“He hits me and that’s just how it is here”: Responding to domestic abuse in rural communities

Abstract

Few criminological studies have specifically set out to research responses to domestic abuse in rural communities. A small number of recent studies have arrived at the problem from a health and/or social geography perspective lending weight to the increasingly apparent significance of space and culture in rural domestic abuse. This paper contributes to this research agenda, focussing on the ways in which police and other agencies respond to domestic abuse within the spatial context of rural England and victim-survivors experiences of such responses. The paper outlines empirical work with a police partner based in the North of England. The study involved a case file analysis of police data and interviews with police officers, partner agency representatives and victim-survivors. We discuss the ways in which apparent heightened gendered conservatism and the ‘cloak of silence’ leads to difficulties in the identification of domestic abuse in rural communities and argue the importance of engaging in holistic and multi-agency approaches when responding to domestic abuse in remote and inaccessible rural communities.

Key messages

Drawing on empirical work with a police partner in the North of England this article:

- identifies important characteristics of domestic abuse in rural communities;
- explores how rural living produces barriers for victim-survivors in accessing support, and complexities for police and other agencies in providing adequate safeguarding;
- discusses how gendered conservatism, a ‘cloak of silence’, attitudinal issues and the cultural fabric of rural life leads to difficulties in the identification of domestic abuse in rural communities and can exacerbate experiences of such

abuse all giving permission for domestic abuse to routinely occur in such communities.

Introduction

Much existing research on domestic abuse has largely focussed on urban areas, however this has increasingly helped to generate specific interest in the rural (Dekeseredy et al, 2007; Little, 2017; Sandberg, 2013). This work identifies important characteristics of intimate partner abuse in rural communities, drawing attention to the problems of effectively delivering services to support people living with violence (Wendt, 2009). This emergent research agenda, recognises the significance of space and culture in rural domestic abuse (Little, 2017). Springer (2011:90) argues that "violence sits in places" and challenges neoliberal arguments that associate violence with "particular people and cultures". Similarly Pain (2015) suggests that existing work by geographers on the spatiality of violence has concentrated on violence in the form of war and terrorism, with an absence of attention to intimate partner abuse. Furthermore, Owen and Carrington (2015: 1) have noted the importance of the 'architecture of rural life' in recognizing the prevalence of domestic abuse in rural areas.

Different kinds of rurality can converge with individual circumstances as well as local histories and geographies (Little, 2017). Policing in these areas may also be impacted by resourcing, with densely populated towns and cities receiving heightened attention from specialist teams (Leigh et al, 2019). Current work focuses on experiences of domestic abuse in rural communities in jurisdictions such as Australia (Owen and Carrington, 2015) and the US (Dekeseredy et al, 2007). Less is known about the geographical context of England and Wales. This paper contributes to this research agenda, focussing on the ways in which police and other agencies respond to

domestic abuse within the spatial context of rural England and victim-survivors experiences of such responses. The article outlines empirical work with a police partner based in the North of England. In doing so, this paper is separated into six subsequent parts. The first two sections contextualise the study on which this paper is based, outlining the difficulties in defining rurality and the existing domestic abuse and rurality literature. The third introduces our study and the fourth outlines the ways in which rurality produces barriers for victim-survivors in accessing support, and complexities for the police and other agencies in providing adequate safeguarding. Next, we outline the ways in which gendered conservatism and the 'cloak of silence' leads to difficulty in the identification of domestic abuse in rural communities. The final section reflects on the barriers to effective response and engagement leading into our conclusions where we reinforce the importance of engaging in holistic and multi-agency approaches when responding to domestic abuse in rural communities.

Defining rurality

During the past 30 years there have been significant shifts towards seeing domestic abuse as a social and public problem in many jurisdictions, including the UK, and the gendered nature of domestic abuse has long been known (see for example Stark, 2007; Hester, 2013). Improved understandings of the gendered dynamics of intimate partner abuse has led to an increased emphasis on the ways in which minoritized identities, such as ethnicity and disability, can exacerbate such experiences (Sokoloff & Duppont, 2005; Nixon, 2009). There is also a growing body of work which explores the influence of place or space on experiences of domestic abuse, particularly rurality.

