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Korkodeilou, J. (2014) Dealing with the unknown: Learning from stalking victims' experiences. Crime Prevention and Community Safety: An International Journal, 16 (4). pp. 253-268. ISSN 1460-3780

https://doi.org/10.1057/cpcs.2014.10

"**Dealing with the unknown: Learning from stalking victims' experiences**"

Abstract

Stalking was first criminalised in the United States in the early nineties and most recently two stalking offences were introduced in the UK to deal specifically with stalking behaviour, strengthen the prosecution of stalkers and improve the protection of victims.

However, despite growing policy and research attention in the last decade, the available knowledge and understanding regarding the nature, impact and needs of stalking and its victims are rather limited.

As such, this article aims to add to current knowledge by exploring the needs and suggestions of stalking victims based on the in-depth accounts of 26 self-defined victims/survivors of stalking who took part in a study examining the impact of stalking and the criminal justice system responses to victims.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that often stalking victims' voices are not heard, their complaints are dismissed, their emotional turmoil is not recognised, their needs for support and safety are not properly addressed and therefore while they may be statistically present in essence they remain 'invisible'.

Key words: stalking, victims, needs, changes, support

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1. Introduction

Stalking is an alarmingly common and pernicious crime affecting a significant number of individuals every year. Research studies show that 12% to 32% of women and 4% to 17% of men have been stalked in their lifetime (Weller et al., 2012). According to the Home Office almost 120,000 women are stalked every year and approximately 53,000 incidents of stalking are recorded as crimes in England and Wales (Church-Taylor, 2012).

Most stalking victimisation studies carried out in the United Kingdom, USA and Europe have shown that stalkers' persistent and unwanted pursuit can cause significant disruption to their targets' everyday lives and force them to a plethora of lifestyle changes ranging from changing their phone numbers and daily routines, reducing their social outings to relocating, changing their jobs and/or names (Pathé and Mullen, 1997; Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998; Sheridan et al., 2001; Purcell et al., 2002; Dressing et al., 2005; Melton, 2007; Baum et al., 2009).

Most importantly, it has been established that the incessant, prolonged and threatening nature of stalkers' acts and behaviours often deteriorates the victims' quality of life and can be increasingly traumatic giving rise to feelings of fear, anxiety, depression, suicidality, helplessness, distress, anger and distrust that in many cases last for many years after the pursuit has ceased (Pathé and Mullen, 1997; Brewster, 1998; Westrup et al., 1999; Sheridan, 2001; Sheridan et al., 2001; Davis et al., 2002; Dressing et al., 2005; Purcell et al., 2005; Melton, 2007; Cox and Speziale, 2009; Logan and Walker, 2010).

In parallel, victims of stalking often experience a gradual erosion of their personal, social and family relationships and support networks as a direct result of their pursuit

due to the prolonged and menacing nature of the stalkers' conduct but also because of the lack of understanding regarding stalking victimisation (Sheridan, 2001; Sheridan et al., 2001; Logan and Walker, 2009).

However, despite the prevalence of stalking victimisation in the general population and its widespread and long-term psycho-social effects on victims' lives, research studies[1] exploring victims' experiences and needs have found that in many cases victims' complaints and cases are either inappropriately dealt with or not dealt with at all by the criminal justice system, victim services and sometimes by significant others (Brewster, 1998; Finch, 2001; Sheridan et al., 2001; Galeazzi et al., 2009; Van der Aa and Groenen, 2011).

Specifically, Brewster (1998) conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 187 female stalking victims in the United States recruited through victim aid services and law enforcement agencies. Most victims reported that the response by the police was swift but mostly unsympathetic and stressed their needs for emotional support, "sense of security" and criminal justice system support (p. 9).

Also, Sheridan and her colleagues (2001) who surveyed 95 self-defined victims of prolonged stalking in the UK found that, whilst the quality of police responses varied, many victims were disappointed with the way the police dealt with their cases. They also felt that their complaints were often downplayed and not taken seriously by family and friends and that there was insufficient support for victims of stalking in general.

