



Empower & Enable:

Help For You - Accessing Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Support

Podcast Information

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Hosts: Monica Majumdar and Kate Clayton-Hathaway

Guests: Aliza Gurung of Citizens Advice Rushmoor and Sam Colella of Victims First

Podcast Episode Transcription

Kate: Hey everyone, I'm Kate.

Monica: I'm Monica and this is the Empower & Enable podcast by Elmore and Oxford Against Cutting

Oxford Against Cutting, also known as OAC is a rights-based charity working to end harmful practices suffered by girls and women. These include female genital mutilation (FGM), 'honour'-based abuse (HBA), early and forced marriage (EFM) and female cosmetic genital surgery.

Tom: Hi, Tom Hayes here, CEO of Elmore. Elmore is a complex needs, mental health, and domestic abuse charity in Oxfordshire, working with vulnerable people experiencing several overlapping challenges at the same time. Elmore is delivering the victim and perpetrator programmes as part of Oxfordshire's new Family Solutions Plus domestic abuse service, funded by Oxfordshire County Council. This podcast has been made possible by funding by the Office of the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner.

Kate: In today's episode, we are going to be talking about accessing advice, resources, and services on domestic violence. We are joined by Sam Colella, an Outreach worker for Victims First specialist support service and a trained ISVA. We will also be talking with Aliza Gurung, an IDVA and domestic abuse case worker who works for Citizens Advice Rushmoor and specialises in working with the Nepali community.

Monica: Before we kick off, please note that this episode covers topics of a sensitive nature including sexual abuse and domestic abuse. This podcast is age-appropriate for 16+

Monica: Thank you both. Thank you so much for giving up your free time and for joining us in this conversation. For today's podcast we're specifically focusing on ISVA (Independent Sexual Violence Advisors) & IDVA (Independent Domestic Violence Advisor). I'm going to let you ladies introduce what that means and what your roles are, so Sam can I hand over to you first? If you could tell us a bit about your background and what you do and what your role entails?

Sam: I'm Sam from Victims First. I am an outreach worker. It's a new role that I started in January and my background is actually completely different industry. I actually previously worked in sales as a manager, that's me.

Aliza: Hi, I'm Aliza Gurung. I work at Rushmoor Citizens Advice as an IDVA, that's Independent Domestic Violence Advisor. My role is funded by the Armed Forces Covenant, and I started working here since March 2017. My role is basically to support Nepali victims of domestic abuse all around the UK.

Monica: Perfect, thank you. I was just hoping, could you both elaborate a bit more about your work? In terms of like the day-to-day scenarios, what you do as part of your role?

Sam: My role is an outreach worker; I deal with victims in the BAME community who are victims of sexual violence. Just offering the support that they need and obviously sign posting. We support all the way through the criminal process, if that is a route that they wish to follow and just any practical and emotional support that they need.

Aliza: My role is the same as what Sam said. Basically, supporting victims of domestic abuse in the Nepali community, with the emotional and practical side of things. That could be anywhere from helping them apply for injunctions, legal aid or attending different meetings with them or even raising awareness through different groups.

Monica: Thank you so much. My next question is, do you think sexual violence or domestic abuse are widely discussed or understood within minority communities?

Sam: I feel like with sexual violence, it is quite a taboo subject - sex in general. I feel like part of my role to educate around that within the minority groups is key, because what one would interpret as sexual violence or any sort of abuse, someone from the minority community that struggles to understand that.

It's about educating - actually, this is wrong; what you're experiencing is wrong. It's not right, and there are avenues to support you with that abuse that you're receiving.

Aliza: Yes, I completely agree with what she just said. It is basically about educating them and then because there's a lot of lack of awareness about what domestic abuse actually is. With the community that I look after; with the Nepali community, the definition of domestic abuse in the Nepali community is equal to just physical abuse. They are not aware about other forms of abuse, with sexual abuse, financial abuse, or emotional abuse. It's a very foreign concept for them.

That's why they don't even realise that they are in an abusive relationship, so the educating them becomes key.

Monica: So, I myself come from a British Bangladeshi background, identify as Muslim as well. But do you think that comes to play because of how much sex isn't openly discussed in our communities? Do you think that plays a role or is does that then heighten the chance of it happening?

Sam: Yeah, I agree it doesn't get discussed in the community. If it heightens it? I mean, it's just not understood and that's the key thing. Heightens it for what, the perpetrator you mean?

Monica: Yeah, so the angle I'm trying to almost convey is that because young girls or young boys aren't openly discussing and don't know that is what sexual abuse is. The predators who are aware of this is a sexual act that I'm going to possibly carry out with this victim, then uses that to his advantage. "Oh no, this is very innocent, what I'm doing to you is very normal." In that angle, does that make sense?

