhat complex support systems involving multiple agencies that need to be mobilised in offering women alternatives to relocating to a refuge. A few women expressed their preference for such options rather than the dislocation entailed in moving to a refuge.

No, I didn't want to. Well, that's the thing. Now, this is what they offer me. But I said, no, why on earth me as a victim, I have to run away? Why can't you deal with the perpetrator? Why can't you remove the risk for me and my daughter, I wasn't ready for that. I didn't want to traumatise my child more by going to the refuge. I know that people have a different view of it. But imagine, you know, the child is already over traumatised, already going through a lot. Changing their surroundings completely, going to the refuge where you do not know where you are. It's not the solution. It's simply not the solution. (Malwina)

I was the one who had to leave everything I work for and I still didn't kind of, I couldn't understand why it was me again, you know, I left everything I knew, my friends, my work, my house, everything, I took my child, just few belongings, and I ended up two hundred miles away in the place where I don't know nobody, I was always working and now I'm going to be relying on benefits. (Julia)

As migrants who relied on the social networks that they had built from scratch since arriving in the UK, dislocating again to make fresh start was a daunting prospect for many women we interviewed. Several had rejected the option of going to a refuge and utilised injunctions to get the perpetrator to leave the family home.

Understanding of funding arrangements for refuge support could be complicated. Describing her first contact with a 'by and for' domestic violence service to assess her eligibility for a refuge, one woman explained:

I sit down with them, after an hour of the interview they tell me ... "Well no, we can't help you. We have no basis to help you. You're working, you're earning money, [...] you don't receive benefits, you are not our majority". So I felt like ... the fact that I'm working is my problem! That it actually works against me, right? You know, because I don't accept benefits or that I never called the police. It's a shock in general. (Julia)

For women who are self-funded, refuges can be somewhat expensive because of the short-term nature of the accommodation, as the rent includes the costs of furnishings which may need to be replaced between tenants and security arrangements. For women who work, refuges obtain a discount on the rent through housing benefits but it may take weeks to obtain a decision. In this case, it seems that these systems were not clearly conveyed to Julia, nor does she seem to have been informed or she did not understand that there is no need to give up work to access refuge services. Though the vast majority of women housed within refuges receive public benefits and have to give up work to relocate with their children, this is not an essential feature of the refuge system. However, Julia left the consultation with that understanding, which made it seem to be an unacceptable option for her, and for some other women we interviewed.

Julia eventually decided to go to a refuge. However, she reported her frustration with the refuge when they began to work with her to complete the rehousing form soon after her arrival; she wanted therapeutic support and time to recover from the impact of the abuse. She felt that the refuge was trying to 'get rid of' her, as if she was being processed through a system. Refuges operate to strict rehousing targets and time limits due to commissioning requirements, which was not explained to her and left her feeling unsupported.

For those who moved into a refuge, the process could also be intimidating, including the strict processes around secrecy of location and arrangements, suggesting that it is important to explain the reasons for processes to women who may not be familiar with the concept of a refuge:

Because when the first thing you hear after arriving to the refuge is "Say nothing to no one", I think to myself, if someone tells me that, God, I wouldn't go there. It doesn't sound good. But that's it. This is the thing that I wanted to talk to [the refuge provider] about, that this is not the best signal to send to new women, they would have to explain a little bit to a person who is so desperate why she can't talk [about the place]. Because just saying "Don't tell anyone" raises some kind of tension, it's worrying. (Laura)

Due to eligibility criteria and the funding structures of refuges (which are funded through public benefits), they also remain inaccessible for certain categories of women such as those with no recourse to public funds. One woman, Paulina explained what happened:

The social services came to me two days later, that they were taking me to a hotel. [...] They said that afterwards they would go with me, somewhere to the office, try to get me

some benefits or something. Of course it was of no use, because I had just arrived, I didn't have a job, I didn't have anything, my child wasn't even born in England. So what could I get? Well, absolutely nothing. I spent two days in a hotel and that's all, I had hot water, I could take a proper bath and that's all. It was total nonsense. I came back. (Paulina)

The no recourse to public funds requirement trapped Paulina in a life of violence and abuse for want of any other options. It took several years before she was able to leave. Eligibility for public funds is likely to become an acute issue for Polish women arriving in the UK in the post-Brexit period.

Overall, women's accounts endorsed domestic violence services that provided genuine advocacy for survivors – defined as partnering with them to represent their rights and interests while linking them to concrete resources, protections, and opportunities (Sullivan and Goodman 2019). Kulkarni (2019) calls for reimagining current intimate partner violence service delivery within an intersectional feminist, trauma-informed framework that centres on the experiences and needs of women in shaping service delivery. Such an approach would entail moving away from an individualised service model based on meeting the standard outcome measures associated with government-funded programmes to a more victim-centred approach that prioritises advocacy, a network-orientated approach and empowerment (Goodman et al. 2016). From women's accounts, they valued these approaches when they encountered them in domestic violence service delivery.

### *By and for services*

Specialist 'by and for' domestic violence services were established in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s to address the unmet needs that arose from racially minoritised women's location at the intersection of multiple disadvantages. Practitioners working in these services are women from racially minoritised communities themselves and their services are for women from these communities, hence their designation as 'by and for' services. The fact that trustees are also commonly from the relevant community further fosters an organisational culture that prioritises specialist expertise and shared experience. Research indicates that minoritised women are more likely to approach 'by and for' services for help because these are the spaces they trust and in which they feel safe, understood and less alone (EVAW, 2015).

We learnt about several projects and services specifically focused on support Polish and Eastern European women. Most had been launched by Polish volunteers with a smaller number established by services working primarily with other categories of racially minoritised women (for example, South Asian women) who had noticed an unmet need for support among Polish women. A Polish practitioner explained that:

It's just a problem for most Poles to use English services because first of all they feel they can't express themselves, they can't even say what they think even though they think they know English, secondly there's this problem of misunderstanding because it's out of context sometimes, right? Where the social worker doesn't really know why the person said that, because they don't know the cultural context, because they don't know certain things, they don't know the pressure that the woman has brought from her home, from the way she was brought up, from the whole patriarchy, the system of social roles. It is just a little bit incomprehensible for them. (Practitioner 11, 'by and for' domestic violence service)

Contrasting experiences of talking to a Women's Aid service and a specialist Polish 'by and for' domestic violence helpline, Joanna explained:

[My] first phone call was to Polish abuse helpline and it was easy because it was a Polish girl so I could use my own language to express. It had cost me a lot of effort to call Women's Aid [earlier] and say "Look, I need help, what can I do?" (Joanna)

While women praised the high level of communication and support where it was provided, the value they accorded to the availability of 'by and for' services needs be understood within the context of their migration experiences. Isolation, guilt and shame engendered from understandings of domestic violence and abuse in the Polish context, the migration experience and lack of extended support networks in the UK, language barriers and fear of services all combine to make leaving a particularly daunting time for Polish women. Both practical and emotional support from 'by and for' services was highly valued:

They can support me even with their very presence, that is a lot. Not to mention the phone calls, the support like "You can do it! But why are you giving up? You have to! You can do it! You know you can do it!", and gives you faith in yourself, in your worth. (Agnieszka)

[The support worker] started to call me every week to ask how I was feeling. She directed me a bit on how to handle it, where to go, so that I could get better, so that I could handle it. (Jola)

A practitioner from a 'by and for' domestic violence service explained why Polish women perceived such services as more easily accessible to them:

Polish people in particular I think they, when they look for support, and even research shows that, that when they look for support they would look, they would ask, you know, the closest family, friends, people in their, in their, their community; they would look online also to look for information, they wouldn't go to the council or to the main organisations to look for help in the first instance, they will try the other options. (Practitioner 3, 'by and for' domestic violence service)

Group work and peer support facilitated by the 'by and for' services were greatly appreciated. Oliwia particularly valued being able to share her experiences of abuse with other Polish women who had been through similar experiences and could understand her: "There was this programme from [a 'by and for' domestic abuse service for Polish women] ... it was so interesting, just to learn about these different behaviours and how these women talked about them, it was so helpful."

Their positive experiences of 'by and for' services meant that some women felt their visibility in the Polish community needed to be increased:

Surely it should be more widespread, like, that there's help in Polish, right? [...] I think that still so many women do not know about these things, so... [...] I know that the girls from here [the 'by and for' service] also had some leaflets about a support group and so on. Well, they left them in Polish shops, didn't they? (Maja)

Most of the women we met had learned about these services through referrals from GPs or from domestic violence and abuse helplines, suggesting that overall awareness about the existence of such services was not high in Polish communities around the UK.

