



Ending victim
blaming in the
context of violence
against women
and girls.

Why language, attitudes,
and behaviours matter.

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Foreword



Violence against women and girls remains an endemic problem in British society.

We know that too many women and girls do not have a good experience when reporting what has happened to them to the police, the police complaints system and the criminal justice system more widely. All victim-survivors should get the best possible support throughout their journey to justice, but sadly, too often they are let down by the system which is there to help them.

A significant contributing factor is the language we use when speaking to, or about, victim-survivors of violence against women and girls - usually the kind which is perpetrated by a male, against a female. Reporting these crimes takes courage and coming up against a system which often uses language which blames victim-survivors themselves erodes faith and hampers progress. Factors such as ethnicity, disability or social circumstances can also increase the chances of victim-survivors experiencing victim blaming, creating a further barrier to the system.

Those facing abuse may already have been blamed or had their experiences minimised by the perpetrator. Quite wrongly, they may also have spent significant time blaming themselves.

Victim blaming language, attitudes, and behaviours by their very nature put the onus and responsibility on the victim-survivor for the abuse they have endured. For victim-survivors who have experienced significant trauma, it can worsen their experience even further. This can not only prevent victim-survivors from reporting their experiences and pursuing justice, but can also stop other victim-survivors from coming forward. The effects are far reaching.

The words we use in our communications, written or spoken, can set the tone for an investigation, any future contact and impact on the victim-survivor - so getting this right is vital. We haven't always done so at the IOPC and recognise that as part of the system, we are part of the problem. But we also want to be part of the solution, which is why we initially developed this guidance for our own staff as part of our commitment to improve.

It provides a set of key principles to follow when engaging with victim-survivors. As the IOPC's lead on our work on violence against women and girls, I am very proud of this guidance and believe it is a valuable resource, not just for IOPC staff but for the whole system. That's why I am sharing it with all police forces across England and Wales.

I hope you agree it will help toward providing a service which enables women and girls - and men and boys - to feel heard, understood and supported.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Rowe'.

Amanda Rowe
Acting Director of Operations
Strategic Lead – Violence against women and girls

Our work on violence against women and girls

The IOPC has committed to a programme of work focused on violence against women and girls. This has been prioritised in response to increasing public concern about the police response to violence against women and girls and cultural attitudes in policing towards women and girls. A key focus of the work will address actions from the investigation into the Centre for Women's Justice super-complaint on police perpetrated domestic abuse. By focusing on our statutory function, oversight of the police complaints system, we aim to:

- Improve trust and confidence in complainants and those who support them in the police response to violence against women and girls
- Hold the police to account for their response to violence against women and girls
- Identify and share learning to improve policing practice
- Ensure the public understand our role within the police handling of violence against women and girls

Who we are

The Independent Office for Police Conduct is the police complaints watchdog. We are not the police and are completely independent of them. We set the standards for the police complaints system. We make sure the police are investigating complaints about them properly. We also investigate the most serious and sensitive incidents involving the police ourselves.

Through our work, we hold the police to account when things go wrong, recommend changes to prevent the same mistakes happening again and promote high standards of policing. We use our evidence to drive improvements in police practices for the benefit of the public and the police. This will help achieve our vision for everyone to be able to have trust and confidence in policing.

This guidance has been produced by the IOPC in collaboration with organisations and people working to tackle violence against women and girls. We would like to say a special thank you to the IOPC's Youth Panel, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's office, the office of the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales, Refuge, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, Eva Echo, Saba Ali, Hourglass, Southall Black Sisters, DIVAS Women's Centre Cornwall, Muslim Women's Network, Avon and Somerset Constabulary, Dr Charlotte Barlow, Women's Aid, Leicestershire Police, Dr Patricia Canning, Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse, Safe Lives, and the Crown Prosecution Service.

We would also like to thank the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing for their support.

This guidance includes content which some people may find upsetting. Support organisations are available that you can contact if you are affected by any of the content in this guidance. For more information, see [page 29](#).

In some sections, examples that are specific to certain types of violence against women and girls are used to illustrate particular points. However the reader is reminded that these examples are not exhaustive, and that the principles in this guidance apply across all types of violence against women and girls.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for police officers, police staff, and those working for the IOPC.

Its aim is to help practitioners think critically about their own and others' language, attitudes, and behaviours, and to provide advice and best practice on effectively challenging victim blaming language, attitudes, and behaviours. This guidance does not comment on the process of investigation but focuses on communication and working with victim-survivors to enable them to provide details and evidence of their experience.

This guidance was first published in February 2024.

Victim blaming

What is 'victim blaming'?

The term 'victim blaming' was first coined by William Ryan in 1971. It is defined as 'the transference of blame from the perpetrator of a crime to the victim-survivor, who is held entirely or partially to blame for the harm they suffered'.

Some people identify as a 'victim', while others prefer the term 'survivor'. Throughout this guidance, we will use the term 'victim-survivor'. This includes members of the public and also police victims of violence against women and girls.

Why does victim blaming occur?

