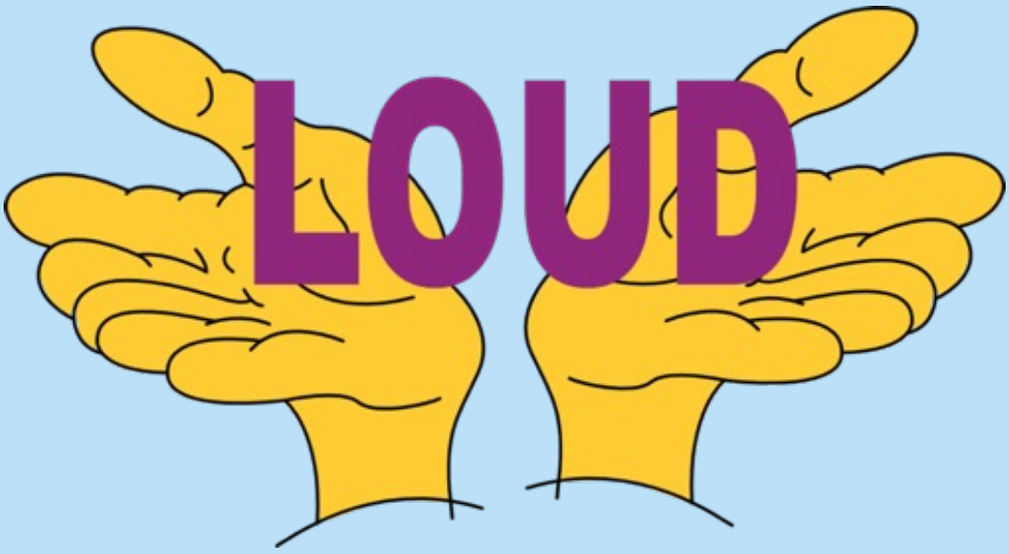

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Sign Loud: Perspectives of Deaf mothers and signing practitioners on domestic abuse, communication issues and the impact on Deaf families

By Jemina Napier, Claire Houghton, Lucy Clark and Tasnim Ahmed

Foreword Karen Adam MSP

It is an honour to be able to write the foreword to this landmark report. I want to begin by thanking the Deaf women and families who were willing to share their experiences with the Sign LOUD team. I know that doing so will not have been easy. It is because of your honesty and your courage that this work has been made possible.

This report shows what happens when domestic abuse is experienced in a world that is still designed, first and foremost, for hearing people. It makes clear that Deaf women's experiences are not simply "the same as everyone else's, but in BSL". The way abusers use communication, the way abuse is hidden, the isolation, the fear of services, and the lack of proper communication support combine into what many Deaf women have described to me as a kind of double trauma: the abuse itself, and then the systems that are meant to help, but too often don't.

Again and again, Deaf mothers here describe being shut out of conversations about their own lives and their children's lives. Without British Sign Language access to information, support or advocacy, they are left fighting just to get an interpreter, just to understand what is being decided, just to be seen as mothers in their own right. That constant battle, the extra time, energy and stress that Deaf people have to spend simply to stand in the same queue as everyone else is a thread that runs throughout this report.

When I first spoke with the Sign LOUD team in the Scottish Parliament, I knew straight away that this work mattered. As someone who has survived domestic abuse, I recognise the confusion, fear and long-lasting impact it can have on every part of your life and on your children's lives. As a CODA (Child of Deaf Adult), the daughter of a Deaf father, I also know the daily barriers Deaf people face with things that others take for granted like a GP appointment, a phone call about a bill, a discussion about a pension. I cannot begin to fully imagine what it means to deal with domestic abuse on top of all of that, but I can see the extra weight it brings.

In my work as an MSP, and now as Convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, I have seen how much difference it makes when our laws, policies and services are shaped by the people they are meant to serve, and how damaging it is when they are not. I write this foreword in a personal capacity, but I cannot separate what I have read in these pages from what I hear in my constituency and in committee: when Deaf people are not properly included from the start, the consequences are felt for years.

One of the most powerful parts of this report is the focus on children. Deaf and hearing children living with domestic abuse are not on the side lines, they are right in the middle of it. They see and sense far more than adults often realise. Where there is a shared language, especially BSL, it can be a lifeline, helping mothers and children to stay connected and make sense of what has happened. But when children are left to "broker" communication because there is no interpreter, they end up carrying information and responsibility that no child should have to carry. That is something I find deeply troubling, and it is something we must address.

At the heart of all of this is a very simple truth that language and communication are not an add on. They are fundamental to safety, to justice and to recovery. If a Deaf woman cannot explain what is happening to her in her own language, if she cannot communicate with the police, the courts, social work or specialist services in BSL, then we cannot honestly say she has equal access to protection or support.

The findings of the Sign LOUD project are a clear challenge to all of us, to those in all spheres of governments, in statutory services, in specialist organisations and in wider society. They show the need for genuine Deaf and BSL awareness across mainstream services, properly planned and funded interpreting in domestic abuse contexts, and specialist Deaf domestic abuse support that includes Deaf children and CODAs. They also remind us that national frameworks like Equally Safe and BSL policy cannot sit in separate boxes. If we are serious about tackling gender-based violence in Scotland, Deaf women and Deaf families must be part of that work from the very beginning, shaping it with their expertise.

This report does not just describe problems; it offers a way forward. The emerging considerations set out here come from Deaf women, practitioners and researchers who know this landscape better than anyone. We now have a responsibility to listen and to act, not to treat this as a one-off project but as the start of sustained change.

As an MSP, as a CODA and as a survivor of domestic abuse, I am determined that the voices in this report are heard in the places where power sits. I will do all I can to support the next steps that Deaf women and Deaf organisations are calling for.

My sincere thanks go to everyone involved in the Sign LOUD project for bringing this work together, and above all to the Deaf women and families who trusted you with their stories. I hope that what you have shared here will help to build a Scotland where safety, support and justice are genuinely accessible to all.

Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks go to all participants, including signing practitioners and stakeholders, and especially to the Deaf mothers who bravely shared their stories as victim-survivors. We are indebted to the BSL interpreters who supported us throughout the project. We gratefully acknowledge the British Academy for funding this one-year project. Finally, we extend our appreciation to Karen Adam MSP for her unwavering support throughout the course of this project.

Note on terminology

- This report focuses on research conducted only with Deaf BSL users and not deaf people in general. It also focuses on Deaf women and has not involved Deafblind women.
- We use the convention 'Deaf' to demonstrate we are referring to culturally Deaf BSL users.
- Audism is a form of discrimination that privileges hearing norms and marginalises Deaf cultural ways of being.
- CODA is a term for a hearing Child of Deaf Adult/s.
- The term 'mainstream' in the context of this report refers to hearing non-signing, non-Deaf aware services, either statutory or third sector, including domestic abuse specific services.
- The term 'specialist services' in the context of this report can refer to signing -specific services, specialist domestic abuse services or services by and for Deaf people in BSL– we will specify in the text.

See Sign LOUD webpage for BSL version of executive summary

Executive summary

The Sign LOUD project explored the experiences of Deaf mothers in relation to domestic abuse, communication issues and the impact on their family. This summary presents perspectives of six Deaf mothers who are victim-survivors and five signing practitioners who use BSL to support Deaf women. The first section focuses on Lived Experience, the second on Communication in BSL. These findings inform the 'key considerations' developed with thirteen key stakeholders with Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Deaf/BSL policy and practice expertise.

1. Lived Experience

Deaf women reported that their experiences of domestic abuse differ significantly from those of hearing women, due to unique abusive tactics and communication barriers. Perpetrators exploited language modalities (spoken or signed) to control, coerce or demean Deaf women, while professionals often failed to recognise these dynamics. This created a "double trauma" of abuse and systemic barriers to support, compounded by limited BSL-accessible services, alongside intersectional inequalities.

Key Points:

- Professionals lacked awareness of Deaf-specific abuse tactics, leading to inadequate identification and support.
- Communication barriers and absence of BSL services slowed disclosure and recovery, increasing safety risks.

1.1 Isolation

Deaf mothers described profound isolation while experiencing domestic abuse, compounded by structural discrimination and lack of accessible information in BSL. Limited awareness of mainstream support services and absence of professionals or friends who understood both Deaf/BSL culture and domestic abuse left women feeling trapped and unsupported. Community spaces could offer connection, but the close-knit nature of the Deaf community sometimes increased vulnerability and risk.

Key Points:

- Lack of BSL-accessible information and Deaf-aware professionals intensified feelings of isolation and limited access to help.
- Deaf community networks could provide safety and support but also posed risks of confidentiality breaches and further abuse.

1.3 Mothers' perspectives on the impact on children

Deaf mothers expressed deep concern about the emotional and psychological impact of domestic abuse on their children. Children experienced verbal, physical, and emotional abuse alongside their mothers, and some were subjected to serious harm that came to light later. Deaf and hearing children experienced abuse differently. Contact arrangements often perpetuated abuse, leaving children distressed and mothers anxious about safety, especially in the absence of BSL interpreters. Communication about domestic abuse varied depending on whether the child was Deaf or hearing, and also whether they could also sign, which affected the nature and extent of the impact on the family.

Key Points:

- Children experienced trauma through living with abuse and suffered ongoing manipulation during contact, affecting mental health and behaviour.
- Deaf and hearing children faced different risks: Deaf children were highly sensitive to visual cues, while hearing children were impacted by auditory triggers and threats.

1.4 A shared language between mothers and children

Having a shared language, particularly BSL, was crucial for fostering strong, supportive relationships between Deaf mothers and their children. Early exposure to sign language contributed to positive communication and emotional closeness, helping families navigate and recover from abuse. However, practitioners raised concerns about over-reliance on children for emotional support and the risk of exposing them to traumatic details when mothers lacked contact with trusted sign-fluent adults.

Key Points:

- Shared BSL use strengthened mother-child bonds and provided a sense of safety and connection during and after abuse.
- Over-reliance on children for emotional disclosure posed risks of further trauma and blurred boundaries.