Although space has long been recognised as a central issue in understanding experiences of violence in disciplines such as geography (Pain, 2015; Little, 2017), other disciplines have been slower to appreciate this. A shared issue across this work is difficulties in defining rurality. No single or standard definition of rural areas captures all the key features. In the UK, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) adopt a definition of rural areas using the 'rural urban classification'. This classification defines areas as rural if they fall outside of settlements with more than 10,000 resident population. The 'Rural Urban Local Authority Classification' categorises districts and unitary authorities on a six-point scale, based on the share of the resident population that resides in rural areas (Gov.uk, 2021). It is widely acknowledged that much of the UK is neither deep country nor urban as, characteristically, rural areas merge seamlessly into towns, and their economies and social structures are closely interlinked. Conversely, the concept of 'remoteness' is sometimes used to distinguish remote from accessible rural districts. In 2000, the Cabinet Office, following an earlier Rural White Paper Report, concluded that 'rurality is a difficult concept' (HCSC 1996), recognising the lack of homogeneity within areas broadly defined as rural:

> Rural areas do not all share the same characteristics: some are prosperous, others are not; and some have better access to services, facilities and higher levels of employment than others' (Cabinet Office 2000: 4).

For this study, rural areas exist on a continuum of remoteness and accessibility. This captures the social-spatial and 'relational' (see below) dimensions of rural living.

According to Hogg (2016), rurality is a mix of geographic, demographic and economic elements which are contrasted to the characteristics of cities, in that it is also a state of mind. For Hogg (2016), rurality is not only physical but ideological, representing

imagined cultural values and attributes as well as demographic characteristics. Campbell's ideas (2016) are inspiring here. She encourages criminology to 'take a turn to relationality in spatial analysis ' (Campbell 2016:82) and is spurred by the notion of dwelling as a topological space of *being with* and *acting in* the world. In sum, criminology has paid insufficient attention to notions of space and place (Davies and Rowe, 2020). When spatial dimensions have informed research and practice these have predominantly been on public and urban domains. In relation to domestic abuse, the notion of the 'rural idyll', the romanticised myth that rural places are free of crime, pervades dominant perceptions of rural life. This is a fallacy that should be confronted (Harris and Woodlock, 2019).

Domestic abuse and rurality

Understanding the prevalence of domestic abuse in rural communities is difficult. With 80% of victims not contacting the police about their experiences (ONS, 2019) police recorded cases of domestic abuse are unreliable. Under-reporting to police is particularly profound in rural communities (Harris and Woodlock, 2019). Drawing on findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales -which provides some quantitative data on the characteristics of domestic abuse - the Office for National Statistics does not publish details on location other than in terms of inside/outside the home (see ONS, 2019). Beyond these national data there is some discussion of the comparative rates of domestic abuse in urban and rural areas and of levels of domestic abuse in rural parts of the UK being under-estimated (see McCarry and Williamson, 2009). The National Rural Crime Network (NCRN) conducted research across seven police force areas in England noting an endemic data bias against rural communities where rural victims are half as likely as urban victims to report their abuse. The report lists ten key findings including abuse lasting, on average, 25% longer in the most rural areas, with a higher risk of harm the more rural the setting (NCRN

2019). A study of intimate partner homicide rates over a 20-year period (1980 to 1999) in the United States revealed heightened rates of intimate partner homicide in rural areas where homicides occurred at rates of 8.3 per 100, 000 compared to 2.0 per 100, 000 in metropolitan areas (Gallup-Black, 2005). Though prevalence of domestic abuse in rural communities is unknown, research points towards a significant problem in terms of nature, extent, seriousness and lived-experience.

Much research to date related to rurality and domestic abuse focuses on the specific aspects of rural life that exacerbate experiences of abuse. Sandberg (2013) argues that rural women should be included in intersectional studies of violence against women. She suggests that rurality imposes particular vulnerabilities to women, including distance between residences and a lack of access to support services (including police or health care). Accessibility is a reoccurring theme in the literature. Research in the US and Australia highlights that access to resources for perpetrators and victims that might reduce rates of domestic abuse, such as substance abuse treatment and transportation, have been found to be more limited in rural areas than in urban areas (Websdale, 1998). However, transferring research findings from one jurisdiction (USA/ Australia) to another (England) is problematic in this context, as rurality is differently understood.

