

HELPLINE SERVICE THREE YEAR EVALUATION (2022- 2024)

Supported by:
Amber Shotton –
Charity Sector
Consultant



“A butterfly reminds us that change is possible, transformation can happen, more importantly, when we take time out for ourselves we allow for healing to happen. Therefore the three words I would use to describe [our] impact is: **transformation, hope and rebirth**”

Quote from MWN UK Helpline Advisor
during Impact workshop Apr 2025

Contents

1. Report Summary	4
1.1 Background	4
1.2 Overview	4
1.3 Demographics and issues	4
1.4 Addressing needs and impact	5
1.5 Challenges faced	5
1.6 Recommendations for future improvements	5
2. Who are the helpline service users?	6
2.1 Overview	6
2.2 Age profile	6
2.3 Ethnicity and Faith	7
2.4 Disability and immigration	7
2.5 Location	8
2.6 Issues and needs	9
3. What the helpline achieved in three years	12
4.1 Women better informed to deal with their issues	12
4.2 Women feel heard, less isolated and empowered	13
4.3 Women protected from harm	14
4.4 Women helped to find their voices	15
4.5 Women provided with critical financial support	17
4.6 New IDVA role having a positive impact	17
4. Contributing towards reducing femicide	18
5. How the helpline achieves success	20
5.1 Skilled and culturally-aware helpline workers	20
5.2 Training and capacity building staff	21
5.3 Understanding language and communication needs	21
6. External factors challenging helpline success	22
7.1 Helpline under recognised as a domestic abuse service despite impact	22
7.2 Racism and Islamophobia	23
7.3 Reduction in funding / cost of living	24

7. Recommendations and the way forward	25
7.1 Investment in the use of digital Technology despite impact	25
7.2 Trauma informed organisation that nurtures its team	25
7.3 Team learning and development	26
7.4 Team structures	26
7.5 Counsellors	26
7.6 Discussion with funders	27
7.7 Consider helpline accreditation	27
Appendix - External Training Provision 2022 – 24	28

1. Report Summary

1.1 Background

Muslim Women’s Network UK (MWNUK) is a national registered charity (charity number 1155092) that works to promote social justice and equality for Muslim women and girls. More information about its work can be found on the MWNUK website (www.mwnuk.co.uk). The charity runs a national helpline Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm, which helps about 1400 service users every year. The helpline provides confidential, culturally sensitive, multi-lingual and non-judgemental support to an underserved population of the UK. Support includes information, guidance, casework and IDVA services, counselling, access to a hardship fund and referrals to and from statutory and non-statutory agencies. MWNUK is a ‘by and for’ organisation delivering a specific domestic abuse service to minoritised women.

1.2 Overview

The report provides a comprehensive overview of the impact and operations of the Muslim Women’s Network UK helpline (known as the MWN Helpline) over three years from 2022 - 2024. It highlights how the helpline supports Muslim women and girls who are victims of gender-based violence and experiencing poor mental health. The helpline, which has its own website (www.mwnhelpline.co.uk), offers various services, including guidance, counselling, and referrals to other agencies to assist them. It supports **1400 women** annually and as many are mothers, around **1,000 children** also benefit indirectly from the support provided¹ The helpline also empowers women by increasing their awareness of rights and facilitating self-advocacy.

MWNUK’s Organisation-wide Theory of Change is to:

- Help / empower more women/girls
- Reduce the risk of harm
- Improve mental health and wellbeing
- Empower women with knowledge about their rights so they use the law to protect themselves
- Support women to have a voice and advocate for themselves, their families and communities

1.3 Demographics and issues

During the three year evaluation period, MWNUK supported over **4,300** helpline users, with **96%** being women, predominantly aged **26-50** (average 60%) and with the largest ethnic group being of **Pakistani heritage** (45%). Overall, 94% of users were Muslim. Also, the number of service users reporting:

- Poor mental health increased from **43%** to **59%**
- Domestic abuse increased from **34%** to **40%**
- Financial challenges increased from **19%** to **21%**

¹ 2024 - direct service users 1380 - 936 children (indirect beneficiaries) and 2023 - direct service users 1473 - 1029 children (indirect beneficiaries)

1.4 Addressing needs and impact

The evaluation shows the various ways in which the helpline addresses the needs of their service users such as by:

1. **Reducing risk of harm** - Providing safety advice, police contact, safeguarding referrals and finding safe accommodation.
2. **Improving wellbeing** - Providing emotional support, counselling sessions, regular wellbeing checks, and facilitating connections to social support networks to address mental health challenges and reduce isolation.
3. **Empowering through knowledge** - Providing information and resources on legal rights / protections and available services.
4. **Advocating on their behalf** - Representing their voices to professionals and holding agencies to account and assisting them to navigate different systems (criminal justice, housing, social services, education, DWP etc)
5. **Supporting with financial resilience** - Helping them with advice to manage finances and accessing public funds and hardship grants.

1.5 Challenges faced

It was evident throughout the evaluation that the charity encounters, (and works to overcome), multiple ongoing challenges, including but not limited to:

- Gaining recognition as a domestic abuse organisation among funders
- Navigating cultural sensitivities surrounding the acknowledgment of domestic abuse
- The impact of external factors such as racism, Islamophobia, and economic difficulties

1.6 Recommendations for future improvements

There are a number of recommendations made throughout the report that will enhance service delivery, including:

- Investing in digital technology to improve helpline operations
- Continuing to provide trauma-informed care to staff and service users
- Expanding training and development for helpline workers to address inconsistencies in service delivery

In conclusion, the MWNUK helpline plays a crucial role in supporting Muslim women facing domestic abuse and related issues, while continuously adapting to the evolving needs of its users.



2. Who are the helpline service users?

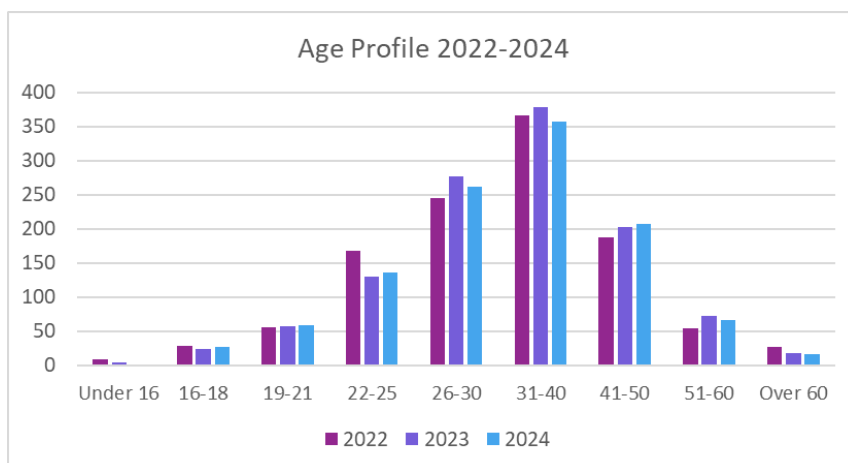
2.1 Overview

Over the three years of the evaluation, MWNUK was contacted around 11,200 times (over 3700 times per year) and supported over **4300 helpline users, averaging 1400 per year**. Due to the complexity of calls the initial call average time rose from **24 minutes** in 2022 to **34 minutes** by 2024.