1.5 Mother - child communication about domestic abuse

Deaf mothers found it challenging to communicate with their children about domestic abuse. Most tried to shield children from distress by avoiding discussions, especially when they were young, while others gradually disclosed information as children grew older. Practitioners highlighted the need for resources to help mothers communicate in a developmentally appropriate and sensitive way, and concerns that some mothers might over-share due to a lack of alternative support and limited incidental knowledge about child-friendly communication.

Key Points:

- Mothers often delayed or limited conversations about abuse to protect children, leading to gaps in understanding and emotional strain.
- Lack of Deaf-specific resources on communicating with children about domestic abuse and this increased risks of over-sharing, silencing and further trauma for children.

1.6 Being seen as a mother

Deaf mothers frequently felt invisible in key moments of their children's lives due to communication barriers and systemic bias. Professionals often bypassed mothers, speaking directly to children, or relied on inadequate written English, which undermined mothers' roles and responsibilities. Women strongly resisted using children as interpreters, especially regarding abuse, but acknowledged the tension when no alternative support was available. Practitioners highlighted societal stigma that Deaf women are seen as less competent mothers, adding trauma and limiting access to appropriate support.

Key Points:

- Communication barriers and professional assumptions led to mothers being excluded from decisions and interactions about their children.
- Lack of Deaf-specific support for Deaf mothers, and stigmatised audist attitudes about their parenting, reinforced feelings of invisibility and increased isolation.

1.7 Family dynamics

Family relationships often intensified Deaf women's experiences of domestic abuse and isolation. Many women reported that their wider families were hearing and did not sign, creating communication barriers and feelings of exclusion. Audist attitudes and language power imbalances allowed perpetrators to undermine mothers and manipulate family dynamics and interactions with services, sometimes fuelling fears of losing children. Intersectional factors, such as families using other spoken languages, added complexity. Even when families were Deaf, small community dynamics could create conflict and additional stress for mothers and children.

Key Points:

- Lack of sign language use and audist attitudes in hearing families increased isolation and vulnerability for Deaf mothers.
- Language power imbalances and small community dynamics complicated relationships, excarbating the impact of domestic abuse on Deaf mothers and children.

2. Communication in British Sign Language

2.1 Access to information in BSL

Deaf women consistently reported significant barriers to accessing information about domestic abuse in BSL. This lack of accessible resources often delayed Deaf mothers own recognition of their experience of domestic abuse and limited awareness of available support services. While improvements have been noted over time, information remains scarce and of poor quality. Deaf women described the exhausting burden of advocating for their language rights and the inadequacy of written English as an alternative.

Key Points:

- Limited BSL resources on domestic abuse hindered early recognition and access to support.
- Persistent "Deaf tax" burden forced women to fight for interpreters and accessible communication.

2.2 Lack of provision of BSL interpreters

Deaf mothers reported feeling highly vulnerable when reporting and seeking support for domestic abuse and child-focused interventions due to the lack of BSL interpreters. Consideration was needed for appropriate deployment of interpreters when more than one member of the family is Deaf. This resulted in significant delays in police interviews, court hearings, and social work visits, undermining safety and trust in services. Deaf women strongly preferred face-to-face interpreting for sensitive situations, but practitioners suggested that video remote interpreting could sometimes be offered as an immediate short-term solution in emergency or crisis situations. Practitioners highlighted systemic issues such as limited availability of qualified interpreters, poor booking systems, lack of funding, and poor Deaf/ BSL awareness among service providers, which also impacted safeguarding for children.

Key Points:

- Interpreter shortages caused delays and exclusion in critical processes, including social work, court and police interactions.
- Lack of Deaf-specific planning and protocols increases risk for Deaf mothers and children.

2.3 Sign language brokering

The absence of interpreters often forces Deaf mothers to rely on their hearing children for communication, a practice known as sign language brokering. While mothers and practitioners commented that children might want to help, both raised concerns that this could expose them to inappropriate information about domestic abuse. Mothers expressed reluctance to involve children but noted that emergencies and systemic failures often left them with no choice. Practitioners highlighted the potential long-term psychological impact on children and the risks of confidentiality breaches.

Key Points:

- Lack of interpreter provision leads to children brokering communication in sensitive contexts, increasing emotional strain and risk of trauma.
- Over-reliance on children compromises privacy and places too much responsibility on them, affecting their well-being and development.

2.4 Lack of Deaf/ BSL awareness in mainstream (hearing) services

Deaf women and signing practitioners highlighted widespread gaps in Deaf awareness among mainstream (hearing) services. Professionals often lacked understanding of Deaf culture and the specific needs of Deaf BSL users, resulting in inadequate accommodations and systemic barriers. Women reported feeling exhausted from repeatedly educating service providers about deafness and the unique dynamics of domestic abuse in Deaf communities. Misinterpretations of signing behaviours sometimes led to negative stereotypes, compounding stigma and mistrust.

Key Points:

- Deaf mothers faced constant pressure to educate professionals about Deafness and domestic abuse, adding emotional strain.
- Lack of cultural and linguistic awareness led to miscommunication, exclusion, and harmful assumptions about Deaf women.
- Mainstream (hearing) services, including domestic abuse specialist services, need to adapt to meet the needs of the Deaf women and children.

2.5 Fear of statutory response

Deaf women expressed deep fear of engaging with statutory agencies due to historical and ongoing experiences of discrimination and lack of Deaf/BSL awareness. Concerns included being labelled as aggressive, assumptions about their parenting competence, and the risk of child removal without proper communication or interpreters. These fears often led to reluctance to seek help and resistance during professional interventions, creating further barriers to safeguarding and support.

Key Points:

- Fear of child removal and mistrust of statutory agencies stemmed from systemic bias and poor communication practices.
- Lack of transparency and interpreters during interventions heightened anxiety and disrupted engagement with services.

2.6 Education and accessible programmes

Deaf women and practitioners emphasised the urgent need for education on domestic abuse and healthy relationships within schools and Deaf community settings, delivered in BSL. They highlighted the importance of challenging normalised abusive behaviours and creating Deaf-only spaces for discussion, also a specific need for women-only spaces within Deaf communities. Practitioners stressed that existing multi-agency programmes should be adapted for deaf participants to reduce isolation, improve mother-child communication, and provide strategies for recovery. Inclusive programmes could also help reinforce that domestic abuse is a societal issue, not limited to deaf communities.

Key Points:

- Education in BSL for the Deaf community, including children, is essential to prevent abuse and promote healthy relationships.
- Adapting mainstream (hearing) programmes and creating safe, Deaf and women-only spaces can empower women, reduce stigma, and build support networks.

2.7 Specialist Deaf domestic abuse support

Participants emphasised the urgent need for specialist domestic abuse services tailored to Deaf women and their families so they can communicate directly with someone in BSL without the need for interpreters. Current systems are heavily oriented toward hearing people, leaving Deaf mothers without adequate support for themselves or their children. Deaf mothers and practitioners flagged that this can lead to mental health issues, stress and trauma. They recommended that Deaf domestic abuse specialist services should include Deaf support/ counselling and advocacy workers, sign-fluent staff, and targeted support for CODAs/ deaf children, ensuring both individual and joint mother-child interventions to strengthen relationships, promote recovery and reduce long-term harm.

Key Points:

- Lack of specialist services leaves deaf mothers isolated with a lack of support for them and their children, increasing emotional strain.
- Dedicated deaf domestic abuse services, including support for CODAs and deaf children and family-focused interventions, are essential for recovery and safeguarding.

3. Key considerations

What follows are suggestions for stakeholder organisations to collaboratively take forward in light of the findings of this report. Any steps taken should be in collaboration with Deaf stakeholder organisations and include the participation of Deaf victim-survivors and their children.

As a first critical step, we recommend that:

- An Equally Safe BSL Advisory Group is established to improve responses and delivery to Deaf families, including Deaf stakeholder and survivor participation.

Improving Access to Information and Support

- Develop BSL accessible domestic abuse multi-media resources for Deaf women and their children.
- Increase numbers of suitably trained Deaf signing experts to provide support and advice to Deaf victim-survivors, including Deaf children and CODAs.
- Improve accessibility of mainstream (hearing) services for Deaf women and children (including (including universal services, helplines, IDAAs, domestic abuse services), helplines, IDAAs, domestic abuse specialist).
- Develop child-focused provision of domestic abuse support for Deaf children and CODAs, including BSL provision for Deaf mothers.
- Adapt existing mainstream (hearing) domestic abuse programmes for Deaf women and children (including support for the mother-child relationship).
- Establish Deaf specific domestic abuse support services for Deaf women and their children where support is provided directly in BSL.

Enhancing Communication and Access in BSL

- Increase capacity of BSL interpreters through domestic abuse professional development training, support and supervision.
- Improve availability and booking systems for trained BSL interpreters in domestic abuse contexts.
- Ensure Deaf mothers have access to BSL interpreters and accessible information when children are interacting with services/systems.
- Ensure children are not used as language brokers in domestic abuse situations.
- Ensure opportunities for Deaf children and CODAs to be exposed to BSL and bilingual education from birth to support communication about domestic abuse.
- Provide education about gender-based violence and healthy relationships in BSL from an early age in schools where Deaf children are educated.

Taking collaborative action across GBV/ BSL fields

- Ensure action to change public attitudes connects women and children's equality and rights to BSL/Deaf awareness and Deaf families' rights
- Increase Deaf community awareness of domestic abuse, rights and help- seeking options (e.g. through Deaf community workshops, women-only spaces, child/youth spaces, social media).
- Embed domestic abuse and Deaf awareness training in curricula and CPD of frontline practitioners (police, social worker, education, health, justice agencies and IDAAs, NGOs, etc.).
- Co-create a national multi-agency training hub of materials (building on current best practice).
- Improve connections and collaborations between Equally Safe/ GBV and Deaf/ BSL policy and practice.
- Ensure participation of Deaf women, Deaf children and CODAs in research, policy and practice development.

