

'What is 'Honour'?' Language Cafés & Barriers to Reporting Abuse for Diverse Communities Webinars August 2024-February 2025



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1 Introduction

The Sundial Centre for Education on Harmful Practices ('Sundial') is an Oxford-based charity dedicated to ending harmful practices and abuse suffered by girls and women living in the Midlands and the south of the UK. These include (but are not limited to) female genital mutilation (FGM), 'honour'-based abuse (HBA), early and forced marriage (EFM), female cosmetic genital surgery and online harm. Our mission is to end harmful practices affecting girls and women by:

- providing education for schools, communities and professionals
- offering technical expertise to frontline domestic abuse services
- supporting survivors with information
- empowering young people to champion initiatives against harmful practices through the arts
- conducting research with practical value.

During the period August 2024 to February 2025, Sundial facilitators, community partners and expert guest facilitators delivered five webinars and five discussion workshops. The webinars focused on exploring the barriers that women from minoritised groups encounter when trying to access services dealing with harmful practices, with the in-person sessions dealing with the question 'What is 'Honour'?' These two topics were felt to be inextricably linked. If communities and wider society cannot recognise where harmful practices and abuse are motivated by 'honour', crimes will not be identifiable and reported in the correct context. As we recognise that many people feel more comfortable discussing tricky topics in their first language, the 'honour' workshops were run in appropriate languages, with all but one of these being in-person to allow a richer exchange of information. We worked in partnership with community groups to deliver the 'language' session in Shona (online), Mandinka and Wolof, Swahili/English-speaking, Arabic and Tetum.

This report collates notes and findings from the discussions held and later reflections from facilitators. We have analysed these to document the range of barriers women from diverse groups can face in accessing services and the contexts and impacts that exist around 'honour'. This will help us better understand how to help women affected by these, supporting continuous improvement in our work and that of our partners.

We are grateful to partner organisations and guest facilitators. A full list of these is shown in section 2. This work was funded by **Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner; Thames Valley Community Fund**, and we thank them for their support.

2 The sessions

Across both sets of activities for this project, we successfully involved **158** individuals. The community group sessions engaged with **62** women¹, with the web cafés reaching **96** attendees. The in-person sessions for the ‘What is ‘Honour’?’ groups were generally 60-90 minutes long and facilitated by a community member (sometimes accompanied by a Sundial facilitator for backup with notes, etc). The web cafés were 60 minutes long, facilitated by Sundial staff and involved subject experts for discussion and Q&A.

Barriers to reporting: A new Web Cafe series!

Please join us at our upcoming Web Cafe series, discussing barriers to reporting crimes such as ‘honour’-based abuse and female genital mutilation.

Each cafe will include a panel of speakers who will share perspectives on reporting abuse and harmful practices. We will be hearing from survivors, communities, activists, services, counsellors, police and the CPS.

We are really grateful to Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner for funding this series, thank you.

So save the dates and join us!

Both types of session were structured around a set of pre-planned questions.² We were able to reach our audiences through social media adverts (examples of which are shown on the report cover and elsewhere in the following section), our existing community networks and the kind support of our guest facilitators.

2.1 Facilitation

All of our sessions are run by expert facilitators, wherever possible from affected communities. Webinars are designed and structured to ensure consistent and professional delivery. We work hard to create a safe environment during our sessions, emphasising the need for a non-judgmental space where everyone’s opinions are respected. There is no pressure to speak, and any input is recorded anonymously. Our safeguarding lead is on the call wherever practicable, and we share support service information at every session.

2.2 Feedback

To carry out the evaluation and collate the information shared, we drew on feedback from facilitators and comments from participants. For the online Zoom sessions, these were from notes taken by a Sundial team member during the session and/or in the Zoom ‘chat’ facility. We also record the first 30 minutes of all of these webinars, to collect the input from our professional guest speakers. With the in-person session we followed up with facilitators and where possible conducted a short, recorded Q&A with them on how the session had gone and the response of the attendees.



¹ This includes the community facilitators, who were members of the community group in attendance.

² See Annex I.

