

# Woman of honour

Honour crimes cover a range of issues, from violence to forced marriages and even to killings, and all can have a massive impact. One Cleveland police officer has been recognised for her work helping victims of honour-based violence, an area of investigation which is still controversial

Detective Inspector Helen Eustace of Cleveland Police set up a helpline for women who are victims of honour-based violence. The helpline, called Choice, is aimed mainly, though not exclusively, at Asian women, and many of those seeking help are teenagers. Between November 2007 and April last year, the line received 394 calls, primarily from people in Cleveland. Since it went regional, linking with neighbours Northumbria and Durham, it has been receiving 20 calls a month.

The detective just missed out on the top prize in the 999 Category at the Children's



Champions Awards in March, having been nominated by a teenage girl who she helped cope with an oppressive home life. The young woman has since said that she would have killed herself had she not received the support.

The service was established to counteract the impact of some traditional beliefs on young lives within the Asian community, including restriction of freedoms and forced marriages. Typical was the teenage Asian girl who nominated Det Insp Eustace for the award. They got to know each other before the establishment of the helpline, when the detective was working with one of the force's domestic abuse units.

"It was a very traditional family and she was not allowed to do the things she wanted, like socialising with her friends and wearing westernised clothes. She was having a bad time at school as well," says Det Insp Eustace.

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"After the police got involved, we were able to bring an end to the problems. She has since said that had she not met me she would have committed suicide. For us, it is not always about a prosecution. For many families, the perfect outcome is that the abuse stops. That's important because the girls still love their parents. What we have to do is remove the risk."

The emphasis on resolving problems rather than simply bringing forward prosecutions is a striking characteristic of the team's work. Det Insp Eustace explains: "We live in a performance-driven culture, but we are not performance driven, and I am very grateful that our chief constable has supported us in what we are doing. We are ensuring the safety of people living within the Cleveland Police area."

The girl herself, who has asked to remain anonymous, underlines the point: "Helen has been my rock. She has been there for me and supported me. I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for her. Cleveland Police call it the Choice helpline but it should be the Choice lifeline because that is what it is."

Many other young women have appreciated the same support when it was offered through Choice. "The calls to the helpline have either come from victims themselves or people who know the victims," says Det Insp Eustace.

"Initially, when we set it up, we received calls from all over the country. We soon had to restrict our publicity to Cleveland because we couldn't really help people from

elsewhere, aside from referring them to the force in their area."

First point of call for those seeking help (85 percent are female) is a team of 22 officers, all women, who work on an on-call basis to staff the service round the clock. They are all volunteers from various disciplines in the force, including CID, neighbourhood teams and general uniform duties. Helpline officers have undergone specialist training provided by east-Midlands charity Karma Nirvana, whose staff and most of its volunteers have experienced forced marriages and honour-based violence.

Det Insp Eustace says: "They operate the helpline in addition to their normal duties. They are really passionate about what they do and want to understand more about the culture.

"We use them to answer the phone because if a control room takes a call, they might not immediately recognise it as an honour-based issue whereas our people recognise immediately what is happening. They can recognise the signs. And because the call comes directly through to the helpline, they know straight away what they are dealing with."

Once a call comes in, the helpline officer assesses them and response officers will go out if it is emergency; if not the case is passed onto one of the force's two vulnerability units which deal with sexual and domestic abuse.

Although not all calls come from the Asian community – some have come from Eastern European families – the majority have, and Det Insp Eustace believes another important initiative has been the appointment of someone from the community to act as a forced marriages support worker.

Soraya Azam, whose post is funded through Stockton Primary Care Trust, acts as a bridge between police and the Asian community, a move which Det Insp Eustace says has helped to develop closer links with that community: "We do have connections with them, and they will raise issues with us," she adds.

The expansion to offer a regional service including Durham and Northumbria was a logical step, according to Det Insp Eustace, who can see the service spreading round the country. "We already worked regionally, holding regional meetings and regional collaborations, so the move to a regional service was the next step. Other forces from elsewhere in the country have been expressing an interest in setting up similar projects.

"We are saving the lives of people. The statistics show that Asian women under 24 are two to three times more likely to commit suicide than their Caucasian counterparts.

"I am humbled by my nomination for the award. My name was on the nomination, but it is for all the people who have worked on the team and supported the work. Seeing the victims get the help they need is very rewarding."