



Clare's Law & Domestic Violence Disclosure Schemes: Victim-Survivor Perspectives

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Headline Findings

1. The women in our sample demonstrated a lack of awareness of DVDS and how it can be accessed.
2. Their experience in accessing a DVDS was variable, as was whether a disclosure was made, and the kind of information disclosed.
3. Failing to provide some of these women with disclosures because the relationship was perceived to have 'ended' meant that some of them returned to abusive relationships. Where information was provided irrespective of the relationship having ended, they reported feeling validated.
4. Positive experiences were reported by some women in our study when information was provided swiftly, with sensitivity and when accompanied with additional support. Negative experiences were reported when information was not disclosed based on the relationship having 'ended', or when that information was provided in haste with no follow-on support.
5. In the experiences of the women interviewed, wrap around support was rarely forthcoming following an application or disclosure and in some cases was contingent upon whether women engaged with the criminal justice process.
6. 'Nothing to disclose' does not mean there is nothing to know, a point that is not conveyed to women clearly and thus potentially leading to a false sense of security amongst the DVDS applicants here.
7. In some victim's experiences, there were many missed opportunities to inform women of a partner's violent past via a right to know. This included multiple occasions where police were called out to a domestic incident, yet information about the DVDS was not provided, despite their partner having a history of abuse.
8. Minoritized ethnic and disabled women did not feature well in our sample. The majority of women who had accessed a DVDS were heterosexual, White-British women.
9. From our sample, those women with prior negative experiences of the criminal justice system influenced their decision to request a disclosure from the police.
10. A Freedom of Information request to 43 police forces in England and Wales demonstrates that recording DVDS requests and disclosures varied, with most police forces failing to record (or at least collate data in a publicly accessible way) by sex, ethnicity or disability. This makes it difficult to understand who is and who is not accessing DVDS.



Background to the study and rationale

The first Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (DVDS) (Clare's Law) was rolled out across England and Wales in March 2014. The scheme is currently based on the common law power of the police to disclose information where necessary to prevent crime, though this moves to a statutory requirement under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

Such schemes comprise two elements: a right to ask (a request made by any member of the public for information about whether a person has a history of violence) and a right to know (police proactively requesting disclosure of information to protect a 'high risk' victim from harm from their partner). The gendered nature of DA is well documented (for example Hester, 2013; Stark, 2007), and Clare's Law has been almost exclusively used as a response to women living with violence (ONS, 2018).

Clare's Law/ DVDS has three aims: to strengthen the ability of the police and other agencies to provide appropriate protection to victims of DA, to reduce DA through prevention, and to reduce health and criminal justice costs of DA. However, issues remain with the implementation of such schemes.

First, some police force areas are more likely to use Clare's Law than others, leading to justice by geography (Duggan, 2018). Recent work by Hadjimatheou and Grace (2020) points to not only the wide variety in disclosure rates between different police forces but also a variation in the amount and depth of information disclosed, adding further nuance to the notion of justice by geography.

Second, approximately 80% of DA victims do not call the police about their experiences of abuse (ONS, 2018), so the absence of information to disclose about an individual perpetrator does not necessarily mean there is no history of violence to disclose in reality (Greene and O'Leary, 2018).

Third, Duggan (2018) has identified issues with practitioners engaging in 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victim narratives when supporting victims of DA who were given information under the DVDS but remained in the relationship with their partner. More recently, Hadjimatheou (2021) points to police concerns about the involvement of social care agencies, particularly child protection services in prompting women to ask about their partner's offending history. In this scenario it would seem women are being pressed to ask for such information in the interests of child protection and their role in relation to their children.

Finally, there are issues associated with engaging hard to reach groups with DVDS, particularly ethnic minority and disabled victims (Walklate and Fitz-Gibbon, 2019). Except for an evaluation study of DVDS introduced in New South Wales Australia (2018), there has been no empirical work internationally, including England and Wales, exploring victim-survivors' experiences of DVDS. Despite their increased presence in policy internationally (Australia, New Zealand and Canada), little is known about how these schemes are being received by victim-survivors, whether they serve a protective/preventive function, and whether this kind of scheme best meets the needs of victim-survivors. This project was designed to explore victim-survivors' experiences of DVDS.

