

Briefing Note: Supporting Staff & Students Experiencing Gender-based Violence (GBV) During the COVID-19 Crisis

Key actions the sector can take

In a letter of 6th April 2020, the #EmilyTest campaign¹, endorsed by key GBV support agencies, called on the sector to take 8 key actions related to domestic and sexual violence experienced by students. This briefing note endorses that important appeal, and complements and dovetails with that call, in addressing the needs of staff as victim/survivors, perpetrators and those to whom students might disclose. Based on advice from the #EmilyTest and other GBV experts, the following were identified as key to supporting staff and students experiencing GBV.

- **Signposting** to support is vital (either internal counselling and student services or external GBV support agencies). It is essential that the services that victims/survivors are directed to have an understanding of the issues and work safely. Please signpost with sensitivity and appropriately, ensuring that Scottish and local signposting is prioritised. This is particularly important for colleges where the majority of students will be drawn from the local area. Whilst many university students will have moved out of Scotland during the pandemic, many remain as do the staff from both colleges and universities. A list of GBV support services is attached to this briefing.
- **Messaging** to victims/survivors needs to be simple and straight-forward. Do not over-complicate the message. Avoid victim blaming language and avoid the implication that abuse is caused by stress, or responsibility for it is shared (for example, coercive control is not about fights). Remember that perpetrators as well as victims/survivors are likely to see what you send out so ensure that what you send does not provide information a perpetrator might be able to use against a victim. Avoid being explicit about identifying tools of abuse or providing 'code words' in general communications.
- **Think about your staff and student demographic** and take an intersectional approach to the different forms of GBV they might be experiencing. Based on your knowledge of your institution, tailor specific messages to different groups. The phrase 'GBV' may not make sense to victims/survivors so focusing the message on the issues (fear of partner/fear of being forced into a marriage/harassment because of your gender identity) is likely to be more effective.
- **Prepare for post lock-down.** Experts suggest that given the difficulty some victims/survivors will face in accessing support in this period, there may be a spike in help-seeking post lock-down. Planning now to ensure that counselling and student support services have the capacity is important. This might include making contact with local GBV service providers, collecting leaflets and other appropriate materials and staff training. It might also mean contingency planning for supporting impacted staff who, temporarily, need greater work flexibility. If lock-down ends during the summer period, consider the possibility of making any student accommodation available to students and staff who need to remove themselves from their current abode because they are experiencing GBV.

¹ For further information about this organisation working to address domestic and sexual violence experienced by students, please visit their website - <http://emilytest.co.uk/>.

Background

For many, home is not a safe and secure place. The COVID-19 outbreak united with current social distancing and self-isolation requirements can be particularly challenging for those experiencing gender-based violence (GBV) and abuse. It will have serious impacts on the ability of victims to source safety. It is vital that those in this situation are reassured that they are not alone and that support services are continuing to operate. The college and university sector has a role to play in working to support victims/survivors who are either staff or students within their institutions. Some issues will be the same across the sector but some will differ. For example, universities are more likely to have students still living in their accommodation.

This briefing paper will outline the major intersections between COVID-19 and GBV, highlight central messages that institutions should be providing to staff and students, and identify key actions that can be taken to promote the safety of victims/survivors. It builds on and aligns to the recently distributed letter from #EmilyTest and is a complement to Equally Safe In Higher Education guidance for responding to student disclosures of GBV (see additional information section at the end of this briefing).

What is GBV and how is it linked with COVID-19?

GBV is an umbrella term for abuse that is perpetrated against a person's will and that results from power inequalities based on gender roles in the private and public spheres. It is primarily perpetrated by men and experienced by women, but men can also be victims and key helplines offer support across the gender and sexuality spectrum. It has been described as a 'policing mechanism' to maintain the gendered status quo (Lang, 2002). It incorporates all violence against women and also includes violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and non-binary (LGBT+) people in the form of homophobic and transphobic abuse. It occurs in all sections of society, irrespective of class and culture. It is systematic, controlled and controlling (not a loss of temper) and takes the form of actions that result in physical, sexual and psychological harm or suffering. These include but are not limited to: domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, stalking, forced marriage, 'honour'-based violence and commercial sexual exploitation.