2.3 Language cafés – ‘What is ‘Honour’?’

Date	Language(s)	Community facilitator(s)	Attendee numbers
1/8/24 ³	Shona (primarily spoken in Zimbabwe, also Zambia and Botswana)	Jacqui Mukono: Project Salama	17
10/8/24	Mandinka and Wolof (The Gambia and Senegal)	Fatou Badjie: The Gambian Women’s Society	7
15/11/24	Swahili/English (with English used because of the diversity of the group, which included women from Uganda, East Timor and Kenya)	Jacqui Gitau; Millie Khisa: AFI-UK	12
14/2/25	Arabic	Rana Ibrahim: Iraqi Women Art & War	7
17/2/25	Tetum (East Timor)	Adelia Fernandes: East Timor Women and Children Community Group	13

Group discussions for the ‘language cafés’ covered a wide range of topics relating to honour and shame, including the place that the related words have in their cultures. Across several groups, it was noted that the word does not translate directly into English and had to be explained with examples or linked to concepts like respect. The Mandinka and Wolof group, for example, lacked a direct word for honour and needed contextual examples. Words such as ‘respect’ and ‘tarnish’ were suggested instead. In Tetum, women’s social status was linguistically tied to her ‘honour’, and the Shona group participants highlighted that “‘honour’ is upheld by women” showing the gendered and cultural framing. Over the groups as a whole, women’s purity, obedience, and family reputation, and preserving family name and respect, not just individual behaviour, were key themes. Other observations were:

- ‘Honour’ is closely tied to women’s behaviour, especially virginity and marriage: *"It's women that are expected to be virgins ... 'honour' mainly impacts women"* (Shona Group).
- Some pointed out that in their culture, men’s role as provider is also a matter of ‘honour’; migration challenges this role and causes tension: *"Back home they were the man of the house ... here they work in factories and feel lower than women"* (Swahili/English-speaking).

³ Online – all other community group sessions were in person.

- In Timor, 'honour' is embedded in marriage traditions and bride price negotiations: "*In order to increase the price it is very important that the bride is pure*" (Tetum Group).
- In Arabic-speaking communities, 'honour' is seen as central to cultural identity and policed especially by women: "*Women police each other, particularly older women*" (Arabic Group).

Within the discussions there were also explorations of the impact of **shame** as a part of maintaining 'honour', and there were similarities across groups on this subject, where shame was repeatedly connected to women's sexuality, divorce, and loss of family respect and/or not meeting family expectations. In particular, within some of the specific groups we noted that:

- Shame is heavily gendered; unmarried pregnancy or divorce brings shame to women (Shona).
- It is often expressed as "loss of respect" or "tarnishing the family name" (Mandinka and Wolof).

In Arabic contexts, shame is tied to failing family/community expectations and bringing disgrace, which is observed as being intensified in diaspora. Moreover, within the Swahili/English-speaking group, participants described men's shame at loss of authority when wives gain rights abroad.

We also obtained feedback from the facilitators on their personal impressions of what was said in the sessions. Some reported that they had heard things that were new to them. This included the issue of inter-ethnic marriage restrictions, which was new learning for some (Mandinka & Wolof) and the scale of abuse tied to immigration sponsorship systems was unexpected (Shona). Several were struck by the openness of participants and new information about cultural practices that was revealed and suggested that informal safe settings with food and use of local languages encouraged openness. Indeed (and as hoped), participants in some of the sessions stated that use of their own languages allowed them to express themselves more fully and share emotional experiences as a feeling of comfort was created. In the Mandinka and Wolof session, use of their own languages helped uncover hidden practices, because the vocabulary gave them access to things that were otherwise missed.

Across the discussions, the women identified a number of **barriers to seeking help**, which included some similarities across groups and with reiterated previous themes, for example language and immigration issues, and fear of shame within the community and in addition:

- Dependency on men limits women's freedom.

- Fear of community gossip and dishonour keeps problems hidden: "*Family will tell you to stay silent, they don't want the community gossiping*" (Swahili/English-speaking group).
- Women fear worsening abuse or community retaliation if they report: "*Speaking out might worsen the abuse*" (Arabic).

Sadly, many participants were **unaware of available services**, for example, only able to think of the police as last resort.

Across the groups there were several suggestions on how to support those dealing with 'honour' and shame, and to feel more **empowered**. These included:

- Safe discussion spaces for men, women, and couples.
- Education on rights and support systems for women and youth in accessible languages.
- Teaching boys to share household duties and respect women.
- Sharing helplines, legal contacts, and health visitor/GP routes.

They also shared ideas about where to **seek help and support**, which included information about legal support, helplines, and services and, for the Swahili/English-speaking group, the possibility of faith-based or community spaces as first points of help.