Methodology

Little known about the experiences of women who access a DVDS, what barriers they may face, or why some women may be more reticent to do so than others. Therefore, the underlying rationale for this research study was to explore:

- who is using Clare's Law, and by that measure, who is not and why not?
- what are women's experiences and perceptions of DVDS schemes?
- what are the experiences of women who ask for a disclosure via a right to ask versus those who are offered information via a right to know?
- are there circumstances in which disclosure requests are made or denied and what factors influence such decisions?
- what do women do with disclosure information if/once they receive it?
- can Clare's Law prevent domestic abuse?

In this section we outline the recruitment and data collection methods we used to reach the population of interest – that is victim-survivors who have accessed a DVDS; and those who did not access the scheme either because they were not aware of its existence or perceived there were barriers to doing so.

Research design

The research consisted of three strands of data collection; a Freedom of Information Request, semi-structured interviews with victim-survivors and an online survey which was developed to capture victim-survivors' responses first-hand or through the experiences of practitioners who had used the scheme on their behalf. We also interviewed practitioners who had experienced abuse and/or had accessed a DVDS for themselves and/or a client in the course of their work.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained via Lancaster University research ethics committee. All survey responses and interviews were anonymised. All interviewees were provided with a participation information and consent sheet well before a final decision was made for them to be interviewed. Survey respondents' consent was obtained via a tick box at the end of the questionnaire. The right to withdraw from the study was explained and consent to use extended quotations was also gained. Debriefs were conducted at the end of every interview which were not recorded. Information pertaining to signposted support was provided on the research website and participant information sheet.

Participant recruitment

A research project website was designed which included accessible recruitment posters, a survey, and details about how to contact the Principal Investigator to participate in an interview. Participants were also recruited via email using professional contacts and organisations; and social media, for example: Mum's net; victim-survivor Facebook groups; and Twitter.

Interviews

In total, 29 interviews were undertaken. This included 26 victim-survivors and practitioner-survivors and three professionals' interviews. A further in-depth account was received via email from a victim-survivor. A focus group was also undertaken with and led by Project Managers from the Determined Individual Victorious Amazing Survivors (DIVAS) group in Cornwall made up of disabled women who have experienced domestic abuse. We refer to all these respondents in subsequent sections as the interview participants.

The interviews were carried out online via MS Teams or telephone and were either video or audio recorded. These were then transcribed and anonymised at the point of transcription. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour and a half.

Participants were asked to describe their experiences of domestic abuse, accessing Clare's Law, and other relevant questions pertaining to their perceptions of DVDS as a useful tool to prevent domestic abuse.

Survey

The survey was developed using similar questions to those asked during the interviews. Additional questions regarding practitioners' experiences in supporting women were asked, as well as others that might capture the experiences of those who may never have heard of Clare's Law and wanted to say more about this or how they perceived this might have worked for them or not.

There was a total of 98 respondents which were reduced to 91 after data cleaning (56 victim-survivors and practitioner-survivors, and 35 practitioners).

Results

In this section we provide an overview and breakdown of the FOI request and the quantitative data collected from the survey. We also capture the demographic and DVDS context data of the interview participants. The qualitative thematic findings will be described in the subsequent section.

Respondent demographics

Survey

As mentioned above, 91 survey respondents were included in the final analysis. Six respondents were the family member or friend of the victim-survivor and 29 were practitioners who had accessed a DVDS on their behalf – also known as ‘the right to ask’ (3rd party RTA hereon in). The remaining 56 (61%) of respondents were victim-survivors, or practitioners who had been victims of domestic abuse themselves and now supported other women to apply for a DVDS as part of their professional role (n=1).

Given the aims of the project, questions were asked about sexual orientation, age, disability, and ethnicity in order to gauge an overall picture of those responding to the survey.

54 respondents identified as heterosexual, one as lesbian, with one respondent preferring not to say. All but one of our respondents were aged between 18-34 (n= 20), 35-59 (n=35) with one, aged between 60-74.

Ten victim-survivors identified as disabled (13%) with the type of disability recorded as ‘Poor mental health affecting day to day functioning’ (n=6), ‘physical impairment’ (n=3) and ‘multi disabilities’ (n=1).