Whilst a small proportion are men or unknown/other, on average over the three years **96% were women**. Therefore, throughout this evaluation, service users will be referred to as women and occasionally people/individuals. Helpline staff are trained to sensitively gather a broad spectrum of data during calls which helps to understand the needs and challenges of service users. The information is also used to identify trends that arise over time that are used to develop and tailor the helpline service to meet changing needs.

The most common pathways over the three years to access support from the helpline were, in order of preference; **Phone calls (33%), Emails (29%), leaving a Voice message (22%), Webchat (9%) and Text/WhatsApp (6%)**. Overall, verbal communication was 55% compared with 45% of written messages (e.g. email, text, Amal app, webchat). The choice of communication methods offered ensures accessibility, safety, and respect for individual needs.

2.2 Age profile

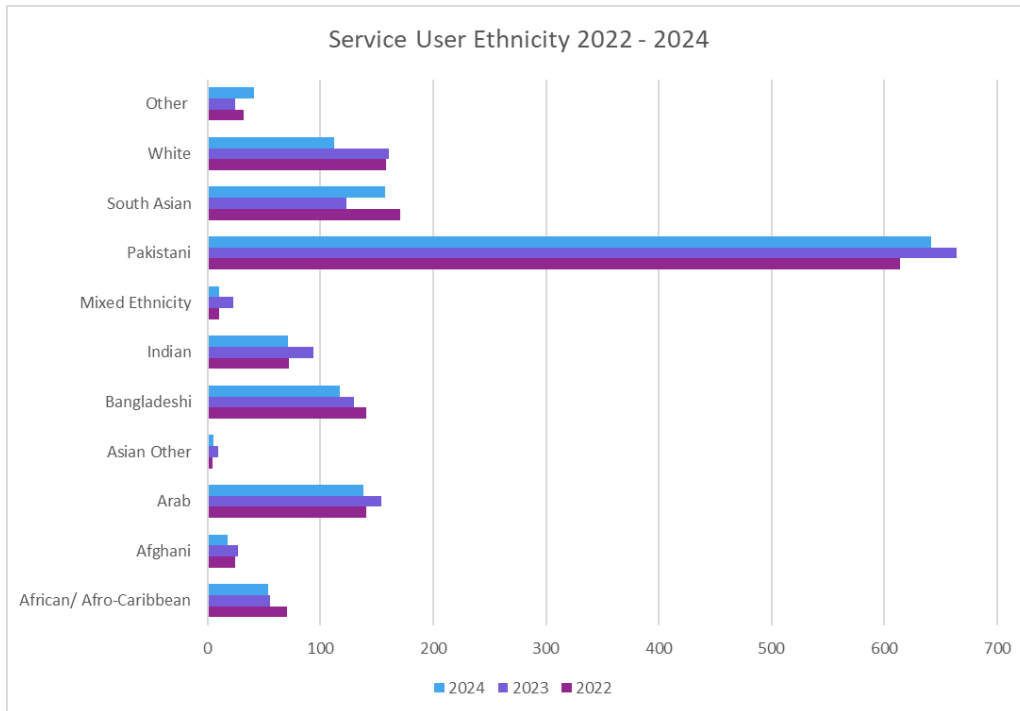


During the three years (2022-2024) the age profile remained consistent with **women being aged between 31-40** most likely to contact the helpline. Overall, around 60% of women were between the ages of 26 to 50 when contacting the helpline. It is interesting to compare this to national statistics. According to Crime Survey for England and Wales: Office for National Statistics for 2024, Young people aged 16-24 are the highest percentage of victims of domestic abuse and that women aged 16 -19 are more likely to be victims than women aged 25 years and over².

² <https://www.ncdv.org.uk/domestic-abuse-statistics-uk/>

2.3 Ethnicity and faith

Over the three years, the faith profile also predominantly Muslim, with an average of **94% of helpline contacts being Muslim**. Almost half (**45%**) of helpline users were of **Pakistani** heritage. Whilst faith was predominantly Muslim, there was other (Hindu, Sikh, Christian) and non-faith helpline users too.



2.4 Disability and immigration status

Although the proportion of service users with disabilities remained below the UK average (**19% for women³**), the helpline had a consistent increase: **6% (2022), 11% (2023), and 13% (2024)**. The team underwent additional equality training in 2023-24, which likely contributed to this. More service users reporting a disability likely reflects better engagement by helpline staff resulting in more service users feeling comfortable to share they a disability. **Insecure immigration status** also increased over the 3 years from, **10% (2022 and 2023) to 13% (2024)**.

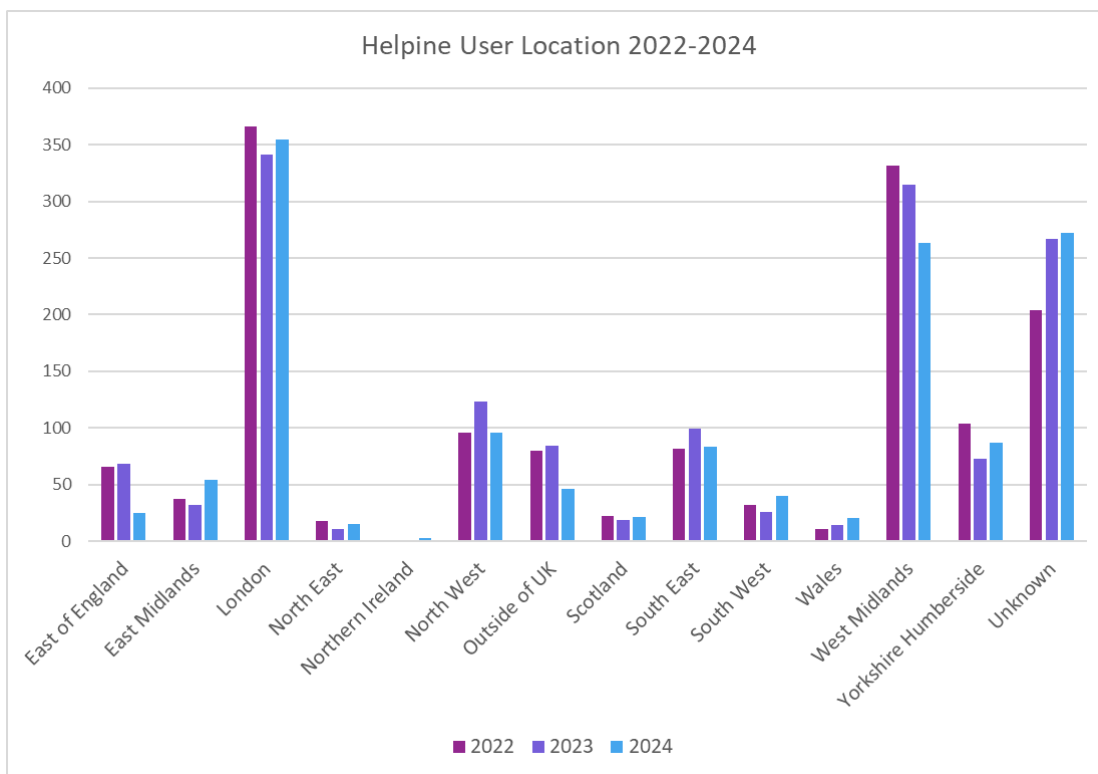
3

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/disabilitybyagesexanddeprivationenglandandwales/census2021>

2.5 Location

A considerable proportion (average 17%) withheld their location information. Reasons included fear of information being share with social services. Other reasons included engagement taking place via emails rather than a phone conversation where it is easier to gain trust and obtain more information. The helpline tries to building a rapport with service users and do not push for location information unless the women are comfortable to share it.

