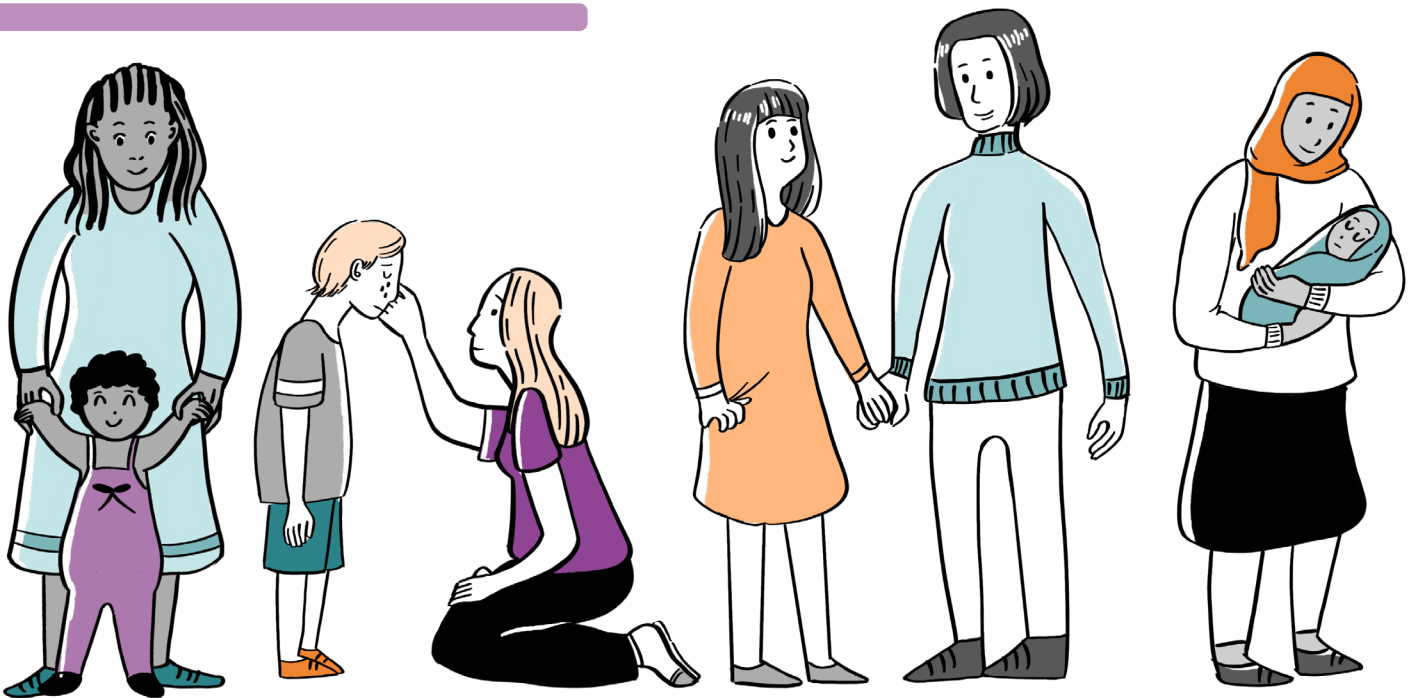


Staying Mum

Findings from peer research with mothers surviving
domestic abuse & child removal



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About AVA

AVA is a feminist organisation committed to creating a world without gender-based violence and abuse. Our mission is to work with survivors to end gender-based violence by championing evidence-based change.

We are a national charity, independent and particularly recognized for our specialist expertise in multiple disadvantage and children and young people's work. Our core work includes training, policy, research, and consultancy.

Staying Mum

'Staying Mum' was a two-year project run by AVA and funded by the John Ellerman foundation. The project focused on women facing multiple disadvantage and their experiences of child removal. It aimed to develop professionals' understanding and responses to mothers facing domestic abuse and other forms of disadvantage, in recognition of the fact that child removal increases trauma for both mother and child.

Key findings and recommendations

This peer research report was carried out by AVA as part of the Staying Mum project, designed to help understand and improve responses to women who have faced domestic and sexual violence and abuse and child removal. Staying Mum was designed to give a voice to women who had experienced the removal of a child or children in the context of domestic abuse.

Domestic abuse and motherhood

- Mothers were subject to coercive, controlling and violent abuse before their children were removed, which disrupted their parenting.
- Post-separation abuse continued to have an impact on the safety of mothers and children after separation or divorce from perpetrators.
- Children were direct targets of domestic and sexual abuse both before and after being removed from their mothers. This affected their safety and in some cases their behaviour, impacting mother's ability to parent effectively.
- Child removal led mothers to question their own identity and left them with feelings of shame, self-blame and failure, compounded by judgement from families, friends and community.

Journeys through child removal

- Common life experiences in the period leading up to child removal included divorce or separation; changes in the financial stability and housing circumstances of mothers; and deteriorating physical or mental health of mothers. These were interconnected and commonly linked to changes or escalation in domestic and sexual abuse of mothers and children.
- The most common grounds for the removal of children were abuse or unfit parenting by mothers.
- Abuse allegations against mothers included emotional abuse through parental alienation, or 'coaching' children to disclose domestic or sexual violence. In some cases, mothers were subject to counter-allegations of physical violence against partners and children.
- Mothers were judged to be unfit parents most commonly on the grounds of their mental health.
- These allegations of abuse, neglect and poor parenting made and accepted during family court proceedings contrasted greatly with mothers' own experience of domestic abuse and motherhood, and aligned with perpetrator narratives of events.

¹See <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/parental-alienation-and-the-family-courts/>

- The majority of mothers told us that their children had been ordered to live with the perpetrator or a member of the perpetrator's family either temporarily or permanently after they were removed from their mother's care.
- Mothers felt their socio-economic status affected their treatment by professionals, particularly where their partner was wealthier or better-connected than them.
- Some mothers felt that their mental health problems, or those invented by the perpetrator, were used to discriminate against them. This was also the case for women with autism spectrum disorders and learning disabilities.
- Black and minoritised mothers, Muslim mothers and those from migrant backgrounds told us that they experienced racism and cultural stereotyping from both perpetrators and professionals.

Impact on mothers

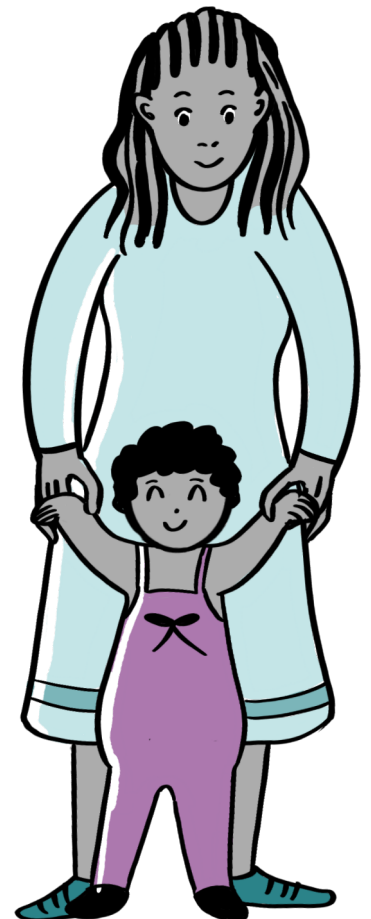
- The emotional impact of child removal for mothers was profound, including lasting feelings of fear, guilt, shame and humiliation, as well as exhaustion, powerlessness and anger.
- Many women told us that their mental health deteriorated sharply after their children were removed, and a high number had considered or attempted suicide.
- Child removal had wide-ranging impacts on mothers' relationships with friends, family, colleagues and communities, leaving women isolated.
- Mothers told us that the severe impact of child removal left them vulnerable to control and abuse in future partner relationships, as well as post-separation abuse from ex-partners.
- Damaging impacts on living standards and financial stability for mothers following child removal had the added effect of limiting the potential for children to be returned to them.
- These emotional and practical impacts on mothers' lives had the effect of limiting the ability of mothers to keep themselves and their children safe from domestic abuse.

Survivors and professionals

- System-wide lack of knowledge about domestic abuse and trauma across social services and family court professionals led to poor decision-making and missed opportunities to reduce harm for mothers and children.
- Professionals with a poor understanding of domestic abuse were at risk of being manipulated and drawn into colluding with perpetrators.
- At times, professionals themselves displayed behaviour that mothers experienced as abusive and coercive during child removal proceedings.
- The family court system was used as a platform by perpetrators to silence, humiliate, isolate and financially abuse survivors, including through the use of court orders restricting their ability to speak about domestic and sexual abuse and further limiting contact with their children.
- Mothers felt that perpetrators, family courts and social services were aligned in creating and upholding a persistent narrative that they were unfit or abusive parents.
- In light of their experiences, many mothers reported that they wished they had never told anyone about the domestic abuse or attempted to leave their partner.

Support and systems change

- Mothers called for better training and support to prevent the removal of children from survivors of domestic abuse wherever possible, including:
 - Education for professionals on domestic abuse dynamics and the impact of trauma
 - Funding and access to specialist domestic abuse services
 - Peer support from women with lived experience of domestic abuse and child removal
 - improved mental health support for mothers
- Support to navigate the family court system
- Survivors called for radical changes to the family court system, which they understood as being biased against mothers and pro-contact for fathers regardless of circumstance.
- Further recommendations were made to overhaul the working of social services, which mothers understood as actively working to remove children from survivors of domestic abuse.



