

scottish justice matters

CYBERCRIME



THREE HARD-TO-REACH INDIVIDUALS WALK INTO A SERVICE PROVIDER'S OFFICE...

Angela Voulgari on reaching the hard to reach.

A YOUNG AFRICAN GIRL is going to her home country to celebrate 'becoming a woman'.

A GAY MALE South Asian teen was just told he will be marrying his female cousin in six months' time.

AN AFRICAN MAN with no recourse to public funds is threatened with deportation by his partner.

A TRANSGENDERED Scottish man's partner is threatening to reveal his trans status.

OK that's four but my point is that when targeted and sought out, the number of people in such situations increases exponentially.

The above cases might sound unusual in Scotland: they are under-represented in official statistics and hardly ever present for support. Do they just form a percentage of the population so small that can be considered negligible? Do they just not require services? Or do they represent such a niche fraction of the population that their inclusion in official statistics would not make a noticeable difference?

Cases like these are not rare. Female Genital Mutilation, Forced Marriage, male victims of domestic abuse, relationships with homophobic and transphobic abuse are the daily reality for many people in Scotland today. People affected by Honour Based Violence (HBV) and atypical victims of domestic abuse are under-represented in service access statistics, despite such issues being prevalent in societies around the world for centuries and homophobia, transphobia and racism playing a central part in political discourse in the months following Brexit and the recent US election. So the question remains: why don't more people know about this?

All the categories described above are 'hard to reach' victims. The reason behind their lack of representation in service provision is that they do not often access support.

Why are particular categories 'hard to reach?'

Abuse is particularly difficult to discuss as it encompasses coercive control, threats of violence, murder, the loss of one's family and children. For hard-to-reach victims of abuse, this is compounded by language difficulties, cross-cultural misunderstandings, a lack of awareness as to how services operate in Scotland, fear of deportation, being 'outed', no recourse to public funds, community exclusion, bullying and the threat of 'honour' killings.

Being a 'hard-to-reach' victim of abuse can trap individuals in cycles of abuse that feel impossible to break out of. For those who manage to escape, the uphill struggle is only beginning: leaving an abuser means facing a system they do not understand, and reaching out to professionals who might not understand their specific needs.

What can be done to support hard to reach victims of abuse?

When reaching out for support could be life-threatening, the onus falls to services themselves to reach out to those who cannot access them. It is for this reason that specialist services for BME and LGBT service users bridge the gap between vulnerable, hard to reach individuals and mainstream services. Services that focus on particular access needs can provide a highly skilled and specialised workforce to respond effectively.

Staff from different cultural/religious/ethnic backgrounds can provide language support to facilitate access to those whose English language competence prevents them from accessing services. Staff with lived experience of surviving and escaping abuse within the family, a culture or a relationship act as 'peer support' for those who struggle to take steps towards escaping. The experience of staff who openly identify as LGBT provides a unique insight into service users' experience, their psychological and emotional journeys and can act as an inspirational example for those struggling with issues of identity and coming out. Migrant staff members have a unique insight into the traumatic process of migration, relocation and dealing with the UK immigration system.

Having lived experience, coming from similar backgrounds and sharing journeys not only promotes equality of access to much needed mainstream services; it also supports staff commitment to best practice by enabling identification with people using specialist services and a personal and professional investment in excellent service performance. There is no doubt that specialist services are very successful in addressing the specific needs of hard-to-reach service user groups. Such services are often oversubscribed and themselves underrepresented, but this only proves their effectiveness and the need for their existence.

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www.sacro.org.uk/services/criminal-justice/bright-choices

Angela will be co-presenting a public lecture for the Scottish Association for the Study of Offending entitled: "Hard to reach, easy to ignore: designing and delivering public protection services for less visible communities". The lecture takes place on 6 December 2016 at 5.30pm at Edinburgh Sheriff Court, Chambers Street, Edinburgh. <http://www.sastudyoffending.org.uk>