Rurality also exacerbates certain abusive techniques often used by perpetrators, such as isolation and surveillance, which can co-occur with methods of physical control (Stansfield and Williams, 2021). Drawing on Foucaldian ideas, Bowstead (2011) explores self-surveillance and the ways in which fear is spatialized through such surveillance. Domestic abuse is used to restrict the victim- survivor’s freedom of movement in rural spaces. Harris and Woodlock (2019) also explore the ways in which surveillance is extended in rural communities by what they term digital coercive control. They suggest that the spaceless feature and ever-present nature of

technology, and associated practices of surveillance, leads to a sense of the perpetrators omnipresence in women's lives. This is often compounded in rural communities where any opportunities of 'escape' are limited by mobility and accessibility issues.

Several studies find that attitudes may be more tolerant towards domestic abuse in rural communities, particularly those that stem from patriarchal ideology or those supportive of traditional gender roles. For instance, Eastman and colleagues (2007) found victim blaming to be more common in rural areas. Those living in small communities in particular are more visible to support systems and perpetrators, impinging on the victim-survivors sense of privacy and often resulting in stigmatisation when help seeking (DeKeseredy and Scwartz 2009). Little (2017) also suggests that a 'cloak of silence' prevents the identification of rural domestic abuse in areas where a strong sense of community and collective consensus often override the safety of the victim-survivor.

Policing and responding to domestic abuse in this cultural context and landscape is no doubt complex. Domestic abuse is a key priority for all police forces in England and Wales (HMRC, 2015). Yet police responses to domestic abuse face persistent critical scrutiny, in particular issues related to attitudinal problems (i.e. domestic abuse not being taken seriously by police officers), barriers with multi agency working (including inconsistent information sharing), flawed risk assessment practices and the need for improvements in training (HMIC 2015; Myhill and Hohl, 2016; Barlow et al, 2020; Barlow & Walklate, 2021). However, less work to date has explored police and other agency responses to domestic abuse in rural communities and the geographical and cultural barriers that are faced, particularly in the context of England and Wales. The small body of work which does exist has mostly been conducted in Australia (Owen and Carrington, 2015) and the US (DeKeseredy et al, 2007), with studies emerging

from Sweden (Nylen and Nygren, 2019; Strand and Storey, 2019). Most of the work exploring agency responses to date is comparative, exploring similarities and differences between rural and urban police responses. Less work focusses on the barriers impeding effective responses in the rural context in and of itself. Damningly however, findings published in 2019 by the NCRN suggest the rural policing response is largely inadequate and support services are scarce – less available, less visible and less effective.

Methodology

Our contribution draws on the qualitative analysis of an N8 Policing Research Partnership funded study, conducted with the support of a policing partner in the North of England. The force area comprises four divisions, two of which are identified by the force as incorporating a rural geography. The study involved a qualitative analysis of case studies, obtained from the partner police force information management system (IMS) and interviews with police officers, partner agencies and victim-survivors of domestic abuse. Ethical approval was granted by Lancaster University Faculty of Social Sciences Ethics Committee prior to data collection.

The case study analysis aimed to explore police responses to domestic abuse in context, identifying the various agencies that victim-survivors came into contact with and how these cases were managed. Sixteen cases were analysed in total. The selection of the case studies involved two stages. Stage one involved identifying all domestic abuse cases that had occurred in the two rural divisions of the force area from January-July 2019 (a 6 month period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). To narrow the focus, we identified what the force termed ‘repeat repeat’ victims within this sample (i.e. victims who had come into contact with the force on at least five occasions within the previous 12 months), of which there were 32 in total. This

allowed us to gain a more in-depth understanding of police responses to particular victims rather than isolated incidents and cases. From this, we randomly selected the 16 of these cases to analyse in depth. This involved accessing police data and case files using the police IMS. We analysed the nature and context of the crime report and police responses and examined previous or subsequent occurrences connected to the suspect and victim recorded on the system. Extensive files were attached to each case, including victim and witness statements, police statements and notes, case logs and records of communication between agencies.

