

# Living at the Edge: CWASU Evaluation of the Support for Migrant Victims Programme

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## Executive Summary

In May 2021, the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) were commissioned by Southall Black Sisters to produce an evaluation of the Home Office's Support for Migrant Victims pilot programme (SMV pilot) and to document the experiences and support needs of migrant victim-survivors of domestic abuse, particularly foregrounding the women's voices. CWASU took a multi-method approach to the data collection and this report contains an integrated analysis of the following:

- Outcomes Monitoring Data on 299 beneficiaries of the SMV pilot that had exited the scheme by end March 2022 (though a total of 415 people had entered the scheme not all had exited at the end of the first year);
- 91 pro formas completed containing quantitative and qualitative data;
- 2 focus group sessions involving 20 women;
- In depth interviews with 10 women that had accessed the SMV pilot;
- In depth interviews with 5 immigration solicitors and advisors;
- Two rounds of interviews with partner organisations (near the beginning of the SMV pilot and towards the end of its first year) which totalled 17 research participants.
- The findings are discussed in three parts: the impact of immigration controls for victims of domestic abuse; women's experiences of the SMV pilot and feedback from partner organisations; the shifts in women's sense of themselves and their 'space for action' before and after the SMV intervention.<sup>1</sup>

### Key findings:

1. Women's knowledge of their immigration status and the no recourse to public funds (NRPF) condition was very limited but abusers repeatedly told them that they had no rights to be in the country or to access government / welfare support. This is why, for many, immigration status had been a significant barrier to help seeking.
2. Immigration controls strengthened the power of abusers and women described the way their immigration status was a constitutive part of their experiences of physical, emotional and sexual violence.
3. Immigration controls exacerbated women's dependence on abusers – women with little knowledge of the country were silenced on threat of deportation and the threat of losing their children, they were dehumanised and isolated (some were imprisoned) by abusers, further restricting the 'space for action' of women already unfamiliar with UK systems and services. Their dependency on abusers was intensified by the lack of access to work and education.

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<sup>1</sup> Although we had intended to interview the same workers, the turnover of staff meant this was not possible.

4. Some women had been deceived, commodified and forced into domestic servitude. They were expected to offer something in 'exchange' for being brought into the UK, under threat of deportation and/or being thrown out of the marital home.
5. The SMV pilot offered limited funding for rental and subsistence costs for up to 12 weeks for women and their children with NRPF from the UK wide last resort No Recourse Fund (NRF).
6. There was a clear consensus among the women and the partner organisations that the SMV pilot offered a vital lifeline by providing subsistence and emergency accommodation, both of which were key for material exit from the abuse. Practitioners had previously been frustrated by the lack of support they could offer victims.
7. However, many women, particularly at the beginning of the pilot, were not able to enter safe refuge accommodation due to a cap on rental costs. Later, when the cap was lifted, more women were able to access a refuge, but in some areas the rent was still too high. Furthermore, some refuges would not accept women with NRPF as the NRF funding was time limited or due to being over-subscribed, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, most women were housed in a hotel or bed and breakfast accommodation.
8. Some women were entitled to alternative sources of forms of support such as from social services for women with children or benefits via the Destitution Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC). However, these were often delayed due to inappropriate or refusal decisions by social care, late benefit payments or slow Home Office decisions on DDVC applications, which were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pilot provided 'bridging' support for these cases while matters were resolved through advocacy by the partners or legal intervention.
9. Moreover, the subsistence amount only covered the purchase of fruit and vegetables and there were huge regional variations in what was possible with the budget for accommodation. The SMV allowance needed to work in conjunction with a huge number of, often unfunded, wrap around services provided by the partner organisations.
10. One of the key reasons that women could cope on such low levels of subsistence is because of the array of services and social capital garnered by the partner organisations, which had not been costed into the SMV programme. The partner organisations had become skilled at identifying charitable funds and donations to meet women's needs for medicines, clothes, toiletries, transport costs, technology and WIFI, counselling and support.
11. Most interviewees needed time to process all that had happened (or been done to them) and also experienced a lag before they could meet with an immigration advisor. This meant that immigration applications could not be made straight away. They needed much longer than the time allocated by the fund to think through their 'options' and were incredibly stressed by the decisions that they had to make. This is in a context where women are getting access to an advocate and reasonably good immigration advice.

12. This particular group of women displayed complex and high support needs. It was clear that specialist refuge accommodation rather than a hostel or bed and breakfast would have been the most suitable and safest place for them.
13. The data we collected from women revealed a distinct reduction in women's sense of fear and desperation but less so with respect to anxiety as this and material restrictions continued so long as their immigration applications were pending. This is also underlined by women's accounts that they had moved from husband/family control to Home Office power over them, with similar emotional impacts and restrictions on their movements.

Drawing on women's own messages to government, our key recommendations are:

1. Abolish the NRPF condition.
2. Extend the DDVC to 6 months to allow for welfare benefits to be processed, for women to gain good legal advice and overcome some of the trauma of the abuse before they make life changing decisions about the type of visa application they will make.
3. Extend the DDVC to women on other visas or undocumented women as their experiences of violence and abuse are identical to those on the DDVC pathway.
4. Extend the period of support as the majority were not able to secure decisions on immigration applications and therefore employment rights or welfare benefits within the maximum period of SMV support.
5. Ensure that the SMV programme covers access to specialist refuge accommodation and specialist holistic support from by and for minoritised women's organisations.
6. Extend the Domestic Violence Indefinite Leave to Remain (DVILR) rule currently available to those on spousal/partner visas to all migrant women experiencing violence and abuse with an insecure immigration status. This will encourage them to come forward to seek help without the fear of deportation and reduce anxiety and depression about an uncertain future.
7. Give victim-survivors the right to work and study so that they may regain their dignity on their terms.
8. Improve practice in local authorities and other statutory agencies for migrant victim-survivors so that they can also access other entitlements.
9. Provide migrant women information about their rights to protection and support.
10. Tackle the inequality and discrimination that is currently separating out support for different categories of women and child victims of domestic abuse. In doing so, this would enable the full and proper ratification and implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

## Introduction

This is a report on support provided to victims of violence who have insecure immigration status. It takes place in the context of the Home Office's decision to offer one year's funding (from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022) to victims of violence and abuse who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). The pilot was named the Support for Migrant Victims programme (from here the SMV pilot). The SMV pilot channelled subsistence and accommodation funds through a last resort No Recourse Fund (NRF)<sup>2</sup> by six partner organisations across the UK: Foyle Women's Aid in Northern Ireland; Shakti Women's Aid in Scotland; BAWSO in Wales; Ashiana covering the North of England, Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid (BSWA) covering the Midlands area; and Southall Black Sisters (SBS) for London and the South East. The pilot offered survivors £40 per week and £10 per child for subsistence and £150 -250 per family per week to meet accommodation costs from the NRF.<sup>3</sup> Women with access to the Destitution Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC) were only able to access funds for six weeks as it was assumed that they could gain immediate assistance through the concession. The same applied to those eligible for alternative support such as those with children entitled to assistance from social services under the Children Act. Women that were not on this pathway, could get up to 12 weeks subsistence and accommodation. In exceptional cases, the lead organisation, SBS, could agree to 16 weeks support.<sup>4</sup>

The NRF was weighted in favour of non-DDVC cases as they had fewer rights to access support and status. Women on the DDVC pathway are entitled to Universal Credit and local authority housing provision immediately for a period of three months while they apply to stay in the UK under the Domestic Violence Indefinite Leave to Remain (DVLIR) Rule. The DVLIR and the DDVC only apply to those in the UK on spousal or partner visas. Those on other visas with NRPF or who are undocumented are not entitled to most benefits or local authority housing. Regardless of their immigration status, however, all victims can access assistance from local authorities under Section 17 of the Children's Act in England and Wales or Section 25 of the Children's Act in Scotland. These place a statutory duty on local authorities to prevent children in need from becoming destitute. However, partner organisations highlighted that local authorities were not making provision for NRPF women with children, which delayed their access to social care support. Equally, some cases where women had applied for the DDVC, late benefit payments or while women waited for their

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<sup>2</sup> The NRF was originally set up by SBS in 2009 with donations and funding from other sources, and mainly operated in London. The NRF was expanded to cover the UK under the SMV pilot.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that there were significant regional differences in terms of the geographical location and the distance covered by each of the partner organisations, which impacted the cost of accommodation and women's access to wrap around services. Due to an underspend in the final Quarter, the amounts were increased to £50 per week subsistence and up to £350 per week for refuge accommodation in Jan 2022.

