



# Report

*Delivering sexual  
violence support  
services that work for  
survivors of colour*

Talat Yaqoob



**RAPE  
CRISIS  
SCOTLAND**

## **Delivering sexual violence support services that work for women of colour**

### **Talat Yaqoob (2023), in equal partnership with women of colour survivors.**

Rape Crisis Scotland has commissioned an independent report to assess how it can better respond to the needs of women of colour both in terms of its services and in its advocacy for improved justice and policing. This work has come about as part of an ambition of Rape Crisis Scotland to be an anti-racist ally and take a more coherent anti-racist and inclusive approach, with and for, women of colour.

To support the development of this review, a group of four women of colour who have experience of sexual violence and engaging in services and the justice system in Scotland, co-designed the review process and the key questions asked in all engagement with women of colour. This group was paid for their participation at all meetings.

The safety and wellbeing of women of colour has been prioritised in this work and as such, outreach to engage women of colour was done sensitively and without pressure. Questions asked were done in inclusive ways without re-traumatising individuals, and all individuals were signposted to additional support services.

### **The landscape**

The intersection of racism and sexism is well documented globally, and somewhat documented in Scotland, however data related to women of colour's lives continues to be under-resourced and unpublished. Women of colour and in particular, migrant women of colour, are more likely to be under-paid than white women and men of colour (Close the Gap, 2022) and are more likely to be financially dependent on patriarchy in their lives. In 2022, Imkaan reported that BME and migrant women experience higher rates of domestic abuse related homicide and are 3 times more likely to commit suicide than other women in the UK. The systems of oppression of racism, poverty and sexism overlap (intersect) to create conditions which increase women of colour's risk to abuse without access to adequate services, exit support, financial freedom and safe access to justice.

Analysis of Scotland specific data on experiences of rape and sexual violence by women of colour is largely unavailable. Police Scotland provides published data on ethnicity of victims who report rape, sexual assault, or domestic abuse, however there is a lack of context and analysis of consequences for and experiences of women of colour. In Scotland, data to contextualise and amplify the experiences of women of colour is too often left to under-resourced and over-stretched specialist BAME women's organisations. This is, largely, through lived experience case studies, quotes, and blogs. The Scottish Crime and Justice Survey which provides the most detailed analysis on the public's experiences of sexual harassment and sexual violence, regardless of whether it was reported to the police, does not provide any race specific analysis, and certainly no gender and race intersecting analysis. The lack of parity of esteem for alternative data sets and methodologies, leaves women of colour's experiences unknown and ignored.

The 2015 UK and Northern Ireland report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Rashida Manjoo, it was clear that under-reporting, stigma and under-resourcing all played a role in the invisibility of ethnic minority women who have experienced sexual violence. Stating; *"For women and girls from black and minority ethnic communities, the consequences of sexual violence include additional fears, pressure, shame linked to family honour and community norms, stigmatization and rejection. This then leads to further silence in these families and communities."*

Furthermore, it stated that the consequences of austerity measures of the time, has had a disproportionate impact on specialist services including ethnic minority women's services and LGBT+ services. With the new wave of austerity measures expected, the current cost of living crisis, and significant resourcing issues across national and local government funding, more of the same is possible over coming years.

### **Interventions to prevent violence against women and girls of colour**

The Scottish Government's 2020 review of effective interventions in the prevention of violence against women and girls stated that comprehensive evaluation of social attitude changes or success of interventions within Scotland (or the UK) was limited and leant on multiple international examples. A mere two references to interventions for "ethnic minority" women were cited and came from one academic review by Femi-Ajoa et al (2020). This review highlighted the limited data available and focused solely on experiences of domestic abuse. It stated that immigration status, community influences, difficulties with language and interpretation and "unsupportive attitudes of staff within mainstream services" all negatively impacted ethnic minority women's ability to access life-saving services and their ability to exit abusive situations.

Femi-Ajoa et al (2020), further stated that support workers and staff needed an increased awareness of the experiences of ethnic minority women and the additional complexities they may experience. This conclusion adds further validity to the conclusions of this report.

### **The reality for women of colour; Imkaan Case Study Report (2020)**

Research by Imkaan; Reclaiming Voice (2020), included one of the largest sets of interviews with women of colour survivors of sexual violence (36) but explained that despite high-profile and visible interventions and cases related to the #MeToo movement, Black and women of colour's experiences "remain largely invisible". The publication included a series of case studies with women of colour and clearly expressed the barriers to support and justice that women of colour in the UK regularly face. These case studies covered perpetrators use of insecure immigration status to prevent survivors seeking support services, collusion between family members and professional agencies (such as legal services), negative experiences with the police, negative experiences with courts and stereotyping of "cultural framing" by agencies.