In a context where Poland is the second-most common non-UK country of birth for people living in the UK after India (The Migration Observatory 2020), the dearth of Polish ‘by and for’ domestic violence services is concerning. Funding insecurities plague the existing Polish ‘by and for’ domestic violence services, and there is no Polish ‘by and for’ domestic violence refuge anywhere in the UK. Providing a diverse range of services will allow victims of domestic violence and abuse to access services that they can trust and thus leave abusive relationships.

### **Schools and children’s centres**

The age profile of Polish migrants to the UK is younger than the UK average, with 69% aged 25-49 compared to 34% of the UK population in 2016 (ONS 2016). Polish families are more likely to have dependent children—26% were married couples with dependent children vs 16% of all families in 2016 (House of Commons, 2016: 8). Hence schools and children’s services such as Children’s Centres were a point of contact for many women during the period when they were experiencing domestic violence and abuse.

Schools received a lot of praise for their support with children and arranging practical aspects of life during and after leaving abusive relationships. This positive work may be partly due to the non-statutory nature of much of their work, meaning that their actions are less constrained by strictly defined processes. Occasionally schools were the first service to learn about abuse, although many women reported hesitation about talking to schools due to shame or fears of other services becoming involved. One woman was prompted to take out an injunction against her abusive partner after sharing details of abuse with a staff member at the Children’s Centre, triggering mandatory reporting of child protection concerns:

When I disclosed the information to the Children’s Centre and what it is happening at that moment after he came back to me and into my house, they said “Look, it's not right, look you and your child are at risk. We cannot leave it like that.” They made a decision that, look, we are informing the police... Women’s Aid and the social services, whatever, you know, things need to be informed. (Malwina)

Polish women’s disclosure to schools about problems of abuse and challenges after leaving abusive relationships must be set in the context of their possible fears about scrutiny from social services in relation to their children’s well-being. High levels of reassurance about the value of available support from schools and how referrals to children’s services are not necessarily negative are very important:

In school I slowly started, because at some point, I got convinced, because I was told by these [British] friends, they said "Listen, say it in school. The school will help you," and I said, "But what if they take my children away from me?" and "They won't take your children away! They have no right to take them away." That was my first thought, I was afraid of it, of those stories I'd heard about Polish women having their children taken away because something was wrong! Wild things [...] And people believe it so much. (Viola)

Several women found schools or nurseries very supportive in building their new lives after leaving abusive relationships, for example when in new flats or temporary accommodation:

The schools dressed the children in uniforms, they helped me buy beds, they applied for the grant themselves, I got the grant, I did the shopping for the house. So it's very important that the school knows. Because it's often the case that parents don't want to cause problems, they don't want to report to the school, because the school will ask about it, or maybe services will report it. There's nothing to be afraid of, you just have to go, talk to them, tell them what it's like. And then everyone can feel safe. Yes. (Aniela)

A member of staff at a children's centre was equally praised for her practical and emotional support by another research participant:

I just sometimes drove from my brother, brought the kids to school, it was an hour away. We had to get up, we had to... and all that, I was sometimes late. After a while she said what was going on. Because I was ashamed of it and everything. And when she found out about it, she was just, like, what do I need. First thing, she just gave me a voucher to the food bank. What do I need? Some clothes or some stuff? Because I had just moved into temporary accommodation and I said, "I've got nothing". And then she organised some cutlery, some forks, some cups, plates, towels. And in general, I saw that she started to take an interest. Every now and then she would say "Have you heard from anyone about the flat? She was simply very involved. A lot of support, even such that I could talk. Sometimes I just couldn't stand it emotionally anymore and cried. So she helped me a lot! Really! Really! She called on my behalf, asked the council what to do next, what about housing. And really!" (Oliwia)

It was several months before Oliwia managed to access council housing, an issue that several women faced in the months after leaving an abusive relationship (Women's Aid 2020). In post-abuse periods, schools were often regarded as safe spaces for the children and valuable sources of support for children:

The teacher of my youngest child called me. Then the middle one's teacher, then the oldest one's teacher. They all called me one by one. To have a chat, to explain that I'll keep an eye on, they'll see how the behaviour is, if there, you know, something in the teaching changes. (Pola)

The school is informed about everything. My children also had victim support therapy, they also got support, which helped a lot. It's very important for schools to know, because in every primary and secondary school there is one person assigned to support families, to support children. It's like a psychologist, a link between the school, the children and the parents. And it's very important to tell everything, because then I feel very protected by the school at this point. They have a picture of the father, they know what he looks like, they know my situation, at each stage I inform them what stage the case is at. (Aniela)

Research documents the vital role of schools in identifying signs of abuse and signposting referral pathways, but also indicates that teachers often lack confidence and knowledge for such work (Lloyd 2018). Given the place of schools and children's centres in the lives of migrant women, services seeking to reach out to Polish women could do well to work with educational and childcare institutions to build their capacity to support women experiencing domestic violence and abuse.

## Catholic Church

The Catholic church has a very important social role in Poland, having been a longstanding feature of Polish identity and resistance to state socialism and older waves of historical occupation. It is therefore unsurprising that religion played an important role in the identity and social context of many of the women to whom we talked. The frequency of contact and nature of confession meant that the Church was an organisation to which women might turn and seek support for domestic violence and abuse. The sample size is not representative, but we learnt that there was a major risk of being rejected and not supported in domestic violence and abuse cases. The conservatism of the Catholic church manifests itself in seeking to preserve marriage even at high costs to women victims of abuse and being very hostile to ideas of single parenting and leaving marriage. Such approaches meant that claims of abuse were often downplayed, and women were not advised to seek support from services, an orientation to victims of domestic violence that is common in other faith-based communities (Levitt and Ware 2006; Truong et al. 2020).

Zusanna explained to us that there was a huge difference between the church in Poland and in the United Kingdom:

[The Polish Catholic Church] somehow forbids you to divorce, so you are stuck with someone, despite what he is doing to you, that man. You cannot arrange your life because, because the priests have decided otherwise [...] when I went to see the priest [...] when I am saying umm that it is tough with him and that we have that problem, that perhaps my husband drinks too much. And I'd hear [from the priest] 'I am not saying that it is your fault but perhaps it's worthwhile to ask why?' So I say, I know why, meaning that it is an emotional problem, from as far as parents and so on. But when he tells me that it is the marriage, because of the marriage, I feel so powerless, you know what I mean. [...] That there is something that the wife is not providing [...] that there is something I am not coping with [...] you know what I mean? (Zuzanna)

Joanna explained how she encountered indifference to her many approaches:

There were so many times when I was in bruises, blood, and I ran away to the church just to sit in the bench and just prayed by myself; there was no reaction from, from people who were there [...] I was crying there and the priest will not approach me and he will not ask "Can I help you? What's wrong?" So I stopped going there because there was no understanding. (Joanna)

Both women had equally encountered resistance when trying to launch services for the Polish community together with Polish churches:

A lot depends on the priest. For example, our priest, I have been telling him let's open up a family centre, let's apply for money from the National Lottery. And he responds saying, but you are not a church goer, for the last two years I have not seen you in church, you do not celebrate the sacraments, so either you come back to church or there are no such initiatives, no [grant] applications. Even though I will write the applications, and not him. (Zuzanna)



Joanna had worked with a Polish 'by and for' domestic violence service to develop a leaflet about sources of support, but the Church she approached was not supportive in distributing it:

They are not supportive [...] The attitude is still the same, people who are like in my country [...] They don't want to listen about this, it's a, a sin, I can't, I can't be an unmarried parent, my children are, you know, from bad, bad relationship; so it's not understanding. I got some understanding from Scottish and Irish priests who baptised my kids, who gave them first communion, even if I'm unmarried, but Polish, Polish church here, no ... they will close their ears, they will close their eyes, nothing like that [domestic violence] happens; it's the same way of thinking where we see my family come from. (Joanna)

Professionals should be aware that the Church can have a significant role in Polish women's lives and that liaison with them could be useful where a supportive priest can be found, but alternatively result in harsh, unhelpful responses. Supporting women's own faith will be important for professionals, including recognising the challenges that may arise in the Catholic church's approach to domestic violence and abuse and family life. A number of our respondents had moved away from the Polish Catholic Church to services from English, Scottish or Irish Churches that were felt to be more sensitive in domestic violence and abuse cases, particularly regarding divorce and single parenting.

### **Self-help and support groups**

We learnt that women often complemented support from services with self-help and support groups, some based within their own Polish networks and others connected to domestic violence services.