<sup>4</sup> The level and period of payments were determined by restrictions imposed by the criteria of the Home Office commission which resulted in payments being below Universal Credit rates.

payments also meant women needed assistance from the NRF.<sup>5</sup> In these cases, women were provided with ‘bridging’ support from the NRF for up to six weeks while they accessed their rights. Those not entitled to alternative forms of support initially received up to 12 weeks of support from the NRF, which was later extended to 16 weeks in exceptional circumstances. The level of funding for rent and subsistence were also increased in the final Quarter of the pilot.<sup>6</sup> The interviews with partner organisations underlined how changes to the criteria led to a significant increase in the numbers of people they were able to assist.

### Background to the evaluation

The partnership, led by SBS, explored the position of women simultaneously subjected to violence and abuse and to immigration controls by documenting the issues the women and support organisations are facing, and within this assess how far the Home Office’s SMV pilot met their needs.

This evaluation adds to SBS’ previous work in this area.<sup>7</sup> SBS have campaigned for the rights of women with insecure immigration status and against the NRPF restriction since the 1990s, frequently referring to victim-survivors’ entrapment as a ‘stark choice’ between domestic abuse, destitution and deportation. Their advocacy, policy and campaigns work in this area led to the introduction of the DVILR in 2002 (firstly introduced as a concession in 1999) providing a pathway for women fleeing violence and abuse to access indefinite leave to remain in the UK. While welcoming this amendment to the immigration rules, SBS raised concerns that this new pathway was only available to women on spousal visas, that evidentiary requirements were initially incredibly high (and did not match the realities of victim-survivors) but also that the ongoing restriction on access to public funds effectively prevented them from exiting abusive relationships. This is a paradox that Anitha (2010: 467) has referred to as ‘a negative concept of freedom’ where legislative opportunities are not matched by the material support required to exercise those opportunities.

After sustained campaigning, SBS gained a groundswell of support from the women’s sector and civil liberties organisations, and in 2009 the government agreed to offer short term funding for women with NRPF. This was channelled through the Sojourner Project and was

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<sup>5</sup> Late payments often result when women have to wait for their national insurance numbers or Home Office making decisions on the DDVC applications, which became more acute during the Covid-19 pandemic.

<sup>6</sup> An underspend occurred in the first year of provision because contracts for this work were not agreed until the end of the first Quarter and then partner organisations needed time to build the profile of the project. Case numbers reflect this - they increased sharply as projects became more established. Numbers also increased after the Home Office agreed for projects to use the underspend from the first two Quarters to increase the period and level of funding. Increased budgets for accommodation also meant that more women could be housed in refuge accommodation.

<sup>7</sup> You can follow the development of this work by exploring the immigration sections of SBS’ website here: <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/>; and their briefing: <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/05/da-bill-briefing-paper-2.pdf>. Also see Amnesty International and SBS, 2008.

renewed annually until 2012 when Theresa May took the bold step of introducing the DDVC for women on spousal visas. Since then, the Tampon Tax Fund, London Councils and the Mayor of London have also funded services for other migrant victims of domestic abuse. The SMV pilot arose in the context of a growing consensus that victims on visas other than spousal visas need to be given access to material support to exit violence and abuse. The SMV pilot scheme was announced in 2020 during the debates on the Domestic Abuse Bill during which SBS had introduced amendments to extend the DVILR and the DDVC to all victims regardless of their immigration status. As discussed below, it seems that the SMV pilot has carried the subsistence and accommodation arrangements piloted almost a decade ago and these sums are in sharp contrast to the current cost of living.

This particular report adds more recent evidence to SBS' own research, notably SBS' briefing papers and reports since 1992 (the most recent being SBS, 2019) including the earlier evaluations of the Sojourner Project and the early implementation of the DDVC (see Kesete, 2013; Siddiqui, 2013) and of a UK wide pilot project on domestic abuse and NRPF financed by the Tampon Tax Fund (see Thiara, 2019). As can be seen in the discussion that follows, we echo some of the concerns of previous research in relation to: the peculiar domestic abuse experiences of migrant women and their complex needs; the financial and human cost of Home Office delays in processing applications; the political will of statutory agencies to provide for victim-survivors; the absence of options for women on non-spousal visas; and the extraordinary length and complexity of support required for women traumatised by abuse that also have to make difficult decisions about applications to remain in the UK. Notably, the range of immigration statuses of women appealing for help appears to have diversified. Interviews with partner organisations showed that women were presenting with a wide range of visas including: spouse, fiancé, visitor, student, dependent of student, work visa, dependent of someone with a work visa, EEA national, EEA family reunion, EU pre-settlement, and asylum. Meanwhile, our analysis of the Outcomes Monitoring Data noted that 17 categories of visa applications had been made by beneficiaries before they exited the SMV pilot programme, giving an insight into the level of expertise required to support migrant women fleeing domestic abuse.

### The aim and objectives of the SBS evaluation

While the Home Office commissioned its own evaluation of the SMV pilot programme, SBS in consultation with the partner organisations, approached the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit to undertake a wider research project that linked with its historical work in this area. The objectives were to:

1. Evaluate the provisions and outcomes of the first year of the SMV pilot programme.
2. Document the experiences of victims of violence and abuse who have insecure immigration status and are impacted by the NRPF restriction.
3. Provide insights into the issues for VAWG sector organisations in supporting women with NRPF and insecure immigration status.



## Our approach to the evaluation

We were asked to foreground the voices of women subject to immigration controls. We therefore took a mixed methods approach to this evaluation. As shown in Table 1 below, our data comprised: qualitative interviews and focus group sessions with women that had been supported by the SMV pilot; pre and post support pro-formas which project workers completed with the women they were supporting; two rounds of interviews with partner organisations (near the beginning of the SMV pilot and towards the end of its first year); and interviews with immigration advisors. While we had direct contact with 30 women through interviews and focus groups, the pro-formas enabled a larger group of 91 to take part in the study.

Table 1: Data collected for the study

Organisation	1 <sup>st</sup> Round Interviews with Project Workers	Completed Pro Formas (Case numbers to end Q4)	Survivor Engagement	Immigration Solicitors	2 <sup>nd</sup> Round Interviews with Project Workers
<b>TOTAL</b>	9	91 (300)	30	5	7

For the analysis, we produced descriptive statistics from the project and pro-forma data, a content analysis of the open text boxes in the pro-formas, and a thematic analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts. While 415 women accessed the service during the pilot year, only 300 of those had completed and exited the intervention by the end of that first year and we have included some analysis of the Outcomes Monitoring Data for 299 beneficiaries of the programme.