This research provided insight into the multiple and, often compounding, challenges facing women of colour and migrant women from accessing the support they need to report or escape sexual violence. A number of recommendations from it are echoed in this research project and will be referred to later in this report.

### **The research:**

This research project involved 21 women from across Scotland and across the diversity of what defines "women of colour". All involved had experience of sexual violence, however not all had engaged with support services and not all had pursued legal support or prosecution.

### **Challenges of the research**

To provide context to how the methodology was developed, the challenges and systemic inequalities at the intersections of racism, misogyny, sexual violence and, for many participants, religious discrimination and poverty/classism, need to be fully acknowledged.

### **Trust, systemic inequality, and research engagement**

Experiences of oppression as a consequence of multiple systemic inequalities creates a lack of trust for women of colour to be involved in research of this kind and in particular, research assumed to be from a predominantly white organisation. Mistrust is cited as a key barrier to participation in multiple research settings, including in health-related research (NHS England, 2022) and education specific research for ethnic minority communities. Within the NHS England data, mistrust is attributed to; *“Participants’ perception of risk associated with taking part in research, poor day-to-day service from the NHS leaving potential participants unwilling to commit time or insight for research, previous negative experiences, lack of support”* Whilst this is specifically in reference to a healthcare setting, this can be translated into the work of support services and certainly across the justice system. Indeed, polling data related to policing (UK wide) has illustrated this lack of trust within minority ethnic communities (44% stating they do not trust the police) and within that, 55% of Black respondents stating they do not trust the police (YouGov, 2021) Unfortunately, intersectional analysis on polling data to determine the extent of trust women of colour have in policing is not available, particularly in a Scotland specific dataset.

The challenges of trusted participation has been acknowledged across sectors and, limited, attempts have been made to overcome these barriers through change to institutions themselves and research methods.

### **Over-consulted yet over-looked**

The National Institute for Health and Care Research (England focused) published a toolkit; *Increasing Participation of Black Asian and Minority Ethnic Groups in Health and Social Care Research* (2018), detailing the lack of trust across communities and the need to develop longer-term trusted and open relationships. The toolkit also outlines a second salient point to this research project on the experience of being “over-consulted but under-serviced.” Black and Ethnic Minority communities participating in workshops within the evidence base for this toolkit explained that they felt their communities were talked about and researched too often, with little change as a consequence of participation. This is likely to create an apathy and/or frustration towards current research efforts.

“Survey fatigue” and “over-consultation” are being more widely acknowledged across social research spaces as participants report back similar feelings of being researched yet still overlooked. Similar comments were made by focus group participants throughout this research project. In particular, this was highlighted by the core group of four women of colour who co-produced the research questions and outreach. They explained that whilst there are women who may wish to discuss their experiences, there is a feeling that research “happens to our communities, not with us.”

This experience can be specific to communities of colour, ethnic minority communities and migrants. Font and Méndez (2013) explain in their publication *“Surveying Ethnic Minorities and Immigrant Populations”*; that survey fatigue may become a “serious problem” as research interest increases towards a minority population and as such, some within the population are more likely to be “over-sampled”.

### **Stigma and confidentiality.**

Though the issue of stigma, community “respect” and confidentiality come up in the discussion and research findings, it is also an influencer in how women of colour engage in research about sexual violence. The research development group stated that women of colour who are survivors of rape, sexual violence or abuse may feel unable to participate due to a fear of a lack of anonymity. Whilst this is an experience shared across survivors of sexual violence, it is particularly prevalent for ethnic minority women. A literature review by Women’s Aid (2021) explained the impact of stigma, honour

and a concept referred to as “izzat” meaning respect or reputation in Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi, whilst not unique to “ethnic minority” communities, does exacerbate the poor mental health of women of colour who have experienced domestic abuse and their ability to seek support.

AMINA; Muslim Women’s Resource Centre, recently focused on this issue in a series of short plays which focused on the impact of stigma and shame which prevents Muslim women from coming forward to seek support for abuse, sexual violence or so-called honour-based violence.

### **Time and resource**

Outreach to women of colour with experience of sexual violence and building enough trust for them to feel safe enough to participate has been, understandably, time consuming. The time allocated for this research has had to be extended to enable facilitators to engage with women of colour specific organisations and lay groundwork for a sound understanding of the focus and purpose of this work. This in turn has increased the level of capacity and resource required to do this work justice. Research activity that focuses on being trauma informed, involves sound participatory methods and has a focus of those most marginalised and excluded from research processes will always require more time and resource to be done ethically and successfully.