Many women tried hard to source information online, for example through closed Facebook groups where informal networks of survivors based across the UK supported each other:

And as far as the court cases are concerned, concerning violence and so on. Well, here I think the local groups are more helpful, after all. In my opinion, organisations, Facebook groups, or any other groups, where the majority of Poles are, very much translate their Polish experiences to the local area, which is not really [relevant] ... the system here works very differently. And I'll be honest and say that I've benefited more from advice from British women than from what I've been advised in Polish groups [online]. (Iwona)

These closed groups of survivors on Facebook included representation from different professionals and strict measures so that abusive partners could not join. A number of women highlighted that they found online resources like YouTube videos and self-help guides by popular psychologists in Poland to be very useful for understanding the nature of abuse and relationships with abusive men.

There was strong agreement that support groups for Polish women would be useful, including Polish language support groups:

When she has that one-on-one, well she's just talking about her problem, and the moment there's a support group, she hears that she's not alone, that there are other women who are either going through something similar, or have already gone through something similar, and that it can be worked through, and you can come out of it, and have a great life, no?

You know, it would be good if... ideally, it would be good for these women to have this help in Polish. Because, you know, now in [the 'by and for' domestic violence service] there's this support group, which we have on Tuesdays, well, it's without comparison. (Maja)

Fortune tellers and tarot readers were mentioned by two women as figures involved in prompting their decision to leave abusive relationships. Such services show the importance of outside views and opportunities to discuss personal life for women facing isolation and abuse. Whilst it is likely to be a minority of women who use such services, it may be useful checking if women consult such services and regard them as a potential source of advice or support, and as a venue for leaflets about sources of support.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of survivors' use of services indicates that information about processes is crucial. Polish women are often very unfamiliar with processes around Legal Aid, social housing, child protection and police injunctions. Multiple referral paths and information flows are therefore important to increase the level of support and provide a strong safety net. In this context, automatic statutory referrals around child protection or high risk to adults were often positive for increasing the exchange of information and provision of support.

The help from services goes far beyond the practical to encompass important emotional support in dealing with the complex processes involving in exiting a relationship and building a new life. Relationship-based support is therefore important for Polish victims and survivors of abuse because they need to overcome a wide range of barriers and concerns about navigating systems in the UK. Services that target single aspects of abuse—for example the protection focus on children—are therefore sometimes unhelpful for not addressing the complex dynamics of abuse and the holistic issue of family wellbeing.

Many interview participants were comfortable with accessing domestic violence services that were not specifically 'by and for' Polish women, but felt that understanding and some adjustment for navigating processes in non-native languages would be useful. Polish 'by and for' domestic abuse and Polish community support services offer understanding of the national-cultural context, migration patterns and specific barriers, which are important for all services to consider when seeing to be more accessible for Polish women living in the UK.

### Case study: Aniela

Aniela was a single mum when she came to the UK, initially for a year to make some money, learn English and to give her son an interesting, cultural experience. She soon met her future partner at work, and they started dating. He was very charming, and he tried to discourage her from going back to Poland, offering her financial stability. However, she decided to return because she missed her family very much. At that point, she found out that she was pregnant, which made her change her plans. The abuse started soon after they moved in together. He would threaten and belittle her and abused her financially. Soon after giving birth, she decided to part ways with him. She moved to another flat, but he quickly found her. He kept turning up, uninvited, and she agreed to whatever he demanded—money, food, accommodation, sex—to avoid violence in front of the children. She didn't say anything to friends and family, because she was ashamed and felt inferior, relative to her siblings' 'ideal families'. "Even if I told my family, they would urge me to go back [to him] as soon as possible." Looking for help, she called the Polish embassy and was directed to a Polish Saturday school and a Polish community organisation. She was advised to report it to the police, but she wasn't ready to do so. It took her another two years, during which the violence escalated. He would often threaten to kill her, and she felt that he was capable of it. After yet another threat, she reported the violence to the police. She regretted it immediately. She presented several recordings of severe verbal abuse to the police, of her partner smashing things and making threats on her life, but since there was no evidence of physical violence against her person, the police officer informed her that they had no grounds to arrest him. Following advice from a worker at the Polish Saturday school who had been supporting her throughout this period, she contacted a domestic violence refuge. She was told to leave him immediately, not to pack but just pick up the children from school and come to their office. They organised a B&B in the same town, where she stayed for 3 weeks. Meanwhile, the abuser had posted the pictures of her and the children saying she was a missing person and asking for help to find her. She asked to be moved to another place, because she didn't feel safe. Aniela got a place in a refuge in another city. While she was in the refuge her ex-partner applied for custody. Cafcass got involved and in their report, they revealed the location of her refuge and passed the report to him. Just a few days later he was stopped by the police close to the refuge while driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs. "If he had caught me then, I simply wouldn't have made it here. I know that", she reflected. She is very disappointed in how her case was handled by the police and Cafcass. On the other hand, she greatly values her time in the refuge and the support she received and feels that this it was crucial to her recovery and helped her to get back on her feet. She now wants to help other women who experience domestic abuse. "I feel such a power inside me that I want to work on this, that I can't even describe it! I just feel the need to take these women by the hand, these children, so that they are not afraid, because they have their rights!"

## **4.5 Surviving domestic violence and abuse: Post-separation abuse, civil/criminal court processes and children's contact arrangements**

### **Post separation abuse**

Research from diverse contexts documents how leaving the abusive relationship does not mark the end of the violence and abuse; there is now a large body of evidence which points to the ongoing nature of domestic violence and abuse which, in many cases, escalates or indeed takes new forms after the end of the relationship (Ornstein and Rickne 2013; Shim et al. 2021; Toews and Bermea 2017). Post-separation abuse can be defined as the ongoing, wilful pattern of intimidation of a former intimate partner including through stalking, harassment, destruction of property, legal abuse, economic abuse, isolating her, discrediting her, and threats and endangerment to children. A large majority of our sample, twenty-one out of 28 women, experienced post-separation abuse which in some cases lasted for over eight years and in many cases was ongoing.

An abuser who was a coercive controller during the relationship may interpret his partner's decision to leave as a challenge to his control and continue to engage in, or indeed escalate, abusive behaviour, often through post-separation stalking (Ornstein and Rickne 2013).

I think I managed to hide for a week or two. He kept calling me. But at some point, when I was at work, in the city centre, there was a shop and he was passing by on his motorbike and he saw me. And suddenly he stood in the queue, God. I started to shake all over and he asked me if I would talk to him. [...] I said "I'm not coming back to you and that's it. No discussion." I didn't tell him where I lived. He just stalked me so much, he stalked me so much that he finally tracked down where I lived. (Marta)

Such repeated intrusive and intimidating behaviours are intended to cause the target to feel harassed, threatened and afraid (Miller, 2012), and may be based on the perpetrator's knowledge of his ex-partner's vulnerabilities and context.

He does a lot of things to make me feel small, to make me feel scared. He knows he can't come next to me, but what he will be doing for example [...] he would go around, around, around the house or go one way, go other way, slow down when he comes to us, so we clearly see that he's there and he's watching us. And he's not doing anything, he's just there and watching us. (Mirka, 35)

Mirka's ex-partner was careful to keep his distance but nonetheless maintained his campaign of terror, safe in the knowledge that the absence of close proximity or physical harm would make it harder for her to secure a response from the agencies, but succeed in intimidating her.

When Julia finally managed to leave her abusive partner and found space in a refuge, she thought she was safe.

He fucking hired a detective. And he found me, the fucker! [...] I completely forgot that the phone that Junior was playing with—I had turned off the location—it was in his name. He said that his phone had been stolen, that the phone needed to be found. Well! He traced it. [...] It shook me inside! I had figured, well I'm 200 miles [away], he can't find us, he's blocked everywhere, you know, well I don't need this non-molestation order [and also

because she had been told she would have to pay for it]. So I didn't do that non molestation order. In the meantime, I found out that he just more or less knows where I am. (Julia)

Julia knew that she needed to be untraceable to keep herself and her son safe; his text notifying her that he knew her location was meant to send a message that there was no getting away from him.

Similar to Julia's experience, several men utilised technological devices and their know-how of digital systems to perpetuate post-separation violence and abuse.

He would stalk me on the phone, so he knew where I was. I think I had this Snapchat or whatever he was able to track... so he approached me suddenly, he stopped by the bus stop, [...] he approached me by my workplace. So on about 3-4 occasions and each time it was so stressful to call the police again, you know. The amount of stress I went through—if you see my white blood cells early this year—the level was so low because of the stress. (Ania)

Research documents the mental health effects of stalking victimisation whereby the accompanying fear and threat has been positively correlated with post-traumatic stress (Fleming et al. 2012), similar to Ania's account of the impact of stalking upon her. Other forms of technology-facilitated abuse also included the use of social media to mobilise a wider community against the women:

He set up a general public account on social media, on Instagram, where he started posting pictures of me, pictures of my children. [...] And there, under these very pictures, he would put messages, various threats against me, intimidation of the Polish embassy. [...] And now, after a year, another wave of hatred towards me has surfaced again. [...] Over 2,000 people were following him [on social media]. So these people are spread everywhere, because he works everywhere. So he put me in further danger once again. So I once again went to the police, reported everything, gave evidence and he got a prohibited steps order [...] that he has no right to come near us, he has no right to take the children out of my care, for example from school, etc. [...] And now letting my children go to school, I worry every day that one of the kids from the school or even parents might recognise my children and me too [and tell him where we are]! No. (Aniela)

Through his use of social media, Aniela's ex-partner managed to create a situation where she could not trust, indeed feared, the people in and around her everyday life.

