



## **Creating a Collective Response to Sexual Violence in Manchester: the Perspective of Men, Women from Minority Ethnic Backgrounds and the LGBTQ+ Community**

On November 25th, which is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and also marks the start of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, Macc convened a Voluntary Sector Assembly (VSA) focused on creating a collective response to sexual violence in Manchester. Given that sexual violence is a pervasive issue and a major public health concern, affecting the lifelong health and opportunities of thousands in Manchester and millions nationally and globally, the need for an inclusive, cross-sector response is more urgent than ever.

The aim of the event was to specifically bring into the spotlight the experiences of male victims, individuals from LGBTQ+ community and women from minority ethnic backgrounds—particularly those who are refugees and asylum seekers. Less than two years ago, our colleagues at Macc organised a similar event showcasing the experiences of women and girls. The November VSA served as a natural progression from that event, providing an opportunity to amplify the often-overlooked voices of victims and survivors from these groups.

The UK has witnessed a considerable increase in reported cases of sexual violence, with women and girls being particularly affected. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported approximately 130,000 instances of rape and sexual assault in England and Wales alone in 2022, underscoring the urgent need to address this deeply rooted societal issue. Men, members of the LGBTQ+ community and women from ethnic minority backgrounds face unique challenges that render them vulnerable and often without adequate support, highlighting the intersectionality of these experiences. Stigma, discrimination and limited access to resources frequently hinder individuals from reporting incidents and obtaining necessary support.

For instance, the UK Home Office reveals that LGBTQ individuals are disproportionately affected by sexual violence compared to their heterosexual counterparts. A 2020 study by Stonewall, a human rights group and charity, found that nearly 1 in 5 LGBTQ people (18%) have experienced hate crime due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Galop's recent Sexual Violence report presents alarming data, indicating that a staggering 88% of LGBTQ+ survey respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment, while 77% faced sexual assault since turning 18. Notably, a significant majority (79% out of 755) of LGBTQ+ survivors indicated that the perpetrators were individuals known to them.

Despite growing public awareness and concern, the situation for women from minority ethnic backgrounds seeking justice and recovery, too, remains dire, as reflected in declining rates of prosecutions and convictions in recent years. Rather than receiving the affirmation and support they deserve, many of

these individuals encounter substantial barriers when seeking help. They are often met with blame for the violations they endured, accused of fabricating their stories for reasons such as immigration, or dismissed altogether, with their experiences attributed to cultural norms. National research and direct engagement with victims and survivors reveal that women from ethnic minority backgrounds face unique intersectional challenges that necessitate tailored responses. The intersection of sexual violence with factors such as misogyny, racism, immigration status, age, poverty, homelessness, unemployment and poor health culminates in complex trauma and multifaceted support needs. Addressing these challenges requires holistic, wraparound support systems with a critical emphasis on intersectional accuracy within institutional responses.

In relation to male victims, research by Mankind UK in 2021, alongside ONS statistics, sheds light on the troubling reality of sexual violence against men. Their findings indicate that a significant number of men report experiences of non-consensual sexual activity; however, many do not identify as victims, contributing to underreporting. ONS data corroborates this, revealing that around 1 in 20 men aged 16 to 59 have experienced sexual assault since the age of 16, with many enduring multiple incidents. Male survivors encounter substantial barriers to reporting, including stigma, traditional constructs of masculinity, shame and fear of disbelief, which discourage them from seeking help. The psychological impact of such experiences can be profound, leading to anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress. There is a pressing need for specialized support services that address the unique experiences of male survivors, nurturing an environment where they feel heard and validated.

However, it is important to emphasize that the VSA space intended to be inclusive and did not mean that discussions about women and girls in general were sidelined. Victims and survivors of sexual violence are not one-dimensional; while there are unique characteristics relevant to specific communities, there also exists an element of interconnectedness. We all face shared challenges linked to socio-economic factors that contribute to the rising demand for services within the sector, insufficient resources and competition for funding amongst other things. Collectively, the research findings above indicate the necessity for greater awareness and tailored responses for all survivors of sexual violence, recognising the multiple and complex challenges faced by different groups.