The findings are presented in three sections. The first part discusses the particular ways that immigration controls feature as part of women's experiences of domestic abuse, particularly by bolstering the power of abusive men and their families. This section includes data on women's knowledge of their immigration status and the NRPF condition, and whether/how their immigration status acted as a barrier to help seeking. The second section focuses on experiences of the SMV programme, its advantages and limitations. This part of the report also reflects on a range of mechanisms that enabled positive outcomes for the SMV programme. The final section draws on the concept of 'space for action' (Kelly, Sharp & Klein, 2014) to highlight the way that this is expanded by SMV subsistence and accommodation yet continues to be restricted by the structural power of immigration controls over survivors' lives.

## Impacts of immigration status and no recourse to public funds

The Outcomes Monitoring Data provides some information about the immigration status of people that accessed the SMV pilot. The tables that follow are based on the 300 beneficiaries of the scheme for whom this data was available because they had exited the project within the first year (before end March 2022).

Table 2 shows the immigration status when people entered the UK, which could be some years before they reached out for support. Contrary to populist belief, the vast majority entered with valid clearance (278/300 or 93%) and in the majority of cases what victims believed was actually the case.

Table 2: Immigration status on entry into the UK

<b>Immigration status</b>	<b>Scheme assessment</b>	<b>What victim believed</b>
Valid Entry Clearance	275	274
No Valid Entry Clearance/ Permission	10	7
Permission granted at Border	4	7
Other	3	2
Unknown	8	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>298</b>

Table 3 shows the complexity of the types of visas that might be in play. It also shows that following the UK's exit from the European Union, EU citizens who previously had the right to live and work have found themselves subject to the NRPF condition (n=40). If spousal visas are included in the 'family settlement' category and as only spousal visas are eligible for DDVC, then 170/299 (or 57%) potentially fall within this category and the remainder 129/299 (or 43%, so less than half) are not eligible for the DDVC pathway and therefore might need support for a much longer period of time. This is different to the assertions in the other literature (Thiara, 2019; Anitha, 2011 Southall Black Sisters, 2019) that around two thirds of migrant women seeking support on domestic abuse are non-DDVC cases.<sup>8</sup>

Table 3: Type of visa on entry into the UK

<b>Type of visa</b>	<b>Scheme assessment</b>	<b>What victim believed</b>
Family Settlement (Including Parent/ Partner/child)	170	172
EU Free Movement	18	16
Visit	26	28
Study	16	16
EUSS Pre-settled Status	10	12

<sup>8</sup> The change in the pattern may be due to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic which increased demand from those on spousal visas due to lack of access to other services and driven those on non-spousal visas into further isolation.

EEA Family Permit	7	4
Study- Dependant	7	4
Work- Dependant	7	7
EUSS Family Permit	5	4
Family Reunion	6	6
Work	3	3
Overseas Domestic Worker	2	2
No Permission/ Route	2	2
Other	12	11
Unknown	8	12
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>299</b>	<b>299</b>

Table 4 shows the immigration status on entry into the scheme and on exit. It also offers a window on the work needed to address the legal status of this group. Almost 50 who had valid leave on entry to the UK did not by the time they exited the scheme, also reflected by increase in those with no valid leave and with valid leave who made applications whilst supported within the scheme (n=90). This chimes with insights from the qualitative data, that part of the abuse involved husbands and in laws destroying or holding onto immigration papers, not making necessary applications for leave to remain within the required time frame and preventing women from accessing their documents or understanding their immigration status. There remain a small number with limited options, but shifts have taken place for at least half of this sample. The Table suggests that at the point of exiting the scheme, around two thirds (57%) had not as yet resolved their immigration applications, which chimes with concerns raised in the following sections that the SMV pilot intervention was too short to provide effective exit from abuse. This Table also provides a sense of the problem with the term ‘illegal immigrant’ (used so widely within the ‘hostile environment’ rhetoric – see Jones et al (2017), Dhaliwal and Forkert (2016) – only one person had exhausted all routes to remain in the UK while over 100 (one third) had applications or appeals in progress.

Table 4: Immigration status on entry to and exit from the scheme

<b>Immigration status</b>	<b>On entry</b>	<b>On exit</b>
Valid Leave	173	128
No Valid Leave	21	08
No Valid Leave- Application in Progress	20	51
Valid Leave- Further Application in Progress	07	66
Expired leave	06	04
No Valid Leave- Appeal Rights Exhausted	02	01
No Valid Leave- Appeal/ Administrative Review in Progress	02	01
Other	63	28
Unknown	4	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>298</b>

Table 5 shows the type of visa that someone has or is applying for on leaving the scheme and confirms the importance of the DVILR rule and DDVC for this group, with 122 (119 + 3), the largest group, taking this track. That said, there are 17 other variations for this group.

Table 5: Visa type of leave granted/applied for on exit from scheme

Visa / type of leave	Number
Victim of Domestic Abuse (DDVC)	119
Family Settlement (Including Parent/ Partner)	28
EUSS Pre-settled Status	20
No Valid Entry Clearance	18
Asylum and Humanitarian Protection	16
Work- Dependent	7
Visit	6
EUSS Settled Status	5
Study	3
DVILR	3
Study- Dependent	3
EUSS Family Permit	3
Modern Slavery	2
EEA Family Permit	2
LOTR	2
Work	2
EU Free Movement	1
Private Life	1
Family Reunion	1
Other	30
Unknown	27
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>299</b>

Taken together this data shows the complexity of these cases, and the absolute necessity that victims have access to specialist services and qualified legal advisors who can unpick their current status and offer advice on which route might work for them to remain in the UK.

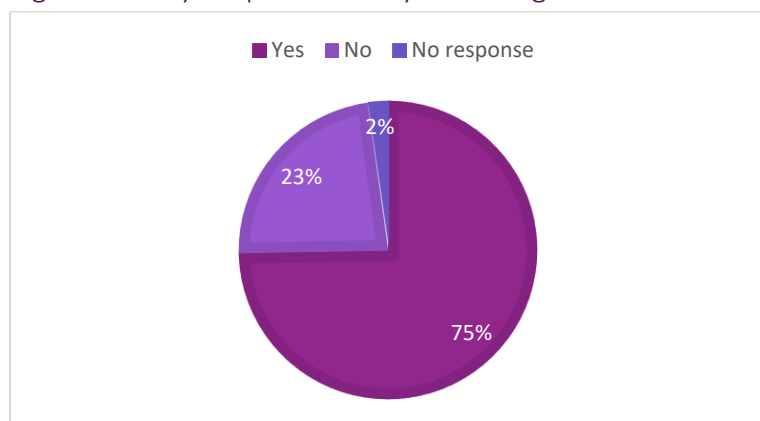
### Collision and collusion of domestic abuse and immigration controls

Immigration controls, and particularly the NRPF condition, exacerbated women's experiences of abuse and violence, and undoubtedly strengthened the power of abusive men and their families. This section discusses the pro-forma data and the interview/focus group data in turn and highlights how immigration controls strengthen the power of abusers, enable control compliance and fear among victims, act as a barrier to help-seeking.

### Pro-forma data analysis

Not every respondent answered every single question on the pro-formas but they still provide some glaring statistics. Figure 1 shows that three-quarters (75%) of respondents (n=68 of 91) had their immigration status used as a form of control. In fact, two women that answered 'no' to this question also provided details of how their immigration status had been part of the abuse.

Figure 1: Did your partner use your immigration status to control you?