Similarly, one of the main issues emerging from Finch's (2001) interviews with 40 victims of stalking revealed the lack of appropriate treatment by the police. Also, Morris

[1] The inclusion of the studies covered in this article was based on their salience and relevance to the scope of the paper and the methodology of the study the findings resulted from.

et al. (2002) carried out the first study examining the prevalence, nature and impact of stalking in Scotland by surveying the general public and practitioners' views and interviewing 27 stalking victims. With regard to the way the police dealt with their cases, the main problems victims reported were that they had to recount their story to a different police officer every time a new incident took place, inaction and a tendency by the police to dismiss their cases as 'domestic'.

In addition, Galeazzi et al. (2009) who examined the different help-seeking routes taken by stalking victims and the criminal justice system responses to their cases in three European countries (Belgium, Italy and Slovenia) found that most victims did not feel supported by the police and other helping agencies (e.g. social services, GPS) mainly because their cases were not taken seriously.

In the same line, in Van der Aa and Groenen's (2011) study the Dutch stalking victims referred to the police officers' indifference and reluctance to consider stalking behaviour a serious criminal act and said that their experiences were trivialised and they were not taken seriously. In fact, many victims reported that they had been "disbelieved, insulted, laughed at or even blamed" for being stalked (Van der Aa and Groenen, 2011, p. 27). As a result, they stressed their need for appropriate treatment, information, safety and effective interventions for stalkers such as punishment and arrest.

Bearing in mind these findings and the fact that there is a dearth of qualitative research exploring stalking victimisation through victims' in-depth narratives this paper aims to add to the current knowledge and understanding regarding the needs of stalking victims drawing material from the findings of a doctoral study examining the impact of stalking as well as the criminal justice system and society's responses through stalking victims/survivors' experiences and accounts.

Specifically, the article will first briefly review how stalking has been defined and criminalised so far given the elusive nature of the crime and the ambiguities involved in its interpretation. It will then delineate the scope of the study, the methodology employed and main characteristics of its sample.

Next, it will discuss the needs of stalking victims as these emerged through the experiences and views of the study's participants in relation to the quality of help and responses they received by the criminal justice system, victim support agencies and society in general.

These needs will be then examined in the light of the recent addition of two new stalking offences to the current legislation. Finally, this paper will reflect on the changes required to render stalking victims visible and thus improve their protection, safety and support based on the participants' views and suggestions.

Before delving into the needs, views and suggestions of stalking victims it is important to give an overview of the different ways stalking has been defined because, as almost all victims' accounts attest, there seems to be a pervasive lack of awareness and understanding regarding what is stalking which in turn contributes to and perpetuates the often inadequate responses and lack of support by the criminal justice system, victim support agencies and the community in general.

1. What is stalking?

Stalking suffers from the lack of a globally accepted unanimous definition (Jagessar and Sheridan, 2004). The difficulty in defining stalking mainly rests on the fact that it is not one single act but it consists of a series of behaviours and activities that when seen in isolation may seem rather ordinary, harmless and not necessarily illegal in their own

right (e.g. sending Valentine's gifts and cards or appearing in the same places as the victim) (Sheridan, 2000; Sheridan et al., 2001).

3.1. Legal Definitions and Responses

The first attempt to define and criminalise stalking was made with California's introduction of an anti-stalking law in 1990 prompted by the shooting of a young actress, Rebecca Schaeffer, outside her house by her stalker in 1989 (Gallagher, 2002; Kinkade et al., 2005) and the subsequent murders of four women by their former partners who had previously stalked them in Orange County, California (Tjaden, 2009). This first anti-stalking statute defines stalking as a situation where "*a person wilfully, maliciously, and repeatedly follows or harasses another person and...makes a credible threat with the intent to place that person in reasonable fear for his or her safety or the safety of his or her immediate family*" (Gardner, 2000, p. 480).