### **Methodology.**

In the original proposal, this research was conducted through trauma-informed focus groups with women of colour and co-produced with a group of women of colour. Whilst the co-production work was included, it became clear from feedback from the co-production group, that focus groups alone would not be appropriate or would not enable enough women to take part. Due to feeling of mistrust, a lack of safety and fear of being identified. As such, despite small sample size, three different research methods were adopted; one to one interviews, focus groups (online and in-person) and surveys.

Focus groups were supported and enabled through trusted community organisations. For example, Amina Muslim Women’s Centre supported this work by sharing information with their service users and groups and hosting a focus group on their premises. The latter was particularly important to allow participants to be in a known and trusted environment. The organisation closed their premises for any other activities that day, as to not have noise or too many unknown faces on the premises and ensured that a trained helpline volunteer was available for participants to chat to should they feel the need for emotional support. The extent of support and thoughtfulness provided by this partner organisation illustrates the importance of taking a considered, trauma-informed approach and creating genuinely safe spaces for participants to feel secure in.

Results from these methodologies were written up and sense-checked with the co-production group, who also developed recommendations as part of an online meeting. All participants engaged through advertising on social media or through community-specific networks. Advertising included descriptions of the purpose of the research and expressed this through the using the term “sexual violence.”

### **Findings**

**Engaging in national and local rape crisis or specialist sexual violence services.**

**Understanding the intersection of sexism and racism:**

The research asked women of colour about their experiences of accessing sexual violence related support services that are promoted as being for “all women,” in other words, not specialist women of colour or BAME women’s organisations.

The majority of women expressed feeling unsure as to whether “generic” or “standard” services would understand their cultural or language needs. In particular, there was concern that these organisations would not have a competent enough understanding of the intersection of sexism and racism. Participants expressed that whilst the services may be well intentioned, a lifetime of experiences of inequality and discrimination mean that they are sceptical that these spaces will be about them or for them.

*I have experienced this first hand, there doesn’t seem to be an understanding of what black women need, especially if there is a religious need.* – One to one interview participant

*With these “normal” services I would not feel comfortable accessing, I just don’t think they would know how to respond to the community stuff that I experience, that might be something they do but not something I see them do.”* – Focus group participant

*“I would be inclined to go to a helpline that is in a predominantly Asian area, maybe somewhere else in the UK, so I trust they would probably know me better.”* – Focus group participant

A minority of participants had engaged with Rape Crisis Scotland or local rape crisis centres, and whilst they spoke positively about the intention of this work, there were clear concerns about their ability to deliver it for women of colour. Two participants expressed that they had contacted rape crisis services, but did not feel that this was a space that would understand them beyond initial contact or signposting. Some had experienced both positive and negative contact and attributed this to a lack of competency of delivering sensitive, trauma-informed work for women who were not “British-born, English-speaking or white.”

*“It is so dependent on who picks up the helpline, I have had some good experiences and some bad, there needs to be some better training which is anti-racist and culturally informed – so you get some consistency.”* One to one interview participant

Multiple participants also questioned whether support services had the resources and funding to provide them with what they needed:

*“I actually had a good experience but this was years ago, they told me what I could do, where I could go, it was local, but I don’t think I would get that service now, it looks like there not the same funding or amount of space for it.”* One to one interview participant.

This reflects either a noticeable decline in the standard of service once available or that women of colour who were participating in the research were already aware of the funding environment across the third and public sector, so were under the impression that their needs would be the first to go in a time of cuts. The latter is evidenced by previous data on the consequences of austerity measures on public services and the impact on BAME women (Women’s Budget Group, 2017).

Evidence by Imkaan (2020) in their publication; Reclaiming Voice supports the findings of this research on women of colour’s hesitation to access “mainstream” services. The report states that *“The reluctance of minoritised women to seek help for violence and abuse from mainstream services, as well as poor responses when they do, has been repeatedly highlighted (Burman et al., 2014; Thiara and Gill, 2010; Gill and Harrison, 2016; Love et al., 2017).”*

It is however, important to note that some participants expressed how well Rape Crisis and similar services had supported them, and that their experience was one of well-trained, racism-informed, staff:

*“Rape crisis have provided me with a culturally sensitive and culturally understanding service - my worker is a white british woman, and she is always very aware of the difficulties that people like me face and continue to face, she is always supportive of challenging this too.”* Survey Participant

### **The need for specialist, safe, women of colour services:**

Despite the above concerns about engaging in “mainstream” or “standard” services for sexual violence survivors, participants expressed an equal concern about anonymity when accessing local, community-specific, and culturally-specific organisations. Issues related to “honour” and “shame” were discussed and the anxiety associated with knowing or being connected to those who are providing the service:

*“I have experienced generations of it, my mum experienced it, then I did in my marriage. But sometimes you don’t want to go to local, specialist services because they might know the perpetrator or their family or friends.”* Focus group participant

This was discussed further in two of the one-one interviews, where participants stated that they would want specific BAME women’s organisations to exist and would be more likely to turn to them, but wanted more women of colour to be aware of their anonymity being secure and the efforts that go into ensuring survivor’s safety. Participants expressed that, for some women, taking the step to disclose information of the sexual violence they have experienced or accessing support is already overwhelming and is sometimes pursued without telling family members (or in opposition of family members), as such any connection to their families or spouses, no matter how superficial, may prevent them from seeking support unless they could be fully assured of confidentiality and compassion. These are core principles of BAME women’s support services, however participants stated more awareness was needed within their own communities of these values.

*“I would be inclined to go to a helpline that is in a predominantly Asian area, maybe somewhere else in the UK, so I trust they would probably know what I am going through, but not anyone I know. I should trust the organisations that are here, but there’s just always a wee worry.”* Focus group participant

*“It’s the layers of problems, it’s knowing it might be multiple perpetrators in the relationship, it’s the details that are about our lives, our cultures, our backgrounds, that needs to be addressed – there need to be better services and more of them.”* Survey participant

Whilst there are valid reasons for hesitation in coming forward for support, women of colour in both surveys and focus groups stated that the anti-racism and cultural understanding of BAME women specific organisations enabled them to understand their lives and experiences better. In particular, they stated feeling more at ease with how their experiences were being interpreted or acted on:

*“It’s more about not having to explain why something wasn’t ok, I mean, obviously all these services understand rape, but sometimes there are things that we see, we feel because of our colour, because of how we have been treated in our younger lives. It feels easier to talk about that when someone else knows that same feeling.”* Focus group participant

### **“A never-ending cycle of violence against us” – understanding individual and systemic consequences that enable sexual violence against women**

## **Dangerous Policies and System Design**

Women of colour in the focus groups discussed the environments that surround them and enable perpetrators to exist and prevent women of colour from accessing support and/or engaging in the justice system.

Participants discussed the intersecting consequences of racism, sexism, insecure migration status and poverty which work together preventing women from escaping violent relationships or silence them from reporting their experiences of sexual violence.

As a focus group participant expressed: *“it’s like a never-ending cycle of violence against us, yeah, ok we know it is from the men who have hurt us, but it’s also around us in other ways, in services and stereotyping, it’s just a different kind of violence.”*

This is discussed in further detail later in the report, however the experiences of a lack of trust, racism and sexism within policing and the justice system more widely, were highlighted as key influences which act as barriers to women seeking support and, critically, can indirectly embolden perpetrators. Related to this, specifically the so-called “hostile environment policies” of the Home Office, in particular some visas including a requirement of “no recourse to public funds” was stated as another challenge which leaves women feeling “trapped” or “isolated” and has prevented them from seeking support with the assumption that these services, often Government or local authority funded, cannot be for them.

For some migrant women who are under visa restrictions of this kind, they may be in the UK on “spousal visas” or be “undocumented.” As a consequence, they may be trapped in a relationship with the perpetrator who “governs” their ability to remain in the UK. Coming forward for support as a survivor of sexual violence can create even more uncertainty over their migration status and open them to risk of deportation or detention. These particular barriers caused by UK Government policy have been highlighted by both Scottish Women’s Aid (2017) and the Scottish Women’s Rights Centre (2020), in both cases this was written evidence to the Scottish Parliament’s Equality and Human Rights Committee and Local Government and Communities Committee, respectively.

Many specialist organisations including Southall Black Sisters have a “No Recourse Fund” for this very reason, which is specifically created to ensure migrant women facing such barriers have access, and is promoted heavily across migrant communities.

### **Definitions of victimhood and Societal Attitudes:**

Participants discussed the stereotypes that are attached to women of colour that can pre-determine their ability or intention to seek support. The concept of the “worthy” or “ideal” victim has been theorised by Long (2021) in an analysis of applying critical race theory to how Black men and women report crime. In her review she explains that intersecting discriminations will have an impact on public perceptions of who is an “ideal victim”. This is further influenced by perceptions of “femininity”, “vulnerability”, “aggression” and “oppression”. “

*“Black men, and some Black women (particularly those with an offending history), are not only non-ideal victims; their racialized construction as the ‘suspect’ is incongruous with the ideal victim and they are constructed as the ‘ideal offender’. Not only are they not ideal victims, they are not victims at all: they become the (un)victim”* (Long, 2021).