Some people blame victim-survivors unconsciously. They may not realise that what they believe to be commonly held assumptions, might be prejudicial views about diverse groups and minoritised communities. These views may be rooted in misogyny, sexism (how women should behave, or how men are entitled to behave), ableism (unfairly favouring non-disabled people), and racism.

Others may blame victim-survivors in order to cope with hearing about their trauma, by distancing themselves from what the victim-survivor has been through, making them feel like they are restoring a sense of control and order in a chaotic and unpredictable situation. They might do this by reassuring themselves that "because I would never do XYZ, the same thing could never happen to me".

Why does victim blaming matter?

A perpetrator chooses to do harm. Victim blaming language, attitudes, and behaviours can shift the blame onto the victim-survivor, when it is the perpetrator who should be held accountable.

When victim-survivors are blamed, and this goes unchallenged, it can reinforce predator-like attitudes and may lead perpetrators to believe they can 'get away' with committing violence against women and girls and evade accountability. It can also result in the victim-survivor feeling that they are responsible for what happened to them. This can further victimise them (sometimes referred to as 'secondary victimisation') and increase barriers to leaving an abuser, seeking help, and reporting violence against women and girls to the police or the IOPC, owing to a lack of trust and confidence in reports being taken seriously.

Communicating in a way that does not directly or indirectly blame victim-survivors can improve their confidence in the process and can lead to other victim-survivors feeling safer to come forward and report their experience.

Victim blaming and intersectionality

Intersectionality describes how different aspects of a person's identity - such as their gender, race, disability, and sexuality - can affect their experiences of advantage and disadvantage in society. Intersectionality includes, but is not limited to, the nine protected characteristics:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation



People might have very different experiences and challenges in life, according to how the different aspects of their identity combine.

Diverse groups and minoritised communities may face different kinds of discrimination and victim blaming based on the different aspects of their identity, which can overlap and interact in complex ways. Due to unfair treatment, they may be less likely to report violence against women and girls.

[Annex A](#) provides detailed information on some of the groups and communities that are affected by language, attitudes, and behaviours that blame them or minimise their experiences of violence against women and girls. This is not an exhaustive list; there are many more groups and communities who also face their own unique challenges, of which we should be mindful.

Challenging victim blaming

Challenging victim blaming in the context of violence against women and girls is a crucial step towards ending it. Practitioners can do this in a constructive and supportive way that encourages people who handle cases to think critically about the potential impact of their language, attitudes and behaviours. Practitioners should:

- Challenge harmful stereotypes, assumptions, or jokes that blame victim-survivors for abuse.
- Provide reassurance to victim-survivors that the perpetrator is to blame in their situation, rather than the victim-survivor.
- Hold perpetrators accountable for their actions. Perpetrators will make excuses for their behaviour, but that does not absolve them of what they did.
- In most circumstances, victim-survivors will know what is best for them - support their decision-making wherever possible.
- Recognise that victim blaming is often rooted in discriminatory attitudes or commonly held assumptions which have gone unchallenged.
- Ensure that any written communication and notes remain neutral and are written in a way that does not perpetuate victim blaming

Victim blaming

is defined as:

'the transference of blame from the perpetrator of a crime to the victim-survivor, who is held entirely or partially to blame for the harm they suffered'.

When victim-survivors are blamed, and this goes unchallenged, it can increase barriers to leaving an abuser, seeking help, and reporting violence against women and girls to the IOPC and the police, owing to a lack of trust and confidence in reports being taken seriously.

Do...



Use **neutral language** when describing a victim-survivor's account of violence against women and girls.



Think about your **body language** and any gestures you make - do they make the victim-survivor feel safe?



Be aware of the impact that **trauma** may have on the presentation of victim-survivors.



Think particularly carefully about how you **structure questions**.



Establish **who holds the power and control**, and be mindful of how this can vary between different groups or communities.



Consider that a victim-survivor may rely on **survival strategies** to manage the perpetrator's behaviour.



Take all violence against women and girls reports **seriously**, regardless of the age of the perpetrator or victim-survivor.

Don't...



Don't **make assumptions** about a victim-survivor's **mental health**, or 'pathologise' their behaviour.



Don't blame a victim-survivor for what happened to them when they have taken **alcohol or ingested substances**.



Don't '**minimise**' abuse.



Don't '**mutualise**' abuse.



Don't make assumptions about the needs of victim-survivors of violence against women and girls who are also **police officers or staff**.

Remember...



Use '**active**' rather than '**passive**' voice when talking about victim-survivors of violence against women and girls.



Some victim-survivors **may blame themselves**, or minimise their experiences of violence against women and girls.



Make reasonable adjustments for victim-survivors, and ensure that information is accessible.



Any 'choices' a victim-survivor makes are often made in **compromised circumstances**.

Key principles

1. Use neutral language when describing a victim-survivor's account of violence against women and girls

In the event of a burglary, it would usually be recorded that a member of the public 'reported they were burgled' rather than 'alleged they were burgled'. Practitioners should adopt a similar approach for violence against women and girls. For example, they should record 'reported they were raped', as opposed to 'alleged they were raped'. 'Reported' is neutral language that simply means the victim-survivor has informed authorities about the incident.