An open text box offered space to give details of what this involved. All the accounts<sup>9</sup> suggest that the abusers knew that immigration controls gave them greater power over their victim(s) and they frequently made explicit references to this. Of the 69 entries, almost half (n=31) refer to having been threatened with deportation, often to force them to do things they did not want to do. There were specific references to labour exploitation and sexual abuse.

*They were saying that if I do not do what they ask of me, they will call the immigration people and they will take me back to Pakistan.*

*My husband would often threaten me to deport me out of the country. He would use my visa to make me do things he wanted to.*

*Woman felt she was living like a slave and would have to do whatever her husband says. Her husband had threatened her that he will take her to Pakistan, if she does not listen to his demands. He also took away her I.D Card, Passport and Visa Card away from her to try to control her.*

*I was locked in the house for a year. He said that he will deport me back if I don't do as he says.*

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<sup>9</sup> Many of these are in women's own words, translated where necessary into English, but some are a summary provided by support workers.

*He would threaten to deport me if I ever called the police on him. His dad and mum would constantly use deportation as a way to make me listen and do everything that they asked me to do.*

A fifth of women (n= 14 out of 69) referred to partners and families refusing to renew their visas or threatening to cancel them. Twelve (17%) were kept in the dark about their immigration status and had their papers destroyed by abusers, stolen or hidden from them.

*My husband would delay or cancel appointments with the Home Office when asked to provide biometrics. He told me that it did not matter to miss appointments. My husband delayed sending forms and on one occasion he failed to send an application to the Home Office. I have limited knowledge of the English language and was not in a position to apply to the Home Office myself.*

*Destroyed my passport.*

*He told me not to work because he would cancel my visa, he didn't want me to be independent. If I refused to have sex with him, he would threaten to cancel my visa.*

*He didn't tell me the truth about my rights and options. He threatened me and said he would destroy my documents if I left him. He told me I couldn't go back to my home and I wouldn't be accepted again by my family. I left him and had to return because he had my documents, everything belonged to him.*

*He withheld my documents, so I didn't know anything about my status and I didn't have any ID documents.*

Fourteen responses note the way that abusers used immigration status to underline women/children's complete dependence on them. Several comments show that abusers exploited the fact that women subject to immigration controls have less rights and used this to dehumanise them, as part of their verbal and emotional abuse. This lack of rights was also used to stop them speaking out about the abuse or seeking help. In this way, immigration controls enabled abusers to further isolate and restrict the movement of women/children as they were unfamiliar with local systems and processes and told they had no rights.

*He used to say to me that "you came here because of me, and you are not allowed to do anything without my permission, even to go and see your family". He always humiliated or threatened me about it.*

*I googled the police number after the abuse got really bad and my husband found it. He threatened to revoke my visa and told me that the police would assault me and send me back home. He made me feel that the police would not help me. I wasn't allowed to talk to anyone, he made it so I could never get advice and support to help my situation. The only way I found help is by hiding my conversations with people which was very difficult.*

*He held me hostage in his home. I was not allowed to go out or keep in contact with anyone. He took advantage of the fact that I did not know my rights here.*

*When he abused me, he would say "What are you going to do? Call the police? They will send you back to Jamaica". I didn't know my rights. A lot of men use this excuse on women in my community. I was scared because he was threatening to deport me. I didn't want to anger him in any way. I only wanted shelter, food and clothes to live. When he used my status against me, I felt hopeless... like I didn't have any chance. I was miserable all the time. He would say I had to stay because no one would help me.*

*The woman explained how her husband would often threaten her and say if she ever leaves him, he will deport her and get her out the country. The woman was told she could stay with her husband, be killed or get sent back to Pakistan, she was not aware of anything else.*

There were also examples of abusers using immigration controls to impact women's access to their children.

*He told me to try and leave to see who has more rights over the children, they will deport you only.*

*My husband attacked me, and I reported it to police. He dropped his support of me from spousal application because I would not drop charges against him then I could not go home to him and my child.*

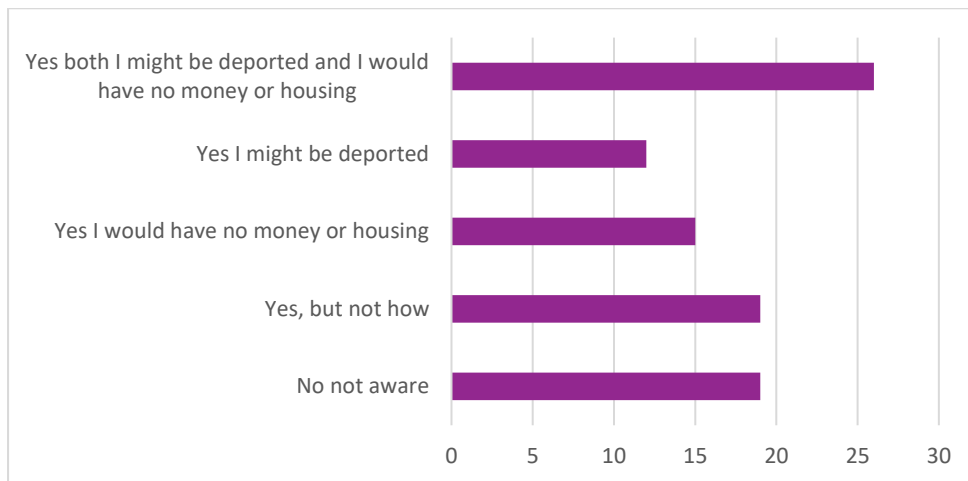
*He promised me that if I bring the children to London from Israel, that we can be together as a family. That he would apply for my leave to remain in the UK. He was abusive to me, he didn't apply for my immigration. He now has my children and has refused to provide me with the documents to support my application to remain in the UK. I have been destitute and homeless since February, having to rely on charity to survive.*

*He tried to intimidate me with my immigration status, he was abusive, verbally and physically, he said he would deport me to Pakistan and was threatening to take our unborn child away.*

*By saying I would have to leave the children with him.*

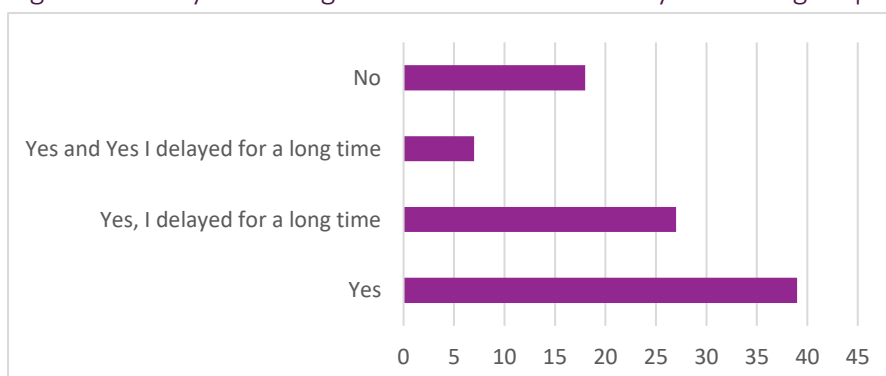
Given all this, it is not surprising that of 91 completed pro-formas, 80% (n= 72) answered yes when asked whether they knew that their immigration status might be a problem if they left their partner. Figure 2 provides a more detailed breakdown of these responses and shows that the largest proportion believed that they would either be deported or have no accommodation or money or face both deportation and destitution.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 2: Did you know your immigration status might be a problem if you left your partner?