Recommendations

These findings lend weight to earlier recommendations from AVA and Agenda as part of the [National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage](#), which include:

- The Department for Education should **prioritise work to develop alternatives to permanent child removal** that protect the child from short term risk whilst recognising the long-term risks to both mother and child of permanent removal into care. The What Works Centre for Children's Social Care should support and evaluate projects and evidence development that will enable these approaches to be embedded in the profession longer-term.
- Children's social services should apply **strengths-based approaches** that enable women to draw on their strengths, make safe plans for their children, and allow decision making about a child's welfare based on a proper understanding of the family context. **Multi-disciplinary teams** should be in place in all local areas, drawing on the skills of substance misuse, mental health and domestic abuse practitioners to work alongside children and adult social workers.
- A full understanding of the experiences of survivors facing multiple disadvantage must be **embedded in all children and family social work training and development in England and Wales**. Social Work England has a potentially important role to play in ensuring this happens.²

In the time since the Commission recommendations were published, we recognise and commend the efforts of activists and domestic abuse specialists to **scrutinise and challenge the family courts and prevent harm to survivors**, including by securing additional powers and protections through the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

Based on our findings and recommendations from our peer researchers and participants, AVA also recommends that:

- Education about the dynamics of domestic abuse, including coercive control, economic abuse and post-separation abuse, should be embedded into **professional training for family court judges, lawyers and CAFCASS**.
- Specialist domestic abuse services should be resourced to develop, implement and evaluate **specific support for survivors who have had children removed from their care**, including peer support approaches and trauma-responsive therapeutic approaches for women at risk of self-harm, substance use and suicide.
- Further research should be conducted to understand **safety and outcomes for children** in family court cases involving domestic and sexual abuse allegations. This should include children who have been placed with both fathers and mothers against whom allegations have been made, and children placed in kinship care with family members of alleged perpetrators of abuse.

² For full recommendations from the National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage, see the final report: <https://avaproject.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Breaking-down-the-Barriers-full-report-.pdf>

Introduction

This peer research was carried out by AVA as part of the Staying Mum project, designed to help understand and improve responses to women who have faced domestic and sexual violence and abuse and child removal.

AVA's previous work on the [National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage](#), in partnership with Agenda, found that women's role as mothers featured strongly in their ability to access help and support. Many women described the fear of losing their children as a huge barrier to seeking help. Having children removed was a major barrier to recovery from violence and abuse for women facing multiple disadvantage.

Staying Mum was designed to give a voice to women who had experienced the removal of a child or children in the context of domestic abuse. Alongside this peer research, AVA has also facilitated a community of practice for professionals working with women experiencing domestic abuse and child removal. We have published an evidence review and online training for professionals alongside this report, with a domestic abuse and child removal survivors' guide to follow in autumn 2022.

Methodology

This research was conducted using qualitative peer research methodology, chosen to give mothers the chance to share their journeys with a researcher with their own lived experience of child removal and domestic abuse.

AVA recruited seven women with lived experience of domestic abuse and child removal to support the Staying Mum project as peer researchers, following a national recruitment exercise. Peer researchers received training from AVA in research methods, safeguarding and professional boundaries and were subject to DBS checks.

A total of 33 mothers with experience of domestic abuse and child removal took part in the research. Recruitment was conducted through AVA's networks with specialist gender-based violence organisations and through our peer researcher's own networks. The response to our call for participants was overwhelming, and many more women offered to share their stories than the research team were safely able to accommodate.

Our team of peer researchers conducted 26 semi-structured interviews with mothers during summer and autumn 2021. The interview topic guide was developed by peer researchers and AVA staff via online workshops, and is available in Appendix 1. The AVA team also collected seven further written and audio responses to the topic guide questions.

Audio recordings were stored securely by AVA and transcribed professionally. Coding and thematic analysis was conducted by AVA staff.

Safeguarding and risk

All participants were provided with an interview guidance pack which included information sheets, consent forms and equalities monitoring forms. Participants were free to withdraw from the research before, during or after the interview and to withdraw their data before this report was published.

To manage risks from COVID-19, interviews were conducted remotely via phone or video call. Pre-interview checks were carried out by AVA staff to ensure that participants had a safe and private space and communication method to take part in the research.

Peer researchers completed reflection logs and debrief calls with AVA staff after each interview, and received monthly 1-2-1 support from AVA and independent clinical supervision to support their safe involvement in the project.



Demographics³

Age	25-34	35-44	45-55	55-64
Peer researchers	1	3	1	1
Participants	8	17	7	1

Sexuality	Heterosexual	Bisexual	Don't know/ prefer not to say
Peer researchers	5	1	0
Participants	28	3	2

³Six peer researchers provided demographic data, while seven peer researchers in total supported the project.

Ethnicity	Peer researchers	Participants
Asian - Bangladeshi	1	1
Asian - British		2
Asian - Indian	1	2
Black - African		1
Black - Caribbean		1
Middle - Eastern		1
Mixed	2	2
Roma		1
White - British	2	18
White - European		2
Chose not to answer		2

Religion or belief	Peer researchers	Participants
Agnostic	1	1
Christian	1	11
Muslim	1	3
Sikh	1	1
Spiritual		2
No religion	2	13
Chose not to answer		2

1. The lives of mothers

AVA spoke to mothers from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences as part of the Staying Mum project. Among the mothers that took part in our peer research, occupations included a teacher, a lecturer, a legal secretary, a safeguarding professional, a cabin crew member, a housing advisor, a computer engineer, a baker, and several nurses and carers. Around a quarter of women we spoke to were born and grew up outside the UK.

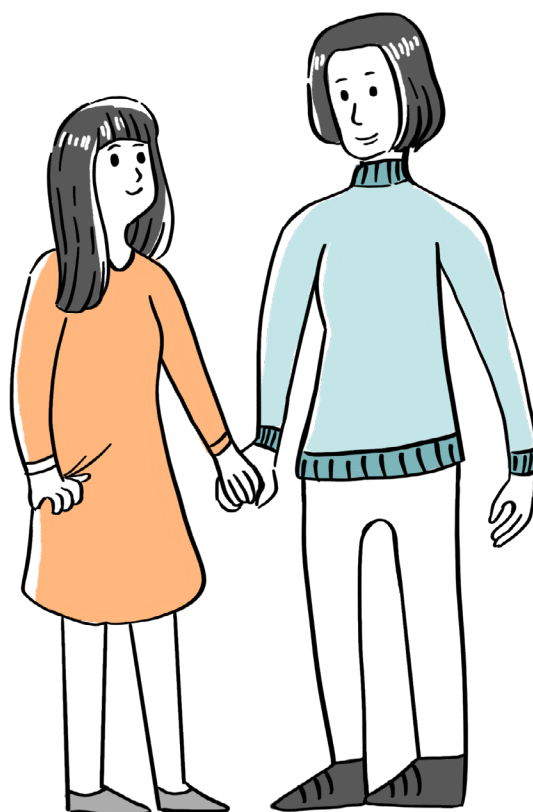
While some mothers described their own childhoods as happy, loving, or privileged, nearly half of mothers disclosed childhood experiences of abuse, including sexual abuse, domestic abuse, neglect, grooming and trafficking. Several women had their own experiences of the care system and social services involvement as children.

We also spoke to a number of women who had experienced multiple disadvantage as adults, including poverty, mental health problems, homelessness, substance use and repeated experiences of violence, abuse and sexual exploitation.

Protecting mothers' identities

Many mothers involved in our research have ongoing cases in the family courts, court orders that restrict their ability to disclose details about their case, and/or have fled domestic abuse. We thank women for their bravery in sharing their experiences with us

AVA has taken careful steps to protect mothers' identities throughout this report, including changing or redacting identifying details in participant quotes and descriptions throughout.



2. Mothering and domestic abuse

Mothers told us about a wide range of experiences of domestic abuse that happened before, during and after their children were removed from their care.

Common experiences for mothers included rape and sexual abuse, physical abuse and intimidation, coercive control and being isolated from friends and family. Many reported economic abuse, including forced debt, theft, and their partner restricting access to money, work, housing and transportation.

Several mothers told us they had been subject to threatened or attempted murder by their partner or ex-partner, including by strangulation.

Mothers from migrant backgrounds told us that threats to their immigration status were used as a control tactic, including in cases where their children and partner were British citizens.

Post-separation abuse was a very common experience. Several mothers told us about stalking, harassment and property damage by ex-partners and fathers of their children. We heard many accounts of ex-partners manipulating family courts, social services professionals and child contact arrangements to control, isolate, humiliate and drain the financial resources of mothers years after relationships had ended. These tactics of post-separation abuse are explored in more detail throughout this report.

"I didn't understand about post-separation abuse at all. I thought I've left, that's not an issue anymore, but actually it was continuing to happen and happen and happen."

Wealth, status and respect

A number of mothers told us that their partner or ex-partner was wealthy or highly respected in their career or community, for example as Armed Forces personnel or airline pilots. Others worked with children, for example as a youth worker or sports coach. Mothers said this gave them credibility in the eyes of other people, including professionals and the family courts, which they could use to disguise and discredit allegations of abuse.

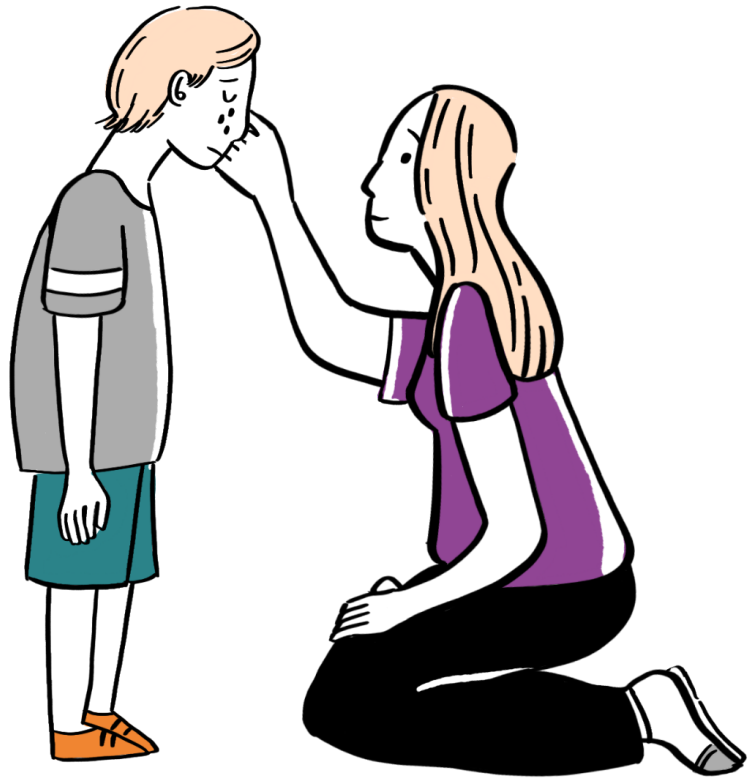
"If you come across somebody and they say, I'm a police officer, or I've been in the Army, I was in the Navy, you instantly - they're in a trusted job, they must be good people to do that sort of job."

