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# Use of domestic violence services by Portuguese women in England

Sofia Graca<sup>\*</sup>

*School of Law, Criminal Justice and Computing, Canterbury Christ Church  
University, Canterbury, United Kingdom*

This article explores Portuguese women's relationship with the English justice system, in particular with service providers, when experiencing domestic violence. Research conducted on a variety of countries reveals that immigrant women experience specific added challenges when escaping violence in the country of destination, when compared to non-immigrants. There is however little information specifically on Portuguese women in this situation. This article begins to address this gap in knowledge by discussing the findings of socio-legal research conducted on the Portuguese immigrant population in England in light of existing literature on individuals' relationship with the English justice system, and on immigrant women's use of services when tackling domestic violence.

**Keywords:** domestic violence; service providers; immigration; ethnic minorities; Portuguese.

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<sup>\*</sup> Email: sofia.graca@canterbury.ac.uk

## **Introduction**

This article explores Portuguese women's relationship with the English justice system, in particular with service providers, when experiencing domestic violence. Research conducted in a variety of countries reveals that immigrant women experience specific added challenges when escaping violence in the country of destination, when compared to non-immigrants. One of the few examples of such research in relation to the Portuguese population is a large-scale study conducted by Barata, McNally, Sales and Steward on Portuguese-speaking women's responses to domestic violence in Canada. Barata et al. reveal that Portuguese culture has an overwhelming impact on Portuguese-speaking women's perceptions of and reactions to domestic violence (2005, p. 138-39).

Indeed, Barata et al. identify a number of cultural factors that influence Portuguese women's reaction to domestic violence. One particularly salient cultural factor that should be borne in mind when discussing the use of service providers is placing great importance on the family and striving to keep the family united, ahead of the needs of the individual (2005, p. 1134). The existence of a close family network often leads women to resort more often to informal sources of support when experiencing domestic violence than to the formal justice system (Sokoloff, 2008, p.247). The impact of this cultural trait will therefore also be discussed in this article in the context of the use of service providers by Portuguese women when addressing domestic violence.

There is no indication that domestic violence is more prevalent in the Portuguese community than any other community in England. Anecdotal evidence indicates that domestic violence does exist amongst the Portuguese population in this country, as would be expected, but that it is very difficult to

discern its extent or provide adequate support to victims. Research on the Portuguese population in England is scarce. There are studies and reports on the Portuguese community conducted by Portuguese and English-based institutions and individuals, but these focus mainly on the needs of local populations. As such, Figueiroa discusses health provisions for the Portuguese-speaking community in Lambeth (2000); Valério researches the Portuguese-speaking community in Stockwell in relation to areas such as education, housing and health (2007); and Collis et al. make an extensive analysis of the needs of Portuguese migrant workers in Norfolk (2010). Whenever domestic violence is mentioned in these studies, it is usually by listing the problems associated with current service provisions, such as understaffing or lack of visibility of the services. There is therefore little research-based knowledge of this community's (lack of) engagement with service providers, especially in situations of domestic violence. The research that informs this article begins to address this lack of knowledge. It consists of 24 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Portuguese women living in England, and was conducted in three areas that were identified as having high density of Portuguese immigrants: London, Norfolk and Reading. A more detailed description of the methodology adopted is provided later in this article.

### **Service providers, multi-agency and policy**

Women's use of the justice system in situations of domestic violence is largely informed by the relationship that they establish with service providers. For example, if this relationship is a positive one, then it is more likely that women will proceed with the use of courts in dealing with domestic violence, than if a

negative or no relationship is established (Felstiner, Abel & Sarat, 1980/81, p. 639-648; Fleury-Steiner, Bybee, Sullivan, Belknap, & Melton, 2006, p. 338). In Genn's research on individuals' use of the use of the justice system in England and Wales to address a variety of justiciable problems, two out of three respondents tried to solve the problems they were experiencing by themselves before seeking help from advisers or giving up dealing with the problem altogether. However, individuals who sought help and advice were more likely to engage with the justice system at a later stage (1999, p. 68), thus reinforcing the importance of service providers in shaping the relationship of individuals with the justice system.

Victims of domestic violence may engage with a range of different services when escaping domestic violence. These include health services, IDVAs, solicitors, the police, local authority housing services and voluntary organisations. Different types of relationships can be established with different service providers and indeed different service providers will have different agendas and roles. As well as providing direct services, service providers can also act as gatekeepers to the justice system. Service providers offer different quality and levels of support for women, with voluntary organisations often mentioned by victims as providing a more positive experience than non-voluntary organisations (Bostock et al, 2009, p. 103-05; Hague, Gangoli, Joseph, & Alphonse, 2010, p. 31).