Government guidance on social distancing to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 is challenging when home is not safe, and for some these measures could increase the risk of experiencing abuse. For those experiencing multiple forms of discrimination – including BAME women and disabled and LGBT+ victims/survivors – the barriers to safety are multiplied. We know perpetrators will use infection control measures as a tool of coercive and controlling behaviour. Measures introduced to decrease social contact are likely to exacerbate the social isolation also felt by, and enforced on, victims of GBV. Access to support is also likely to become more challenging and the mental health impacts of social distancing/isolation are likely to be more acute for survivors coping with and/or recovering from trauma.

It is important to note that while it is not 'business as usual' for most of us in our working and social lives, the tactics of coercion, control, surveillance and intimidation will continue for those experiencing GBV. COVID-19 will not offer respite from these tactics but does offer the perpetrator further opportunity and scope to extend the abuse or introduce new tools of abuse into the existing regime. Following are examples of the connections between COVID-19 and specific forms of GBV that have been reported to support organisations.

Virus-specific sources of abuse: Perpetrators are using virus-specific misinformation and scare-tactics to control, frighten or torment victims/survivors, or to prevent them from seeking appropriate medical attention or other help. Where children live across two households, they might be weaponised by a perpetrator. Effectively, COVID-19 becomes another tool in the abuser's toolkit. This might be particularly prevalent in cases where the victim/survivor and perpetrator live together such as domestic abuse, forced marriage, 'honour'-based violence and child sexual abuse.

Use of social distancing and isolation measures: Social distancing and isolation increases face-to-face exposure to perpetrators, producing a conducive space for abuse. The closure of libraries, offices, shops etc. deny the victim/survivor the opportunity for respite or to reach out for help. Social isolation is a key tactic used by perpetrators of abuse and this can be reinforced and justified in the current context. GBV victims/survivors have described their experiences as like being taken hostage and this sense of entrapment is likely to be compounded under lock-down. For victims of domestic abuse, the levels of sexual violence they experience may increase. Those being coerced into a forced marriage may feel even greater pressure to capitulate to the demands. LGBT+ people, including those recently coming to understand their identity in the new environment of university or college, may be forced to lock-down with families hostile to their sexuality or gender identity and face abuse associated with this.

The message to 'stay at home' does not just impact those victims/survivors living with abusers. Those being stalked are at additional risk in this situation, as are those who have fled a forced marriage or other forms of 'honour' based violence. Furthermore, post separation abuse is commonly experienced by victims of domestic abuse. It will be easier for perpetrators to track their victim in these instances and victims are likely to be living with additional levels of fear. Where child contact arrangements are in place, risk may be increased by existing safety measures (eg hand-over in a neutral or observed space) being reduced.

Risks associated with social distancing in public space: As we are encouraged to exercise away from other people, there is an additional risk of sexual predators making use of this. This is also a concern for those who sell or exchange sex who may be operating in even more isolated ways than usual (and evidence suggests that some young women do sell sex to help pay their way through the education system).

Living on-line and technology mediated abuse: Victims/survivors of domestic abuse, either those still with their partner or those who have separated, regularly identify on-line surveillance and harassment as part of the pattern of behaviour they experience and this becomes more likely as we spend more of our lives virtually. Virtual communication with the outside world may be monitored and observed, meaning the victim/survivor is unable to speak freely. The risk of cyber-harassment is also increased for victims of stalking and those fleeing 'honour'-based violence. The creation of sexual images and films is also mediated through the move to on-line living with the resultant risk of increased distribution without consent. This may be between partners or between contacts built up by increased virtual socialising. Additionally, women who sell or exchange sex may move to doing so online, operating in an unknown environment which gets exploited by punters.

