

FORWARD ASSIST



'Seen But Not Heard'

Unheard Voices From The Military
Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic (BAME)
Community

Tony Wright
2022

FORWARD ASSIST

FORCES - VETERAN - CITIZEN



Forward Assist is a multi-award-winning charity that facilitates “Post Traumatic Growth’ for military veterans with combat experience and/or unresolved trauma. The charity campaigns for better service provision for hidden populations within the armed forces community. It is by capturing the lived experience of those individuals and presenting it to government that change becomes possible. For the past ten years the charity has taught military veterans British Parliamentary Debating skills to enhance communication skills and we also facilitate annual therapeutic retreats for combat veterans of all ages. Many of the former service personnel accessing our services come from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds and some are socially isolated and disenfranchised from mainstream services and others have had very successful careers after they left the military.

As a writer and advocate, I have dedicated the latter part of my social work career to understanding and addressing the complexities of institutional racism, in-service sexual assault and associated military sexual trauma. I feel that it is important that we understand that sexual assault encompasses a wide range of non-consensual sexual activities, including harassment, verbal abuse, bullying, sexual assault and rape. In the context of the UK armed forces, these incidents can have profound and long-lasting effects on the victims, shaping their emotional well-being and overall quality of life. Military sexual trauma refers to any sexual harassment or assault experienced during military service, and it is an issue that can disproportionately affect individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities.

The impact of sexual assault and military sexual trauma is particularly challenging for BAME victims in the UK armed forces. These individuals often face unique barriers in seeking and receiving support due to racism, cultural stigmas, language barriers, and a lack of culturally sensitive services. The intersectionality of their identities—being both victims of sexual assault and members of minority communities—compounds the challenges they face. It is essential to recognise these complexities and work towards inclusive and effective solutions that address the needs of BAME victims within the armed forces.

Challenges Faced by BAME Victims in the UK Armed Forces

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) personnel account for approximately 9.9 per cent of the UK Regular Armed Forces. (2022)

According to the British Army;

"There is no place in the British army for any form of racist view or behaviour and all personnel receive regular diversity and inclusion and respect for others training. They are also made aware of how to report any unacceptable behaviour, including to the Speak Out confidential helpline, and other means available to resolve interpersonal conflicts such as the Army mediation service. The Army takes all allegations of mistreatment very seriously and we encourage any suggestion of unacceptable behaviour to be raised to the chain of command to be investigated accordingly."

Yet, the challenges faced by BAME victims of sexual assault in the UK armed forces are multifaceted and deeply rooted in systemic issues. One of the primary obstacles is the reluctance to report incidents of sexual assault due to fear of retaliation, disbelief, or being ostracised within their units. This reluctance is often amplified for BAME individuals, as they may have concerns about not being understood or taken seriously within predominantly white military structures. Additionally, cultural norms and expectations within BAME communities can create significant barriers to disclosure and seeking help, as victims may fear bringing shame or dishonor to their families.

Language barriers further exacerbate the challenges faced by BAME victims, as accessing support services and communicating their experiences effectively, can be daunting. The lack of culturally competent care and representation within support systems also contributes to the alienation and underreporting of sexual assault within BAME communities. Moreover, the historical and ongoing discrimination and marginalisation of BAME individuals in the UK armed forces can perpetuate power imbalances and create environments where sexual misconduct and harassment thrive unchecked. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the unique experiences and needs of BAME victims within the military context.

Advocacy and Support for BAME Victims of Sexual Assault

Advocating for BAME victims of sexual assault in the UK armed forces is a multifaceted endeavour that requires collaboration between military leadership, non-military support organisations, and the broader community. It is imperative to create safe and inclusive spaces where victims feel empowered to come forward and seek assistance without fear of retribution or judgment. This involves implementing culturally sensitive and trauma-informed support services that consider the specific needs and experiences of BAME individuals. Additionally, raising awareness and providing education on the intersectionality of sexual assault and cultural diversity is crucial in fostering a more understanding and responsive environment within the armed forces.

Support organisations play a vital role in amplifying the voices of BAME victim/survivors and advocating for their rights and well-being. By engaging with BAME communities, offering tailored support, and promoting inclusivity, these organisations can help

bridge the gaps in accessing services and empower victims to navigate their paths to recovery. Furthermore, advocating for policy changes and institutional reforms within the armed forces is essential to address the systemic issues perpetuating the marginalisation and mistreatment of BAME individuals. By working collaboratively with military leadership and policymakers, advocates can influence meaningful changes that promote accountability, transparency, and equity in addressing sexual assault and military sexual trauma within the UK armed forces.