Mothering through domestic abuse

Mothers described the ways that domestic abuse affected their parenting and relationships with their children. Alongside many accounts of motherhood as loving and joyful, many mothers described their role as being **strong** and **protecting their children** from harm.

“It wasn’t a safe environment for me or my son, and I still was able to take care of my son. I still fed him and clothed him and changed his nappy and, you know, put him to bed and washed his clothes and bathed him and loved him, and he always knew I loved him.”

In the context of violent, coercive and controlling behaviour from an abusive parent, many mothers expressed **shame** and a **sense of failure** in not being able to keep their children safe, and felt that professionals and the courts did not support them to fulfil their role as a protective parent. This dynamic is explored further in **Sections 3 and 4**.



“I know it’s the system that failed them [...] but in my head I feel like I’ve failed them, because as a mum, the one thing I should be able to do is protect them and I’ve not been able to do that.”

Mothers commonly described **escalating risk and harm from domestic abuse during pregnancy and after birth**. Several mothers said they became pregnant very quickly after entering the relationship, or were coerced into pregnancy.

“I was really, really young, and isolated from all my family...suddenly I was there, pregnant with twins in a bad area of town, completely isolated and didn’t even have any friends anymore.”

“The father wouldn’t stop raping me, and he didn’t want to be a dad. He was extremely angry when I told him I was expecting, you know, because obviously, being a controlling man, he didn’t want my focus taken off him.”

“I thought, ‘Please don’t let me be pregnant.’ It would be the worst thing because I was trying to get away from him.”

Mothers described having to manage jealous and demanding perpetrators to try and keep their children safe.

“I’m very scared of being driven fast. [...] he’d drive 90 miles in a 30-mile zone, that sort of thing. And the kids would be screaming in the background and I’m trying to calm them down, and he would say, I’d have to give in to whatever he was wanting me to give in to, otherwise he wouldn’t stop.”

Living and parenting with an abusive father placed an enormous amount of pressure on mothers’ own parenting. Some fathers were described as **neglectful** or refusing to care for children, or sometimes **actively disrupted** mothers’ parenting.

“You can’t co-parent with someone like that [...] he’d do stuff like trying to prevent us going to sleep or wake them up at annoying times so their whole routine would be disrupted.”

It was very common for **children to be directly affected** by domestic abuse in their household. Several women described how perpetrators would deliberately abuse them in front of their children.

“He was very angry and he pulled the wire out, you know the phone wire, the house phone wire. He strangled my neck with the wire, in front of my three kids and my girls started crying.”

“He admitted to forcing the children to stand at the bottom of the bed and watch while he mentally, emotionally, verbally and physically abused me.”

Many mothers told us that their children were the **direct target of physical, sexual and emotional abuse** by their fathers before, during and after removal from their mother’s care. Mothers described tactics of manipulation and control used against their children. These included **criticising the mother’s parenting** to the children, **lying** about mothers’ actions and feelings, and **promises of lavish gifts** as a reward for spending time with fathers.

“It’s not that this shouldn’t be happening to us, it shouldn’t be happening to our children, because in these cases, I really think they’re the true victims. And when they’re too young to know what’s going on, it’s all just confusing, quite often they’re told bad things about the other parent, the one that’s removed.”

“Leave your mother, say we’re not happy with you, we want to stay with our grandmother. Then we will take you Disney Paris, we will take you shopping, we will take you London. We will take you wherever you want, whatever you want to buy, we will buy you stuff.”

The constant threat of removal

A number of mothers told us that the active threat of removing their children was used as a way to control their choices and behaviour, for example as a highly effective way of preventing women from leaving a relationship or reporting domestic abuse to authorities.

This threat was present from pregnancy or their children’s early infancy for some women, and remained a constant presence that discouraged mothers from seeking help from professionals.

“The thing that he used to do to control me, to keep me in check, you know, to keep me quiet, if you like, was to threaten to contact the police, social services. Threaten to have me locked away, you know, put in the psychiatric ward.”

As discussed in **Sections 3 and 4**, many mothers reported that perpetrators were successfully able to manipulate social services and family courts to make these threats a reality.

Some women told us that **their children’s behaviour** changed as a result of their experiences of domestic abuse, and that children themselves became hostile, rude or abusive towards their mothers, making parenting increasingly challenging.

“Both of them have been absolutely petrified, they’ve been threatened to treat me badly. And if they don’t treat me badly when the step-mum is around, they get into trouble when they get home.”

“My son was quite aggressive towards me, but he copied his father and the issue was there was no therapy.”

Being a mother after children are removed

As well as the many practical and emotional impacts of removal, explored further in **Section 4**, child removal had a profound impact on the way women viewed motherhood itself. Some women **questioned their own identity as mothers**, or found being around children or other mothers extremely painful.

“There are days where I feel like I’m not a mother and I shouldn’t be a mother because she’s not in my care. I do get those thoughts and feelings still. I always have to remind myself that for the first five years of her life, she was happy, she was healthy, she was striving, and that was because of me.”

“In shops I avoid the children’s aisle, if I come across it by accident and if I see mums and their children, I immediately walk away because I’m not one of them, I’m excluded now. I was excluded thirteen years ago and it’s killing me.”

These experiences were compounded by **judgement and criticism** from perpetrators, family, friends, communities and professionals.

“My ex-partner would ring and tell me that I’m a bad mother and I was never meant to be a mother. He told me that when he came out of prison he would take the kids away from me for good.”

“People stereotype and they judge, and so most people who haven’t been through this situation, they see where children have been taken off their mum and put with dad, they think the mum must have done something terrible.”

Key findings - domestic abuse and motherhood

- Mothers were subject to coercive, controlling and violent abuse before their children were removed, which disrupted their parenting.
- Post-separation abuse continued to have an impact on the safety of mothers and children after separation or divorce from perpetrators.
- Children were direct targets of domestic and sexual abuse both before and after being removed from their mothers. This affected their safety and in some cases their behaviour, affecting mother’s ability to parent effectively.
- Child removal led mothers to question their own identity and left them with feelings of shame, self-blame and failure, compounded by judgement from families, friends and community.

3. Journeys through child removal

The mothers who shared their experiences with AVA had many different journeys through domestic abuse and child removal. Many were battling with both on an ongoing basis, with post-separation abuse and lengthy disputes in the family courts continuing to dominate their lives. This section sets out common themes and challenges mothers face before, during and after children are removed from their care.

Life changes before child removal

While mothers came from a range of different backgrounds and circumstances, their accounts revealed some common life experiences in the period leading up to child removal.

Many women were going through **divorce or separation** from their partners around the time their children were removed. This triggered a number of outcomes, including divorce and child arrangement **proceedings in the family courts**, changes in **housing and economic circumstances** for mothers and children, and **post-separation abuse** from partners.

“They can’t stand the rejection and they can’t stand that they have no power over you anymore. But they actually do have a lot of power if they start going through this family court system with all their applications for contact.”

Mothers told us about **changes in the domestic abuse they and their children were experiencing**, and in their response to it. Several experienced an escalation in abuse, including physical violence towards their children. In a handful of cases the father was arrested for domestic abuse related offences in the period leading up to children being removed from their mother.

“That’s what hit home for me, is the fact that he was putting their lives at risk. At this point, I wasn’t worried about my life but he was doing that to my children.”

Several mothers had **fled domestic abuse** into refuge, triggering social services involvement in their family lives. Other mothers **made a disclosure of domestic abuse** to professionals, including school teachers, police, or GPs.

In some cases, mother noticed **signs of domestic or sexual abuse in their children**, or children made disclosures to mothers, teachers or in the family courts.

Several mothers told us that their partners made allegations or **counter-allegations of domestic abuse** against them before their children were removed. In two cases mothers themselves were arrested for domestic abuse related offences.

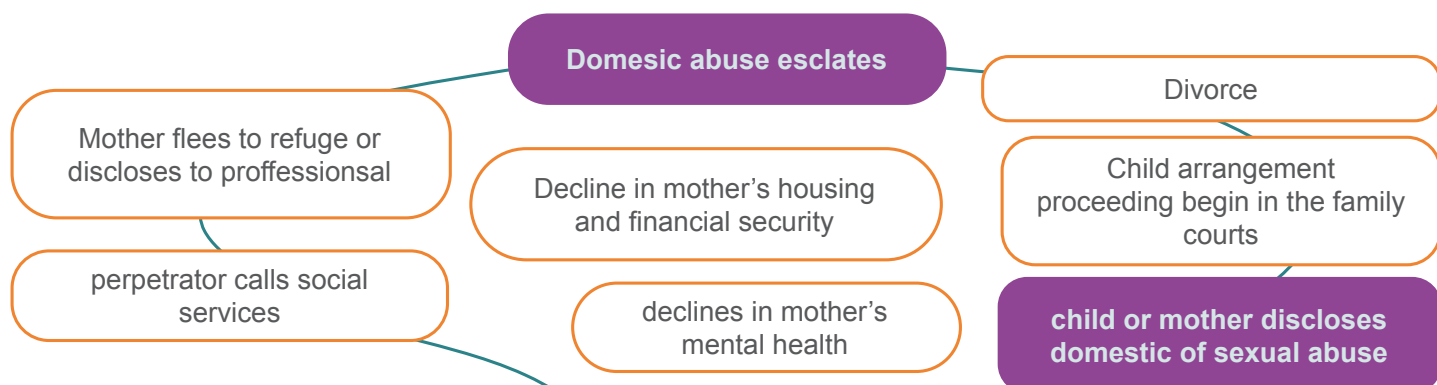
“I was driven from the house, and then he pursued injunctions, he said he’d been a victim of domestic abuse for many many many years. I did this, I did that, I was awful to the kids, I wasn’t a good mum.”