The police are often victims' first point of contact with the justice system. Women who call the police, and who are given information about the justice system by the police, are more likely in future to re-use the legal system than those who have no contact with the police (Fleury-Steiner et al, 2006, p. 339).

However, it is not only the type of provider that is important but also the ease with which it can be accessed. The ability to access housing associations and refuges, for example, is particularly important in shaping women's reactions in situations of domestic violence, as they can offer much needed practical support in dealing with the justice system (Bostock, Plumpton & Pratt, 2009, p. 103-105). Indeed, ease of access to services is an extremely important aspect of the relationship between victims and the justice system, and can be translated into, for example, whether services are easy to reach personally, by phone or other methods (Burman and Chantler, 2006, p. 65). When deciding whether to seek help, Genn's respondents looked at the type of services available, whether the advice would be of good quality and how expensive it would be before deciding to contact an advisor (Genn, 1999, p. 81-82). Similarly, Bostock et al highlight the importance of the quality of the services available on potential users, by stating that it can have a strong influence on women's psychological and material ability to end a situation of domestic violence (2009, p. 103-05). Specifically in relation to immigrant populations, Burman and Chantler highlight the lack of adequate information on the availability of services for immigrants as an important factor in immigrant women' inability to seek help in situations of domestic violence. Immigrant women's decision to access services is heavily influenced by individual resources that they have at their disposal, such as their language proficiency, and by cultural factors, such as fear of bringing shame to the community and the family (Burman and Chantler, 2009, p. 65).

In the 1990s, British governments started making a systematic effort to promote inter-agency work as a way of delivering support services (Hague et al, 1999, p. 3-4). This had an impact in the way domestic violence had been

addressed in England since then. It became accepted that victims of domestic violence often experience a number of concurrent demands that cannot effectively be met by one single agency. At the same time, the work of the voluntary sector was integrated with and recognised by formal agencies such as the police forces and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), in what can be described as an inter- or multi-agency approach to domestic violence (Harwin, Hague & Malos, 1999, p. 2). This was done through changes in legislation, such as the introduction of the Family Law Act 1996 (FLA) and the Domestic Violence Crime and Victims Act 2004 (DVCVA), and the creation of a number of institutions designed to put these changes into practice, such as Specialist Domestic Violence Courts (SDVCs), Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) and Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs).

The provision of services through a multi-agency framework is not, however, completely unproblematic. A concern raised by early studies on multi-agency approaches to domestic violence is that differences in power, resources, working ethos and practices between the various participating agencies may lead to situations where one agency feels undermined by others and pressured to comply with the 'lead' agency's agenda. This is particularly acute when contrasting working practices and resources available to the police and local authorities with those of voluntary organisations (Patel, 1999, p. 65, 72). Yet another concern is that multi-agency initiatives work as a mere forum for discussion with few practical results, or even as a 'smokescreen' for local government to draw attention away from ineffective practices, and a way to show good will and engagement in finding solutions for domestic violence (Hague, 1999, p. 12-14; Patel, 1999, p. 62, 67).

Another important aspect in the use of a multi-agency framework to address domestic violence is that immigrant women tend to bring their legal sensitivity with them to the country of destination. This means if they were not likely to seek help from support services for situations of domestic violence in their home country, they are also not likely to do so in the country of destination (Nielsen, 2000, p. 1085; Menjívar and Salcido, 2002, p. 903-11; Burman and Chantler, 2009, p. 71). This has been found to be the case in South Asian immigrants living in the UK (Anitha, 2008, p. 462, 472; Gill, 2004, p. 189), South American immigrants living in North America (Earner, 2010, p. 33; Vidales, 2010, p. 539) and also first generation Portuguese emigrants generally (Rocha-Trindade, 2006, p. 9). It is therefore possible that a lack awareness of the role of support services in the country of origin that is imported by immigrants when they move to England steers them away from support services as a viable option to help solve their problems.