Twenty semi-structured interviews with police officers and representatives from other partner agencies (including specialist domestic abuse services and adult and child social care) were conducted, which focussed on unpicking responses to domestic abuse in the specified areas, particularly reflecting on barriers to help-seeking and complexities which impacted effective responses. The interview schedule consisted of six 'prompt' questions to encourage open discussion. Recruitment for these interviews involved an email sent to the whole force and partner agencies, followed by the option of an informal discussion with the researchers for those who sought further information. Members of staff who wanted to take part contacted the researchers directly via email. A police force contact facilitated the organisation of these interviews. We conducted 13 interviews with police officers of varying role and rank (four men and nine women) and seven interviews with representatives from partner agencies (six women and one man). Most partner agency representatives worked at specialised domestic abuse services (five in total). In this paper, each participant has been allocated an individual, anonymous code. PO: Police officer, PA: partner agency representative, VS: Victim-survivor

Finally, six interviews with victim- survivors of domestic abuse were conducted, all of which were women. Local domestic abuse charities supported the research team with

the recruitment of participants. This was to ensure that the women were provided with appropriate support and, if required, counselling after the interviews had taken place. The interviews focused attention on these women's experiences of police and partner agency responses, with a particular emphasis on the influence of rurality.

The case study and interview data were coded and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify overarching themes in the data. To enhance inter-rater reliability, two researchers performed this analytic stage where themes were independently identified within the data and then compared and discussed to reach a thematic consensus. Themes were then identified across the interviews and case file analysis. In what follows, we discuss our findings according to two key themes that relate to rurality, namely 'the barrier of inaccessibility' and 'gendered conservativism and the cloak of silence'. The former relates to the rural 'space' and landscape impeding effective responses, whereas the latter relates to the ideological, patriarchal culture that often characterises rural life. Both the case study and interview data will be drawn upon throughout both sections as appropriate.

Space: The barrier of inaccessibility

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the key barrier which impeded effective responses to domestic abuse identified by police in particular, but which was also reflected on by partner agencies and victim-survivors, was (in)accessibility. This barrier was understood as a product of the rural landscape and geography. A key aspect of this was the sheer geographic distance in the two policing divisions which formed part of this study, meaning that it often took long periods of time for the police and other agencies to provide support to victim-survivors. The time taken to get to

victim-survivors who were particularly isolated and living in rural areas was reflected on by many police officers in the interviews. This is captured by the following quotes:

> I think the distance plays a big part. Some immediate response jobs you can be driving as fast as you can with blue lights and it still takes nearly 40 minutes to get there. If someone is in a lot of trouble then that's a big difference to a 5 minute whizz through town (PO2).

> Rural areas around here are just enormous. So it doesn't matter where you are, it can be so difficult to get to people in good time. It's sometimes difficult as well because are we going to go knocking on someone's door ages after they called if we don't know if the perpetrator is back again? (PO5)

These quotes highlight that the vast remote spaces which police officers often have to travel to get to a victim-survivor means that a quick response, even in an emergency situation, is not always practically possible. Remoteness and inaccessibility are recognised as barriers for effective responses in vast geographic landscapes such as Australia and the US (DeKeseredy et al, 2007). However, despite the smaller geography of the UK, police officers suggested that these issues were also evident in the partner force area. This was particularly exacerbated by a lack of localised policing, with some remote rural villages and farming communities being many miles away from the nearest local police station or health care support. With this in mind, one solution that was offered by police officers was the possibility of setting up smaller, localised police stations in particularly remote areas. Similar sentiments were shared by partner agencies, with the suggestion of establishing 'one stop hubs' in remote areas to encourage wider help-seeking for women experiencing abuse. This is exemplified by the following quote:

> I think if in these little communities if there was a hub, for example, for women to go and for it to be a bit of a one stop shop. This could be massive, somewhere for victims to go to. If it were discrete, I think it could really work. (PA3)

This kind of approach could be highly effective in raising awareness and increasing the accessibility of the support available to victim-survivors of domestic abuse. However, the latter point raised in this quote regarding discreetness is key, due to the visibility of victim-survivor help-seeking in rural communities and a lack of privacy. Participants who raised this as a suggestion also recognised the associated resourcing and financial implications with this approach, with one police officer stating “to have smaller stations open, we need more staff, which means more money” (PO2). Engaging in effective rural policing requires considerable financial investment, an issue we return to later.