Another common theme for mothers was **a period of physical or mental ill-health**. In the majority of these cases this involved a decline in mothers’ mental health as a result of sustained experience of violence and abuse. Three mothers attempted suicide, triggering social services involvement. In other cases, perpetrators **reported mothers to social services themselves**, alleging that their mental health made them an unfit parent.

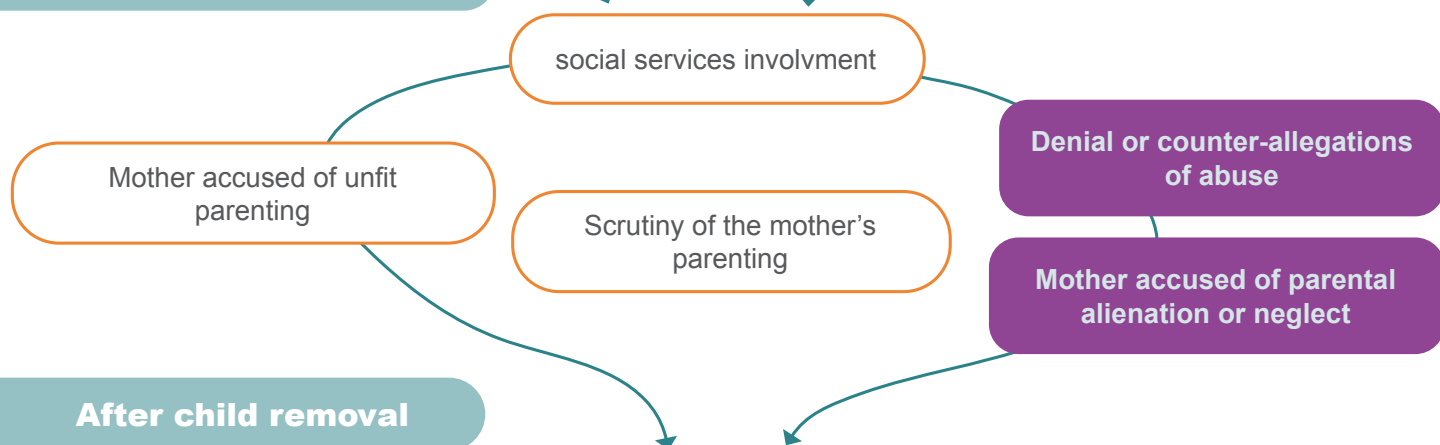
“It was because I’d said to him I was leaving that he decided to take absolute control by making sure that I would not leave with my son by telling social services that I was an unfit mum.”

Journeys through domestic abuse and child removal⁴

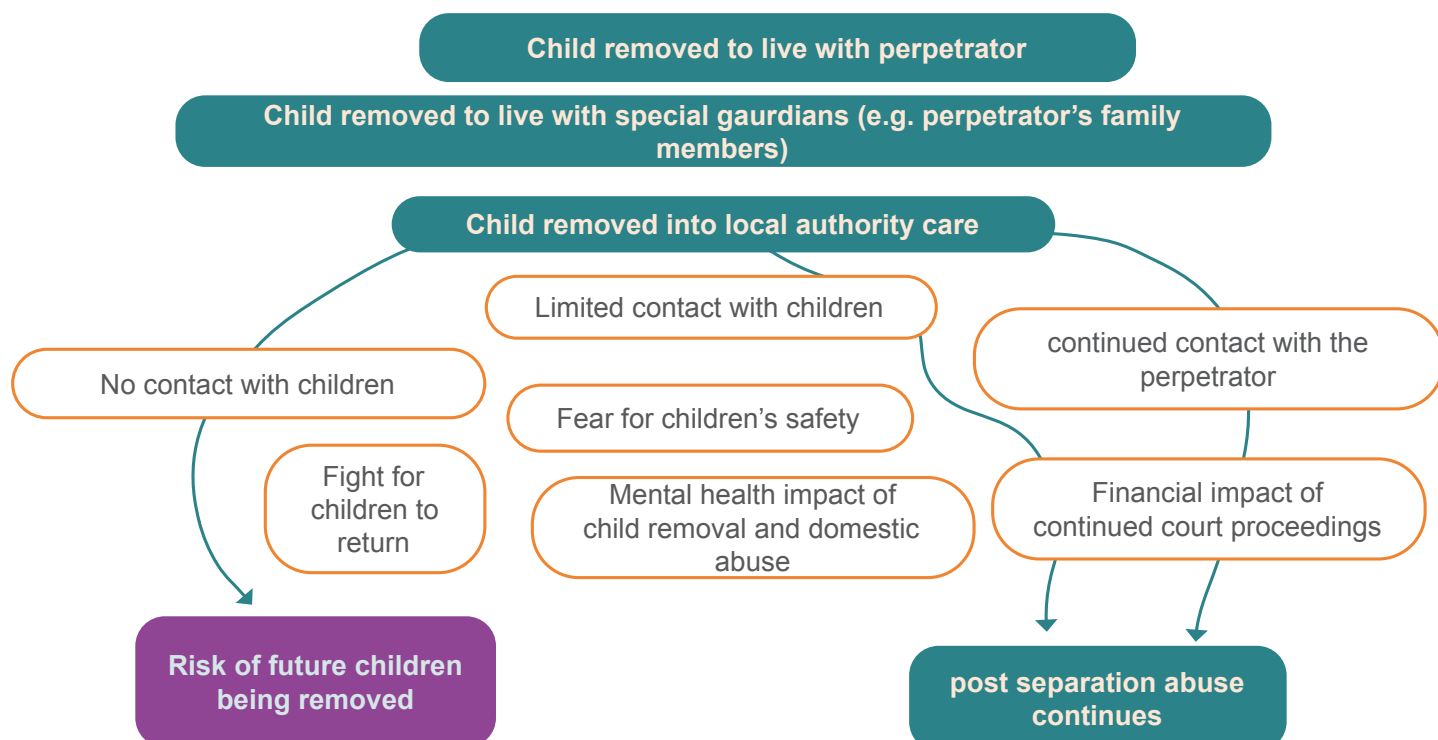
Before child removal



During child removal



After child removal



⁴These example journeys are based on experiences shared with AVA by a number of mothers, in order to protect the identities of individual participants.

Mechanisms of child removal

Children had been removed from the mothers we spoke to through both private and public family law proceedings, with and without the involvement of social services. Cases frequently included elements of both private and public law.

Table 1: Mechanisms of child removal - examples from research participants

Public law - involving local authorities	Private law - between private individuals
<p>Care orders, giving parental responsibility to local authorities.</p> <p>Emergency protection orders, removing a child to a 'place of safety.'</p> <p>Adoption orders and post-adoption contact orders.</p>	<p>Child arrangement orders, which decide who the child is to live with (residency) or spend time with (contact) following divorce.</p> <p>Special guardianship orders, which place a child to live permanently with someone other than their parents up until the age of 18.</p> <p>Occupation orders, which prevent a parent from residing at the family home.</p> <p>Social services may be asked to intervene in private law proceedings where child welfare is a concern to the court.</p>

Reasons for removal

Among mothers who contributed to AVA's research, the two most common grounds for removing children through the family courts were **emotional abuse**, including parental alienation, and **unfit parenting**.

Mothers were judged to be emotionally abusive to their children on two main grounds. The first was **parental alienation** – the allegation that mothers were deliberately manipulating their children to be hostile towards the other parent.

"This is what the fathers' rights groups tell their dads to do. As soon as they get accused of domestic abuse, they play the parental alienation card."

A second common justification for removal on the ground of emotional abuse was that mothers were **coaching children to make false allegations** of domestic and sexual abuse, causing emotional harm. Mothers shared examples of evidence of domestic and child sexual abuse by fathers being dismissed by the courts and allegations of emotional abuse levelled at mothers in response.

“They turned it around on me, and they said that I’m causing her to be intimately examined and this is emotionally abusive.”

Some mothers had been issued with **gagging orders**, prohibiting them from discussing the abuse of their children with anyone. The impact of gagging orders on mothers and children is discussed further in **Section 4**.

For mothers who had been judged **unfit parents**, this most commonly related to their mental health. Mental health problems were in some cases invented or exaggerated by perpetrators to persuade professionals that mothers were unfit. In other cases, mothers’ poor mental health and economic circumstances, including poor housing, were linked to their experiences of surviving and fleeing violence and abuse.

“My second husband went on to tell social services that I had a mental problem that I had to lie about abuse, and that was the catalyst for social services being quite biased against me, because he’d set the seeds that I was this lying person.”

“Because I was sick, he said that nobody in the land, no judge in the land would ever let me have my daughter and he would never let me have my daughter and I believed him, but nobody else did, and I kept saying eventually to solicitors, ‘He’ll take her,’ but nobody believed me.”



A small number of mothers told us they had children removed due to their own or their partners **drug and alcohol use**. For these women, drug and alcohol use was also frequently linked to past trauma, including lifetime experiences of violence and abuse.

Some mothers had children removed because **they were themselves accused of physical violence against their children or partner**. In the context of coercive control, perpetrators used counter-allegations of abuse to disrupt and damage mothers' standing with professionals and in family court proceedings. One notable exception was a mother who told us that prior to removal she had herself disclosed to social workers that she had slapped her child, not knowing that physically punishing children was unacceptable in the UK.

