

Revealing domestic abuse realities and viable help-seeking pathways for South Asian women in Scotland



Nughmana Mirza, Lisa Bradley and Nic Dickson



BACKGROUND

This briefing is one of five drawn from the study *Diversifying Justice* (Mirza, Bradley, Dickson, 2025), a participatory research project that set out to build a fuller understanding of **how South Asian women in Scotland perceive and experience domestic abuse**. Each briefing shares key insights and recommendations to help improve support and services.

South Asian women's experiences of domestic abuse are **shaped by their cultures and communities** (Gill & Virdee, 2021; Gill, 2004; Burman & Chantler, 2005). Help-seeking is **influenced by individual and structural factors** (Tonsing & Tonsing, 2019). The impact of gender-based violence on BME women and girls is “**disproportionate and devastating**” (Siddiqui, 2018: 1). This includes **prolonged abuse, reluctance to access services, and fear of racism**, leading to **under-reporting** (BMA, 2014).

Despite evidence of severe, culturally specific patterns of abuse, and multiple and persistent barriers to support, very few studies have focused on the experiences of South Asian women in Scotland or explored how they understand and seek help for domestic abuse. *Diversifying Justice* aimed to address this gap by working directly with South Asian women. Using an arts-based, participatory approach this research:

- **Engaged South Asian women in in arts-based focus groups**[1] (n=15) to explore experiences of domestic abuse and justice. These sessions used object-based introductions and collage-making to support the sharing of personal and collective stories and encourage creative reflection on abuse and help-seeking.
- **Conducted narrative interviews with South Asian victim/survivors of domestic abuse** (n=14). Conducted in Urdu and English[2], these narrative interviews focused on the lived experience of participants and their perspectives on abuse, help-seeking, and support.
- **Prioritised care and reciprocity** through a feminist methodology designed to reduce harm, and support participants to share their experiences in safe and meaningful ways.

This briefing focuses on: **Help-seeking and ‘justice’**

[1] Owing to the sensitive nature of this research, pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the identity of the women who participated.

[2] Urdu has been retained in certain quotes in transliterated form with the English translation provided in parenthesis.



Help seeking and justice. Digitised hand-drawn illustration by Nic Dickson.

KEY FINDINGS

- Help-seeking yields highly variable results, from supportive and culturally sensitive responses to significant failures and breaches of trust.
- Some services empower women to recognise abuse and access justice. Others deliver dismissive or culturally uninformed interventions that cause further harm.
- Fear of judgement, racism, and 'race anxiety' among professionals undermine trust and deter women from seeking help.
- Justice is understood not only as punishment but also as acknowledgment of harm, restoration of losses, and freedom from abuse.
- Religion is a key source of strength for South Asian women, with the concept of 'divine justice' often recognised as central to recovery.
- Natal kin[3] and friendships play a vital role in providing practical and emotional support.

[3] Their family of birth, such as mother, sister and brother.

Variable service responses

Participants described a spectrum of experiences when seeking help – from supportive interventions to harmful failures. Some women spoke of services helping them name what was happening to them. Saira, for example, called the police to report her husband's violence. The attending officer explained that the “*other stuff*” – the emotional manipulation – was also abuse. She reflected:

“A police officer afterwards had said coercive control is emotional abuse, and I did not realise until we'd separated, and he was in jail ... that there had been twelve years of emotional abuse by him and his family.”

Others described services responding quickly and appropriately. Kossar felt supported by the police due to her ex-husband's known history of violence: “*I can't fault it at that time. It was all done fairly good, quick. I felt I did have support, yes.*” Asma also described helpful support from police and social work after her husband attempted to sell their home without her knowledge. However, the court process left her feeling ashamed: “*The room was empty, but inside I was ashamed that I had to see this day too. I said to the police a lot that I don't want to go to court. They said I had to go.*”

Other participants experienced clear failures of care. In Saira's case, the arresting police officer did not caution her husband at the time of his arrest. Saira felt this to be an “*honest mistake*”, but as a result, the court would not uphold his confession:

“Even though there was marks on my hands, the kids testified to it, he testified to it when it went into court, his statement was not upheld because the police had not cautioned him.”

This left Saira to live with her husband's claims that she was lying: “*He actually said that to everybody that it was false claims, and nothing had happened, and I had made it all up,*”

Amina described the traumatic process her sister Jannah went through reporting rape. Jannah, who had learning disabilities, was not allowed support during the evidence-gathering process. Amina recalled:

“Jannah wanted me to be there because she had to give a statement and then she got an internal [examination] done ... they wouldn't allow me in and they kept saying, ‘Well, it's because you could corroborate’, ... but I remember saying to them, ‘Listen, she can't be there on her own’. This is a really harrowing, traumatic experience for someone [without disabilities], but for someone who's got a learning disability, it's even harder.”

Some participants turned to trusted community figures for advice but were met with discouragement. Khadija sought guidance from a woman she knew, who also had a background in social work. She was told:

“Khadija, ghar kai ūndar tōh ēkh behrīyā hai, ghar kai bāhar saw behrīyā honge[4]. Don’t leave this place. Don’t leave the house.”