From that legislative point stalking was rapidly criminalised in all USA states and the District of Columbia, Canada, Australia, Belgium[2], Germany, Austria, England and Wales and most recently in the Netherlands, Italy and Scotland with the latter introducing two specific anti-stalking offences[3] under the Criminal Justice and

[2] It is worth noting here that the European countries who have specific anti-stalking legislation refrain from using the word and concept of 'stalking' in their legal texts. For example, article 442 bis of the Belgian Penal Code defines stalking as "the disturbance of a person's peace and quiet" and uses the word 'belaging' (synonymous to 'harassing') instead of the term 'stalking'. Similarly, the Netherlands introduced the much debated concept of privacy by defining stalking as "the violation of a person's privacy" (De Fazio, 2009, p. 232).

[3] The prosecution of stalkers was undertaken by using the common law crime of breach of the peace and thus there was a lack of provisions dealing with stalking in Scotland (Middlemiss and Sharp, 2009). As such, two anti-stalking offences were introduced: a) the 'threatening and abusive behaviour' offence and b) the offence of stalking with the latter providing a list of examples of stalking behaviour (e.g. following, contacting, entering or loitering in the vicinity, interfering with property) and stressing that the list is not exhaustive (Middlemiss, 2010). In essence, Scottish law and the new anti-stalking offences in England and Wales share many similarities as they name and criminalise stalking, require a course of conduct and provide an indicative list of behaviours including cyber-stalking.

Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010 (Modena Group on Stalking, 2007; Middlemiss, 2010; De Fazio, 2011).

Specifically, England and Wales criminalised stalking by introducing the Protection from Harassment Act (PHA) in June 1997 following a series of high-profile cases, most notably that of Tracey Morgan who was relentlessly pursued by her stalker for ten years (R. v. Burstow) (Finch, 2001) and the inability of the then available legislation to protect all victims of this crime (Finch, 2002).

The Protection from Harassment Act does not name or define stalking; instead it criminalises it through its provisions (sections 2 & 4) stating that "*a person must not pursue a course of conduct that amounts to the harassment of another person which he knows or ought to know amounts to the harassment of the other*" and causes alarm, distress or fear of violence to the victim (Finch, 2001, p. 311). The emphasis here is on the repetition of the conduct (two or more incidents), that it is unwelcome and brings about adverse reactions in the victim (Finch, 2001).

3.2. Clinical/Academic Definitions

Stalking has also been defined as broadly as "persistent and unwanted attention" (Budd and Mattinson, 2000). It has been clinically framed as a "constellation of behaviours where one individuals inflicts on another repeated, unwanted intrusions and communications" where the intrusions are defined as following, loitering nearby, keeping surveillance or making approaches and communicating is made through letters, telephone, e-mails or notes (Pathé and Mullen, 1997, p. 12).

Most commonly stalking has been described through the prescription of specific behaviours such as watching, following, calling, sending threatening, abusive and/or

begging letters, trying to gain information about the victim from third parties like her/his friends and family, defaming the victim, damaging the victim's car and home and issuing direct and/or indirect threats (Sheridan et al., 2001).

Finally, another way used to define and understand stalking and the one adopted by the current study is through self-definitions which entails relying on self-identified victims' perceptions about what stalking is based on their experiences (see Emerson et al., 1998).

Employing this type of definitions allowed the researcher to realise that while there is a discernible pattern in most stalkers' behaviour, there is no such phenomenon as a 'classic stalking scenario' or 'typical' feelings which stalking induces as many victims in this study experienced not only fear but also confusion, despair, anger and frustration, especially when they were disbelieved and their cases were not properly dealt with.

2. Researching stalking victimisation

The main purpose of the current study was to learn more about, document and understand the nature and impact of stalking through the experiences and voices of individuals who have been subjected to this form of interpersonal violence. It also aims to examine the way the criminal justice system and society deal with and respond to stalking victims and their ordeal.

In order to gain an insight into the reality of being stalked, qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face and telephone interviews lasting from thirty minutes to three hours were conducted with 26 self-defined victims of stalking who were recruited through the National Stalking Helpline, victim support advocates and also through several local universities. All these organisations supported the research by placing

information about the study on their websites and/or allowing the circulation of e-mails asking potential respondents to contact the researcher.