'Allegation' is a legal term that has its place in the justice system. However, when practitioners record violence against women and girls as having 'allegedly' happened, it risks casting doubt on the truth of the report from the beginning. In turn, this could potentially affect the policing response that the report receives. It is during the investigation process that practitioners should take steps to establish whether there is evidence to support the report.

Likewise, victim-survivors may be unable or find it difficult to engage with an investigation owing to a variety of complex circumstances, including fear for their own or others' safety. Practitioners must consider these reasons and not cast judgement on the victim-survivor.

Be factual in your notes. Use language like 'the victim-survivor cannot engage', followed by context explaining the reasons. For example:

- Are they fearful of repercussions, such as losing custody of their children?
- Could their life be at risk if they take the report any further?
- Do they fear not being believed because the perpetrator is in a position of power?

If the answer is 'yes' to any of the above, then it is likely they have little choice and cannot engage.

2. When meeting a victim-survivor of violence against women and girls, think about the way you have positioned your body and any gestures you make. Is your body language making the victim-survivor feel safe to share their account?

Language is not just verbal. Body language and facial expressions are a form of nonverbal communication that can convey various messages and emotions. When meeting a victim-survivor of violence against women and girls, be conscious that they may have already experienced months or years of persistent victim blaming and language that minimises or trivialises their experience. They may also be traumatised and 'hypervigilant' (constantly on their guard against threat). Even subtle and perceived victim blaming can have an extremely negative effect, resulting in a victim-survivor losing complete trust and confidence in their experience being taken seriously.

If the person you are dealing with is a young person or a child, ensure your body language is adapted to meet their specific needs. For example, positive body language could include:

- not crossing your arms
- nodding to show that you are listening
- maintaining eye contact
- proactively summarising the victim-survivor's account back to them to check you have understood correctly
- ensuring that you do not appear distracted
- not using a monotonous tone, or 'going through the motions' in a mechanical way

3. Be aware of the impact that trauma may have on the presentation of victim-survivors

Everyone reacts differently to trauma – there is no script. Victim-survivors can freeze, resist, fight back, or submit out of fear. Afterwards, they can feel shock, shame, confusion, fear, and denial. They may also seem fine on the surface. They may not immediately recognise their experience as violence against women and girls, and they may delay reporting it – sometimes by years.

They may also continue to see, or live with, the perpetrator. For some, realising they have been a victim-survivor of violence against women and girls and taking steps to

seek justice are incredibly tough and courageous steps to take. These steps are rarely taken lightly.

Trauma can affect memory in different ways, and it may affect a person's ability to take in and later recall the experience. Victim-survivors can be honest and also give inconsistent accounts. That is because trauma can jumble a person's memory, so they remember different things at different times. They are being honest - what they recall has changed.

4. Think particularly carefully about how you structure questions when taking a victim-survivor's account

Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) guidance produced by The National Police Chiefs' Council and The Ministry of Justice contains best practice on interviewing vulnerable and intimidated people, which may include victim-survivors of violence against women and girls. You will find a link in the ['Further reading and learning resources' section](#) on page 26.

The guidance states that 'why' questions which seek to understand victim-survivors' reactions to violence against women and girls could be perceived by them to be a form of blame. Therefore, it is important to avoid accusatory questions. 'Why' questions should be directed at the perpetrator, not the victim-survivor.

Ask only what is relevant and use open-ended questions. Give the victim-survivor the opportunity to fully tell you in their own words what happened. Listen without judgement, validate their experience and feelings by summarising their account back to them to show you have understood, avoid making assumptions, stick to the facts, and refrain from offering your own interpretation of events.

5. Establish who holds the power and control, and be mindful of how this can vary between different groups or communities

In some situations, there can be more than one perpetrator. For example, in so-called 'honour'-based abuse, a family network could be perpetrating and enabling violence against women and girls. Each person in this network may hold all, or some, power and control, which can make it more difficult for a victim-survivor to come forward and report violence against women and girls.

Practitioners should tailor their approach to meet the needs of all victim-survivors including deaf, disabled, neurodivergent people or people with learning difficulties. These groups and communities can sometimes be reliant on other people for care and support, such as family, partners, and external agencies.

Their voice can become lost if someone is speaking on their behalf, and their carers or advocates may be their abusers. It is important to ensure that a victim-survivor is given the opportunity to tell you about their experience from their own point of view, and that any signs or disclosures of abuse are not minimised based on what their carers or advocates say, which may be different.

In same-sex relationships, although the traditional gender power dynamics do not apply, there are various other indicators of power, such as social class, disability, race / ethnicity, faith, and relative wealth. Additionally, the duration of each party's openness about their identity and the extent to which they are 'out' can significantly influence the power dynamics within the relationship. Therefore, it is crucial to avoid making assumptions based on physical appearance or preconceived notions about who holds more power.