Sam: Yeah, I completely understand now. I guess it can. You're completely right because it's not discussed. People might use that to their advantage to think that there are certain situations in what they might do, they might portray in their own mind that it's quite innocent when they probably actually do know that it's wrong; but they just don't want to sort of admit that to themselves. I mean, that's a personal view there.

Aliza: Yeah, just looking at different South Asian communities, the topic about consent, is sort of not really talked about that much. Men do get away with a lot and they are forgiven. Whereas compared with women who will be not in those times, but they do describe it in a way where their tainted in that way.

The topic of consent is not talked about at all, especially in Nepali community, and there's a lot of encouragement where the couples are encouraged to reconcile. Even if they are victims of abuse; that happens quite a lot.

Sam: Yeah, I completely agree sorry, just to echo that because it's all down to the one thing, which is shame. If you have a victim who is speaking up on something, it does come down to the fact of shame or in the community that will be known for a certain situation and it just all comes down to cultural thing.

Aliza: It's around the word 'honour' - isn't it at the end of the day.

Sam: Yeah

Monica: Yeah, thank you for that is such an interesting topic, isn't it? About how it's hidden away as well within our community. If you have been abused, whether it's domestic abuse, sexual abuse. How you should almost just live with it, deal with it. I don't know if you have any thoughts on that.

Sam: It's just OK. It happened, just shut up about it. It's just brushed under the carpet, it's not discussed. Sexual violence is a big, big taboo thing. Again, what Aliza said about consent; they don't. There's no understanding about that consent needing to be received, given, whatever; but just feel like it's just not discussed enough.

Aliza: Yes, definitely. With them having that sort of pressure from, not just their own family, or can be relatives, close family friends, a lot of support systems that don't really support them in that way. It happens in an opposite way, where they are saying 'what would happen if you left?', 'what's going to happen to your children?', 'what's going to happen to the

repetition of a family?' So, that's what puts them backwards. Sometimes they don't even discuss this.

Sam: The guilt.

Aliza: Yeah, it's the guilt. Definitely.

Sam: Yeah, they're made to feel guilty and consider everybody else before themselves. That's a big emotional thing, I think for the victims to have to deal with.

Aliza: Definitely.

Monica: Thank you so much. Sorry, I know I added a few additional questions there, but it's really useful to hear your insights. I'm going to hand over to Kate for the next few questions.

Kate: Thanks Monica, that's great.

You've both talked about ideas of consent and different understandings of abuse and the role of shame and a little about the role of honour. Also, the fact that these subjects are taboo.

I wondered in your work as a practitioner, both of you. What particular needs have you found that women from minority communities have, particularly around emotional and financial abuse? Which both of you identified as something that perhaps comes from a different angle when we're talking about minority communities.

Sam: Well, one of the clients that I've worked, she is a stay-at-home mum and her husband, I guess is the breadwinner. There is an element of control with the finances, but she's not very well. She suffers from kidney infection and she's on dialysis.

She said that she does have a lot of emotional abuse from her husband, regarding the finances and that he's out to work. She's just at home and then just completely always putting her down. She was asking me; I don't know what I can do here. I've got a mortgage with this man; he doesn't want to be with me. He constantly tells me he wants to leave me.

She was dealing with an awful lot of emotional abuse from him. I talked her through it and offer that emotional support but it's like she knows herself. She feels herself rather that, she just has to put up with it because there's no way out. There are ways out.

Kate: Aliza, has that echoed any of your experience as a practitioner?

Aliza: Yes, definitely with the financial abuse side of things.

When I'm looking at the age group, it's quite interesting because there are two which I've noticed starting from early 20s to late 30s. They do tend to be a little educated and they do recognise different forms of abuse and are quite capable of taking next steps to safeguard themselves.

Starting from late 30's to all the way till late 80's, where they don't have education. Where they can't even read or write in their own language, in the Nepali community. That makes them completely dependent on their spouse; this has been throughout their whole marriage.

They think that leaving, divorce/ separation - it's not a choice for them at all. This is also just purely to do with the finance side of things. Also, with what the community will say, but also, they've never done it throughout their lives.

They think that 'what I'm going to do if I do get out?' 'what I'm going to do in terms of money?' and 'I'm going to be separated with my children?' Education also plays quite an important part in what kind of decision a Nepali victim of abuse would make.

I thought that was quite interesting because there's been so many of my ongoing and past cases that I've noticed the similarities with education, and with finance, and being financially dependent on someone.

Monica: Can I just ask a question to both of you? Do you feel like language and when I say language, in terms of first obviously being able to go to support workers or the police and openly discuss what's happened is a barrier; also, how words are translated. A lot of women might use a word like *izzat* (respect) and about respect. Then assume that to protect that husband's *izzat* or that husbands respect, that being sexually abused is okay, because she's protecting her family.