Regardless of the problematic nature of such an approach, multi-agency work has been considered by governments to be essential in addressing domestic violence. To a large extent, the current governmental policy on domestic violence provides continuity with the mechanisms of multi-agency cooperation adopted by previous governments, namely the prevention of violence, and the provision of services to and protection of women and girls who are victims of violence (Home Office, 2009; Home Office, 2010), albeit now with an emphasis on decentralisation (Home Office, 2011, p. 20). The provision of support for victims therefore remains devolved to local services (Home Office, 2009). According to the *Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls*, decentralisation entails continuing to fund IDVAs and MARACs (Home Office,



2011, p. 15), and developing further ways in which voluntary organisations, health services and the police can work together to achieve good results in both preventing domestic violence and supporting its victims (Home Office, 2011, p. 15). There is, therefore, a political desire to maintain and further develop a structured approach to domestic violence that goes beyond the legislation and the more 'traditional' agents of the criminal justice system, such as the police and the CPS, and incorporates the work of local authorities and voluntary organisations alongside these (Home Office, 2011, p. 9). This position seems to contradict recent cuts in funding towards domestic violence support services, which have a clear negative impact on the ability of services to provide adequate support to victims (Towers and Walby, 2012; Women's Aid, 2014).

National policy on domestic violence relies on local implementation of its guidelines and policies. The areas in which the research used for this research was conducted (Lambeth, Reading and Norfolk) have implemented governmental policy in a fairly standardised way. This translates in the development of local policies focusing on the prevention and the dissemination of information on domestic violence, running MARACs with the collaboration of IDVAs, local police and health representatives, as well as victim and women's support organisations and housing associations. Also standardised is the lead role that statutory organisations, and especially the police, have in the chairing and coordination of MARACs. Local housing policies tend to focus their approach to domestic violence on emergency assistance for victims, such as refuges, and Sanctuary schemes, rather than on long-term initiatives, which may not present an adequate solution for victims hoping to escape domestic violence.

## **Methodology**

The research that underlines the analysis presented in this article is based on 24 interviews conducted with Portuguese women living in England. The interviews include women who are and are not victims of domestic violence. The decision to be more inclusive regarding respondents' previous experience of domestic violence emulates the research methodology used by Barata et al. in which participants were asked to talk about domestic violence, without the prerequisite that they were themselves victims of violence (2005, p. 137, 142). A reason behind this decision was to avoid a very low level of participation in the research due to cultural factors preventing Portuguese women from disclosing details of their personal lives. In order to maximise participation, the fact that the study did not require participants to be victims of domestic violence was made evident whenever approaching potential participants and institutions that might support the research. During the interviews, six participants disclosed that they had been victims of domestic violence. Direct victimisation is highlighted whenever relevant throughout the analysis.

An effort was made to include participants that represented different types of Portuguese immigrants in England. In the 1960s and 1970s, Portuguese emigrants generally consisted of unskilled workers, who would relocate to European countries, such as France, Luxembourg and Switzerland searching for work. Since the 1990s, the characteristics of Portuguese emigrants have been changing, with highly skilled and educated emigrants choosing to move to countries such as England and Spain (Malheiros, 2010, p. 135). This means that England, which had been receiving mainly unskilled Portuguese workers, has more recently also been receiving skilled and highly educated professionals

(Malheiros, 2010, p. 137). In order to secure the participation in this study of immigrants with a higher academic background than that associated with the traditional Portuguese community, the Portuguese Association of Researchers and Students in the United Kingdom (PARSUK) was contacted and support for this research gained. Participants from the 'traditional' Portuguese community were reached through contacts established with service providers who introduced active members of the community to the research.

The criteria for the selection of participants was that they were Portuguese, women, over 18 years of age, and living in England on a permanent basis (that is, who were not in England for a set period of time such as on holidays). In a first instance, stakeholders in areas that were identified as having a high number of Portuguese immigrants were contacted and their support for the research sought. In London, a major breakthrough was made with the help of the Community Police Consultative Group for Lambeth, which helped to establish contacts with two active members of the Portuguese community in Lambeth. Through them, it was possible to reach the first interviewees, and a snowball method was used from then on to reach 13 more participants, making the total number of participants in London 15. In Reading, 12 institutions were contacted in November 2011. The contacts made in Reading elicited no results. Interestingly, the two participants in this research who live in Reading were contacted through the online social networking webpage of PARSUK. The contacts for Norfolk started in April 2012. Two organisations that provide support to migrant workers, amongst other projects (KLARS and the Keystone Development Trust) agreed to support the research and seven interviews were conducted as a result. Ethical approval was obtained from the Kent Law School's

Research Ethics Advisory Group before any participants or stakeholders were contacted.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary research method because they allow participants to describe events and ideas in their own words and time. Participants were not expected to have an in depth knowledge of the English justice system and available solutions for domestic violence. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to express themselves freely in their interactions and expectations with service providers, whilst still forcing them to engage with certain topics. An effort was made to accept all answers as equally valid and, as far as possible, not to be judgemental. The interviews were translated from Portuguese into English and it is the English translation that is used to illustrate respondents' direct speech.