The recent Macc event brought together a diverse array of stakeholders from approximately 60 organisations across Manchester and beyond, encompassing a well-rounded mix of frontline groups, emerging and well-established organisations, some of which serve very specific community demographics; council representatives and NHS colleagues. The intention of this space was to foster open discussions and share examples of best practices to strengthen the collective response to sexual violence within our communities. Ultimately, our primary goal for the day was to explore how we could collaborate as an integrated ecosystem, overcoming existing barriers to effectively support those in need—victims, survivors and others affected by the issue. The conversation was particularly relevant for the Policy and Influence Team at Macc, who seized the opportunity to refine our key messages and identify critical areas that need more focus. We are committed to bringing these insights back to the decision-making spaces we engage in as a team and as Macc.

### **Summary of Learnings and Recommendations from the Event**

This summary aims to delineate the key learnings, significant takeaways and actionable recommendations derived from the table discussions conducted during the event.

The discussions were organised into eight breakout tables, each facilitated by a Macc representative who ensured that dialogue was both productive and inclusive, allowing every participant the opportunity to contribute in an equitable manner.

The session was divided into two parts, encompassing the following questions:

#### *Breakout Session 1*

1. What challenges has your organisation encountered when providing support to diverse victims of sexual violence?
2. What strategies can you implement to use language that effectively includes all victims in discussions about sexual violence, minimising stigma and bias in the conversation?
3. How can we foster a sense of safety and security for victims of sexual violence when they seek to report incidents or access support services?

#### *Breakout Session 2*

1. How will you implement new approaches within your organisation as a result of insights gained from this event?
2. What collective responses do you think the sector should adopt to effectively address sexual violence affecting men, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, refugees and asylum seekers and members of LGBTQ+ community?
3. What prevention strategies could be developed and implemented to address sexual violence in different communities?
4. How can Macc support your organisation in addressing sexual violence within your community?

#### **Key Takeaways from Table Discussions**

The conversations offered a space for stakeholders to voice the critical challenges encountered by organisations committed to assisting victims of sexual violence. These dialogues highlighted significant barriers and suggested strategies and successful practices that can improve the effectiveness and inclusivity of support services in the VCSE sector, law enforcement and local authority.

Macc's role as a conduit and a facilitator also served its purpose during the event, providing a much needed platform for the groups to come together, network and build connections.

#### **Challenges in Supporting Diverse Victims**

A prominent theme throughout the discussions was the recognition of fragmented services, which often leads to significant confusion regarding referral processes for victims. Participants highlighted that sexual violence is frequently misunderstood as solely a component of domestic abuse, resulting in a lack of clarity and support. The consensus among attendees was that a centralised directory of services, complete with quality ratings and feedback mechanisms, is essential. This resource would empower victims by providing clear guidance on available support options, subsequently reducing the sense of abandonment and uncertainty that often accompanies signposting.

Another critical challenge stemmed from insufficient capacity and resources. Many organisations reported struggling with inadequate funding that hampers their ability to deliver essential services effectively. Attendees emphasized the importance of securing long-term funding commitments—preferably spanning five to ten years—to help instill confidence in service delivery and ensure sustainability and resilience.

Cultural and language barriers also emerged as significant impediments to accessing support. Victims from diverse backgrounds often face difficulties due to differences in language and the stigma surrounding sexual violence within our communities. Participants called for enhanced training offer on cultural competence and effective communication to ensure services are inclusive and accessible to all.

It was highlighted, that the stigma of being a victim in close-knit communities complicates the path to disclosure and seeking help. Overcoming these cultural nuances requires an intricate understanding of the emotional and psychological barriers that victims face, particularly when familial loyalty may hinder their willingness to come forward.

### **Strategies for Effective Inclusivity**

In response to these challenges, participants proposed several strategies to cultivate inclusivity in addressing sexual violence. A significant recommendation was the adoption of person-first language, prioritising the identity of the individual affected—such as using "person who has experienced sexual violence"—to foster understanding and reduce stigma.

Furthermore, the need for culturally appropriate training for frontline staff was underscored. The attendees emphasized, that such training should focus on recognising and respecting the diverse experiences of victims, particularly in statutory services. Participatory dialogues were recommended to engage community members, people with lived-experience and organisations working directly with victims and survivors, in the co-design of services and support networks. This approach would ensure that programmes are closely aligned with the genuine needs and experiences of those they intend to assist. Respondents expressed concern that they are currently invited to these spaces only after key decisions have been made, which exacerbates the divide between those on the ground and decision-makers, leading to a mistrust in the true meaning of co-design.

### **Creating a Safe Environment for Reporting**

A key area of discussion revolved around fostering a sense of safety and security for victims, emphasizing the importance of trauma-informed approaches and proactive support mechanisms. A victim-centric practice was advocated, highlighting the need to centre survivor voices in training materials and organisational policies. This helps create an environment where victims feel validated and empowered to seek help.

