

Open Letter: Hidden Harm Summit for Domestic Abuse, 21st May 2020

Dear Home Secretary.

We are writing to you to ask that your Government takes urgent steps to reduce the impact of the domestic abuse within Black, African, Asian and other Minority Ethnic heritage communities – during the Covid-19 lockdown and in the future. Additionally, to recognise the impact of ‘honour’ abuse, forced and child marriage, and female genital mutilation (FGM) in its agenda.

Let us open this letter with facts. The prevalence of domestic abuse in the UK is at epidemic levels. During the first three weeks of COVID-19 lockdown, the number of domestic killings doubled¹ - at least 14 women, 1 man, and two children were murdered. More broadly, reports of domestic abuse spiked so sharply that UN Women termed this second crisis a “shadow pandemic”.²

This alarming rise is linked with mandatory protective measures used to contain the spread of COVID-19. Stay-at-home orders, movement restrictions, and rechanneling resources to emergency services have contributed to reports of domestic abuse reaching catastrophic levels. In a 20-year global projection, the UN estimates that the impact of COVID-19 will lead to a one-third reduction in efforts to combat domestic violence³ causing irreparable long-term psychological and societal damage, the devastating trauma of which will ripple through generations.⁴

The scale of this imminent crisis is illustrated by calls to mainstream charity helplines. Refuge, for example, reported a 700% increase in just one day and the national ‘honour’ abuse helpline run by Karma Nirvana have seen increases by up to 200% during a time that is usually a ‘low reporting season’. At best, these figures remain a conservative estimate, representing only the tip of the iceberg. What these figures do not fully capture are the children, young people, women, and men of Black, African, Asian and other Minority Ethnic heritage communities suffering in silence from abuse excluded from the mainstream agenda.⁵ These include hidden harms such as ‘honour’ abuse, forced and child marriage, and female genital mutilation (FGM), which are covered only superficially in the New Domestic Abuse Bill and it does not make explicit reference to specific safeguarding measures.

It must be recognised that these victims often suffer manifold from the harm inflicted by their abusers and self-blame for seeking help. There is an additional layer of suffering when they also experience racism or are overlooked by external organisations due to cultural ignorance or fear of being racist. For these marginalised victims, and those dedicated to protecting them, there is no doubt that the decisions made at this Hidden Harm Summit for Domestic Abuse can be lifesaving.

We welcome the steps that the Government has already taken to provide £2 million Home Office fund for domestic abuse charities affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as an extra £10million for domestic abuse safe accommodation charities announced by MHCLG. However, this falls short of the investment required to meet the scale of need. Let us, therefore, present you with pragmatic solutions. We are calling on your Government to act on the following:

- Draw on exemplary provisions, innovations, and services to guide your discussions, focusing specifically on initiatives to support domestic abuse victims in the UK of Black, African, Asian and other Minority Ethnic heritage.
- With a solid financial business case, adopted by NHS Employers, and similar to Boots pharmacies offering “safe spaces” for victims during lockdown, we urge you to draw on the new, widely-endorsed, national [Harmful Traditional Practices: Workplace Guidance](#). This provides practical, evidence-based recommendations for organisations to safeguard employees and service-users affected by ‘honour’ abuse, forced marriage, and FGM.

- **Support grassroots organisations undertaking specialised initiatives on ‘honour’ abuse, forced marriage, and FGM** like the Halo Project, H.O.P.E Training & Consultancy, Naz & Matt Foundation, Sahara (Preston), London’s Black Women Project, Yellow Door African woman’s group, Road to Recovery, Sharan Project, Clare Walker, Saheli Women’s Project, IKWRO, and Karma Nirvana, as well as working directly with influential faith and community leaders.
- **There remains a clear funding shortfall for other projects.** We ask that monies are ringfenced and funding streams are prioritised for local and regional charities, as well as community projects to provide culturally-competent, specialised support services that recognise the hidden harm that victims suffer that are compounded by inequalities.

As victim-survivors, professional researchers, practitioners, human rights lawyers, policy-makers, support agencies, emergency workers, and activists, we urge you to join multiple health and safeguarding bodies across the UK in recognising that victims of Black, Asian and other Minority Ethnic heritage must be included in the agenda at the Hidden Harm Summit for Domestic Abuse.

We recognise the scale of the challenge that the Government is facing. However, by taking bold action now to recognise these ‘hidden’ victims, you can save countless lives.

Yours sincerely

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***Many survivors across the UK, who ask to remain anonymous, have
contributed to and signed this open letter***