6% of respondents (n=3) identified as being from a Black, Asian or other ethnic minority woman and 2% as a woman with insecure immigration status (n=3 and n=1, respectively).

Interview participants

All 26 victim-survivors who participated in semi-structured interviews were female. One participant identified as lesbian and another bisexual. All were aged between 18-34 (n=8) and 35-59 (n=17). One participant was unknown.

Two women identified as disabled with the type of disability reported as Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) (n=1) and poor mental health affecting daily life (n=1) The DIVAS comprises a group of disabled women who are autistic and/or have learning difficulties/disabilities.

Three interviewees identified as coming from a minoritized ethnic community.

The email respondent did not provide any defining characteristics or demographic data.

The largest proportion (n=12) of participants were from the North of England with other participants (where known) came from South of England (n=8), Scotland (n=4), The Midlands (n=2) and Northern Ireland (n=1).

All interviewees were (or had been most of their lives) in employment, and/or were Higher Education students. This included doctoral students and those undertaking professional degrees whilst working.

Quantitative DVDS related information

Survey

In this section we describe information regarding victim-survivors and, in some cases, practitioner responses, in relation to:

- 1) how they came to know about Clare’s Law and DVDS;
- 2) how many had accessed or had heard about DVDS;
- 3) whether there were children involved at the time a DVDS was accessed;
- 4) their relationship status at the time.

Out of 56 victim-survivors, 45 provided information on how they knew about Clare’s Law. 18 (40%) said that they had heard about Clare’s Law and DVDS via the media/social media and was the highest reported knowledge source. Next was a 3rd Party organisation such as a Domestic Abuse Service or Social Services at 20% (n=9). Other sources, in order, were the police (9%), a family member/friend or an alleged perpetrators ex-partner, each at 4%. Also at 4%, were respondents who stated that the research project survey was the first time they had heard about the DVDS. 11 respondents (20% of the victim-survivor sample) had never heard of Clare’s Law prior to participating in the survey.

Finally, practitioner only respondents reported similar responses to victim-survivors, though the dominating source was because of their employment/role.

Using a DVDS

Survey

In relation to accessing a DVDS, just over half of the respondents (29) had used a scheme or it had been used on their behalf. The remaining had not accessed a DVDS (27).

At the time of making a DVDS application 55% of victim-survivors were in a relationship with the suspected perpetrator and 46% had children living with them.

27 victim-survivors had accessed a DVDS themselves through the right to ask route whilst the scheme had been accessed by a third party on their behalf for the other two. A further five respondents stated that a right to know disclosure had been given or at least offered. 18 cases resulted in a disclosure being made (including right to know or 3rd party applications) with six respondents stating that there had been ‘nothing to disclose’. The most common disclosure method was over telephone (n=12) with the next most cited method being by home visit or attending a police station (both n=5). Email and multidisciplinary meeting were cited in two cases.

The most common history disclosed of the alleged suspect related to domestic abuse-related offending (n=11) followed by offences that included fraud, threats, sexual and violent offending, violent offending only, and (reported) domestic abuse with no conviction. All of these were each cited once in the survey.

Where the information was known, 11 respondents ended the relationship following the disclosure, although only two terminated the relationship immediately. A further six ended the relationship a short time later and four reported taking some time post-disclosure to do so. Five women reported having remained in the relationship.

All women who accessed the scheme via the right to know route or where a family member had requested information on their behalf remained in the relationship after the disclosure for a longer period than those who had not received information in this way.

Interview Participants

Less than half of interviewees had used a DVDS, all of whom had made the referral themselves (n=13). The remaining 13 had not accessed the scheme. Of the 13 who had accessed a DVDS, 11 had resulted in disclosure – three of whom were told there was ‘nothing to disclose’. Two of these women’s relationships had ended naturally. However, one interviewee subsequently ended the relationship sometime later as it became abusive.

Where a history of domestic abuse was disclosed as part of the referral request, five women had received this information at a point in which they had already left the relationship but may have been likely to return but never did. One woman ended the relationship, which was in its infancy at the time, immediately upon disclosure, whilst a further two ended the relationship within the 12 months after. In one case, a DVDS had been requested twice with the first disclosure application having resulted in no response to this applicant.

