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The Help-Seeking Experiences of Domestic Abuse Survivors in England: Insights from the Research Phase of an Experience-Based Co-Design Study

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Abstract

Experience-based co-design emphasizes understanding service-users' experiences to inform service improvement, yet little research has explored domestic abuse survivors' perspectives within this framework. This study examined survivors' accounts of their interactions with the police and organizations that support domestic abuse survivors. We aimed to identify aspects of practice experienced as either helpful or in need of improvement. Semi-structured interviews with six survivors in one area of England were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Survivors described obstructive and supportive responses from formal services. Four interrelated themes were developed: The Importance of Being Understood, Believed, and Cared For; It Is Important That There Is Good Communication Between the Survivor and Formal Services; Survivors Want a Victim-Centered, Rapid, and Meaningful Response; and Specific Circumstances Sometimes Influence Opportunities for Help-Seeking. Survivors described being dismissed and disbelieved, which contributed to negative help-seeking experiences and heightened feelings of vulnerability. In contrast, empathic and timely responses validated survivors' experiences and supported their sense of safety. The findings highlighted the importance of practice that recognizes the different forms abuse can take, provides timely, victim-centered support, and responds equitably to survivors in diverse circumstances. This study demonstrates the valuable insights gained through applying an experience-based co-design approach in this setting.

Keywords: domestic abuse; intimate partner violence; help-seeking; survivor experiences; response; victim-centered practice; experience-based co-design (EBCD); formal support services; reflexive thematic analysis; service improvement

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1. Introduction

Despite decades of policy attention, domestic abuse continues to affect millions of adults in the United Kingdom each year. Data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales indicate that approximately 3.8 million people (7.8%) aged 16 years and over experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2025. This included an estimated 2.2 million females (9.1%) and 1.5 million males (6.5%) who experienced domestic abuse in the previous year (Office for National Statistics 2025). Domestic abuse has significant and wide-ranging consequences for survivors' physical and mental health (Laskey et al. 2019). Higher levels of mental health difficulties have been found to be related to the amount of violence survivors

experience, regardless of gender (Próspero 2007). Domestic abuse therefore represents a serious and enduring threat to survivors' health and wellbeing, underscoring the need to understand how survivors seek and receive support and how their experiences can inform improvements to the services they rely on.

Domestic abuse encompasses a wide range of behaviors that extend far beyond physical violence. Coercive and controlling behaviors are key components of these patterns. Controlling behavior refers to actions intended to make a person dependent and/or subordinate, for example by removing sources of support, limiting opportunities for escape or independence, regulating everyday activities, and exploiting the survivor's resources. Coercive behavior involves actions or patterns of threats, intimidation, humiliation, assault, or other abuse used to frighten, harm, or punish the survivor (Home Office 2013). Stark's (2007) conceptualization of coercive control illustrates how perpetrators may micro-regulate daily life, particularly in relation to stereotypically gendered roles and responsibilities. Although Stark highlights its gendered dynamics, research also shows that men may experience coercive control from female partners (Bates 2020). These dynamics underscore the complexity of domestic abuse and its diverse manifestations.

Research identifies a wide range of barriers that shape whether, when, and how survivors seek support. Among women from ethnic minority backgrounds in the United Kingdom, barriers include immigration-related concerns, difficulties with language and interpretation, unsupportive or stereotypical attitudes from professionals, and community pressure to remain in the relationship (Femi-Ajao et al. 2020). Similarly, White and ethnic minority women may blame themselves, fear repercussions, harbor concerns that seeking help from formal services will result in their children being taken into care or fail to recognize their experiences as abusive (Evans and Feder 2016). Some survivors also hope that the perpetrator will change or may interpret controlling behavior as a sign of love (Pocock et al. 2020).

A recent systematic review shows that male survivors experience a range of barriers to help-seeking, including fear of being disbelieved or falsely accused, fear of repercussions from the partner, and uncertainty about available services (Huntley et al. 2019). More recent evidence from call-handlers in a UK domestic abuse agency indicates that men may also fear losing their children, be unsure where to seek further help, and struggle to afford leaving the relationship (Hine et al. 2020). Despite these obstacles, male survivors may be motivated to seek help when they hope the police can stop the abuse and when children are involved (Drijber et al. 2013). However, research also suggests that men often do not seek help until the situation reaches a crisis point (Huntley et al. 2019). Thus, while men are less likely to be subjected to domestic abuse, these distinctive aspects of their experiences indicate that it is important to involve them in research about help seeking, service development, and policy formation.