Resources for BAME Victims/Survivors of Military Sexual Trauma

In the pursuit of justice and support for BAME victims/survivors of military sexual trauma, it has to be recognised that there are very few if any organisations dedicated to providing resources that serve their specific needs. Culturally competent advocacy, support, and resources for military service personnel from diverse ethnic backgrounds is in short supply. It should be a priority for military leadership to create pathways to community outreach, peer support, and educational initiatives, that empower BAME sexual trauma survivors to reclaim their agency and access the help they deserve. Additionally, specialised trauma informed care for BAME individuals should be made available during service that recognises the importance of tailored care and representation in addressing the unique challenges they face.

The UK Ministry of Defence should be actively engaged in promoting awareness and understanding of the intersectionality of sexual assault and ethnicity within the armed forces. By collaborating with external experts in the field, community leaders, mental health professionals, and legal experts, any initiative that seeks to foster a more inclusive and responsive environment for BAME victims/survivors would be welcome. Furthermore, culturally specific resources and access to similar organisations could play a pivotal role in advocating for the rights and well-being of BAME survivors of military sexual trauma in the UK armed forces.

Stories of Resilience: BAME Veterans' Experiences

Amidst the challenges and adversity faced by BAME survivors of sexual assault in the UK armed forces, stories of resilience emerge as powerful testaments to the strength and determination of these individuals. The experiences of BAME veterans who have navigated the aftermath of military sexual trauma offer profound insights into the complexities of their journeys and the transformative power of advocacy and support. By sharing their stories, these veterans not only inspire others to seek help and speak out but also illuminate the pressing need for inclusive and equitable solutions within the military community. I spoke with eight members of the BAME veteran community (six male-two female) with representation from all three services, about their experiences and the challenges they faced finding culturally sensitive support. The importance of connecting with advocacy organisations that spearhead initiatives to raise awareness about the unique struggles of BAME survivors of military sexual trauma is not lost on this charity. We will continue to serve as a beacon of hope for others, demonstrating the transformative impact of amplifying BAME voices and advocating for systemic

change within the armed forces. Cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination account for 25% of all the complaints the armed forces receive, and a "disproportionate" number of those come from ethnic minorities.

"Racism is prevalent within the armed forces and incidents of racism are occurring with increasing and depressing frequency."

"I now realise I was overlooked for promotion after I reported that I'd been sexually assaulted and racially abused."

"I am a woman with characteristics that everyone hates. I'm mixed race, bisexual, young & attractive. I'm fair game to everyone. I'm a walking target."

"Post medical board and while awaiting the outcome of a medical discharge, I was granted military accommodation on camp where as a white friend of mine was given housing outside of the wire."

"During phase two training there was a corporal in my chain of command, who was clearly racist, notably by the way he interacted with myself and three other non-white colleagues. It was clear he hated us."

"It felt like I was spoken down upon by chain of command in basic training and generally got punished more than others."

"General lack of disrespect from peers in training."

"In basic training we had around six commonwealth soldiers, people were generally disrespectful about these soldiers behind their back."

"I actually know someone who transferred job roles as she felt there were too many commonwealths going to her phase two course and she felt outnumbered. I remember her and a member of the chain of command making slightly racist jokes about this and laughing about it."

"I also think it's important for me to mention that these examples may not necessarily be down to racism. You need to remember that I was almost always the youngest and only female as well as being a minority ethnically (with basic training as the exception), so these examples could be a result of one of the others."

"I joined the British Army from Malawi and served for nine years including a tour of Afghanistan. I was subjected to sexualised initiation rituals on two occasions and experienced racial discrimination throughout my career. When I was discharged I had to apply for indefinite leave to remain in the UK or be deported. That tells you everything."

"After I was raped they couldn't get rid of me quick enough and medically discharged me with a Personality Disorder. I've since been diagnosed with PTSD too. There was no support immediately after I was raped or since I was discharged"

"If I had a pound for the number of people who told me I had to be good in bed because I was black I'd be rich. It's not 'banter' it's pathetic."

“I was told to report for a photographic shoot as they had asked for a black woman to help promote recruitment. It felt tokenistic.”