Stable housing for victims also emerged as critical for their recovery journey. Access to safe accommodation arrangements that allow victims to remain connected to their support networks is essential for rebuilding their lives following trauma.

### **Collective Responses for Community Impact**

The assembly brought into spotlight the potential for diverse organisations to align their efforts in order to cultivate a meaningful impact on tackling sexual violence. A key takeaway was the urgency to develop

a sector-wide directory that enables organisations and stakeholders to share expertise and resources more effectively. Collaborative initiatives like the Lotus Hub, which supports women from ethnic minority groups, can serve as exemplary models for other communities aiming for integrated support systems.

The discussions also highlighted the necessity for holistic prevention strategies that recognise the interrelated nature of various forms of violence, including sexual, domestic and honour-based violence. A collective prevention strategy across Greater Manchester was proposed, emphasizing the inclusion of educational interventions within schools and community centres to foster awareness and prevention from a young age. However, the lack of investment in prevention initiatives in Manchester was raised as a concern.

### **Space for Continued Cross-Sector Dialogue**

The attendees expressed a desire for more regular meetings dedicated to shared learning and collaborative problem-solving regarding sexual violence within diverse communities. Participants posited that Macc, as the local infrastructure organisation, should take the initiative to facilitate these meetings on a regular basis. Get togethers of such nature would serve multiple purposes: they would help ensure that services remain interconnected, thus preventing duplication of efforts and working in silos; they would enable more effective allocation and utilisation of resources; and most importantly, they would function as a vital bridge between key stakeholders, including the police, the MCC, the NHS and the VCSE sector. However, it was acknowledged, that to host and facilitate such a space will require funding, time and resources.

The discussions outlined how these networks and regular catch-ups could help develop a more unified approach to addressing sexual violence. By facilitating these interactions, the meetings could amplify the voices of survivors and victims within decision-making spaces, ensuring that their experiences are adequately represented in policy generation—both at local and national levels. This would be crucial in ensuring that policies are reflective of the actual needs of individuals from local communities, particularly those with lived experiences of sexual violence.

The attendees also noted that there is an urgent need for greater engagement with the local council, Elected Members, the NHS and the GMP. They stressed the importance of having senior leadership present in these discussions to reinforce the significance of the issues being addressed. It was pointed out that frontline organisations, already facing overwhelming demand and limited capacity, have managed to prioritise attendance; consequently, it is essential for those in leadership positions to demonstrate a similar commitment. Improved collaboration and dialogue among these parties could ultimately lead to more effective strategies and policies that resonate with the realities faced by victims and survivors in the community.

### **Conclusion**

The conversations we held during the assembly have exposed the critical systemic challenges faced by organisations supporting victims of sexual violence and have revealed valuable insights into nurturing a more inclusive and effective city-wide response. The recurring themes of fragmented services, inadequate resources and cultural barriers must be addressed through concrete strategies, such as establishing a centralised directory, a stakeholder network or a convening space to provide peer support, share learning and showcase examples of good practice and ultimately, prioritising long-term funding strategies in Manchester to build sustainability and resilience within the essential support services. The participants'

emphasis on person-first language, culturally appropriate training and trauma-informed mechanisms underscores the need for a holistic approach that centres the voices and experiences of survivors.

As we seek to carry this momentum forward, we are eager to reconnect in the new year to explore how we can embed these learnings into our work within the Policy and Influence team. We will utilise existing platforms, such as the Community Explorers, to ensure continuity in our efforts and integrate the insights gained into city-wide strategic initiatives we are involved in and the VCSE strategy we are currently developing.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to all participants who contributed to the event and these conversations, particularly Duncan Craig, Caleb Cunniffe, Daniel Griffin and Christopher Egan from We Are Survivors, Ayesha from Saheli, Gareth Nixon and Candida Turner from Manchester City Council, as well as Tiffany Sky from the LGBT Foundation for their support and the huge work that they do to help people on a daily basis. Your feedback and experiences are invaluable as we strive to create an inclusive, safe and responsive ecosystem of support for all victims and survivors of sexual violence in our city.

If you would like to learn more about the work of the Policy and Influence team at Macc, get involved, or contribute to the VCSE Strategy for the sector, please reach out to Zara on [zara@macc.org.uk](mailto:zara@macc.org.uk).

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