Among formal agencies, the police play a particularly significant role as primary gatekeepers to the criminal justice system. Yet survivors do not always receive effective support. Many live with abuse for years before obtaining meaningful help, and survivors frequently contact the police multiple times before receiving effective intervention (SafeLives 2015). Research shows that survivors in the United Kingdom value police responses in which officers treat them with respect, listen to their accounts, show concern, demonstrate understanding, take the situation seriously, and speak to them separately from the perpetrator (Robinson and Stroshine 2005). By contrast, when the police do not appear to recognize the seriousness or pattern of coercive control, survivors can feel more vulnerable and fearful, and their confidence in the criminal justice system may decline. Such experiences can also make them less likely to seek help again (Wydall and Zerk 2020). Understanding which aspects of service responses survivors experience as helpful or harmful is particu-

larly important given that many seek help at moments when abuse is escalating in either frequency, severity, or both (SafeLives 2015). To understand why survivors' disclosures are responded to differently, and how these responses shape ongoing help-seeking, it is necessary to draw on theoretical frameworks that attend to both survivors' interpretations and institutional reactions.

Two theoretical frameworks inform this study. This study draws on the help-seeking framework proposed by Liang et al. (2005), which outlines how individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors shape three interconnected stages of the help-seeking process of intimate partner violence survivors: defining and appraising the problem, deciding to seek help, and selecting a help-provider. These stages mutually influence one another. Survivors' interpretations of the abuse shape whether they seek help, while the responses they receive can reshape their understanding of the situation and influence future help-seeking. Although not developed specifically for domestic abuse, Strobl's (2004) Four Aspects of the Communication of a Victimisation model offers a useful lens for understanding why some disclosures are recognized and acted upon, while others are not. Strobl argues that the response a victim receives depends on four factors: the actual facts of the victimization, the impression the victim conveys, the social group to which they are perceived to belong, and the distinctness and clarity of their request for help. Together, these frameworks highlight the importance of attending closely to survivors' lived experiences of service responses, pointing to the value of participatory approaches that foreground service-users' perspectives in service development.

Experience-based co-design (EBCD) is a user-focused improvement approach that places service-users' experiences at the center of service development and involves them as co-designers alongside service-providers (Bate and Robert 2006). EBCD was developed in the field of physical healthcare and was first piloted to improve the care and treatment experiences of patients with head and neck cancer and their carers (Bate and Robert 2007). It has also been applied in mental health settings (Larkin et al. 2015). The early stages of EBCD are research-focused, involving the generation of new knowledge through qualitative data capture and analysis, and inform subsequent co-design and service improvement activities (Wright et al. 2024).

Although EBCD has been widely used in physical and mental healthcare, its application in policing responses to domestic abuse remains limited. Earlier work examined the feasibility and acceptability of applying EBCD in this setting (Gander-Zaucker et al. 2022) but did not focus on survivors' experiences in depth. Improving responses to survivors is central to reducing the escalation, recurrence, and harms associated with domestic abuse. Drawing on survivors' accounts of their interactions with the police and organizations which support domestic abuse survivors, this study examines which aspects of practice promote safety, trust, and engagement, and which create additional barriers or risk.

The aim of this paper is to report on the research phase of an EBCD project by identifying elements of police and support service responses that survivors experienced as helpful or in need of improvement. Such knowledge is essential for informing interventions that strengthen early responses and reduce further victimisation. In doing so, this study extends existing knowledge by demonstrating the rich insights that can be gained through applying an EBCD approach to explore domestic abuse survivors' experiences of police and domestic abuse support organizations' responses.

2. Materials and Methods

The study included a diverse sample of domestic abuse survivors, comprising one male and five female participants. The abuse was primarily perpetrated by a partner or ex-partner, although in one case the perpetrator was the survivor's mother-in-law, and in

the case of the male survivor, he also experienced abuse from his ex-partner's new partner and his eldest son. All participants had children and received support from an organization supporting domestic abuse survivors. All but one had also sought services from the police.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Birmingham STEM Ethics Committee. The interview guide was developed with input from a steering group with wide representation beyond the research partners, including domestic abuse survivors, representatives from domestic abuse support organizations, the county police force, who confirmed that the questions were clear, comprehensive, and sensitive. The resulting study procedures were consistent with the World Health Organization's ethical and safety recommendations for research on domestic violence against women (World Health Organization 2001), including efforts to minimize potential distress to participants and ensuring that interview questions were not judgmental, blaming, or stigmatizing.

Eligible participants were those with current or recent experiences of domestic abuse who were in a psychologically, emotionally, and physically safe position to participate. Participants were recruited through stakeholders in domestic abuse support organizations and the police, who were provided with a briefing outlining inclusion and exclusion criteria and a project flyer. In this paper, the term domestic abuse support organizations is used to refer to organizations that provide support to domestic abuse survivors, including services that also support other service-user groups. Participants were recruited from a large conurbation in England that has undergone a long-term transition from a predominantly heavy-industry economy to a more mixed economic base.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Interviews centered on survivors' help-seeking experiences and the broader context of their relationships, circumstances during the abuse, and coping strategies. They were conducted face-to-face in safe and familiar locations, either civic centers or domestic abuse support organizations, where support staff were available. Interviews lasted 58–121 min and were audio-recorded. Participants were reassured that they could decline any question, and the conversation followed the issues they wished to raise. All participants and the people they named were provided with a coded pseudonym.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021a). The analysis was conducted by the first author. Regular discussions with the last author supported reflexive engagement with the data and the development and refinement of the analysis. Analysis began with repeated reading of transcripts followed by line-by-line coding with reflexive notes. Codes were then organized into potential themes and sub-themes, supported by case summaries and thematic documents to identify patterns across participants. Themes were reviewed, refined, and named to best represent the central meanings in the data. Reflexive thematic analysis does not rely on the concept of data saturation (Braun and Clarke 2021b). Instead, emphasis was placed on in-depth engagement with participants' accounts to develop meaningful themes.