If she was to go and report it, that *izzat* would then be impacted, the translations of words may hold in their community or their cultural practice. Has that come across in your field of work?

Aliza: Yeah, it has. Especially when the victims are giving interviews with the police or especially during court proceedings; it does. They have said many times it does get lost in translation almost and also them not being able to express what they're saying. Also, cultural barrier plays an important role in whether or not they will disclose, or whether or not after disclosing and how comfortable they feel with other frontline practitioners.

They retract their statements just because they're worried about how they will come across and then not being understood by professional and going in the wrong way. With social workers it can be quite difficult for them to give that for us, because I think there's a lot said in the community about how the Council/ Social services are going to take away the children and separate you.

Yeah, that does happen quite a lot. The need to protect their honour within the community outweighs their personal safety. That's how they will answer the questions even after they have disclosed, and they've called 999. They might be making that call because they were scared during that time, but they might change their mind immediately after the abuser has been taken away. Or a couple of days or weeks and they might just easily change their statements.

If the frontline professionals had a deep understanding about this *izzat* like you said and about their importance of wanting to protect this and I think they would be able to do it in many sessions and they would be able to open up more if deeply understood.

Monica: Thank you. Sorry Kate, I completely interrupted you, but just really wanted to hear from that different perspective as well.

Kate: That's no problem at all. I have a question here; you have both talked a little about the need to educate and how much of your role in IDVA & ISVA roles are about education. Can you say a little bit about the service that you are able to provide, to help women from minority communities in particular?

Sam: It's quite inclusive with regard to the support, in terms of the emotional side and practical support. The only other sort of service we have is obviously the interpreters that we can offer if that is a need. In general, it's quite inclusive, so the services are the same the

whole way through. It's just having that understanding piece, really, to educate them around what it is and if they are suffering at the hands of an abuser to get that support that is available to them.

It is a slow burner in terms of building that rapport, but once you're finally getting there, you do feel like actually, yeah. It is quite shocking at how much people actually do experience.

Kate: Thank you. Aliza, From your perspective, in terms of the services that you're able to offer women. Are there particular ways that you feel that you've been able to help with minority communities in particular? I'm also really interested from your angle about the education process.

Aliza: In terms of educating side of things, I raise awareness in different Nepali group. So, in Rushmoor which is Aldershot and Farnborough, there's a lot of Nepali population, so it's kind of easy for me to access those groups. Obviously, my surname is Gurung, so with every surname to have different languages, different everything. There are so many different groups has been going on, so actually used to do it for face to face but now it's been done virtually. Attending groups such as those and with attendees of about like 150 to 200, so that's reaching a lot of groups.

Also, ESOL classes or training local GP's and nurses, attending army wife coffee evenings, and talking to them about case studies in where obviously victims have given consent to talk about it; so just basically going through that. Those kind of sessions do sometimes tend to be quite intense, because if it is just me, a Nepali girl delivering those things, I'm talking about sexual abuse and I'm talking about rape and consent. There's a lot of challenging questions that can be asked.

That can be quite difficult at times to be honest, but then I think doing that also helps quite a lot.

Most of my referrals they tend to be self-referrals, or it done through word of mouth, where so many of the cases I've had is basically someone saying, *"oh I was sat at your presentation and 7 months later it reminded me of my niece living in Oxford, about financial abuse and I want talk about how can I help her without putting myself in a dangerous place?"*.

It's happened so many times, to this even little presentations and briefings here and there becomes so important, to help them understand that there is help available. They might be worried about the language and cultural side of things; so that is a number one thing.

The others are that providing emotional and practical support with helping them. With the emotional side of things, obviously they do need a lot of hand holding throughout the whole process; I've noticed. Especially with later age group, because they know so little because obviously, they can't read or write. So, they just want to give up at so many points. It's just having a lot of session and just encouraging them.

Repetition becomes key because they might say that *oh, I'll just go back*. They would rather, like I said earlier, the need to protect their honour becomes everything for them.

Yeah, that is quite important, and the other ways is basically you are helping them through other practical support, through their court proceedings papers or the legal aid side of things.

Kate: A really rich list of things that you can do for the people you work with and all sorts of different support that you can give. Monica, will you ask the final question?

Monica: Yeah, of course. I'm going to actually break this up as two questions. First, is how do we get people to get involved more? In terms of accessing the support and feeling comfortable in getting that support and what exists out there for them?

Sam: I think it's really key, like with what I'm doing to have a really good relationship with partners, whether that be community leaders, mum and toddler groups, refuge groups, domestic violence groups. Just, basically so that the service users coming to them know what is out there in terms of support services.

