Muslim Women's Network UK Submission

Impact of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021
(Domestic Abuse Act 2021 Committee)

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Declaration of Interest

We would like to declare that our founding member and CEO, Baroness Shaista Gohir, is a member of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 Inquiry Committee.

About the Submission

This submission has been prepared and authored by Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK). Formatting, structuring, and clarity have been supported by editing tools; however, all content remains the original work of MWNUK. We take full ownership and responsibility for the material presented, including all analysis, case studies, and conclusions. Responses have been provided only to those questions most relevant to our work and areas of expertise.

About MWNUK

MWNUK has been advancing equality, and social justice for Muslims women and girls since 2003 and is a registered charity (no.1155092) with a national membership. We provide direct support through our Muslim Women's Network Helpline (www.mwnhelpline.co.uk) which focuses on gender-based violence, (primarily domestic abuse and related issues) and Muslim Safety Net Helpline (www.muslimsafetnet.org.uk) which focuses on anti-Muslim abuse, hostility and discrimination. We also conduct research and use lived experiences to identify policy and practice gaps which informs our advocacy, campaign and resource production work to empower women. Further information about our work can be found on our main organisational website (www.mwnuk.co.uk).

Question 1 - Children as Victims of Domestic Abuse

We welcomed the Domestic Abuse Act's recognition of children as victims of domestic abuse. However, through our helpline we have observed that some victims are reluctant to share their full details when seeking advice, due to fears that this will automatically trigger formal investigations and involvement of social services. We have also seen that perpetrators can exploit these fears, using the threat of reporting mothers to authorities or manipulating child protection processes as a means of control. This highlights a need for greater awareness and reassurance around how safeguarding processes work including about the thresholds for child removal.

Question 2 – Statutory Definition of Domestic Abuse

The Domestic Abuse Act recognises several forms of abuse; however, there remain notable gaps, including the absence of explicit recognition of **spiritual abuse** and **transnational abandonment**. While these may fall under the broader category of coercive control, this area is still poorly understood in practice, and convictions for coercive control remain very low. This highlights the need to strengthen the legal framework to ensure these forms of abuse are clearly identified and addressed.

There is also a pressing need for **targeted awareness-raising campaigns across different communities to improve understanding of the full range of domestic abuse**. This should include clear information on physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as coercive control, spiritual abuse, economic abuse, non-fatal strangulation, and technology-facilitated abuse.

Coercive Control

Many women who contact our **helpline do not fully understand what constitutes coercive control**. As a result, they may not recognise or report it. In most cases, these patterns only emerge through careful engagement and sensitive questioning. For example, one woman shared that her husband required her to provide shopping receipts so he could monitor the exact times she visited different locations. In another example, the husband would only buy baby formula if she had sexual intercourse with him. They did not initially recognise these actions as coercive control.

Spiritual Abuse

There is also a lack of awareness around how faith can be misused to exert power and control. For instance, some women report repeated threats of unilateral Islamic divorce being used as a form of intimidation. In one case, a husband would regularly state "I divorce you" and then claim to revoke it, leaving the woman uncertain for years about her marital status according to her faith. Such practices amount to **spiritual abuse**, which intersects with coercive control. **Spiritual abuse should therefore be explicitly recognised as a form of domestic abuse and defined in a domestic abuse situation.** We are currently starting research into how faith is used by spouses and family members to perpetrate abuse. The research will also examine how faith leaders may misuse religion as a means of coercive control. Sometimes families can involve them especially when women are accused of being possessed by a spirit. Sometimes they may also be accused of doing black magic. Such accusations are used as an excuse to abuse the victim further. There is a need to strengthen legislation to ensure accountability of these types of perpetrators.

We have also observed gaps in understanding among frontline professionals, including the police. In one case, a woman's report of coercive control was dismissed by the attending officer. Even after intervention from our helpline, the same officer did not take the matter seriously until it was escalated through a formal complaint and the police officer provided additional training.