Similarly, Beaubouf (2009) interviewed 58 Black women about their experiences of the archetype which has been created of the “strong, Black woman” and how it has suppressed the ability for Black



women to seek support and to be seen as needing or worthy of support. Beauboeuf explain the consequence of this as creates “a distraction from broader forces of discrimination and power.”

These stereotypes on how women of colour are perceived by the public (and potentially services and the justice system) will have consequences on both their ability to feel able to come forward for support and, potentially, the competency and non-judgemental support they hope to receive.

Inverse stereotypes appear to exist for South Asian women, Ahmed et al (2008) explained the public perception, reinforced by representation and community narratives, of South Asian women being “compliant, passive or subservient to men”. A review with 18 South Asian women was conducted in this analysis with a focus on the extent of agency South Asian women in different environments.

Whilst these are academic analyses conducted outwith Scotland, the consequences of public perceptions were also discussed as barriers by the majority of the 21 women of colour who engaged in this research. Participants shared the stereotypes that exist, both from individuals within their own racial or religious communities and those in the wider public.

*“I think sometimes, Pakistani and the Muslim women like me, sometimes we stay quiet cause that’s what people think we are. I wear a headscarf and sometimes I think people look at me like they pity me or they think, like I’m oppressed, and then I think, if they knew what I had been through, they are going to think they are right and all of us are like this.”* Focus group participant

Participants discussed the MeToo movement and that they felt that celebrities and those who people feel able to empathise with, or who they already like, are more likely to be believed. They briefly compared their own experiences and wondered how their appearance, their religion or their race would be responded to by the general public if they were to be part of such high profile, visible, movements about sexual assault. Participants shared feeling sceptical that their experiences would be believed fully and they questioned whether they would receive wider, public support.

#### **How “mainstream” services better deliver for, and with, women of colour:**

Participants in focus groups, interviews and via surveys were asked for their recommendations on how sexual violence support services can improve their delivery to meet the needs of women of colour.

#### **Promotion and culturally – informed advertising.**

Participants expressed that too many women in their communities did not know such services existed, and if they did know they existed, assumed it was not for them. They stated they need to promote the work of Rape Crisis, and other relevant organisations, within communities and utilise trusted women’s voices within those communities to encourage women who need them to engage. Suggestions were made of local community spaces and commercial spaces where women of colour are more likely to visit:

*“Advertising needs to happen – but not some tv advert, where we actually go to, build bridges with local community groups. Build local advisers and champions in our communities. What about local spaces that do specialist hair or fabric shops, libraries?”* Focus group participant

*“Mosques, churches and gurdwaras – we need to come away from the stigma that this information shouldn’t be there, RCS could champion that, they are maybe in a safer place to build that link – more so than us survivors who are pushed away from our communities.”* Focus group participant

*“How do you ask for support when you have to search for the information, or the information doesn’t look like its for you? The harder it is, the less likely someone goes for support”* Survey participant

The idea of community advisers or champions was raised on a number of occasions. Whilst this was largely supported, participants did want to highlight the need to prevent gatekeeping, ensuring champions respected anonymity and that training was provided to anyone who had a “representative” role in promoting sexual violence services. In general, it was considered a positive step to have more volunteers or ambassadors who were women of colour to connect with and promote services through, as there was a belief that this may increase feeling of trust towards services.

In particular, the role of Rape Crisis Scotland and other national agencies was discussed and the perception that they had the “safety”, distance and expertise to encourage promotion of this information in community-specific spaces, which the majority of women of colour participants felt they did not feel enabled to do themselves.

### **Training, education and understanding**

The need for culturally sensitive, anti-racist and intersectionally competent training was a repeated recommendation. Participants stated that there are elements of the experience of sexual violence that may be more universal, however knowledge is required by those working across these services of how these experiences may differ for women of colour, for women of faith, for migrant women and for women for whom English is a second language.

Issues related to access, victim-blaming in a cultural context, shame and silencing, visa and migration status as a method of coercive control and societal attitudes to Black women, were specifically targeted as areas of training and knowledge exchange they wish to see more of across the deliver of all types of services that are for women in Scotland.

*“A wider understanding from lived experience. Providing women from BAME backgrounds who have had experiences of services in the past to deliver training to organisations.”* Survey participant

*“It’s the layers of problems, it’s knowing it might be multiple perpetrators in the relationship, it’s the details that are about our lives, our cultures, our backgrounds, that needs to be addressed – there need to be better services and more of them and that is only going to happen with training, knowledge, working with our communities, come and hear from us and learn”* Interview participant

*“Lived experience input, look at the addictions field, someone who has come out the other side and is able to help others. A space for survivors to help others.”* Focus group participants

### **Representation and bi-lingual support**

The need for services to look more like those accessing them or in need of them was discussed in detail. A balancing act of hiring more women of colour but ensuring this was not a tokenistic effort was the focus of the discussion. Women in both focus groups stated they themselves would be interested in being involved and volunteering but did not know where to start with this.

