

## **WRITTEN EVIDENCE FROM MUSLIM WOMEN'S NETWORK UK [HBA0057]**

### **Introduction for inquiry**

1. Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK) is a national charity (reg. no. 1155092) that works primarily to improve social justice and equality for Muslim women and girls. We are informed by lived experiences by our national membership, research projects and national culturally sensitive helpline and counselling service. This work informs our resources, training, campaigning and our advocacy work.
2. We help and support women from diverse demographics in terms of age, socio-economic backgrounds, education levels, religiosity and ethnicities (Arab, Afghan, Bangladeshi, Black African / Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Other South Asian and White etc). Further information can be found on our websites: [www.mwnuk.co.uk](http://www.mwnuk.co.uk) and [www.mwnhelpline.co.uk](http://www.mwnhelpline.co.uk) and [www.mwnhub.com](http://www.mwnhub.com). We also help small number of service users from non BAME backgrounds and men.

### **Why are we responding to the inquiry?**

3. We are responding to this call for evidence because we deal with honour-based abuse (HBA) through our helpline enquiries and when we conducted research in 2019 on Muslim Women's Experiences of the Criminal Justice System<sup>1</sup>, we identified gaps in services when it came to addressing and supporting victims of honour-based abuse. Although our helpline deals with over 40 difference types of issues, two thirds are about difference forms of violence, including honour-based abuse. On average per year, we are now contacted more than 4000 times and help around 1500 women and girls.
4. Honour based abuse typically makes up around 3-4% of our helpline cases. Since our helpline launched in 2015, we have dealt with almost 350 cases that have an element of honour-based abuse. This year so far, we have handled 46 cases that involve HBA, which may have been reported as the primary reason for contacting the helpline or a secondary reason for contacting us i.e. forced marriage may have the primary reason but honour-based abuse then may also have emerged as an issue upon getting more details from the service user.

1) Gohir, S., *Muslim Women's Experience of the Criminal Justice System*, Muslim Women's Network UK, June 2019. <https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/resourcesDetail.php?id=218>

### **What forms of violence against women and girls are motivated by so-called honour? Are these different forms understood by the Government, police and other agencies?**

5. The police are provided with a range of guidance on so called honour-based abuse. Previously in our report Muslim Women's Experiences of the Criminal Justice System published June 2019 (henceforth "CJS Report"), we highlighted the inconsistent definitions of so called HBA by the college of Policing and the CPS guidelines. We noted

that following the publication of our report the CPS revised its definition of honour-based abuse, which will help guide police forces to implement a more consistent approach. However, we still note that guidance does not contain activities or action that may be perceived as dishonouring individuals or families that then potentially could result in so called honour-based abuse. Although examples are likely to be provided during training, such a list would also be beneficial in the guidance to help identify whether a person is at risk of honour-based abuse. For example, even training does not always highlight or recognise that obtaining a divorce, being a victim of revenge porn or reporting of childhood sexual abuse could also put some women at risk of HBA. Any lists contained in any guidance could contain a note to state that it was not an exhaustive list.

6. Police fail to recognise the threat of HBA, particularly in cases of revenge porn. This can result in police not acting proportionally and more swiftly to the threat of harm. For example, in the case of 'Ambar' her ex-boyfriend and his friend threatened to put sexually explicit images of her online unless she had sex with them. She was worried that her relatives would see them and was concerned about the response from her family as it would alert them to the fact that she had been having pre-marital sex. She reported this to the police and explained that if the pictures appeared online, she would be at risk. She was told that she would be contacted by a police officer within a few days, however it took three weeks for the police to take a statement where she could hand over evidence of the blackmail. It appeared that the police took their time as they did not think Ambar was in any danger of honour-based abuse and viewed it as a revenge porn case only (case study taken from the CJS report).
7. Most victims who contact the MWN Helpline about revenge porn are reluctant to make a police report because they fear it will result in the perpetrator putting the images online as punishment and then family members and the wider Muslim community finding out. Even when images are posted online, victims usually do not want to pursue prosecution because they fear taking the matter to court will result in families becoming aware of the images and discovering they have been in a sexual relationship. Whilst we acknowledge that recently revenge porn laws have increased protection for victims who are exposed to threats of image disclosure (as this is an offence), police do not always recognise the immediate threat of so-called honour-based abuse to victims from communities where there is a culture of shame and honour is prevalent and where there is a threat to victims' safety. Police officers need to be better trained to make the links from other issues / crimes reported to HBA.
8. We are also concerned that sometimes professionals are overzealous in their approach thus falsely linking HBA to parenting practices and stigmatising minority families. For example, one mother wanted to temporarily ban her daughter using her mobile phone during her GCSE exams but this was regarded as HBA by social services. However, when white parents implement similar bans they are unlikely to be accused of committing HBA or any other type of abuse.
9. We are also increasingly concerned by the rhetoric emerging from policing and government round table meetings associating domestic abuse (including HBA) to