Mandinka & Wolof community group



East Timor Community Group

2.4 Barriers to services web cafés/webinars

Date	Topic	Facilitator(s)	Attendee numbers ⁴
9/10/2024	Barriers to reporting 'honour'-based abuse	Jaswant Narwal (Crown Prosecution Service) & Sam Colella (Outreach and Inclusion Worker)	25
16/10/24	Barriers to reporting sexual violence	Naseem Sarbatta-Walia (Survivor Space/Sundial); Katy Barrow – Grint (Thames Valley Police); Imran Manzoor (Breaking the Silence)	23
23/10/24	Barriers to reporting domestic abuse	Jacqui Mukono (Project Salama), Rachel Carter (Thames Valley Police); Vania Martins (Sundial Domestic Abuse Specialist)	25
6/11/24	Barriers to reporting community-based abuse in African communities	Fanuel Ncube (ISVA, with Hope After Harm); Eva Karanji (Utulivu) & Shama Cora (Utulivu)	17
13/11/24	Barriers to reporting FGM	Fatou Ceesay (FGM specialist); Imogen Mellor (Court of Protection and immigration practitioner); Tracey Taylor (Thames Valley Police)	6

All of these sessions were led by our own Tanya Vyas.

Given the specific **focus on barriers** to access covered by these webinars, our analysis specifically centred these. Carrying out an analysis across transcripts and 'chat' from the five sessions, it was notable that 'honour', shame and community pressure (fear of ostracism or bringing shame on the family/community) featured heavily, building on the discussions from the 'What is 'Honour'?' session. There were also many other recurring themes in the barriers to seeking help, including:

- Immigration insecurity and dependency (No Recourse to Public Funds, fear of deportation/visa loss) and threats about children being taken, often actively used by perpetrators to control victims.

⁴ Excluding Sundial Centre staff

- Distrust of authorities based on experiences in their country of origin (e.g., police corruption/militarised policing) and fear of racial profiling or being targeted; reluctance to approach police or social services.
- Pressure from religious leaders or community figures discouraging reporting to avoid 'shame' on the family.
- Language barriers and low awareness of UK law, rights and routes (e.g., protection orders, the role difference between police and CPS).
- Isolation and practical obstacles: limited safe housing/shelter, economic dependence, coercive control restricting movement/communication, and lack of transport/childcare.
- Worries about confidentiality—particularly when interpreters or professionals are from the same community.
- Stereotypes and gaps in cultural competence among services (e.g., assumptions that Black and Brown women are “strong” and can cope), reducing trust and help seeking.
- Overwhelm with complex systems (multiple workers/agencies) and fear that “nothing will happen” or the case will not be taken seriously.
- Not recognising abuse (e.g., children who may not understand).

Those encountering some types of abuse may also face some very specific barriers. For example:

FGM: a distinct culture of secrecy/taboo (sometimes framed as spiritual consequences), tight knit family networks, and low awareness of health/legal implications; tension around mandatory professional reporting (perceived loss of autonomy). These flow from the practice’s deeply embedded cultural framing and intergenerational transmission.

‘Honour’/community-based abuse: collective shame and multiple perpetrator dynamics (extended family/community enforcement), fear of repercussions for relatives, and in some African contexts additional beliefs (e.g., witchcraft) that can expand abuse to children. These are tied to communal identity, gender norms and social control.



Domestic abuse in migrant contexts: No recourse to public funds blocks access to refuge and support; perpetrators weaponising immigration/children; preference or need for female officers; confusion about how UK services work. These stem from immigration rules, economic precarity and service design.