Introduction

1.1 Human Rights Framework

The United Nations (UN) defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. Proclaimed by the UN General Assembly resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993). It recognises that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women leading to domination over and discrimination against women by men, and that some groups of women are particularly vulnerable to violence and limited opportunities to achieve legal, social, political and economic equality. This study will explore Deaf women's particular vulnerability to domestic abuse, its impact on their human rights and fundamental freedoms, including discrimination and inequality.

Domestic abuse is defined in Scots Law as a course of violent, threatening or intimidating behaviour that is abusive of a partner or ex-partner, likely to cause physical or psychological harm (fear, alarm and distress). It reflects the harm done to children through abusive behaviour towards a child, making use of a child, a child seeing, hearing or being present during incidents//course of behaviour and adverse affects on a child of living with domestic abuse (Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018). The Istanbul Convention explicitly recognises children as victims of domestic abuse and this study recognises children as co-victim - survivors and the need for further research centring children and young people. Acknowledging the relational human rights of women and children experiencing domestic abuse is key to our approach (Morrison and Houghton, 2023), recognising the importance of strong mother-child relations for recovery (Katz, 2022) and that each is respected as an individual with full human rights.

To address the human rights of Deaf families experiencing domestic abuse, the integration of rights instruments is important, as is their gradual incorporation into Scots law. The UNCRPD (United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities) outlines the rights of Deaf people to use sign language, to freedom of expression, access to information and services, effective access to justice and their rights to professional interpreters. This is relevant to victim-survivors rights to the range of services set out in the Istanbul Convention, including child victim-survivors. It specifically states the right to accessible services in a language they can understand. The UNCRC (United Nations Convention, which includes child victim-survivors' rights) outlines the rights of children to protection from abuse, a range of provision, prevention efforts and participation in decisions affecting their lives. The authors are committed to a child rights as well as women's rights approach to this issue, including children's right to participate in future research, practice and policy development.

1.2 Deaf community contextual information

The last Scottish Census (2022) reported that there are 117,300 people in Scotland who use British Sign Language (BSL), but that around 2,600 consider sign language to be their main language. Turner (2020), however, has estimated that there are 6,500 Deaf BSL users in Scotland through analyses of various census data.

Deaf individuals are predominantly born to hearing parents, which often results in limited early exposure to British Sign Language (BSL). This lack of access can lead to language deprivation, particularly during critical developmental periods (Hall, 2017) and impact on socio-emotional development of deaf children dependent on the potentially limited communication strategies between parents and children (Vaccari & Marschark, 1997). Consequently, many Deaf people experience delayed acquisition of their first or preferred language—BSL—and may only encounter the Deaf community later in life. This delayed connection can impact identity formation and access to culturally and linguistically appropriate support networks, along with other intersectional factors (Leigh, 2017). Although Deaf people do not inherently possess superior vision, research shows they often develop enhanced peripheral vision and heightened visual attention, adaptations that support communication and environmental awareness in the absence of auditory input (Dye, Hauser & Bavelier, 2008).

Within the Deaf community, English literacy levels tend to be lower on average, due in part to educational and linguistic barriers (Leigh & Power, 2000). The concept of "Deaf-same", the idea that shared experiences of being Deaf creates a bond of mutual understanding, captures the experiential and cultural solidarity among Deaf individuals (Kusters & Friedner, 2015). This notion is grounded in shared sensorial, social, and moral experiences. Deaf communities are small and typically tightly interconnected, not necessarily by geography, but through shared language and culture.

Deaf individuals face structural inequalities and systemic oppression, often referred to as the "Deaf tax" (Aldalur et al., 2022). This term encapsulates the invisible labour required to secure access and inclusion—whether through advocating for interpreters, accessible information formats, or participation in public services. These efforts are compounded by the legacy of 'audism', a form of discrimination that privileges hearing norms and marginalises Deaf ways of being (Bauman, 2004).

There is a range of research that confirms the systemic barriers encountered by Deaf BSL users in accessing services in the UK (especially health and justice systems), despite an inclusive policy framework (Harris & Bamford, 2001); in particular the rights afforded to Deaf people through the Equality Act 2010, the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 and the BSL Act 2022. Findings have revealed lack of Deaf cultural awareness among service providers, lack of information in BSL, and lack of availability of BSL interpreters as a consistent issue (see recent examples from Lumsden & Black, 2020; Parmar, et al., 2025; Skinner & Napier, 2022; Terry, Meara & England, 2024). Hearing children who grow up with Deaf parents using BSL at home are referred to as Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs) or 'heritage signers' (Napier, 2021). Studies have found that children can be drawn in as 'language brokers' to interpret for their Deaf parents in a range of different low and high-risk contexts, including healthcare (Gee, et al, 2021; Napier, 2017, 2021). This is typically (but not always) due to the lack of availability of professional BSL interpreters.

1.3 What we know about domestic abuse in the Deaf community

Until recently, the majority of research on domestic abuse in the Deaf community was conducted in the United States. These studies found that Deaf women are disproportionately affected by domestic abuse, with prevalence rates significantly higher than in the general population, with Deaf women generally being 2-3 times more likely to experience some form of domestic abuse (Crowe, 2017). They also found that the inability to hear can increase vulnerability, particularly in situations where communication barriers hinder reporting to authorities or accessing support; and that power imbalances between Deaf and hearing partners are a critical factor in domestic abuse dynamics (Anderson, et al., 2011, 2012, 2014; Mastrocinque, et al., 2017, 2022). Hearing privilege may be used to control and coerce Deaf individuals, although it is important to note that Deaf perpetrators can also exert control.

More recent research by the authors with Deaf women who report domestic abuse in the UK have identified barriers such as lack of access to qualified BSL interpreters, limited availability of information in BSL, and insufficient Deaf cultural awareness among support services; as well as the need for the need for ongoing support in BSL, Deaf-specific services provided in BSL, and training for both the Deaf community and service providers (Napier, et al., 2024). Police and support services often lack the knowledge and infrastructure to appropriately book and work with BSL interpreters (Napier et al., 2023; Stonard, et al., 2025). Additionally, interpreters themselves may be reluctant to take assignments in domestic abuse contexts due to insufficient specialist training (Napier, Clark & Gorman, 2023), further compounding the barriers faced by Deaf women seeking help.

Close-knit Deaf community networks can perpetuate domestic abuse through fear of speaking out (Napier, et al., 2024). Historical and ongoing abuse in the Deaf community has been systemically obscured, particularly in contexts such as social work and education in Scotland, where naming and addressing abuse has been fraught with challenges (Alana Harper, personal communication, 18 November 2024). Furthermore, there is a lack of recognition of how the experiences of Deaf victim-survivors can be compounded through intersectional factors (Napier, et al., 2024).

Domestic abuse remains a pervasive form of gender-based violence, disproportionately affecting Deaf women. Its consequences inevitably impact children who are also victim-survivors in Deaf families, but no research to date has explored these impacts. The heightened risk to Deaf women who are victim-survivors underscores the urgent need to understand the intersection of being Deaf, experiencing domestic abuse, and communication barriers in families. Such understanding is critical for developing effective strategies to mitigate harm, inform future research that centres children's experiences, and ensure equitable protections for all women and children who lack access to the majority language of their country.

1.4 Scotland's Policy framework

1.4.1 Equally Safe Strategy (2023) and Equally Safe Delivery Plan (2024-26)

The Equally Safe strategy aims to establish a unified and collective approach to combat violence against women and girls (VAWG) and states that diverse identities and experiences of women and girls, and children's rights are central to the strategy. It has a focus on tackling misogyny, 'a way of thinking that upholds the primary status of men and a sense of male entitlement, while subordinating women and limiting their power and freedom' (Scottish Government 2022), of particular relevance to this study where abuse of power includes the power of English as the primary language in Scotland. Important Equally Safe priorities for Deaf families include the delivery of sustainable, informed and safe specialist and universal service responses for victim/survivors' that are holistic and meet victim/survivors' individual needs (Priority 6) and an intersectional approach to preventing, reorganising and responding to compounding inequalities and risks experienced (Priority 7). An Independent Strategic Review of VAWG services (2023) identified that Deaf women's needs were not being met in Scotland. It recommended provision of 'by and for' services, consideration of a national advocacy worker, alongside innovative partnership services such as the Deaf Links/Women's Aid advocacy pilot. There is a growing Equally Safe intersectional focus, in governance, access to services, justice and participation; this report will argue for the inclusion of Deaf families and BSL action.

1.4.2 The BSL National Plan (2023-2029) and BSL inquiry (2025)

The first BSL National Plan (2017-2023) was published after the approval of the BSL (Scotland) Act in 2015. The current BSL National Plan seeks to deliver the ambition of the Scottish Government to make Scotland "the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work, visit and learn", and features actions under ten priority areas. Although none of the priority areas specifically make reference to domestic abuse, five of the priority areas are of significant relevance to the findings from this study:

- BSL accessibility (Action 2) – which recognises that as many Deaf BSL users have BSL as their first and/ or preferred language, public services need to be made accessible for BSL users, through Deaf cultural awareness and provision of vital information in BSL and enabling people to access services using their own language.
- Children young people and their families (Action 3) – reinforces the Scottish Government's commitment to provide all children, young people and their families with the right support at the right time. Although reference to deaf children is specifically made, in this report we highlight that this is also relevant for hearing children with Deaf parents who use BSL.
- Health and wellbeing (Action 5) – states that BSL users will have access to the information and services they need to live active, healthy lives, and to make informed choices at every stage of their lives.
- BSL data (Action 7) – seeks to strengthen the evidence and data on the BSL community in Scotland to better inform decision making in public policy and service design.
- Access to justice (Action 9) – stresses that BSL users should have fair and equal access to the civil, criminal and juvenile justice systems in Scotland.

