

The impact of COVID-19 on partnerships between police and GBV service providers in remote, rural and island communities in Scotland.

Sarah Pedersen, Natascha Mueller-Hirth and Leia Miller.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Domestic abuse and violence in rural, remote and island locations tends to be underestimated and the unique experiences of women and girls from rural communities are rarely captured in domestic abuse scholarship. Moreover, rural, remote and island communities offer particular challenges around the policing of domestic abuse and around support for victims. The geographical profile of rural communities means that victims often live miles from their nearest third-sector support organisation or police station, yet face pressures where approaching the police is concerned due to the tight-knit nature of rural communities. Victims additionally face issues speaking out against domestic abuse as they are aware of the proximity they have to perpetrators and those associated with them.

The challenges experienced by domestic abuse victims in rural communities were further heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdown typically led to abusers spending more time with their victim, creating further opportunities for monitoring and control of their behaviour.

This study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on partnerships between the police and third-sector gender-based violence (GBV) service providers in remote, rural and island communities in Scotland. Between April and November 2022, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with police officers of different experience and ranks, including community, response, and specialist task force officers. Further interviews were undertaken with representatives from third-sector domestic abuse organisations in remote, rural and island communities in Scotland.

The main challenges that arose in the partnerships between the police and GBV service providers during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural, remote and island communities included:

The secretive nature of domestic abuse

Victims are reluctant to speak out where they must live in close proximity to their perpetrators and their family and friends, which contributes to serious underreporting of domestic abuse in these areas. During the pandemic, identification of police outside of the home was more noticeable, as the social-distancing measures required officers to adopt drastic measures, such as taking statements through windows wearing very visible PPE equipment, opening victims up to public scrutiny.

Geographical challenges

The geographical challenges of policing domestic abuse in rural and remote Scotland were further exacerbated during the pandemic, with 'stay at home' orders and closure of vital ferry and air services substantially impacting the policing of domestic abuse.

Staffing

Limited staff numbers meant that officers were occasionally unable to attend outer island calls and there was a lack of female officers available to domestic abuse victims.

Police and third-sector organisations were able to overcome some of these challenges by:

- **Implementing videoconferencing and telephone communication as a contingency strategy for their multi-agency relationships.**
- **Working together to use national and local media to make victims aware that it was lawful to leave home to escape abuse.**
- **Responding flexibly to support victims in rural, remote and island communities.**

Based on the qualitative research conducted in this study and the best practice it documents, we make the following recommendations:

1. Continued Use of Videoconferencing and Telephone Communication

The use of video links has also been shown to be effective in managing the backlog of domestic abuse court cases amidst the pandemic. We also recommend that digital communication is considered where domestic abuse specific training is concerned.

2. Victim-Centred Training

CPD training should be considered for non-specialist officers based in remote, rural and island communities. Findings from the research suggest that most officers had received little to no specific training relating to domestic abuse beyond their onboarding training.

3. Female Officers

More female officers should be trained to deal with domestic abuse cases in rural, remote and island Scotland in order to encourage a greater number of victims to engage with the criminal justice system.

4. Flexibility in Responses

The flexibility shown by officers during the pandemic should continue to be used as best practice, with special measures, like the use of third-sector office locations to take statements, considered in communication between the police and third-sector organisations.

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a major public health, equality and human rights issue which affects 1 in 3 women across the globe (World Health Organisation 2021). It can expose victims to physical, sexual, and psychological harm, which often has a long-lasting impact on their lives. Even though 9.7 million British people, and nearly one-fifth of the Scottish population, live in rural areas (Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs 2021, Scottish Government 2021), the unique experiences of women and girls from rural communities are rarely captured in domestic abuse scholarship (DeKeseredy 2015, Little 2017) and domestic abuse and violence in rural, remote and island locations tends to be underestimated. This has been attributed to the nature of rural gender relations, which might remain particularly conservative and patriarchal in nature (Terry 2020) and involve a blurring of boundaries between violence and non-violent behaviour in the home (DeKeseredy et al. 2007). Moreover, rural, remote and island communities offer particular challenges around the policing of GBV and around support for victims. The geographical profile of rural communities means that victims often live miles from their nearest third-sector support organisation or police station, yet face pressures where approaching the police is concerned due to the tight-knit nature of rural communities. Victims additionally face issues speaking out against

domestic abuse as they are aware of the proximity they have to perpetrators and those associated with them.