offenders of Islamic extremism but the same assertions have not been applied to far-right extremism like the growing INCEL movement or other religious extremism. Domestic abuse is prevalent across the UK and male perpetrators are from all socio-economic backgrounds and will no doubt also include people who hold & promote extremist views. Therefore, domestic abuse should not be singly placed within a religious context. Our concern is that men particularly from Muslim communities identified as perpetrators of domestic abuse may then also start being linked to Islamic extremism without any evidence. When abuse happens in religious and racialised minority communities there is always assumptions made that the abuse is so called honour-based abuse when that is not the case always. These assumptions will not only hinder women from reporting domestic abuse but would also lead to inaccuracies in police data.

**How prevalent is honour-based abuse? What do we know about the background or characteristics of victims and perpetrators?**

10. On the MWN helpline the majority of victims of so-called honour-based abuse are women and the perpetrators are male. The MWN helpline has also had cases where a female member of the family is the main perpetrator or may also be colluding with the male member of the family and may use emotional blackmail and misinformation as a tactic to keep the service user quiet. Families or partners may also misinform service users and make them believe that there is no support out there for them.
11. Honour is often associated with racialised minority communities however crimes related to honour are also prevalent in non-religious and non-minority communities. Abuse and violence motivated by honour should not always be associated to one specific culture or religion, it is imperative to understand that honour is a motivator for perpetrators which stems from unchallenged rampant sexism and misogyny that exist across communities. We do recognise due to patriarchal structures in some communities that some women & girls from those communities are subjected to stringent honour codes that are embedded in families and communities collectively and therefore likely to have a higher prevalence of so-called honour-based abuse. However, when abuse is committed in these communities they should not be automatically regarded as HBA and a careful assessment should be made based on evidence as to whether honour was a motivating factor.

**What is known about abuse practised under the pretext of upholding cultural norms? Is there available data and/or research on the prevalence of these practices?**

12. Data collection and recording needs to be better to increase understanding of the scale of HBA. The inquiry could check whether Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) recommendations have been implemented. For example, after inspecting police forces on their responses to the 'set of crimes, which disproportionately affect women from ethnic minorities,' HMIC also raised concerns that the police do not understand honour-based abuse and therefore are not adequately protecting victims.<sup>2</sup> The HMIC

found that only three of the 43 forces in England and Wales were sufficiently prepared in all areas to respond to the needs of victims and take cases through to prosecution. HMIC recommendations included also *'ensuring that information management processes are in place to record and flag honour-based abuse information in an efficient, effective and systematic way so that the risk to individual victims is identified at an early stage and properly assessed and managed throughout the progression of victim's case.'*

13. It is important that when police are recording incidents such as violence, threats, harassment, sexual assault, forced marriage etc., they also record any concerns about honour-based abuse. For example, police should log whether the victim has been subjected to the crime because of honour or is at risk of honour-based abuse. Improved recording of honour abuse related incidents will also provide a better overall national picture of the scale of the issue. This will enable the government to strengthen its work to change attitudes and improve prevention as part of its 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' strategy. It is important that police identify and flag all honour-based abuse cases for effective risk profiling because there is a significant likelihood that other family members could already have experienced similar abuse. This intelligence could therefore help the police to safeguard other family members at risk.

#### **What are the challenges or barriers faced by victims of honour-based abuse in seeking support or protection?**

14. Some victims have been reluctant to report so called honour-based abuse to the police or have withdrawn their complaints after being made to go through the honour-based abuse assessment tool (used by some police forces and addressed in sections 16, 17 and 18) because they were very concerned about a specific question relating to the level of religiosity (e.g., practising or non-practising) of their family or partner. They were concerned that this information would be misused by police such as making false linkages to extremism and also felt that the question was not relevant to their risk. Although they wanted to report partners or families, they did not want them to portrayed as extremists.

