
‘A confident approach in responding to the needs of domestically abused South Asian women – Laying the foundations for Police Scotland 2026 Strategy’

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INTRODUCTION

Police Scotland is the leading organisation dealing with crime. The focus is to keep people safe whilst working in a complex web of laws, rules, procedures and evolving criminal activity. In order to respond to the changing criminal landscape a ten-year policing strategy (hereinafter referred to as ‘the 2026 Strategy’) has been produced identifying five principal areas for improvement and sustainability (Police Scotland, 2017). The research in this report has been conducted under strategic heading number 2; Prevention. It is hoped that the data obtained from the study lays the foundations for necessary change in responding to the needs of women from a South Asian background who are experiencing domestic abuse in Scotland.

This paper outlines the interaction of police officers with South Asian women who contacted them as a consequence of domestic abuse. The accessibility of the current service for domestically abused South Asian women is explored. The majority of the women were unaware of what support they could obtain from the police whilst living within an abusive relationship. The data shows that the women experienced increased confidence after contacting the police and they provided messages of support for women in similar situations. Recommendations for change are nevertheless proposed given the unique difficulties South Asian women encounter which hinder their contact with the police.

SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN & DOMESTIC ABUSE

The Scottish Government has assumed an active role in tackling violence against women, which it has identified as a ‘*major issue in Scotland*’ (Scottish Government, 2009:2). It recognises the detrimental effects of domestic abuse on the health and welfare of those affected. These concerns have been anecdotally reinforced by Police Scotland and the Crown Office Procurator Fiscal Service (2017), who work in partnership in their approach to tackling domestic abuse. Additionally, the 2026 strategy (2017:22), identifies ‘*domestic incidents as the most resource intensive type of incident attended by local police officers...and [they] account for 26% of all violent crime in Scotland.*’

For a small country, the prevalence of domestic abuse in Scotland is high (Scottish Government, 2009:2). During 2016/2017, there were 58,810 incidents of domestic abuse recorded by Police Scotland (Scottish Government, 2017:1). Of the incidents recorded, 79% identified females as victims (Scottish Government, 2017:3). Records of domestic abuse incidents highlight that domestic abuse in Scotland is predominantly carried out by men against women (Scottish Government, 2016:6).

These figures do not, however, highlight the number of women from the minority ethnic community who were victims of domestic abuse. For instance, research of McLaughlin (2017) identified the successes and challenges faced by police officers when dealing with domestically abused South Asian women with an insecure immigration status in Scotland. This is significant because women who are hard to reach, socially excluded and marginalised, are more vulnerable to domestic abuse.

METHODOLOGY

Research participants were women in Scotland selected on the basis of their having had recent contact with the police as a consequence of domestic abuse. Ethics approval was granted by the Higher Ethics Committee of the University of Strathclyde. Interviews commenced in April 2018 and concluded in July 2018.

The interviews were conducted at Hemat Gryffe Women's Aid, Glasgow. An employee of the organisation acted as 'gatekeeper,' recruiting the participants. Qualitative semi-structured interviews consisting of twenty-three questions (Appendix 1) were conducted with fifteen South Asian women. Seven of the interviews involved an interpreter where the first language of the research participant was not English. At the outset of the interview participants read, signed and dated a Research Participant Information Sheet. This was read to participants not proficient in English. All of the women provided a pseudonym at the commencement of the interview, agreed for the interview to be recorded and provided informed consent. The research participants are referred to throughout this report by alphabetical letter (Person A, B, C etc.). This was necessary to protect the identity and confidentiality of the women, even after having provided a pseudonym, given the sensitive nature of the data and the fact that certain of the events discussed were *sub judice*.

Seven interviews requiring the service of an interpreter lasted approximately sixty minutes each, with all other interviews lasting approximately twenty minutes each. The participants received a Boots voucher to the value of £20, plus travel expenses.

The findings contained within this report are not representative of all of the data obtained from the interviews. The data was categorised according to the following three objectives identified at the outset of the project to answer the research question, namely: -

1. To consider the accessibility of the current police service for South Asian women.
2. To consider the interaction of South Asian women with police when they experience domestic abuse.
3. To provide information for Police Scotland as a means to implement improvements in preparation for the Police 2026 strategy.

FINDINGS: SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN, DOMESTIC ABUSE & POLICE SCOTLAND

All of the women lived in Glasgow and were separated from their abusers. Eight were British citizens whereas seven were not. Fourteen of the women experienced domestic abuse whilst married and one woman was unmarried. Thirteen women fled with their children. Five women were living within an extended family household. These women experienced multi perpetrator abuse, with no support from family members. They were unable to come and go as they pleased, but rather were deliberately confined to the house subjected to a life of domestic servitude.