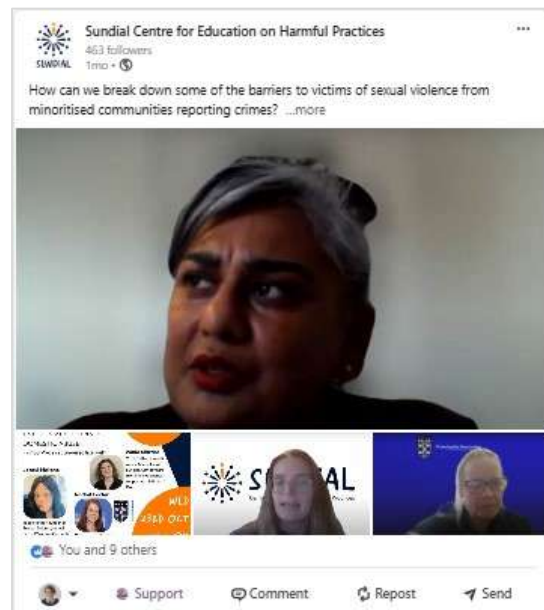
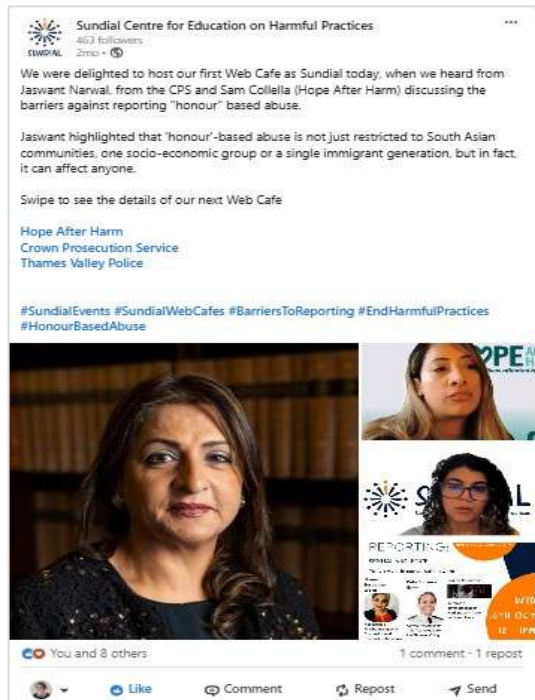
Diaspora context across all: pressure to be the “perfect migrant” under scrutiny and making disclosure feel like betraying the community. This particularly intensifies reporting barriers when abuse is framed as a ‘private’ cultural matter.

During discussions, our speakers and those participating were also able to identify what is in place (from the police / legal side) to help combat some of these barriers. These include:

- Safeguarding focus alongside prosecution—police emphasise listening to victims’ wishes and can act to prevent harm without insisting on criminal charges.
- FGM Protection Orders (wide, flexible conditions) and Forced Marriage Protection Orders; ability to apply quickly via family courts to prevent imminent harm.
- Mandatory reporting by regulated professionals when FGM appears to have been carried out (not for risk), which can surface hidden harm.
- Police single points of contact and specialist leads (e.g., for FGM), use of Language Line/interpreters, and multiagency working with social care, health and education.
- CPS/police training and national coordination on HBA/DA; emphasis on first responders spotting indicators and building better evidence. Civil protective orders beyond FM/FGM: non molestation, occupation orders, Domestic Violence Protection Orders (transitioning to new frameworks), restraining orders.
- Court special measures (e.g., screens/video links) and victim meetings to improve engagement and reduce intimidation.
- Community engagement by police in trusted spaces (e.g., community hubs, mosques/temples) to build familiarity and confidence.

In cases where crimes have been committed and prosecution is a possibility there are also potential challenges which can make it very difficult to achieve a conviction. These include:

- Victim withdrawal or desire for ‘space’; trauma, shame and community pressure can reduce engagement with a criminal case.
- Evidence hurdles for hidden, private and long running abuse; language issues; perpetrators exploit knowledge/power gaps.



- Delays in the Crown Court for serious cases (backlogs) can prolong uncertainty and increase attrition.
- Inconsistent early evidence is captured if first responders miss indicators; limited awareness among officers lowers case strength.
- Risk of re-traumatisation for victims navigating a legal process that may not align with their expectations of 'justice.'

Reporting is therefore not always best for the victim/survivor. Instead, a case-by-case assessment is recommended, especially as reporting can increase the risk of retaliation, ostracism or immigration consequences if safety and support are not in place. It was felt that for FGM there is also a strong 'prevention-versus-prosecution' tension. In these cases, civil routes can be more suitable. Also, criminal thresholds/evidence remain demanding. Police can therefore prioritise safeguarding and civil protection (e.g., FGMPO/FMPO/non-molestation order), aligning action with the victim's wishes and risk profile.

Advice on how to provide the best support includes:

- Be client-led: present options without pressure; check immediate safety; build a safety plan that factors family/community dynamics and immigration realities.
- Identify potential needs relating to mental health and trauma and seek culturally appropriate support where possible.
- Use independent, trauma-informed advocacy; secure interpreters who are not from the same close community; maintain confidentiality.
- Explain processes simply (police vs CPS roles; civil vs criminal routes; special measures) and offer to facilitate pre-court familiarisation visits.
- Document safely (logs, photos, messages) and discuss digital/security hygiene; agree safe contact times and channels.
- Address practical barriers early (welfare, housing/shelter capacity, childcare, transport); link to specialist 'by and for' services.
- If relevant, outline immigration safe pathways to support; counter common perpetrator myths (e.g., "you'll lose your children if you tell anyone").
- Provide information on Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) that allow reporting without going to a police station; victims can access medical/legal support without necessarily engaging police.

