

# Centring Women's Needs: Learning from Feminist Social Work Practice in India



## Executive Summary

**Image description for photo on the cover page:** This photo was taken at the Asian Women's Resources Centre (AWRC) during a workshop provided by Surviving And Thriving Project. The object in the photo represents the image of a woman holding her Kintsugi art- the Japanese practice of filling broken fragments with gold reflecting an awareness of the cracks within current systems and a commitment to repair them with care, inclusivity, and strength.

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## Coaction Hub & Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

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# Acknowledgements

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# About Coaction Hub

The project was commissioned by Coaction Hub. Coaction Hub is a partnership project between Asian Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) and Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse (STADA) which works to strengthen the Coordinated Community Response (CCR) to improve responses to Black and minoritised victim-survivors<sup>[1]</sup> of domestic abuse and harmful practices. The project aims to create an equitable partnership between a by and for agency<sup>[2]</sup> and a mainstream agency working in the ending violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector.

Each agency brings a range of expertise which complements the other - AWRC as a frontline agency with 45 years of experience working with Black and minoritised victim-survivors of domestic abuse and harmful practices and STADA as a second-tier agency which pioneered the CCR in the UK.

The Coaction Hub examines aspects of the CCR such as risk assessment tools, Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews (DARDRs)<sup>[3]</sup>, (formerly known as DHRs) and Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs).<sup>[4]</sup> Key to this work is collaboration with a range of agencies across the sector, most importantly Black and minoritised by and for agencies working to end VAWG whose voices have been historically marginalised within the Coordinated Community Responses (CCR).

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<sup>[1]</sup> The terms 'women', 'victim-survivors', and 'survivors' are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

<sup>[2]</sup> By and for agencies are organisations which are run by the community they service. In this report we are specifically referring to Ending VAWG By and For Services run by and for Black and minoritised women. Imkaan's definition of By and for agencies can be found: [here](#).

<sup>[3]</sup> In 2024 DHRs were renamed Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews. These statutory Reviews have been conducted since April 2011, to look into the circumstances of the death of a person, where the death resulted from domestic abuse towards the person, within the meaning of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, with a view to identifying the lessons learnt from the death.

<sup>[4]</sup> A Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (Marac) is a local meeting where representatives from statutory and non-statutory agencies meet to discuss individuals at high risk of serious harm or murder because of domestic abuse. The meeting provides a safe environment for agencies to share relevant and proportionate information about current risks, after which the Chair will summarise and ask agencies to volunteer actions to reduce risk and increase safety through the development of a tailor-made action plan.

<sup>[6]</sup> Harmful practices are forms of violence, often perpetrated against women and girls, that have persisted in some communities and societies for so long that they are considered, or portrayed by perpetrators, as part of accepted "cultural" norms. In these cases, religion, culture, patriarchal codes of behavior, and perceived notions of "honour" are often misused by individuals or groups to justify coercive control, threats, and abuse. Harmful traditional practices occur across all sexes, sexual identities and genders. They are not unique to a culture or religion. To learn more about this framework, visit AWRC's [Knowledge Hub](#).

# Executive Summary

This report draws on a UK–India peer learning exchange led by Coaction Hub (AWRC & STADA) to examine opportunities to strengthen the UK’s Coordinated Community Response (CCR) for Black and minoritised victim–survivors of domestic abuse. Focusing on India’s Special Cells for Women and Children (established in 1984 in partnership with the Tata Institute for Social Sciences (TISS) and the police), this resource documents approaches used by practitioners that embed the agency of victim–survivors, the long-term benefits of community engagement, and engagement with perpetrators for accountability within state systems, with the aim of adapting applicable elements to UK responses to domestic abuse. This resource has been developed on the premise of feminist knowledge sharing: Special Cells demonstrate survivor–led, culturally competent and trauma-informed practices embedded within policing. The study does not aim to evaluate the Special Cell for Women (Special Cell), but rather to document some of its unique approaches in supporting survivors while navigating complex familial, social, legal, religious, and cultural dynamics. It documents key practice insights from the model, while acknowledging that these approaches may not suit all UK or Indian contexts. It is important to recognise that elements of the UK domestic abuse response, particularly safeguarding mechanisms and the women’s refuge/shelter provision present valuable learning that could be adapted to strengthen service delivery in the Indian context.