A number of times, respondents did not answer the question being put to them directly, but instead told a personal story related to the subject; in some cases, the story did not answer the question altogether. Whenever answers did not relate to the questions being asked, prompts were used to refocus respondents' attention back on to the question; this was done with varying degrees of success. As such, the information collated varies sometimes from question to question, with some questions being answered by all respondents and others not, something which will be highlighted in the analysis whenever relevant. The variation in responses should not be seen as a serious limitation for two reasons: firstly a qualitative study explores experiences and opinions and is not merely an attempt to quantify the answers to various questions; secondly, although there was a defined framework for analysis, the study had an exploratory nature, making it important to allow participants to express

themselves, narrating the events that they saw as important and not limiting the answers to pre-determined categories, which could lead to misrepresentations of the participant's true meaning. Each respondent was given a different pseudonym for the purposes of the data analysis in order to ensure their anonymity. It is the pseudonyms that are used in this article when referring to participants' views.

### **Research Findings**

Participants in this research were asked a number of questions on their use and perception of services. Broadly, they were asked whether they had any contact with service providers in England, regardless of it being related to domestic violence or not. Should the answer to this question be positive, they were then asked to describe how this experience was and whether they perceived it in a positive or negative light. Finally, respondents were asked whether they thought other Portuguese women would resort to service providers in England to address domestic violence and why. The concept of service provider was left deliberately vague in the interview schedule. 'Service provider' included any organisation that provides support to victims of domestic violence, such as refuges and victim support groups, or support with aspects that are not only for victims of domestic violence but may be useful in these circumstances, such as housing associations. The only service considered separately in the interviews was the police. This is because the relationship established with the police can be of a very different nature from that established with other service providers, and the separation ensured that respondents included both types of organisations in

their answers. The analysis described in this section continues with this distinction in order to better reflect participants' responses.

### ***Police***

The police are generally well regarded by all respondents in London and Reading. In London, respondents who revealed having had any contact with the police in the past, both in situations of domestic violence and other situations, are impressed by police officers' politeness and the level of support offered. There is a sense amongst these respondents that the police forces in England are better trained to interact with the public than the police forces in Portugal. Elsa, a respondent in London, expresses this by saying:

The police helped me change my life (...) The police officer in charge of my case took my case to heart and took very good care of me.(...) The courts gave him [the abuser] probation, a fine and community service. I was constantly kept updated. Even today, when visiting the police station, they recognise me and ask me how I am coping.

There are, however, a small number of respondents in London (two) who do not have such a good opinion of the police. Diana is one of these respondents and she finds the police 'lacking in common sense'. She adds that 'they follow the law and regulations but don't seem too much in touch with reality'. Fátima also displays great reluctance to engage with the police, at any level, because she would then have to 'live with the consequences' of this while living in the community. Fátima was generally elusive with her answers during the interview and therefore it is not clear whether her answers in relation to the police result from a previous

negative interaction with them or not. All other respondents say that they would use the police in a situation of domestic violence, mainly to stop immediate violence.

There is a marked contrast between the view that respondents in London have of the police and that held by respondents in Norfolk. Helena expresses a common view of the police in Norfolk when she says that they need 'to improve in some aspects' or even that 'they don't do anything'. Respondents in Norfolk see the police as interfering and unhelpful; they say that the police pay too much attention to 'minor aspects', such as whether a 'car window is cracked', but when it comes to important matters, such as robbery or anti-social behaviour, they are useless. Helena explains this by saying, 'If it is to deal with a small matter, they are all there. If it is to deal with something important, they are nowhere to be seen'. Helena's perception of the police in Norfolk is, to a certain extent, that it persecutes the local Portuguese population for what she deems as minor disturbances but when they need the police to intervene, for example, because a gang of youths are causing major disruption in the estate that she lives, they do not provide any assistance.

Importantly, three of the seven respondents in Norfolk think that dealing with domestic violence using the police will most likely lead to an excessive response from this service. According to these respondents, the police should only be called to act in 'serious matters', when there is physical violence and danger to life. Domestic violence will not qualify as a serious enough matter to call the police according to these respondents. Interestingly, although respondents in Norfolk generally do not see the police in a good light, when

prompted to say whether they would call the police or not to deal with a personal matter, they all say that they would, except one.