We can also take steps to make it easier for someone to report, if they wish to take this route.

These might include through:

- Proactive trust building: routine police presence and Q&As in community hubs, mosques/temples and refugee/asylum drop-ins; recruit a more representative workforce; sustained cultural competence training for all responders.
- Clear, multilingual information on rights and options (FGMPO/FMPO/DVPO, what happens after calling 999/101, anonymous routes).
- Named single points of contact and easy interpreter access; offering female officers/interviewers where preferred.
- Expanding safe accommodation and rapid refuge pathways, including for people with No Recourse to Public Funds via lawful mechanisms; coordinate with shelters to avoid leaving people street homeless after disclosure.
- Enabling third-party and anonymous intelligence pathways; allow staged reporting (initial safeguarding + later evidential statement when safe).

- Raising awareness among new immigrants about UK laws, rights, and services. Education for parents and communities about legal/health implications of harmful practices (e.g., FGM).
- Opening up conversations to normalise talking about abuse and support-seeking.

2.5 Learning and looking forward

These workshops have been very helpful in developing a more comprehensive understanding of both ‘honour’ in different community contexts and the broader barriers women face to asking for help and support. We know from feedback that they had a positive impact on attendees, opening up conversations with other women and providing learning points for them.

For Sundial, there has been practical learning on organising this type of programme. Work with community groups can be time-consuming, with long lead-in discussions, primarily due to the voluntary nature of most of these groups, many of which are run by and for women with family and other responsibilities. Sadly, this can sometimes curtail activities, for example, our planned sessions with a Kurdish women’s group were unable to proceed during the timescale of the project. However, the richly rewarding interactions and connections made are well worth continuing with this type of project. The sessions were generally well-attended, though there were fewer than expected for the Mandinka and Wolof group. This was thought to be an (understandable) reaction to ongoing unrest in the UK targeting migrants. For this group particular attention was paid to using a secure venue, which had double door locks. From a practical perspective, this aspect of working with community groups should remain a consideration on a case-by-case basis and be addressed by our internal risk assessment process. This also serves as a stark reminder that the community groups Sundial works with and for can be vulnerable for a number of reasons and need special attention with regards to safeguarding, etc.

Overall, the combined web cafes have provided a forum, in safe spaces, for women from diverse communities to discuss a subject that is generally taboo. Feedback from the women that participated was that they need more spaces like these to learn and support one another. The information we have been able to collect during the sessions has given us plenty of material to plan focused activities going forward. We thank the Office of the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner for funding this important work, and the women themselves for their time and willingness to speak out.

Annex I - Discussion topics & feedback questions for facilitators

Online web café/webinar discussion topics

1. What are some of the barriers that may prevent a victim reporting a crime of domestic abuse or violence/sexual violence or abuse/'honour'-based abuse/FGM/C/'honour'-based abuse in different communities? Or confiding in someone? Continuing the process?
2. Is there anything in place (from the police / legal side) to help combat some of these barriers?
3. What are some of the challenges when it comes to prosecuting these types of crimes?
4. Is reporting always the best thing for the victim? How can people who support victims advise them safely?
5. What steps can we take to make reporting easier for someone, should they want to take this route?

Supplementary questions, adapted for the individual sessions, included: In what ways is community-based abuse similar to 'honour'-based abuse in other communities, such as South Asian communities? And in what ways might it be different?

'Language' group discussion topics

1. What is 'honour'? What does 'honour' mean to you? What is your experience of 'honour'?
2. Whose 'honour' matters the most?
3. Who can cause the most damage to 'honour'?
4. Is 'honour' more important than life? Safety?
5. Where can we go for support if we, or someone we know, is experiencing abuse linked to 'honour'?

Feedback questions for facilitators

1. What were the key ideas that came out about 'honour'?
2. Was there anything new to you or any surprises in what people were saying?
3. What worked well with the questions and content of the discussion?
4. What was less helpful in bringing out ideas and thoughts from the participants?
5. Would you ask anything different if doing this again?

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner for supporting this project, and also to all of those who facilitated or took part and contributed to the discussions.

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