A substantial share of our service users were based in London (25%) and the West Midlands (20%). This aligns with demographic expectations: London has the largest Muslim population in the UK, and the West Midlands — where MWNUK is headquartered — has the second largest.



Whilst West Midlands has the second highest service users, it saw a decline over the three years from 23% to 19%. There were minor fluctuations across all other regions, such as increases in Wales and East Midlands which may account for the statistical reduction in West Midlands. This is likely to indicate increased awareness of the helpline in other parts of the country and shows that it is truly a national service. Interestingly on average 5% of cases every year were from women outside of the country but who had links to the UK and included transnational abandonment cases.

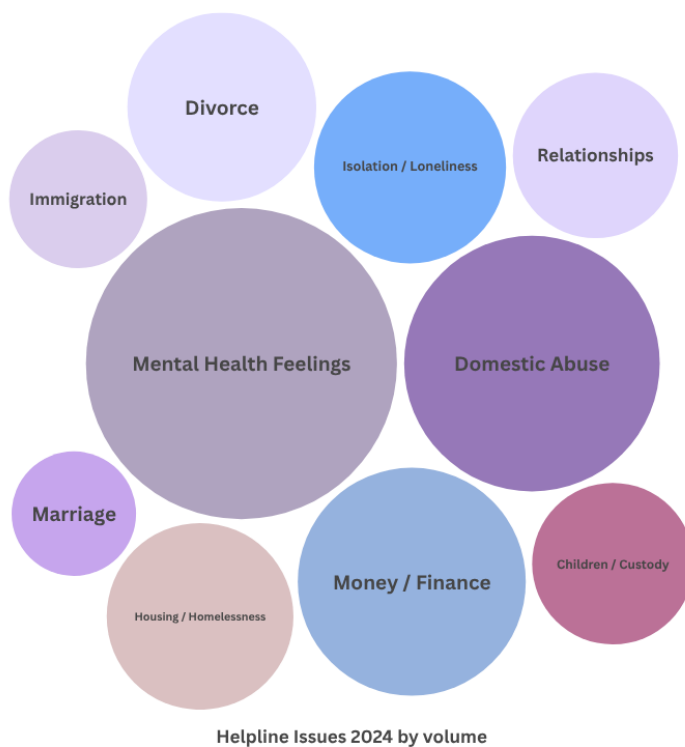
Note: If service users with unknown location are removed from the dataset, then service users from the West Midlands and London will be higher i.e. around 25% and just 30% respectively (which may be helpful when comparing data to previous evaluations).

2.6 Issues and needs

Across the three years of data collection, the same key issues consistently emerged as primary reasons women sought support. A clear upward trend was observed from 2022 to 2024 in the proportion of women requesting help for:

- **Poor Mental Health & feelings** - rising from **43%** to **59%**
- **Domestic Abuse** - increasing from **34%** to **40%**,
- **Increased Isolation/Loneliness** - rising sharply from **9%** to **32%**.
- **Difficulties arising from divorce** - increasing from **19%** to **21%**
- **Money and finance challenges** – rising from **17%** to **23%**

Whilst individually the trends noted may not appear connected, they are collectively known as **primary indicators of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)** and/or **Domestic Abuse**⁴. Although 40% of women cited domestic abuse as their primary reason for contacting the helpline, cases where women reached out primarily about divorce, mental health, isolation, or financial difficulties were frequently found to have domestic abuse as an underlying or associated factor.



Divorce can present additional complexities for Muslim women who have entered into a ‘Nikah’ marriage (an Islamic marriage) that took place in the UK, as such unions are not legally recognised. This lack of legal recognition restricted the financial rights available to these women upon divorce, increasing their risk of poverty. Notably, in 2024, more than a quarter of the women who disclosed their marital status had marriages conducted solely through Nikah in the UK.

⁴ <https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/what-is-abuse/>

New indicators were introduced during the past three years to capture data and trends to more clearly demonstrate the nuances of domestic abuse. Throughout all the trends Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) continues to play a key role behind the issues and requests for support.

Based upon the new indicators for 2024, data captured on service users that report domestic abuse showed that:

- **100%** reported **psychological abuse and coercive control**;
- **50%** had experienced **financial or economic abuse**;
- **45%** reported **physical abuse**;
- **19%** experiencing **sexual abuse**,

Most victims were affected by a combination of all of these issues. An increasing volume of **coercive control** and **psychological abuse** was noted especially within service users that disclosed domestic abuse. It is important to note that indicators for different types of domestic abuse were not added until 2022 to provide more detailed information.

A further worrying trend, again linked to domestic abuse, has been the significant increase in **transnational abandonment**, which increased from **only 2 cases in 2022 to 17 cases by 2024**. Transnational marriage abandonment is a form of domestic abuse involving controlling and coercive behaviour. It refers to the practice whereby the sponsor's partner or their family member, abandons or strands the partner abroad, usually without financial resources, and with the aim of preventing them from returning to the UK. It may involve children who are either abandoned with, or separated from, the abandoned partner.

In addition to domestic abuse, many service users were also contacting the helpline about other forms of specific abuse such as rape, stalking, harassment, honour-based abuse, forced marriage, intimate image abuse and female genital mutilation. By 2024, helpline data highlighted that **61%** of service users raised a form of VAWG issue – with two third (**40%**) specifically raising **domestic abuse** and one third (**21%**) reporting other forms of gender-based violence. For example, annually the helpline deals with **30 forced marriage cases**, while **honour based cases rose from 51 (2022) to 62 (2023) to 80 (2024)**. Another emerging issue included using technology to carry out abuse and control victims – around **6% of service users indicated tech abuse**, which included intimate image abuse and monitoring.

Most women, regardless of their cultural background, find the first steps of acknowledging and reporting domestic abuse extremely difficult, especially because the perpetrators are often spouses or other family members. For example, an analysis of the perpetrators of abuse showed that the majority were men (approx 71%) - husband (67%), boyfriend (2%), father (2%). Other types of perpetrators of abuse reported included parents (5%), siblings (2%), in laws (4%), mother (2%). When exploring the subject of domestic abuse within Muslim communities there are multiple studies that suggest that **Muslim women are less likely to recognise their own experiences of domestic abuse** due to a number of factors. These factors include:

- **Power** – a study from the University of Huddersfield (2018)⁵ stating “the issue of power; victims who believed perpetrators had a divine right to exert their will on their spouses were more likely to endure the abuse, under the false notion it was their kismet (fate)”.
- **Patriarchy** - with ‘patriarchal norms in Muslim societies [being] strong and that these norms [can] be misused to justify violence against women’⁶.
- **Policing** - racially minoritised victims of domestic abuse often suffer a double disadvantage through inadequate Domestic abuse provision in general, and secondly the policing methods that do not cater for culturally specific needs⁷.