Twenty-four (24) of the twenty-six victims interviewed were women and two were men. Twenty-one (21) of the twenty-four women were stalked by a man and three were stalked by another woman. The two male victims were stalked by women. The victims' age ranged from 19 to 58 years old and stalking lasted from four weeks to thirty years while in many cases the pursuit is still ongoing and/or intermittent.

As far as the prior relationship dynamics are concerned, fifteen (15) participants have been stalked by former husbands and partners, nine (9) by acquaintances such as friends, colleagues, neighbours and two (2) by strangers. Most of the participants were also cyber-stalked[4] in the course of their pursuit with one participant being primarily stalked on-line.

3. Findings: What stalking victims need

The following section will focus on the needs and suggestions of stalking victims as these emerged from the experiences and accounts of the current study's participants. Specifically, it will highlight their need to be taken seriously and provided with relevant and holistic support, the lack of understanding relating to the nature and impact of stalking, the need for stricter punishment and appropriate management of perpetrators by the criminal justice system and the need for a change of socio-cultural beliefs regarding this form of violence.

[4] Cyberstalking has been broadly defined as "the use of the internet, email, or other electronic communications devices (e.g. mobile phones, telephones, computers, recorders, e.t.c.) to stalk another person" (US Attorney General, 1999 cited in Spitzberg and Hoobler, 2002, p. 75).

3.1. Need to be taken seriously and believed

In many cases victims said that when they contacted the police[5] they were met with disbelief, their experiences were downplayed, their complaints were dismissed and they sometimes encountered disrespect and complete inaction. As a result, they often felt disappointed and that they were treated as a 'nuisance':

> "*Police were in fact unresponsive. It took a whole year to get them visit. By which time my new car was seriously damaged, and I was becoming more and more frightened*" (Participant 12)

Also, the main reason some victims did not contact the police was because they were convinced that the latter would not take them seriously.

Disturbingly many participants who resorted to other sources of help and support such as their family, friends, colleagues and the community also encountered disbelief regarding the extent or nature of their victimisation and a tendency to trivialise and downplay their experiences:

> "*[...] it's weird they (people) think such a thing would never happen [...] they just find it very unbelievable that someone would actually put so much effort and energy stalking three different girls [...] I don't think they realise the extent of this like even when I try to explain [...] they think I'm just saying stuff that don't really happen*" (Participant 24)

As such, most participants stressed their need to be taken seriously and believed regardless of the nature of their relationship with their stalkers, the co-occurrence or lack of physical violence and the absence of stereotypical characteristics in their cases

[5] Four participants explained that, although they recognised that they were stalked, they did not report it to the police mainly because they believed that they wouldn't be taken seriously and also because stalking ended using other informal ways (e.g. confronting the stalker, informal warnings) or for other unknown reasons.

(e.g. stranger stalkers perceived as more dangerous than partners or acquaintances and vice versa) (see Scott et al., 2010; Sheridan and Scott, 2010).

3.2. Need for understanding

Many victims reported that often the police and the courts did not recognise stalking and its different forms, did not realise its seriousness and most importantly they did not seem to understand the severity of its psycho-social effects on victims' lives.

Several participants also pointed out that often the police and the courts did not deal with their complaints and cases as a pattern of targeted communications and contacts but they rather treated them as isolated incidents, often focusing only on tangible harms such as physical violence.

The following extract by a woman who was stalked by her husband is indicative of this rather parochial approach:

> "*That's the response from the police because I said he sat outside the house, he is shouting through the letter box, I am here on my own [...] I am frightened [...] and he was shouting "I can get in if I want to. Don't think you can hide from me" this type of things and the police just said "Well he is not harming you, we can't intervene unless he harms you*" (Participant 10)

The lack of proper identification of stalking resulted in many cases being classified as domestic violence and thus being dealt with inadequately because, although stalking often overlaps and/or co-occurs with physical and sexual violence (Burgess et al., 1997; Logan and Cole, 2011), it is still a separate crime encompassing its own risks (Sheridan and Roberts, 2011) and thus should not be dealt with only as part of a domestic violence context (see also Van der Aa and Groenen, 2009).

Hence most victims highlighted the need for better understanding about the course and nature of stalking and its detrimental effects on their lives.