*“What about more volunteers, more opportunities to spread the word, maybe have a role in the community to build connections – then we see more like us being part of the organisation.”* Focus group participant

The need for staff who are fluent in the majority languages spoken within communities of colour was highlighted. For some women of colour the ease of speaking in their first-language and

describing their experiences and trauma would, they feel, significantly increase the chances of women coming forward and women feeling strong enough to seek justice.

*“Training needs to improve and education but more multi lingual support is a must, language barriers are very problematic. How can you explain your pain, when you don’t even know the right words?”* Interview participant

*“How do you ask for support when you have to search for the information, or the information doesn’t look like it’s for you? The harder it is, the less likely someone goes for support”* Focus group participant

*“inclusive language, interpretation service, inclusive content e.g. in leaflets, posters, social media. actively showing that the organisation does recognise the challenges faced and does actively represent women from BAME backgrounds ie. more women of colour in predominantly white teams.”* Survey participant

### **Full pathway and exit support**

The majority of women in the in-person focus group discussed sexual violence as not a single incident but as an experience that had been intertwined with their experiences of domestic abuse and within their relationships. As such, they wished to see more support that helped them discuss and unpick what happened (or is happening) to them, but then also be supported to escape, seek refuge and pursue justice, if they wish to do so. Many assumed that the majority of services did not offer this fuller, holistic support.

*“There are women like me, who stay in their trauma because they don’t know there are places they can go, I know, now, but actually most don’t know that there is something like Rape Crisis that can help them all the way through – from that first call to getting benefits to getting housing – fully escaping the violence and abuse is what we need. Where is the support to get us all the way through to safety? We need organisations to link up better to help us. It can’t be that you need to go to five different places and keep re-telling your story.”*

*“Communication between services is weak, most women fall through these gaps and BME women more so, especially if you don’t know English”* Focus group participant

*“We need more caseworkers that work with you throughout the experience of reporting to police all the way through to trial or giving evidence, I know there are some that do this, we need more, and they need to be from lots of different backgrounds”* Survey participant

### **Trust and closeness to untrusted systems**

Participants expressed that they had had difficult and discriminatory experiences with other agencies; including but not limited to policing, courts and social care services. They expressed concern at the perceived closeness the any support service, including Rape Crisis Scotland would have to these services which may have let them down in the past. In particular, this referred to policing where there have been multiple reports and investigations on institutional racism and sexism.

*“First step – I am an asylum seeker, I go to Home Office, they sent me to a hotel, and they gave me a list of numbers to call, I called them, but they didn’t understand me, they didn’t understand my language, and then they took me to the police. This was scary for me, where I come from, police are not safe, this made it worse. They don’t understand that. When I said I did not want to work with the police, the support service also stopped helping me”* Interview participant

*“Systems cause more trauma, the home office, the police, sometimes in social work, they are looking to deal with you quickly, not deal with you kindly. They think badly of you.”* Focus group participant

*“I always thought Rape Crisis Scotland worked inside the police, so if you call then they might tell the police or want you to tell the police, if that’s not what it is, then they need to say that to us”* Focus group participant

Discussions and responses from participants suggested that sexual violence support services like Rape Crisis need take more care and put in specific effort to ensuring that women of colour, and women more widely, are aware of the independence of support services from institutions where trust is evidenced to be low.

### **The role of communities in tackling male entitlement**

Beyond the work that support services or institutions can do, participants repeatedly called out the lack of prevention work and allyship they felt in their own communities. Whilst they acknowledged that there had been improvements in the way young women of colour understanding their own rights, they felt there was significant work to do in talking to men of all ages about their behaviours and entitlement.

*“What are we doing to educate men? It’s just not enough. Shame, embarrassment about sex, about relationships is stopping families, especially religious ones from talking about these things. They have to.”* Focus group participant

*“It is fine to tell women where to go for help, to make a service for them. But it is better to stop it from happening. I don’t know how we do it, but families need to talk about it to their sons.”*

Interview participant

A further recommendation is to do more with women of colour and community groups to co-produce and deliver prevention programmes with cultural and language sensitive content. Finding routes to create safe spaces to have conversations about sexual violence, consent and women’s rights.

### **Definitions and language**

Throughout the research process and engagement with participants, an important reflection was on language. Participants used a range of terms to express their experiences, this included molestation, domestic abuse, honour-based violence and rape. The term “sexual violence” was very rarely used by participants themselves. This is particularly important when considering what language to use to be accessible and clear with different communities of women across Scotland.