New technologies used to operate home security and utilities was used by one perpetrator to insert himself into the everyday life and the very home of his ex-partner, as documented elsewhere (Kirjalainen and Valtonen 2016):

For over a month me and my daughter were without heating [during the winter] as he put a PIN on the heating so we couldn't control the heating, he had control over it, and I couldn't do anything as he is the registered owner of the thermostat. It was plenty of such stuff at home; like he could control the lights at home, so he could switch them off and on whenever he wanted to. Luckily the lights are sorted right now, we have our heating back, so we can control the heating right now. (Nadia)

Beyond the physical difficulties of living without heating in the winter, his actions were intended to keep her in a permanent hyperalert state, subject to his whims. Nadia's experience provides insight into how new forms of digital technology enable perpetrators to enact harmful and invasive behaviours and can create a sense of the perpetrator's omnipotence and omnipresence (Harris and Woodlock 2019).

Paulina described the impact of her ex-husband's actions, which threatened to prevent her from securing the post-Brexit settlement status for her daughter:

He hacked into my e-mail. How many important emails have gone missing! For example, I had her [daughter's] boarding pass from when we came to England, to have proof, yes? It's gone! Now, in order to get her settled status, I had to write to old schools to prove since when she was here, right? Even though she came with us, it was as if there was no trace of her, right? (Paulina)

Technology—including phones, tablets, computers, and social networking websites—is commonly used in intimate partner stalking to isolate, punish, and humiliate domestic violence victims (Hand et al. 2009; Woodlock 2017).

Several men used retaliatory violence to punish their partners for leaving them, through physical violations of and destruction of her home and property, and theft of her belongings.

He just always told me that he's smart enough that he'll jump through anything to find me and get me. That he knows that even if I go out there and cry to the police or anywhere to anybody, nobody will believe me because he knows how to talk to the police. And this is the honest truth. [...] When I went to the police, I said that he would definitely demolish my flat, he would definitely break into it. It won't be him physically, but there will definitely be a break-in, because he always told me that he will simply destroy everything, he will destroy my life, my flat and everything. [...] And now, after I report it to the police, in 2 weeks I get information that my flat has been burgled. I was already living elsewhere. (Aniela)

He broke in on me two times. I came back once tired from work, went to bed. In the morning I want to put my make up on, I look, I had my cosmetics on the mantelpiece.... nothing! Nothing for makeup! Notebook stolen, registration card stolen! Some ID card stolen from me. A lot of things. [another time] he kicked that door off my room and broke in. And he was so lucky that there was no trace on the lock that there was a break-in. And the police, for lack of evidence, dropped the investigation! Even though I got a text message from him saying, "I'm at your place, and I'm lying on the couch, and I'm looking at your TV," right? (Paulina)

By his repeated intrusions and by sending her the text message, Paulina's ex-partner was recovering a sense of control over her and informing her that he had violated the sanctity of her home, and rendered it a space where she could no longer feel safe. The lack of police response to her fear and the violation she had experienced is reiterated by other research, which documents police officer's minimisation of the seriousness of stalking (Lynch and Logan 2015).

But where police officers from specialist domestic violence units were involved, one woman reported positive outcomes.

Text messages, more insults, more threats. At that time, I only reported online. I didn't do it by phone or directly at the police station. I did it online and requested the police [generic police officers] not to contact me. And I only asked the domestic abuse unit to contact me. And it was only then that I came across these people who... actually two people, who really helped me a lot. [...] And it was only thanks to these two [police officers] that I gained strength and they gave me the belief that I could still do something about it. (Agata)

Several women secured non-molestation orders or prohibition orders, in the hope that the force of the law would protect them from post-separation violence and abuse and deliver deterrence, or failing that, justice. Their experiences indicate that such protection was not always forthcoming.

One of the MARAC was actually about that as well, that police didn't react for so obvious breach of non-molestation order, because he came so close to me [he waited for her at a shop that she frequented]. The police said that they couldn't understand me and there was misunderstanding, my English was not enough—that's what police officer said, that my English is not enough. That there was a miscommunication between us. [...] This is a bakery my daughter really loves the food from there—I have to choose another shop. The police said to me that he lives only one mile from here, we can't tell him to not come here, you need to change your life, you need to go one mile with the pushchair and a little baby to do shopping in the town. [...] And also the funny thing was [where] he is living [...] so who is closer to these shops? Me, not him, this is the first thing. And also he has a car—I don't have a car and I have a little baby. And they said to change my life. They said you have to change your life because there's nothing we can do. The latest is like—now because on the non-molestation order it's written, that he can't come on this road and around the house around here at all. But there is a radius now as well, so I can freely go to these shops actually. (Mirka, 35)

We had already separated. We weren't together. I was meeting somebody else. It was my daughter's weekend with her father. [...] He [boyfriend] came around, his car was parked up in front of my house. Next thing I know I've got somebody banging on my door. It was my ex-husband. Banging on the doors, you know, calling the names. And he was holding [daughter] by her hand because, you know, he just seemed to be, he said, passing by and saw the car. And he went hectic on me, and he literally was like trying to walk in through the door, into the house. I was so petrified because of, as I said, he was a big, big lad, body builder, very strong. [...] I on one hand, my instinct wanted to, you know, my daughter's on the other side, I wanted to get my daughter into safety. But at the same time, I knew that as soon as I opened these doors, that might end up really bad. I was so panicked, so shocked, I was all shaking. [boyfriend] called the police, and bear in mind, they had the red mark already on my new address, they knew I am a domestic violence victim and they should come very quickly in theory. It took them over an hour, um. (S26, Malwina)

Both Mirka and Malwina felt that despite the immediate threat she was facing, she was not being taken seriously by the police, an experience that is well documented in previous studies (Lynch and Logan 2015; Puronvarsi et al. 2020; Taylor-Dunn et al. 2018).

In one case, the police response was seen as supportive but for reasons that we were unable to discern, was insufficient to stop the violation of restraining order:

I had this special phone that the police gave to me, that when I pressed a button, it automatically sent them information that I was in danger, they would track me by GPS, and they would automatically come to my house in a minute. They would call right away, etc. And they would call me practically every day to ask if I was okay, if I didn't see him around, if this or that. Yet he was violating that restraining order! He broke it many times. He would come when I wasn't home. He had to watch me. Because when I wasn't at home, he could come into the house and, for example, leave a note written for the children, saying that daddy loves them, something like that or leave some sweets or something. (Viola)

Viola was concerned about the impact of the stalking and the break-ins on her children, whom he targeted through his messages to them. Research documents the psychosocial, emotional, and physical impacts of stalking on children when their mothers are stalked by a former partner, particularly through disguised acts of stalking and the father's performance of care, love, and longing which entails the exploitation of children in stalking (Nikupeteri and Laitinen 2015).

One domestic violence practitioner from a 'by and for' service recalled how they supported a woman through the process of leaving, but found the police reluctant to take post-separation abuse that entails coercive control as seriously as physical assault:

He never hit her, but of course it was gradual, at first the relationship seemed good, he never left her side, he drove her to work. Well, and then it turned out... financially he also started to use her and control her. She wasn't allowed to see anyone. And later he insulted her all the time, called her names when it came to her appearance, used some insults. [...] and then there was sexual violence, because he forced her, she couldn't say "No". [...] There was also a situation [after she left him] where she once encountered him on the street, she was with a friend, he came up, started threatening, calling her names. This was reported to the police, but the police at the time said it was not enough to initiate criminal proceedings. Some people, even though there's a new coercive control legislation, it's still suggested that there should be assault.... I guess in many situations police are not yet trained and do not understand the whole problem of coercive control. (Practitioner 13, 'by and for' domestic violence service)

One woman reported that her ex-partner took to calling the police on her as a means of harassing her:

So there was a point where he called the police on me all the time. There were 6 or 7 house visits in total. [...] I was like "Holy shit! I can't sit quietly at my own house, because they won't stop bugging me." I was really sick of it. He would call the police on me, saying that I was in violation of my restraining order. So the police comes to my place, and I say "I don't have a restraining order, couldn't you check in your database?" [...] And finally I just say "Can something be done about it? Well, this is sick, this is just harassment! Harassing me all the time, controlling me. I'm starting to be some kind of robot!" (Agnieszka)

Once women left the abusive relationship, men often mobilised services such as the police, social services and most commonly, the court processes, to continue to insert themselves into the women's lives and as a means to controlling them, which we discuss in the next section.