When asked whether respondents would like to see Portuguese police officers or civilians collaborating with the police in England, the response was mixed. In London and Reading, respondents consider the police in England to be generally better than the police in Portugal in terms of politeness and effectiveness. One respondent in London states that she had used the police in England to deal with domestic violence but would not have liked to speak to a Portuguese police officer. Lack of sensitivity for situations of domestic violence and the possibility of gossiping are pointed out by respondents in London as two reasons for not wanting to engage with Portuguese police officers in England. In contrast, all respondents in Norfolk welcome a Portuguese speaker in the local police force, as it makes it easier to communicate with the service. There is already a Portuguese PCSO in this area and the comments regarding her role in the force and the community were positive.

Although all respondents favoured informal solutions to address domestic violence (such as relying on family members and friends) for themselves, when asked whether other Portuguese women would use the police in the same circumstances, 10 out of 17 respondents say that they would. Some respondents say that Portuguese women would use the police in England especially to stop immediate violence, whilst others say that they would do so unreservedly, adding that Portuguese women would not be embarrassed to go to the police to deal with domestic violence. However, six respondents contradict this by saying that Portuguese women would not use the police out of shame or lack of adequate language skills. One respondent in Norfolk says that the



Portuguese population in the area would not use the police in most cases because there are high levels of alcoholism and gambling addiction in the local Portuguese community, which has led to a high proportion of men having been cautioned for drunk and disorderly behaviour or banned from betting shops. This in turn leads women to avoid calling the police for fear of the repercussions upon their husbands, namely a fear that they will be arrested. This statement adds another dimension to the complex relationship that Portuguese immigrants have with service providers, and highlights the need to explore the potential impact of the interaction of abusers with the police for reasons unrelated to domestic violence on Portuguese women's decision to resort to this service to the violence that they experience.

### ***Other services***

All but two respondents are aware of the existence of support services for victims of domestic violence. They are, however, not aware of any specific details. In London, the perception is that support services do not have much to offer individuals. Respondents here see them as 'lacking in teeth' and a place where one would find someone to talk to, but who would not solve any problems. These respondents would rather go to the police or to a family member to address domestic violence than to use dedicated support services. Alexandra describes her decision not to resort to support services as such:

I talked to my GP and she really helped (...) I went to a lawyer, an English lawyer, and they took care of it (...) I didn't want to use support services; I was afraid that

if I saw someone [from a victim support group], I would lose my drive. I wanted to fight the situation and not settle down.

Although Alexandra used service providers without reservations, in the form of a GP, lawyers and the police, she deliberately chose not to use victim support services. Alexandra feared being cast into the category of helpless victim, much like respondents in Bumiller's study who did not complain about the discrimination that they experienced because they rejected the label of victim (Bumiller, 1987, p. 426). In order not to lose momentum and to be able to leave the abuser, Alexandra decided instead to start legal proceedings against her abuser and to enlist the help of lawyers for this. Although she does not state this clearly, it is likely that Alexandra was granted an occupation order and it is also likely that either a restraining order or a non-molestation order was issued against her abuser, as she says that he is 'not allowed to contact her'. Alexandra says in her interview that she did not plan to approach her GP about the violence that she was experiencing at the time; she merely felt close enough to her GP to eventually talk to her about it when she was visiting her for a different matter. Alexandra's experience draws attention to the importance of making health professionals aware and supportive of victims of domestic violence. The NHS has already published guidance on domestic violence for health professionals to address this matter, and governments have made efforts to bring health professionals into the multi-agency prevention and detection mechanisms for domestic violence (NHS, 2010; NHS, 2013; NHS Direct, 2012).

As already mentioned here, there are a number of services available to victims of domestic violence, such as SDVCs, IDVAs, MARACs, refuges and

Sanctuary Schemes. Most respondents do not mention these agencies and services, and demonstrate only a generic awareness of the existence of support services. The three respondents who experienced domestic violence and used the justice system to address their situation are all in London. These are Alexandra, who deliberately chose not to use support services, Beatriz, who went to court specifically to decide the custody of her children, and Elsa, who possibly has the greatest level of involvement with different support services in the group.