The challenges experienced by domestic abuse victims in rural communities were further heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdown typically led to abusers spending more time with their victim, creating further opportunities for the monitoring and control of their behaviour (Lyons and Brewer 2021). People were living together 24/7 with stress factors such as concerns about money, jobs and health impacting on mental health and tempers. In fact, lockdown conditions were often used by abusers to intensify or conceal their violence, coercion, and control (Hohl and Johnson 2021).

In order to explore the impact of the pandemic on partnerships between the police and third-sector gender-based violence (GBV) service providers in remote, rural and island communities in Scotland, 11 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with various police officers of different experience and ranks, including community, response, and specialist task force officers, and a further 6 interviews were undertaken with representatives from third-sector domestic abuse organisations. These interviews took place between April and November 2022.

CHALLENGES

From the interviews, we identified different challenges that arose in the partnerships between the police and GBV service providers in rural, remote and island communities.

Secretive Nature of Domestic Abuse

Discussions with police officers highlighted the secretive nature of domestic abuse in these communities and how rurality and islandness impact victims' likelihood to engage with the criminal justice system. Victims from rural, remote and island communities are likely to fly below the radar as they are reluctant to identify themselves to the police. Officers in this study suggested that this contributes to a serious underreporting of domestic abuse in these areas, as victims are reluctant to speak out where they must live in close proximity to their perpetrators and their family and friends due to the close-knit nature of rural life.

“It all comes back to the almost secretive nature of small communities where something is very much happening behind closed doors and even if everybody on the island knows about it, we don't.”

Contributions from third-sector organisations further develop this idea of domestic abuse being secretive, drawing on victims' concerns around reporting to the police. Third-sector participants in the study highlighted victims' anxieties about being identified in their local communities, for instance if a police car were to be seen outside their home. Identification of police outside of the home was more noticeable during the pandemic, as the social-distancing measures required officers to adopt drastic measures, such as taking statements through windows wearing very visible PPE equipment. For rural communities, surveillance culture tends to be a common characteristic, which one officer noted seemed to increase during lockdown; therefore, such measures could open victims up to public scrutiny and impact the likelihood of them engaging with the police.

“...there was nothing else to talk about and everyone would have noticed everything going on.”

Additionally, one third-sector participant highlighted that the broadcasting of domestic abuse cases in the local press acted as a deterrent for reporting their experiences to the police. Rather, victims would like their personal experiences to remain private and free from public opinion in areas where a third-sector participant suggested people are more “forcibly engaged with each other.”

“Some of the first questions we get asked are: how will this be reported in our local paper when it goes to court or if it goes to court? So, there's a lot of anxiety from people about how them reporting might get reported in the local media and therefore come under scrutiny from the local community about the fact that somebody's made a report.”

“They don't want to rock the boat. Don't want to damage their reputation and have people speaking about them. People speaking about him, you know?”

Geography

Officers and third-sector organisations in the study noted that the geographical challenges of policing domestic abuse in rural and remote Scotland were further exacerbated during the pandemic. With the geographical areas covered by rural, remote and island police officers being vast in scale, the ‘stay at home’ orders and closure of vital ferry and air services had a substantial impact on the

policing of domestic abuse. One third-sector participant drew on this issue, as well as the impact that transportation issues had on victim support, with those on remote islands not having direct access to support services or the police due to their geographical location.

“There's difficulties with transport across the whole area... People that live on some of the islands that are not easily accessible. There are no support services there, there are no police there and a lot of services are now far more centralised.”

Transportation limitations further impacted officers' abilities to engage with victims of domestic abuse as they were less able to travel during the pandemic. One high-ranking officer suggested that travel constraints increased the workload of on-beat officers, who at times were required to conduct interviews and gather evidence on behalf of the specialist domestic abuse task forces from centralised locations, like Inverness, as well as managing their own caseloads.

“...we've had to rely on [local officers] to engage with survivors and to then note statements and gather evidence and then, once we've sort of collated the evidence from them and the information, we've then had to rely on them to arrest the perpetrator and sometimes interview them and deal with it fully.”