Freedom of Information

43 police forces were asked to provide information about right to ask disclosures from applicants other than the victim-survivor for years 2018 – 2020. 42 forces responded. Only 16 forces collected data on who accesses a DVDS broken down by victim-survivor or a third-party applicant. However, even where this data was provided, it was not consistent enough with ONS data to make meaningful analysis possible. Additionally, the search also identified that this data is not consistently collected and/or recorded in a way which lends itself to FOI requests or analysis by sex, ethnicity or disability.

Interview data

This section will outline the qualitative themes that were identified from the interviews, with some reference to the qualitative responses in the survey data where appropriate. Three over-arching themes were identified, namely awareness of Clare’s Law, experiences of using the scheme and broader issues with DVDS. Various sub-themes also emerged and will be discussed in turn.

Awareness of Clare’s Law/ DVDS

A key issue identified in the interviews was a lack of awareness that the DVDS existed or how the scheme could be accessed. For example, one woman stated, “I just don’t think a lot of people know about it” (P2) and “at the time, I just didn’t know that you could get information on your partner” (P7). Approximately half of the women who participated in this study had not accessed or heard of Clare’s Law and for those who had, almost all were introduced to or heard about the scheme during their relationship with their abusive ex or current partner.

It is also important to consider who is not aware of the existence of the DVDS. Most of the women who participated in this study and who had accessed Clare’s Law were white, heterosexual, non-disabled women. The disabled group of women who participated in the study had not only not accessed the scheme but had never heard of Clare’s Law prior to their involvement in this project. Furthermore, one participant who was both a survivor and practitioner reflected on a lack of awareness of the scheme in relation to migrant women:

“Thinking about survivors who have language difficulties. Like I know for example [town] is one of the areas where we are taking in refugees at the moment, so we’ve got a lot of Syrian refugees and I know there are organizations supporting them, but whether they’re aware of these disclosure processes, I don’t know. I doubt it” (P13).

Similarly, three interview participants reflected on the barriers faced by women of colour when accessing Clare’s Law. For example:

“I think we need to talk about race and culture, and like how people may want to deal with things within the community, within the family. Like how does that impact on people using Clare’s Law? How does that impact on people going to the police? I think all of these things need to be considered, because people won’t use Clare’s law in like a blanket way. It won’t be used the same across different communities and across different age groups. Like I think there are communities, especially like the black communities, minoritized communities who don’t have a great relationship with the police. Like it would be interesting to find out whether there’s differences in who uses of Clare’s law, depending on culture and race, because if you don’t see the police as being any help to you, if you see the police is inviting more violence into your life, will you go to them for information about your abusive partner? Or someone who’s being abusive in your life?” (P6)

This quote highlights a range of issues with accessing the scheme for minoritized women, both in terms of awareness of its existence and possible barriers for accessing. As noted above, our FOI request to all 43 police forces in England and Wales also demonstrated that many forces either do not collect or record data in an accessible way related to minoritized statuses, such as ethnicity.

Furthermore, the interview data highlights that even for those women who did know about the scheme, all but three chose not to access it until they were ready to leave the relationship or did not access it at all. Six women suggested DVDS would be most useful early in a relationship before the abuse started. However, four of these women expressed that victim-survivors may not access the scheme in the early stages of a relationship in reality, as there are rarely 'triggers' or signs to prompt them to apply for a disclosure. As one woman said, although she didn't know the scheme existed when she was with her ex-partner, "why would you fill out an inquiry for somebody who has come into your life and made you feel \$1,000,000? and appears to be absolutely lovely? You know there isn't the necessary signs that prompt you to do that" (P9).

Ten women also described feeling too afraid to access the scheme when they were in the relationship because they feared the consequences for themselves and their children. For example, one said that "I was too far in and too scared. I would never have done Clare's Law when I was in the relationship" (P20) and another claimed that "if you've got someone so controlling he takes your phone and stuff and you probably won't even want to go to the police because you don't want to instigate anything. You just want to minimise it all. And how would you even get the opportunity to instigate anything? How would you manage to actually get the information?" (P21)

These issues question the preventive value of the DVDS, either because of the barriers in accessing the scheme or at least having access before their partner turns abusive. These kinds of issues are captured nicely by the following quote:

"You don't go into a relationship thinking 'right, I best check out for domestic abuse before I get involved'. But then you're in the middle of it, and you're tired because they don't let you sleep, or you're tired because of being shouted out, so it becomes low down the list. You can't see your friends, you can't get on the internet. I couldn't use the phone because he was permanently there" (P12).