The Helpline staff found that service users did not always immediately disclose domestic abuse or even recognise their experiences as abuse: ***“often women will call in for one issue, but at the heart of it lies domestic abuse once we begin to unpick it”***.

This is a societal and sector issues as shared by Donna Covey CBE, Chief Executive, AVA (Against Violence and Abuse), stating ***“It is hard for women to recognise when they have experienced domestic abuse. And it can be even harder to talk about it or ask for help. Where women have experienced other forms of disadvantage, such as substance use, mental health, or homelessness, this can make the problem worse. The only way to break this cycle of silence is to make sure that wherever a woman goes for help, she meets practitioners who are able to ask about abuse with skill and compassion. Only then can we begin to transform the response to domestic abuse in the UK”***.

Having multiple identities, such as being both British and Muslim, can be complex as it involves navigating potentially conflicting cultural values, social expectations, and personal beliefs. Supporting some service users was sometimes challenging when they themselves had not considered the complexity and nuances across their identities. Some faced challenges in reconciling their Muslim faith with their British culture. Some experienced discrimination within their own communities while others in mainstream society including in public and third sector services. For example, women requesting they are moved from refuges or housing due to anti-Muslim hatred / discrimination they had experienced.

⁵ <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/161102546.pdf>

⁶ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325827134_Seeking_Help_in_Domestic_Violence_Among_Muslim_Women_in_Muslim-Majority_and_Non-Muslim-Majority_Countries_A_Literature_Review

⁷ <https://hyphenonline.com/2025/05/13/shaista-gohir-domestic-violence-government-culturally-specific-funding-muslim-women/>

⁸ <https://www.agendaalliance.org/news/mental-health-services-failing-to-ask-women-about-domestic-abuse/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIt%20is%20hard%20for%20women,can%20make%20the%20problem%20worse.>

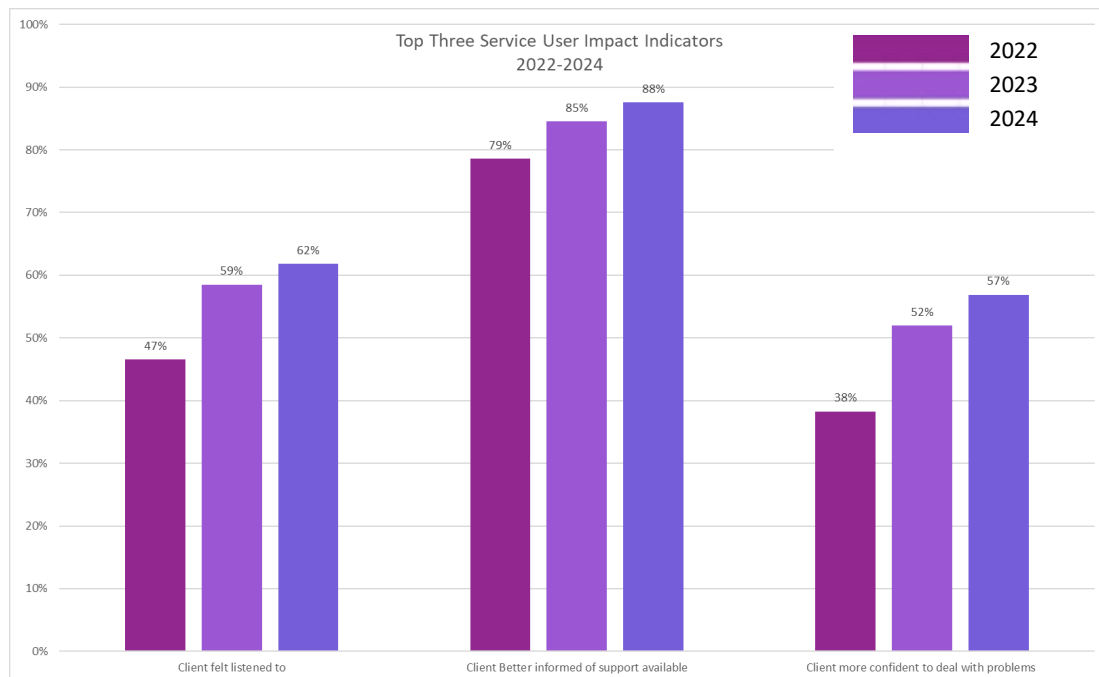
3. What the helpline achieved in 3 years

3.1 Women are better informed to deal with their issues

The Helpline supports women by not only providing them with essential information to make the best decisions for their safety and wellbeing but does so through a timely and culturally sensitive lens.

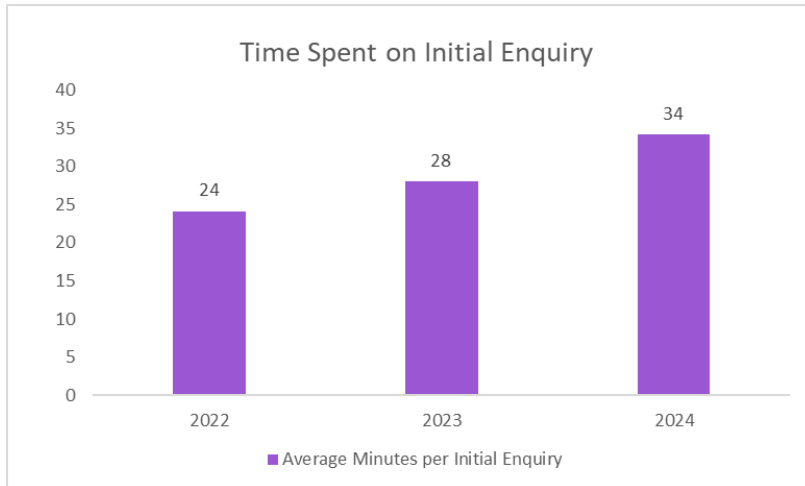
The helpline workers support women to understand and recognise their experiences (**62% of women feeling more listened to** by 2024). Listening to the women and building trust quickly is essential to ensure that the information and support offered is heard and it is the helpline workers ability to do this that enables the women to see an increase in awareness of their rights, clearly indicated by the outcome '**clients feeling better informed**' averaging **88%** over the three years. The helpline team have increased their efforts to engage with agencies over the years, and by 2024 **15% of clients were supported by other services due to the team's active referrals**. The team reflected that improvements into internal systems such as databases had made it easier for the helpline team to access referral agencies more easily.

Through the supportive and non-judgemental approach taken by the team, women feel more able to implement and put the skills and knowledge received into practise, as evidenced by **57% of clients being confident to deal with problem** by 2024. Longer term, these changes are likely to lead to improving the women's mental health and wellbeing as seen in the organisation's wider theory of change.