Staffing Shortages

Police officers mentioned staffing shortages across Police Scotland, and indicated that these shortages were worsened in rural, remote and island locations during the pandemic. As noted above, transport limitations increased the workloads of local officers, who were required to support Domestic Abuse and Rape Investigation units where they could not access rural communities. This caused local officers to be stretched as they were needed to act as both community and response officers, but sometimes did not have enough staff to have these as two separate roles. Moreover, the staffing constraints in the police impacted officers' responses to domestic incidents. One officer who worked on an island highlighted that their limited staff numbers meant that there were occasions where they were unable to attend outer island calls as there would be no cover on the mainland.

“One of the islands is only accessible through Inter-Island flights and I've not attended there once because of how difficult it is for us with numbers unfortunately, although there have been incidents on that island.”

One specific staffing issue noted by third-sector participants in the policing of domestic abuse was the lack of female officers available to victims from rural communities. This issue was considered by one of the female officers interviewed as their “biggest operational challenge”, with another officer noting that the workloads of female officers are “a lot higher than the males”. One third-sector participant also suggested that the lack of female officers can be a deterrent for victims to engage with the criminal justice system; thus, can contribute to further under-reporting of domestic abuse in these communities.

“If you don't get that sympathetic response or your preference would be to speak to a female officer, then that isn't always possible at that initial stage and some people say they've walked into the police station, they've realized it was all male officers on duty or they couldn't speak to specialist officer and then they might turn around and walk out again.”

Issues may also arise when there is not a suitably trained officer to deal with a victim, such as a male victim or those who are in a same-sex relationship.

“The police are not always aware, not all officers are aware, of how best to deal with a male victim of domestic abuse anyway, but it did feel as if things got a bit worse during lockdown.”

Backlog and Delay in the Courts

A major concern highlighted by both police officers and representatives of third-sector organisations was the impact of the pandemic on the time taken for domestic abuse cases to reach court. Interviewees shared concerns that these delays continued to impact on victims' willingness to follow through with a case, as the backlog generated during the pandemic caused many cases to be postponed multiple times.

“I've had people withdraw their charges, their claims. You've had people who just couldn't wait any longer with that hanging over them and pulling away, disengaging.”

“If you've been hanging on for, you know, by your fingertips for 18 months and then you get a date and then suddenly it's not happening any longer and they can't tell you how long it will be or almost worse still is it's been cancelled... That was really difficult for people to deal with.”

Not only have these delays had a significant impact on victims, but one third-sector support worker explained how delays impacted on the work done by her organisation, with case workers being required to offer emotional support for victims over an extended period, affecting the limited resources of small organisations. Despite the delays, officers emphasised the need for honesty where victims choose to engage with the criminal justice system so that their expectations are kept realistic.

“It is important we are honest with them about that because, you know, that's how you basically build trust with someone who's been a victim is through the honesty and having that open, honest conversation. And if we start telling them, aye well give a statement it will probably go to trial in six months. A year and a half later, it's not even set up a preliminary. What credibility does that give the police?”

Another noted that the backlog of cases also impacted on officers, who could be summoned to court to give evidence for a case that happened over a year ago. In the opinion of one senior officer, the courts had been slow to adapt their processes during the pandemic, meaning that a large number of extensions had been instituted to manage cases coming to court.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Videoconferencing and Telephone Communication

To accommodate the government-imposed social-distancing measures, both the police and third-sector domestic abuse organisations implemented videoconferencing and telephone communication as a contingency strategy for their multi-agency relationships. In a pre-pandemic world, the police and interviewees from third-sector organisations would be expected to fund their own travel to meetings that were potentially miles away and involve a lot of travel time. However, the transition to digital communication was praised for being time and cost effective. A police officer noted that the use of videoconferencing meant that meetings about high-risk or emergency cases could now be convened quickly between representatives of different agencies, describing this as “brilliant” and “a huge benefit”.

The benefits of videoconferencing and telephone communication were also noted in the support given to victims of domestic abuse. The offer of digital support allowed victims to get support from professionals without the need to walk into an identifiable domestic abuse building, particularly in places where surveillance culture is a common feature. Additionally, third-sector participants noted the option to give evidence via video-link as a “far less traumatising” experience “without all that stress of travelling”. These special measures implemented by the courts because of the pandemic allowed for victims to give their evidence from out with the court room environment and in a location where they feel less stressed.