Moreover, 73 out of 91 respondents (80%) told us that their immigration status had been a barrier to help seeking. Figure 3 shows that many delayed seeking help because of concerns about their immigration status.

Figure 3: Was your immigration status a barrier to you seeking help?



<sup>10</sup> On reflection, we could have allowed an open 'yes' category to take account of women's fear that they would lose their children.



Two thirds of respondents (n= 56 of 91) also stated that their immigration status had interfered with their ability to work or study. Just over half of these women (n=31) were too frightened to work or study while the other half (n=24) had been told by their partners that they could not.

#### *Qualitative data analysis of interviews and focus groups*

The survivor interviews provided more detail on the ways that immigration controls become a part of the abuse. In particular, women talked about the threat of deportation hanging over them on a daily basis. At the second focus group, Rita<sup>11</sup> explained that her husband would regularly tell her and her children to pack their bags because he was sending them back.

*The threat was always there that, 'I'm not going to extend your visa, you are nothing, you are zero, I kick you out of the house and no one will look after you, who are you? It's only me, because of me you are here and because of me everything is going to happen. If you act smart you pack your bags and leave'. The threat was always 'pack your bags' constantly. Even to the kids, 'guys pack your bag, just leave this place, I'm booking your ticket, you leave'.*

Ajanta said that when her husband was beating her, she tried to get him to stop by threatening to call the police, but he laughed at this and told her that she has no standing in the UK, that the police will deport her rather than help. Amar explained that the threat of having children taken away from her was conjoined to the threat of deportation. For Joy all these things were rolled into one as her husband would tell her that if she didn't comply with what he wanted her to do, including sex, she would face deportation and, by being deported, she would lose her daughter.

*... he used to tell me that I cannot go anywhere because I'm under him, I'm under a spouse visa, and that I do not know how the law works here. Even threatened that if I do not do what he wants he's going to cancel my visa... every time he would force me to do something and I would tell him no I'm not going to do that, it would be like you know you're no good, you're not helping me in any way, I'm the one who is helping you, so I can decide to have your visa cancelled and you will never see [name of daughter] again. That used to really scare me because I did not know what would really happen.*

This is a clear case of sexual and labour exploitation as her immigration status was used by him to insist that she had entered an exchange relationship in which he has to gain something from her for her to merit living in the UK. But also, women that are already

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<sup>11</sup> All victim-survivor names have been changed in this report

culturally trained to keep silent about abuse are being threatened with deportation if they speak out and immigration controls enable their commodification. Alya's in laws, for instance, underlined her dependence on them by regularly telling her that they were 'not going to keep her' by which they meant that they had no plan to apply for her leave to remain in the country. She had been locked into the house and exploited as a domestic servant since her arrival in the UK. As the quote suggests, she was treated as a commodity that could be returned or discarded at any point. She was subjected to total surveillance and restriction on movements and had no idea that help was available to her. Before she was abandoned by her husband and in laws, she had been pushed out of the front door and left in the cold in the front garden on several occasions. She had no idea of where to go and no resources to draw upon and so had pleaded with her abusers to let her back in to the house even though she was being subjected to verbal abuse, imprisonment and exploitation. In this way, husbands and in laws can underline and exploit women's total dependence on them.

This chimed with other examples of women enduring abuse because of the threat of deportation, as illustrated by Harinder in the second focus group.

*My immigration status was used against me a lot, and because of the situation I was in I was too scared to talk about the abuse for a very long time, because I always got threats like, 'All I have to do is make a phone call and you get deported'. So I had to take so much of the abuse because I was worried about what will happen.*

In one focus group, Karen's disclosure of the ways that immigration controls were used as part of the abuse chimed with others and led to a domino effect of disclosures. Another woman said:

*Yeah, like the same as Karen, when I came to this country, I didn't know anything because I trusted him in everything. Even the GP, he was saying, 'If you want to go to the GP you have to pay'. At that time, I trusted him, 'Okay if I want to go to the doctor I have to pay'. When he started to beat me and threaten me of killing me, and I said to him, 'If you don't stop this I will go to the police and report you'. He said, 'They will not believe you because they will not do anything for you or help you'. At that time, I had no choice because if I leave the house, like I'm thinking, 'Who will help me? there is no one to help me'. A lot of the times he kicked me out of the house, and I go to the garden and stay there and thinking, 'What am I going to do now? If I go to the police, they will not help me, where I go?' The only option I had is to go back to his house and accept what he done to me. He just always said, 'I'm British, nobody knows you, I'm British, once I pick up the phone, it's over for you'.*

In fact Karen likened her experience of domestic abuse to her experience of the Home Office, stating: 'I've just been abused by someone, (now I'm being) abused by the Home Office'. For her it was the same experience of power: the same restrictions to her movements, the same lack of funds and the same uncertainty about her future. She described this as entering a black hole, and that in some ways her situation after leaving the abuse was worse. Other women in the focus groups concurred - that all their hope and positivity after ending the domestic abuse had been wrecked by immigration controls.

Where women were not tied to British nationals and had arrived on other kinds of visas (dependent of student, dependent or family member of an EEA national), abusers threatened to stop all access to the children if the woman tried to leave or did not comply. For Nilima, the abuser did not refer to immigration as part of the abuse and she believed this was because, as an international student, he was also subject to immigration controls, but immigration was still very much part of the context of the abuse. She had been forced to leave her children in her country of origin and her husband threatened to do something to the children if she left him. She was too scared to return to her country of origin but also had limited options to apply to remain in the UK. In fact, the immigration application itself could prevent her from contact with her daughters and thereby reproduce the same threats that she had experienced from her husband. She explained that the only route available to her was to claim asylum, but this would prevent her from being united with her children. She required several months of SMV support while she went through counselling and arrived at a decision on what sort of application to make.

The second way that immigration controls reinforced the abuse and violence was when women were denied access to services because service providers assumed that they are not entitled to public funds. This can happen without even checking the woman's documents and assuming that she has full knowledge of and is in a position to explain her immigration status. A number of project worker interviews noted that social services and housing were inclined to assume NRPF and deny support initially, even where women were eligible for DDVC. They tended to only give way when this was undeniably confirmed or they were threatened with legal action. Where support was denied, this reinforced what the woman had been told – that she has no standing in the UK and would not get any assistance.

One particularly disturbing example was provided by an immigration advisor in the West Midlands – he had been contacted by an organisation trying to get assistance for a woman and three children that had fled a violent husband/father the previous night. The woman and children had been placed in emergency housing for the night and, because of the children, the woman was required to attend social services for further support the following morning. However, she was made to wait with her children in the main reception area at social services while the lawyer and support organisations battled with social workers about their duty to provide for the family. The immigration advisor had to pursue a legal order to

force social workers to make provisions but part way through the day he was informed that the woman had left and returned to the abuser. He discovered that no food had been provided to the family since the previous night and the woman struggled to manage a whole day in a public reception area with three hungry and distressed children and persistent calls from her husband. The sheer inhumanity was shocking even to an immigration advisor who argued that the social workers must have known that the woman and children had not eaten and that she was scared for her life, and yet they left her in the main reception area without any food or water or updates on forthcoming support. Her immigration status led social workers to feel justified in withholding support.

Interviews with project workers raised concerns about their poor experience of other refuges and supported housing providers who were reluctant to take on women subject to immigration controls even after SMV money became available. These housing providers were cynical about SMV funds covering the entire period of the woman's stay and also uncertain that women's immigration cases would be resolved in the near future. They were nervous about the women/children becoming a long-term financial responsibility. Where women had not been able to access accommodation or subsistence (either pre-dating the SMV programme or because the agency they contacted was not aware of the SMV programme), they may have been advised to get a non-molestation order to stay in the marital home. One of the women at the focus group sessions noted that this was also used by her abuser to gaslight her and represent her as a manipulative woman that will do whatever it takes to get her stay in the UK. In this way, abusers and government are reproducing the same hostile environment discourse that casts immigrants as deceitful.