These allegations of abuse, neglect and poor parenting made and accepted during family court proceedings contrasted greatly with mothers' own experience of domestic abuse and motherhood, set out in **Section 2**. The apparent reversal of real-life parental roles through the family courts was highly distressing for mothers and further reinforced the ways in which perpetrators had criticised, humiliated and isolated them as tactics of domestic abuse.

"How can this be real, every day I'm battling with my reality, is this actually real? My kids aren't with me, I've done everything right, and this has still happened."

"They've taken my children. They've stolen my children and then they've called me a liar and then they've just said, 'Well you're the problem.'"

Outcomes of removal

Some mothers who spoke to AVA had had children removed from their care very recently, while others had been separated for years. Mothers had experienced the removal of **up to seven children**. Many were still fighting for their children to return.

At the time they shared their experiences with AVA, eleven mothers had no contact with their child or children who had been removed. Ten had limited contact with their child or children living elsewhere, including one mother with letterbox contact only. Seven mothers had their child or children return to live with them - in the majority of cases after lengthy engagement with social services and family courts. The remaining mothers chose not to share this information with AVA.

The majority of mothers told us that their children **had been ordered to live with the perpetrator or a member of the perpetrator's family** either temporarily or permanently after they were removed from their mother's care.

"My son has been placed with my ex's sister, under the agreement that they didn't speak, or have a relationship, which she told the courts, and social that she doesn't, or didn't. But now that their mum has died recently, she's now openly admitted that she's having a relationship with my ex."

“She lives with her dad’s aunty, they all hate me because her dad went to prison obviously for abusing me. I get a bit tearful because it’s just been awful for her.”

Some mothers who had limited contact told us that their ex-partner was **deliberately obstructing contact** with their children, both practically and through the family courts. Two mothers told us that they believed fathers had abused COVID-19 restrictions as a method of obstructing contact.

Several mothers told us that they **struggled to access basic information about their children**, particularly those who had children placed with perpetrators’ family members under special guardianship orders. Some felt this information was deliberately withheld.

“They don’t even know if their child is alive or dead. They are kept out of all their child’s medical records and all their school records and all their life.”

Additional barriers and discrimination

Mothers told us that in contrast to public perception of the family court system, their experience showed that women were at a disadvantage in the courts compared to men. Many felt that expectations of men and women differed greatly, and that women were unfairly judged according to impossible standards of motherhood.

“That’s not right, that I have to suffer because of my gender. It’s okay if a man is a bad man, it’s okay if a man takes drugs, it’s okay if a man commits rape. It’s okay if a man commits a crime. There’s lots of support in place because his mind is upset because of his job or because he doesn’t have enough money. But for a woman, you’re not important to society [...] the law told me I’m not even important [enough] to be my son’s mummy.”

Many mothers told us they had faced barriers or discrimination because of their background or identity. Some felt their **mental health problems**, or those invented by the perpetrator, were used to discriminate against them. This was also the case for women with **autism spectrum disorders** and **learning disabilities**.

“I’d been to Mind and I spoke to the legal team there and they said that they discriminated on the perceived assumption of mental health illness.”

“Even though I wasn’t diagnosed [with Asperger’s] at the time social services came into my life, it’s concerning about the way they’ve treated me [...] it’s quite clear that I am vulnerable, and they were more than happy to take advantage of that.”

Black and minoritised mothers, Muslim mothers and those from migrant backgrounds told us that they experienced **racism and cultural stereotyping** from both abusers and professionals. In some cases, abusers would deliberately manipulate professionals' perceptions of mothers by perpetrating racist stereotypes and tropes. This was particularly clear where mothers had white British partners.

"My then husband said the whole thing about-, I was a mail order bride, I was a gold-digger, I was after all his money, I trapped him with falling pregnant. I think people were really willing to believe that, even though at the time I was the income earner, even though I clearly wasn't a mail order bride."

"He's ex-British military. So, he was viewed with some kind of honour, whereas I'm that coloured foreigner... I honestly believe that if I was of the same ethnicity and nationality as him, things probably would have gone differently."

"I feel the reason my children were taken into care and not returned to me was because the child psychologist appointed in the case unfairly judged me as a weak, submissive, Muslim woman, and chose my family member to take the children instead because this person appeared to be more westernised. I feel this was entirely unfair as both adult psychologists who assessed me and the family court judge were of the opinion that reunification can happen - this is noted in the court papers - and the children can be returned with me."

Mothers' **immigration status or migrant background** was a barrier to engaging successfully with professionals, and was used by abusers to threaten and control mothers.

"When you come here it is totally different and you don't understand it...when you do something wrong, even if you didn't know it, they take advantage of your situation. I feel they just look for your mistakes."

Many women felt their **class and socio-economic status** affected their treatment by professionals. This was the case for women from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, particularly where their partner was wealthier or better-connected than them.

"I feel like if I was more of a professional woman with a proper career it wouldn't have happened but because I'm a single mum on benefits, I think I've been judged."

“Because he’s a six-figure earner, you know, he can afford the most expensive barristers. And you are literally fighting it for yourself. And taken advantage of. There is absolutely no support.”

In some cases, this disparity in social and financial resources was deliberately established by perpetrators through economic abuse, including preventing women from accessing family finances, housing or work, and isolating them from support networks.

Key findings - child removal

- Common life experiences prior to child removal included divorce or separation; changes in the financial stability and housing circumstances of mothers; and deteriorating physical or mental health of mothers. These were interconnected and commonly linked to changes or escalation in domestic and sexual abuse of mothers and children.
- The most common grounds for the removal of children were abuse or unfit parenting by the mother.
- Abuse allegations against mothers included emotional abuse through parental alienation, or ‘coaching’ children to disclose domestic or sexual violence. In some cases, mothers were subject to counter-allegations of physical violence against partners and children.
- Mothers were judged to be unfit parents most commonly on the grounds of their mental health.
- These allegations of abuse, neglect and poor parenting made and accepted during family court proceedings contrasted greatly with mothers’ own experience of domestic abuse and motherhood, and aligned with perpetrator narratives of events.
- The majority of mothers told us that their children had been ordered to live with the perpetrator or a member of the perpetrator’s family either temporarily or permanently after they were removed from their mother’s care.
- Some mothers felt that their mental health problems, or those invented by the perpetrator, were used to discriminate against them. This was also the case for women with autism spectrum disorders and learning disabilities.
- Black and minoritised mothers, Muslim mothers and those from migrant backgrounds told us that they experienced racism and cultural stereotyping from both perpetrators and professionals.
- Mothers felt their socio-economic status affected their treatment by professionals, particularly where their partner was wealthier or better-connected than them.

4. Impact of child removal

Child removal has profound impacts for both children and mothers, extending far beyond the removal itself. While some mothers chose to share the impact of removal on their children, this section focussed primarily on the impact of child removal on mothers themselves.

Many had been living with the threat of removal for years before the event, and expressed the pain, fear and confusion they felt when the decision was finally made.

“When my children were first taken away from me, I literally felt like my heart and everything inside me got ripped away. I wanted to end my life, I didn’t want to be here, I didn’t want to breathe, I didn’t want to laugh, I didn’t want to smile. Everything I did, I felt guilty, because they weren’t with me.”

*“When social services got in touch to say they were taking my son from me and placing him with his father, it broke me in a way that only social services can break a mum, and I was **absolutely petrified and in fear for my son’s life.**”*

*“They informed me your daughter will not come back to you, never ever, and you will not see her again, but if you insist to take or speak or see her, we will take all your kids from you, even the smallest one.” I said, ‘Why is that?’ She says, ‘Because you broke the rules.’ Which rules is she talking about? **I didn’t know, I didn’t know.**”*

*“They were clinging to me, like, ‘Please don’t send us away, please don’t send us away.’ And the social worker just stood there watching...I put them in the car and then I came back inside and this noise just came – **to this day, I’ve never heard a noise like it.** And I just remember my dad picking me up off the floor and carrying me to his car, and he took me home because he didn’t want me to be on my own.”*

Emotional and mental health impacts

Mothers told us that the decision to remove their children had an impact on all aspects of their lives. The **emotional impact** shared by mothers was profound and wide-ranging, including lasting feelings of fear, guilt, shame and humiliation, as well as exhaustion, powerlessness and anger.

“My life is full of shame because I have to avoid things like the school run [...] the summer holiday being the biggest school holiday is so painful for me because it means there are lots of children about.”

“It is difficult to describe this feeling, to be honest with you. Because even as you live your life there are some parts in your heart you miss. With each beat, with each breath, you take it, you will feel that space.”

A high number of participants told us that they had experienced poor and/or deteriorating **mental health** following the removal of their children, including escalating anxiety, depression and symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

“My mental health is shit [...] Look at the traumas that I’ve been through. Don’t ignore them. You can’t ignore the traumas and just look at the diagnosis. You’ve got to acknowledge what I’ve been through. I’ve lost seven children.”

Several women told us that they used **self-harm, drugs and alcohol** to cope with the mental health impacts of child removal.

“After my daughter was taken, I went through such a bad patch to the point where I started drinking and hurting myself, and I was getting so blind drunk that three months after she was taken, I was followed back home by a stranger. He entered my home, and I was assaulted.”

Twelve women disclosed to AVA that they had considered or attempted **suicide** following the removal of their children.

Impact on relationships



As well as the damage to their relationships with their children, some women told us that child removal **affected their relationships with their families, friends, colleagues and communities**. For many, this was linked to experiences of blame and judgement that compounded women’s own sense of shame and guilt.

“The two people, the two women who I thought were my absolute closest, deepest friends, we were like sisters, I didn’t see them ever. I haven’t heard from them since, they just walked away.”

“It’s amazing how many mums at school sort of avoid me, and I kind of want to wear a tee-shirt saying, ‘I didn’t do anything wrong.’”