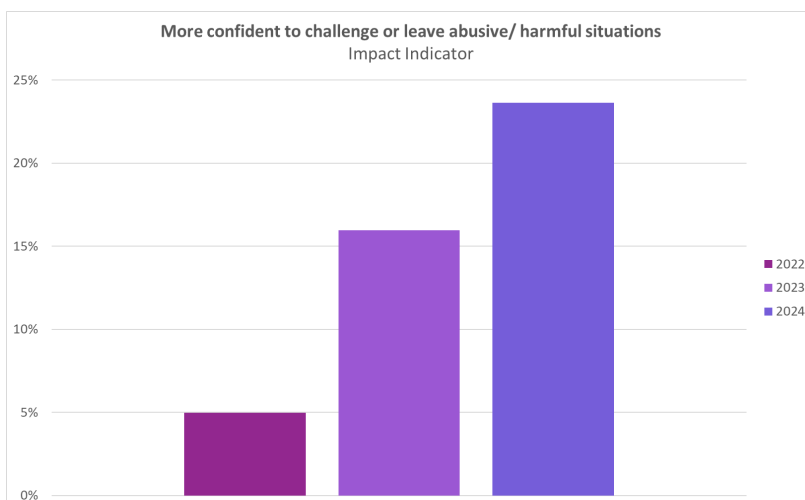
3.2 Women feel heard, less isolated and empowered

Over the three years of the evaluation, the helpline team have increased the proportion of time invested in the initial enquiry with the helpline user to build rapport and confidence and this correlates with earlier referenced improvements in disclosures, such as disability and insecure immigration status. The average time spent on the initial call was as follows: **24 mins (2022), 28 mins (2023) and 34 mins (2024).**



In addition, by increasing their capacity to listen and connect with the women, the team are also reducing the service users' feelings of isolation (**Isolation indicators was reduced for 9% of services users (year 1) and reduced for 42% in (year 3).**

Once trust has been established, the team adopts a solution-focused narrative and provides essential information regarding service users' rights. This approach supports individuals as they begin their journey toward empowerment. The emphasis on building knowledge is likely to have contributed to year-on-year increases in service user confidence in managing their situations (see graph below).



3.3 Women protected from harm

The helpline saw an increase in having to contact the police and social services to safeguard victims of abuse. There was police involvement in 21% of cases in 2022 which rose to 25% by 2024. Sometimes police were already involved prior to the victims contacting the helpline. However, in 2022 the helpline involved the police in 11% of these cases and by 2024 this had risen to 17% of the cases. Similarly, there was social service involvement in 11% of cases which had risen to 13% by 2024. Sometimes the social services were already involved prior to the victims contacting the helpline. In 2022 the helpline involved the social services in 23% of these cases and by 2024 this had risen to 32% of the cases.

Case Study:

A spouse from Pakistan was controlled and abused by their husband and his family and was not allowed out unless chaperoned. She was made to do all household chores, restricting her access to friends, money, and family (in Pakistan). When she had the baby efforts were made to throw her out of the family home whilst retaining the newborn child. We arranged for her to be rescued with her baby. She is now living in safe accommodation.

Direct Impact – Mother and baby from serious emotional and physical harm.

Indirect Impact – Early intervention is likely to have saved the NHS, police and CJS considerable time and money.

Between 2022 and 2024, the helpline supported women in securing both short-term and long-term safe housing, assisting 85 women—including those with children—into emergency accommodation. Recognising the elevated risk of suicide among domestic abuse survivors, the helpline's interventions over these three years helped prevent self-harm and suicide in 90 cases. Service users were also referred to counselling, with an average of 115 referrals made per year. Additionally, the helpline directly provided counselling to approximately 70 service users annually, offering 6–8 sessions each. This counselling service is evaluated separately.

To help safeguard women, MWNUK formally launched the Amal safety mobile phone app in 2024 dedicated to Fawziyah Javed who was murdered by her husband Kashif Anwar on 2nd September 2021, just two days before her birthday. He also took the life of their unborn baby. The Amal App contains a section dedicated to Fawziyah Javed, sharing her story and forms of abuse she endured. It is designed to support victims by helping them to identify various types of abuse, offering safety advice, enabling incident logging, and providing information on available support, including legal remedies. For women concerned about their communications being monitored, the app also allows contact with the Muslim Women's Network Helpline. During its pilot in 2024, the app engaged the helpline 8 times.



Interview with Helpline Manager

*“When women call, they initially only state that they have a single issue and only require one piece of information. But through **the team’s professional curiosity and skilled approach** in asking clarifying questions that we begin to **unpick the web of abuse** from start to end. Often, they might not see it as abuse because it's **normalised - because they're women**. From young girls they are told they need to do XY and Z, from birth to getting married. First, it's your father or your brother with **underlying misogynistic views** that **reinforced in the community and society**. You then marry and find yourself in a situation where these experiences continue and may subtly increase, but the woman’s perspective is that it is still the same. However, through our conversation we will explain that **abuse doesn’t have to be someone being physically violent towards you**. We have women that will share stories stating, **“It's like it's only one slap.”** But it's often then escalating to a point where they can't do or take any more. So, we experience those that come to us when they're already in that crisis mode, and others that don't realise they are experience forms of abuse. And it is our skilled helpline workers that are able to **plant the seed of recognition and providing clear reasons why it’s wrong**.*

*For example, we've had quite a few cases recently where the physical abuse isn't direct. It's indirect, so it maybe banging doors, threatening moves to throw chairs towards you, but doesn't hit you or by raising their hand but not hitting you. It is our experience from the past three years that this is the predecessor to physical harm. We’ve had women sharing that **“he threw banana skin at me”** and **then a week later he threw a suitcase at her**. Or he poured a packet of crisps over her head. And when directly asked about abuse their response is **“oh, no, he doesn't hit me.”** So, we [staff] have to then say what you're telling us is concerning.*

*We train our staff to be clear on what appears to be physical abuse and that just because it's not a slap, a kick, or a punch, it is still abuse. I don't think they even realise it or they do realise it, **but they needed somebody who looks like them, talks like them and has similar experiences to tell them the reality**. Religion can play a role in their belief. So, when you say **“you know what? Even in Islam it says a person shouldn't do this to you, and that you shouldn't suffer”** or make clear that legally in this country, this is an assault – seed begins to grow and develop.*

*Sometimes they've had children, and **they see it happening to their children**, particularly the daughters, and **that's when they realise, they need to do something**.*

*A woman in her 40s **disclosed that her son got suspended because he carried a knife to school** and that he was stabbed and that social services became involved. **She also shared that she was a victim of domestic abuse and recalled incidents when her children witnessed their father chasing her around the house with a knife**. **She began to understand the impact and normalisation that was occurring to her children because of the abuse**. **She wanted to break the cycle for her children but is facing multiple barriers**. It's not as simple as requesting a divorce, they need to understand that their experience is domestic abuse, **they need sanctuary for themselves and their young families, support with finances and help to navigate the world.**”*

3.5 Women provided with critical financial support

MWNUK is able to offer a limited number of hardship grants annually to the women they support for food, clothing, toiletries, household items and travel. Over the past three years, demand for these grants had nearly doubled. This aligns with data indicating that 16% of all callers reported being directly affected by the cost-of-living crisis. Additionally, the crisis has had a pronounced impact on women experiencing domestic abuse, with 41% identifying it as a significant concern. However, the rate of successful applications declined due to an increase in the number of applicants while the available budget had remained unchanged, leading to a reduced success rate.