Not everyone has access to technology. Those living with abuse may have their access to technology denied or controlled. As such, staff and students may struggle to attend meetings and classes. And while many support projects are moving to on-line support, many victims may not be able to access them.

The 'new normal' life continues: Victims/survivors may also be dealing with a range of other stresses associated with COVID-19 which intersect with the abuse they are experiencing. Trans

people may experience difficulty accessing hormones and other medication. Child contact disputes and the need to comply with court orders will be on-going (and can be used) by perpetrators. Uncertainty about immigration status may remain a concern. The need to maintain a tenancy (including university accommodation) can cause stress.

Key messages to provide to staff and students who are victims/survivors

These are challenging times and we are being bombarded with information, so it is important (certainly for the victims/survivors but also for the institutions dealing with multiple and complex pressures) that messaging on this issue is simple. Based on advice from the GBV sector, the following are key.

- Abuse you are experiencing is not your fault.
- You have the right to feel safe wherever you are and whatever you are doing.
- Help is available, services are still running. Many services are moving on-line or to telephone support.
- The police and health service are still here to help you – don't feel you can't call because of COVID-19.
 - Silent solutions:
 - Call 999
 - Listen to the operator
 - Cough or tap the handset
 - If prompted press 55 – this lets the operator know it is a genuine call and you are put through to the police.
- This might not be the right/safe time to leave. You can still safety plan and services can still support you, and will be there for you when the time is right for you.

Key Messages to Provide to Staff

Because we recognise that GBV occurs across all sections of society, it is important to acknowledge that staff members may be victims (and perpetrators), as well as people who may identify a potential victim/survivor or receive a disclosure. The following are the key messages to provide staff in relation to their role as a potential source of support.

- There are many reasons why colleagues or students behave differently in these times, or do not attend meetings or classes. Be aware that control by a GBV perpetrator may be one of these.
- If you receive a disclosure, acknowledge it, listen and ask the victim/survivor what they want you to do.
- You are not expected to be a GBV expert or a counsellor.
- It is ok to feel worried about broaching the subject, getting it wrong and making things worse, if you suspect a colleague or student is experiencing abuse.
- Victims/survivors often do not want you to 'fix' things – listening and believing are important. You can offer to seek advice and information for them if they wish for it.
- Think safety – a perpetrator might be listening in. If you do feel you need to approach the issue, do so conversationally, saying things like "You haven't been in touch much lately. Is everything OK?" or "I've noticed you seem a bit down. Has anyone upset you?"
- Let the person know they can talk to you when they want to.
- If you have concerns about a child, follow your child protection guidance.

Good practice in the sector

The following are some of the actions being undertaken to address this issue in the sector:

- Adding the numbers of support services to email signatures.
- Using social media to share information about support services.
- Making the contact details of sources of health and support more visible on their web-pages.
- Providing briefings to staff and students.

It is intended that, in collaboration with #EmilyTest, a suite of resources (eg. email banners) to support the sector in addressing this issue will be produced. **If you have ideas you would like to feed in, or examples of good practice you can share with us, please do contact Nel Whiting (nel.whiting@advance-he.ac.uk) at Advance HE.**

Useful guidance documents

The following is not exhaustive, but represents a range of information produced by experts to help professionals deal with this issue sensitively. This includes as an employer.