Elsa was abused by her husband while they were married and for two months after the dissolution of the marriage. Her husband tried to poison her and when she first suspected this, she contacted the police. Although she does not refer to it in legal terms, a restraining order was most likely issued against her abuser under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. Elsa probably also benefited from a Sanctuary Scheme when she decided to leave the abuser, as she says that two police officers and Victim Support helped her change the locks in her house. Although Elsa's situation was resolved in court, she never went to court herself. The CPS prosecuted her case and she says that she was kept updated and felt supported throughout the whole process. Elsa did not want to go to court because she did not want to have to relive the abuse. She agreed reluctantly to be a witness but she was never called to testify, possibly because the abuser pleaded guilty. It is possible that an IDVA was also involved in Elsa's case, although when she mentions being kept updated about the progress of her case, she tends to credit the police with this.

Like Alexandra, Elsa is happy with the outcome of her case (her abuser was given a fine and community service) and with the support that she received

from the services that she was engaged with. Indeed, all respondents who had been to court to deal with domestic violence were satisfied with the outcome and found the procedure fair. These experiences to some extent contradict Pleasence, Balmer, Patel, Cleary, Huskinson and Cotton's findings on the use of civil courts in England and Wales in which respondents with previous contact with civil courts were (marginally) more likely to see the justice system as important in asserting their rights, but less likely to expect a fair hearing at court (2011, p. 55).

One respondent, who was a social worker in Portugal, comments that in her experience, support services in Portugal are not respected, especially by men. She used to talk to men and women about domestic violence when she visited rural areas of Portugal in the course of her work, and found that men would not engage with her or would treat her with little respect due to her profession. It is possible that there is simply a lack of cultural awareness of the role of support services in Portugal that is imported by immigrants when they move to England, which leads respondents to perceive support services as having little impact in helping to solve problems. One respondent living in Reading not only has the perception that support services are inefficient, she fears that involving them may make matters worse for victims of domestic violence. Carla talks about the bad reputation associated with refuges that would deter anyone from using them; she goes on to illustrate this by mentioning situations where victims of domestic violence and their children have to share accommodation with women with drug addictions, and comments how 'this hardly makes leaving a viable solution'.

In Norfolk, the situation is slightly different. During the time spent at Mobile Europeans Taking Action (META) drop-in centre in Thetford, it was clear by the number of users and their comments on the service that Portuguese immigrants in the area see the advice provided there as useful. It may be because the services provided are of a very practical nature (for example, filling out national insurance paperwork) or because two of the support workers are Portuguese. There is therefore scope for Portuguese women to access support services, especially if these are perceived as providing practical responses for domestic violence.

When asked whether it would be useful to have support services in Portuguese or to have Portuguese staff in the existing support services, 19 respondents consider having services in Portuguese or staffed by Portuguese-speakers useful. Seven respondents say that more information about existing services in Portuguese would be useful for the community. However, five respondents say that there is already a lot of information in Portuguese out there and if people do not use the services, it is because they do not want to. According to these respondents, what is necessary is not more information in Portuguese but an effort from Portuguese immigrants to learn English and integrate better into the larger community. Difficulty in understanding how services are set up and how to navigate them is a problem raised by two other respondents in London, who say that they had to do some independent research to know how the system works, and that they understand if others less skilled in researching information would have difficulties with this.

Eight respondents, whose work includes providing support to the Portuguese communities in London and Norfolk, say that it is very difficult to get

the Portuguese to attend any information sessions or free English courses, or to do volunteer work. Indeed, lack of engagement with local initiatives designed for the Portuguese community is pointed out by two of these respondents as indicative of the lack of willingness of the Portuguese to integrate with the wider community. Some respondents draw attention to the fact that the lack of language skills and the inability to integrate in the wider community means that a lot of women are dependent on relatives or members of the community whom they pay, for example, to fill in forms, something that had already been identified as a problem in a study on the Portuguese community in Stockwell (Valério, 2007, p. 6). Some Portuguese who do not integrate well into the wider community as a result do not encourage their children to integrate either.