Hardship Fund	2022	2023	2024
Average Hardship Fund Values	£149.00	£173.00	£252.00
Lowest Value	£50.00	£30.00	£40.00
Highest Value	£290.00	£430.00	£1,200.00
Women Applied	24	36	45
Women Successful	11	17	13
Success Rate	46%	47%	29%

Additionally, there had been a notable rise in applications from refugees and asylum seekers awaiting decisions on their status, as well as from women who have arrived on care worker visas.

In 2023 the highest grant provided was £430 this was for a transnational abandonment case that was being supported and this helped to pay for the women’s return flight back to the UK. However, as the cases needing hardship funds have grown, more donations are now needed to meet the

increased demand. For example, in 2024 the highest grant was £1200 for a similar transnational abandonment case, but this time the money was spent on returning both the woman and her children to the UK.

3.6 New IDVA role having a positive impact

An IDVA is an Independent Domestic Violence Advisors and provides intensive support to women in immediate risk of serious harm through Domestic Violence. In 2024 MWNUK, was able to implement a key recommendation from their 2021 evaluation by successfully obtaining additional funding to train one caseworker to become an IDVA. It is widely recognised that there is still a significant shortfall of IDVA coverage in England and Wales⁹. If more funding is available MWNUK would like to train another caseworker as an IDVA.

The team reflected that the increase of staff and introduction of the IDVA role has improved their ability and capacity to spend more time engaging with women, at a time when the demand for support has increased. The role has been culminating for nearly 7 years. The MWNUK IDVA was originally a volunteer who progressed to become a helpline worker then caseworker before being trained as an IDVA. The current IDVA also has a background in psychology.

The team reflected that the introduction of the IDVA in 2024 had helped to realign the time needed to manage additional calls by the helpline team.

9

[https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimservicesenglandandwales/november2020#:~:text=According%20to%20the%202019%20practitioner,with%202017%20\(Table%201\).](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimservicesenglandandwales/november2020#:~:text=According%20to%20the%202019%20practitioner,with%202017%20(Table%201).)

4. Contributing towards reducing Femicide

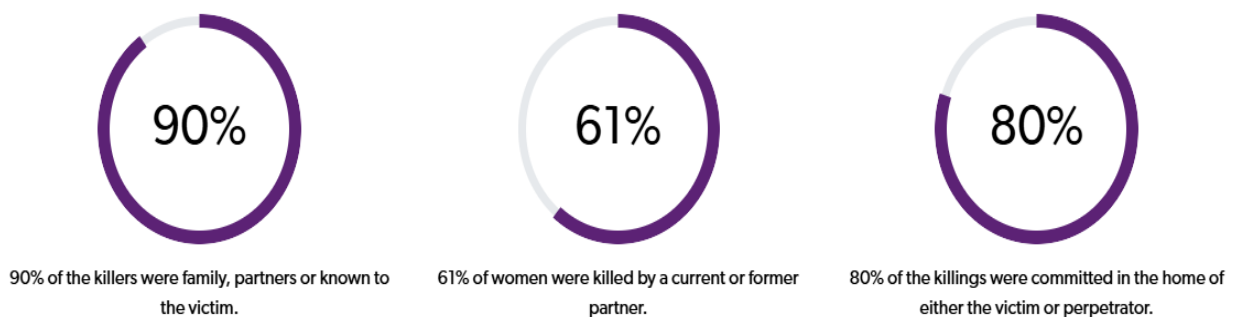
By empowering women to take action and deal with challenges confidently, it is likely that they are supporting the VAWG sector's work in reducing femicide. And, whilst it is difficult to assess the direct attribution to the reduction of femicide through MWNUK's helpline work, it is likely to play a key role in supporting and protecting Muslim women experiencing domestic abuse. The Helpline early interventions will also certainly be saving public service costs.

Government figures suggests that there is an estimated cost for a single victim of domestic abuse of £34,015¹⁰. With MWNUK supporting over 500 domestic abuse women per year they are making a significant contribution to society through their early intervention.

It is clear from the Femicide Consensus that most women are killed by family, partners or someone known to them and that the majority of killings were committed in the home, which very much reflects the demographics of those the helpline supports. More worryingly, the intersectionality of gender and race sees minority ethnic women being disproportionately affected, with **24% of domestic homicides happening to women of minority ethnic yet making up only 18% of the population**, an over representation of 33%¹¹. This has increased from 22% in 2022, causing a concern that this is increasing whilst funding to specialist services are too often underfunded.

Taken from <https://www.femicidecensus.org/>

One woman has been killed
every three days in the UK since 2009



¹⁰

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/918897/horr107.pdf

¹¹ Source: 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 - page 29 section 3.3.1

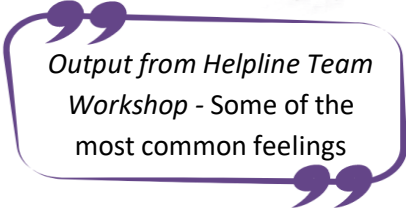
In addition to homicide, the threat of suicide is significantly increased in domestic abuse victims, which is also elevated for minority ethnic women¹². Whilst MWNUK is unable to completely attribute its helpline support to the direct reduction on suicide or femicide, it will be making a significant contribution to a community that is so often overlooked and underserved and highlighting the importance and vital services it provides. For example, as women who have experienced non-fatal strangulation are at more risk of a domestic homicide - this is now recorded as an indicator and helpline workers trained to inform victims about their increased risk of harm and that this type of abuse is also now a criminal offence.

¹² <https://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/report-reveals-scale-of-domestic-homicide-and-suicides-by-victims-of-domestic-abuse>

5. How the helpline achieves success

5.1 Skilled and culturally-aware helpline workers

At the heart of the helpline service are a group of trauma informed, supportive and culturally aware helpline workers. Through their tailored support they work with helpline service users to:



Output from Helpline Team Workshop - Some of the most common feelings

- a) Reduce harm** - The helpline team help to reduce the risk of harm to women by increasing their confidence to address problems by providing advice and information, empowering them to leave abusive situations through safety advice, and ensure continuous support through regular safety check-ins when needed. Their work includes actions like contacting the police or social services, relocating clients to safety, and making safeguarding referrals to MARAC to ensure women are protected and supported comprehensively.
- b) Improve wellbeing** - The helpline team enhance the wellbeing and decrease isolation of service users. The team ensures that each service user feels listened to and has someone to talk to while navigating their often multiple challenges. By offering support to improve local networks, conducting regular wellbeing checks, and providing counselling services, they help to mitigate the anxiety, depression, and ultimately the risks of self-harm and suicide. Their efforts help to create a stronger sense of community and empowerment for women who often face difficult circumstances.
- c) Improve knowledge** - The MWNUK helpline empower women by providing essential knowledge so that they can make informed decisions. They offer detailed information on legal rights, available legal remedies, and the options available to them, while also guiding women towards other helpful services that align with their needs.
- d) Represent them** - The MWNUK helpline also plays a vital role in advocating on behalf of service users by representing their voices to frontline professionals, such as police, social services, and legal representatives. Additionally, the helpline team provides interpreting services to ensure effective communication and supports women in filling out necessary forms. They further assist them by connecting them to essential resources, including foodbanks, to help meet their immediate needs.
- e) Decrease financial worries** - The MWNUK helpline team works diligently to alleviate the financial worries of women by assisting them to access public funds and hardship funds, providing budgeting advice or referrals to budgeting courses, and connecting them to debt helplines. They offer guidance on legal aid, victims' compensation schemes, and financial rights in divorce cases, helping women navigate complex financial situations. Additionally, the team supports repatriation for transnational abandonment cases, ensuring access to public funds, and aids women in finding jobs or voluntary work to improve their financial independence.

