



HEAR Research Project-Case Study from Al-Aman

Gender based violence (GBV) is a persistent and pervasive problem that affects women of all ethnicities and backgrounds. However, because of age-old cultural traditions, religious beliefs and barriers in acclimating to British lifestyle, women from Black, Asian, Minority, Ethnic and Refugee (BAMER) communities experience significant barriers to accessing support to rebuild their lives.

There are approximately 500,000 Arabs living in the UK, the majority of which reside in London. Out of this figure, it is estimated that 5,300 to 6,625 Arab women in London are affected by domestic abuse each year¹, many of whom have also experienced forced marriage, female genital mutilation and honour based violence. We will refer to these types of gendered violence under the umbrella term GBV. Al-Aman, the Arabic speaking team of the Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DVIP), provides unique language and culturally aware services that support these women to combat the difficulties they face.

Intersectionality of gender, culture and religion takes a heavy toll on the women who utilise Al-Aman's services making them more vulnerable to GBV and increasing the obstacles they encounter in rebuilding their lives free from abuse. The mistreatment of Arabic women by their partners or family members is sometimes based on religious beliefs that promote patriarchy and say that it is the man's duty to control and guide his family, especially his wife and female relatives. This is a very common belief that is found in the moral codes of other cultures, too.

Many Arabic women in London do not speak English and are unaccustomed to British systems and customs, hence finding it difficult to communicate effectively. These factors can make the women who are supported by Al-Aman highly reliant on their husbands. Not only do they rely on them for financial support, but they may fear that their immigration status might also be in the hands of their husbands. For example, if a woman decides to disclose the abuse she endures, a husband may refuse to submit her application for 'leave to remain' in the UK. Many of the women are fearful not just of the perpetrators of abuse, but also of bringing shame upon their families and being rejected by them, and ultimately losing their children if they speak about their experiences of abuse. They are additionally fearful of being turned away by services that do not fully grasp the severity and complexity of their situations. Furthermore, legal aid cuts limit the availability of legal support and many have no recourse to public funds leaving them effectively trapped and unable to escape their abuser.

Al-Aman itself faces wider challenges in the provision of support. GBV is a multifaceted issue and some statutory agencies might not be fully aware of the complexities or understand the effects it has on Arabic-speaking communities. One of Al-Aman's main objectives is to work closely with partner agencies to highlight the needs of Arabic speaking families who are affected by GBV and encourage referral to Al-Aman and other appropriate services. Furthermore, funding cuts and tightening of budgets have had a two fold impact on our services; the number of women seeking

¹ Al-aman evaluation 2008 – 2012, L. Roberts, H. Jawad & K. Burls, 2013

support has increased as alternative community sources of support have been cut back or closed, and their engagement with support services have increased in intensity and length of engagement.

Al-Aman works around these challenges. Our team of experienced Arabic speaking staff has expert knowledge on GBV, and the effects of intersectionality on women. Women feel they will be understood by and can trust our staff because of the cultural similarities they share. Our services are woman-centred so that each woman has a support plan tailored to her individual needs. Al-Aman also offers a variety of emotional support services over the phone, face-to-face, and in groups as well as practical skills workshops that aim to empower women and help them gain independence.

Al-Aman also contributes to raising awareness in the community, particularly within religious and cultural centres by delivering workshops and engaging in community activities. Al-Aman has formed key relationships with Imams and other religious workers through intensive workshops that emphasise the causes behind GBV and the effects it has on women and children. Al-Aman also works with statutory and voluntary agencies to inform them of cultural and religious customs in the Arabic community so that they can become advocates against gendered violence focusing on supporting safety in families.

An external evaluation report of Al-aman's work² highlights that women exit the service as stronger and more independent, feeling in control of their own lives .

Fatima* moved to London knowing little English, had no financial support and no knowledge of British customs. She was completely dependent on her abusive husband for all aspects of her life. Fatima's experience came to light after she ended up spending a night in a police cell. Police were called to her house following a report of a domestic incidence. Fatima was unable to explain what happened due to her limited English and her husband said she had attacked him. When Fatima was referred to Al-Aman, she had left her husband but was extremely worried about her and her child's future due to financial difficulties, her unclear immigration status and ongoing threats from her husband and his family over the issue of contact with their child. Al-Aman provided on-going emotional, safety-planning and advocacy support and helped Fatima to access legal advice. During her time with Al-aman, Fatima attended its English and IT lessons and successfully enrolled on a child care course. Fatima was finally granted British citizenship and a divorce. She now has paid employment and volunteers in the community. Fatima refers to Al-Aman as her "safety net" and says that "Al-Aman encouraged me to be strong for me and my son".

Al-Aman's services help women like Fatima to build safer lives. Al-aman assesses each woman's needs and safety and together they produce a safety and support plan tailored to their particular situation. All women are contacted via phone and in person on a regular basis for emotional and advocacy support. They are invited to participate in group support sessions, practical skills workshops and English and IT classes. Al-Aman also familiarises the women with British customs so that they were better aware of how institutions and court proceedings in Britain work.

The barriers that Arabic speaking women face combined with the silence in the Arabic community around GBV hinders the ability of the women we support to make safer choices for themselves and their families. Al-Aman's Women Support Services tackle the intersectionality between gender, culture and religion head on and its culturally sensitive programme works around these hurdles to effectively deliver emotional, advocacy and practical support services to increase the safety of Arabic women and empower them for the future.

**The name has been changed to protect the anonymity of the client.*

² Al-aman evaluation 2008 – 2012, L. Roberts, H. Jawad & K. Burls, 2013