The recent 2025 report from the Scottish Parliament Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee inquiry into the efficacy of the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 expressed particular concerns about the barriers and challenges faced by Deaf women with experience of domestic abuse. The report stated that Deaf women should have better access to education and information about their rights and the law and that Deaf specific service providers would help to achieve this. The committee specifically requested that the Scottish Government consider what further steps should be taken to educate Deaf people (particularly women) about their rights and how the justice system works; increase the numbers of suitably trained Deaf experts and BSL interpreters in working with Deaf victim-survivors and to improve the accuracy and robustness of data in this area.

1.5 The report

Against this backdrop, the present report details findings from the Sign LOUD project, a participatory study funded by the British Academy, noting the need for collaboration and connection across Equally Safe and BSL fields. The project brings together expertise in children's and women's rights, gender-based violence, sign language rights, and access to public services for minoritised communities. It explores Deaf mothers' and signing practitioners' perspectives on domestic abuse and examines how communication barriers shape experiences within Deaf families. By foregrounding these perspectives and working collaboratively with GBV and Deaf/BSL experts and stakeholders, the study aims to inform policy, practice, and future research that promotes safety, equity, and empowerment for all affected individuals.

Overview

The Sign LOUD project was a one-year pilot initiative to explore the experiences of Deaf mothers and signing practitioners in relation to domestic abuse and communication challenges, and to assess the broader impact on Deaf families and children. This research is a collaborative effort between Heriot-Watt University and the University of Edinburgh, drawing on the expertise of academics and practitioners working at the intersection of gender-based violence, women's and children's rights, and Deaf and interpreting studies.

The project is focused primarily on Scotland, with the aim of generating insights that are locally relevant and policy-informing. Central to the study is the lived experience of Deaf mother victim-survivors, whose perspectives have historically been underrepresented in both research and service provision. This pilot lays the groundwork for a future, larger-scale study that will include children and young people from Deaf families.

The research adopts an interdisciplinary and community-engaged approach, incorporating both academic and practitioner knowledge. Data collection involved one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted in BSL with six Deaf mothers based in Scotland. Additionally, a focus group was held in BSL with five signing practitioners (i.e. practitioners who use BSL directly in supporting Deaf women), including Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs) from England and Independent Domestic Abuse Advocacy workers (IDAAs) from Scotland.

2.1 Participant profiles

Deaf women			
Participant Code	**Ethnicity**	**Child profile**	**Perpetrator profile**
DM1	Asian	1 hearing female	Hearing
DM2	White	1 Deaf female	Deaf
DM3	Asian	1 hearing female	Deaf
DM4	White	1 male hearing, 1 female Deaf	Deaf
DM5	White	1 male hearing, 1 female Deaf	Hearing
DM6	White	3 hearing males	Deaf

Signing practitioners			
Participant Code	**Ethnicity**	**Deaf or hearing**	**Role**
SP1	White	Deaf	Former IDVA
SP2	White	Hearing	IDAA
SP3	White	Hearing	IDAA
SP4	White	Hearing	IDVA
SP5	White	Hearing	IDAA

All qualitative data were analysed by the research team using reflexive thematic analysis, led by the Principal and Co-Investigator through several iterations of discussion and sense-checking with the Deaf victim-survivor researcher and the Deaf victim-survivor participatory consultant, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics between domestic abuse, communication barriers, and Deaf family life.

Findings were shared in a workshop of policy and practice stakeholders with expertise in GBV and Deaf/BSL policy and practice. They considered potential actions to improve the lives of Deaf families experiencing domestic abuse based on the data. These actions are reflected in the 'key considerations' section of this report, as well as ongoing collaborations and a set of ideas formulated that will be shared with Equally Safe/BSL leads.

2.2 The Sign LOUD team

- Principal Investigator: Professor Jemina Napier is a hearing heritage signer from a multigenerational Deaf family and a qualified practising sign language interpreter in several signed languages. She has conducted numerous participatory research projects with Deaf communities concerning access to public health services through sign language interpreting, with a more recent focus on Deaf women's experiences of domestic abuse and also children of Deaf parents experiences of language brokering.
- Co-Investigator: Dr Claire Houghton is a hearing non-signer who draws on her expertise that involves bringing victim-survivors, especially young survivors, together with policy-makers to transform domestic abuse law, policy and practice; with close ties to UK and Scottish Governments, independent reviews and national strategies.
- Deaf victim-survivor researcher: Lucy Clark is the founder of LCC Scotland and is a Deaf domestic abuse victim-survivor who has been involved in research and advocacy on domestic abuse in the Deaf community, with a UK-wide reputation as a leading advocate for Deaf women that use BSL. She has worked closely with Professor Napier, delivering training to interpreters, service providers and Deaf women based on their previous projects on Deaf women's experiences of domestic abuse.
- Deaf victim-survivor participatory consultant: Tasnim Ahmed is operations manager of the unique Scottish Ethnic Minority Deaf Charity (SEMDC) through which she developed the women's group Deaf Women Empower. This includes domestic abuse specific work with ethnically minoritised Deaf women that she will build on to support this project, as well as project management, expert by experience and groupwork skills. Tasnim is also a Deaf survivor of domestic abuse.

Findings

This analysis presents perspectives of six Deaf mothers who are victim-survivors and five signing practitioners who use BSL to support Deaf women. The first section focuses on Lived Experience, the second on Communication in BSL. These findings inform the 'key considerations' at the end of the report that were developed with thirteen key stakeholders with Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Deaf/BSL policy and practice expertise. We present the findings using illustrative quotes from Deaf mothers (DM 1-6) and signing practitioners (SP1-5).

3.1 Lived experience

3.1.1 Deaf women's experience of domestic abuse

Deaf women felt that their experience of domestic abuse was different than that of hearing women, although of course they 'shared' experiences of ongoing physical, sexual and psychological abuse. This related to the abusive tactics of the perpetrator and their lived experience as a Deaf woman as well as a victim-survivor of domestic abuse.

> **I think because you're coming from a different situation, Deaf domestic abuse and hearing domestic abuse is different, Deaf people are abusive and controlling in different ways, not shouting but using facial expressions in a different way, or switching the television off, or playing with the lights, or things that people haven't thought about… (DM2)**

Deaf women described how professionals' lack of understanding of this difference meant they had not: identified signs of abuse in Deaf families; understood how abusers targeted the women as visual people (BSL users); provided information that 'named' such abuse or communicated about abuse in a way that understood

That understood the additional and specific dimensions of abuse and control of Deaf Women. They recounted how hearing abusers use their privilege in numerous ways to control, coerce and demean Deaf women, particularly using the power of English in interactions with others. They felt it was vital to understand that the dynamics, impact and experience of domestic abuse for Deaf women was different.

> **If you get support about domestic abuse, they talk about the way hearing people experience domestic abuse, not how Deaf people experience domestic abuse. You're having to educate them all the time. (DM2)**

Deaf women and signing practitioners spoke of the 'double trauma' of experiencing domestic abuse and then additional barriers to support because they were Deaf. They spoke strongly about the burden of educating others, which Deaf women found exhausting. Furthermore, lack of BSL and Deaf-specific services meant that communicating their experience of abuse was slow, painful, frustrating, partial – with significant implications for safety, risk assessment and recovery.

> **I think it would be good to have support in sign language, somebody that I can communicate with directly, because communication has been a big barrier… in an ideal world, what I'd like is somebody to be able to communicate with directly in sign language so I could say everything. At Women's Aid, there was somebody who had some very basic sign language, so I wasn't really able to say everything that I wanted to get out. It meant the process was slow and quite frustrating for me. (DM6)**

One Deaf woman spoke about further obstacles if you were a minority group within the Deaf community, experiencing multiple intersectional inequalities. She felt her arranged marriage with a hearing abusive man should never have happened

> **… there were marks on the walls in his mother's house from where he'd punched the walls. At first I didn't understand what it was, but then later I realised that it was him and he had a very violent temper and everybody knew that, so he shouldn't have married me in the first place. Nobody should have let that happen. It was wrong. (DM1)**

3.1.2 Isolation

Deaf women spoke of an overwhelming sense of isolation as a Deaf victim-survivor, living through the trauma of abuse and structural discrimination as a Deaf person. All spoke about their lack of access to information about domestic abuse (in BSL, through education), which resulted in limited knowledge of support services, compounding their isolation.

I just didn't have the information… I thought I was the only one… I feel stupid. I should have known better. (DM1)

They felt they needed to talk to someone (friend, network, professional) who understood both the experience of domestic abuse and being a Deaf sign language user. Yet this shared experience of 'double disadvantage' (Napier, et al., 2024) was impossible to find:

I've talked to Deaf friends about it, because they understand the Deaf stuff, but they haven't been through domestic abuse. They don't know what it's like, so I'm really stuck.(DM2)

A strong recommendation was that they needed to be able to access a Deaf person with this specialist understanding, and be able to communicate directly about their experiences without interpreters.

I just wanted to have some support from another Deaf person, you know, somebody that really understands. I think it's best to be able to get things off your chest and be able to talk to someone that really gets it. (DM6)

Unfortunately, their experience in some families and across services was one of being 'left out' as a Deaf person, which enhanced Deaf women's feelings of being alone and trapped when experiencing domestic abuse.

'Deaf-same' community spaces could be very important to Deaf women –communication and connection with Deaf people in a safe space. For Deaf women with hearing partners/ex-partners, Deaf spaces could be key to expanding one's 'space for action' (Kelly, 2003), a place to expand agency, speak out and discuss options. However, Deaf women and signing practitioners also noted a lack of women-only and domestic abuse competent spaces/resources within the Deaf community. Also, if the abuser was also Deaf these spaces could become unsafe, and the women could lose networks key to speaking out, accessing help and recovery. The interconnectedness of the Deaf community could exacerbate abuse, increase isolation and compromise any sense of confidentiality in relation to abuse or attempts to escape. Furthermore, there were instances where the abuser would use this closeknit community to further abuse and isolate the woman.