Women's narratives demonstrate how leaving is a process and not an event. Post-separation abuse enacted intentionally and systematically by the perpetrator continues to constrain and dominate their lives, restrict their space for action and prevents them from establishing an independent life. Any, if at all, efforts of the agencies and services which they often relied on to end the violence while they were together, seem to be ill-matched against the will of the perpetrator to dominate and control their lives.

### **Women's engagements with civil and criminal justice systems for domestic violence and abuse**

In a context of ongoing post-separation violence and the repeated inability of the existing criminal justice mechanisms to protect them, several women recounted their struggles which continued in the months and several years following the end of the abusive relationship.

Julia hoped that finding a space in a refuge would be the beginning of a new chapter in her life, but her ex-partner traced her location. She recalled the events that followed:

I'm in refuge, so refuge put me in touch with a lawyer, because a non molestation order is the first thing you have to have. [...] Turns out I'm not entitled to legal aid! [...] Hello!", he says "No, to do a non-molestation order, well it's £1000". And I don't know yet if I'm going to get benefits. You know, no? [...] So I'm like, "Ok, what if I don't get benefits... at the end of the day, listen, I did the non-molestation order myself! I ordered a book from Women's Aid, you know. All the injunctions, I wrote, again with my brother, listen, by email. I ended up going to my caseworker and saying, "Listen, just check it for me grammatically.... So is this ok and can I send it?". Look, I sent it to the court, I got a call 3 days later telling me to show up for the hearing, I showed up for the hearing with no one! Without a fucking lawyer, no one could come with me, so I show up for the hearing, I walk in crying, the judge reads this statement and just "Is this true?", I say "Yes", she says "Ok, you got non molestation order, but it will only be valid at the time it is served. The respondent has to receive it and the moment the court gets that he has received it, then it has the force of law." (Julia)

Julia felt an immense relief that she had managed to secure protection for herself and her child, all through her own resources. However, it did not quite go as planned.

The second hearing was where it [non-molestation order] still wasn't served. [...] Then the third hearing—it hadn't been served the whole time, and until it's served, it doesn't have the force of law. And the judge said to me "Well they can't have it served because when they go to his place of work, and because he works in a building where this person who's supposed to deliver it, she's not allowed in the building, well they can't deliver it to him", I said "Well just forget about it." You know what I mean? The system fucking failed! [...] But he lives where he lives, he doesn't change his phone, he works where he works, and they can't fucking serve it on him! Fucking hell. Well, this system really is... well, something's wrong. Something's wrong, yeah! I was like, "I don't give a shit about your refuge, I was supposed to get help, I didn't, I'm going back." (Julia)

Her partner was in touch with her through these months. Through a combination of harassment, threats, controlling behaviour and a promise to change, he persuaded her that there was no point in trying to leave; she would be no better off. Julia endured several further months of domestic

violence and abuse and eventually ended the abusive relationship with support from friends and family.

Julia's experience draws attention to the repeatedly raised, publicly discussed, and simply ignored consequences of the restrictions on Legal Aid introduced by Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (Choudhry and Herring 2017). Like Julia, other victims of domestic violence who we interviewed remained unable to obtain an injunction and having to face their abuser unrepresented in court. Hunter (2011) argues that in place of access to justice, these cuts have inflicted both symbolic and material violence on subjects excluded from civil Legal Aid. Who will count the cost?

A few women, arguably only those who had the language skills and education, managed to navigate the system on their own.

The prohibited steps order was cancelled at his request? And why? The judge said there was no threat from the father. I said to him "But the father threatened me that he would take the child away, that I would never find her". And the judge said, "Well, the father said that he was joking, that he had no such intention". And that was enough to quash the application for a prohibited steps order. [...] Well, what did the judge expect? That the father would say "Yes, I threatened her with something like that. I threatened to deport her"? [...] But then the more I started to enter the legal system, read, educate myself, talk to different people, only then my eyes were opened to see how everything works here. It was also at this point that I decided not to use the services of any more lawyers, because during this time I had four different, supposedly good, lawyers, none of whom managed to recover the prohibited steps order. Despite applications, they were all rejected. During the holidays, he wrote to me that he wanted to go with her to [his home country]. [...] I applied to court for a prohibited steps order in an emergency, where I got this advice from one of those private groups of mothers who fight in court against fathers in such complicated situations. I prepared the arguments. [...] So satisfaction for me that he has a prohibited steps order and he has no right to go with her outside the UK. (Iwona)

Practitioners echoed these concerns about supporting victims of domestic violence in the face of cuts to Legal Aid. Research documents the challenges posed by self-representation for all victims of domestic violence and abuse (Hunter 2011); Polish women faced enhanced challenges and vulnerabilities due to factors including language barriers and lack of knowledge about how systems worked in the UK. Where women managed to get support from domestic violence services, the challenges of self-representation were somewhat eased.

The lady from Women's Aid said to me that if I represented myself, maybe I would feel better psychologically if someone from them came with me to the trial. Of course you would! If it's a possibility, sure. It was nice to have someone with me! (Iwona)

A practitioner from a 'by and for' Polish domestic violence service reported how they were trying to plug this gap that had opened up due to the cuts in Legal Aid:

Certainly, the lack of knowledge about what rights women have. They also don't know our family law here. We cooperate with a Polish lawyer, and I recently even recorded a two-part webinar on court orders regarding domestic violence and contact with children, because there is very little awareness of what family law is here in this country. And women are often looking for such legal assistance in Polish. So for sure, it is fundamental

to make Polish-speaking people aware of what kind of help is available here, what they can use. [...] (Practitioner 11, 'by and for' domestic violence service)

As in Julia's case, where she had obtained a non-molestation order through her own means, but it was not enforced, even women who secured legal representation reported the long court processes they endured which made little material difference to their circumstances.

It's three years and we are still in court, and even though he has done nothing what was required from Social Services, by court order, we're still in court and I still feel that he's the one who's kind of got more protection than me; and that's why I'm just getting very, very frustrated because, you know, after three years' trial last year when, you know, they found the findings [of domestic violence], proved four allegation out of six you would think this is straight forward, OK, the last chance for you, you're gonna go to, you're gonna be ordered to perpetrators' programme. If you gonna do it then there's this chance... we gonna review the case and you might start having a supervised contact with your child, but if you're not gonna accept, the case is closed. And that's what I thought's gonna happen. It didn't happen, it didn't happen. I had another court case when he literally threatened to kidnap the child or to take the child, and I'm still waiting for another court hearing... it's just how long it can take. (Julia)

Women reported that breaches of non-molestation order not pursued in the courts, or where charges seemed to have been dropped, they were not informed in a context where the post-separation abuse was still ongoing and posed a risk to them.

He had been charged with two breaches of non-molestation order, but in all together it was four. So two others were reported, and I had a proof, that there were breaches—I don't know anything, what has happened with that. (Mirka)

In a context where breaches of non-molestation order were rarely pursued, women reported no deterrence to further breaches and often sought safety by moving home once their location had been traced by their ex-partners. However, for those in receipt of benefits, this was not always possible or easy, as one family support worker recalled.

I just had a call this week from a [Polish] woman, she said that even though he has non-molestation order he still comes to her flat, to her, to her home, she keeps calling the police. She asked me to—because she receives universal credit it's hard to find new accommodation—so she asked me how she can get accommodation because she's tired of him coming and every time she has to call the police. She just found a new solicitor just a week ago and she is trying to get legal aid, but she wasted three months [trying to find help]. And also, she said that his mother who lives in Poland, and other family members, are like bullying her, harassing her, to stop, to remove the accusations. (Practitioner 18, Polish community support service)

Even women who secured some protection did not always come away following their engagement with court processes feeling that justice was served, either in relation to the process or outcome (Gangoli, Baters and Hester 2020). Based on the experiences on the women we interviewed, it was rare for men to be convicted for domestic violence.