“...She can sit at home, she's got her slippers on, she didn't have to dress up, you know, she could be sitting quite calm beforehand not worrying that he's going to walk in the door.”

Use of National and Local Media

Interviewees from both the police and third-sector organisations acknowledged that lockdown made it more difficult for victims to reach out for help: some victims were concerned about criminalising themselves where their abuse had happened in circumstances that broke lockdown rules, for instance at parties in another person's home or because their abuser had visited their home in defiance of lockdown rules.

“We weren't seeing reports of what was undoubtedly still continuing and happening in the community... It was illegal to be having parties. It was illegal to be at events or having lots of people over to your house so there was implications, you know, to making those kinds of reports as far as people were concerned.”

To overcome these concerns, Police Scotland and third-sector organisations worked together to use national and local media to make victims aware that it was lawful for them to leave their home to escape abuse.

“So, we were putting out messaging at the time to kind of make sure people were, you know aware look, leave your house if you need to, phone the police, whatever it may be.”

Disseminating these messages through the media was essential: not only were victims scared of legal implications of making reports, but one third-sector participant drew on how perpetrators weaponised the pandemic by

convincing victims that the police would not want to support them based on the climate at the time. Circulating communications to encourage victims to come forward could undo some of the harmful messages put out by perpetrators and assure victims that support was available.

“...We heard stories from women where perpetrators said there's no point in phoning the police because it's COVID and they are not going to come out, so it was another... That was another contributing factor to women not wanting to or being able to report.”

Flexibility

Despite the variety of challenges that arose during the pandemic, officers in the study evidenced the unique ways employed to support victims of domestic abuse in rural, remote and island Scotland. One female officer drew on an experience where she had to proactively respond to a domestic dispute with no back-up due to staff shortages and geographical challenges. This required her to travel via private boat and quad bike to respond to the incident.

“It was on a private island, so I had to get a private boat and to go over to the island and then I had to go on a quad bike to get to it so that's resources. You know that if I had had to wait for like the Coast Guard or something like that, it could have been hours getting out there.”

Interviewees also drew on the unique measures they implemented around taking statements in order to minimise victims' concerns around surveillance culture and being subjected to public scrutiny. Third-sector organisations liaised with the police to make their offices available as a safe space for statements to be taken.

“We have an arrangement now whereby if somebody wanted to make a report to the police, that can happen in our office rather than going to the police station and, you know, we can provide more trauma-aware surroundings. We can, you know, it's easier to take a break here and just go to the toilet or a stop for a meal and so that's a real step forward.”

One officer drew on a particularly extreme scenario where she had to think outside the box to engage with a victim. The intimate and close-knit nature of the remote community required her to meet a victim, who could not leave the island due to her abuser working on the ferry, in plain clothes in a wood. This demonstrates the truly unique situations faced by the police in rural, remote and island communities around the policing of domestic abuse and the measures implemented to combat surveillance culture.

“We organised to meet in a wood, you know, as if we were out walking. I was in plain clothes, and she was, whilst her husband was working, able to have that interaction, so it was quite, you know, it could be perceived as extreme measures.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Continued Use of Videoconferencing and Telephone Communication

With the transition to videoconferencing and telephone communication being valued by both police and third-sector participants, it is recommended that this form of communication continues as we move out of the pandemic. The continuation of digital communications has proved to be successful where collaboration is required between third-sector organisations and the police to support victims of domestic abuse. Flexibility can improve the efficiency of support by giving victims choice and flexibility, minimising travel times and saving costs for organisations where they would be required to fund their own travel to face-to-face meetings. Digital platforms were also praised for providing access to valuable training courses and opportunities by third-sector participants, which is something that should be maintained as good practice beyond the pandemic.

“I think what worked really well was putting training on to Teams. It cut the costs. So, for us, generally it was quite difficult to access specialist training for our staff and we've been able to access training and also deliver it through Teams.”

The use of video links has also shown to be effective in managing the backlog of domestic abuse court cases amidst the pandemic, which should continue in a post-pandemic world due to the benefits it has for victims. We also recommend that digital communication is considered where domestic abuse specific training is concerned, as participants have demonstrated its efficiency for delivering training. Online training also allows for increased participation for those in rural, remote and island organisations who may not be able to attend if it were held in person.