After it happened, there were lots of rumours about me. Of course, the Deaf community is very small, isn't it? People were talking about me. People changed my sign name… He shared all these rumours about me that were untrue. He told everybody that was my new sign name. He was really horrible about me… For a year I was tormented by that... it was awful. You know, he spread all these rumours about me. He's still out there, talking about me at Deaf pub. (DM6)

3.1.3 Mothers' perspectives on the impact on children

Deaf women also spoke about their experience as a Deaf victim-survivor mother: their concerns about their children's experience of abuse; the impact on them and the difficulties communication brought. All mothers felt their children were adversely affected by the abuse, and were concerned about the impact on children's emotional/ mental health and behaviour. They detailed their child's experiences of the abuse which included verbal, emotional and physical abuse, seeing the abuse of their mother, and abusers involving children in the abuse. One woman spoke about the sexual abuse of two young female relatives by the same perpetrator, and she had no idea until they left and spoke out, though not publicly due to the small community dynamics. Mothers described how the abuse of both women and children continued through contact, with abusers verbally abusing and surveilling women through children, emotionally abusing children, children returning from contact distressed and with changed behaviour. Some older children refused contact due to their father's anger and abuse and mothers spoke of appealing to fathers for safe, reassuring contact:

I said to him, it's not fair. You're abusing the children's minds. He couldn't think about their wellbeing first. You know, he just didn't, he couldn't think about their needs and their safety. It was really hard. (DM6)

Mothers described how whether the child was Deaf or hearing (a CODA- Child of Deaf Adult/s) affected their experience, impact and context of abuse and support.

yes it was affecting her. She'd see him hit me and other things and it was very upsetting for her. Since we've moved out things are much more peaceful… because she is hearing she heard everything… of course she could hear the shouting. (DM1)

Mothers delineated between the abuse experiences of a Deaf child and hearing child. Those with Deaf children felt that their enhanced peripheral vision meant they would be acutely aware of visual cues and movements of the perpetrator and thus be impacted by the visual tactics and dynamics of abuse. Those with hearing children described how children would have different experiences than the Deaf mother; they would hear the noise, the shouting but also could be frightened by potential early warning signs (such as doors opening, windows smashing) that the Deaf mother might not hear. Furthermore, women explained that this realisation was sometimes gradual as there were difficulties communicating with children about abuse.

> **So it's all quite triggering for me and that's affected my daughter too. I think as she's got older, I realised how much it had affected her and that's difficult. And I realised that because she's Deaf and a visual person she saw stuff. (DM2)**

3.1.4 A shared language between mothers and children

Whether or not the child was a fluent BSL user significantly impacted the relationship and communication between mothers and children (whether the child was Deaf or a CODA).

> **we have a really nice time together, um, you know, talk about things, talk about all sorts of topics… I think that's also because we're both Deaf as well, so we have this lovely rapport… (DM2)**

All Deaf mothers stressed the importance of sign language use in the home; firm sign language connections from early childhood seemed to signal a more positive and healthy relationship that sustained them through and beyond abuse. It was often the women themselves that ensured their child was fluent from an early age:

> **My relationship with my [hearing] child is good. She loves learning sign language. I've taught her from when she was quite young. We've always had a really fantastic relationship. (DM3)**

Signing practitioners noted the sense of safety and closeness the shared language brought for some mothers and children. However, signing practitioners also noted that, for some Deaf women, this may mean their child is the only person they can speak to in their own language about domestic abuse and who fully understands what they are signing. There was a concern about over-reliance on children and traumatic effects of 'over-sharing' stories and details of abuse. Children might also inadvertently learn about traumatic events through mothers, friends and practitioners signing about domestic abuse in sight of BSL fluent children, and signing practitioners cautioned about this.

> **A lot of Deaf women are quite open to the children about the domestic abuse situation that they've experienced. But it might be because they've got no one to talk to, everyone surrounding them is hearing all the support services and so on, so… There's not really a person they can trust to understand, um, and to really be able to divulge that emotional impact in their own language, so… often they rely on children because the children know and understand them and can sign and pick up what they're signing too. (SP3)**

3.1.5 Mother- child communication about domestic abuse

Communicating about domestic abuse was complex: most Deaf mothers spoke of efforts to protect children through not talking about it and this could include not answering children's questions, particularly if they were young.

> **I just wanted her to be happy and not be too embroiled in it all. I didn't want her to be worrying about what was happening. She'd asked me about the police and things and I'd say no, that's nothing to do with you, you don't need to worry about that. (DM3)**

Whilst mothers related abuse experiences of all their children, how they were impacted and acted out, they felt there was an age difference in understanding the abuse. Women spoke of not wanting to tell children everything due to the emotional impact on the child; some also wanted some privacy.

> **he was abusive towards me and they saw that. I tried to cover up as much as possible. I didn't want the children to see things. I didn't want the children to worry. So, I tried to put a brave face on and pretend. But the children knew, really. really. The eldest one really understood everything. He's 15 now and he doesn't talk to his dad at all, which is sad, really. (DM6)**

Talking about abuse could be a gradual endeavour, which often became more possible when the children were older or sometimes when the mother felt ready. This could be a long time after leaving the abuser and might not synchronise with when the child was ready, curious, or acting out. Deaf mothers felt teenagers understood more and that it was perhaps more appropriate to talk to older children, though acknowledged that this might not be the child's perspective.

I thought when she was older we'd talk about it but when she was quite young she was asking all these questions it was quite a lot. I didn't want to talk about the past. Now she's a little bit older I've realised that I can tell her more things. I haven't told her everything but I've started telling her about some of the bad things that happened with her father. But of course, it's affected my family too, again it's difficult because my family wants to talk about things, but I don't want to. (DM2)

Deaf mothers also recognised children may need someone else to talk to, outwith the family, and some actively sought support.

I did talk to her and I said, you know, do you want to talk to somebody? If are you upset there's somebody that you can talk to about family or your dad or anything? And she said she wanted to talk to somebody. She's got a favourite support worker and I thought that would be helpful for her. (DM3)

There were several reports from Deaf women and signing practitioners of tensions and estrangement with older children too, which they suggested was due to experiences of abuse, communication difficulties and also resentment as a child of a Deaf mother. Signing practitioners' felt that Deaf victim-survivors needed access to resources to help them to communicate with their child about abuse at an earlier stage, in a developmentally appropriate way; so that mothers could support the child through their experience and maintain mother-child relationships. Whilst acknowledging that such support was helpful to hearing victim-survivors too (e.g. CEDAR – Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse Recovery Programmes, see Morrison, 2024), practitioners felt 'child-friendly' communication was a particular issue when there were language, literacy and education issues in Deaf families.

education to the mums on how, really, to support their children to, you know, talk about things in a child-friendly way with them, but I think that really is the perfect world. (SP3)

Communication had a significant, continued and nuanced effect on the mother-child relationship. Whilst most women expressed resistance to speaking with children about abuse, one spoke about 'talking about everything' with their child. Signing practitioners reported that this was not unusual and shared worries that some Deaf mothers might 'over-share' due to lack of access to an adult to communicate with. They also felt that this might be due to poor education and language deprivation.

Proactive ways to support mums to understand how to talk to their kids about domestic abuse. So, actually, often you see a mother might divulge information to the child without realising how to adapt that or think about what's important for the child to know or not to know. So, the mother's just like, I just want to tell them the truth, I need to tell someone the truth. So, it all just comes out, and then that can have a traumatic effect on the child, from the way it's been explained, because it's not the right way of explaining to the child what's happened. So, if someone was to explain to the mother to be careful about what information is accurate and what isn't and really pick out that information. Then you can still explain in a child-friendly, sensitive way what's going on. But a lot of Deaf mothers don't have that incidental knowledge that a hearing mother would have on that. (SP4)

3.1.6 Being seen as a mother

Women spoke of multiple situations when they weren't seen as a mother, when they felt invisible at important times in their child's lives, where there was no one to communicate with them in BSL and how sometimes professionals wrote English which was inadequate and difficult:

they don't think about me as the mother at all, you know, they just talk or try to write things down, you know, and then they'll say oh we'll try to find somebody but it doesn't happen and it's such a waste of time. (DM5)

Mothers described numerous situations where they needed to communicate with people about their child – in support services, in court, during home visits – and they felt invisible, frustrated, exhausted. This also impacted them being able to access support for their child.

she had said my mum's Deaf and they were like it doesn't matter. (DM5)

They felt very keenly their responsibilities as a mother and that they should be recognized as a mother. One key element of this was protecting children from interpreting, though some 'small' 'positive' everyday circumstances were deemed acceptable for some women.

...I'd never ask them to translate or interpret for me because as a mother I'm responsible for that, you know I wouldn't want her to do that for me, she's a child, she's too young. (DM3)

Deaf women expressed this particularly strongly in circumstances relating to the domestic abuse; several said that they did not want those words – depictions of abuse - to be in their child's head. They explained that as mothers they were responsible for communication and reported that they had to actively resist and intervene when people talked to the child instead of directly to her. Some tempered this with a frustrated acknowledgement that if the child didn't interpret the mother would just not know what was going on or being said.

> **She doesn't sign so much. What will happen is she'll listen to what's happening and when I try to ask what's going on she'll tell me to wait. It's difficult… she doesn't really do any interpreting for me, she's quite nervous so I usually just don't know what's going on. (DM5)**

Deaf mothers also spoke about common scenarios where agencies 'forego' the mother because they can speak directly to the child.

> **It happens all the time. I think people assume they can talk to the children and it's really frustrating. I'll have to say, no, you can talk to me directly. But it just happens so often that people try to talk to the children… sometimes my children will tell me things that have been said afterwards. It's awful, really. (DM6)**

Signing practitioners described the impact of societal stigma that Deaf women are inadequate mothers and lack abilities and competence to be a 'good mother'. This has real life impact on agencies' responses to Deaf victim-survivors of abuse, and to women's reactions to agencies which can be fearful and resistant. They felt this was an additional trauma to that of abuse and discrimination as a Deaf woman.