I regret it now, but I went through it, that was horrible. Absolutely horrible experience, going through reporting this rape. The interview they do with you when you're literally

getting questioned, like you've done something wrong. It was, I was feeling like this. And you know, it was, you going through that trauma again, but having the cameras in your face and you need to talk about it. But I went through all of that. I followed the process; I followed their advice. I've, you know, done everything what they've asked me to. Still, I didn't feel any better, any safer, and I wasn't in any better position whatsoever. He had the injunction order. Fair enough. And that was the only thing which did help, for three years, he stayed away from me, and from my daughter. (Malwina)

As seen in previous literature (McPhee et al. 2021), practitioners engaged in supporting victims also voiced their frustrations with a system where the perpetrators rarely received any sanctions, and attrition rates for domestic violence cases remain high:

It is not enough to work only with the victims of domestic violence. Because it is the perpetrator who did a lot of damage to the family, yes? Whether he has a criminal record or not, it varies. Sometimes he gets a restraining order, sometimes he is arrested, very rarely he goes to jail, because he would have to have several suspended cases... but it happens very rarely. (Practitioner 11, 'by and for' domestic abuse service)

Their experiences echo what the data from the Crown Prosecution Service shows: the number of domestic abuse convictions has dropped by 35% between 2016/17 and 2020/21 (from 70,853 to 46,261), and the figures for rape convictions have plummeted even more (EVAW 2021). Research also demonstrates that this justice gap is higher for those victims of domestic violence for whom gender intersects with other inequalities (McPhee et al 2021).

Following Brexit, the legal processes to apply for a settlement status opened up yet another obstacle for Polish women who had experienced domestic violence.

When this whole Brexit thing started and I heard that we'll have to use passports, I didn't know I thought we can still travel with IDs, right? Well, no, you have to apply for passports as soon as possible. But how can I apply for a passport when daddy won't agree? [...] So I filed a case with the court for a passport, permission to issue without the father's consent. [...] I go to a hearing like this, I had to pay this pseudo solicitor of mine there £90 for a hearing like this, yeah? They debated, they debated, he didn't turn up, well, they set a date for another hearing. [...] I had to pay a hundred-pound parking fine because of this boor, the whole thing got dragged out, right? [...] And I said, well, to spend so much money, to travel so many kilometres... So I decided, I said, "I can handle it, there will be an interpreter, it's just supposed to be an administrative hearing" and I resigned myself to it. And they didn't even call me. It turned out that [...] he ran out of energy to fight. (Paulina)

In this case, Paulina managed to secure the desired outcome despite the obstacles that were put in her way due to a fortuitous set of circumstances.

On the whole, there were few positive accounts of women's engagement with the civil justice systems to secure safety for themselves and their children following the end of the abusive relationship, and in the context of ongoing post-separation abuse. In relation to criminal justice prosecutions for domestic violence, the prospect of justice proved even more elusive.

### **Children, custody and visitation**

All but one woman we interviewed had children. In the period following separation, a strong strand to the post-separation abuse was men's continuation of the pattern of coercive control through their contact with the children. In this section, we present women's experiences of their engagement with the family justice system.

Joanna left her partner following a domestic violence, which included repeated physical and sexual violence. When she sought help from the police, they found enough evidence to charge him. She recalled:

What happened was that he didn't go to jail, he was found not guilty [for domestic violence] so he was happy and he, he just ran jumping from the Court. [...] The problem starts again with contact with children because he wants to see them, he wants to have revenge on me, because he knew that this is the most important thing for me, and since then he's using them to punch, to have revenge on me that I left him. (Joanna)

Several women reported that they had stayed in the abusive relationship because they felt that the children needed a father, and after separation many women tried to support or indeed instigate their ex-partner's contact with the children. This was particularly the case where the violence and abuse were not explicitly directed at the children.

When I left the relationship, I tried to establish—I said please, could you spend like three hours with the children? Nothing. [...] He said, "I'm too heartbroken to see them", stuff like this. (Ania)

After few months, her ex-partner initiated contact with the children, but Ania began to doubt the benefit of this contact when he used the phone calls and visits to harass her. He would get the children to turn the phone on loud-speaker and issue threats and try to reassert his control over her. Others reported similar patterns.

I've tried my best to, you know, rise above everything what's happened and to keep it as sort of normal thing for [daughter], you know, and her upbringing. So, I came to terms with him, okay, every Tuesday, Thursday. And then every second weekend, that was the arrangements we had verbally between each other. [...] Then he rented his place, a flat just literally two or three streets down the road from mine. He was, uh, following me. He was hiding in the bushes, taking pictures of my house from outside. He was absolutely, you know, paranoid if I was meeting somebody else at that time, so he was going on total hectic and with [daughter], for example, whenever I was dropping her off to him, every time when he was taking the child out of my car, it was some sort of insult in front of her oh, you stupid bitch, you know? (Malwina)

Several women reported how their ex-partner interrogated the children about the presence of other men in their mother's lives and extracted information from them about their mother's social life. Where women had new intimate relationships, the children were put in a difficult situation of having to protect their mother by hiding this information from their father or disclosed it only to feel responsible for the abuse that was subsequently perpetrated upon her. In most cases, women felt unable to stop the contact—occasionally because they wanted to preserve the children's relationship with the father, often because they feared his reaction if they stopped the contact and most commonly because they feared the response of the social work practitioners and the family justice system if they took steps to protect themselves, as documented elsewhere (Holt 2017). While some women had access to supervised visits, this

was only after a lengthy court process. Where they tried to come to informal arrangements, and often even where there was court-sanctioned contact, this did not include provisions to keep her and the children safe from his abuse.

After a year when the non-molestation order ended, well then my husband had the right to contact again. [...] He asked to meet [daughter], so ok, fine, in a public place, we go to the park or something. [...] But gradually elements of this control appeared again. [...] He would call me, if I didn't answer right away, "What are you doing? What are you busy with again? You must have someone at your place that you're not answering my phone!". If I picked up straight away, "Well, yes! Glued to the phone, just Facebook groups!". Well, there was no good option! And it often happened that during these meetings, where he would see her at weekends, he would yell at me in an insolent manner. And I mentioned these to my family support worker, [...] and she demands that I stop these meetings immediately! I said: "No problem, I'll put them on hold". (Iwona)

The support Iwona received from her Family worker was quite unusual; in most cases service providers did not take the coercive control seriously. Even in cases where the children refused to see the father or were indeed fearful of him, women felt pressurised to make their children comply with the visits under fear of sanctions:

He creates situations like this... I'll give you an example. Theoretically, he has the right to call [daughter] once a week, to have such a half-hour video conversation. In my opinion, he manipulates the situation in such a way that he makes her so upset, he criticises her and the next week she doesn't want to talk. She doesn't answer his phone, where for him it is already an argument that the mother didn't make the child available for the video call, so he already has the right to make another application. [...] During these visits [face-to-face contacts] her father criticises her non-stop: "You're fat, look how fat your legs are!", "Mum gives you too much pasta, you'll get fat. Look at your cheeks." He also recently used the fact when there was a pandemic [...] to make another application [to the court]. Where here even the judge pointed it out, he says "But what do you mean? It's a lockdown, it's a top-down regulation, it's not the mother's decision that she stopped the contacts". (Iwona)

Iwona's partner was not only using the contact to manipulate and control his daughter, and through this, her mother, but as seen elsewhere (Heward-Belle 2017), also actively undermining Iwona's mothering through comments on his daughter's diet and weight.

The experiences of these women show how domestic violence perpetrators can use coercive control against and through their children after their ex-partner has separated from them (Katz and Laitinen 2020). In a few cases, particularly in the first few months after separation or where the separation was following social service intervention because of the domestic violence and abuse, men were denied contact with their children:

So, at the moment, on the first court hearing regarding the child custody, the judge straight away gave me a final order [for daughter] to live with me and there are also prohibited steps for the father. This is a final order as well, so he can't remove her from me, he can't remove her from Great Britain and he can't remove her from the place I choose her to go to school or a nursery, he can't remove her from there. And at the moment, until September, he cannot have any contact with her as well. (Mirka)

There were several cases where men had threatened to take the children away if she tried to leave. This was also a context in which women feared men's unsupervised contact with the children. Oliwia reported that when denied contact, her ex-partner tried to find various means to see the children:

He wrote to the lawyer [requesting a meeting with the children], because "he's going to Poland to his parents, and he wants to say goodbye to his children." And she calls me... and I say "But what do you mean, he has no parents, his parents are dead." So [he tried] this way and that, some lies. (Oliwia 41)

Common themes in women's accounts of Cafcass engagement included minimisation of the nature and impact of ongoing coercive control by the children's father in the context of contact and visitation, and a pressure upon the mother to maintain the children's unsupervised contact or shared residence arrangements despite ongoing post-separation abuse. The experiences of the women who we interviewed echo previous research findings (Macdonald 2016).