Several women spoke of the loneliness and isolation peculiar to women subjected to immigration controls that in turn reinforces their lack of knowledge and social capital in relation to rights and services in the UK. Many of the focus group participants did not know anything about UK laws and systems nor who they might be able to contact for help. They also did not have the language skills to learn or find out more. When they did make attempts to get assistance, there were obstacles. Just one woman did a google search for support and she called round the agencies on that list but found that many did not pick up the phone while others said they only take referrals from the police.

Deception was also a significant part of the abuse. These women were abandoned to domestic servitude at their in-laws' home. Several focus group participants revealed that they had not even known what visa they were on, partly because they had been deceived by abusers. For instance, Rita thought she was on a spousal visa but discovered that her visa was for a family member of an EEA national. Two women discovered that their husbands were already in other marriages or relationships. For instance, Ajanta married a man that she thought was a British national and discovered not only was he an EEA national, he already had a wife and a child from the period he was living in Spain.

Many women had not seen their documents and so were not able to check their status when seeking advice. A couple described chance encounters with their documents – Joy was handed the documents to resolve issues with her children’s school and that was when she discovered she was a family dependent of an EEA national and not on a spouse visa as she had assumed. Alya overheard her in laws say something about not having any plans to renew her visa. She suspected they were planning to throw her out and she managed to find and hide her passport before they abandoned her to her uncle.

#### *‘Trapped by a Technicality’*

One of the women at the second focus group argued that she had become stuck because of a technicality; she had not known that she was entitled to DDVC so out of desperation and as a result of bad legal advice she had made an application claiming the marriage was continuing even though she was no longer with her husband. She then she missed the window of opportunity to make a DDVC application and this is now obstructing her ability to gain leave to remain in the UK. The immigration application process is an unforgiving one that has no room or space for errors and can send you down the wrong road because of a technicality.

For women that had not been assisted under the DDVC route, there was a palpable sense of inequality and discrimination. For instance, as Rita listened to the other women at the second focus group, she realised that many of them had identical experiences yet she and some of the others were not able to access the same support as the DDVC route.

*I just wanted to say that just because we have different status, like she’s on a spouse, I’m not on spouse, I never knew that, I’m on dependant to live, something like that... that doesn’t change the fact that I’m also a spouse, that doesn’t change the fact that I’ve been through domestic violence. Just because our status are different, we are given different charges... just because I’m not on a spouse visa I’m not access to anything... But I’m married, I was his wife, I came here, I have experienced domestic abuse.*

There are layers and layers of discrimination in this space – in general, women subject to immigration controls are not getting the same services as British nationals that have been through exactly the same experience, then non-DDVC women are not able to access the same support as DDVC women even though the data from this evaluation shows they have had almost identical experiences to women that are eligible for DDVC. Given that their husbands decided which visas they would enter the UK on, women felt this meant that those same abusive men and families were able to determine their futures long after they had fled the relationship. There’s no equal access to the DDVC route because women aren’t

aware before they marry that this is the most supportive route to be on, husbands deal with and keep hidden all the paperwork.

*... he never showed me the papers, nothing at all. I was like I trusted him, he himself is a lawyer. He did some loophole or something because during the extension time I don't know what he showed, he's a British national but I'm not on a spouse visa. I don't know the logic here. So it's not my fault, but still, but although it is not my fault I'm facing the consequences... For four months I'm out I never knew before that I'm on a PBS [work] visa, I always thought that because I'm married, obviously I'm on family visa, I'm on spouse visa. After coming, after people here are helping me out, "How come you never knew?" Because I saw this the first time, because we are, this is the first time I had my BRP card, so they showed me, "See it, it's here". So, I was shocked and now there is no route for me.*

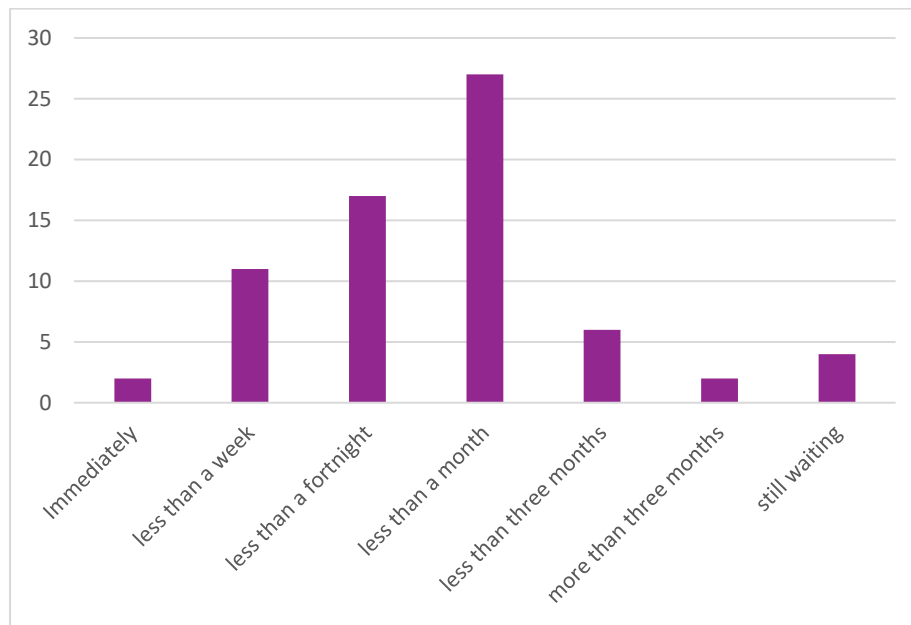
Several interviews illustrated the complex nature of immigration law. For instance, Orla was adopted and taken to South Africa as a child but then reunited with her birth mother in Ireland. They would regularly cross the border into Northern Ireland for school or work. She therefore had no idea that there were immigration restrictions impacting her life until age 18 (pre-Brexit) when she was alerted to a problem as she could not access welfare benefits. She subsequently went through two very violent relationships and had her children removed by social services. She was initially taken on by a Women's Aid organisation but then they could not support her because of her lack of formal residency. The SMV project has been a vital lifeline for her, as she states, to reset her life and apply for residency as a family member of an EEA national. This is a white Irish survivor of horrific violence for whom immigration controls have been a barrier to accessing support for many years. Her immigration status remained unresolved as, at the time of the interview, she was waiting for a decision on her application but, in her own words, 'it seems absurd that I have children and a mother nearby but cannot be sure of being able to stay in the UK!' She describes being trapped by 'one big mistake' simply because those people that ought to have secured papers for her did not know they needed to. This simple oversight has left her with a long-term problem and completely curtailed her ability to access support services.

### Making an immigration application

The complexity of immigration law is exacerbated by the difficulty of finding a good immigration advisor and needing time to make very difficult decisions on immigration applications, which themselves need to be made in a timely manner. Out of 91 completed pro-formas, 69 women responded to a question about how long they had to wait for a meeting with an immigration advisor. As Figure 4 shows, the majority waited between a week and a month, but around one fifth (n=12 out of 69) waited three months or more and some were still waiting. This is very important in a context where SMV funding was set for 6-

12 weeks (exceptionally at 16 weeks) and where DVILR applications have to be made within three months of applying for the DDVC. It is also worth noting that these are women that are in touch with services that have established relationships with excellent immigration advisors, imagine the situation for women that are not in this position.