Four women also reflected on being afraid to go to the police to access the scheme because of previous negative interactions with the criminal justice system. For example, "it will only really work for some survivors who feel comfortable enough to speak to the police in the first place" (P20).

The issues outlined here highlight that limited awareness of the scheme and difficulties in accessing it mean that victim-survivors face barriers prior to even making a DVDS. These issues may be particularly profound for minoritized women.

Experiences of using DVDS

Three of the women we interviewed had a positive experience of using the DVDS. For one of these women, it was very early in the relationship and for the other two, they had previously been in a violent relationship, and they requested information using DVDS when they met a new partner to "protect themselves and (their) children" (P19). For example, one of these women stated "For someone like me, who has been with a violent partner in the past, it was reassuring to be able to check my new partners past before it got serious. I know this won't be the case for everyone, but it was helpful for me" (P10). Another woman reflected on going on two dates with a former partner and a colleague at her place of work informed her that he was a "bad guy", which prompted her to request information via the DVDS. She states "doing it so early (in the relationship) was great for me. I wasn't attached really in anyway, so it meant I could make the choice myself on ending it. So I just blocked him" (P16). These examples highlight the cases in which a DVDS can be useful and potentially empowering for women.

However, the other women who participated in the study and accessed DVDS experienced various barriers. For those that had not used DVDS, they nonetheless reflected on the issues that women would likely face in accessing the scheme based on their own experiences of domestic abuse and interactions with the criminal justice system. The most dominant barriers evident in the interviews are discussed here in turn.

Inconsistency in giving information

One of the most prominent barriers evident in the interviews is the perception that police officers were inconsistent in providing information via the DVDS. This was particularly the case when victim-survivors requested information either once the relationship had ended, or when police officers believed that it had (even though the relationship was ongoing in reality). In the survey, 15 women suggested that they were not given information on the basis that they were no longer in the relationship. This was reflected on further in the interviews, with three women being refused information on these grounds. This is captured by the following quote:

"My biggest worry is this idea that you have to be in a relationship with the perpetrator before they disclosed to you. I just cannot get past that. I mean, how many women leave, and then don't feel safe when they've left, so they may think, I'm going to go and find out if he has a history of abuse. So then you go to the police, and they say, "oh well, we can't tell you because you're not with them anymore". Now that might make women doubt their own judgment and think, maybe I'm just making all this up, and then go back, because there's that hook, there's that pull there anyway" (P15).

The difficulties in leaving a violent partner are extensive and well established in the literature (Anderson et al, 2003; Duggan, 2012). Not giving information on the basis that a relationship has ended, or perceived as such, could lead to highly dangerous situations for women. However, two of the women in this study were given this information shortly after their relationship had ended. These reported experiences lend some weight to the problems of selective decision-making and 'safety by geography' reported by Hadjimatheou and Grace, (2020).

There were also concerns that cases against a partner which led to no further police action (NFA) may not feature as part of a Clare's Law disclosure. This was discussed by five women in the interviews and is captured by the following quote:

"There is so much stuff that people like him do that he won't get convicted of, and would never appear on Clare's Law. So it gives a bit of a false impression about what he's actually done if you get me? How many times did I call and nothing happened? People won't know about that. It's so hard to get a conviction, and the woman has to want to go down that route which I didn't for a long time. You know, there could have been 20 incidents of domestic violence but if there wasn't a conviction people wouldn't know about it, you know. And that's what worries me, I think it's really important that you hear of the alleged stuff on Clare's Law as well and I don't think you do" (P21).

According to the victim-survivors who participated in this study, there appeared to be selectivity in whether or not police officers provided information about previous cases which led to no further action as part of a Clare's Law disclosure. In relation to this issue, the women felt strongly that applicants should be made aware that an absence of information to disclose, does not mean there is not anything to be concerned about. This issue with DVDS' more broadly has been raised elsewhere (Greene and O'Leary, 2018).