I can honestly say that the London Cafcass was a great disappointment to me. I had a very positive attitude to it at the beginning, because from what I had heard, they're supposed to act in the interests of the child, right? [...] At some point she [daughter] was already at such an age that she took part in these interviews, and she could express her opinion. What she suggested, her own wishes, her own thoughts, were completely ignored. [...] You know what, I found in one of the reports that there were other names, and there was another name of the child, another name of the place, as if it was some kind of pattern, some kind of ready-made form of the report, where only specific details were added. Yes, copy and paste. And that gave me food for thought too. I'm like "Well gee, [...] the voice of the child was definitely not heard, my suggestions were not heard, where it was just wasted time only. (Iwona)

As documented in other research, core themes in the women's narratives of engagement with the family courts and family support services included silencing, control, and undermining the mother-child relationship—patterns which mirror domestic violence dynamics, suggesting that the concept of secondary victimisation as a useful lens for understanding women's experiences of the family justice systems following their exit from an abusive relationship (Laing 2017). Iwona, however, went on to have positive experiences of Cafcass in another city.

My first positive experience with Cafcass was here, after I moved to [city in England]. [...] They actually took a completely different approach to the case. First, I had an interview with a Cafcass employee at home, where someone came to the house for the first time! [...] And it was a very, very long interview. I think it lasted over 2 hours. I had a lot of opportunities to say what I think about certain topics, to raise my doubts, where in fact in London nobody was even interested in what I think, what my opinion is. [...] And I had the impression that it was really listened to. [...] Then, probably a week later, there was another meeting with the same Cafcass lady, with [daughter] at home, just a short half-hour, so that [daughter] could simply get to know her, see who she was. And to explain to her that she would have a longer meeting with the same lady at school. She [daughter] suggested it at the time... [...] that if her dad takes her to the pool or something, she can go, no problem. I think that would even be a good idea. [...] And it was actually included in this report. (Iwona)

Though Iwona was happy with her later experiences with Cafcass, it is interesting that her daughter's earlier engagements with Cafcass which voiced experiences of domestic violence including post-separation violence and ongoing fears were the ones that were marginalised. Research indicates that the dominant presumption of the overall benefits of contact with fathers results in selective adult 'gate-keeping' which distorts how children's voices and views are interpreted and represented in welfare reports prepared for the English courts in private family law proceedings (Macdonald 2017). This research reiterates the importance of listening and representing the voice and perspectives of children in court proceedings.

Having engendered blame and being held responsible for the exposure of their children to domestic abuse, mothers may find themselves resisting post-separation child contact and again engendering blame for daring to interfere with the father-child relationship—the same relationship they were charged with protecting their children from (Holt 2017). Thiara and Humphreys (2015) call for social worker practitioners and family justice systems to recognise that the continued presence of domestically abusive men, post separation, may compromise children's safety and recovery from the experience of domestic abuse (Holt 2017).

### **Looking to the future**

We asked women what had changed in their lives and how they imagined their future. Women reflected on the distance they had travelled, but also on the challenges that lay ahead.

I am mentally tired cos no-one ever can, you know, explain to you what literally motherhood is, and not having, you know, the closest family here it's, it's tiring as well and, and it's kind of learning, I'm learning to live with myself, at the same time I'm learning to be a mum, I'm learning to deal with my emotions and with my trauma and, and the guilt, the, the, the guilt is still so strong, and now I have to go through the grieving process. (Julia)

Julia was still trying to come to terms with their situation and recover from the impact of the violence and abuse; others negotiating their way through ongoing post-separation abuse while trying to maintain a semblance of normality for their children.

Now, when we live in this flat, it's like we have a new breath. [...] We live a normal life, so we also function differently. You know, the children are also a bit different now. They are not so scared anymore. A little bit different. But I don't know, everything is also in question. Because the more he hacks all my stuff through the media, the more he pushes me to Poland. [...] I don't work now. Well, I would like to start working. I already feel the safest [I have felt] in this domestic violence situation. (Aniela)

Others reflected on the hope they had for their future and that of their children.

*Q: What has changed for you?*

The fact that I feel safer, right? That's first of all. And the kids because they were looking at it too. [...] Now I feel so free, you know? The beginnings were hard. But no one is controlling me, I don't have to confess anything to anyone, I go home, and I don't have to be afraid of anything, I just know that I go home. It's quiet, it's peaceful, no one will yell at me, raise their hands on me or call me names. Also, if I had known it would be like this, I would have done it long ago. (Kinga)



I would like to continue working. What else? I would like to go out with my kids more, to go somewhere nice. I don't mean abroad, but even somewhere in England, [...] to go somewhere to make nice memories with the kids, so that they can say "Oh, we were here with mummy! [...]" To take better care of myself and the children, yes. How do I imagine life? Well, I don't particularly imagine it, just the normal way. Just to have a job, to work, [...] to have fun with my children. What else? I guess that's it. (Olivia)

More than anything else, the women who bravely shared their stories with us looked forward to an ordinary, normal life and its many small pleasures.

### Case study: Hanna

Hanna was a well-travelled single mum who came to the UK with her young daughter. When she found out that she was pregnant, her boyfriend left and her parents threw her out of the family home. Hanna completed her studies and gained a professional qualification. Her plan was to come to the UK to learn English, work here for a few years to save some money and go back to Poland to advance her career there. However, she ended up staying in the UK but found that she could only get lower-paid jobs despite her experience. She eventually managed to find a job commensurate with her qualifications and was doing well in her career. A few years after she came to the UK, her ex-boyfriend, the father of her child, resumed contact with Hanna and came to the UK with his mother to visit his child. They ended up living together for four years. Hanna supported her partner financially; he contributed little to the family budget and all his income was for himself. She did not see his 'lack of respect' and his treatment of her as something that was unusual or indeed, a problem. A breakthrough realisation that something was wrong came when her sister, who also lived in the UK, broke up with her partner. She was surprised: "after all, they looked so good together". That's when her sister gave Hanna an article with a questionnaire to see if she was in a 'toxic' relationship. On completing the questionnaire, Hanna found that her relationship met most of the criteria of an abusive relationship. Hanna had grown up in an abusive home—while there was no physical violence, there were several elements of economic abuse, there was non-stop verbal abuse, humiliation and controlling behaviour which his mother (who lived with them for a while) colluded with. Hanna later recalled her disbelief at the results of that 'test': "I guess the hardest thing for us to admit was that we're victims, right? Because you have to admit to yourself that you have it in you [to get out], right? And you have to do something about it." She reassessed her relationship and began to seek help. She went to a domestic violence service and asked for therapeutic support, as that was all she wanted. She had a house, a job and friends. However, it took her several attempts to get the help she needed, but she persevered. She gave her partner some terms for improving their relationship, but eventually asked him to leave. She had begun to understand herself and recognise abusive patterns in his behaviour. She remembers this day as "the first day of my freedom." It took Hanna several years to "heal" from being with an abusive partner. She started a support group for women in abusive relationships and reached out to potential victims of violence by placing adverts in Polish grocery stores. A couple of the women we interviewed for this study received support from the group that Hanna set up, which helped them to leave their abusive relationship. Currently, she is training in various forms of therapeutic work.

## 5.0 Conclusions

Based on the first ever study of Polish women's experiences of domestic abuse in the UK, this report highlights the complex histories of violence and abuse that Polish women endured from their partners following their migration to the UK. These different manifestations of abuse took place in the context of intersecting disadvantages arising from gender, class, migration histories and immigration status.

Polish women's experiences were also intrinsically shaped by an imbalance in power between them and their partners that was exacerbated due to a combination of the migration experience, gendered socio-cultural and religious constructions of family in Poland and the Polish diaspora, as well as dominant constructions of domestic violence in Poland which served to normalise some forms of abuse.

Within this context, Polish women faced additional barriers which prevented them from recognising, disclosing and seeking help, both from formal services and from their familial and social networks. A lack of awareness about service responses to domestic violence and abuse in the UK, language barriers and a strong fear and mistrust of services prolonged their entrapment within the abusive relationship. Women learnt about domestic abuse services from very diverse and often unexpected sources, making it crucial to ensure information flows about abuse and support in different community and service locations. Once in contact with services, the nature of service responses either enabled them to leave or in some cases reinforced their perceptions about the lack of viable options. Despite contact with a range of services, it took several attempts for many women to eventually leave, a pattern that may make Polish women's trajectories more akin to other racially minoritised women in the UK, who are likely to stay in abusive relationships for 1.5 times longer than White British women (Safelives 2015).

Leaving an abusive relationship was a life-changing step, but only the beginning of a process of rebuilding their and their children's lives. Women recounted a range of issues that they dealt with in the months and years following their exit from the abusive relationship—including the challenges posed by post-separation abuse, civil and criminal court processes and arrangements relating to their children's contact with their ex-partner. Despite these ongoing issues, women also expressed the joy of their new-found space for action.

Many policy changes introduced by the Conservative-led government over the last decade have serious implications for women leaving an abusive relationship. Changes such as the withdrawal of initial one-off grants to ease women's settlement into their first home, the allocation of Universal Credit to one person in the household, cuts in Legal Aid and shrinking funding for domestic violence services threaten to undermine the systems on which women rely to leave the abusive relationships and to build an independent life free of violence.