Resourcing problems are exacerbated by rural geography. This was particularly evident in the case study analysis. In six of the case studies there were significant delays in the police arriving to the victim, which often led to victim disengagement. In one case, a victim-survivor contacted the police to report extensive physical violence by her ex-partner when her children were present. However, the police were unable to attend for a long period of time due to staff shortages (the woman called the police at 3.30pm immediately after the assault and the police did not arrive until 10.30pm). Another case study example involved adult and child safeguarding teams contacting the police regarding a woman who had been severely assaulted by her partner in front of one of her children. However, the police did not attend the victim for over eight hours. There was correspondence on the log which highlighted that the social work team had not been informed as to when the police would attend the scene, and they were very frustrated by this. The social worker was also not kept updated once

investigations began and had to chase for updates on the case on numerous occasions. Again, police officers noted on the log that a lack of officers 'on the ground' keeping up to date with this case had caused these delayed communications. This highlights that slow response is not only exacerbated by rurality, but also due to broader resourcing issues. Staff shortages and associated resourcing issues need to be situated within the broader national context of austerity and budget cuts affecting policing at local levels (Davies, 2018).

Victim-survivors also raised accessibility issues in relation to engagement with services and help-seeking. The women suggested that their remote location made them feel isolated and unsure of how to ask for help. Similar concerns have previously been identified (See for example Bowstead, 2011; DeKeseredy &Schwartz, 2009). Perpetrators also often used this isolation to further their 'web' of abuse (Stark, 2007). For example "he isolated me a lot, he moved me away from family and friends" (VS3) and "my house was literally in the middle of nowhere, so I was completely isolated" (VS4). This isolation also meant that the women were often unaware of the support that was available to help them. This is captured by the following quotes:

> I didn't really know what was out there in terms of support, and it was difficult for me to get into town as I was so isolated (VS1)

> I think services and agencies are few and far between unless you know about them, it's very hard to use them. Lack of transport is an issue as well (VS6)

This highlights that - similar to police officers and partner agencies - victim/survivors themselves acknowledged that greater awareness raising of the support available in rural communities and ensuring a wider access to this support is fundamental in ensuring that victim/ survivors are effectively supported. These issues are particularly

compounded when situated within the context of the conservative, traditional culture that commonly pervades rural communities.

Culture: Gendered conservativism and the 'cloak of silence'

Feminist research has identified concerns with conservative and traditional attitudes pervading rural life, particularly in farming communities, with gendered power relations and expectations of gendered behaviour influencing experiences of domestic abuse (see, for example, Bryant and Graham 2015; Pini, Mayes, and Boyer 2013). None of our interview prompts were leading in this respect and thus it is worth stressing how commonplace it was that such "old fashioned" and patriarchal beliefs featured in the reflections of all victim-survivors interviewed:

> The man goes to work and the woman stays at home. You don't get a divorce, you fight through it and I still think that there's a bit of stigma around things like people getting divorced. It's all really traditional views (VS4)

> Here, it is very much the view of he hits me and that's just how it is. There are very clear ideas of how men and women should behave, it's so old fashioned. But you just have to accept it (VS5)

These examples provide rich and thick descriptive testimony about the experience of rural women. Gendered assumptions, such as women should stay at home, be a dutiful wife and adhere to their husbands wishes, plays a significant role in the normalisation of domestic abuse in rural communities. Carrington and Scott (2008) argue that such patriarchal expectations exacerbate what they term 'rural masculinity', whereby men's violence is not just done to others, but forms a key part of their identity, reflecting an important power over rurality rather than a mode of behaviour within rural

relations. This rural masculinity is furthered by many aspects of rural life, such as the male dominated nature of key industries like farming (Pini et al, 2013). Rural masculinity thus limits women's help-seeking capabilities and understandings of what constitutes domestic abuse, leading to internalised beliefs of "that's just how it is here" (VS4).