## **Discussion**

Genn found that the majority of individuals attempt to solve justiciable problems without resorting to the help of professionals or support services in the first instance (1999, p. 68). However, this is not the case if the problems involve domestic violence and other family matters, where individuals often seek formal advice before informally approaching the other party (1999, p. 82). This shows the importance of services (in Genn's case, particularly solicitors) in helping victims of domestic violence make decisions on how best to approach their situation. The findings of the research conducted on Portuguese women living in England demonstrate that, unlike Genn's respondents, Portuguese women would overwhelmingly opt for informal solutions to address family matters, including domestic violence. Although the majority of Genn's respondents also preferred informal solutions to engaging with formal agencies of support for the majority

of problems experienced, the major difference between the two populations is in the fact that Portuguese women would prefer informal solutions to address domestic violence, whilst Genn's respondents show less propensity to rely on informal solutions if the problem involves family matters (Genn, 1999, p. 82). These mainly signify resorting to family members for help, advice and shelter when escaping domestic violence. In line with Genn's findings, however, the use of service providers in the Portuguese population also indicates a further engagement with the justice system, as all respondents in this study who used support services did go on to use the court system (1999, p. 82).

The relationship with different service providers displayed by participants in the research conducted for this article in some aspects contradicts existing literature on immigrant women and domestic violence. One of these aspects is that voluntary organisations such as victim support groups do not feature more positively in Portuguese women's perceptions of services than non-voluntary organisations (Bostock et al., 2009, p. 31). One factor that may explain this discrepancy with existing literature is the low proportion of participants in the current study who used support services. Respondents who actually engaged with support services displayed levels of satisfaction comparable to those who engaged with the police. This leads to the conclusion that it is not the experience with service providers that steers Portuguese women away from voluntary support services and towards the police but the expectations that they have of each of these services.

The distinctive interaction that Portuguese women have with service providers in England can be better understood with reference to a number of key aspects that permeated through the interviews. These are the usefulness

associated with the services, the financial implications of accessing a service, the difficulties of navigating a multi-agency network of services and the perception of the police as a distinctive service. Each of these aspects will now be discussed in more detail.

### ***Usefulness***

There is a marked difference in respondents' attitude towards the police and other support services. The police are generally seen in a positive light in London whilst support services, particularly voluntary organisations are avoided. Reasons behind this discrepancy in attitudes towards different services rely on the perceived usefulness of these services.

Only three respondents in London and five in Norfolk have actually ever used support services in England. The problems for which assistance was sought vary between domestic violence, child support and other forms of state welfare. Respondents with experience of these services are generally happy with the assistance received, even though some have complaints, such as the time spent on waiting lists to get a house through a housing association. When comparing respondents who only used the police with respondents who used other support services, the levels of satisfaction are equally high for both. It is in the perception of the usefulness of the police and support services that a gap emerges, with the police rating higher than voluntary services as a service that Portuguese women would use, especially in London. There is also a distinction between voluntary unpaid services and those that are either paid for or associated with reliable services in Portugal, such as lawyers and doctors. The perception is that some



services can offer a quality of support that voluntary or unpaid services cannot match.

### ***Cost***

Cost is often mentioned in literature on victims and access to domestic violence services. Women with more material resources are more likely to leave their abusers and follow through by taking action against them via the justice system, than those with fewer means (material resources include help with children, transportation and emergency money) (Bennet et al., 1999, p. 764). Fleury-Streiner et al's study shows that legal and financial links with the abuser are negatively correlated with future use of the justice system, as women who lived with the abuser at the time of the arrest and those whose abusers contributed to the household income were less likely to use the justice system (2006, p. 338). Economic self-sufficiency is therefore positively linked to women's choices to protect themselves from abuse and women who are not economically independent are less likely to want to prosecute the abuser (Fleury-Steiner et al., 2006, p. 338).

Cost, however, does not seem to have a substantial impact on respondents' use of services in situations of domestic violence. No respondent mentioned cost as having a negative impact in the access of services. Respondents are aware of the impact of economic dependence on women's ability to leave their partners. Interestingly, respondents who are victims of domestic violence do not mention economic dependence as a reason to continue in an abusive relationship. All respondents who revealed suffering abuse, but one, left their abusers. Regardless of this outcome, they say that the money

would not have been enough reason to keep them in an abusive relationship. The only respondent who used a lawyer paid by herself when dealing with domestic violence made no comments on how the expense weighed on her decision to take action, other than saying that when she left the abuser she suffered a significant financial loss.

This is not to say that financial decisions have no bearing in Portuguese women's decision-making. Some respondents in London say that the Portuguese are used to a certain level of comfort that they would not like to lose, or would not like to see their children lose, by leaving an abusive partner. Respondents in London and in Norfolk say that Portuguese immigrants sometimes fear using services of any kind for fear of the financial repercussions of this. Beatriz explains this by saying that some immigrants are not taking full advantage of state support because they think that if they give more information to social services, they run the risk of losing their current benefits. This is usually representative of a more complex situation than only losing state benefits, as is evident from Beatriz's statement when she says that some victims are also afraid to call the police in a situation of domestic violence because they think that they run the risk of losing custody of their children.