3.3. Need for support, information and protection

In several cases victims encountered the inability of the police and victim support agencies to provide adequate or sufficient information and support.

For example, one participant who was cyber-stalked talked about her frustration when she realised the ignorance of her police force regarding cyber-abuse and their inability to help her:

> *"I was extremely frustrated with the police forces who basically just couldn't help me at all, they didn't give me any information leaflets, they didn't say "Yes we have a cyber abuse police officer who will be your main form of contact", I didn't get any of that [...] advice was completely inappropriate uh completely irrelevant, didn't help me whatsoever*" (Participant 09)

Most stalking victims said they would like to be provided with specific, relevant and practical information and advice regarding their safety and protection from their stalkers.

Also, some victims stressed that they should be informed by the police and related services promptly and consistently about court proceedings and in cases where stalkers are sentenced to provide information about the stalker's whereabouts once the latter is released from prison or whilst under probation supervision, especially in cases involving high risks of violence and recidivism.

Beside physical protection some participants also talked about the need for emotional buttress: they suggested that emotional support and counselling should be offered not

only to the primary victim but also to other people close to the victim who may have been also targeted and affected by the stalker's campaign (e.g. family members, children) by a person specifically trained to deal with stalking and its emotional aftermath.

3.4. Need for stronger sentencing and appropriate assessment of stalkers

Many victims also pointed out that their pursuers were rarely charged with or imprisoned for stalking per se; instead, they were mostly prosecuted and convicted for stalking-related offences such as criminal damage, assault or for breaching their restraining orders showing a tendency by criminal justice professionals to tackle isolated incidents rather than a specific pattern.

As such, many participants stressed that both the police and courts should recognise the criminal nature of stalking, its inherent dangers and deleterious effects and therefore deal with perpetrators for their pursuit. In this sense a new stalking law was regarded as a helpful legal tool that could consolidate the prosecution of stalkers for their behaviours and improve the protection of victims.

In the same vein, many victims talked about the need for longer custodial sentences both for their protection and to enable stalkers to have the time to receive appropriate treatment whilst being detained.

In addition to this, some victims stressed that their stalkers should be psychiatrically assessed[6] and provided with treatment as a way to change their behaviour, reduce or

[6] Research studies have shown that stalkers often have mental health problems (e.g. a small number are diagnosed as psychotic) and many suffer from personality disorders such as borderline personality disorder that may underpin and/or partly explain their criminal behaviour (Farnham et al., 2000; Storey, 2009).

stop their pursuit. As a result, victims would feel safer and the perpetrators could be dealt with and monitored through appropriate programmes and interventions.

Many victims also referred to their need for effective protection through the consistent implementation and enforcement of restraining orders as well as stronger policing of stalkers.

3.5. Need for socio-cultural changes

Some participants also stressed the need for a wider change of social and cultural beliefs and attitudes regarding violence against women and intimate relationships as victims were often seen as responsible for being stalked because of their prior intimate relationship with their tormentors:

> "*I think well the courts had all viewed it as not been very serious and because I was involved with him before so sort of my fault*" (Participant 19)

The same participant added that it was the lack of physical violence that also affected the judges' perception of her case:

> "*and the things he were doing were not to me personally, they were to my house and my car um so therefore it was nothing, it wasn't serious*"

The need for recognising the seriousness of emotional harms was also pointed out by another participant:

> "*I think [...] certainly emotional and psychological harm in this country are just not issues [...] nobody cares unless somebody hurts your property or your person*" (Participant 17)

4. Legal Remedy

"Stalking is an abhorrent crime. It makes life a living hell for victims – breaking up relationships, forcing the victims to move house, making them feel they are being watched 24 hours a day. That is why we are explicitly criminalising stalking, to make sure that justice is done, protect the victims and show beyond doubt that stalking is a crime"

(David Cameron, 8 March 2012)

The debate about stalking law reform started in December 2011 when the Justice Unions Parliamentary Group held a joint Commons/Lords inquiry into the need for a review of the PHA[7] (1997) (Richards et al., 2012).