What was found was that some participants used the terms domestic abuse or honour-based violence and went on to describe sexual violence or agree with the term’s relevance to their experience once it was explained by the facilitator. Participants stated that terms they used were those they were most familiar with and had heard of.

### **Experiences of the policing and justice system**

During this research we asked participants who had engaged in the justice system (to any extent) what their experience had been in reporting sexual violence. From the 21 women of colour involved fewer than half had engaged with the police or courts system. Women of colour described feeling overwhelmed and isolated. They described experiences of racism and discrimination.

*“Yes, officers lack cultural understanding beyond stereotyping and discrimination which I have a first-hand understanding and experience of - not just an attitude held by one officer but rather a very large wider team. There isn't really a deepened understanding other than - "that's just the way they are", "that's how they live", an attitude which means though they know the person may be more reluctant to report they do not fully understand why and how to challenge that - this speaks to also a wider problem within the justice system as a whole.”* Survey participant

*“There are such different experiences with police, some might be good and some might be bad, I have had to put in complaints because of how much more trauma police created, it was like they were mocking me.”* Focus group participant

*“There's lot of stereotypes, when police come to your door or you go talk to them, they think things like “oh, the men hurt the women in their culture, that's how it is”, and so if I go to police, it just makes them think more badly of my people.”* Focus group participant

*“Racism in courts or lawyers or police is real – I have felt it, I talked to them, and I wouldn't do it again”* Focus group participant

The experiences described by participants are not unique. Multiple studies and cases have expressed their experiences of racism and sexism, with some detailing institutionalised and historic discrimination. In their 2019 briefing “Policing sexual abuse in South Asian communities, Harrison and Gill found that South Asian women were significantly less likely to report to the police compared to their white counterparts for three reasons; the assumption that the police they will encounter will be men, that police do not understand or respect their cultures and thirdly, a lack of trust.

In 2020 Dame Angiolini reviewed the whistleblowing, complaints and misconduct processes of Police Scotland and found the need for a “broader, fundamental review of equality matters by an independent organisation”. At the time of writing this report, fewer than half of the recommendations of this report had been implemented by the Scottish Government. Some high-profile cases of sexism and racism within policing in Scotland have created new calls for increased accountability and independent reviews of police culture and processes (Guardian; “Review ordered after tribunal finds ‘sexist culture’ in Scotland’s armed police” 2021).

### **What needs to change**

Participants were asked what they felt needed to improve or what interventions would be most effective within policing or in the wider justice/courts system.

Focus was on three areas, the first of which was training. Like their recommendations for support services, they stated the need for more culturally sensitive training which does not lean on stereotypes and does not reinforce the very racism they are trying to eradicate. Participants said that training is often used as means to publicise the police in a positive light or as a response when there is a case of discrimination. Instead, participants wanted to see a dedicated training programme that is mandatory, hold some accountability and is informed by women of colour survivors.

*“Where is the change? They say they do a one-day training, and that's not doing anything.”*  
Interview participant

The second focus on what needed to change, was on accountability and trusted complaints processes. Participants stated that trust would be increased if women of colour felt that there were adequate accountability measures, where if they were to experience discrimination, they would feel the system was taking it seriously and that future interactions would improve and be safer for them.

In particular, women of colour felt that accountability process should be visibly and structurally independent from the justice system, and this process should prioritise clarity, accessibility and lived-experience.

*“There needs to be a clear and independent place to complain about issues when we face police or courts, when we get racism or sexism or something else.”* Focus group participants

*“Most of the time we don’t know how to complain, we need to know how to do it, it needs to be easy to do, and it needs to actually make a difference. Most we are just told to write a letter, I don’t think anyone reads it”* Focus group participants

Finally, an aspect that needs to change is the considerable costs involved in seeking justice. Of those who had engaged in the justice system, some stated that their engagement was limited as a consequence of the rising costs of court appearances and legal representation. Participants stated that more investment and signposting to financial support was critical in enabling women to pursue the justice they deserve to.

*“Financially just unable to - largely for cases which do end up in grooming or specialist crimes need to have access to a more expensive lawyer - with no funds, and having no choice but to access legal aid, often legal aid will not provide for those who are having to go through civil cases from being abused by those in positions of trust in general. There’s so many barriers”. Survey participant*

*“There is a general lack of legal advice due to decreasing numbers of solicitors taking legal aid as a result of reduced fees - this immediately puts women at a disadvantage but especially an added barrier to those who are from the BAME background - who may have been financially dependent on their perpetrator, not highly educated and isolated from any help from family and friends including financially.”* Survey participant

## **Conclusion**

This research provides a necessary insight into the experiences of women of colour sexual violence survivors, however this is a limited insight that reinforces the need for more analysis and improved data collection in Scotland. The difficulties in encouraging women of colour to participate and build trust in the research process, exemplifies the consequences of systemic racism and sexism which prevents women of colour from coming forward and creates a vicious cycle where they feel unable to engage in influencing change.