### ***Multi-agency***

Most agencies and legal provisions that address domestic violence, such as MARACs, IDVAs, occupation and non-molestation orders are absent from respondents' perception of the mechanisms available to address domestic violence in England. Only the three respondents who used the justice system to address domestic violence mentioned some of these agencies and provisions.

The fact that most respondents do not mention these agencies and provisions possibly indicates lack of knowledge of their existence. To some extent, this is not surprising, as respondents were not expected to have good knowledge of the English justice system. However, respondents who engaged with the justice system to address domestic violence mention mainly agencies that would be recognisable in the Portuguese justice system, such as the police, the CPS and courts, rather than the fuller multi-agency provision that exists in England.

There is however evidence of the use of a multi-agency approach to address domestic violence. Alexandra's GP gave her advice on escaping domestic violence, and Elsa mentions Victim Support providing her with assistance, and possibly a Sanctuary Scheme being used. There is also evidence that an occupation order was granted in Alexandra's case (and possibly also in Elsa's) and of either non-molestation orders or restraining orders being issued. Although these mechanisms are clearly being used to address domestic violence, they are not part of respondents' legal consciousness, and even respondents with experience of the English justice system highlight the work of lawyers and of the police as essential in helping them escape violence and not that of other agencies, such as women's support groups.

Difficulty in understanding how services are set up and how to navigate them is another problem raised by two other respondents in London, who say that they had to do some independent research to know how the system works, and that they understand if others less skilled in researching information would have difficulties with this. Domestic violence in Portugal is dealt with from the perspective of service provision in a different way than it is in England. In Portugal, the legal provisions applicable to domestic violence are mostly codified

in the criminal code and civil law intervenes only to regulate marriage, separation and divorce. Any orders that the abuser may be subject to (such as not contacting the complainant or not to return to the property where a crime is suspected to have occurred) are found in the Portuguese criminal procedural code. This represents a significant departure from the English solutions for domestic violence that puts great emphasis on the use of criminal procedures rather than in a multi-agency approach to domestic violence. Consequently, most Portuguese immigrants will be more familiar with a criminal justice-based approach than the English multi-agency approach, which may have an impact not only on their awareness and understanding of the multi-agency network available to support victims of domestic violence but also their willingness to engage with the different agencies involved in this network, particularly non-governmental, voluntary and unpaid services, as discussed above.

## **Conclusion**

There is a major distinction in respondents' perceptions of the police and other service providers. Instead of singling out the police as a unique type of service, respondents actually single out voluntary organisations and victim support services as services that they would not use. Voluntary organisations and victim support services are deemed poor alternatives to the police, doctors and lawyers when dealing with domestic violence. Rather than presenting a form of support, they are even seen as a potential hindrance to women's attempts to escape domestic violence, be it because of the association with being a victim and the shame associated with this situation, or fear of losing the confidence to take more forceful action. The police are therefore not only the first port of call but

often perceived as the only effective port of call for Portuguese women. As a consequence, Portuguese women will only access help for domestic violence when they want the violence to stop and they have resorted to informal support unsuccessfully. It is unlikely that they will access support services merely for advice on domestic violence, unless the perception that they have of the usefulness of this advice changes. Clearer information on the role of service providers, the practical support that they can offer, and the impact that accessing support services for domestic violence would have in a wider sense, for example in terms of child custody, would be valued by this population. Employing Portuguese-speaking staff would also be welcome, especially in Norfolk.

The perception that respondents have of service providers in England results to a large extent from the understanding that they have of service providers in Portugal and the existence of alternative forms of escaping violence. This means that although Portuguese women might not be engaging with service providers in the first stages of escaping violence, they may be actively engaging with alternative forms of support, for example provided by a close family network. This may particularly be the case when trying to find emergency accommodation, as the perception of refuges is very negative among the Portuguese community (a different matter is accessing housing associations for long-term accommodation, which respondents seem more familiar with). It may appear to services in areas where there is a large proportion of Portuguese immigrants that Portuguese women accept domestic violence or take no action against it. This is however probably incorrect, as the research indicates that Portuguese women will access services in order to address domestic violence but will be very selective in the services that they chose to access, often

reflecting their perception of the usefulness of these services and a preference for adopting informal solutions in the first instance, often by resorting to family and friends for support.

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