The main proposed amendments resulting from the inquiry were: a) the creation of a separate criminal offence of stalking, b) harsher sentencing powers including the mandatory counselling of stalkers who have been convicted, the limited use of any means of communications to prevent cyberstalking and giving power to the police to disclose stalkers' previous offending behaviour, c) the training of criminal justice system professionals about the nature and prevention of stalking, e) the establishment of a Victim's Advocacy Scheme and d) a wider awareness campaign within educational institutions and the general public (Lawson-Cruttenden, 2012).

Swiftly responding to these recommendations the government added two new offences to the PHA (1997): the offence of stalking and the offence of stalking "involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress" that were enacted in November 2012 (MacEwan, 2012, p. 768).

[7] Albeit a strong and flexible piece of legislation focusing on the impact of stalking on the victim rather than the perpetrator's intent, it has been shown that the PHA (1997) did not deal with stalkers and protect their victims effectively (see for a comprehensive analysis and evaluation of the Act Harris, 2000; Petch, 2002).

At a first glance this legislative step addresses most of the issues raised by the participants of this study.

In particular, it covers the need for legal reform and recognition of stalking as a serious crime through the creation of the two stalking offences[8].

In addition, the amendment regarding harsher sentencing powers addresses the need for a stronger sentencing approach and appropriate assessment of convicted stalkers as a way of preventing or stopping the resumption of their pursuit.

It also acknowledges the need for training and awareness among criminal justice system professionals and the general public in order to ameliorate understanding about stalking and the way they deal with stalking victims and their cases.

Most importantly, the recommendation for the establishment of a national Victim's Advocacy Scheme for victims of stalking is welcomed. This corroborates the lack of appropriate information and advice about this form of victimisation and addresses the need of many participants of this study for support in relation to the criminal justice system process, safety and protection.

All in all, the new legal policy and its components are an important step in tackling stalking by naming and explicitly criminalising it and taking a holistic approach towards perpetrators and the support offered to the so far ignored stalking victims.

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[8] The offence of stalking involving fear of violence (s.4A) requires that "*a stalker cause another person to fear on at least two occasions that violence will be used against that person or cause that person to suffer serious alarm or distress which has a substantial effect on that person's usual day-to-day activities*" (Leigh, 2013, pp. 119-120). The Home Office provides a list of examples of what may count as adverse effects including changes in the victim's travelling routines, social and job-related activities, moving home and physical or mental health impairment. The importance of this provision rests on the recognition of the life changes, debilitating disruptions and serious emotional harms stalkers can cause to their victims.

An important aspect of this legal recognition could be its potential to instigate and lead to a wider social awareness and understanding regarding the deviance and seriousness of stalking, bearing in mind that law can play an integral part in shaping "understandings of social reality" (Cotterrell, 1998, p. 182).

At the same time it could be argued that a new stalking law does not ensure consistent compliance to and implementation of legal provisions and rigorous enforcement of sentences.

It has also been commented that it is not the creation of a new law that would help stalking victims but the proper investigation and prosecution of their cases and better training of criminal justice system professionals regarding this crime and its effects (Church-Taylor, 2012).

Moreover, a new stalking law may not be suffice to dispel commonly held stereotypical assumptions about stalking victimisation since naming and criminalising stalking does not necessarily entail the change of the social attitudes and beliefs that often underpin and sustain the perpetration of this form of interpersonal violence.

In fact, this could be a challenge for any attempt to legally regulate stalking as the law challenges deep-seated beliefs and norms about what is considered acceptable behaviour both within intimate relationships and social interactions.

5. Discussion

The findings of the current study in relation to the needs of stalking victims lend empirical support to prior research stressing the need of victims to be taken seriously and affirm the inadequate and insufficient support victims of this crime often receive by

criminal justice system professionals, victim support agencies and sometimes significant others and the community.

Specifically, most victims expressed their disappointment with the way the police dealt with them and their cases and talked about their need to be taken seriously, believed and thus respected. This finding is in line with previous studies in the UK (Sheridan et al., 2001) and other European countries such as Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands (Galeazzi et al., 2009; Van der Aa and Groenen, 2011).