Many mothers told us they **relied heavily on family and friends** in the absence of support from professionals, though friends and family did not always fully understand the situation.

“Even your closest friends and your family might think, ‘Well, you must have done something for it to be like this.’”

Several women described how child removal and its emotional impact has impacted their partner relationships. Some found themselves closed off from romantic relationships, while others told us that abusers deliberately exploited their experiences as vulnerability.

“Even though the child removal event happened in my first marriage, the fear of it happening again, and the way it was used against me, and was used as a way of manipulating me, controlling me, if you like, was a very real factor in my subsequent marriage.”

These relational impacts left many mothers **isolated and lonely**, in some cases limiting their own social interactions to protect themselves.

Impact on living standards and financial security

Poor housing and homelessness affected many women we spoke to after the removal of their children. Some women moved in order to flee domestic abuse or to be closer to where their children were now living. For others, the financial impact of child removal led to the loss of their housing, and several experienced street homelessness.

“Child maintenance sided with him and then took it out of my earnings, did a deduction from earnings, and then obviously that left me with not enough money to survive, and then over time I had to lose my house.”

“I ended up in a homeless shelter for, like, seven or eight months. I slept on the street, I had to go in and out of the homeless shelter.”

Many mothers told us they had **spent thousands of pounds during court proceedings**, in addition to the financial impact of domestic abuse. Means testing of legal aid in family law cases meant that mothers were expected to draw on their own financial reserves if they had them. Resolving immigration issues as a result of separation or divorce was an added financial burden for some women.

“I’m paying off legal fees, I’m paying off debts that are caused by him [...] I struggle because I don’t have enough money Ftto get what I need or to get petrol to put in the car to go to work.”

“You can’t get legal aid because you’re above the threshold but you can’t afford a solicitor at £250 an hour.”

Mothers described how changes in housing and financial stability had the added effect of **limiting the potential for children to be returned to them.**

“I don’t have much to give them materially. The house was never in my name, he never put my name on the house. I walked away with zero, with a cabin bag full of stuff, that’s it. After years of marriage, a cabin bag full of stuff, no children.”

“A mother is expected to use everything in her power to get that child back. She’s expected to lose everything [...] I was nearly homeless because I was willing to use the last pennies that I had to secure another barrister instead of a home, but if I’d have not had a home for my daughter then she would never have - if she’d won her case - been allowed back.”

Impact on children

While this research focussed primarily on the experiences of mothers, many participants told us about the impact of removal on their children.

The majority of mothers who took part in the research told us that they feared - or had seen signs - that their children had been subject to domestic and sexual abuse after they were removed.

Of those who had contact with their children, many observed that their children’s mental health had deteriorated. Some said their children had experienced self-harm or suicide ideation.

Some mothers also expressed that their children had lost family and cultural connections after removal. Children who remained in their mother’s care were also affected.

“Even my daughter, my other kids, they punished them, they took their sister away from them. “

These wide-ranging impacts on mothers' lives had the effect of **limiting the ability of mothers to keep themselves and their children safe from domestic abuse**. Lengthy proceedings in the family courts kept mothers and children in contact with perpetrators for months and years after separation, as well as impacting mothers' financial stability, support networks and mental health. These dynamics in the family court system are explored further in **Section 5**.

Key findings - impact on mothers

- The emotional impact of child removal for mothers was profound, including lasting feelings of fear, guilt, shame and humiliation, as well as exhaustion, powerlessness and anger.
- Many women told us that their mental health deteriorated sharply after their children removed, and a high number had considered or attempted suicide.
- Child removal had wide-ranging impacts on relationships with friends, family, colleagues and communities, leaving women isolated.
- Mothers told us that their experience of child removal left them vulnerable to control and abuse in future partner relationships, as well as post-separation abuse from ex-partners.
- Damaging impacts on living standards and financial stability for mothers following child removal had the added effect of limiting the potential for children to be returned to them.
- These emotional and practical impacts on mothers' lives had the effect of limiting the ability of mothers to keep themselves and their children safe from domestic abuse.

5. Survivors and professionals

As part of the research process, we asked mothers about their interactions with professionals before, during and after their children were removed.

Mother told us about the ways in which a system-wide lack of knowledge about domestic abuse and trauma across different professions, from the police, health services, schools, social services and court professionals, led to poor decision-making and missed opportunities to reduce harm for mothers and children. Mothers also explained that professionals with a poor understanding of domestic abuse were at risk of being manipulated and drawn into colluding with perpetrators.

Children's social care

Many mothers told us that the social workers involved in their case **lacked detailed understanding of domestic abuse dynamics**, and had limited professional training.

"They don't understand how domestic violence works. I had a social worker admit, under oath, that she thought it was just hitting and in the house. She did not know about post-separation abuse, she did not know about coercion, she did not know about manipulation. So she was open to be coerced and manipulated, because she wasn't aware of it."

For Black and minoritised women, this lack of understanding was compounded by social workers' **poor knowledge of their cultural background**.

"They bring a new social worker...she was British, she didn't know anything about Arab people, she didn't know anything about Muslim, about Islam."

"I wish she asked me to remove my nikaab, because I suddenly wore a face veil to cover my black eye and facial bruises. If they had a culturally competent social worker, she would know I do not have to wear a face veil in front of a woman."

Mothers told us that this lack of knowledge and understanding led to **missed opportunities for social workers to spot signs of abuse** and take steps to safeguard children and mothers.

"An anonymous passer-by called children's services one time, because they saw me walking barefoot down the road with a small child, and they said there was a man shouting offensive things [...] he denied it all, and obviously I denied it all as well, because I had to. I never spoke up about what was happening...I'm surprised they didn't suspect anything."

Other mothers told us that **social workers did not believe direct disclosures** of domestic and sexual abuse from them and their children.



"They didn't believe us... They deal with us as a monster."

"He was abusing our daughter and the social services weren't believing her when she made reports and they didn't believe me when I made reports either, because they felt that I was either coaching her or I was lying for whatever reason, to get him in trouble."



"I can understand why they think that I'm a liar, but to say that about my daughter, to call her a liar as well."

Mothers contrasted the positive regard in which some perpetrators were held by social workers with the **high level of scrutiny and demand placed on mothers** to demonstrate their worth as parents.

"Social services were very complimentary of him and his mum, even though his mum had bloody nothing to do with the kids, she'd just come in. I was painted as an unfit mum."

"I did parenting courses galore and safeguarding courses and everything. I did psychotherapy and all sorts of things, but it was never enough."

"I've changed my lifestyle. It's still not good enough for them. Nothing will ever be good enough."

Some mothers gave examples of **perpetrators deliberately manipulating professionals** who lacked knowledge of domestic abuse and coercive control.

"Dad is a complete narcissist and very, very good at manipulating the system, and he managed to somehow get this social worker on his side, and had her eating out of his hands."

“To the outside world my mother looks like a grandmother just trying to do the best for her daughter and grandchild. I think that she manipulated the social worker into believing that.”

Other mothers told us that social workers **used mental health, housing and financial issues against them** in a similar way to their perpetrators, not recognising that domestic abuse and trauma were at the root of these challenges.

“They were making me feel like I was overanxious, or paranoid, or it was my mental health playing up and I was seeing all these things that weren’t there, but actually they were there but everyone, professionals were making me feel like they weren’t there.”

“I told her how hard I’m struggling financially because of what he has done to me, and then when she actually did her report, I saw that everything I’ve said, she’s actually used it against me.”

Mothers also told us that their attempts to cooperate with social workers were affected by **the way social services teams were managed and resourced**. Many had dealt with multiple workers during their case, making trust difficult to establish. Some mothers told us that social services lacked accountability when mistakes were made or practice was poor.

“If I was to do something wrong, I’d be quick to get blamed and criticised for it. But social services, they get away with it, and they know they can, there’s no one else to tell them off.”

Several mothers experienced a complete removal of professional involvement after their children were removed, leaving them isolated.

“Your whole life changes afterwards, and social services abandon you.”

Most mothers told us that social workers focussed exclusively on the child, and therefore **missed opportunities to support mothers to keep children safe**. Poor experiences led some mothers to understand that social workers were actively working against them to remove their children.

“Social services look at a woman that is a mum, then they don’t provide you with anything because they’ve already made the decision to remove your child from you. So, why would they spend money on supporting you in any way whatsoever?”

There were some examples of positive support provided by social workers, for example onward referral to specialist women's services. However, these were limited.

Professionals in the family courts

Mothers told us they came to the family courts with little idea about how the system worked, and with the expectation that the justice system would recognise their experiences as domestic abuse and support them to keep their children in their care.

Unfortunately, the experiences mothers shared with us were **overwhelmingly negative**. These extremely poor experiences led mothers to associate the court system, and professionals they encountered during court proceedings, with bias, secrecy and corruption, lack of accountability and due process. Several told us that practice directions for the family courts dealing with cases of domestic abuse were not followed effectively, or at all.

"I went to court thinking that justice would be done, that children would be protected, that the truth would be heard. I had no experience with family court before I went into it, that's what I thought would happen, you know, surely that's what anyone would think. And it's so far from what actually does go on."

"When we talk about the family court, it's like, they don't hear our voices and they always listen to what social services want, and I feel like it's a secret family court."

Many of the themes found in mothers' interactions with social services were replicated in the context of the courts. Mothers felt the courts **lack understanding of domestic abuse and the impact of trauma**.

"Because when someone's traumatised they can look unstable, can't they? In court. And I was very aware of that, and the domestic abuse charity that was supporting me kept reminding me of that, briefing me - try not to be like this, try to be like this - because otherwise it might go against you."

Mothers found that courts **praised the parenting of fathers**, and told us that perpetrators were **manipulating professionals** and using the courts as a platform for further abuse.

"Oh my lord, that man congratulated my ex-husband on caring for my son for six weeks, what a good job he'd done...No mention of the ten years that I'd done it by myself. Honestly, the re-traumatisation of victims or survivors rather in family court by some of the men judges, not the women judges."