“I just don’t think that they understood that I wanted to be around my family after the sexual assault. They just said get over it that’s how things are here if you don’t like it go back to your own country... I’m from Gillingham.”

“Victim support doesn’t exist if you are Black and in the Army.”

“I experienced racism at school but naively thought it wouldn’t be a problem in the Royal Navy as I would be an important member of the team. That bubble burst very quickly. I had a couple of really good friends who were part of the Royal Navy boxing team and they protected me.”

“I didn’t get the impression that my views mattered after I reported racist comments and sexual harassment. It was treated like a joke.”

“I was brought up by my Asian grandparents and I really think they thought they could get away with it because I wasn’t white and nobody would complain on my behalf.”

“I was in the RAF when the Wigston Report came out. I think we were described as members of a minority group. I never felt like I fitted in and if it came down to it I’m not sure many people would have had my back. I found the drinking swearing and sexualised behaviours extremely difficult to be around. I told everyone I was a lesbian to get some peace.”

“I was constantly over looked for promotion and when I complained they suggested I talk with the medics because I clearly had a mental health problem?”

“After I was gang raped I have never felt so lonely in my life. No one seemed to care and I begged to leave the Army. I was told they did me a favour by medically discharging me as I could access a pension. No one has contacted me since I left.”

“I remember my first day in the Army as if it was yesterday. It was the late 80’s and I was told on arrival that...there ain’t no black in the Union Jack. I served 22 years but looking back there was no such thing as anti-discriminatory practice or any understanding of the impact of racism. I saw good soldiers leave early because of it.”

“I came to accept that the Army was institutionally racist.”

“Since I left the RAF my parents have been paying for my therapy.”

“It wasn’t a great time but I get a pension, So I’m trying to put it behind me now.”

Addressing Systemic Issues and Promoting Change within the Armed Forces.

Addressing the systemic issues perpetuating the mistreatment and marginalisation of BAME individuals within the UK armed forces is a critical step towards empowering change and fostering a culture of accountability and inclusivity. This necessitates a

comprehensive examination of existing policies, practices, and organisational dynamics to identify and rectify the structural barriers that hinder the support and protection of BAME victims of sexual assault. By engaging in transparent dialogue and collaboration with BAME communities, military leadership could gain invaluable insights into the specific needs and concerns of these individuals, paving the way for meaningful reforms and cultural shifts.

Furthermore, promoting change within the armed forces requires a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion at all levels of command and decision-making. This entails not only implementing anti-discrimination policies and training programmes but also actively fostering an environment where BAME voices are heard, valued, and respected. By acknowledging the intersectionality of identity and experiences within the military context, leaders can cultivate a culture of empathy, understanding, and support that transcends cultural and ethnic boundaries. Through proactive measures and sustained advocacy, the armed forces can become a beacon of progress and equality in addressing sexual assault and military sexual trauma within BAME communities.

Intersectionality.

The concept of intersectionality is integral to understanding the unique struggles of BAME individuals who are victims of sexual assault in the UK armed forces. Intersectionality acknowledges that individuals hold multiple, interconnected identities that shape their experiences and interactions within society. For BAME victims, their experiences of sexual assault are deeply intertwined with their cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, influencing how they perceive and navigate the aftermath of trauma. Recognising the intersectionality of their experiences is crucial in developing holistic and responsive approaches to support and advocacy that encompass the complexities of their identities.

Moreover, intersectionality emphasises the importance of addressing the interconnected systems of oppression and discrimination that impact BAME victims within the armed forces. It calls attention to the intersecting dynamics of race, gender, and power that shape their experiences of sexual assault and military sexual trauma. By adopting an intersectional lens, advocates and support organisations can tailor their approaches to effectively address the layered challenges faced by BAME individuals, promoting a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of their needs. Embracing intersectionality in advocacy efforts is instrumental in dismantling the barriers and biases that perpetuate the marginalisation of BAME victims and fostering meaningful change within the UK armed forces.

Legal and Policy Considerations for Supporting BAME Victims

Navigating the legal and policy landscape is a pivotal aspect of supporting BAME victims of sexual assault within the UK armed forces. It is essential to ensure that existing legislation and regulations are not only inclusive but also reflective of the diverse needs and experiences of BAME individuals who have been impacted by military sex-

ual trauma. This entails advocating for the implementation of culturally competent reporting mechanisms, legal protections, and support services that are accessible and responsive to the specific challenges faced by BAME victims. Additionally, it is crucial to address any disparities in the application of military justice and disciplinary measures to ensure equitable treatment of all service members.