Taking stalking victims' concerns seriously would encourage more victims to come forward and report being stalked which in turn would allow early identification, timely intervention ensuring victims' safety and consequently reduce or prevent further episodes of abuse.

Most importantly, if the police dealt with stalking victims and their complaints seriously their stance could affect the community and general public's perceptions about the unacceptability of the behaviours involved and therefore improve their responses to victims.

An essential prerequisite of this kind of supportive attitudes and responses would be a sound and empirically-based knowledge and understanding about stalking perpetration and victimisation.

Indeed, most accounts in this study revealed that there is a lack of understanding and recognition regarding the nature of stalking and its effects both by the criminal justice system professionals and general public. This finding also corroborates prior work demonstrating that stalking is often seen as 'domestic violence' by the police and therefore dismissed and/or inappropriately dealt with (Morris et al., 2002).

In-depth understanding could be developed through continued and updated police and judges and magistrates' training about the trajectory of stalking, the appropriate use of relevant legal tools and the impact on victims.

Apart from criminal justice system professionals, many participants also talked about the need for a wider awareness and education about what constitutes stalking in the community and general public in order to enhance understanding about stalking, its effects and how to cope with it effectively.

Better understanding about the nature of stalking and its effects could possibly improve victims' safety within their communities by creating a protective network within which stalking survivors would not feel isolated and embarrassed both for being pursued and because of the lack of help and support.

In the same line, several participants referred to the unavailability of information and support specifically for stalking victims echoing prior findings relating to the lack of support regarding victims' safety and protection (Brewster, 1998; Sheridan et al., 2001; Van der Aa and Groenen, 2011).

Furthermore, the need for harsher punishment and assessment of stalkers by the criminal justice system was also mentioned. The careful assessment and treatment of stalkers is crucial given that many perpetrators are not deterred by restraining orders or civil injunctions that in some cases may even exacerbate their behaviour(s) (Finch, 2001; Logan and Walker, 2010).

Finally, some participants talked about the contributory role of a 'victim-blaming' culture and certain beliefs about violence against women and the seriousness of emotional harms to the perpetration of stalking. As such, they argued that there is a need

for a change of these beliefs for stalking victims to be taken seriously and properly dealt with. These views are important as they provide an insight into the causes of stalking and stress its socio-cultural dynamics.

Conclusion: Voices Heard

To sum up, the findings of the present study regarding the needs of stalking victims suggest that what victims mostly need is to be taken seriously by the criminal justice system and society in general, better understanding of the impact of stalkers' behaviour on their lives, practical information about their safety and protection, specialised support and stronger sentencing that reflects the seriousness of stalking.

Hence it is obvious that there is a need for a wider, continued and in-depth awareness and education about the nature of stalking within the criminal justice system, victim support agencies and the community to improve the responses victims receive in their help-seeking endeavours.

There is also a need for integrated responses to ensure early identification, risk assessment and intervention, consistent enforcement of protective measures and adequate information and support to ensure that stalking victims do not feel afraid, unsafe and invisible.

And indeed the new stalking law is an important legal change towards this direction as it makes stalking a separate crime and therefore may help stalking victims and their cases to be taken seriously and dealt with properly by the criminal justice system and society.

Further research will be necessary to assess the implementation and utility of the new legal measures in addressing victims' needs. Yet, the messages from other countries

such as Scotland are positive as the latest figures show that the rate of convictions for stalking has increased drastically since the enactment of the Criminal Justice and Licensing Act (2010) (Richards et al., 2012).

In addition to this, the new legislation is important because it emphasises the far reaching effects of stalking. This may urge other international jurisdictions that do not have anti-stalking laws recognise the seriousness of this crime and legislate against it.

Nevertheless, the criminalisation of stalking would not be effective enough if it did not co-occur with a gradual change of certain social and cultural beliefs with regard to violence against women, intimate relationships and the seriousness of emotional harm that seem to undermine the safety and hinder the provision of adequate protection and support to stalking victims/survivors.

Therefore, despite recent policy interest in UK, there is still a long way to go and a need for further research in order to understand stalking victimisation and dispel socio-cultural assumptions that often facilitate it.

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Biography

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