- Public Health Scotland's information leaflets on GBV, providing accessible background information about various forms of GBV:
<http://www.healthscotland.scot/health-topics/gender-based-violence>
- ESHE guidance for responding to student disclosures of GBV:
https://www.strath.ac.uk/media/1newwebsite/departmentsubject/socialwork/documents/eshe/8_Guidance_for_Responding_to_Student_Disclosures_of_Gender_Based_Violence_on_Campus.pdf
- Safelives guidance for employers and if you suspect a friend is experiencing abuse during COVID-19:
<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/030420%20Briefing%20note%20for%20Employers%20during%20covid-19.pdf>
<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Friends%20and%20family%20blog%20covid-19.pdf>
- UCLAN guidance on harmful traditional practices:
<http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/32886/1/COVID-19%20Response-HARM.pdf>
- While it is important to only use risk assessment tools when it is safe, the Safe Lives and Lime Culture risk assessment documents are a useful guide:
<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Dash%20risk%20checklist%20quick%20start%20guidance.pdf>
<https://limeculture.co.uk/universities/>

GBV Support Contacts

DOMESTIC ABUSE & FORCED MARRIAGE

- Scotland's Domestic Abuse And Forced Marriage Helpline
Open 24/7
Call: 0800 027 1234
Email: helpline@sdafmh.org.uk
Web chat: sdafmh.org.uk
- Local Women's Aid Groups
Find your [local women's aid group](#)
- National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline
Open Monday to Friday, 10am - 5pm and Wednesday to Thursday, 10am-8pm
Call: 0800 999 5428
Email: help@galop.org.uk
- AMINA – Muslim Women's Resource Centre
Open Monday to Friday, 10am - 4pm.
Call: 0808 801 0301
- Respect Phonenumber – for perpetrators seeking help
Open, 9am – 5pm
0808 8024040 or www.respectphonenumber.org.uk

RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

- Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline
Open daily, 6 pm - midnight
Call: 08088 01 03 02
Text: 07537 410027
Email: support@rapecrisisScotland.org.uk
- Local Rape Crisis Centres
Find your [local rape crisis](#) centre.
Some of them also have a helpline open outside the National Rape Crisis Helpline hours.
- Trauma Counselling Line Scotland – for survivors of childhood abuse
Open Monday to Wednesday, 2pm - 6pm and Friday, 9am - 3pm.
Call: 08088 02 04 06
- Click – support for women selling sex on-line
Chat is open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, 11am - 1pm.
Online chat: www.click.scot/chat

STALKING & CYBER-STALKING

- National Stalking Helpline
Open daily 9:30am - 4pm, except Wednesday, 1pm - 4pm
Call: 0808 802 0300
- FollowIt App – can be downloaded to record incidents of stalking
download this app
- Revenge Porn helpline
Email: **help@revengepornhelpline.org.uk**
- The Cyber Helpline
Access **their range of guides** to help you when your online security has been compromised.
- Report Harmful Content
This organisation can **support you** in reporting harmful online content across different social media platforms.
- Voice of Internet Crime
This site has **instructions on removing your images** from Google and other websites.

HOMOPHOBIC AND TRANSPHOBIC ABUSE

- LGBT Helpline Scotland
Open Tuesday and Wednesday between 12-9pm
Call 0300 123 2523
Email the helpline confidentially on **helpline@lgbthealth.org.uk**.
- LGBT Youth Scotland's transgender support service
- Email **info@lgbtyouth.org.uk** or send a text to 07786 202 370

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

- Modern Slavery Helpline
Call: 08000 121 700

LEGAL AND FINANCIAL ADVICE

- Scottish Women's Rights Centre
Open for legal information: Monday 2 - 5 pm. Tuesday 6 - 8 pm, Wednesday 11 am - 2 pm,
Friday 10 am - 1 pm
Open for advocacy support: Tuesday 11 am - 2 pm
Open for Sexual harassment support: Thursday 5 - 8 pm
Call: 08088 010 789

- Scottish Refugee Council (for immigration advice)
Open Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm
Call: 0141 223 7979
Information on the [changes to the asylum process and resettlement](#) here.
- Shelter Scotland (for housing advice)
Open Monday – Friday 9am-5pm
Call: 0808800 4444

SUPPORT FOR MENTAL HELATH

- Samaritans
Open 24/7
Call: 116 123
- Breathing Space
Open Monday-Thursday 6pm to 2am and Friday 6pm - Monday 6am
Call: 0800 83 85 87