It is well documented that convictions are consistently low for domestic abuse related offences and many cases lead to no further action for various reasons, such as a lack of evidence or the victim-survivor not wanting to pursue a prosecution. This is particularly the case for ongoing domestic abuse, as seen in coercive and controlling behaviour cases (Brennan and Myhill, 2021). Furthermore, according to the ONS (2019) approximately 80% of victim-survivors of domestic abuse will not report their experiences to the police for reasons such as fear of not being believed or fear the abuse will escalate. Not including NFA cases, or a lack of transparency that abuse that is not reported to the police will not feature on a DVDS, can therefore be problematic.

Time taken for the information to be given

The issue with the length of time it took for information to be disclosed (or not) to the applicant was raised by seven women. It took longer than the 35 recommended days to receive information for all these women, with it taking much longer than this for four of them. One stated "So I put the request in, but it must have slipped through the system because nothing came back to me for months" (P22). Another example:

"It took 5 months for me to hear back. I rang 3 or 4 times asking what had happened. I can't remember exactly, but I just know it was after I had already decided it was the end of the relationship and it was finished. So a very long time. It was just so slow. If I had been in a very violent relationship, and I was worried I was going to be killed for instance, can you imagine the repercussions of that taking 5 months? It doesn't bare thinking about" (P24)

The latter part of this quote captures the possible repercussions of disclosures taking long periods of time. The Home Office recommended 35 days is too long for women living with an abusive partner. Having to chase the police for information places the responsibility of safety on the women themselves, contradicting the intended aims of the scheme. Furthermore, taking such long periods of time for information to be disclosed fundamentally contradicts the preventive intentions of the scheme.

Delivery of the information and follow-up support

As stated earlier in the report, information was disclosed (or not) to the women in various ways, including in person and over the telephone. In person delivery appeared to be favored by the interview participants over other methods because, supporting the College of Policing recommendations, for example, the "telephone just felt really impersonal" (P17). Three women also reported feeling uncomfortable sharing their experiences with a male police officer, "I didn't feel like I got any compassion until I spoke with a female police officer" (P1). The delivery of the information, including who this is delivered by, is important to ensure a positive experience of the DVDS for victim/ survivors. Some police forces disclose the information with the support of an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA), which may help to ensure that victim-survivors are appropriately supported during the process. However, none of the women who participated in this study had the information given to them in the presence of an IDVA, suggesting this approach is not widely used.

Furthermore, eight of the women interviewed highlighted issues with a lack of follow up support after the disclosure process. The women reported feeling "left alone" and "unsupported" as a result. One woman stated,

"I got no support after I had received the disclosure. I made that request for a reason you know, and nobody checked up on me to see if I was ok" (P24).

Another stated

"There seems to be nothing after the disclosure is made to really support or help you. I've got friends who work in DA services and they know girls who have taken out a Clare's law on their partners, and then a few months later they are dead. And there is nothing in between the disclosure and afterwards. I mean they put numbers on a leaflet and that, but I think something afterwards is needed, just to stop people going back" (P27).

Whether or not information can be disclosed, the process can be extremely challenging for women. Deciding what course of action to take following a disclosure is complicated and can compromise women's safety, particularly if they decide to leave the relationship. Ensuring that women are supported both during and after this process is important. Police officers may not be best placed to do this, particularly if criminal justice intervention is not favoured by the victim-survivor. IDVAs or other specialist domestic abuse services may therefore be better placed to provide survivor centred follow-up support.

Broader issues with DVDS

The women also identified broader issues with the DVDS that they felt hindered the overall preventive and protective aims of the scheme. In particular, the women felt that there was a lack of a proactive use of the right to know route of DVDS. They suggested that there had been missed opportunities for the police to inform them about their ex-partner's violent history. For example, "there was a few times that the police were involved but not once did the police say to me about Clare's Law, they must have been able to see his record, but not once did they tell me or suggest I apply for it or anything" (P11). Another victim-survivor reflected:

"if maybe the first time (the police) come round, the first time I called 999, the first time his name was mentioned, if they had said something to me, maybe things would have been different. I remember thinking 'so that is why so many people turned up that first time', because I could never understand that. Why did 6 police turn up for one man? And I thought why the hell didn't they tell me then? He had a criminal record for violence with a knife but they didn't tell me" (P21)

For the latter victim-survivor, she suggested that she was only informed about Clare's Law by the police once she agreed to pursue a prosecution, "It was almost like once I agreed to support the conviction, all of a sudden all this help became available that I never knew about" (P21). This raises interesting questions about the conditions under which victim-survivors receive a positive and proactive criminal justice response.