5.2 Training and capacity building staff

MWNUK Staff team are central to their success. Over the years we have developed a set of training both internal and external to provide their helpline workers with the information, skills and approaches they require to support the complex calls they navigate. External training included; Recognising and responding to economic abuse, Stress, vicarious trauma and managing wellbeing and handling suicidal conversations. See appendices for the extensive list of learning provided. Internal training provides skills around the systems used and capturing indicators as well as bespoke sessions exploring the cultural nuances of their service users, often applying the external training within an Islamic setting and languages. Examples of training provided is listed in the Appendix.

“Language can be tricky so getting familiar with words around intimacy is important when supporting women – and often there isn’t a specific word say in Urdu for it.”

5.3 Understanding language and communication needs

A critical aspect of the helpline is the ability to not only speak the right language but also have the ability to listen and draw out the hidden issues lurking in the background of conversation. Over the three years the number of women contacting the helpline, who do not speak English, has grown from 9% in 2022 to 13% in 2024, a more than 30% increase.

The Helpline team speaks six languages, including Bengali, Urdu, and Arabic. They also have access to a language translation service for additional languages when needed.

However, in reality women are unlikely to use a lot of the formal language used by the support sector when discussing abuse such as the term ‘economically abused’ so it is important for the helpline workers to be able to identify key comments and markers such as a women stating that she is ‘not allowed to go to college’ or ‘restricted to take employment or learning’.



6. External factors challenging helpline success

6.1 Helpline under recognised as a domestic abuse service despite impact

MWNUK operates the only national helpline dedicated to Muslim women and therefore plays a growing and significant role within the DA and VAWG sector – including using helpline data and case studies in its policy influencing work when engaging with the public sector including the government.

However, perhaps surprisingly, MWNUK is not widely recognised by some funders as a domestic abuse organisation. This may be due to the fact that MWNUK’s domestic / VAWG helpline is just one of its projects (despite it being the most prominent and major one taking up significant resources). From time to time MWNUK undertakes a range of other activities and projects. However, MWNUK’s national helpline service and its impact is comparable to other similar services in the minoritised women’s domestic abuse sector. It is important that funders therefore improve their understanding of the different types of organisations delivering domestic abuse services. In the current difficult funding environment, more women’s groups like MWNUK may have to adapt and take on additional projects to access funding.

Unlike many of its counterparts, MWNUK has to consider the sensitivity surrounding overtly naming itself as a domestic abuse organisation – it could become a barrier to reporting. The general name is likely to be providing comfort for those women engaging with the service given that discussing domestic abuse is still a taboo subject in some communities.

“Why do they ring us?”

Our specialist staff are skilled and know to consider why is this woman reaching out? Why does she need to ‘download’ or have these mental health feeling?”

6.2 Racism and Islamophobia

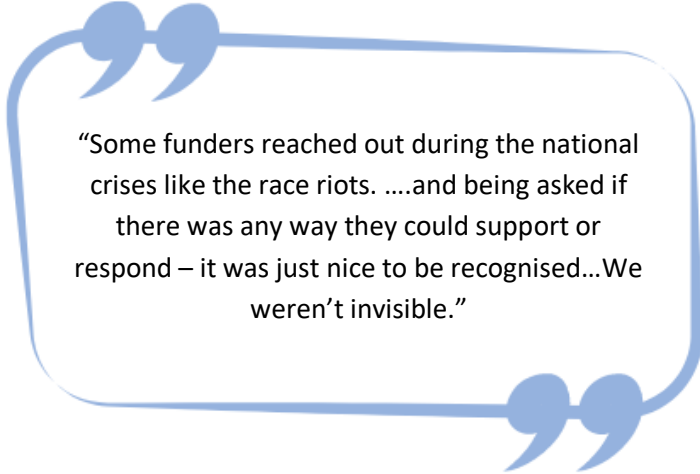
It is well documented that the effect of Islamophobia is disproportionate on Muslim women particularly the experience of hate crimes¹³. According to crime surveys South Asians report a higher level of hate crime than any other ethnicity in Britain, with Muslims and members of ‘other’ religions being most likely to experience hate crimes against persons and property.

During the three years of the evaluation the resurgence of right-wing political parties, their divisive narratives and several national incidents such as the War in Israel¹⁴ and 2024 Summer Race Riots has exacerbated the social and political climate in which MWNUK delivered its services.

This not only negatively affected the clients using the helpline¹⁵ but also resulted in the team having to deploy new processes to respond to the external factors including: removing the MWNUK logo from building to reduce targeting of abuse, removing staff profiles from their website as well as staff changing work habits to ensure safety e.g. call/text family members when walking to car after work.

In addition to these measures, the staff capacity was impacted by the need to respond to threatening emails, calls and social media and the police investigations that ensued, as well as the increase in threatening Hoax calls. This has also placed additional staff safeguarding and wellbeing needs, unlikely to be experienced by other helplines.

Whilst this was difficult some of the practises became custom and practise with the shutdown process still completed daily. There was a sense of sisterhood, pulling together and embedding skills e.g. recognising and assessing genuine vs. hoax calls.



“Some funders reached out during the national crises like the race riots.and being asked if there was any way they could support or respond – it was just nice to be recognised...We weren’t invisible.”

Service users have also reported experiencing racism and Islamophobia / discrimination due to their Muslim faith by public sector and public services. For example, being dismissed by police or feeling unsafe in refuges or other housing they had been placed in due to other anti-Muslim hostility or racism from other service users or neighbours.

¹³ https://www.enar-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/forgotten_women_report_united_kingdom_-_final.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2024/oct/04/record-amount-of-anti-muslim-abuse-reported-in-uk-since-7-october-attacks>

¹⁵ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/623880/islamophobic-hate-crimes-england-and-wales/>

6.3 Reduction in funding / cost of living

Whilst the recent economic downturn has affected all communities, research is showing that it is disproportionately affecting marginalised communities with over a third of people from minoritised backgrounds no longer affording bills, rent or mortgage compared to a quarter of people from white backgrounds leading to the potential need to increase debt and place additional stress and burden upon those households¹⁶. Other research by The National Zakat Foundation (NZF), has also seen a significant rise in the number of Muslim people applying for hardship relief funds.