## Why this report?

Risk-led UK frameworks (e.g., threshold, incident–centric models) frequently miss the intersectional realities shaping Black and minoritised women’s safety including structural racism, immigration control, class inequality, English language barrier, and patriarchal community norms. Survivors’ agency is not meaningfully and holistically supported; by and for organisations are under resourced while long-term, needs-led support is fragmented. The study aims to explore how Special Cells in India counter such systemic barriers through community rooted interventions that bridge the inaccessibility and hostility of police stations with addressing the holistic priorities of women facing domestic abuse.

## Methodology

Following ethics approval, a qualitative study (Sept 2024–Mar 2025) spanned four Indian regions (Maharashtra, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Bihar) and nine Special Cell sites. The team ran a scoping workshop with practitioners, then conducted 10 in-depth interviews (nine social workers; one regional coordinator). Interviews (English/Hindi/Urdu) were transcribed, anonymised, thematically analysed, and shared back with participants for validation.

# Key Practice Insights from the Special Cells

- 1. Open ended, survivor- defined support:** Cases remain open until the woman decides to close; support intensity is tailored depending on risk and needs over time.
- 2. Whole family engagement:** Practitioners build women's support networks across their natal and marital families and, when safe and desired by the survivor, involve men and community leaders to shift patriarchal norms and work towards accountability for gendered violence.
- 3. Women's economic empowerment:** Integrated legal, welfare, and livelihood support helps rebuild women's autonomy and disrupt the cycle of financial dependence and economic abuse.
- 4. Strategic co-location within police stations:** The Special Cell's approach centres creating a safe, non-judgemental and empowering environment where women feel heard and supported. It also works to address the gendered nature of policing to ensure sensitive and survivor-centred responses. The location inside police settings can improve access, trust, and coordinated action while the social workers ensure that the women's needs are prioritised.

5. **Proactive outreach to engage women:** Regular presence in hard to reach areas, partnerships with schools, health settings, and faith leaders, and practical accessibility solutions enable a help-seeking environment. The Cell's approach to supporting women is through creating allies and shifting cultural attitudes that normalise violence. The Cell attempts to engage with a wider section of society through programmes and venues catering to the health, educational, religious and cultural needs of a community such as schools, Anganwadi centres and mosques.
6. **Addressing weaponisation of violence using religious and cultural practices:** Practitioners challenge harmful practices through their work with women, their families and with faith leaders to challenge patriarchal norms and have a dialogue on women's rights and freedoms.
7. **Addressing economic abuse:** One of the key strengths of the Cell is to recognise economic abuse as a distinct and serious form of gendered harm. The Cell adapts a range of strategies to challenge male control of household finances and to advance women's financial independence and autonomy.

## Implications for domestic abuse responses in the UK

Adapting these features can help ensure that models of the CCR are more meaningful and effective, particularly for migrant and racially minoritised victim-survivors. Embedding independent, feminist and specialist advocates within police and statutory settings can improve early, culturally competent identification. Structured work with families is necessary to address the relational contexts of abuse and integrated responses addressing elements of economic abuse and gendered family dynamics can counter coercive control beyond incidents.

# Key Policy and Practice Recommendations

- **Engage with family members:** A more relational, context-specific approach such as that modelled by the Special Cells recognises the wider, complex social and familial influence around survivors and could open up new possibilities for prevention, accountability, and long-term societal change.
- **Shift from time-limited interventions to trust-based, survivor-centred support by adopting needs based tailored intervention lengths:** Better and improved survivor-centred support requires commissioners funding structures for continuity that prioritise trust-building, and cultural competence over short-term outcomes.
- **Adopt a meaningful partnership with community members:** There is a clear need for community-engaged approaches that address the collective reinforcement of abuse—particularly where cultural or religious norms are used to justify gendered violence or suppress disclosure.
- **Invest in faith-literate, trauma-informed, and culturally competent responses:** Embedding this approach into safeguarding, commissioning, and multi-agency frameworks will help close the current data and practice gaps and ensure faith is no longer invisibilised in domestic abuse responses.