3. Results

The findings illuminate how survivors navigated the complex process of seeking help from formal services and how these interactions shaped their safety, confidence, and willingness to continue seeking support. Across the interviews, survivors described a spectrum of experiences ranging from feeling dismissed, disbelieved, or unsupported, to receiving compassionate and meaningful assistance. Their accounts revealed not only the qualities of responses that hindered or facilitated help-seeking, but also the circumstances in their lives that influenced when and how they sought support. These themes are presented below.

3.1. Theme A: The Importance of Being Understood, Believed, and Cared for

Most participants reported that formal services could be dismissive and, at times, appeared to lack understanding and empathy towards survivors. Consequently, participants frequently emphasized their dissatisfaction with the police. Many described reluctance to seek help, citing concerns that the police would not comprehend their experiences, and that accessing support could be challenging. Nevertheless, several survivors acknowledged instances in which they received effective support from certain individuals within both the police. Within this theme, four key components were identified, three of which were predominantly negative: A1/being dismissed; A2/being disbelieved; A3/not being understood or cared for. There were also some positive examples of A4/being understood and cared for, which will be discussed further below.

3.1.1. A1. Being Dismissed, Including When Reporting Coercive Control

Several participants reported that experiences with the police were unhelpful when their concerns were dismissed, not taken seriously, or when their fears regarding the perpetrator were devalued. As a result, survivors often felt that the police were not providing adequate protection from the perpetrator. For instance, Reya described how the police's dismissive response to her concerns prolonged her anxiety about the abuse:

> "*I said 'Why you know he's coming here', . . . [Police said] 'You don't know he's coming here, he no have a GP, you no watch him 24 h. . . . .I know him I know he's crazy he's coming here. I know he coming here wa- coming here looking for me. . . . and that's scary just all the times I'm just worry and look my back*" [Reya]

Grace's account illustrated a similar concern when she reported coercive control but not physical abuse:

> "*I had kept all the messages and the PC turned around and said 'Oh it's probably just all mouth all ahh..he is just saying it he he he won't hurt you,' and he deleted what I had on my phone . . . and I said, 'But that that's my proof of what he is saying and what he is threatening to do'. . .'Don't worry Grace,' he said, 'It's nothing jus I will delete them if I delete then you can't read them and they won't freak you out,' and he deleted them*" [Grace]

The officer's dismissive response, "It's nothing," implies a failure to recognize coercive control and verbal abuse as genuine forms of abuse in this case. The officer's comment, "It's probably just all mouth," further emphasized this interpretation. Grace found the experience of being dismissed painful and felt powerless to protect herself from potential further abuse.

3.1.2. A2. Being Disbelieved

Participants also described instances in which police officers did not believe their accounts, and in some cases appeared to believe the perpetrator instead. This disbelief was often expressed through statements such as it being 'their word against the word of the perpetrator' (e.g., "*they took statement down and, again, it was like sort of my word against his*"—Jake).

For survivors, the dismissal of their testimony, possibly justified by police as a matter of insufficient evidence, was often experienced as a broader form of disbelief and as a dismissal of their *experience*. This suggests that being dismissed may contribute to feelings of being disbelieved, which many participants described as emotionally exhausting. For instance, Jake reflected on how 'mentally draining' it was when the police failed to believe him or take sufficient action to stop the abuse, despite his repeated reports: "*It's like sort of nobody believes you, nobody believes me and it's a nightmare, it really is.*" [Jake].

Another example was reflected in Shayan's account, in which a police officer appeared to believe her abusive husband rather than her. The officer accepted the perpetrator's claim that Shayan had intentionally injured herself:

> "*She laughed me, and she cut my nail . . . She shouted me. I say, 'Why you broken my nail'? She say maybe you do it you done for yourself.' I say, 'Why, I can't do it because I have a lot of pain'. She said she cutting my own nail. She was cut my nail.*" [Shayan]

> "*But first time they didn't believe me. They saw my hair on the floor, and they saw children was crying and me crying and I was crying but they didn't believe me, just laugh.*" [Shayan]

3.1.3. A3. Not Being Understood or Cared for

Participants also expressed that the police often failed to understand their circumstances or behaved as though they did not care. Grace offered a particularly powerful example, recounting how she was informed that the perpetrator of her abuse was being released, which reinforced her perception that the authorities lacked empathy and concern for her safety:

> "*They got him in custody, but they were releasing him with no charge and I said 'But you don't understand what he is doing, he is harassing me' and, and she [police] turned around—which made me so mad . . .—and she [police] said 'Well I just think it's a bit of tit-for-tat.' . . . and I was like 'Excuse me, you are not standing in my shoes, you are not going through this, it's me, you can't tell me it's tit-for-tat', and she said, 'Well we are releasing him without charge' and I just threw the phone down and I said [to my sister] 'He's gonna get me, I know he's gonna get me'*" [Grace]

Grace's experience captures this lack of understanding clearly—"*You don't understand what he is doing*." The release of the perpetrator left her feeling deeply vulnerable ("*He's gonna get me*") and isolated in her fear, as the police appeared detached from her lived reality ("*You are not going through this*").

Participants provided numerous examples of the police appearing not to understand their circumstances or failing to offer adequate support, instead expecting them to cope independently. In Grace's case, her concerns were minimized by a police officer's comment ("*I just think it's a bit of tit-for-tat*") which positioned her as a potential co-perpetrator and reflected an abdication of the police's duty of care. Similarly, Shayan described her experience as unhelpful when the police did not try to protect her from further abuse and retaliation by releasing the perpetrator. Other participants, such as Jake and Reya, also felt that the police showed little concern for their situations. Collectively, these accounts illustrate an overarching sense of not being cared for by formal services, and of heightened vulnerability following the premature release of perpetrators without adequate regard to survivors' safety.

Participants also described other formal services as failing to understand or appropriately respond to their needs. For instance, Ruba explained that she wished to remain with her husband, as she perceived it was his mother who was abusive. She recounted feeling threatened when Social Services informed her that returning to her husband would result in the removal of her baby. This experience left her feeling "*scared*" and isolated. Ruba described the situation as one in which she was forced to choose between two unacceptable options, perceiving the intervention as a form of imposed help rather than supportive assistance:

> "*Because I wanted to solve the problem and then they said- they gave me just two option, er one option was er I I I could go back to my mother in-law's house and I I was able to*

living with my husband but then they they said I have to my give them my baby and I was not agree that." [Ruba]

Grace also described being placed in a similarly difficult position, having to choose between two challenging options (whether or not to testify in court). Her experience mirrored Ruba's but was further compounded after she made her decision. Despite preparing herself to testify, she was later informed that her testimony was no longer required. This left her feeling that her needs were not met and her emotions invalidated: "*I wanted that judge to know that I am a broken woman now. I will never be the same Gracy*" [Grace].

3.1.4. A4. Being Understood and Cared for

There were also accounts in which survivors felt that the police officers handling their cases demonstrated genuine concern for them:

"*But one lady from the police, English lady, when she saw me, nearly she was crying and she give me her badge name, number sorry, her badge number, she told me what happened, if anything happen, or you're tired you can contact me and you can contact the police, he he give me her name but I forget now. Some policemen, some police officers really good help but someone is not.*" [Shayan]

Here, Shayan described that some police officers can adopt an understanding, empathic, and non-judgmental approach, resulting in positive interactions for survivors. This contrasted with her negative experiences when first contacting the police (as described above), highlighting how the quality of support depends on the individual officer involved. As Shayan plainly noted, "*some police officers really good help but someone is not*".

3.2. Theme B: It Is Important That There Is Good Communication Between the Survivor and Formal Services

Participants emphasized that effective communication with formal services was critical for both practical and emotional support. Survivors frequently described frustration when they had to repeatedly contact the police for updates on their cases, only to be ignored or promised follow-ups that did not occur. These experiences could make obtaining help more difficult and undermine survivors' confidence in returning to the police. Similarly, it was considered unhelpful when domestic abuse support organizations required repeated prompting to provide assistance, delayed responses, or provided wrong information.

Conversely, timely follow-ups and regular check-ins from support workers were experienced as highly supportive, particularly because survivors often felt unable to share personal or emotional difficulties with the police. This highlights how the two formal services can serve distinct roles, allowing survivors to receive different types of support from each. As Grace explained: "*she phones me every other week to see how I am doing which is a… just that phone call makes you feel a little better… you know it's like you haven't been forgotten*". Similarly, Jake described the value of having a support worker: "*I mean the only real things help that, I mean I come and talk to Martyn*".

Participants also indicated that they would appreciate more consistent follow-up from the police, as this would provide reassurance and help. As Myra stated: "*because maybe I forget the number, I think it's er nearly after one hour, they have to call again and to check you need any help and er everything is fine.*" [Myra].