The current cost of living challenges can play a role in exacerbating domestic abuse as economic abuse or control is seen as a key factor within in domestic abuse situations. The charity, Victim Support, have raised concerns that *“abusers may use the rising cost of living to tighten their control over you, or push you into further hardship or debt.”*¹⁷

In addition, the team have seen a reduction in support provision from other partners who have historically supported through form filling assistance. There is a perfect storm rising, where charities struggle with insufficient funding to adequately support service users, including the costs associated with intensive form filling assistance especially for those that struggle utilising technology or have language barriers.

¹⁶ <https://www.nafsiyat.org.uk/blog-and-news/health-inequalities-report>

¹⁷ <https://www.victimsupport.org.uk/crime-info/types-crime/domestic-abuse/domestic-abuse-and-the-rising-cost-of-living/#:~:text=Economic%20abuse%20or%20control%20is,into%20further%20hardship%20or%20debt.>

7. Recommendations and way forward

7.1 Investment in the use of digital technology

During the helpline team workshop the need for reinvestment into the hardware used to deliver the helpline service was a clear ask, as the system has regular glitches that make it slow, with one worker stating that they went to make a drink whilst waiting for the system to reset or work. Small charities often do not prioritize IT hardware investments as highly as other areas like frontline services or fundraising, however the impact on service delivery can be significant, especially if the systems fall over.

The Charity Digital Report 2024 raised that it “consistently sees a digital skills gap between large and small charities. 72% of small charities are struggling due to squeezed organisation finances and this, in turn, means they have very little capacity and headspace to engage with digital.” And that they hope that funders will consider how they can help¹⁸.

The team also requested IT transcription software to minimize manual notetaking from calls and voice messages. Consider reviewing current systems to ensure this feature isn't already available considering today's advanced AI capabilities.

As with all new technology this would need to be developed and piloted to ensure that it creates the right results for staff and service users e.g. improve listening for staff (not having to type and listen at the same time) and potentially reduce time to type up which could be allocated to the service user.

7.2 Trauma informed organisation that nurtures its team

Discussions with the team and helpline manager highlighted that the good working environment and relationships in place are essential to the success of the helpdesk. **A trauma-informed organisation** promotes a culture of empathy, understanding, and support, which can improve outcomes for women who have experienced trauma, as well as staff who work with them. It helps create a safer and more effective service delivery environment, fostering trust and collaboration while **reducing the risk of re-traumatization**. The person-centred approach actively considers the needs of individuals. To ensure this approach is considered and embedded by all staff and managers, it is advisable to implement a process within one-to-one and appraisal sessions where staff share how they have demonstrated their values in their work. Furthermore, **creating "about me" mini manuals** for each staff member allows for sharing strengths and challenges—this is particularly helpful given the increasing understanding of neurodiversity.

¹⁸ <https://charitydigitalskills.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Charity-Digital-Skills-Report-2024.pdf>

7.3 Team learning and development

The role of the Helpline Worker is central to successful service delivery. Over the three years it is evident from the evaluation that there have been inconsistencies in the inputting into monitoring and database and level of training received. This is particularly where internal training is delivered by helpline managers. Some ways that this could be mitigated include:

- a) **Creating a formal induction package** for all new starters but can also be used to provide refresher sessions. This could include the creation of a digital sandpit where staff, particularly new starters, can play with the helpline system. A digital sandbox is a secure, isolated environment where people can safely trial applications without impacting live systems or data. It's like a controlled playground where experimentation can occur without risking real-world damage.
- b) **Digitizing the learning** by creating an online training package. Packages such as [Scribeshow](#) can provide an inexpensive way to test whether this type of resource is effective, compared to the current face to face delivery. Adding multiple choice testing options as workers learn.
- c) **Developing a whole team Internal Verification process**, something which is often used within academic setting to ensure reliable and standardised approaches, as well as identifying areas for improvement. By holding quarterly review meetings with the team to clarify which indicators to use will support consistency in data. During the three years, data has shown a steady increase of 'unknown' location captured for clients from 14% to 20%. This maybe that MWNUK staff are not asking or recording this information at the time of conversation and regular reminders to staff may help. The team also reflected that **regular refreshers** on specific area such as divorce processes for both Islamic and civil requirements would also be helpful.
- d) **Accessing sector resources** such as the Routes to Support Directory which is an online system providing up to date information on violence against women and girls services. It aims to assist women and children facing violence against women and girls to find the right help by enabling front-line services to identify refuge spaces and other services that are available.

7.4 Team structures

As the team and organisation has grown, it is important to reflect on the structures in place to support staff, ensure day to day operations and more strategic operational discussions are had, along with good communication. MWNUK could consider the creation of a Senior Leadership team to ensure that more strategic operational conversations are undertake regularly. The creation of senior support worker roles would also provide additional support when the helpline manager is unavailable due to planned or unplanned leave.

7.5 Counsellors

Expanding the portfolio of helpline workers and counsellors has led to increased contact from Bangla-speaking women, necessitating the hiring of Bangla-speaking counsellors. Similarly, the addition of an Arabic-speaking helpline worker has resulted in growing enquiries for an Arabic-speaking counsellor.

There has been an increasing number of 'Revert' contacts (converts to Islam). In these situations, some women may feel isolated from their usual networks and communities and can also experience abuse from family members because of their choice to change their faith, turning to the helpline in these instances. Specialised knowledge and support are necessary to assist women on this journey, and an expert would ensure that the women receive culturally appropriate support.

7.6 Discussion with funders

While funders recognise that MWNUK is a 'by and for led' minoritised specialist organisation, there may be a lack of recognition about the importance of MWNUK in being a trusted service by Muslim women. The important role played by minoritised specialised faith organisations in the domestic abuse sector should be an issue raised with funders and the government.

Maintaining their connections with organisations for referrals but also wider networks such as [ImKaan](#) (VAWG) and [Womens' Aid](#) which will also ensure that MWNUK is connected and continues to influence the wider Domestic Abuse and Violence against Women and Girls sectors.

7.7 Consider helpline accreditation

Another tool that can help organisations with consistency of service is to enrol in accreditations. There are a number of bodies and organisations that offer quality assurance whether in helplines generally, women specifically and domestic abuse. MWNUK should continue to explore The Advice Quality Standard (AQS) which is a sector-owned, independently audited quality standard which is awarded to services delivering social welfare legal advice. However, there are alternative accreditations for helplines more broadly such as [Helplines.org](#) and their helpline standard.

Appendix - Training Provision 2022 – 24

1. Modern day slavery and human trafficking
2. GDPR awareness training for charities
3. Working with resistant families (Birmingham Children's Trust)
4. Trauma informed practice
5. Professional curiosity and challenge (Birmingham Children's Trust)
6. Recognising difference between DV and parental conflict (Birmingham Children's Trust)
7. Equality and diversity
8. Mental health first aid awareness
9. Recognising and responding to economic abuse
10. Stress, vicarious trauma and managing wellbeing
11. Handling suicidal conversations
12. Professional boundaries
13. Safeguarding children (SAFE CiC)
14. Safeguarding adults (SAFE CiC)