6. Remember that any 'choices' a victim-survivor makes are often not really choices at all, as they are made in compromised circumstances

It is natural to want to understand someone's actions. However, focusing on what 'drove' a perpetrator to commit offences, or why a victim-survivor did / did not do something, or why they didn't leave, is risky. This can lead to presenting the narrative in a way that holds the victim-survivor either entirely or partially responsible for what happened to them – excusing the perpetrator of their actions.

A common misconception surrounding violence against women and girls is that perpetrators have 'lost control' of their actions when they commit acts of abuse, or that they are violent or abusive owing to their intoxication at the time. Whatever excuses a perpetrator makes about any act of violence against women and girls they have carried out, their actions were a decision they chose to make, and they alone are responsible for their behaviour. They have power and control over their actions.

Questions to consider when writing, interviewing, and talking about an abusive relationship:

- Who had the power?
- Who made the decisions?
- Does the way you have written, discussed, or talked about an incident inadvertently give power to the victim-survivor, when in fact they had none?

7. Take into consideration that a victim-survivor may rely on survival strategies to manage the perpetrator's behaviour

It is important to recognise that leaving or planning to leave a perpetrator significantly increases the risk of the perpetrator harming the victim-survivor. Victim-survivors may rely heavily on survival strategies in stalking and coercive / controlling behaviour cases to manage the perpetrator's behaviour, which could escalate at any time. A victim-survivor may co-operate with the perpetrator or act in a conciliatory manner in order to appease them, and as a response to the trauma they are experiencing.

Practitioners should avoid making comments such as “you responded to your stalker, you are encouraging them to continue stalking you”, or “are you sure this behaviour is unwanted?” This is blaming the victim-survivor for the actions of others. When practitioners begin telling victim-survivors what they can and cannot do (such as telling them to stop calling the stalker, which may not be possible if they have children with them, for example), those survival strategies can fall away, leaving the victim-survivor vulnerable and at higher risk of harm.

If a decision is made that is contrary to a victim-survivor's wishes, practitioners must ensure that their risk of harm is re-assessed, and that appropriate safeguards are in place.

8. Take all violence against women and girls reports seriously, regardless of the age of the perpetrator or the age of the victim-survivor

Perpetrators can be any age, young or old. Practitioners must ensure that perpetrators are not viewed or treated differently, simply because of their age.

Similarly, victim-survivors can be any age. Practitioners should not discourage victim-survivors from progressing with reports of violence against women and girls based on assumptions about their age. For example, whether an older victim-survivor lives long enough to see a case to completion should not factor into decisions practitioners make about whether the case should progress or not. All victim-survivors deserve justice, and their age should not determine the level of service they receive.

The IOPC's Youth Panel has noted that sometimes young people's experience of violence against women and girls can be overlooked, and they can feel invisible.

Care should be taken to not further isolate a group that is already often distrustful of agencies. The response should be consistent, regardless of age.

9. Do not make assumptions about a victim-survivor's mental health, or 'pathologise' their behaviour

Pathologising someone is when certain behaviours or traits are labelled as 'abnormal' or indicative of mental illness. These labels can have harmful consequences, and result in people thinking something is wrong with them, when there is not.

Mental ill health can be caused or made worse by experiences of violence against women and girls. Practitioners should be mindful that when meeting a victim-survivor the behaviours they display may be in response to a traumatic experience. They are not being 'crazy' or 'hysterical' or 'attention seeking' or 'over the top' – these are examples of pathologising language which perpetrators may use. They are harmful labels that practitioners should probe and challenge. When perpetrators pathologise a victim-survivor, it could be a strategy they are using to reinforce their perpetrator tactics and undermine the credibility of the victim-survivor.

One of the consequences of violence against women and girls is death by suicide. This could be because the victim-survivor can see no other way out, or because of the trauma they have experienced and the long-term effect on their mental health. It is therefore important to recognise vulnerability early on and provide an increased supportive safeguarding response.

Practitioners should take a trauma-informed approach, as pathologising victim-survivors and making judgements can result in them never asking for help again, and being labelled can increase the risk of harm.

10. Take care not to blame a victim-survivor for what happened to them when they have taken alcohol or ingested substances

Victim-survivors may be judged about their use of alcohol or other substances. As well as being inappropriate, this is unhelpful. People sometimes use substances to cope with what they are going through. This is often not a lifestyle choice, but rather a coping response to trauma. Victim-survivors of violence against women and girls require a consistently high level of service irrespective of their personal circumstances.

Victim-survivors who use substances can also be made to feel like they are not credible witnesses. Sometimes their accounts can be dismissed because their memory and recollection of events is affected by a dependency on chemicals. There may be gaps in their recollection, but this does not mean they are being untruthful.

Some perpetrators exert power and control over victim-survivors by withholding their medication. Others force victim-survivors to take alcohol and ingest drugs and then coerce them into situations for the perpetrator's gratification. When these crimes are

reported, take care not to suggest or imply that the victim-survivor is not ‘credible’ because they had substances in their system. They may not have had a choice in taking those substances, and the repercussions of not taking them could have been worse.

Finally, do not excuse perpetrator behaviour because they were ‘under the influence’.