Economic Abuse

Although financial and economic abuse is recognised under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, it remains poorly understood by many women. Through our helpline, we have encountered a range of examples, some of these have included:

- Forcing a spouse to work illegally ("cash in hand") and surrender their wages
- Exercising full control over benefits and household finances
- Taking out loans in the victim's name without repayment
- Transferring assets and then applying for a divorce
- Pressuring to agree to a more favourable financial settlement in civil divorce proceedings in return for a religious divorce
- Preventing access to employment or education
- Restricting or denying access to a personal bank account

These forms of abuse often go unrecognised, leaving women financially dependent and further trapped in abusive situations. In one case the husband refused to buy the victim sanitary pads and she had no choice but to use old rags from the house.

Transnational abandonment

The government recognises that transnational marriage abandonment (TMA) is a form of domestic abuse and therefore allows victims and any of their children who are abandoned overseas to apply for entry clearance back to the UK, and immediate settlement and access to public funds upon entry. However, they can only access this support once they return to the UK. The financial and logistical burden of facilitating returns, including flights and necessary documentation, continues to fall on organisations like ours, often using our own limited resources. **This responsibility for repatriation should lie with the government**, not underfunded charities. At present we work with Islington Law who prepare the paperwork and we provide finances for document fees and travel through donations.

What is particularly concerning is that transnational cases are not decreasing; in fact, the data you shared suggests they are on the rise. This trend is reflected in our own helpline figures, with 2 cases reported in 2022, rising to 10 in 2023 and 17 in 2024. According to government data, 83 TMA victims of abuse applied for entry clearance back to the UK in 2024. The true scale of the issue is likely underrepresented in official data, as many women remain trapped abroad and therefore unable to access government support or services.

It is time to hold perpetrators of this type of abuse accountable. When we asked the current government about this, they said they consider transnational abandonment to potentially fall under the offence of coercive control. However, as far as we are aware there have been no convictions under this specific context. The government must now consider more robust deterrents. One such measure could be to **recognise TMA in the Domestic Act** and by the **introduction of a specific offence of transnational abandonment, similar to Australia's recognition of "exit trafficking",to ensure the gravity of this abuse is acknowledged and prosecuted effectively.**

Non-fatal strangulation

We have supported many women who have experienced non-fatal strangulation. However, most have been unaware that it was a criminal offence. This highlights a critical gap in public awareness. Many perpetrators are similarly likely to be unaware. As victims of strangulation are at significantly higher risk of being killed and considering that strangulation is a leading method of homicide, this lack of awareness poses a serious risk to life.

Minority ethnic women already experience disproportionately higher rates of domestic homicide. **The government should therefore prioritise and fund targeted and tailored**

awareness-raising initiatives on non-fatal strangulation. Such campaigns must explain the law, outline the risks, and emphasise the importance of reporting. These interventions would save lives.

MWNUK has observed a rise in cases where strangulation has been a factor. While strangulation is often a common feature in domestic abuse, we are now recording it more accurately and consistently. Annually we support around 1400 women on a range of issues and we found that:

- In 2023, of the 523 domestic abuse victims, 17 (3%) reported strangulation
- In 2024, of the 553 domestic abuse victims, 29 (5%) reported strangulation
- In 2025, of the 675 domestic abuse victims, 49 (7%) reported strangulation

However, we believe the numbers are likely higher than what we are recording as women may not be disclosing this type of abuse. Among the cases we have encountered:

- Several victims were pregnant or had a newborn at the time of the abuse.
- In many cases, the violence occurred in front of children.
- Most victims were reluctant to report the abuse to police, and when they did, strangulation was often not recognised or charged as a separate offence. Instead, protection orders—such as non-molestation orders—were typically issued in response to broader domestic abuse.

Perpetrators were most often intimate partners, but in some cases, they were brothers or fathers. Here are a few anonymised examples from our helpline:

- A Muslim Arab woman in her 20s was strangled and raped by her husband, then dragged outside by her hair and left in her underwear.
- A Muslim Pakistani woman in her 30s was strangled and hit with an iron in front of her children.
- A Muslim woman was strangled while pregnant and told by her husband that she was carrying "Satan" because she was expecting a girl.
- A Black Muslim woman in her 20s described feeling paralysed and collapsing after being strangled.
- A Somali Muslim woman in her 30s reported being choked by her brother, who also held a knife to her throat.
- A young woman shared that her father pushed her onto a bed and strangled her.