Khadija said that she was discouraged from “tell[ing] anyone or do[ing] anything” about the abuse. When she eventually sought help for depression from her GP, she said that her confidentiality was breached and her affinal kin were informed.

Failure to respond

Some participants were baffled by how services failed to recognise or act on clear signs of harm. Israa, who grew up with an abusive father, recalled:

“I remember conversations as a kid, they would say, ‘We’ll come, we’ll take you out, take you and your siblings out to the park and do this and that’ and none of it ever happened. I always wonder why. I’m like, why did they not check in on us?”

Kossar shared similar experiences. Her school attendance was erratic due to her mother’s mental health, but no one followed up:

“... I think back now, why did nobody intervene? Nobody spoke to us about our home life, why are you not coming to school, is everything okay? Nothing. It was just letter sent home. They’re not at school, why are they not at school? They should be here ... My schoolwork really suffered.”

Kossar also believed her mother’s suicide could have been prevented if professionals had intervened. Despite her mother repeatedly disclosing suicidal thoughts, she was placed in a high-rise flat known for drug use and violence:

“These were her words, ‘I want to hand my keys back because I’m going right to the top and I’m going to kill myself’ ... That should have been big alarm bells ringing there and I don’t know why nobody intervened.”

For some women, this absence of care reflected what Chantler et al. (2001) describe as race anxiety: a fear among professionals of being labelled racist or culturally insensitive. Research shows that when services cannot confidently distinguish abuse from cultural practices, they sometimes fail to respond at all (Chantler & Gangoli, 2011; Chantler et al., 2022).

Participants described how such failures created lasting mistrust and resentment. Amina spoke about police responses that felt judgemental:

“I think sometimes they have quite a negative view of Pakistani culture, they’ve already made a statement out when they come and speak to you, if you say anything that is different to that, you can see it on their faces, it’s quite evident.”

[4] there is one wolf in the house, but outside, there are 100 wolves

Others feared their entire culture would be judged. Israa questioned whether racism had shaped her childhood experience: *“Is it because we were a Pakistani, were they not interested?”*. She went on to explain that the “underlying racism” she sees in *“the NHS, within education”*, makes people “so reluctant” to engage with services.

Furzana described how this fear of stigma prevented help-seeking:

“That Police Officer or that professional, whoever it is in front of you ... You can just tell they’re just judging you and your whole community. ‘Oh, you’re so oppressed or you’re so this and that.’ You would rather not feel that kind of stigma either ... All these situations puts you off enough from seeking help as well from outside services.”

Attending well to incidents of domestic abuse is an incredibly difficult task. For South Asian women, who encounter the combined impacts of racism, cultural stereotyping, and historical experiences of neglect, the barriers to trusting and accessing help can be profound. Where services lack cultural understanding or fail to act, the chance of achieving justice becomes improbable, if not impossible.

Justice is ...

Justice was described by participants as broader than a conviction or prison sentence. For Noor, justice was about recognition and accountability:

“Justice means that he should realise that you can’t treat people like that because he’s done it to me, right, and I know that he’s done it in the past to his previous girlfriend, ex-girlfriend, so he thinks it’s okay to get away with treating women like this.”

Others saw justice in terms of not having to endure further losses, whether of material possessions, relationships or reputation. Aisha reflected that she had *“lost everything”*, and that true justice would be simply to *“live happily”* with her children. Hena described the pain of her ex-husband keeping jewellery and belongings given by her parents: *“He has everything, the stuff my parents gave me.”*

Financial insecurity and a lack of resolution were common themes. Noreen and Amina felt that *“Something is broken in the system,”* where charges were dropped and no consequences followed. Kossar shared similar frustrations, explaining that an absence of real deterrents left her believing *“The justice system is a joke here... a lot more could be done.”*

Participants’ understandings of justice often moved beyond punishment. For some, it meant rebuilding dignity and security after abuse. These processes rarely centred on formal justice systems, but drew strength from personal *“architectures of support”* (Bhandari and Sabri, 2020: 65), including friendships, family ties and faith.

Divine Justice

Religion played a powerful role in shaping participants' understandings of justice and survival. For many, faith offered a way to make sense of their experiences, providing hope, comfort, and a sense of accountability that extended beyond this world. While women's practices cannot be homogenised, most participants described religion as a lifeline that helped them endure and recover. Fatima called herself a "God-fearing Muslim" and described placing her complete trust in Allah[5], especially during moments of crisis, such as her child's ill health:

"I was like, "Oh God has chosen me for this amazing test," you know, "God is the one who has given me this son and he's chosen to give him an illness and he's chosen to make me worthy to look after him, so I have to step up and I have to do what I have to do for this child."

Saira also felt her suffering had a purpose:

"There is a phrase in the Qur'an[6], God will not put you through more than what you can bear ... if you're able to bear it then it will only make you stronger at the other end and there is wisdom behind everything ... at that point I couldn't see it but I see that the strength of my character ... the reason I went through all of that [was] to come out fighting, and to be able to offer support to other women."