However, it is recommended that the police and third-sector domestic abuse organisations remain aware that face-to-face communication

is sometimes necessary when it comes to supporting and interviewing victims. The lack of face-to-face contact can arguably inhibit the formation of positive relationships with victims, whether that be with the police or domestic-abuse organisations, as it is harder to pick up on reactions and emotional responses through technology. Therefore, a hybrid of face-to-face and digital communication channels should be considered.

Victim-Centred Training

From the interviews with third-sector participants who outlined operational issues around capacity and the number of trained officers, it is apparent that there is a need for more specific training around domestic abuse. In particular, CPD training should be considered for non-specialist officers based in remote, rural and island communities: findings from the research suggest that most officers had received little to no specific training relating to domestic abuse beyond their onboarding training, unless they were trained as a specialist, such as a domestic abuse or sexual offences liaison officer. Where this training is lacking, it can significantly affect victims: one third-sector employee drew on cases of 'victim-blaming' from officers who were not sufficiently trained in domestic abuse. Thus, it is recommended that specific training that promotes a victim-centred approach is rolled out to both community and response officers.

The findings also suggest a clear need for more training relating to male and same-sex victims of domestic abuse, with one third-sector interviewee who specialised in supporting male victims commenting that the amount of time they get to inform police officers is “really not enough”. This third-sector participant drew on the reality for male victims, who often face false allegations when the reality is that they are the victim in the situation.

“It's trying to get people to understand that just because my client's a man doesn't necessarily mean that he's a perpetrator, you know he can be a victim.”

Therefore, to ensure the training is truly victim-centred, it should focus on the support of all types of victims so that officers are better equipped when responding to a domestic abuse incident. We recommend that this training should be supported by third-sector domestic abuse organisations so that the police are equipped with knowledge from people who work with different types of victims directly.

“I would love to take more time training the police, but the total time we get just now is about 20 minutes once a year when there's new police officers who are becoming domestic abuse specialist officers when they're in their training, they get 20 minutes from us to tell them about male victims, that's it.”

Female Officers

Although staffing shortages were exacerbated during the pandemic, it is clear that there is a need for more female officers to be trained to deal with domestic abuse cases in rural, remote and island Scotland. By providing female officers in the police with appropriate training to deal with these cases, it could encourage more victims to engage with the criminal justice system where their preference is to speak to a female officer about their experience.

Flexibility in Responses

Finally, we recommend that the flexibility shown by officers during the pandemic continues to be used as best practice. With the close-knit nature of rural life, it is apparent that unique measures are often required for victims to get support and report their experiences of abuse to the police. One third-sector participant drew on the implications for those in island communities where police were not able to exercise flexibility in their responses, as it made victims less likely to engage with the criminal justice system as they did not want police presence at their home to make them identifiable in the community.

“The police were saying that they couldn't have people coming into the station, so it would have to be like a home visit and a lot of people don't want to have the police outside the door.”

Given their trauma-related benefits to victims, special measures, like the use of third-sector office locations to take statements, should be considered in the communication between the police and third-sector organisations as we emerge from the pandemic.

References

DEFRA (2021) Rural_population__Oct_2021.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)

DeKeseredy, W., Donnermeyer, J. F., Schwartz, M. D., Tunnell, K. D., & Hall, M. (2007). Thinking critically about rural gender relations: Toward a rural masculinity crisis/male peer support model of separation/divorce sexual assault. *Critical Criminology*, 15(4): 295-311. 10.1007/s10612-007-9038-0

Little, J. (2017) "Understanding domestic violence in rural spaces: A research agenda." *Progress in Human Geography* 41(4): 472-488. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132516645960>

Scottish Government (2021). People and Communities - Rural Scotland Key Facts 2021 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

Terry, A. N. (2020). The Architecture of Rural Life: The Dangers of Dense Collective Efficacy for At Risk Girls. *Rural Sociology*, 85(3): 780-805. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12325>

World Health Organisation (2021). Devastatingly pervasive: 1 in 3 women globally experience violence. <https://www.who.int/news/item/09-03-2021-devastatingly-pervasive-1-in-3-women-globally-experience-violence>