A key aspect of the conservative, traditional culture present in many British rural communities is the normalisation of domestic abuse. Pain (2015) suggests that domestic abuse is 'everywhere' in rural communities, with intergenerational violence being a particular issue (i.e. domestic abuse being experienced and perpetrated within multiple generations of the same family). Although we recognise that police officers may not consider abuse that existed in other relationships in the victim-survivors family unless they were also abusing the victim, there was a general lack of awareness that this issue existed in our study. When we specifically prompted police officers about intergenerational violence, all but one did not perceive this as an issue. For example:

> Intergenerational violence isn't an issue really. We just deal with all domestic abuse the same as any other job (PO13)

This lack of understanding of the 'everywhereness' (Pain, 2015) and 'everydayness' of domestic abuse (Stanko, 1990) was also evident in the way police officers responded to repeat victimization in the case studies. For example, in one case the victim-survivor had contacted the police 14 times about her ex-partner over a two year period. There was extensive abuse evident and her ex-partner had a restraining order forbidding him from visiting her house. On the police IMS, adult social care staff had noted that numerous members of her extended family had been in violent relationships (including her mother and father) and she had been in intimate relationships with other violent

partners in the past. Nowhere on the IMS is there evidence that officers understood this as a pattern of abusive behaviour, such as coercive control, with officers viewing each incident in isolation. There was also limited evidence of the victim-survivor being directed to other services (for example, she did not appear to have been supported by an IDVA). This suggests that for this particular woman, a lack of understanding of issues such as coercive control and intergenerational violence meant that she received a disjointed response from police and other agencies over at least a two year period. Similar issues are

The findings reported above highlight the ways in which police officers typically respond to jobs in isolation, rather than understanding the ways in which coercive control and the patriarchal, conservative *culture* of rural life may influence experiences of domestic abuse in rural communities. This is perhaps unsurprising, given broader issues with police understandings of coercive control and the gendered nature of such abuse (Authors own). Furthermore, one senior officer suggested the reluctance of police to accept the normalised nature of domestic abuse, stems from their being part of this culture:

> It seems to be acceptable, you go out, get drunk and beat your wife up. I'm not saying all cops think that, but that's kind what they've been brought up with, yer know, that's kinda what happens (PO11)

Traditional, gendered attitudes pervade all aspects of rural life. Police officers are part of that rural reality potentially playing a role in this normalisation of abuse in rural communities. For example, Dekseredy and Schwartz (2009) found that rural men rely on their friends and often police officers to maintain the patriarchal status quo. This has implications for the ways in which some police officers identify domestic abuse when responding to cases, which is particularly pertinent for coercive control and

patterned abusive behaviour which may not always be 'visible' (Barlow et al, 2020). Our findings suggest this is a compounded problem concerning poor understanding of the seriousness of cumulated repeat incidents and the gender patterning to domestic abuse. Furthermore limited access to real-time data about victim histories, particularly as officers do not have remote access to data, can exacerbate poor understanding and inadequate responses in such cases. Police officers limited understandings of the gendered, rural culture and issues such as intergenerational abuse stand in stark contrast to the interviews with domestic abuse specialists and partner agencies, who recognised the normalisation of domestic abuse as a significant issue:

> You learn about their families and it just runs through generations of women's lives, their grandparents, then parents. It's just part of life. And no-one thinks to question it, because all of this is ingrained in expectations of what women do and what men do (PA2)

> Norms and culture are very ingrained, it passes through some families for generations. Something I have noticed is a feeling of 'well that's what happens' 'that's what our relationship is' 'he hits me that's just how it is' and again this won't just be rural communities but it does seem more prevalent here (PA1).