2) *Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary The depths of dishonour: hidden voices and shameful crimes, 2015* <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/wp-content/uploads/the-depths-of-dishonour.pdf>

15. Further there are many barriers that victims of so-called honour-based abuse face such as having language barriers, social isolation, being stigmatised by the family and community, lacking in confidence to navigate the system, the fear of not being believed, being afraid of further violence against them or their loved ones. Furthermore, services that may lack faith and culturally sensitive approach may also be a barrier for service users reaching out for help. They may feel they will not be believed, misunderstood or judged by services that lack awareness of so-called honour – based abuse. Police forces do not always provide a comprehensive list that contain a range of services thus limiting the choices for victims.

**How would you assess the police response to honour-based abuse? How could it be improved?**

16. Currently there is no consistent way of assessing risk of so-called honour-based abuse across all police forces thus putting victims at increased risk of harm. At present some police forces use an honour-based assessment tool that has been developed by one charity without wider input across different experts on VAWG which are working with different communities.
17. The tool contains weaknesses that can result in missing risk. For example, one question focuses on the religiosity of the perpetrator by asking whether they are practising or not. We cannot understand what the answer will demonstrate as so-called honour-based abuse crimes tend to be associated with culture. What is meant by practicing? How is this defined anyway? How someone describes another person as 'practicing' or not is also subjective. How a police officer interprets 'practising faith' is also subjective. For example, a police officer may assess a more practicing person of being more likely to commit an honour crime and a less practicing person to be less likely to commit an honour crime. However, in someone less practicing may as likely or even more likely to commit an honour crime. This means risk may be missed, the consequences of which can be fatal.
18. Also, the term practicing and non-practicing is often associated with Muslim communities. We are concerned this question has been adopted from the preventing violent extremism agenda and may be misused by police forces and counter terrorism officers. We believe there is no justification to use such a question to assess so called honour-based abuse.
19. To best protect victims and ensure that risk is properly assessed, we recommend that the Home Office produces an assessment tool with input from a wide range of organisations and experts which is then disseminated to all police forces to ensure there is a consistent approach to identifying and responding to so called honour-based abuse. It is essential that any tool should have been collaboratively developed with input from a range of charities which have expertise in this area.

**Is the current law in relation to honour-based abuse adequate to protect victims? If not, what should change?**

20. Sentencing guidelines should be updated to include honour as an aggravating factor i.e. where a perpetrator has used threats to share images, videos or audio recordings (whether or not sexually explicit) knowing that the consequences of sharing such material would put the victim at risk of honour related abuse including forced marriage.
21. We do not recommend that religion is considered as an aggravating factor in sentencing for honour-based abuse as this would create evidential hurdles making it difficult to

obtain justice for victims. It should be sufficient to have HBA as an aggravating factor. If some perpetrators try to use their faith to justify abuse, it will be due to their own cultural interpretation of their religion and not the religion itself. It means that culture will still be the main motivating driver for the abuse. Furthermore, as highlighted in previous sections (14, 16, 17 and 18) care should be taken not to falsely link HBA with particular faith-based communities.

**What are the challenges for services supporting victims of honour-based abuse? How could those challenges be mitigated or overcome?**

22. Often direct Government funding excludes small specialist organisations that are faith and culturally sensitive. The government seems to have now shifted to a funding model that involves providing large grants to a few large organisations. The funding model means that the only way small specialist organisations like ours can access the funding is by setting up coalitions which is resource intensive or to be at the whim of large mainstream organisations on what they decide is worth funding if they have been providing funds to give onward grants. Furthermore, the government has also added another barrier by moving applications through to its tender portal which have the dedicated resources to write such bids.
23. Given that 1 in 3 BAME women are likely to be Muslim there is not enough adequate support for specialist charities like ours who support victims of so-called honour-based abuse. Often, we support victims of so-called honour-based abuse that also find themselves a minority within a minority. For example, Muslim women who are either in same sex relationships or are same sex attracted and often are at risk of so-called honour-based and forced marriages would require a more sensitive and specialist approach. Sometimes when they access mainstream services, or non-faith sensitive services, there is an assumption they want to move away from their faith or even pressure to move away from their faith, thus isolating them further. We would like to develop specialist support for such Muslim women. Government funding therefore needs not only be accessible to organisations like ours but also provide opportunities for organisations to develop provision for those victims that are isolated and marginalised within mainstream communities.

***August 2023***