- **Strengthen male allyship:** Although centring women's and victim-survivors' voices is essential, the lack of systematic male allyship reinforces the idea that ending violence against women is solely women's responsibility. Male allyship must be developed with care grounded in feminist principles, community accountability, and a clear commitment to complement, not replace, women's leadership.
- **Adopt sustained culturally responsive counselling services:** There is an urgent need for sustainable investment, as many survivors are turned away from services due to a lack of resources. This situation is even more critical for faith-informed and culturally responsive counselling services, which are both rare and often excluded from mainstream funding streams.
- **Invest in capacity building of the practitioners:** Practitioners need comprehensive training on harmful practices, including caste-based abuse and dowry abuse. Such training can be meaningfully provided by engaging by and for organisations, who have decades of experience and knowledge around these themes.
- **Integrate a Black feminist lens:** A Black feminist lens highlights that Black and minoritised women experience violence through interconnected systems of racism, patriarchy, faith and community expectations, immigration control, economic abuse and other structural inequalities. In practice, this means moving beyond inclusion and representation towards transforming systems, so they are built around the knowledge, leadership, and experiences of Black and minoritised women.

# Conclusion

Recentring Black and minoritised women's lived experiences, knowledge and agency through survivor-tailored timelines, community engaged practice, holistic responses to domestic abuse (legal, financial, welfare, educational, health) and training on harmful practices will lead to more inclusive, intersectional and effective CCRs. This feminist peer learning endeavour with the TISS team in India demonstrates practical insights in how we can operationalise this shift: equity over standardisation, transforming patriarchal power dynamics to address root causes of gendered violence, and seeking accountability at different levels- cultural, institutional, societal and personal.

The Coaction Hub's work on the Special Cells model has prompted rich dialogue across by and for organisations and the broader VAWG sector. There is clear appetite for developing models of the CCR that centre victim-survivor needs and cultural relevance; embedding by and for organisations in every stage of the response system and adopting decolonial, feminist, intersectional, and community-led ways of working that move beyond risk alone, in line with the core components of the CCR Framework (In Search of Excellence, 2020).

As one participant framed it:

***'None of us have all the answers. But if we centre survivors, stay accountable, and remain open to learning especially from the Global South, we have a better chance of creating something truly inclusive.'***

# Glossary

## **Global Majority or migrant and minoritised women**

This term is used to refer to individuals and 'groups' other than the majority 'White-British' population who experience discrimination on the basis of their skin colour or real or perceived religious and cultural backgrounds. We acknowledge the significant diversity within and between the many 'groups' and 'communities' that are included under this umbrella term.

## **By and For organisations**

By and For organisations refer to the organisations that are created and run by a specific community for the same community. They are established to address unique needs and concerns for a particular group with the direct involvement from those affected in informing leadership and decision making. In this report we are specifically referring to Ending VAWG By and For Services run by and for Black and minoritised women. Imkaan's definition of By and for agencies can be found: [here](#).

## **Coordinated Community Response (CCR)**

The CCR is an approach to domestic abuse which involves bringing communities together to improve the safety of survivors and hold abusers to account. Often the CCR is used to mean statutory and non-statutory agencies working together, but a successful CCR needs to involve a wide range of communities and individuals. To be effective the CCR needs to work to improve the safety of all victim-survivors, including those from marginalised and minoritised communities.

## **Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews (DARDRs)**

These statutory Reviews have been conducted since April 2011, to look into the circumstances of the death of a person, where the death resulted from domestic abuse towards the person, within the meaning of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, with a view to identifying the lessons learnt from the death.

## **Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC)**

A coordinated meeting where local agencies (such as police, health, social services, housing, and domestic abuse services) share information and collaboratively plan actions to safeguard victim-survivors identified as at high risk of serious harm or homicide from domestic abuse.

# Resources

- Coaction Hub (2025) Rethinking Risk Beyond the Checklist, <https://www.awrc.org.uk/knowledge-hub/risk-assessment-tools-research-paper>
- Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse (2020), In Search of Excellence: A refreshed guide to effective domestic abuse partnership work – The Coordinated Community Response (CCR) , <https://www.standingtogether.org.uk/blog-3/in-search-of-excellence>
- Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Resource Centre for Interventions on Violence Against Women (RCI-VAW)
- Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Special Cell for Women and Children: Maharashtra



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