> **…linked to mums becoming resistant, you know, not allowing a professional into the home to talk to children, and I think that's really important. You know, it's a normal trauma response for mothers to have that. Mothers often have that trauma themselves. They've left an awful situation, or they're trying to leave that situation. So, it's natural to have that traumatic response to that kind of thing [domestic abuse], and… Also, they're, Deaf mums, there's barriers to add to that, in addition to the trauma response … the professional view of Deaf mothers often tends to be quite patronising. (SP4)**

They identified a distinct lack of support for Deaf victim-survivors who were mothers.

> **there's not enough support for Deaf mothers, specifically if in a domestic abuse situation, maybe a mother's very isolated and can't reach out to their network for support. They might be like, well, actually, what I'm going to do, who do I talk to? (SP4)**

3.1.7 Family dynamics

Deaf women reported that their domestic abuse experience and feelings of isolation were often exacerbated because their wider family were all hearing and could not sign. For some Deaf women, this was because of family audist attitudes towards them and their assumptions about their capacity as a Deaf person.

> **...it's mostly speech [in my family], but I prefer to use sign language. I'm the only Deaf person in my family, everybody else is hearing...I felt like they didn't really believe it [about the domestic abuse]… sometimes my [hearing] family would say quite negative things like 'oh you can't hear this' or 'you can't drive' or 'you're stupid' and actually I just thought you know what? I don't want this. I don't want to engage in this. (DM3)**

For others, the sense of isolation was compounded when they knew other family members were communicating with their children, but they were left out. Both Deaf mothers and signing practitioners raised concerns about family power dynamics when the perpetrator/ father is hearing. As a user of the majority spoken language, they feel that fathers can use this to their advantage to harm mother-child and wider family relationships.

> **You know my daughter will always just speak to her dad because he's hearing too. And sometimes I'll be told something and I'll think oh he knows everything and I don't know everything. But I'm her mum. I think it's difficult because I'm Deaf. But I've always said you know you can tell me things and she said yes I know but it's difficult because you're Deaf. It's easy for dad, he understands but it's more difficult for you to understand because you're Deaf. It's not fair on me. (DM5)**

This power of language was also used by perpetrators in interactions with agencies to discredit the Deaf mother, exacerbating the fear of children being taken away and affecting relationships.

> **If they've got a hearing father as well, in that, you know. Spoken English is powerful, [Deaf women] feel that disempowerment in terms of the difference between the languages, and they're worried there's going to be pressure on the child that makes them be taken away and affect their relationship. And it becomes an unhealthy relationship. So, it's very cyclical. (SP5)**

This situation is further complicated by the intersectional experience of being in a family that uses a different spoken language to the majority language.

> **[My daughter] uses sign language. She always signs. I'm profoundly Deaf. She's hearing but she uses sign language fluently. My parents and that side of the family they don't really sign at all, they speak Punjabi, they don't communicate with me very much. They use a bit of home sign… [my daughter] will do some translation for me because me and mum don't communicate at all really, so she'll phone my daughter and then my daughter will explain things to me. (DM1)**

One Deaf mother stated that she felt her experience of reporting and being supported through her domestic abuse experience would have been different if she had a Deaf, rather than hearing, wider family.

> **I wish I had a Deaf family. That's what I would want because everybody's hearing and I just I just wish I had a Deaf family where everybody used sign language. Because then if the police arrived and everybody was Deaf then they'd have to do something differently. (DM5)**

However, another Deaf mother who did have a Deaf family commented on how challenging this can be due to the small nature of the Deaf community, and how this can have a negative impact on the children as co-victims.

> **As she got older it started to impact her more because her father's also Deaf and his family is also Deaf, so there was lots of conflict between the two families and that affected her as she got a bit older. She started to understand what was going on and started to ask me more questions. And I wasn't really prepared for that. I thought she was too young to talk about it. (DM2)**

3.2 Communication in British Sign Language

3.2.1 Access to information in BSL

The Deaf women had all encountered frustrations in not being able to access information about domestic abuse in BSL. For some this meant that they did not even recognise that what they were experiencing was domestic abuse, and then if they suspected they were a victim of domestic abuse they did not know which services to turn to for support.

> **I know there's more information [in BSL] than before. I used to think I was the only one and then later I realised that I wasn't the only one and it wasn't my fault. I know that now. (DM1)**

Although it was acknowledged that there has been some improvement over the years, it was made clear that there still is not enough information provided in BSL (for example, websites, leaflets, posters), which was reinforced by the signing practitioners.

> **All Deaf women say they would like the same information. But it needs to be in BSL. When I'm looking for information, really there isn't much about. There's very little or it's poor information. Yeah, it's very bad. (SP1)**

Many of them found the 'Deaf tax' burden overwhelming in having to constantly fight for their BSL rights, especially if no interpreters were present.

> **They'd write things down for me, but my English isn't very good, so I was very left out. (DM5)**

3.2.2 Lack of provision of BSL interpreters

The Deaf women all were clear that they felt more vulnerable in reporting and receiving support for domestic abuse because of a lack of provision of BSL interpreters. Many of them reported experiencing significant process delays once they reported domestic abuse because interpreters were not booked or were not available, meaning that the Deaf women could then not interact with mainstream service providers. For example, no interpreters for police interviews or social work visits, or court hearings. Extensive delays were noted by both the Deaf women and signing practitioners.

> **There were problems. There was no interpreter there. Court was put off many times because they couldn't get an interpreter. I had to go to court 3 times. The first time there was no interpreter. The second time there was not enough information, then finally the third time there was an interpreter. (DM4)**

> **…normally you see these extensive delays that create more issues because the services don't know how to work with Deaf people. (SP4)**

Also, because of the sensitivities of talking about domestic abuse, the Deaf women all preferred to have interpreters in person rather than online.

> **There were maybe four occasions when the police came to my house without an interpreter. And when they came, I'd always say can you have an interpreter please? They tried to phone somebody, and they'd say we can't find one and they tried to maybe use a video interpreter but that's not what I wanted. I wanted a face-to-face interpreter but it was really hard to find somebody so that never happened. (DM5)**

Signing practitioners suggested that the use of video remote interpreting can mitigate the shortage of BSL interpreters but that the importance of having appropriately skilled interpreters anyway is particularly acute due to the additional demands of interpreting online.

> **The truth is there's not enough [interpreters], and that's often the response you get when you're trying to book them. If you have in two face-to-face interpreters that's great. Sometimes you have to resort to maybe video remote interpreters prior to that. But they need to be confident in court, they need to be qualified, and so on, so you need to explain that first to the solicitor that perhaps they could use remote interpreting with the solicitor outside of court in the room briefing with the solicitor, or something like that, I think. Now we do have different options that can maybe try to get past that excuse of not enough interpreters. There's ways to mitigate that. (SP4)**

Video remote interpreting is often regarded as a quick fix and cheaper solution to the lack of availability of interpreters. But research has already shown that video remote interpreting provision should be used carefully for interactions between Deaf people and the police (see Skinner, 2024; Skinner & Napier, 2022) and that it may be appropriate for first point of contact in emergency situations or for brief meetings to give reassurance to Deaf BSL users, but that face-to-face interpreting is preferable for sensitive situations or on-going contact.

These experiences led to Deaf mothers losing their trust in the support system because they were frequently told that an interpreter was coming. This is exacerbated if the perpetrator and/ or the child(ren) are also Deaf when it is hard enough to find one interpreter in the first place (at whatever stage of the process or interaction with service provider). In this case each individual has rights to their own interpreters, but this is often not organised either due to a lack of awareness of how to make arrangements or due to lack of budget, as noted by signing practitioners.

> **I know in Scotland that we have limited court interpreters anyway. So, trying to find interpreters who can work in court, you're already very limited, so then, on top of that, trying to find two or three separate interpreters. How do you do that? So, often, you know, if you have a mum and a dad who are both Deaf and only one court interpreter is then available who else do you look to? How do you get that access for each of them separately? (SP3)**

The lack of knowledge on the part of hearing domestic abuse service providers on how to book interpreters can also impact on access for Deaf children who have experienced abuse.

> **The first time that they've worked with a Deaf child, they were unsure how to book interpreters, what the process would be like. So, the first person that they called said, we don't have a budget for the interpreter, so it's like, well, hang on, you do have to, you need to just find out where it is, find that budget, and then book the interpreter… (SP4)**

This is a particular issue for home visits or contact centres. In this case, the police officer or social worker might not know what is being said between a child and one parent or another at a contact centre, or the Deaf mother might not understand what the visitor is saying to their child in their home. This highlights issues of risks and safeguarding for both Deaf mothers and children in these contexts, which was commented on by both Deaf mothers and signing practitioners.

> **I think the police weren't thinking about me [as a mother] at all or about my needs at all they just talked to my daughter, and I just sat there left out of it. I didn't know what was going on at all. You know I didn't know what's going on. That's wrong. The police just aren't interested in Deaf people. They just ignored me completely. I was just there. It's not acceptable. (DM5)**

Deaf mothers and signing practitioners also commented on the lack of connection between civil and criminal court, and the inconsistencies with the provision of BSL interpreters.

> **When she went to court, there was an interpreter present. But then, when she first went to a contact centre, there was no interpreter present for that. So… I contacted the court, and I said, no, there must be an interpreter for this, and they again mentioned about this funding… I, therefore responded about the risk to the child because, for example, the father could say something to the children and the social worker doesn't know, because they're signing, what he said to the child. I was concerned about that, and the possible security of having an interpreter present. If that should happen it's putting the children more at risk by not having interpreters, so you need to put the children first. (SP2)**

3.2.3 Sign language brokering

One of the other impacts of not having interpreters provided is that Deaf mothers with hearing children in particular find themselves in situations where their children are either asked to, or offer to, assist with communication. This phenomenon is referred to as sign language brokering, where children are effectively interpreting for their parents. Sign language brokering has been found to occur in low-stakes (such as food drive thru) and high-stakes (such as medical appointments) settings (Napier, 2017, 2021, Gee et al., 2021), with both Deaf parents and brokers having mixed feelings about the experience. Deaf mothers reported to us that they are reluctant to task their children with responsibility for communication—especially about domestic abuse.