11. Do not make assumptions about the needs of police victim-survivors of violence against women and girls

Cases where a victim-survivor is also a police officer or staff member should be investigated and progressed in the same way as if the victim-survivor was a member of the public. Do not assume that just because they work for the police, they need less information about the investigative process or fewer support provisions.

Explain in detail what the investigative process is, give them information about what will happen if the case results in charges, and explain the process of giving evidence at court. Tell them about special measures, give them information about victim support services – especially those designed for police victim-survivors – and update them regularly on the progress of their case.

Be mindful that support may need to be tailored according to their requests and circumstances. For example, they may face negative comments from colleagues of the perpetrator, especially if they work from the same location. Think about how this can be appropriately managed and safeguards put in place.

12. Use ‘active’ voice rather than ‘passive’ voice when talking about victim-survivors of violence against women and girls

The following examples show the difference between using ‘active’ voice and ‘passive’ voice:

X beat Y	This sentence is written in an active voice. It is clear who is committing the abuse.
Y was beaten by X	This sentence is written in a passive voice. It inadvertently shifts the focus onto Y, rather than X who committed the abuse.
Y was beaten	Notice that X is removed from the sentence completely.
Y is a battered woman	Being a battered woman is now part of Y’s identity, and X is not a part of the statement.

From these examples, it is clear how using 'passive' voice in the last three examples can shift the focus onto the victim-survivor.

The first example uses 'active' voice and focuses on the perpetrator committing the action.

13. Do not 'mutualise' abuse

It can seem like abuse is being 'mutualised' when practitioners use language or exhibit attitudes and behaviours that suggests the responsibility is equal between two people, instead of holding one person responsible for their actions. This can increase a victim-survivor's sense of entrapment and make it more challenging to hold the perpetrator to account.

Stating 'X assaulted Y after they had an argument' implies that the argument caused the assault, and so by taking part in the argument, Y instigated the assault perpetrated by X. Better language would be to simply say 'X assaulted Y'.

Manipulative tactics can be used by some perpetrators to avoid taking responsibility for their actions, shifting the blame onto the victim-survivor, and resulting in the victim-survivor not being believed when they report the perpetrator for abuse. This could also lead to the perpetrator seeming less abusive than the victim-survivor described. Experiencing this level of manipulation daily can take a significant toll on the victim-survivor's mental, physical, and emotional health.

Sometimes in violence against women and girls' cases, there can be evidence of 'violent resistance'. This is where a victim-survivor is physically violent towards the perpetrator in response to those tactics. They are not however in control. They may experience shame and convince themselves that they are an abuser because they reacted with violence. This does not mean that the victim-survivor and perpetrator are 'as bad as each other', nor that it is 'one word against the other'. There is wider context to consider here around the motivation for the victim-survivor's behaviour which should be captured in any records made.

Making statements such as the perpetrator and victim-survivor had a 'volatile relationship' can make it seem as though the nature of the relationship is to blame, rather than the perpetrator's actions. This can result in the perpetrator avoiding accountability, and the victim-survivor feeling like they are equally to blame for the situation they are in.

Remaining neutral about the abuse takes away responsibility from the perpetrator. This may lead to the victim-survivor feeling unsupported and undermine their confidence in the police and the IOPC.

14. Do not minimise abuse

Abuse can be minimised when the severity or impact of abuse or harm that a person has experienced is downplayed, dismissed, or trivialised.

Common examples of minimising language include describing an incident as 'low level' or 'just' or 'only' an assault. This language invalidates the severity of the behaviour. Avoid unnecessary words and stick to the facts. All violence against women and girls is serious.

15. Note that some victim-survivors may blame themselves, or minimise their experiences of violence against women and girls

Many people who have been the victim of a crime experience some degree of self-blame and shame. This self-directed shame can prevent them from seeking support. When victim-survivors experience victim blaming, minimising, or negative reactions from practitioners following disclosures of violence against women and girls, they are more likely to internalise this by blaming themselves, minimising their own experiences. They can sometimes even convince themselves that they are guilty of causing what happened to them. For example:

- "I provoked him by asking him about his whereabouts."
- "I shouldn't have visited my friend because I know he doesn't like that."

A victim-survivor of violence against women and girls may give inconsistent information or play down the severity of the abuse, but this does not necessarily mean they are less credible. There could be gaps in their recollection because of trauma or fear of repercussions. Therefore it is important to recognise when it seems like a victim-survivor is blaming themselves or minimising their experience of violence against women and girls. Be accurate in notations about what seems like a victim-survivor blaming themselves, rather than record that they are not 'credible' owing to the different accounts that may be given.

Reassurance should be provided to the victim-survivor that they are not to blame, and questions should be phrased to get beyond any self-blame or self-minimisation.

16. Make reasonable adjustments for victim-survivors, and ensure information is accessible

Victim-survivors may require reasonable adjustments. They may have a preferred communication style or require an intermediary. Ensure that written materials are

available in an 'easy read' format. If there are language requirements, provide an interpreter.