In fact, the data identified that all of the women lived within a controlling environment and they experienced various forms of domestic abuse: physical, sexual, financial, psychological, coercive control and honour based violence and abuse. One woman experienced extreme abuse by her husband which was ignored by extended family living in the household. When she said she would leave, her husband attempted intimate partner femicide:

Person O disclosed:

'I was strangled with cable wires...I couldn't breathe; I saw death close to me. I felt myself slipping into unconsciousness. I was dying.'

BARRIERS PREVENTING CONTACT WITH THE POLICE

The data identified that the women encountered numerous barriers preventing contact with the police. All of the women were largely unaware of how the police could help them when they were living with their abusers. Person A described a lack of courage that stopped her approaching the police, although she

'Sort of had an idea of how they could help.'

There were various reasons disclosed for not contacting the police. For example, a lack of strength, having no courage or confidence, being scared, having a lack of education, a fear of picking up the phone, and a fear of deportation. Five women disclosed they stayed with their abuser for the sake of their children. There were also instances where the women did not contact the police due to their insecure immigration status, linguistic difficulties, extended family pressure, having no access to a phone, having no knowledge or understanding of the police service and whether it was safe to make contact. Two women disclosed they were unaware of the police contact telephone numbers 101 or 999. One woman failed to contact the police as the behaviour was condoned in her country of origin.

Insecure Immigration Status

Three women with an insecure immigration status were unaware of their legal rights. They lived with the abuse and had no information about how the police could assist. One thought she may be deported.

Person C disclosed:

'When you come from another country, you don't know about anything about the rules of the new country. I wasn't aware of the laws here or how to get help. All I knew about was staying in the house.'

Person D endured the abuse as a consequence of her immigration status:

'Eight years I suffered because of my visa status.... I did not have the information. I did not have the confidence. I did not know that the police would sort these matters for me.'

Person J said:

'I thought that the police had strict rules and because I did not have nationality... that was a worry for me. I had no idea that I wouldn't be deported.'

Extended family pressure

Living in an extended family household environment was lonely and isolating. One woman was told by her mother in law that she had to put up with the abuse; she normalised the behaviour as an acceptable way to be (mis)treated. Person K disclosed:

'I used to have his mum beg me, be at my feet, constantly saying 'don't leave him, we will fix it' and I would get blamed for it as well, you know the wife should just shut up, be quiet and sit there and if their man's angry shouldn't say anything.'

Person L said:

'I was living in his mother's house....I was surrounded by his family, his uncles, his aunties, everybody. I just felt completely trapped and alone.'

Language barrier

In addition, a lack of English was identified as a barrier for some of the women.

Person C said:

'Language is also a barrier as I don't know how to speak English and I did not know how to speak to or get in touch with the police anyway.'

Communication methods

Some women did not have the facilities or practical mechanisms to contact the police. For instance: Person C lived with her extended family, and disclosed:

'[I] had no access to a phone and nobody told me that this is the number that you press for the police.'

Similarly, Person F explained:

'I didn't know how to contact the police during the abusive relationship. I failed to contact the police because I didn't know whether it was safe, and I wanted to make sure whether I would get help from the police.'

Abuse condoned in country of origin

Person I was unsure whether to contact the Police because the abuse of women was considered acceptable in her country of origin. She said:

'I did not speak to the police about my husband hitting me...in Pakistan when husbands hit their wives you can't get any help and I just thought it would be the same here.'

Lack of knowledge of role of police

Person B discovered that the police could assist her only after she had fled the abusive relationship. She disclosed:

'I had no knowledge of how the police could help, I only found out after having fled and whilst I was living in temporary accommodation.'

Person C reported historical abuse after admission to a refuge. She said:

'It was only when I got to the refuge my worker helped me speak to the police, before that I was not aware that I could actually talk to the police.'

Person E was also unaware that the police could assist her when living within an extended family household. She said:

'I did not know that I could call the police or to tell them what was happening. I did not know that I could do anything about these matters.'

INTERACTION BETWEEN THE POLICE AND SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN

All of the women eventually had contact with the police. One woman believed the police could help in relation to a contact order. Six women made contact with the assistance of a third party, namely, a sister, a women's aid support worker, a friend, housing officer, and a neighbour. The police met with the women at various locations: six at their home; five at the police station; two at homeless accommodation; one at a women's aid office and one at their child's nursery. The police took a statement from all of the women and the services of an interpreter were utilised by the police on seven occasions. The data showed that seven women then had their matters taken further in the criminal justice system.

