**Recognising Risk Factors and Indicators of Abuse.**

**The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) has described six high-risk identifiers for domestic homicide reviews in the form of a mnemonic –**

**SPECSS:**

1. Separation (child contact)

Victims are more vulnerable when contemplating or actively leaving the abusive relationship, the MPS emphasise the importance of heeding threats made that begin with *‘If you ever leave me…*’ and themes such as ‘*If I can’t have her, then no-one* *can..*’ are recurrent in domestic homicide reviews. The stark reality and risk of Post- Separation Domestic Abuse signals that agencies have to be more vigilant in protecting women and children in these circumstances. Where there are children, it is imperative that they form part of the risk assessment, particularly in disputes about child contact orders or residence orders in family court proceedings.

2. Pregnancy/New Birth

There is a strong correlation between domestic abuse and pregnancy, this is often a time when abuse begins and increases with severity. Domestic Abuse in pregnancy is associated with miscarriage, low birth weight babies, premature birth, foetal injury and death. There is an opportunity for women to be asked through routine inquiry by health professionals about the risk or experience of partner abuse, it is recognised that women are more likely to respond to sensitive questioning rather than making a voluntary disclosure.

**3. Escalation : The attacks becoming worse and happening more often**

Previous domestic abuse is the most effective indicator that further domestic abuse will occur. Victims of domestic abuse are more likely to become repeat victims than any other crime which is why it is critical to identify repeat victimisation and escalation. The risk of lethality to women and children as victims is of particular concern where the man is known to have a previous violent offending history in previous intimate relationships.

**4. Cultural issues and sensitivity**

There is a need for cultural awareness and sensitivity when addressing concerns of domestic abuse within black and ethnic minority communities while safeguarding against agencies/professionals making assumptions based on lack of understanding and not intervening to protect the interests of victims. Aside from possible language barriers, there is the fear that victims will be criticised or punished for breaking a code of silence in preventing the victim from seeking help and/or bringing shame and dishonour to the family. There is the additional mistrust factor that a victim may have negative experiences of racism by agencies and this may be further compounded by her fear about her vulnerable immigration status. Essentially, domestic abuse has to be seen as an abuse of human rights and agencies are directed to be culturally and sensitive when dealing with the needs of victims, but racially and ethnically desensitised when dealing with perpetrators.

**5. Stalking**

The MPS informs that stalking behaviour merits serious consideration as it was reported in 40% of reviewed murder cases, commonly occurring after the relationship had ended. Stalking in the context of domestic abuse is revealed to be related to lethal and near lethal abuse against women, and coupled with physical assault, is significantly associated with murder and attempted murder.

**6. Sexual assault**

Sexual assault and rape as a crime are underreported and these crimes as part of an intimate relationship are even more vastly underreported. Analysis from the MPS on domestic sexual assaults demonstrates that those who are sexually assaulted are subjected to more serious injury. Further, those who report a domestic abuse assault tend to have a history of domestic abuse, whether or not it has ever been reported.

*Source*: Metropolitan Police (2003) Domestic Abuse Murder Reviews