Figure 4: How long did you have to wait before your first appointment with an immigration adviser?



It also needs to be recognised that most of the interviewees needed time to process all that had happened and experienced a lag before they could meet with an immigration advisor. This meant that immigration applications could not be made straight away, some women were so traumatised by the abuse and so anxious that even where they had advice from a lawyer, they needed as much as four months to decide what form of immigration application they would make. Nilima’s dilemma is a clear example of the incredible pressure of making decisions on applications for leave to remain as she had to choose between going back home and being at risk of further violence, even death, and making an application for asylum in the UK that would prevent her from seeing her children who she had agreed to leave back in her country of origin. This double bind reproduced the threat that her husband had made that if she left him, she would lose her children. The most obvious way for government to support her would be to allow her to access a student or work visa in her own right and for her daughters to then join her as dependents.

Even straightforward applications could take a long time. Project worker interviews highlighted a six month wait for women to get a decision on the most straightforward DDVC application. To get a sense of how that works out for women on the DDVC route – Alya was abandoned and dropped to her uncle’s accommodation. Neither of them had any idea that Shakti existed and that she could access subsistence and accommodation through them. So,

for an entire month before she accessed Shakti's support she was surviving on her uncle's food and the accommodation he managed to organise through his network. A few weeks into contact with Shakti, she gained the DDVC letter entitling her to welfare benefits (7 weeks after being abandoned with nothing but her summer clothes). Then the lawyer made an application for leave to remain in the country within three months of that letter. That decision took six months to come through. So, it took 10 months to resolve her immigration status and this was one of the fastest cases supported by the organisation. Conversely, Ajanta was still traumatised for a few months after exiting the abuse and the advice on her immigration status did not help her feel any calmer. She took four months to decide what kind of application to make and Shakti were only able to support her through this period because of an underspend on the SMV project.

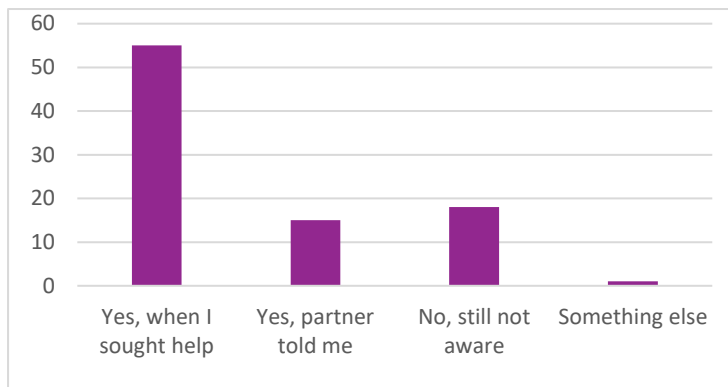
#### Awareness of the no recourse to public funds condition

The vast majority of interviewees and focus group participants were completely unaware of the NRPf condition. At the second focus group, only 1 woman out of 11 knew about it as she had seen it written on her BRP card. Of the 10 interviewees, only 1 was aware that she had NRPf because she had her own passport and had wanted to train to be a nurse but could not access the bursaries to do so. Some gained this knowledge when they attempted to access assistance but many were not able to explain what this meant even after they were receiving support, highlighting what little understanding women have of the immigration system in the UK. Moreover, many of the women could not read or speak English so would not have been able to read the information even if they had access to their papers. As noted above, abusers reinforced this lack of awareness by isolating women and telling them they have no rights in the UK.

The pro-formas suggested a slightly different situation, possibly because these were completed with the support of advocates at the partner organisations. Of 89 respondents that answered the question 'Did you know that you were subject to the NRPf rule?' over three-quarters (77%, n=70) stated that they were aware of this. As the following bar chart shows, the largest number of respondents became aware of it when they attempted to access support and others were told this by their partners.



Figure 5: Did you know that you were subject to the NRPF rule?



Nonetheless, the NRPF condition had a huge impact on all their lives. It had led to women being denied refuge accommodation. Samantha was able to make phone calls to seek advice on the abuse she was experiencing, she spoke with around 10 agencies and none of them would help her because of her immigration status. There were many examples of women relying on the charity of friends, some of whom were not at all hospitable. Unsurprisingly, this placed women at risk of further victimisation. Desree was given just a chair in a 'friend's' living room but not offered any food. The friend would eat in front of her but not offer her anything. Sade explained that she was referred by the police after she called them because she had been locked into a house with a man that she met at the church. Milly fled abuse and ended up on the street for five nights waiting for assistance. As mentioned above, Ajanta resorted to asking a complete stranger in the park for some money – this could easily have led to other exploitation. Others talked about sexual harassment and the threat of sexual assault and asserted that women are at risk of being murdered.

## The benefits and limitations of the SMV support

The SMV programme originally offered £40 per week cash (which increased to £50 per week from January 2022) with an additional £10 per child<sup>12</sup> and a weekly sum to cover the cost of accommodation (ranging £150 to £250 per week depending on location). Feedback to the Home Office from SMV partners about lack of affordable accommodation, led to agreement to increase the weekly accommodation caps to £250 for non-refuge accommodation and £350 a week for refuge accommodation from January 2022. The Home Office also agreed for some of the underspend in Quarter 4 to be used to provide a broader range of services and holistic support.

A series of specific and measurable outcomes were tracked, albeit that this data is not as complete across the partners and the time frames of the project. The clearest here is the provision of safe accommodation and support - with a goal set of between 500-1000. Clearly 412 is lower than anticipated – but this has to be considered in relation to issues about set up time and that for the final Quarter, where further funding is not secured, numbers are likely to drop as partners cannot guarantee covering the costs. Table 6 below shows that the figures in Quarters 3 and 4, when the scheme could be said to have reached optimal functioning, were closer to the predicted numbers.

Table 6: Provision of safe accommodation and support

<b>Time period</b>	<b>Forecast</b>	<b>Actual</b>	<b>Percentage of forecast</b>
Q1	123	77	63
Q2	128	96	75
Q3	128	126	96
Q4	126	113	90
<b>Total</b>	<b>505</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>81.5</b>

A set of 5 outcomes were set for the scheme, with three to five indicators nested underneath, these are detailed below.

### **Outcome 1: Protection and recovery**

90% of service users (SU) are provided with refuge or other safe accommodation and subsistence

90% of SU are signposted to Law Society/OISC registered immigration lawyers/advisors

<sup>12</sup> These amounts have increased into the second year of the SMV programme, from April 2022, to £60 per week subsistence and £15 per week per child due to the cost-of-living crisis.