3.3. Theme C: Survivors Want a Victim-Centred, Rapid, and Meaningful Response

Participants consistently emphasized that formal services must provide responses that are victim-centered, rapid, and meaningful. Survivors described experiences in which services failed to consider their perspectives or wishes, which often worsened the situation rather than alleviating it. For instance, Ruba believed that the police could worsen the

situation for survivors by breaking up families, preventing them from solving problems independently, and assuming that imprisoning perpetrators is the sole solution. This isn't necessarily the right approach for survivors. The quote below describes why Ruba did not contact the police:

> "*They don't have any of the solutions, um they just er [laughs], they like they just er close the person in the jail we're talking about even, then they make things worse than before. Like if if we got argues with somebody. . . . Then we- like when we are in anger and then we then we get normal and we are okay, and if we contact the police, they then they make worse the things and then they ask the question and then they um they took them in the jail*" [Ruba]

Her account illustrates a fundamental tension in survivors' help-seeking: formal interventions that aim to "solve the problem" can undermine survivors' agency and, paradoxically, prolong distress. Survivors suggested that effective support should work with them to co-produce solutions, rather than imposing external measures without consultation.

A related concern was the timeliness of response. Survivors described how delays, skepticism, or demands for evidence created situations in which threats were not taken seriously. Reya reflected: "*Maybe police waiting for he find me kill me or doing something bad for just waiting because we no have enough evidence*" [Reya]. This prolonged the duration of the abuse, as participants felt compelled to prove their cases to be taken seriously. At times, they even attempted to gather evidence themselves. However, even then, the police sometimes dismissed the evidence provided by the participants. This highlights the importance of providing victim-centered services by believing survivors and not dismissing their accounts. Grace captured this experience powerfully:

> "*I said they don't believe me anyway, they don't believe him, but it was I told them it would be bad, but they didn't even it was, it was kind of as if, they there was waiting for something really bad physically to happen to me before they would believe me.*" [Grace]

Her frustration deepened when she was refused a restraining order despite clear threats from the perpetrator:

> "*So, I said to Jack I want a restraining order on him, and he because you don't need one of them there's he hasn't done anything to you yet. . .and I said so I have to wait for him to attack me I said he won't leave me alone now. . .and I went to get it myself I had no support, nothing*" [Grace]

These examples illustrate how survivors felt that delays and disbelief could prolong abuse and heighten feelings of fear and powerlessness and that one's wishes were not listened to. Jake's account of his son's experience similarly showed how procedural delays created vulnerability:

> "*Sam and that Luke, I were, in at the time, have gone down to my house and Sam's been kicking the front door with Luke, now Albie's in the house, he's phoned the police up, Albie has, and they've turned round and says, [Police said] 'we'll get somebody to come out and check in the next hour', and Albie's like, 'but them kicking the front door in'.*" [Jake]

Jake describes how his non-abusive son, who was exposed to the perpetrators' abuse, felt surprised and vulnerable when he didn't receive the quick response from the police he was expecting. These accounts highlight that some participants felt it was crucial that the police reacted quickly when they sought help, rather than waiting until something physically bad happened.

Participants felt that a good response is a prompt and effective response. By contrast, Myra described how a rapid and supportive police response fostered reassurance and a sense of protection:

> "*Er, one thing is er after er when when I call to police, they came very quick, I can't expect, because, I think I dropped the phone nobodies coming. . . . I feel it's really good the police er find to my number, my house, they came very quickly*". [Myra]

Here, Myra described the police response as both prompt and effective. She explained that it gave her *confidence*, emotional support, and reassurance that she could rely on the police if she needed help. She also observed that after this interaction her husband, who was still living with her, stopped being physically abusive because he feared she would contact the police again. This impact occurred despite her limited contact with the police.

3.4. Theme D: Specific Circumstances Sometimes Influence Opportunities for Help-Seeking

3.4.1. D1. Domestic Abuse Is a More Complex Experience When You Have Children

The presence of children shaped survivors' opportunities and decisions around help-seeking in complex and often contradictory ways. For some participants, children acted as a barrier to seeking help; for others, they were a catalyst for change. For example, Myra explained that although she wanted to leave her husband, it was difficult to make major life changes when children were involved:

> "*But that time I decided . . .he slapped me when he drunk, he shouting me but er I think, it's okay, maybe tomorrow is better, tomorrow is better, but er that time was in front of my children, the children came back for me, 'what happened mumma, what happened', I said 'no', because when I taking this, it's not good for children, I I'm sure in front of my children, I'm very strong, yeah, no worries abuse me, no worries hit me. Because my the- I think mother is a good er er- because most of the time, children living with mother. . .and it's- main part, main role for mother, to show how to live, that's why it's, I said 'no', and it's four months ago I take a decision to leave him.*" [Myra]

Myra's account shows how her children witnessing the abuse acted as a turning point, prompting a shift from enduring the violence to taking action.