It can be life saving for victims to receive support from agencies who have a broader understanding of the ways in which rural culture itself exacerbates experiences of domestic abuse and limits capacity for help-seeking. The lack of shared understanding gives rise to other rural-cultural nexus barriers to responding effectively to domestic abuse. One of these is the likely under-reporting and under-recording/counting of domestic abuse in rural areas which may be more highly under-estimated in rural than in urban areas (McCarry and Williamson 2009; NCRN 2019). A second problem associated with the poor understanding of the seriousness of repeat calls and incidents of domestic abuse is the likelihood that coercive and

controlling behaviour is not spotted and captured as compelling evidence in support of CPS prosecution decisions. This issue is arguably not unique to a rural context, with police responses to a course of conduct constituting coercive control being identified as problematic more broadly (authors own). There appear to be similar problems in operationalising the provisions of the Stalking Protection Act 2019 (Taylor-Dunn 2021), the legislation for both offences being designed in the same way - i.e. a course of conduct and emotional impact on the victim. As a minimum, police officers should engage in further training on such issues, however the extent to which training alone would be sufficient to address deep routed attitudinal issues are questionable, and will be discussed further later in the paper.

This normalisation of domestic abuse influences victim-survivors engagement with support services. A hesitancy to engage with services was raised by all of the women we interviewed. Reasons for this ranged from not knowing what help was available, “I just didn’t know what support was out there” (VS1), to not wanting to be the focus of community gossip. The latter was a particular concern for fear of the perpetrator finding out that they were seeking help:

> I never wanted to say anything, as I didn’t want it getting back to him (perpetrator) that I had been talking to people in the village or anyone (VS5)

Police were sensitive to this with one stating “if you’re in a small community, do you want to start upsetting people by ringing the police because everyone's going to know it's you that's done it?” (PO6). In those rural areas where there is a strong sense of community and limited privacy, victim-survivors are often worried about making their experiences of domestic abuse public. Such concerns apply also to reporting to services (Little, 2017). Carrington (2007) suggests that lower reporting of gendered crimes in rural areas is a function of stronger means of social control. Furthermore, rural living can sometimes offer greater opportunities for surveillance by the

perpetrator, with close-knit communities seeing victim-survivors being monitored by extended family members and neighbours (Little, 2017; Bowstead, 2011). These issues collectively highlight that the patriarchal culture and gendered assumptions which infiltrates the fabrics of rural life lead to the normalisation of domestic abuse and limits women's capacity to seek and access help or support. The latter points lead us to further consider police, victim-survivor and partner agency findings about barriers to effective responses and engagement.

Barriers to Effective Responses and Criminal Justice Engagement

In spite of myths that there are greater demands for policing in urban rather than rural areas, rurality imposes many additional barriers to effective responses and help-seeking. These are both spatial (i.e. limited accessibility, remoteness and isolation) and cultural (normalisation of abuse, gendered assumptions and community cohesion). The 'cloak of silence' that forms part of the architecture of rural life (Owen and Carrington, 2014; Sandberg, 2013) hinders women's capacity for help seeking and limits the ability of police and other agencies in providing effective responses. The spatial-cultural-relational complex compounds the experience of domestic abuse.

For the police officers we interviewed, the emphasis was unsurprisingly based on the practical barriers they faced as part of their role in responding to domestic abuse. This included resourcing issues influenced by budget cuts and delays in getting to victim-survivors in good time. These issues were also evident in the case study analysis. Police officers also reflected on issues with victim-survivor engagement with criminal justice agencies. A key suggestion to overcome this was to establish localised police stations in particularly remote communities to increase the police presence and victim-survivor accessibility of services. However, it is not spatial (in)accessibility alone that prevents victim-survivor engagement with the police and other agencies. Interviews with partner agencies and victim- survivors themselves