The purpose of the research was to understand how sexual violence support services could respond better to the needs of women of colour and identifying what women of colour felt were the systemic causes that enabled their experience of sexual violence. The research reinforced that both of these research topics are deeply intertwined with each other and the intersections of sexism, racism and xenophobia in society as a whole, and then in institutions and individual attitudes create a “perfect storm” where women of colour are disproportionately less likely to seek support, engage in the justice system and be victim-blamed or stereotyped.

Most importantly, participants shared their experiences in the hope that support services would improve in meeting their needs and engage in policy or institutional influencing that would tangibly improve their lives and the lives of other women from their communities. Clear interventions on training, community relationship building, representation and the connectedness between services and systems were provided by participants as positive routes forward.

Follow up research and wider, co-produced projects with women of colour should be invested in to enable a more robust understanding of women of colour survivors' experiences and needed. A lack of Scotland specific data and research to build this project on only works to illustrate the extent of systemic, intersecting racism and sexism which was detailed in participants' responses.

### **Recommendations:**

Recommendations for Rape Crisis Scotland and local services:

- 1: "Mainstream" services must have a strong foundation of understanding on anti-racism, intersectionality, and cultural competence. This should be intentional and visible to women of colour for them to feel safer and more related to the service being provided.
- 2: "Mainstream" services need to spend time and resource to build meaningful relationships with communities groups on the ground to build trust and enable more women of colour to know the services exist and will cater to them. Consideration should be given into resourcing "ambassadors" within communities who understand the work of Rape Crisis Scotland and are able to promote it within their spaces.
- 3: Increased, sustainable funding from local and national authorities are needed to ensure specialist organisations can deliver with increasing demand.
- 4: Specialist organisations need to take further action to ensure that women across communities are fully assured of the trust and anonymity of coming forward for support within a space that may recognise them
- 5: Specialist services should be funded to provide expertise to mainstream organisations that need improved understanding and capacity building around anti-racism, cultural inclusivity, and migration.
6. Rape Crisis Scotland should invest in delivering communications, policy and campaigns work that focuses on marginalised women such as; the impact of hostile migration policies on survivors of sexual violence or institutionalised racism/sexism in policing. Delivering this work is not only the right thing to do, it will, as a by-product encourage women of colour to see the organisation delivering for them specifically.
7. Local and national "mainstream" services should invest in advertising and outreach in a range of languages, creative and accessible formats.
8. Consideration should be given to the language used around "sexual violence" as not all communities use the same language or definitions. Using clear and accessible definitions and wording is crucial to ensuring that women of colour from all backgrounds are able to access the support they need.
9. Representation is crucial – services should outreach and recruit women of colour into their teams to ensure there is representation and understanding through lived experience within teams.
10. Beginning to end services and clear information routes/literature, which enable survivors to be supported from initial engagement with sexual violence services through to benefits, housing, access to work, etc are necessary to enable women of colour to access what they need without having to build trust, repeatedly, through different organisations or services.

Prevention and education:

10. Local and national investment is needed (along with influencing from Rape Crisis Scotland) to engage more project-work in prevention work within communities, and specifically with boys and men.

Justice, policing and public services:

11. Fully independent and influential accountability mechanisms of policing are needed to help tackle institutionalised racism and sexism. Reporting mechanisms for survivors to make official complaints safely in relation to their experience with policing are necessary and should be pursued by Rape Crisis Scotland. This should include public responses on how complaints are being dealt with and access routes for complainants to have the right to seek confirmation/clarity on how their complaints have been addressed.

12. Further financial support is needed for women of colour (including those with No Recourse to Public Funds) to be able to pursue justice through the court system which is, too often, too costly for women to access.

13. Investment in legal advice and information services that are within communities themselves and take a “go-to” model rather than waiting for women of colour to source them.

14. Significant increase in investment is needed to deliver long-term and meaningful training across policing, courts and the legal system on equality, sexism, racism, anti-oppression, and cultural awareness. This should, ideally be delivered by those with direct knowledge, with on-the ground specialist experience and with extensive experience.

15. Access to specialist and trusted support which can enable women whose second language is English or who have experience compounding inequalities, such as disability discrimination, to access the same trauma informed, trained “champion” throughout their experience with policing and/or the justice system.