The narratives also illustrated that children could act simultaneously as a barrier and a trigger to help-seeking. For example, Grace's powerful account explained that although her daughter was an adult, she still felt a strong need to protect her, including by limiting contact in order to reduce risk. Yet it was also the thought of leaving her children behind that ultimately played a decisive role in preventing her from ending her life. She described reaching a crisis point:

> "*I brought all my tablets, and I opened every packet I got. . .I thought if I am at this world if I am gone if I am dead then he can't hurt no one else he will leave my family alone and I I just honest to God I cannot believe I picked them up and my phone rang, and I just turned and I looked, and it was my daughter. . .and I just stopped. . . and I thought no I am not leaving my children no way in the world am I leaving my children. . .I am not going nowhere and honestly I got all these tablets I threw them down the toilet and I just ran straight to my doctor*" [Grace]

Here, Grace's account highlights how perceived police inaction shaped her belief that self-sacrifice was the only means of protection, while her attachment to her children ultimately led her to seek help instead.

3.4.2. D2. It Is Perceived to Be Difficult to Get Effective Help When Your Problem Doesn't Fit the Mould

Several participants described how seeking help became more difficult when their circumstances did not align with what they perceived formal services to view as the "typical" domestic abuse case. In these instances, survivors felt that their gender, nationality, religion, or immigration status shaped the responses they received and limited the support

available to them. For example, Ruba perceived that a domestic abuse support organization excluded her from receiving the same level of assistance as other British survivors:

> "*Like they they gave other ladies like a microwave and kettles and er like I was from Pakistan and I haven't got Indefinite Leave and maybe I was Muslim that's why they um- I I asked them to them and they said oh I can buy kettle for me and microwave and I said 'why, why you are giving other ladies?', they they didn't answer anything, and just- they discriminate many times.*" [Ruba]

Jake, the male participant in this study, also felt that he did not receive an effective response because he was a man. He explained that the police made assumptions about gender roles in abuse, viewing men as physically capable of defending themselves or as potential perpetrators in contrast to women, and he felt that his strong physique reinforced these assumptions. As a result, he believed he was expected to cope and defend himself, even though, as he said, one should "*never judge a book by its cover*" [Jake].

Jake felt that these assumptions contributed to his experiences of being dismissed or not taken seriously, despite his repeated attempts to seek help:

> "*You know when you come like sort of- you keep telling people but it's like sort you're in a glass box, everybody can see in there, but they can't hear what you're saying. Nobody listens to you, they all think well you, you know, deal with it, you're a grown man. But I ain't that sort of person, I don't cope as good as what somebody else would, I mean it's, I don't know how to fight*" [Jake]

Jake felt that this lack of response placed him at significant risk, as he did not feel able to defend himself or cope with the abuse he was experiencing. Similarly to the female survivors in this study, he felt that he would have to wait for something worse to happen before receiving help but by then it might be too late for him. Despite this he emphasized that he was actively reporting the abuse and seeking assistance rather than attempting to resolve it himself. As Jake described:

> "*Um, you do that, you like sort of, you fall into a trap of like sort of you ain't got nothing to get you out of this predicament, you try and ask for people's help like with the police and that what's going on now, you report stuff but it's like sort of, I mean come on, you're a bloke, you know what I mean, you thingy, sort yourself out. Most blokes they go out and sort it out, get in trouble, get locked, I ain't that person. You know what I mean, I'm like sort of, ask peop- ask the police, this is happening, that's happening, you know what I mean it's bad, it really is.*" [Jake]

The experiences of Ruba and Jake illustrate that survivors whose circumstances fall outside dominant expectations about domestic abuse, or who face additional constraints linked to service provision, may feel that their needs are not recognized or responded to equitably. These accounts emphasize the importance of avoiding preconceptions about who can be victimized, while also ensuring that services provide fair and consistent support to survivors from diverse backgrounds.

Taken together, these themes illustrate the complex and often challenging pathways survivors navigated when seeking formal support. Across experiences of dismissal, poor communication, delayed responses, and identity-related barriers, participants described both the vulnerabilities created by inadequate support and the value of compassionate, timely, and victim-centered practice when it occurred. These findings collectively highlight the factors that shaped survivors' willingness and ability to seek help, setting the foundation for the discussion that follows.

4. Discussion

This study explored what happens when domestic abuse survivors seek help from the police and domestic abuse support organizations. The findings demonstrated that domestic abuse is complex and, as a result, so is help-seeking. Survivors described feeling dismissed, misunderstood, or disbelieved. At the same time, several survivors also described moments in which they felt understood, cared for, and supported. Together, these contrasting responses can be understood through existing theoretical work: the help-seeking model proposed by Liang et al. (2005) and Strobl's (2004) Four Aspects of the Communication of a Victimization model help to explain how survivors made sense of these responses and how these experiences shaped their decisions about further help-seeking.