These stories illustrate the severity and complexity of the abuse that many minority ethnic women face. Urgent, targeted action is needed to raise awareness, improve identification, and ensure justice is served.

<u>Question 4 – Office of Domestic Abuse Commissioner</u>

By the end of her current contract, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner will have served eight years in post, with the possibility of a further extension. This represents an unusually long tenure, particularly when compared with other comparable Commissioner roles. Such length risks entrenching a single perspective or approach. A six-year term—structured as two three-year terms—offers a more balanced model: sufficient time to develop and deliver a strategic vision, while ensuring space for fresh thinking and constructive challenge. **Policies and legislation should therefore be updated to introduce clear term limits.**

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's engagement, commentary, and overall work **have not sufficiently recognised the contribution of "led by and for" faith-based women's organisations.** Without meaningful and sustained engagement with faith-informed groups, there is a risk that policy and practice fail to reflect the lived realities of these communities. This can lead to important nuances being overlooked, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of responses and creating gaps in support for a large and diverse group of survivors.

Question 6 – Community Service Providers

Specialist "by and for" helplines supporting minoritised women and women of faith are often the first point of contact because they offer anonymity, confidentiality, and culturally competent support. Survivors can speak in their first language to women who share similar backgrounds and understand the nuances of their experiences, which builds trust and makes it easier to reach out. For many, contacting the police feels like a point of no return. In contrast, a helpline provides space to talk, reflect, and explore options at their own pace. This early intervention can be life-saving, helping before situations escalate into crisis.

However, specialist services like ours remain chronically underfunded, those serving faith communities appear to be excluded. Previous government funding criteria, such as high income thresholds, have created significant barriers. Funding streams intended to address VAWG in minoritised communities are often inaccessible to "by and for" organisations. Application processes have shifted from relatively straightforward grants to complex tendering systems, with annual income thresholds frequently set above £500,000.

As a result, many organisations are forced to form coalitions simply to meet eligibility requirements, placing further strain on already limited resources. Many others choose not to apply at all, leaving only a small number able to access funding. **This not only limits the reach of vital specialist support but also risks perpetuating systemic inequality.**

Question 7 – Prevention

A meaningful focus on prevention and early intervention is essential to reduce violence in the long term. However, any national awareness-raising and behaviour-change campaigns will need to be inclusive and culturally informed, with tailored approaches for different communities, including faith leaders who can reach men in their communities. Generic messaging will miss those most at risk.

Question 8 - Inclusion

Every week 2-3 women are killed in domestic homicide. These figures mask the disproportionate number minority women victims. This led to us creating the Say Her Name page on our website. We are particularly concerned about rates for Black women. This over-representation has received little attention from women's groups, Domestic Abuse / Victim's Commissioners and the government. According to the latest government data domestic homicide rates for minority women have risen from 22% to 24% even though minority ethnic communities make up 18% of the population. This indicates they are by one third now (rising from one fifth).

The over representation appears to be most stark for Black women who make up 10% of domestic homicides even though they make up 4% of the population according to the

Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP): Domestic Homicides and Suspected - Victim Suicides 2020-2024 (Year 4 Report)
https://www.vkpp.org.uk/assets/Year-4-Report_publication-with-footnote.pdf

Although the government has finally acknowledged in its VAWG strategy that ethnic minority women are disproportionately represented in domestic homicide rates, it has failed to outline any concrete action to address this. The Domestic Abuse Act is clearly not working for Black women, and this requires urgent attention. **A formal inquiry is needed to examine the interconnected factors driving these outcomes**. Continued inaction on this issue amounts to a form of institutional racism.

Question 9 - External Developments

As already highlighted in Question 2, the law should be strengthened to specifically recognise Transnational Marriage Abandonment as a criminal offence as Australia has done as currently perpetrators of this type of domestic abuse are not being held accountable.

Question 10 – Gaps

As already highlighted in Question 2, the statutory definition should include in the types of abuse list, spiritual abuse and transnational abandonment.