Family Protection v Police Protection

Two competing factors impacted upon the decision of some of the women as to whether they should contact the police or remain within the abusive relationship. Women described being prohibited on their pathway to safety as a consequence of family pressure and family honour.

Research of McLaughlin (2017) highlighted that adhering to a strict code of honour is a powerful discourse in South Asian families, leaving women subordinate to coercive control. The honour code operates within a patriarchal ideology where women are shunned, ostracised and may be killed for failing to conform to the expectations of, and behave in a manner acceptable to, the family and community. Women are silenced and rendered incapable of speaking about abuse and mistreatment. Family honour is a concept that has severely negative connotations for those who do not adhere to it, as it imposes a level of fear. It controls women emotionally. Women who fail to adhere to the norm are criticised, shamed

and ostracised from the family and community, irrespective of what might have caused them to rebel. In the worst-case scenarios, the women are in danger and will suffer harm.

Six women described experiencing extended family pressure before, during or after having made a report to the police. This involved being discouraged from reporting rape and sexual assault, being pressured to drop the court case, being encouraged to remain in the abusive relationship, being pressured to return to the abusive relationship and being prevented from calling the police. The women were required to conform to the patriarchal culture and maintain the reputation of the family at all costs.

Person D was raped. When she informed her parents, they told her:

'We don't go to the police for these matters.'

Person E disclosed that she experienced pressure from her in-laws to drop the court case, as they insisted that for her to continue to do so was against Islam:

'My family started calling me and telling me I am wrong about everything...that I should not be behaving like this. They said a lot of things that made me feel guilty about calling the police. They said I shouldn't have caused trouble for my husband, that is not what we do, you do not know how you will be treated in Islam.'

Person K disclosed that she was pressured to stay by her family and the community and that this was a factor that the police should be made aware of:

'They don't get that you are pressured by like one hundred people. Not just one, and not just a parent, but there is extended family that gets involved. The police might think that it is religious when it is not. It is actually the culture, and people have been brought up a certain way and not to go against the family.'

Gender & Minority Ethnic Background of Police Officers

One of the research hypotheses was that the gender of the police officer may be important to the confidence they inspired in the victims of domestic abuse, but in fact it was irrelevant for ten of the women interviewed. One was undecided. Four stated that they would have preferred to have been interviewed by a female police officer. Further, eleven women did not believe that the police officers required to be from a minority ethnic background, whereas four women said it would have been helpful in their situation.

Increased Confidence

All of the women described having a positive experience with the police after being in contact with them and stated they were satisfied with their response.

Person A said she felt:

'Fantastic when I found out that the police can charge him.'

Person F disclosed that she felt secure and safe after contacting the police:

'I am happy now, I have a good life, the police helped me get away from my husband, and this is a much better life for me.'

Person L had experience of dealing with police officers in other parts of the UK. Of the Scottish police officers, she was of the view:

'The police were very competent, I can see why Scotland has a gold star in domestic abuse, and they took my historical abuse really seriously. I thought there was nothing that could be done. I felt very comfortable and very confident, they were absolutely amazing.'

Person O experienced extreme forms of domestic abuse including attempted murder by her husband. She disclosed:

'I feel now that I am protected everywhere I go. I have the police to help me. I feel more confident. Before I didn't know, now that I am involved with the police my confidence is up.'

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The increase in confidence enjoyed by the women after contacting the police is encouraging and is certainly worth promoting amongst the South Asian community, particularly amongst women. An awareness of the unique difficulties that South Asian women encounter however, as identified above, would further assist the police when responding to incidents of domestic abuse in this community.

Cultural Competence in Service Provision

Person A regarded it as important that a police officer should be aware of a culture difference between South Asian women and Scottish indigenous women:

'Scottish girls are brought up in a different environment. Asian girls are suppressed by their brothers and fathers in the family. Understanding would be much greater if the police were aware of and understood the culture. They should know about the way the girls can be treated by their brothers and the fathers. Culturally the girls are really pressed down for speaking up and the brothers and fathers have a big voice here and women are pressed down in that environment. One hundred percent the police should know about the environment of the women and girls.'

Person D was of the view that the police should be aware of the different circumstances of the victims that they deal with and emphasised that cases should be treated on an individual basis. She said:

'They should be aware that our problems are not just as a consequence of the crime but also as a consequence of our circumstances. Having this information could

improve their skills too if they were told about culture and family problems. For me he kept me pressured that I would be killed by my own community or questioned by them. Importantly women should know that help is available and that this help should be made available in different languages.'