I think that's really important for that message to get out. It has to be like in a non-informal way which clients would want to talk out. I feel for me my relationship with partners is key in trying to access them people.

Aliza: With me, is just continuing to go to different group and making them feel comfortable. That they do have a familiar face to talk to and they might not want to disclose in the first session, maybe in a couple of sessions. Also, finding other such groups, where they can continue delivering those kind of presentations to make them aware that there is help available for them.

Monica: You may have touched on this already. How do we empower both women and men who may be victims or know someone that is a victim to have that conversation? I think as we've mentioned, the stuff about honour. I think it's hard enough as it is without the community pressure and the cultural pressure.

How does someone like myself engage in those conversations? What terminology should I be using?

Sam: I feel like the way to empower the men and women would be just let them know about their own happiness. Really like hit home about that they need to be happy. They don't need to be at the hands of an abuser and there are ways of dealing with certain situations and not having to worry about the community and what other people are thinking or are going to think.

So, it's just about really making that victim feel good or try and feel good about themselves. If they have been in a situation where they're receiving that abuse, that emotional abuse or anything.

Aliza: No, I agree, I agree. Just validating them, just listening to them. I was actually making some support group with the community that I have. So, basically what I was doing, I was helping some of the victims.

There's been so many victims who have been trapped in a domestic abuse marriage or relationship and they've come from Nepal to here through spousal visa. There's a lot of dialogues going on from the perpetrator to the victim. Saying that I brought you here, you need to be grateful to me, that sort of thing. I'll separate you from your kids and them kinds of things; so, helping them because they think that they don't have any option once they are here through their husbands or through their wives. Just trying/ applying for that indefinite leave to remain.

I set up a support group for the immigration side of things. When I helped the first victim, the first victim's application would come as a success. The first victim would remain anonymous and talk to the other victim with their consent of course.

With the first victim they would feel like they been in a better place once the application is sorted. The benefit side of thing, the accommodation.

I started this from 2018 so they don't disclose their names. Some of them do want to do that, meet face to face because by the time they reach their safe place, they feel confident to kind of help the other person/ other victim in need who is in a similar situation to them. Making these anonymous, very anonymous support groups.

We also made sure that there was one victim, who wanted to do a podcast it is actually on YouTube. They were sharing their side of the story; we distorted their voice. It got tremendous response from the Nepali community because it was actually a victim of domestic abuse and sexual abuse. Talking about what happened to her, how she escaped; so, it actually got quite popular within the community that we shared around.

Monica: Thank you. It just shows, doesn't it. It could be something that's so simple but actually it could be a few words. It could be a leaflet, it could be a podcast to help encourage that change or that, maybe empowerment isn't that word. But, just to feel confident that you can share your story.

My last question is really is around resources. I know you've mentioned some, but are there any in particular that you would recommend to everyone listening today?

Sam: In terms of resources, I think just being able to access different groups. Obviously, the websites are there. Social media. We've got our Victims First website.

Monica: Perfect. Aliza, what about you?

Aliza: Yes, we've got a website called the Northeast Hampshire Domestic Abuse Forum that contains a lot of resources, pictorial, and written leaflets for domestic abuse.

There's also a lot on safety planning in different ways, about what to do if you still live with your abusive partner or abusive family member. Or if they are thinking of leaving or if they've just left with their children. Those kind of things are very helpful. Also, there's one like a flyer on Gov.uk, it's called barriers faced by the Nepali community affected by domestic abuse. So, it talks really in a detailed way about culture and language barriers and their total reluctance to consider about divorce separation. I think that that would be really helpful.

Monica: Thank you so much both and that's been very insightful. I've learnt a lot as well. Kate, do you have anything to add?

Kate: A comment, really. I'm just really blown away by just the amazing work that you've been doing and how broad the education, the kind of ways that you're able to educate people has been as you've described it, with one to one or both building relationships with groups, with individuals building that rapport, helping people to trust you right through to the more formalised sort of websites and social media. But that relationship building really has come across to me as something just completely invaluable; So, I think you've just both done quite an amazing job.

Monica: Thank you so much, ladies. Thank you for your time. It's been an absolute pleasure to have you both on the podcast.

Kate: Yes, it certainly has.

Sam: Thank you.

Aliza: Thank you.

Tom: As our podcast comes to an end, we hope that listeners from minority communities have gained knowledge and understanding to seek support around domestic abuse or sexual violence, in particular around the criminal justice system. Our aim is to give people more confidence and empower them with accurate information, so that they are able to make informed choices.

Monica: Thanks for listening! All the resources and service provision discussed in this podcast will be listed in the description.

Kate: If you enjoyed this episode, please share it with others and post about it on social media. Keep an ear out for our other podcasts. Until then stay safe, join the conversation, and help raise awareness.