Survivors' accounts showed that help-seeking was shaped by wider beliefs and family responsibilities within close relationships. The implications of their narratives suggest that such beliefs do not shift immediately once abuse is recognized. This was reflected in participants' accounts and aligns with the help-seeking model proposed by Liang et al. (2005), which proposes that intimate partner violence survivors engage in a form of cost–benefit analysis when coping with their situation. Myra, for example, described remaining with her partner because her children were emotionally attached to him, indicating that staying felt more valuable to her than prioritizing her own safety, highlighting how deeply embedded values about motherhood and sacrifice influenced her decisions. The tipping point for Myra came when the children witnessed the abuse; at that moment, her cost–benefit analysis shifted, and being a good role model and keeping them safe outweighed maintaining their attachment to their father. Grace's experience similarly illustrated a turning point: after feeling unsupported by the police and becoming emotionally overwhelmed and contemplating suicide, remembering her responsibilities to her children prompted her to seek help from her doctor instead. These narratives support previous findings that survivors with children are more likely to seek help (Bonomi et al. 2006), and that they can also be a reason why survivors stay or leave an abusive relationship (Fanslow and Robinson 2010). Together, these accounts demonstrate that survivors often face a combination of interrelated challenges, and that their help-seeking decisions are shaped by values and family responsibilities within their everyday lives.

Survivors' accounts highlighted important differences between positive and negative interactions with services, and how these shaped their help-seeking. Negative encounters often involved responses that minimized, questioned, or blamed survivors for their experiences, including when physical violence was reported. In these situations, they felt the seriousness of their experiences was not recognized. As noted elsewhere, this can heighten survivors' fear and vulnerability, reduce their confidence in the criminal justice system, and thereby decrease the likelihood of future help-seeking (Wydall and Zerk 2020).

These experiences occurred despite the participants having already defined their experiences as domestic abuse and viewed the behavior as unacceptable—processes described within the help-seeking model proposed by Liang et al. (2005). Yet participants reported that the police did little to help at first. One possible explanation is that some officers perceived the abuse as a private matter or did not view it as a crime due to expectations that domestic abuse involves severe physical injury. Strobl's (2004) model supports this interpretation by suggesting that victimization may not be recognized when it does not match expectations, such as the expectation that "real" victims will show injuries. For survivors, who clearly recognized the abuse, the lack of recognition from police made little sense and contributed to feelings of dismissal.

Strobl's (2004) model helps to illuminate Jake's experience. The model suggests that successful communication of victimization may be hindered by the personal impression victims make, such as projecting strength rather than vulnerability, and by the social group

they belong to. In Jake's case, this appeared to occur both because he was a man (a group not typically associated with domestic abuse victimization) and because of his strong physique. Therefore, his service providers may not have interpreted his experience as serious because they might have felt that, theoretically, he could better protect himself. These dynamics reflect wider societal discourses around gender and domestic abuse. McCarrick et al. (2016), for example, have shown that men in the United Kingdom who experienced female-perpetrated intimate partner violence were disbelieved, treated as perpetrators, and, thus, retraumatized by criminal justice responses. Their findings indicate that gender stereotypes can shape how professionals interpret and respond to men's accounts of abuse, which aligns with Jake's experience here.

By contrast, participants also described occasions in which they felt understood and cared for by formal services. These positive encounters appeared to influence how survivors interpreted the abuse and what they felt able to do next, which aligns with the help-seeking model proposed by Liang et al. (2005). In this study, such experiences appeared to validate survivors' interpretations of their situation and reassure them that they could return for help if needed, for example, Myra felt more confident that abusive behavior should not be tolerated. Indeed, such responses appear to play an important role in shaping survivors' sense of safety and empowerment (Wydall and Zerk 2020).

Taken together, these findings show that help-seeking is shaped by the ongoing interplay between survivors' internal meaning-making and the institutional responses they encounter. Survivors may reach a point of recognizing the abuse as harmful and deciding to seek help, but this alone is not enough; their attempts must also be recognized as legitimate by those they approach. When survivors felt understood, believed, and cared for, they reported feeling safer and more supported. When they felt dismissed or misinterpreted, the consequences were emotionally damaging and sometimes dangerous. These findings reinforce the importance of recognizing survivors' perspectives and experiences when they seek help, and of responding in ways that support their safety, wellbeing, and ability to seek help again.

Collectively, these insights highlight the contribution this study makes to existing knowledge on survivors' help-seeking and service responses. Specifically, the study examines survivors' experiences of interactions with both the police and domestic abuse support organizations within the context of an EBCD project, reflecting the central role of experience within this approach to service development. Survivors emphasized the value of being listened to, believed, and treated with empathy and care, as well as the importance of effective communication and prompt responses from services. Conversely, experiences of being dismissed, disbelieved, not taken seriously, or provided with ineffective help were described as undermining confidence in services. In doing so, the study adds to existing knowledge by demonstrating how survivors' accounts of these service interactions can be examined during the research phase of an EBCD process to identify aspects of practice requiring improvement. These insights informed the subsequent co-design phase. They highlighted aspects of service provision that required strengthening or change. These areas were addressed thorough the co-design process aimed at improving survivors' experiences of engaging with services, strengthening confidence in seeking help, and fostering trust in responses from both police and domestic abuse support organizations. In this way, the interviews served not only to explore survivors' experiences but also to identify experiential insights that could inform the subsequent co-design phase of the EBCD process.

