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How migrant women have become the forgotten victims of Britain's domestic abuse crisis

Migrant women who need help are finding themselves trapped with their abusers by the insurmountable barriers blocking their escape

By Claire Cohen

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When he addressed the nation in the first week of January to announce a new national lockdown, Prime Minister Boris Johnson made a point of explicitly mentioning that fleeing domestic abuse was an allowable exception to lockdown restrictions. Officials have been keen to emphasise that support is available for survivors.

But support is not available for everybody. One group of women has been forgotten.

Andrea, a migrant woman whose immigration status had not yet been regularised, became trapped in abuse when her husband became violent during lockdown. She reported him to the police but finding emergency accommodation was near-impossible because of her immigration status. Andrea was moved four times in a period of just 28 days, with police, the local authority and other statutory bodies arguing that they were not responsible because of her lack of access to public funds. With the added dangers of the pandemic and the constant threat of homelessness, Andrea eventually returned to her perpetrator.

Migrant women in the UK face a complex web of often insurmountable barriers to receiving support when they experience domestic abuse. The “no recourse to public funds” (NRPF) condition (part of the Government’s hostile environment policy) means that over 90 per cent of migrant women who apply for a refuge place are refused. This leaves them with a stark and desperate choice: remain in the abusive situation or risk destitution, deportation and separation from their children.

In one case, a woman was controlled by multiple abusers who told her: “Immigration control has your passport: if you try and leave the house without a guardian, alarms will go off and you’ll be arrested and deported.” Another was driven to a police station by her abuser after he had beaten her so badly, she was bleeding and had head injuries. He told her: “Go on then, choose. Are you reporting or are you staying with me?” She was so terrified that she chose to stay with the perpetrator.

Another survivor told non-profit organisation Southall Black Sisters (SBS): “He tells me: I sponsor you, you are my maid, you are in this country because of me, I have the power to get you out of the country. He controls me in every way.”

One woman who was supported by SBS came to the UK on a six-month visitor visa but was dependent on her husband for the process of applying for asylum and regularising their immigration status. He became violent, threatening to kill her and attempting to strangle her. After one occasion, when he threw furniture at her and threatened her and their children with a knife, she reported him to the police, who asked her to come to the station to make a statement. But once there, she found herself being questioned about her own immigration status.

For many women, the experience of becoming undocumented is at the heart of their abuse. Perpetrators deliberately withhold the documents women need for the application process, or lie about their appointment dates, forcing them to remain reliant on their abusers; a form of coercive control.

Shaista Aziz, Head of Media and Communications at Solace Women’s Aid, explains: “It’s cruel and targeted and it’s designed to apply constant pressure onto a woman, so she feels trapped. Even if she ‘goes back home’, home is no longer safe for her because in many cases she’s accused of bringing shame onto her family. So there’s nowhere safe for her to go.”

Members of the House of Lords are currently debating amendments to the Domestic Abuse Bill, spearheaded by charities who have highlighted a glaring gap in its provision. There are a number of positives about the Bill; it defines domestic abuse in legislation for the first time, recognises children as potential victims and introduces a Domestic Abuse Commissioner. But it leaves migrant women without recourse to public funds completely unprotected. Fifty organisations are now standing together as part of #StepUpMigrantWomen, a campaign led by Latin American Women’s Rights Service (LAWRS), to call for changes to the Bill.

The amendments aim to prevent women from being discriminated against because of their immigration status, to extend provisions for migrant survivors and secure safe reporting mechanisms for abuse victims with insecure immigration status. As Lord Wooley of Woodford points out: “It does not bode well for the Government to refuse to listen given that following the Windrush Lessons Learned Review, it promised to address ‘institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness towards the issues of race’”

Campaigners are also calling for sustainable ring-fenced funding for specialist by-and-for support services, which provide refuge and support for black and minoritised women and migrant women. There are only around 30 such services across the UK, with most clustered in London or major cities, and demand far outstrips capacity.

The Government has announced a pilot scheme to collect evidence about the needs of migrant women and a short-term fund, but campaigners say this is not a viable alternative to enshrining statutory protection for migrant women in the Bill, pointing out that ample evidence already exists about what is an “urgent and mounting crisis”.

Campaigners working with migrant women tell myriad similar stories, with women repeatedly being forced back into unsafe environments or risking homelessness. “It’s become much more acute under Covid, when we’ve had women who have been destitute on the streets and without access to healthcare,” says Sandhya Sharma, group coordinator at Safety4Sisters North West, a small frontline feminist black and minority ethnic led women’s charity.

During the initial period of the pandemic, referrals to Safety4Sisters doubled. Every woman referred to them who had no recourse to public funds and who had sought a refuge place had been refused. Sharma describes a “two tier system” in which the invisibility of migrant women in legislation will leave them completely unprotected from perpetrators well aware of how to take advantage of the situation. Even as the Government claims to be prioritising safety for victims of abuse, migrant women remain locked out.

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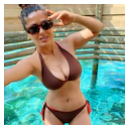
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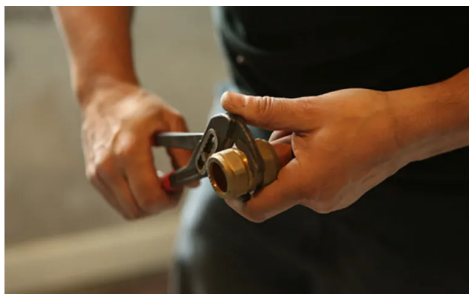


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