However, all women in the survey who were offered information by the police through the RTK route remained in the relationship after the disclosure. This supports a broader issue identified in the interviews, in victim-survivors not wanting to believe the information that was disclosed to them about their partner. For example one woman stated, "I think people think that as soon as someone is told something like that they will walk away, but normally by the time that's happened, you're invested, you're in that relationship, you're brain washed, you probably love that person and they've probably given you their own wee version of what happened" (P11) and "I like to think Clare's Law would have been useful for me, but if I actually go back to that time and think of the red flags I ignored and if a police officer told me he had a history, I don't think I would have done anything. I'm quite ashamed to say that really, and I can't explain why" (P26).

The latter participants' guilt associated with not leaving a relationship if information is provided (through either route) was evident in many of the women we interviewed highlighting the potential unintended consequences of responsabilising women who access such schemes. It should be ensured that no matter what women choose to do with the information after a disclosure, they are supported and feel safe to go to the police or other agencies in the future, should they want or need to.

Concluding thoughts

Overall, although five women we interviewed suggested that DVDS may prevent further abuse within a relationship if information is provided early enough, the remaining 21 felt that DVDS do not help to prevent domestic abuse. The suggested lack of a preventive function is perhaps best evidenced by those women who returned to the relationship after the disclosure process. This was the experience of five women in the survey. One of these women was informed there was 'nothing to disclose' and she therefore continued the relationship. However, eight months later she was informed by the police that they had 'got it wrong' and he was in fact a high-risk perpetrator. She had experienced extensive domestic abuse in the interim.

Although stories like this may not reflect the majority, and the results of this study only reflect the experiences of those women who wanted to participate, they highlight important issues with the scheme that need to be thought through, given its placement on statutory footing as part of the Domestic Abuse Act (2021). Furthermore, these issues lead to bigger questions such as whose needs are being met with DVDS? The women's accounts discussed here suggest that the DVDS in its current form may not meeting the needs or expectations of victim-survivors, particularly for minoritized and disabled women.

Recommendations

Our research findings suggest many victim- survivors do not believe that DVDS serve a preventive function. Thus, we recommend:

1. There needs to be greater societal awareness raising of what the DVDS is, how it can be accessed and what information can be provided. We have developed resources (discussed below) to support with this.
2. Police understandings of how and when DVDS can be used needs to be improved across all police forces, minimising the opportunity for 'safety by geography' (see also HMICFRS, 2017).
3. Due to the significant number of domestic abuse cases that lead to no further action, consideration for disclosure should be given in cases where there are multiple police recorded reports about the accused (by one or more victim-survivors).
4. The time taken between a request for information and the disclosure of such information needs to be reduced significantly with the Home Office recommendation of 35 days reconsidered.
5. When a disclosure is made, it should be put in writing that an absence of information does not mean there is nothing to disclose.
6. The method of disclosure should be carefully considered based on the victim-survivors individual needs.
7. Disclosures should be supported with an IDVA or DA specialist.
8. Wrap-around support be provided to victim-survivors once information has been disclosed by police or other domestic abuse services whether or not the individual concerned wishes to engage with the criminal justice process.
9. Working with specialist service providers to understand the limits of DVDS in reaching marginalised communities who have reason to distrust statutory services needs to be considered with a view to developing alternative preventive and protective strategies of support.
10. Police should engage in more thorough recording practices documenting who is accessing the DVDS, including sex, ethnicity and disability.

Resources

The project team have developed a range of easy read and accessible resources explaining what the DVDS is, how it can be accessed and what information victim-survivors may be provided with. We have worked with the DIVAS at the Women's Centre Cornwall to collaboratively develop these materials. These include an animated video, poster, and leaflet. All of these materials can be accessed via clareslawexperiencesproject.com.

We would like to extend our thanks to Adam York Gregory for developing the animation and video, Dr Cara Molyneux for creating the poster and leaflet and Dean Milner-Bell for providing the images for the leaflet.

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