Be flexible to accommodate the victim-survivors' needs to ensure they have a fair opportunity to provide a full account.

You will find a link to information about reasonable adjustments in the ['Further reading and learning resources' section](#) on page 26.

Annex A:

Impact of victim blaming on some minoritised and marginalised groups and communities

Sex, gender identity, and LGBTQ+

Violence against women and girls is a gendered crime that is deeply rooted in sexism, misogyny, and the societal inequalities between women and men. Society can have unrealistic expectations of women that are not expected of men. For example, women may experience 'Perfect Victim Bias', whereby they are treated negatively if they do not deem the victim-survivor to be of good character. As a result of this unachievable standard that women are expected to live up to, they may experience a lesser service from the police, and shame and guilt when coming to terms with the reality that they are a victim-survivor of violence against women and girls.

Men and boys are victim-survivors of offences and behaviours that fall within the violence against women and girls category too. They may face specific barriers when reporting, such as stigma around being overtly emotional and vulnerable, and they are less likely to speak out to friends, relatives, or the police. When they do report, they are often not believed.

The complexity of the issues faced by victim-survivors can be further complicated when they are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Holding stereotypical, homophobic, and transphobic views like, "gay, bisexual and trans people are promiscuous" is deeply troubling and can prevent victim-survivors from reporting violence against women and girls due to prejudicial societal beliefs, fear of being 'outed' if they do report crimes, and fear of being blamed for what happened to them.

A commonly held assumption is that violence against women and girls can only be perpetrated by men. Where the perpetrator is a woman in same-sex relationships, or in a relationship with a man or non-binary person, there can be risk that practitioners may perceive her as being incapable of abuse because of her gender. These cases can sometimes be framed as abusive 'on both sides', which can lead to a lesser service and expose the victim-survivor to continued harm.

Some LGBTQ+ people who are subjected to so-called conversion practices may not recognise their experiences as abuse, which has been widely evidenced as a barrier to seeking help. When victim-survivors do build the awareness and courage to report, their experiences can be minimised. This can include reports of conversion practices not being seen as 'serious', because conversion practices are technically legal in the UK, however they often involve harmful criminal offences such as so-called 'corrective' rape and false imprisonment.

Race, religion / belief, and culture

We recognise that Black and minoritised communities are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system which is likely to have an effect on Black and minoritised victim-survivors' confidence in reporting and seeking help from the police or the IOPC.

Cultural, familial, and religious expectations can make it much harder for victim-survivors to report violence against women and girls. Victim-survivors can experience blame for what happened to them if they were dressed in a certain way, or if their behaviour did not align with what their community deem to be culturally appropriate. These views can result in a victim-survivor's experience being minimised, and them feeling guilty, ashamed, and responsible for what happened.

Multiple silencing strategies can be used by some families, and professionals in some communities who should be supporting victim-survivors to get justice. They may do this to deter victim-survivors from speaking out, to 'hide' the abuse, and to negate their experiences of violence against women and girls. When violence against women and girls reports are not taken seriously, it can result in the victim-survivors continued exposure to harm.

Language differences, economic abuse, bringing shame to the family, and putting their so called 'honour' on the line are just some of the barriers some communities face when reporting violence against women and girls offences.

Immigration status

In a super-complaint about the police sharing immigration data, Liberty and Southall Black Sisters noted that when perpetrators abuse a victim-survivor's insecure immigration status, it can result in the victim-survivor becoming an overstayer / undocumented immigrant. Sometimes, the immigration / policing system can then end up placing blame on the victim-survivor by punishing them for not complying with the immigration system. However, they should be seen as a victim-survivor of abuse first and foremost, and the barriers they have faced should be recognised. In these cases, there is risk that the abuse can become minimised, with the immigration status conditions becoming the main focus.

Disability

Disabled victim-survivors are sometimes made to feel like they are not 'credible witnesses' because of their disability. This belief can have a significant negative impact on any subsequent investigation. Similarly, repeatedly asking if a victim-survivor is 'sure they want to proceed' may make them feel like they are being dissuaded from continuing with an investigation. Experiences like this or hearing about them from others and in the media may discourage disabled victim-survivors

from reporting violence against women and girls. In these scenarios, the focus can shift entirely from the perpetrator's actions to the victim-survivor's credibility.

Neurodivergence

The individual communication and access needs of neurodivergent people must be respected and always upheld. If their needs are not properly considered, they may feel discouraged from continuing with an investigation, on an assumption that the process will be too difficult or distressing for them, or that they won't understand it. This can result in them either not reporting violence against women and girls or getting support when they do report it.

Age

Changing attitudes towards violence against women and girls may mean that older victim-survivors are less likely to identify their experiences as such, or report it. When an older victim-survivor's experience of violence against women and girls is validated, it can be an emotional moment for them, as it could be the first time they realise they have been abused, sometimes for many years. With this realisation can come shame, guilt, and embarrassment, especially if the abuse is being perpetrated by their own children or grandchildren.