> **I don't want her to be thinking about those things having those thoughts in her head. It's something that I do. I'm responsible for making phone calls using BSL interpreters or making relay calls. If there was a very small thing for example at home I might ask her for something very little but not aside from that, absolutely not. (DM3)**

However, they also noted that sometimes it is necessary if a police officer or social worker arrives at the door and has not realised in advance that the mother (and sometimes the perpetrator) is Deaf. Therefore, they do not present with an interpreter and the child may end up supporting the communication. Some mothers reported this occurring repeatedly.

> **The NHS is the worst. NHS is terrible. If anything happens, if there's an emergency, you have to go to hospital or something, they'll always talk to the children. They always use the children to interpret. (DM6)**

The professionals have the obligation to arrange interpreters, but signing practitioners agreed with Deaf mothers that this often does not happen. Therefore, children get drawn in to assist with communication, and this can have a longer-term impact on the children.

> **I've seen with the domestic abuse situation, where social workers have raised issues through safeguarding but they've not prior informed the mother of that, so they turn up for safeguarding, and the Deaf mother has hearing children, and then they say…we need to speak to the mum, so we'll speak to the children…the mums that are more empowered will say no use an interpreter do not to talk through my children…but if someone's in a vulnerable situation…if you're at an awful point in your life, it's not always possible to be confident enough to speak up against that. (SP4)**

I know a… [adult] CODA. She was always having to interpret, you know, whether it was with police, with doctors, and just different environments. And she still talks about it, and the mental impact from having to do that, the stress on her. And until now, she's still experiencing that stress… traumatised from always having to be that interpreter for everything. And their family experienced domestic abuse as well… it's that clear mental impact that it has on children when they're having to be the interpreter. (SP3)

Interestingly, Deaf mothers also reported their children feeling proud of being able to use their BSL skills to assist with communication.

She is very good at telling me things in sign language. My daughter wants to be an interpreter. She has seen me use interpreters in more settings. (DM3)

This corresponds with previous findings that brokers often offer to assist with communication in the spirit of cooperation and responsibility (Napier, 2021); something that they feel is helpful and caring for someone through action. However, this has implications in domestic abuse contexts when the children are then exposed to information which may not be appropriate, or feel burdened to broker, as observed by signing practitioners.

Children often are relied on as sort of relays or brokers, and they become almost like a young carer, in that they have the same stresses as a carer would have for caring for someone physically. They have that responsibility of growing up very quickly. They're not able to just have that childlike kind of experience. (SP4)

I think that sometimes, often the children are relied on too much because they can communicate. So, if the mother and child are together… and they're talking to someone, and the child's with them, then it's like, oh, well, my child can communicate in these situations. (SP3)

Children themselves can be put in the situation when they feel they have no choice but to assist with brokering. Even if they generally feel confident enough to do this, signing practitioners commented that it is not appropriate as it places the onus on the child to explain to the professional what happened in relation to the domestic abuse.

[They] will maybe ask the child, because there's no interpreter, and they're a bit uncomfortable, and they don't know how to interact with the mother, or what to do, and it becomes kind of a, oh, okay, well, what happened? And children can be quite confident. Maybe it's a CODA thing. (SP4)

This is also a concern as some Deaf mothers noted that children who do some sign language brokering may have communicative control over interactions concerning domestic abuse, leaving the mother powerless.

What will happen is she'll listen to what's happening and when I try to ask what's going on she'll tell me to wait. It's difficult… she doesn't really do any interpreting for me so I usually just don't know what's going on… Whenever I ask for she constantly tells me to wait. I'm really left out and it's exhausting. I'm so left out there's just no communication. And then later after the police went I'd say, you know, what happened? And she'd only tell me very limited information about what happened. (DM5)

It was noted by signing practitioners that children might still engage in brokering communication by intervening even when an interpreter is present. This can assist the mother in understanding what is happening, and ensure the Deaf mother is understood by the interpreter who may not be familiar with them.

The mum doesn't always understand what's going on, you know, so the children almost kind of give summaries, brief summaries of information about what's being discussed. The child is still acting as an interpreter by feeding that information, you know, even if the interpreter is present. (SP4)

Children want to be often involved and sometimes do step into that role of broker... often if there's an interpreter present, they might say, oh, no, that isn't quite what my mum said. So… I'm kind of torn about that. (SP5)

Sign language brokering can also be taken on by other family members, which Deaf mothers stated reduces their level of personal privacy in talking about their domestic abuse experience.

I had to write things down or ask a member of my family to sign for me… it made me feel really uncomfortable. I didn't want my family to be aware of all of my personal information. I wanted to keep things private. I didn't want them to worry… I didn't want [my mum] to be worried about me. I don't want her to know everything. But I had to because it was an emergency. So that was the only thing that we could do. There were no interpreters available. (DM6)

3.2.4 Lack of Deaf/ BSL awareness in mainstream (hearing) services

The lack of Deaf/ BSL awareness in mainstream (hearing) services was highlighted as an issue by the Deaf mothers, which reinforces previous findings with Deaf women victim-survivors (Napier, et al., 2024). A lack of understanding of Deaf BSL users' needs translates into lack of understanding of actions and accommodations needed to support Deaf women's navigation through services and systems (i.e. provision of information in BSL, interpreters, etc.), and this was corroborated by signing practitioners.

At the start there was nothing. I did try to ask for help but I realised how many barriers there were. There's just no communication, there's no access for Deaf people, and no Deaf awareness. (DM2)

And they need to understand, also, there is Deaf culture… professionals need to have a full understanding of that situation as it relates to a Deaf mother. (SP4)

Deaf mothers reported feeling exhausted that they constantly have to educate professionals about what it means to live as a Deaf person. But they also commented on the fact that they often have to educate professionals that domestic abuse in Deaf communities can manifest in different ways.

Whenever you engage with any services you have to do so much education for hearing people… in every single setting you're having to say this happens, that happened, and they're like oh that's new, I didn't know that, that's different, educating them constantly… You have to give them Deaf awareness, because they just don't get it. When you try to explain things people don't really seem to understand what you're saying. It's hard for them to relate because the experiences are so different. (DM2)

It was noted by signing practitioners that Deaf mothers can be misunderstood when they get exhausted and frustrated about lack of Deaf awareness and having their needs met.

…hearing professionals and Deaf mums, there's always kind of a conflict, a tension there. And they often label Deaf mums as aggressive women [because of the way they sign]. But it's not that, [professionals] just need that education, the same way that we need to educate professionals how to work with Deaf people. (SP5)

3.2.5 Fear of statutory response

Many of the Deaf mothers reported a fear of the response from statutory agencies because they are labelled as aggressive when they sign because there is a lack of Deaf/BSL awareness. Practitioners felt there was a lack of awareness on the part of Deaf mothers of the systems and processes concerning domestic abuse. Through many years of experiencing oppression as a result of structural inequalities, Deaf mothers have internalised suspicion of hearing service providers. They perceive that there is a lack of understanding of Deaf women's capabilities as mothers. They fear that agencies will take away their children, because there are legacies of social workers removing children without communication and without interpreters and lack of understanding on the part of social workers how to assess Deaf parent competencies in child safeguarding procedures (Oram et al., 2023; 2024).

I was scared as well. I thought if I asked for help they'd take my child away. So, I tried to protect my daughter and then when she became a teenager we wanted to ask for help but also I was still quite scared of social services… I was worried they'd try and remove my child. I've got this fear and she felt the same as me… Recently, last year, I started asking for a bit of help. I wanted to check my daughter would feel safe and was reassured that social workers wouldn't be there. (DM2)

They're frightened to lose their children. Because Deaf mothers live with that oppression every day from that hearing environment they're living in. So, they're worried their children are going to be taken away. (SP5)

Signing practitioners noted that this fear can manifest in resistance to cooperate with non-signing hearing professionals, because Deaf mothers do not know what is happening and why and feel powerless in the situation. One Deaf mother spoke movingly on this issue:

I wasn't I wasn't provided with enough support afterwards. I had a social worker but they ended up removing my child. I just asked for help and they removed my child and that really affected me.. They said there is more support now and things have improved but it's hard for me to engage with that because of the negative experiences I've had. (DM2)

…once they arrive, the children are there, and [the child welfare reporter] always comes in, talks to the mother, and the mother always goes, no, where's the interpreter? But the [reporter] will say, no, I'm here for the [hearing] child to talk with them and see their well-being. So, they're not really questioning the child, it's just to get their views. And often the mother's quite resistant because of that fear of what it is, and it can really disrupt the situation, because they don't really know, you know. (SP5)

3.2.6 Education and accessible programmes

Deaf mothers and signing practitioners felt that improving education for Deaf people on domestic abuse and healthy relationships was a priority, within schools and within Deaf community workshops. BSL content integrated into resources that exist for the hearing pupils throughout the curriculum (not just PSHE). Deaf women spoke about the normalisation of abusive behaviour within families and the community and how this should be challenged. Practitioners also felt this was a priority for action:

Education [for Deaf women]… is so important. It's a must, but I think that we also need education for Deaf men. To really be clear on what behaviour is appropriate. Because I really do feel that how can we judge them if they don't know? They don't know that their behaviour's wrong, necessarily. So, we need to think about that education for women and for men too, really for both of them, from school age, there needs to be that education. (SP2)

Deaf mothers made it clear that there is a need for Deaf women only spaces to talk about domestic abuse issues, as well as general Deaf community spaces.