5. Implications for Practice

The accounts discussed in this paper demonstrate that domestic abuse is complex and that survivors encounter a range of difficulties when seeking support. Effective practice

therefore requires responses that are sensitive to this complexity and grounded in an understanding of the broader systems in which survivors live.

First, the findings emphasize that delays, dismissive attitudes, or victim-blaming responses undermine survivors' confidence in formal services and create barriers to help-seeking. In contrast, responses in which survivors feel believed, listened to, and treated with respect can enhance their sense of safety and willingness to seek help again. Services should convey care and appropriate support rather than judgement and include timely follow-up, effective communication, and early involvement of domestic abuse specialists. Allowing space for survivors to talk through the difficulties they have encountered can help practitioners better recognize the influences shaping help-seeking and tailor support accordingly.

Second, the findings illustrate that help-seeking is shaped by broader values, cultural norms, family responsibilities, and personal circumstances. These influences affect how survivors understand their situations and determine the cost–benefit analyses they undertake when considering whether, when, and how to seek help. Practitioners should therefore adopt patient, non-judgmental approaches that acknowledge the role of socialization, cultural expectations, and family dynamics. Recognizing that deeply held beliefs and longstanding relational patterns do not change immediately is crucial for providing appropriate and sustainable support.

Third, the findings highlight the value of presenting information and interventions as options rather than directives. Survivors benefit from having clear explanations of available choices and from support that enhances their sense of agency rather than imposing decisions upon them. Approaches perceived as coercive risk disengagement or resistance, whereas practices that prioritize autonomy can strengthen engagement and safety planning. In addition, survivors should be consulted about decisions that affect their cases as failing to involve them can create barriers and undermine their sense of safety.

Finally, the findings indicate that gendered expectations can shape professional responses to victimization. These expectations can result in some individuals being viewed as less credible or as not fitting dominant images of a domestic abuse victim. Training and organizational guidance should therefore emphasize that domestic abuse can affect anyone, and that all victims are entitled to equitable support, regardless of gender or physical appearance. It is also important that domestic abuse support organizations provide equal and non-discriminatory support, particularly for survivors whose immigration status may otherwise create barriers to accessing services.

Together, these implications highlight the need for practice that is informed by survivors' lived experiences, attentive to the complexity of abuse, and responsive to the diverse ways in which individuals seek help. Within the wider EBCD project, these findings also offer a foundation for collaborative service improvement aimed at better understanding and reducing domestic abuse. EBCD enables survivors, police, and domestic abuse support organizations to work together to redesign practices in ways that are more responsive, empathetic, and grounded in lived experience. Using this approach can help ensure that service responses are genuinely victim-centered and support safer and more effective help-seeking.

6. Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths. The use of reflexive thematic analysis enabled an in-depth exploration of survivors' experiences, and the diversity of participants' backgrounds allowed for examination of the familial, cultural, and social factors shaping help-seeking. The inclusion of a male survivor also offered valuable insight into gendered expectations and how stereotypes influence service responses. In addition, the depth and openness of

the interviews generated rich and detailed accounts. Nonetheless, some limitations should be acknowledged. All participants were recruited through the police and domestic abuse support organizations, so the findings reflect the experiences of survivors who sought formal support and do not capture those who do not engage with such services. All participants were in heterosexual relationships, limiting transferability to LGBTQ+ survivors. Information on participants' socioeconomic background or education was not collected, which may also limit insight into how these factors shape help-seeking. In addition, several participants were not fluent in English and did not have access to interpreters, which may have constrained the nuance of the accounts they were able to provide. The study further involved a small sample of six participants from a single area of England, which may reduce representativeness, particularly regarding the male survivor's account. However, the study formed part of an EBCD project aimed at improving local service provision, and recruitment therefore intentionally focused on survivors from this area. In addition, subsequent stages of the wider EBCD project involved additional domestic abuse survivors, allowing a broader range of perspectives to inform the overall project.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that survivors' pathways to seeking help are shaped by an interplay of personal circumstances, relational influences, and institutional responses. Survivors described both obstructive and supportive encounters with formal services, and these experiences affected their sense of safety, emotional wellbeing, and willingness to seek support in the future. Children, culture, and perceptions of not fitting dominant assumptions about domestic abuse further shaped help-seeking opportunities. The findings emphasize the importance of responses that recognize the full range of abusive behaviors, provide timely and meaningful support, and treat survivors' choices with respect. These insights informed the EBCD process in identifying priority areas for service improvement and demonstrate the value of EBCD in fostering organizational learning within policing contexts, supporting more responsive practice shaped by lived experience.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

EBCD Experience-based co-design

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