While gendered norms and inequalities create a commonality in women's experience of domestic violence and abuse across diverse contexts, it is also important to recognise the particularities in the experiences of Polish women, in order to craft appropriate policy and practice responses. Specialist 'by and for' domestic violence services grew out of a recognition of the intersecting disadvantages faced by racially minoritised survivors of domestic violence and abuse, and the earliest such services were created 'by and for' South Asian women. The projects and services established 'by and for' Polish women in the UK offer invaluable understanding of shared national background, the experience of living in the UK, policy and practice contexts in both Poland and the UK as well as opportunities to meet other Polish

survivors. However, the existence of Polish ‘by and for’ domestic abuse services is very fragile in the absence of dedicated statutory funding. Particularly in the context of Brexit and the political mobilisations that cast Eastern European communities in the UK as the racialised ‘other’ and led to increased levels of racist attacks on members of these communities in recent times (Rzepnikowska 2019), ‘by and for’ services to cater to Polish women in the UK are urgently required. The capacity of statutory and voluntary services to understand and respond to specific needs of Polish women and children must equally be strengthened.

Addressing the issues arising from this research will require a range of mechanisms at the level of policy and practice. It is only by addressing the very structures that enhance women’s vulnerabilities within and beyond relationships that a lasting solution to domestic violence and abuse can be found.

## **6.0 Recommendations**

The report's recommendations have been developed by contextualising the research findings in the current practice and policy context for domestic abuse provision, including funding cuts to domestic abuse and social services in the past ten years, tighter eligibility for public funds and hostile immigration policies. Many points are highly relevant to other groups of minoritised women and all victims and survivors of domestic abuse. Whilst the practitioner recommendations are oriented towards different professions, they can be read as a whole to support the delivery of multi-agency and holistic interventions.

### **Practice recommendations**

#### **Awareness raising about available support**

- Widely distribute information about domestic abuse support to outlets specifically addressing the Polish community (shops, services, churches, community centres, embassies and consulates) as well as more general venues such as family centres, schools, workplaces, GP surgeries, supermarkets, in order to encourage referrals by friends, family, community members and professionals.
- Ensure that staff working in different services are aware of organisations offering domestic abuse support, to which women can be referred.
- Increase the availability of domestic violence services in the Polish language.
- Incorporate information on the availability of interpreters to enable Polish women to be confident about the accessibility of domestic violence and health services.

#### **Language, translation and interpretation services**

- Understand that Polish women may require reassurance to feel confident about their levels of English and interview techniques can need to be adjusted for women speaking in English.
- Provide translation services for Polish women who need it;
- Recognise that the presence of Polish interpreters (especially from their local community) can feel awkward for Polish women and reassure women about confidentiality.
- Seek to ensure continuity in the allocation of interpreters to a particular case.

#### **Domestic violence and abuse services**

- 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—as they are very different from those in Poland.
- 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, refuge).
- Recognise the barriers to entering refuge support connected to Polish women's migration to the UK and the challenge of rebuilding a life in the UK with limited financial and social resources.

- Provide clear information to Polish women on how refuges operate in the UK, the confidentiality requirements and the reasons for this, and the rehousing pathways because Polish women may be unfamiliar with such services.
- Provide outreach support for victims of domestic violence who may not yet be ready to take the decision to leave.
- Provide mental health support in collaboration with domestic violence services.
- Support survivors through group work and peer support networks.
- Encourage networking and sharing of good practice between the range of domestic abuse services working with Polish women.

### **Social services**

- Work to address the intersecting oppressions and needs faced by Polish women experiencing domestic violence and abuse, including mental health issues and financial difficulties.
- Understand Polish women's fears around having children removed and how this can shape their interaction with professionals and disclosure of abuse and other challenges.
- Take a whole-family approach to understanding domestic abuse and child welfare that does not consider children in isolation from mothers facing abuse.
- Avoid holding women primarily responsible for child safety and focus on the perpetrators' responsibility for harm and abuse.
- Organise multi-agency interventions to ensure joint decision-making by a network of appropriate key stakeholders.
- Ensure that child protection plans do not deny the challenges faced by women because this could elevate the risk of harm, including the likelihood of violence faced by women when leaving their abusive partner.
- Recognise the impact of post-separation abuse—including through coercive control and child contact—on the ability of women and children to live safely and independently.
- Offer post-separation counselling in cases where children are taken into temporary or long-term care as well as information about the policy and practice frameworks shaping the decision.

### **Police**

- Recognise the pressures leading Polish women to not disclose abuse.
- Understand that migration history is a risk factor for domestic abuse.
- Provide training to officers in enquiring about and recognising non-physical forms of abuse (especially coercive control and psychological abuse) during all home visits relating to reports of 'family disturbances'.
- Provide referrals to domestic abuse services and information about possible court interventions in all cases of family-based violence and disruption.

### **Health services**

- Fully implement routine enquiry about domestic violence and abuse in health services such as GP surgeries, mental health services, accident and emergency and maternity services to reduce missed opportunities for disclosure and increase women's awareness of health services as sources of support.

- Recognise that Polish women may make great efforts to hide abuse, especially if children are involved or the partner is present during appointments.
- Provide dedicated training to professionals responding to domestic abuse (including healthcare professionals, police, social workers, legal professionals) that strengthens their understanding of perpetrator tactics in weaponising mental ill health.
- Train healthcare professionals to address the mental health impacts of domestic violence on survivors in a trauma-informed way.

### **Schools and children's centres**

- Recognise Polish women's fears and possible misconceptions about contact with official services and mandatory reporting of child welfare concerns to social services.
- Encourage staff to sensitively discuss home life and highlight the availability of services for domestic abuse and family support to Polish women.
- Proactively distribute information on services and discuss available material and emotional support for families facing domestic abuse.

### **Policy recommendations**

#### **Improving protection, safety and support for migrant women**

- Recognise specificities in the experiences of domestic violence and abuse for Polish women and more broadly women from different backgrounds.
- Provide long-term ring-fenced funding to ensure the sustainability of domestic violence services, including ring-fenced funding for specialist 'by and for' domestic violence services for racially minoritised women.
- Include Polish domestic violence and abuse services within this ring-fenced provision for 'by and for' services based on a recognition of the size of this population group and othering of Polish communities in the UK.
- Disaggregate the crime survey data not just by categories used in the census, but also by country of birth to understand (any) differential patterns of victimisation for Polish and other Eastern European populations in the UK.

The end of the transition period following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union has changed the eligibility of new arrivals from Poland for public funds, including domestic abuse support. The severe consequences for support need to be recognised and addressed through policy measures to:

- Ensure all survivors, regardless of immigration status, are entitled to support, equal access to welfare systems and legal tools that can provide protection from abuse, in accordance with the requirements of the Istanbul Convention.
- Abolish the no recourse to public funds policy which prevents many migrant women with insecure immigration status from accessing vital support and routes to safety.
- Short of the above, extend the eligibility for the existing Domestic Violence (DV) Rule, to ensure all women with insecure immigration status, not only those on spousal visas, are eligible to apply for indefinite leave to remain and the Destitution Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC), and extend the time period for the DDVC to at least six months.

- Enable migrant women subjected to ‘transnational marriage abandonment’ by spouses resident in the UK (being taken back to home country and abandoned there with or without their children) to apply under the existing Domestic Violence (DV) Rule from abroad.
- Deliver safe reporting mechanisms which ensure immigration enforcement is kept completely separate from the domestic abuse response and the safety of the victim is paramount.

### **Safe and suitable accommodation**

- Impose a duty on local authorities to ensure that housing allocation for survivors is safe and suitable.

### **Social security and protection**

- Reform the welfare system to deliver separate payments of Universal Credit to spouses (rather than one monthly payment to nominated spouse, almost always the man) by default.

### **Family courts and civil/criminal justice systems**

- Deliver a safer family court and child contact system which effectively protects child and adult victims of domestic violence and abuse from further harm.
- Prioritise the child’s best interests over presumption of contact by the father in cases of domestic violence and abuse.
- Deliver uniform and consistent implementation of judicial guidance (Practice Direction 12J) which states that the court must in every case consider carefully whether the presumption of parental involvement applies.
- Reverse Legal Aid cuts which seriously impede survivors of domestic violence from accessing safety and justice.

### **Recommendations for research**

- Include Polish and East European communities in studies exploring 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 to understand the changed policy and practice context around eligibility for funding.



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**Please cite this report as:**

Zielinska, I., Anitha, S., Rasell, M. and Kane, R. (2022) Polish women's experiences of domestic violence and abuse in the UK. Interim research report. Lincoln: EDAN Lincs and University of Lincoln.

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