There may also be an assumption that older people who have been married to a perpetrator for several decades cannot be a victim-survivor of violence against women and girls - because otherwise they would have reported the behaviour sooner, or not continued with the marriage. These views blame the victim-survivors, because they disregard the fact that they cannot leave, with a range of reasons why they might not do so - such as fear of violence from the perpetrator, threats of losing custody of their children, and worries about bringing shame to their community.

Older victim-survivors face additional barriers, such as when accessing help, they are more likely to suffer from health problems, and reduced mobility or other disabilities which can further exacerbate their vulnerability to harm.

Violence against women and girls occurs across the age span. Perpetrators may intentionally target young people assuming they are easier to control. Due to power imbalances, young people who speak out about violence against women and girls may not be believed, or their accounts may be belittled. They may be silenced from speaking up by family or people in positions of authority, which can result in them feeling ashamed about what happened to them, and their experiences not being validated or taken seriously. Care should be taken not to further isolate a group that is already often distrustful of agencies.

Glossary

Chemical dependency

A chemical dependency is the body's physical and/or psychological addiction to a psychoactive (mind-altering) substance, such as narcotics, alcohol, or nicotine.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality describes how a person's different aspects of identity - such as their gender, race, disability or sexuality - can affect their experiences of advantage and disadvantage in society.

Minimising language

Minimising language is any language that downplays, dismisses, or trivialises the severity or impact of abuse or harm that a person has experienced.

Mutualising language

Mutualising language is any language that makes it seem as though the responsibility is equal between two people, instead of holding one person responsible for their actions.

Neurodivergent

Neurodivergent describes a person whose brain 'diverges' from the neurotypical majority. This may be due to a condition that is present from birth (such as autism) or acquired during a person's lifetime.

Pathologising

Pathologising someone is when certain behaviours or traits are labelled as 'abnormal' or indicative of mental illness. It can have harmful consequences, and result in people thinking something is wrong with them when there is not.

So-called conversion practices

So-called conversion practices are techniques intended to suppress, 'cure', or change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. They can take many forms and commonly range from pseudo-psychological treatments to spiritual counselling.

So-called 'honour'-based abuse

Karma Nirvana, a charity supporting those affected by so-called 'honour'-based abuse, define it as: any incident or pattern of controlling; coercive; manipulative; intimidating; or threatening behaviour, violence, or abuse perpetrated by one or more family, extended family, and / or community members and / or current / former

intimate partners in response to perceived or alleged transgressions of accepted behaviours. While most often perpetrated against women and girls, anyone can experience 'honour'-based abuse regardless of age, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, or gender, including men and boys. It can encompass, but is not limited to: psychological, emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual and faith-related, economic, financial, and hate-aggravated abuse; forced marriage; female genital mutilation; abduction; isolation; threats; murder; and other acts of domestic abuse. People living in the context of an 'honour' dynamic face additional barriers to their ability to speak out against and report abuse for fear of repercussions including further and more severe abuse; shame; stigma; and being shunned / ostracised.

Trauma-informed

Trauma-informed practice is an approach to health and care interventions which is grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological, and social development.

Violence against women and girls

The IOPC definition of violence against women and girls refers to acts of violence or abuse that we know disproportionately affect women and girls. Crimes and behaviour covered by this term include domestic abuse, stalking, harassment, so-called 'honour'-based abuse (including female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and 'honour' killings), rape, and other sexual offences, including offences committed online. Our position is that the term covers any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm. When we use the definition, we are referring to circumstances where at least one victim is a woman or a girl (including transgender women and girls).

The term 'violence against women and girls' is often shortened to 'VAWG'.

Further reading and learning resources

The National Police Chiefs' Council and The Ministry of Justice:
Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings - Guidance on Interviewing Victims and Witnesses, and Guidance on Using Special Measures
assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1164429/achieving-best-evidence-criminal-proceedings-2023.pdf

Reasonable adjustments information on Gov.uk:
www.gov.uk/government/publications/reasonable-adjustments-a-legal-duty/reasonable-adjustments-a-legal-duty#what-we-mean-by-reasonable-adjustments

Ryan, W., (1971). Blaming the Victim: The Folklore of Cultural Deprivation. This Magazine is About Schools (magazine).
This article was also published as a book in 1976.

Barlow, C., Walklate, S., & Renehan, N. (2023). Rendering them responsible: victim-survivors experiences of Clare's Law and domestic violence disclosure schemes, *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* (published online ahead of print 2023). Retrieved Aug 21, 2023, from doi.org/10.1332/239868021X16751803681186.