“He managed to coerce them as he’d coerced me. He’s very adept at playing the victim.”

“I remember going to the CAFCASS office and thinking, ‘This woman is going to be totally on my side [...] she was taken in by his lies. She totally bought all of his rubbish and I am now fighting her as well as him.’”

Post-separation abuse in the family courts

Mothers told us that lengthy disputes with ex-partners in the family courts gave perpetrators opportunities to control and abuse them long after relationships had ended.

Examples of post-separation abuse through the courts included draining the financial resources of mothers by bringing repeated applications to court. Some perpetrators used court appearances to humiliate and abuse survivors directly.

“They leave you open up for abuse. They literally leave you like a lamb to the slaughter, I’d describe my court thing at the moment. It’s all the snide remarks he makes when you’re giving evidence, there was snide little shitty remarks he makes under his breath.”

Mothers also told us they felt coerced by family court professionals themselves, comparing these to the actions of the perpetrator.

“I feel like I was coerced not just by the perpetrator but by CAFCASS as well and by the judge, and even by my own solicitor saying, ‘If you don’t do this, worse things are going to happen,’ and eventually I had to give up the fight. Instead of focusing on the perpetrator’s behaviour, the professionals in family court wanted me to change, even though I was just trying to protect the children and keep myself safe.”

Judges

Mothers told us about a broad range of experiences with family court judges, who sometimes played a positive role in challenging poor evidence provided by social services. However, others felt that judges were **led overwhelmingly by social services recommendations**, and failed to consider the evidence they presented fully.

Some women reported negative experiences with judges who were notorious for **promoting a pro-contact** culture with a bias towards fathers.

“Within the first minute of the three-day hearing, the first day, I knew, straight away, that I had no chance and that I’d lost the kids. This judge, I mean, he was just an absolute arsehole. He shouted over everyone [...] A few words into the sentence, he’d shout over me, he said, ‘That’s not the truth, now stop it.’”

Family lawyers

Mothers who reported a good relationship with lawyers were clear about the impact this had on their experience of court proceedings.

“I was really, really lucky, in my case, I had a lawyer who basically told me what was going to happen, the time frame of the whole process and what I could expect. And even knowing that, it was hugely, hugely, hugely distressing.”

However, other mothers told us that they understood that **their lawyer was not representing their best interests** or working to the best of their ability. This was particularly true where mothers learnt that family lawyers were also representing social services in other cases.

“If you need a family lawyer, do not get a family lawyer from the area you live in. They work alongside social services. They do not work for you, they just represent you at court [...] so, not only did I have social services working against me, I also had my own family lawyer working against me and assisting social services with the removal of my son.”

Family court orders

Several mothers had been subject to family court orders which restricted their ability to speak about domestic and sexual abuse, or further limited their contact with their children. Some told us that perpetrators were using orders and injunctions as a further tool of domestic abuse, and showing these documents to others in order to discredit and humiliate mothers.

“[The judge] said that he finds that the sexual abuse didn’t happen, and that if I ever mention it again, I will be sent to prison for contempt of court.”

We also heard examples of injunctions and orders intended to protect survivors of domestic abuse being used to further harm mothers. For example, one mother told us her ex-partner successfully sought a barring order, intended to prevent perpetrators from dragging survivors back to court repeatedly, to prevent her from making further applications to the court.

“He loves [the barring order] because of course he can do what he wants and he can withhold contact and he can do anything and I’m powerless to do anything about it.”

Mothers accused of domestic abuse had also been subject to prohibited steps orders and non-molestation orders limiting their ability to live with their children or take part in parenting decisions.

Mothers felt that perpetrators, family courts and social services were **aligned in creating and upholding a persistent narrative** that they were unfit parents, which had a negative impact on their future life experiences and ability to be a mother.

“They judge me because they see these bits of paper about me that other people want to write about me. Do you know what I mean? And I’ve had that my whole life, because of being in social services, in care. ‘Oh, she must be a scumbag.’”

“My other son’s removal from me, that was another reason, which I don’t think should have been used because that was seventeen years beforehand.”

In light of their experiences with the family courts, it was common for mothers to report that they wished they had **never told anyone about the domestic abuse** or attempted to leave their partner. This indicates the overwhelmingly negative impact that family court proceedings had on survivors of domestic abuse.

“In hindsight, I regret telling people about the domestic violence. I regret having concerns about my daughter and trying to speak about them. From my experience, I regret ever speaking out. If I had known I would have been treated in this way, I wouldn’t have been so vocal in my concerns about contact because it’s my concerns about future contact that stopped my daughter living with me.”

Other professionals

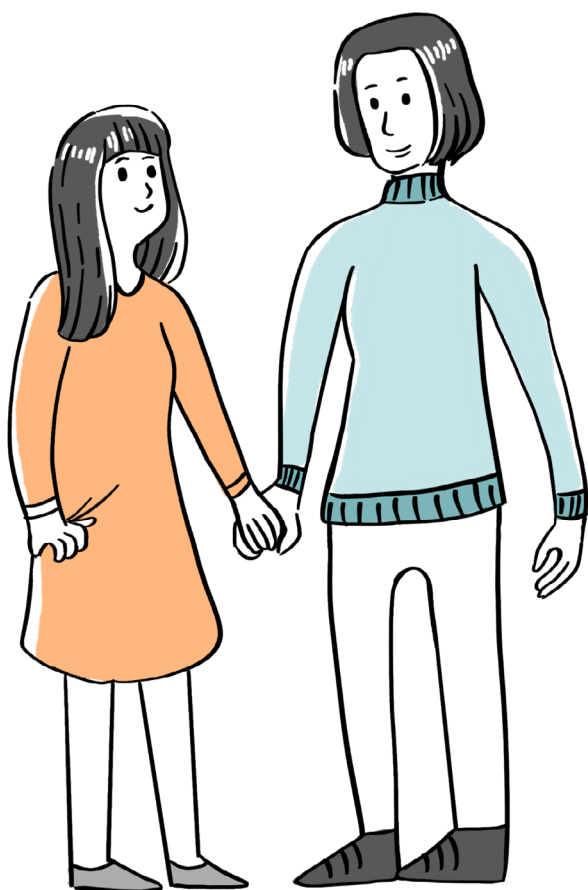
Mothers and children had also disclosed domestic abuse to other professionals, including police, healthcare professionals and teachers. Lack of confidence in professional responses to domestic abuse was common.

- Most mothers who told us they had reported to **the police** felt that their report was not taken seriously and police did not investigate or take action in the way they had hoped.
- **Schools and teachers** became involved in cases when children disclosed abuse or teachers spotted the signs. Mothers in these cases often felt that teachers and schools were colluding with social services and in some cases with perpetrators.
- Experiences with **healthcare professionals** were mixed - some mothers reported that GPs supported and believed them, providing evidence to support them in court and with social services. However, other mothers found that understanding of domestic abuse was limited in healthcare settings and were concerned about information being shared with social services.



Key findings - survivors and professionals

- System-wide lack of knowledge about domestic abuse and trauma across social services and family court professionals led to poor decision-making and missed opportunities to reduce harm for mothers and children.
- Professionals with a poor understanding of domestic abuse were at risk of being manipulated and drawn into colluding with perpetrators.
- At times, professionals themselves displayed behaviour that mothers experienced as abusive and coercive during child removal proceedings.
- The family court system was used as a platform by perpetrators to silence, humiliate, isolate and financially abuse survivors, including through the use of court orders restricting their ability to speak about domestic and sexual abuse and further limiting contact with their children.
- Mothers felt that perpetrators, family courts and social services were aligned in creating and upholding a persistent narrative that they were unfit or abusive parents.
- In light of their experiences, many mothers reported that they wished they had never told anyone about the domestic abuse or attempted to leave their partner.



6. What needs to change?

Over the course of the research, we asked survivors to share their recommendations for professionals, services and systems to better support survivors of domestic abuse. The recommendations shared by mothers were both radical and practical, informed by their personal journeys.

Support for mothers

The most common recommendation to improve support for mothers was increased **education for professionals**, to enable social workers and judges to understand the dynamics of domestic abuse and the impacts of trauma. Mothers felt this would improve support and decision making and reduce the likelihood of professionals being manipulated by perpetrators.

“Can you imagine the world we live in if the police recognised abuse, if Social Services recognised abuse? If all of these institutions that were supposed to, actually recognised it?”

Mothers also told us about the importance of funding and access to **specialist domestic abuse services** for survivors, and **safe confidential spaces** for disclosure. Supporting survivors to be safe from domestic abuse was seen as a key tool for preventing child removal.

“What has that person been through? Is that person still in that environment that led to this, or they’re out of it? If they’re out of it, how can we help them get past this issue so that they conquer this, and the children can be with their mum?”

Working with survivors to **prevent child removal** was a common theme in mothers’ recommendations. Many felt that support at an early stage - rather than scrutiny or judgement - could prevent children being removed.

“At the moment it’s very much, ‘Okay, well, you’re at risk of having your children removed and you have to prove that you’re okay. You have to prove.’ And I think it needs to be, ‘You’re at risk of having your children removed, what do you need for that not to happen? How would that support look? What would you need to ensure that you can stay as a family unit?’”

Mothers also told us that **support at the point of removal and afterwards** needed to be strengthened, to mitigate the harmful effects on mothers and put them in the best possible position for children to be returned to their care.

“A woman shouldn’t be alone at the point of having their child removed without support.”

Mothers recommended that support that **took into account mothers’ experiences** and **focussed on their strengths** would have the greatest impact in keeping both mothers and children safe. This included information that was clear and easy to understand, and support to navigate complicated systems.

“We need to care about the mum. Why she did that, or how. Or how we could support her in the future to avoid these things from happening again.”