I'd like all Deaf mothers, single mothers particularly, to have the opportunity to have discussions without the abusers being present, to bring people together, workshops, to have some communication, to have people together, to have fun, to share their experiences. (DM3)

Signing practitioners who are familiar with the range of programmes available to educate and support Deaf women victim-survivors and perpetrators felt that although specialist sign language support services are crucial, it is also important to ensure that existing multiagency programmes, for example the Freedom or Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse Recovery (CEDAR) programmes, are made accessible to the Deaf community. They asserted that this would reduce perceptions of domestic abuse as a taboo topic, reduce feelings of isolation, inform women and children of rights, enhance mother-child communication and ensure that Deaf mothers can develop strategies to help their children feel safe and recover from domestic abuse.

That's why I really believe that Deaf mothers should have the Freedom Programme really taught to them. So, Deaf mothers know where to draw that line… there should be that training for Deaf women, so that they know how to protect children. A lot of Deaf mums just don't have access to that clear understanding of the kind of boundaries and behaviour around that. (SP5)

Signing practitioners suggested that by adapting programmes like Freedom to be inclusive of Deaf women and delivering to a mixed Deaf-hearing group, this could reinforce that domestic abuse is a broad societal issue not just experienced by Deaf women. Deaf mothers reported that they want to see more safe spaces for Deaf women, so they can share experiences of being Deaf domestic abuse victim- survivors, but that talking to Deaf peers is not as helpful if they have not experienced domestic abuse themselves. So, this point also reinforces the importance of choice and access to support as noted by Napier, et al. (2024), in that Deaf women can still feel supported by other women who have experienced domestic abuse but are not Deaf.

With the Freedom Programme…it's not like the hearing course, where we just have one person up chatting. We have more visual performances, games, really interactive engagement in that course.. they also developed really good rapport with each other, good relationships with each other, they can understand and empathise. They can talk to each other, and they develop a network through that course. It's their network of support. (SP4)

3.2.7 Specialist Deaf domestic abuse support

The need for specialist Deaf domestic abuse support was raised in many ways by all participants. They commented on the low levels of support available for Deaf mothers, for their children and for families. Many of the Deaf mothers have experienced barriers to accessing mainstream (hearing) support services.

Because my family are all Deaf and his family are all Deaf we just faced so many barriers, there was just nobody there to support us. There was just a huge impact on us all… I think because everything's orientated around hearing people, and there isn't anything for Deaf people. (DM2)

Signing practitioners noted a particular problem for Deaf mothers in not being able to access support with respect to their children, or when their child(ren) are accessing support services, so they know what is going on, which was echoed by Deaf mothers.

I've seen more often and more regularly in these situations with Deaf parents, or a Deaf mother, in domestic abuse situations, where later on [the children] develop these challenging behaviours. And again, the mother hasn't really been able to get that support, because there isn't any support out there for challenging behaviour that's accessible So, the legislation really doesn't say anything about disabled parents. There's nothing in there, so there's no rights as a disabled parent. If a child's Deaf, you can provide an interpreter, but not if it's the parents that are Deaf. The legislation's not clear on this, that's a challenge. (SP4)

[I'd like for the future] ...for Deaf women who are mothers or are single mothers particularly they need more support for them and their children because there are difficult circumstances... They need more support, they have to be given more support. (DM3)

Several of the Deaf mothers also reported that they receive support from their own children because their children can sign and they feel reassured.

Yes [I feel better when my daughter] is there for support. (DM1)

But now she's (daughter] a teenager she understands more and she's been a lot more supportive to me… she always says she doesn't want to see me suffer anymore and that's obviously a big thing for me to hear. She's been a massive support for me. (DM2)

This was highlighted as an issue by signing practitioners, who were concerned that this placed too much responsibility on the children. Even if hearing mainstream services and programmes are more inclusive, for all of these reasons stated above, the majority of participants stated that they would also like to see Deaf domestic abuse specialist support services available for Deaf women. They recommend that these services are provided directly in sign language, and by people who understand the lived experiences of Deaf people generally, and also specifically of Deaf victim-survivors and their families.

> **More support because even though there is more than there used to be, it's not enough. [We need] Deaf counsellors as well, so Deaf people are able to have access directly and provision immediately because the longer you have to wait the more your mental health can suffer before you get access to those [mainstream] services. Children need support as well, not in a way that's punitive but it's a way that's encouraging because of course that's anything that's difficult for the children it's going to produce future trauma. (DM2)**

Signing practitioners also commented that there needs to be specialist support available for children of Deaf parents, including from providers who understand the CODA experience and the multilayered dynamics of being a hearing co-victim in a Deaf family domestic abuse situation.

> **I think… there definitely should be support for CODAs. There definitely needs to be more support for them, and I think that it's a group that's forgotten. They're not Deaf, they're not hearing, they're just sidelined. And if the children were Deaf with Deaf parents, would they be looked after the same way? You know, parents might receive that support, but then the services miss the child, especially hearing child in these situations when the parents are both Deaf. (SP3)**

There needs to be specific support for Deaf mothers and their children together, as well as individually.

> **There needs to be support together for that [mother-child] relationship. But also, there needs to be that kind of… letting go of being joined at the hip, if you like. Because often the child is always with the mother in various capacities, and that can become quite stressful. They cling on… They need to let go, there needs to be that support for the child. (SP5)**

Deaf women spoke about recognising this need and actively seeking support for their child from specialist domestic abuse children's workers and from schools.

> **I had spoken to [the school] and said please do speak to her [daughter]. I didn't want her to feel like she couldn't say things. I didn't want her to feel like she couldn't talk about me or talk about home. I had a conversation with her and the school and I said you know, I'm really happy for you to have these conversations… I did talk to [my daughter] and I said, do you want to talk to somebody? If are you upset there's somebody that you can talk to about family or your dad or anything? And she said she wanted to talk to somebody, a support worker. She's got a favourite support worker and I thought that would be helpful for her. (DM3)**

4

Conclusions

The Sign LOUD pilot project findings have highlighted the urgent and complex realities faced by Deaf mothers who experience domestic abuse. Their testimonies reveal a distinct and often overlooked intersection of gender-based violence, communication barriers, and systemic exclusion. Deaf women are not only navigating the trauma of abuse but also the structural challenges of accessing support in a society where mainstream services remain largely inaccessible and uninformed about Deaf culture and British Sign Language (BSL).

The findings underscore that Deaf women's experiences of domestic abuse differ significantly from those of hearing women, shaped by unique tactics of control and coercion that exploit visual communication and language deprivation. The lack of BSL-accessible information and qualified interpreters compounds their isolation and undermines their safety, recovery, and ability to parent effectively. Deaf mothers often face the double burden of educating professionals about both domestic abuse and Deafness, while simultaneously protecting their children from interpreting traumatic content.

Children in Deaf families, whether Deaf or hearing, are deeply affected by abuse and the communication dynamics within the home, according to Deaf mothers and signing practitioners. The absence of specialist support for Deaf and hearing children of Deaf parents needs to be addressed. There are serious safeguarding concerns when hearing children may be relied upon as informal interpreters and when mothers are not informed of concerns and processes. The project highlights the need for trauma-informed, rights-based, domestic abuse and culturally competent services that recognise Deaf mothers as capable parents and ensure their full participation in decision-making processes.

The evidence calls for immediate and sustained action across a range of deliverables, including investment in BSL-accessible resources, specialist training for interpreters and service providers, and the development of Deaf-led specialist services. Deaf mothers and their children must be recognised as rights-bearing individuals, with equitable access to protection, justice, and recovery.

The Sign LOUD project provides a compelling foundation for policy reform and service innovation to ensure that Deaf families are no longer left behind.

5

Key Considerations

What follows are suggestions for stakeholder organisations to collaboratively take forward in light of the findings of this report. Any steps taken should be in collaboration with Deaf stakeholder organisations and include the participation of Deaf victim-survivors and their children.

As a first critical step, we recommend that:

- An Equally Safe BSL Advisory Group is established to improve responses and delivery to Deaf families, including Deaf stakeholder and survivor participation.

Improving Access to Information and Support

- Develop BSL accessible domestic abuse multi-media resources for Deaf women and their children.
- Increase numbers of suitably trained Deaf signing experts to provide support and advice to Deaf victim-survivors, including Deaf children and CODAs.
- Improve accessibility of mainstream (hearing) services for Deaf women and children (including universal services, helplines, IDAAs, domestic abuse services, helplines, IDAAs, domestic abuse specialist services).
- Develop child-focused provision of domestic abuse support for Deaf children and CODAs, including BSL provision for Deaf mothers.
- Adapt existing mainstream (hearing) domestic abuse programmes for Deaf women and children (including support for the mother-child relationship).
- Establish Deaf specific domestic abuse support services for Deaf women and their children where support is provided directly in BSL.

Enhancing Communication and Access in BSL

- Increase capacity of BSL interpreters through domestic abuse professional development training, support and supervision.
- Improve availability and booking systems for trained BSL interpreters in domestic abuse contexts.
- Ensure Deaf mothers have access to BSL interpreters and accessible information when children are interacting with services/systems.
- Ensure children are not used as language brokers in domestic abuse situations.
- Ensure opportunities for Deaf children and CODAs to be exposed to BSL and bilingual education from birth to support communication about domestic abuse.
- Provide education about gender-based violence and healthy relationships in BSL from an early age in schools where Deaf children are educated.

Taking collaborative action across GBV/ BSL

- Ensure action to change public attitudes connects women and children's equality and rights to BSL/Deaf awareness and Deaf families' rights
- Increase Deaf community awareness of domestic abuse, rights and help- seeking options (e.g. through Deaf community workshops, women-only spaces, child/youth spaces, social media).
- Embed domestic abuse and Deaf awareness training in curricula and CPD of frontline practitioners (police, social worker, education, health, justice agencies and IDAAs, NGOs, etc.).
- Co-create a national multi-agency training hub of materials (building on current best practice).
- Improve connections and collaborations between Equally Safe/ GBV and Deaf/ BSL policy and practice.
- Ensure participation of Deaf women, Deaf children and CODAs in research, policy and practice development.

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