Hopkins, A. (2023). Examining reasons for victim retraction in domestic violence and abuse: A qualitative analysis of police retraction statements in the United Kingdom. *The Police Journal*, 0(0). doi.org/10.1177/0032258X231159807

Katy Barrow-Grint, Attrition Rates in Domestic Abuse: Time for a Change? An Application of Temporal Sequencing Theory, *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, Volume 10, Issue 3, September 2016, Pages 250–263,
doi.org/10.1093/police/pav054

Johnson M. P. (2006). Conflict and control: Gender symmetry and asymmetry in domestic violence. *Violence Against Women*, 12, 1003-1018.
journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1077801206293328 (paywall)

Lynn and Canning (2023). Additions, Omissions, and Transformations in Police Reports of Domestic Abuse
www.researchgate.net/publication/373659310_Lynn_and_Canning_2023_reworked_for_non-linguists_ADDITIONS_OMISSIONS_AND_TRANSFORMATIONS_IN_POLICE_REPORTS_OF_DOMESTIC_ABUSE

Lynn and Canning (2020). Additions, Omissions, and Transformations in Institutional 'Retellings' of Domestic Violence
www.researchgate.net/publication/343737317_Additions_Omissions_and_Transformations_in_Institutional_'Retellings'_of_Domestic_Violence

Safe Lives
Managing counter-allegations
safelives.org.uk/practice_blog/managing-counter-allegations

Women's Aid

Come Together to End Domestic Abuse: a survey of UK attitudes to domestic abuse 2022

www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Come-Together-to-End-Domestic-Abuse-a-survey-of-UK-attitudes-to-domestic-abuse-2022.pdf

Crown Prosecution Service

Rape and Sexual Offences - Annex A: Tackling Rape Myths and Stereotypes

www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/rape-and-sexual-offences-annex-tackling-rape-myths-and-stereotypes

- contains a detailed table of common rape myths, their implications, and how they can be addressed

Ministry of Justice

Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings (publishing.service.gov.uk)

assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1164429/achieving-best-evidence-criminal-proceedings-2023.pdf

Crown Prosecution Service

Same sex sexual violence and sexual violence involving a trans complainant or suspect/defendant - Toolkit for Prosecutors

www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/same-sex-sexual-violence-and-sexual-violence-involving-trans-complainant-or

Dr Jessica Taylor

Why Women Are Blamed For Everything: Exposing the Culture of Victim-Blaming

Widely available from bookshops in hardback, paperback, e-book, audiobook.

Dr Charlotte Barlow and Dr Sandra Walklate

Coercive Control

Widely available from bookshops in hardback, paperback, e-book, audiobook.

Sarah-Jane Walker

The Use of Chemical Control Within Coercive Controlling Intimate Partner Violence and Abuse

journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/10778012231197579#bibr4-10778012231197579

Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs

The Duluth Model Power and Control Wheel

www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/

The Center for Relationship Abuse Awareness

Avoiding Victim Blaming

stoprelationshipabuse.org/educated/avoiding-victim-blaming/

Galop - the UK's LGBT+ anti-abuse charity

LGBT+ survivors' experiences of conversion practices

galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Galop-Conversion-Practices-Report-Jan-2023.pdf

End Violence Against Women

Key findings on sexual violence and Black and minoritised women's interactions with the Criminal Justice System

www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Imkaan-Reclaiming-Voice-CJS-briefing-June-2020.pdf

Southall Black Sisters super-complaint into police data sharing for immigration purposes

www.gov.uk/government/publications/police-data-sharing-for-immigration-purposes-a-super-complaint

Time Magazine

She Coined the Term 'Intersectionality' Over 30 Years Ago. Here's What It Means to Her Today

time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/

Equality Act 2010 – nine protected characteristics

www.gov.uk/discrimination-your-rights

Good Practice Briefing - Developing A Trauma Informed Approach

www.wgn.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-05/Good-Practice-Briefing-TIA-Model-1.pdf

Support organisations

Women's Aid

www.womensaid.org.uk

A grassroots federation working together to provide services for victim-survivors of domestic abuse in England.

Refuge – free 24 hour helpline

www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/en

Provide women fleeing domestic abuse with support to access a refuge.

Suzy Lamplugh Trust

www.suzylamplugh.org/

The National Stalking Helpline is a service set up to provide advice and advocacy to victim-survivors of stalking.

Southall Black Sisters

southallblacksisters.org.uk/

Provide holistic advocacy services aimed at helping Black and minoritised women live free from all forms of abuse.

Muslim Women's Network

www.mwnuk.co.uk/mwn-helpline

Operate a national specialist faith and culturally sensitive helpline which offers support, guidance, and referrals to those who are suffering from or at risk of abuse.

Galop

galop.org.uk/

Provide support to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people experiencing domestic abuse.

Stay Safe East

www.staysafe-east.org.uk/

Provide advocacy and support services to disabled victim-survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence, hate crime, harassment and other forms of abuse.

Hourglass – free 24 hour helpline

wearehourglass.org/domestic-abuse

Provide support to older men, women and their families suffering from abuse.

Men's Advice Line

mensadviceline.org.uk/

The helpline for male victims of domestic abuse.

Rape Crisis – National Telephone Helpline

www.rasasc.org.uk

The National Helpline is provided by Rape Crisis South London. It offers confidential emotional support, information and referral details.

Rape Crisis – Live Chat Helpline

rapecrisis.org.uk/get-help/live-chat-helpline/about-the-live-chat-helpline/

The one-to-one Live Chat Helpline is a free, confidential emotional support service for women and girls aged 16 and over who have experienced sexual violence.

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