suggests that it is the culture of rural life and associated patriarchal expectations that are the most significant barrier for help-seeking. Concern about gossip, the perpetrator finding out, a strong community consensus and a lack of privacy were particular barriers for accessing criminal justice support for women experiencing domestic abuse. Localised police stations would unlikely resolve these issues. The location of these rural stations may too present accessibility issues, as they would likely have limited operating hours and variable staffing. Furthermore, local officers who would work in these stations would likely know perpetrators of domestic abuse or even be perpetrators themselves. Although this is arguably an issue in any local police station, the 'culture of silence' previously discussed and the proximity of the rural setting would make this a pertinent issue. Partner agencies also suggested the creation of one stop 'hubs' in rural communities, which would be led by specialised domestic abuse services and provide various forms of support for women. The specialised nature of such hubs would mean that professionals would likely have greater understandings of the sensitivities and safety implications for women who access such support, meaning they would be better placed in delivering this kind of service. This approach would be particularly beneficial for women who do not want to engage with the police or pursue a prosecution. This has implications for minoritized women, such as black and minority ethnic, migrant and indigenous women, who for many and varied reasons have limited trust in the police (Sokoloff and Dupont, 2008; Blagg, 2008).

For victim-survivors and partner agencies, the most significant barrier to effective responses and engagement with agencies were cultural, in particular the gendered patriarchal attitudes and normalisation of domestic abuse that often characterise rural life. Even though there was some awareness of these issues by some police officers, particularly the senior officers interviewed, there was a general lack of awareness of the ways in which this 'cloak of silence' limits women's capacity and confidence to

access help or support. This was perhaps most evident by police officers lack of understanding of issues such as intergenerational violence and the influence of gender on patterned abuse, such as coercive control. These barriers have particular implications for minoritized women, where for them it is not only gendered assumptions that pervade their experiences of British rural life, but also the ethnically cleansed picture, whereby some minoritized identities are denied or excluded (Pugh, 2003). There is also the related concerns that police officers themselves are part of this cultural issue, whereby 'rural masculinity' is furthered by problematic police attitudes towards domestic abuse and a lack of awareness of the extended harms it causes, which has particular implications for coercive control and forms of abuse which are not always visible. More training and education is often the go-to response as a way of dealing with such attitudinal issues within the police. However, the extent to which training and supervision alone can solve underlying attitudinal problems is questionable, particularly given the persistent minimization of intimate partner abuse in police work (Loftus, 2009). Training will provide 'guidance' to police officers in understanding procedure (Waddington, 2012), but it is unlikely to impact on either their understanding of the broader social context and/ or the attitudinal issues, both of which are key in recognising how the cultural fabric of rural life can exacerbate experiences of such abuse.

Conclusion

Despite the varied and complex issues related to rurality and domestic abuse outlined in this paper, a recent cross-government Rural Proofing Report (DEFRA, 2021) did not mention domestic abuse at all. The paper promised that the Government will "deliver effective rural services by meeting additional delivery costs and overcoming

accessibility challenges" and develop a new "community services formula to better recognise the specific needs of rural areas". However, there was minimal discussion of the role of policing in this context, with one short paragraph in the 50 page report on 'rural policing' consisting of four sentences, none of which mention policing domestic abuse. This suggests a continued lack of understanding at a national policy level of the role that rurality can play in exacerbating domestic abuse and limiting victim-survivors capacity for help-seeking.

In sum, our reflections collectively highlight that the police and criminal justice system alone cannot impact on the nature and extent of domestic abuse. This is relevant in all contexts, but for the purposes of this paper, is particularly significant for women seeking support in rural communities. The victim-survivors interviewed for this study greatly appreciated the work of partner agencies, particularly domestic abuse services, highlighting the continued need for specialised services.

The criminalisation thesis (Goodmark, 2018) continues to rapidly expand across the globe, with the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) emphasising criminal justice responses and expansion of the law as the best way to tackle violence against women. However, despite the increased expansion of domestic abuse laws and criminal justice policy in recent years, two women a week are still murdered by a current of former partner in England and Wales,

suggesting that criminalisation alone is not an adequate safeguard. Furthermore, this emphasis on criminalisation has particular implications for women living in rural communities who do not wish to report their experiences of abuse to the police for the many and varied reasons outlined in this paper. Effective support in rural communities should focus on localised, holistic, multi-agency approaches which are victim-survivor centred. This should be community driven and routed in understandings of the normalisation of domestic abuse in rural contexts and the ways in which gendered,

conservative attitudes give permission for domestic abuse to routinely occur in such communities.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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