Furthermore, policy considerations should encompass proactive measures to prevent sexual assault and military sexual trauma within the armed forces. This involves promoting a culture of consent, respect, and accountability through comprehensive training and awareness programmes that are tailored to the diverse cultural backgrounds of service members. By integrating cultural competence and diversity into the fabric of military policies, leaders can signal a firm commitment to upholding the rights and well-being of BAME individuals and fostering a culture of trust and safety. Legal and policy considerations play a fundamental role in shaping the institutional response to sexual assault within the armed forces and are instrumental in empowering BAME victims to seek justice and support.

Empowering BAME Voices.

Empowering BAME voices is a fundamental pillar of advocating for justice and support for survivors of sexual assault in the UK armed forces. By amplifying the narratives and experiences of BAME individuals, advocates can shed light on the nuanced challenges they face and mobilise broader support for inclusive and equitable solutions. This involves creating platforms for BAME service members and veterans to share their stories, perspectives, and recommendations for change, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the intersectionality of sexual assault within the military context. By elevating BAME voices, advocates can challenge existing narratives and stereotypes, driving meaningful conversations and actions towards systemic transformation.

Additionally, empowering BAME voices entails building collaborative networks and partnerships that amplify the impact of advocacy efforts. By fostering alliances with civilian based community leaders, cultural organisations, and policy influencers, advocates can leverage collective expertise and resources to advocate for policy reforms, cultural shifts, and institutional changes within the armed forces. Furthermore, providing mentorship and leadership opportunities for BAME individuals within advocacy initiatives can help cultivate a more inclusive and representative advocacy landscape, ensuring that their voices are not only heard but also actively shaping the trajectory of change. Empowering BAME voices is a vital catalyst for driving sustainable progress and promoting the rights and well-being of survivors of sexual assault within the UK armed forces.

Conclusion

In conclusion, advocating for justice and support for BAME survivors of sexual assault in the UK armed forces is an urgent and complex imperative that demands concerted action and commitment. Understanding the multifaceted nature of sexual assault and

military sexual trauma, the unique challenges faced by BAME individuals, and the intersectionality of their experiences is paramount in shaping effective advocacy and support initiatives. By addressing systemic issues, promoting inclusive policies, and amplifying BAME voices, we can work towards fostering a culture of accountability, equity, and empowerment within the armed forces.

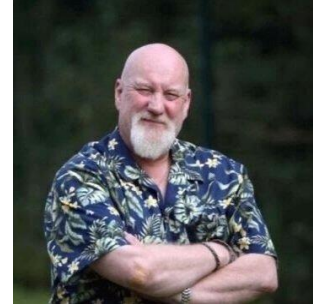
As we reflect on the stories of resilience and the ongoing struggles of BAME survivors, it is incumbent upon us all to take collective responsibility for change. We must advocate for comprehensive reforms, support culturally competent services, and elevate the voices of BAME individuals within the armed forces. By promoting diversity, embracing intersectionality, and championing inclusive advocacy, we can pave the way for a more just, supportive, and inclusive environment for all victims of racism and sexual assault.



Tony Wright

Founder & Chief Executive Forward Assist

Tony joined the Royal Marines in 1978 and was medically discharged in 1981 after seriously injuring his shoulder during basic training. Tony established Forward Assist (2013) & Salute Her UK (2021) He originally started work in the service charity sector when he set up About Turn CIC in 2009 to assist veterans involved with the CJS make a successful transition from Prison to the community. Following a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Travelling Fellowship in 2011, which involved a six-week research trip to the USA, he changed his direction of travel and began to focus on supporting combat veterans who had difficulty accessing trauma informed care and services. He is particularly supportive of those that have survived Military Sexual Assault (MSA) and now suffer from Moral Injury, Post Traumatic Stress and Military Sexual Trauma (MST). A Qualified and Registered Social Worker, Former Probation Officer, and Home Office Adviser with over 39 years' experience of working in a variety of senior management positions within the social welfare and voluntary sector. Tony describes himself as a political activist, campaigner and agent of change. Forward Assists research projects and their ability to design 'needs led' services for invisible populations has led to significant policy change within the UK Military, increased understanding and awareness of the unmet intersectional needs of minority groups. He lives a life led by sobriety, commitment, compassion and being of service to others.



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