Support for Women from Survivors

All of the women were satisfied with the service they received and note that their confidence increased after dealing with the police. The following are messages they have for women who may be living in difficult domestic situations and experiencing domestic abuse. These messages are to communicate to women who may be afraid of leaving their abusive husband or partner, or worried about repercussions from the family or community for betraying the family honour, that help is available.

Person E said:

'Women should try to be confident about their decision to leave...that decision is made for themselves and their safety of their children not for their relatives or what they will say.'

Person F said:

'Women should call the police...they should leave because they get a new life....'

Person K emphasised that with the help of the police, women become more confident:

'They should call the police they shouldn't be scared, help is out there; they should try to feel more confident. Women need to be more aware that they can take this step and leave, it's all about coming out of the madness, they need to know that it is not hard speaking to the police. Be brave; don't be put off by extended family pressure.'

Awareness of the police service

The data identified that women did not have knowledge as to whether the police could help them. It would be beneficial if information and awareness of the police service was disseminated within minority ethnic communities. Consideration of a visible police presence and verbal and written communication tools in minority ethnic languages would assist. The availability of this information would increase victims' sense of safety and assist them when deciding to leave the abusive relationship.

Person E disclosed:

'If their husband is mentally, physically or anyway abusive and this behaviour is part of everyday life...women should not accept that. Women should be aware of all the facts and information about getting help, this would support her. Women would be able to make a decision very quickly about whether to leave if she knows where the help is and that the police can help her, she needs all the information...'

Person J learned that the police cannot deport women with an insecure immigration status:

‘Women need to know that they won’t be sent back to their country of origin by the police, I didn’t call the police because of that. I think they should arrange more awareness of what they do like in a park or publicly, so everyone knows that the police are here and that women should know that, and they shouldn’t be scared of the police.’

In summary, South Asian women experiencing domestic abuse may not contact police because they:

1. Do not speak English, or are not fluent in English
2. Do not know how to contact police
3. Do not know how police can help them
4. Do not have access to a telephone
5. Are not free to leave the family home
6. Do not have their own financial resources
7. Do not have family support in Scotland or elsewhere
8. Are under pressure to maintain family honour
9. Are concerned about their immigration status, including the risk of being deported
10. Are concerned about the welfare and custody of their children

Overall, the data identified numerous reasons why South Asian women are prevented from approaching the police for help, support and protection. This report has identified the multitude of difficulties South Asian women encounter as a consequence of their gender, ethnicity, socio-economic and legal status. The intersection of these factors not only create barriers for women constraining them within an abusive relationship but are also challenging for police officers responding to an incident. Importantly, the women in this research were satisfied by the police response and their interaction with police, despite not all of them being able to take the matters any further in the criminal justice system.

Recognition of these findings is essential in future Police Scotland policies, practices and procedures. Use of a framework recognising the unique difficulties South Asian women experience would go some way to ensuring a robust approach is implemented by police officers responding to a domestic abuse incident involving South Asian women. This would simultaneously improve women’s experience of the police and justice system and engender even greater confidence in Police Scotland.

APPENDIX 1: Interview Questions

1.	Are you a British Citizen? (If not, what is your nationality?)
2.	Do you live in Glasgow?
3.	Do you live with your husband, or partner, or within an extended family? [Or other – please explain]
4.	Have you experienced domestic abuse?
5.	Can you tell me your relationship to the perpetrator(s) of the abuse?
6.	Can you tell me about the abuse that you experienced?
7.	Do you know how to call/contact the police (i.e. dial 999 or 101) or attend at a police station?
8.	Did you (or someone else) call the police/contact the police about the abuse?
9.	(If relevant) What prevented you contacting the police?
10.	(If relevant) Did the police come to your home, or did you attend at their office (or where did you meet them)?
11.	Do you know what the police do in Scotland for women who experience domestic abuse?
12.	Did the police take a statement from you?
13.	Did the police use an interpreter?
14.	Did the police explain the procedure to you (that the perpetrator may be charged and may have to attend court, and that you would have to attend court too as a witness)?
15.	Did the police (or anybody else) refer you to ASSIST/VIA or women's aid for support?
16.	Do you know whether the perpetrator of the abuse against you was charged?
17.	Did you go to court for this matter?
18.	How did you feel about your security and safety after contacting police?
19.	What would help women in similar circumstances in the future?
20.	In your opinion does the gender of the police officers' matter?
21.	Should the police in these cases be from a minority ethnic background?
22.	What was your overall experience with the police in these circumstances?
23.	Overall, how confident are you about the police in these circumstances?

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