Many participants described praying to reduce anxiety and cope with the uncertainty of the future. Asma prayed repeatedly that her husband would change or that God would remove him from her life. For some, prayer actualised hope, as Saira recounted of a friend who left an abusive marriage and remarried: *"She always used to ... pray ... and Masha'Allah[7] she got married and she's met someone who is really good, very similar to her"*.

Belief in divine justice often replaced the need for more mainstream justice. Amina described her sister's death as something only Allah could truly reckon with: *"At the end of the day, Allah's the one that's going to give justice ... She's gone now. It's only Allah that's going to give that justice to her"*.

Forgiveness and acceptance were woven through many accounts. Israa's mother, despite years of abuse, urged her to honour her father. Israa questioned her mother's unwitting reliance on God's justice and judgement, stressing the need for formal support:

"The women that I've worked with who are supported and they always say the same thing, "Allah is watching. Allah will punish them." I'm like, "Oh God, what's he's doing is so illegal, he can't be doing this, he can't be doing that." They're like, "No, no, no."

[5] God

[6] Muslim sacred text

[7] as God has willed

Amina agreed that faith must be balanced with action, arguing that *“justice also means me having justice for my own self,”* and that women needed support to believe they were not being punished for *“sins”*.

Participants noted that religious structures themselves could be sites of harm. While religion provided many women with comfort and strength, it did not remove the need for practical, accessible support and routes to justice. As Bhandari (2018) reminds us, faith can offer powerful coping strategies, but these must be met with systems that uphold women’s rights and dignity.

Natal kin and friendships

Participants described natal kin as both a barrier and a lifeline in their experiences of abuse and exit. While some families pressured women to stay, others offered emotional, practical, and material support once the severity of abuse was clear (Ahmad et al., 2013; Qureshi, 2016; Chaudhry, 2019).

Furzana reflected that keeping in touch with her mother helped her to resist the isolation tactics adopted by her affinal kin:

“From the beginning I kept in touch with her. I intentionally kept her informed... I think I could see things weren’t great. I’m not sure if I deliberately did that as well because I always knew that that attempt to isolate someone from their own family, that is always really a major red flag and that’s usually the downfall.”

When things got too much, Furzana sought refuge with her mum:

“I finished that workday and sat in the car. I was like, ‘Forget it. I’m physically not going to drive back to that house. I want to go to mum’s house.’ ... I was like, ‘Mum, I’ve had enough. I’m not going back to that house. Let me come back to yours.’ I was like, ‘Mum, if you don’t let me come back to yours, I will be phoning Women’s Aid.”

For others, support was slower to come. Aisha’s family initially encouraged her to stay despite violence, fearing the fallout of a cousin marriage ending. Eventually, they helped her leave: *“I’m with you. Whatever you want to do, I’m with you”*. When her brothers found out, they instructed Aisha *“to get a camera installed in the house then there will be a recording of him hitting you.”*

Fatima highlighted the power of natal kin standing by women, countering the cultural fable that *“your doli goes from the house, but only your janāza returns.”*[8] She felt “blessed” her family welcomed her back: *“it’s still my brother’s house and it’s my brother’s family’s house and I would never, ever want them to think that I was any sort of burden or stepping on any toes.”*

Noreen was determined to keep trying to save her marriage until her parents intervened:

“I still wanted to pursue it cos I was thinking ... he’ll try and change or whatever, but it was my parents that made me realise that no, we’re not going any further with this ... I’m so glad, so thankful that that marriage ended ... I don’t know where I would have been now.”

[8] your bridal carriage leaves your parents’ home, but only your funeral bier comes back

While family support was vital for many, others drew strength from friendships and voluntary kinship. Kossar, Hena, and Naseem described the solidarity and practical help found among women with shared experiences (Chaudhry, 2021; Bhandari, 2018).

Reflecting on the focus groups, Hena described how being heard eased long-held pain: *“it feels good. Sometimes so much happens to you on the inside, and I’ve never told anyone anything. So, now when I get a chance to talk about it, I feel light.”*

For Naseem friendships were essential both for survival and building a livelihood:

“I met some people, some good friends. Because of them, I got some help. They told me stuff, ... because of this, I’ve been really supported that I can survive and get by.”

Furzana described sharing her experiences with older colleagues, from non-BME backgrounds, as vital for offering understanding without judgement:

“I’m really glad that those conversations happened because I think it was almost a way of me processing things ... I was able to speak to those women. There was a woman within the team who had gone through a divorce and things as well, so they were really kind of empathetic and listening. I think crucially from them there wasn’t that same sort of judgement either. I think that made it easier.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Ensure policies and services recognise that justice for South Asian women is not always tied to prosecution or imprisonment, and may include economic security, acknowledgement, and other forms of care and repair.
- Improve cultural awareness among professionals to reduce race anxiety and to challenge implicit assumptions about South Asian families and communities.
- Consider investment in peer-led and community-based support models that build trust and enable women to share experiences safely.
- Ensure services are responsive to women’s reliance on faith and spirituality as sources of resilience, while supporting their rights to safety and justice in this world.

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