Many mothers recommended that **women with lived experience** of domestic abuse and child removal would be well placed to effectively support other mothers, both because of their knowledge and also to combat isolation and shame.

“It needs to be people that have been through the experiences themselves so they do get it and they understand the dynamics, because only then can they really support properly.”

“Having someone there, a peer mentor, that would, I think, help, sort of, enormously. Just knowing that you’re not alone. Just knowing that you’re not-, you know, this, sort of, aberration in society.”

Mothers shared their own positive experiences of accessing peer support. However, one mother gave a note of caution about accepting advice from other mothers based on their individual experiences.

“Don’t take advice from someone who has had their child removed and hasn’t had their child returned, because they’re not going to give you the best advice. A lot of the advice is going to come out in anger, and a lot of it is going to be about their own situation and not about your situation.”

The two most common forms of support mothers told us were needed were **support for mental health** and **support to navigate the family courts**.

Recommendations to improve mental health support included better professional understanding of trauma and its impacts, support to manage harmful coping mechanisms such as drug and alcohol use, and access to grief counselling for mothers after removal.

“There was no support from anywhere, mental health services just go, ‘Oh yes, she’s got depression.’ But the thing is, nobody picked up on that this person’s had a hard life, maybe this person has trauma. Maybe it’s not just she’s mentally ill, maybe she’s just a traumatised person. It took a year and a half for any professional to pick up on that.”

“I am grieving the loss of my children, but they’re still very much alive. It’s so wrong.”

“The most effective therapy was with culturally sensitive services, which completely understood the faith perspective and helped me resolve a lot of the conflicted thoughts and feelings I have been carrying for many years.”

In the family courts, mothers recommended support to understand the system, emotional support during proceedings, and support to manage the financial impact of the process.

“There should also be financial support. It’s not right that three years on I’m still paying for legal costs that I didn’t want to go through, that were issued against me and that were used to take away my children.”

Self-education on domestic abuse and the family courts was recommended as a key tool to support mothers before, during and after child removal, and for some mothers was their primary source of support.

Changing the system

Mothers made radical recommendations for system-wide change in legislation, the family courts, and social services. The strength of recommendations reflected the overwhelmingly negative experiences of most mothers who had been in contact with the family courts, some of whom told us that parts of the system were so unsafe that they needed to be abolished entirely.

Many told us that **the current system is structured in favour of removing children** and that this emphasis needed to be changed, for the safety of survivors and their children. Most felt that child removal did not make the child safer, and told us that children should not be removed from mothers who were survivors of domestic abuse unless the mother was herself abusive or neglectful.

For the family courts, recommendations made by mothers included reform to increase **transparency** of proceedings, improve access to **legal aid** and **end the use of gagging orders** to prevent mothers speaking about violence and abuse. Several made recommendations to tackle the use of **parental alienation** accusations to silence survivors of domestic abuse. Many felt that **CAFCASS** also needed significant reform to adequately protect the interests of children.

For social services, mothers called for reforms to **letterbox contact**, increased **accountability** in cases where errors were made by social workers, and increased **oversight of special guardians** to ensure that children are safe in their care.

Mothers also told us that **campaigning and press coverage** was crucial to change the public perception of child removal and influence system change.

Key findings - support and systems change

- Mothers called for better training and support to prevent the removal of children from survivors of domestic abuse wherever possible, including:
 - Education for professionals on domestic abuse dynamics and the impact of trauma
 - Funding and access to specialist domestic abuse services
 - Peer support from women with lived experience of domestic abuse and child removal
 - Improved mental health support for mothers
 - Support to navigate the family court system
- Survivors called for radical changes to the family court system, which they understood as being biased against mothers and pro-contact for fathers regardless of circumstance.
- Further recommendations were made to overhaul the working of social services, which mothers understood as actively working to remove children from survivors of domestic abuse.

6. What needs to change?

These findings lend weight to earlier recommendations from AVA and Agenda as part of the National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage:

- The Department for Education should **prioritise work to develop alternatives to permanent child removal** that protect the child from short term risk whilst recognising the long term risks to both mother and child of permanent removal into care. The What Works Centre for Children's Social Care should support and evaluate projects and evidence development that will enable these approaches to be embedded in the profession longer-term.
- Children's social services should apply **strengths-based approaches** that enable women to draw on their strengths, make safe plans for their children, and allow decision making about a child's welfare based on a proper understanding of the family context. **Multi-disciplinary teams** should be in place in all local areas, drawing on the skills of substance misuse, mental health and domestic abuse practitioners to work alongside children and adult social workers.
- A full understanding of the experiences of survivors facing multiple disadvantage must be **embedded in all children and family social work training and development in England and Wales**. Social Work England has a potentially important role to play in ensuring this happens.⁵

In the time since the Commission recommendations were published, we recognise and commend the efforts of activists and domestic abuse specialists to **scrutinise and challenge the family courts and prevent harm to survivors**, including by securing additional powers and protections through the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

Based on our findings and recommendations from our peer researchers and participants, AVA also recommends that:

- Education about the dynamics of domestic abuse, including coercive control, economic abuse and post-separation abuse, should be embedded into **professional training for family court judges, lawyers and CAFCASS**.
- Specialist domestic abuse services are resourced to develop, implement and evaluate **specific support for survivors who have had children removed from their care**, including peer support approaches and therapeutic approaches for women at risk of self-harm, substance use and suicide.
- Further research is conducted to understand **safety and outcomes for children** in family court cases involving domestic and sexual abuse allegations. This should include children who have been placed with both fathers and mothers against whom allegations have been made, and children placed in kinship care with family members of alleged perpetrators of abuse.

⁵For full recommendations from the National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage, see the final report: <https://avaproject.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Breaking-down-the-Barriers-full-report-pdf>

Appendix 1 - Topic Guide

This first set of questions is about you, your life and your experience of separation from your child/ren. All questions are optional, and you are welcome to share as little or as much as you feel comfortable.

1.

Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your life?

- How would you describe yourself when you were younger?
- How would you describe yourself now?
- What have been the biggest changes that have happened during your life?
- What have been some of the most important defining moments in your life?

2.

Can you tell me about some of the challenges you have faced in your life? You can tell me as much or as little as you are comfortable with.

- Start with an open question - could be challenges around health, housing, money, work...
- Have you had challenges in your relationships with family or partners?
- Have you felt unsafe or afraid at times? Who was it that made you unsafe or afraid?
- What has the impact of violence and abuse been in your life?
- Thinking about times you were struggling, what were you doing to cope?
- Were your ways of coping helpful to you? Looking back, was anything harmful or risky?
- How do you cope with challenges now? Has anything changed?

3.

Can you tell me about your experience of being a mother?

- What changed in your life when you became a mother?
- At times when you felt unsafe or afraid because of violence or abuse, what impact did that have on you as a parent?

4.

If you feel comfortable sharing, can you tell me a bit about your situation around the time you were separated from your child/ren?

- What was happening for you and your child/ren around that time?
- What were you asked or expected to do? How did you feel about the things you were asked to do?
- Can you tell me about the different people and agencies that were involved in the decision to remove your children from you?
- Looking back, do you think there were any defining moments that had the biggest impact on the decision to remove your child/ren from you? e.g. a particular interaction with a professional or a specific event
- What reasons were given to you for the removal of your child/ren? How did you feel about those reasons at the time? How do you feel now?
- What happened in your life afterwards?

This next set of questions is about the support that could help you and other women going through violence and abuse who are at risk of having children removed from their care.

5.

In the run up to the time when your child/ren were removed, what was your experience of working with different agencies or professionals?

For example: CAFCASS, social services, court experts, the police, a specialist support organisation, counsellor, psychiatrist

- What advice or support, if any, did you get from children's social services?
- ... from other people or agencies?
- What type of advice or support, if any, were you offered?
- Where did you look for advice and support?
- Were you able to find the information you needed about your situation?
- What was the most useful advice or support you received? Who was it from?
- What support and advice do you wish you had before your children were removed?
- At times when you didn't get the support you needed, what did you do instead?

6.

After the time when your child/ren were removed, what was your experience of working with different agencies or professionals?

- What advice or support, if any, did you get from children's social services?
- ... from other people or agencies? Healthcare, housing, legal support
- What type of advice or support, if any, were you offered?
- Where did you look for advice and support?
- What was the most useful advice or support you received? Who was it from?
- What support and advice do you wish you had after your children were removed?
- At times when you didn't get the advice and support you needed, what did you do instead?

7.

Did you get any support to address the violence and abuse in your life?

- Did anyone know about the violence and abuse in your life? Which agencies involved in the decision to remove your child/ren knew?
- Did anyone ask you about it? What was that like
- Did you tell anyone about the violence and abuse? What was that like?
- What stopped you telling someone? Were you ever afraid to tell someone?
- Did the agencies involved in your case understand your situation?
- What support and advice were you looking for?
- What support and advice do you wish you had?
- Have you had any support or advice from domestic abuse specialist services, or sexual violence specialist services? What was that like?

8.

Thinking about your experience, do you think you were judged or treated unfairly by any professionals because of who you are?

- Your race, ethnicity, religion, culture, sexuality, gender identity, class, migration status, education, language, disability?
- In what ways have you been judged or treated unfairly?

9.

If you were going to design an ideal way to support a woman at risk of having her children removed, what would that support look like?

- Who would be supporting her?
- When should support be available? Before, during, after children are removed?
- What types of support would be most important?
- What impact would the support have on her?
- From your experience, what barriers do women face to getting the support they need?
- What do you think can be done to remove these barriers?
- To support women properly, what training should professionals get?
- What is most important for professionals to understand?

10.

We are designing a guide for women going through similar experiences to those you have shared with me. What would your advice be for another woman going through violence and abuse and facing her children being removed?

- What do you wish you had known during your journey?
- What have you learned?
- What have you done that has helped you?

11.

Is there anything that we haven't covered or you would like to tell me?

- Anything about the experience of being interviewed by another survivor?