90% supported to navigate the immigration advice received

90% access to holistic support where available

*On this measure all targets were met or exceeded across the four quarters*

**Outcome 2: Positive impact**

90% feel safer

90% feel more confident of their rights and options in seeking support

90% access immigration advice and take action

*On this measure, with two exceptions of missing by 1-2% in quarter three, all targets were met or exceeded across the four quarters.*

**Outcome 3: Assisted to obtain Local authority housing if eligible and other support if not**

100% of eligible assisted to access LA or alternative forms of support

90% of eligible to obtain LA or alternative forms of support within six weeks

*These targets were not all met but the shortfall was never more than 12% (Q1 and Q3 for the 100%) and more often 2-7%.*

**Outcome 4: Signposting to registered immigration advisors**

100% signposted to Law Society/OISC immigration lawyers/advisors

90% access immigration advice

90% supported and assisted to navigate the immigration advice received

*All were met or exceeded, with the exception of Q1 and Q3 of one service user not being signposted*

**Outcome 5: gather more information on the scale of the problem and which types of migrants are involved**

Project to collect required data from partners

Project provides monitoring reports with data on numbers, types of migrant/visas and other information required by the Home Office

Project provides data to the independent evaluators

*These are all recorded at 100%.*

**Overarching points**

The majority of the women had not had access to any resources at all during the time they had been in the UK, so their expectations were very low. This could explain why the qualitative data reflects a deep gratitude even where the subsistence allowance only covered basic foods and left them with a long list of unmet needs. As one of the women at

the second focus group proclaimed: 'when you have nothing, £40 per week is a lot!' Similarly, very few women complained about their accommodation because, as one noted, they were pleased to have a bed to sleep in.

There was no doubt among both the survivors and the support workers that the SMV provision had been a lifeline for the hundreds of women and children they had assisted during the period of this evaluation. Before connecting with the SMV partners, women experienced utter despair as they had been denied assistance by various agencies. The NRPF condition had also taken its toll on advocacy workers who underlined the importance of the DDVC and now the SMV money for their day to day work. So even though the SMV support had been limited and temporary, it had meant that they could offer women a real chance of exiting abuse, particularly those not entitled to the DDVC. SMV money had been vital for women that felt they could not surmount the structural and institutional barriers imposed on them by the NRPF condition. One advocate described how, before the SMV pilot, she would only be able to offer emotional support to migrant women and they found this so frustrating that they would tell her not to call again unless she could identify a practical way out of the abuse. She reflected on the bind she had been in as a caseworker before the SMV pilot.

*DDVC has been great for women... but unfortunately there are so many, so many women out there that don't have the option of DDVC, and you just see them struggling and you feel just as helpless. I'm stuck as a case worker and it's almost like there comes a time where you almost try and, I don't want to say avoid, but you almost feel that apprehension before giving them a ring or before sending them a message because I had a client, she was a similar case and she was saying that... there should be some place where they write that only leave, only take that step if you've got the right immigration status, because if you don't then you won't get help. And it's true because there's so much support out there for people that have the right immigration status, but for those that don't, they have nothing. And I would call her, and she was like 'Why are you calling me? I don't need emotional support, I need actual support' so it was almost like they didn't want you to call anymore.*

Concerns were also raised about local authorities refusing to assist women with NRPF even those with children. The same advocate noted the frequency with which local authority staff could find pots of money to 'repatriate' women rather than set funds aside to assist women to exit the abuse and to settle in the UK. All interviewees pointed to the lack of concern among local authority staff that women's lives are at risk if they are forced to return to their countries of origin. An advocacy worker explained that she tried to convince her local authority that, with the introduction of SMV funding, the partner organisation and the local authority could share the cost of accommodating non-DDVC cases but the local authority refused to do this on the basis that SMV funding is only temporary. It was clear from the

practitioner and lawyer interviews that local authorities are sidestepping their duties and trying to avoid long term responsibility for NRPF women.

As this section makes clear, the SMV programme has enabled the partner organisations to be able to offer a vital lifeline, an actual material alternative to living with violent and abusive men and families but that this programme is still limited in the scope of what it offers. A key issue raised was its limited impact because of its temporary nature. There were mixed responses to the question on the pro-forma of whether the support had been long enough. Out of 91 respondents, 45 answered yes and 41 answered no, yet all but three of those that answered yes used the open text box to identify continuing need after they had exited the programme.

Before moving to specific comments about the subsistence allowance and the accommodation, it's worth noting a couple of other practical and administrative issues that led to differential delivery across the partner organisations. It was clear that given the paperwork and processes established to claim the money for each woman, some women were impacted by the lack of documentation and a bank account (meaning that arrangements needed to be made to pay the woman cash in hand). To address such challenges, partner organisations had to draw on their stock of shop vouchers and other pots of money to ensure cash was provided to the women in lieu of paperwork being completed and online payments being established. Moreover, some of the partner organisations covered a far greater geographical space than others which meant that not all women were able to access the same wrap around services at the heart of the organisation's service delivery e.g. access to a support group and developmental activities or counselling services, all of which were identified as key for women's mental health and survival. Scottish, Irish and Welsh partners in particular had to negotiate localised support and legal representation for women that were placed a great distance from each other and from the central hub of the organisation.

### Weekly subsistence

It was very clear that the weekly subsistence allowance was too small and even when this was increased from £40 pw to £50 pw it could only work with access to additional forms of support from the partner organisations. In most part, the weekly cash only enabled women to purchase fresh fruit, vegetables, bread and milk. They topped this up with food parcels and access to food banks, particularly for canned food, as well as occasional free meals provided by the partner organisations. For their toiletries, almost all of them relied on hand outs from the partner organisations but a couple referred to alternating between buying food and buying toiletries. Many women had left abusive households or were thrown out without clothes and relied on their support agencies to offer key items from their stock of donations or to identify additional funds (such as by advocates making grant applications to

charitable trusts) that would enable women to purchase clothes. Others purchased one or two items at charity shops every few weeks.

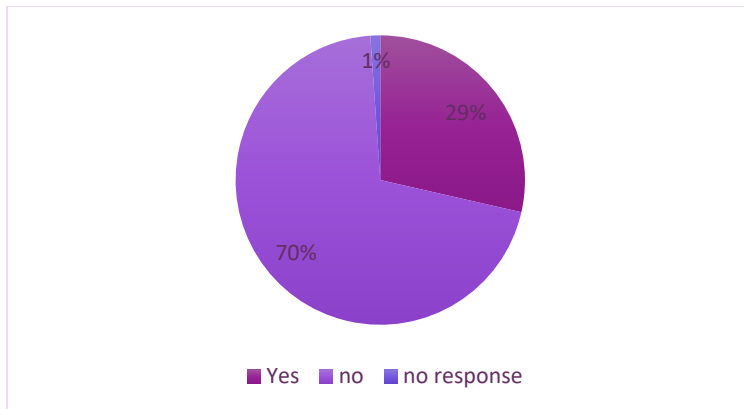
Just one woman talked about using up her weekly cash on taxis because she was new to the area and very afraid of being found by her abusers. All the other women walked everywhere so as not to use their subsistence on travel, or they relied on free bus tickets sourced by their support worker. Women required travel reimbursements from the partner organisations to be able to attend the weekly support group sessions. They also relied on virtual/online appointments with caseworkers and immigration lawyers to restrict the cost of travel but for this to work, they needed access to smart phones, laptops or iPads, and good Wi-Fi connectivity. Only two of the partner organisations had been able to give out phones and iPads from specific funding during the lock down period. Most women reported that they had very little money to purchase data for their mobile phones and they complained about poor Wi-Fi connectivity at their hotels. Others noted the problem of having to pay gas and electricity bills out of a subsistence allowance that barely covered their food needs.

There were two specific examples of women's vulnerability to further exploitation as a result of lack of funds or accommodation. Ajanta slept in her coat to avoid using the heating because she was having to pay electricity and gas bills out of her weekly SMV allowance. She also had to find a way to get clothes because she left the house in her slippers and no change of clothing. She resorted to borrowing money from a woman in a park that she had known a very short time, to make up for the subsistence shortfalls. Sade had moved in with a man that she met at a church service only to have to call the police when he locked her into the house and claimed that 'something' might happen to her. From the police she learnt that he had previous offences and there was additional concern that he might be in possession of a gun.

Moreover, some women spent weeks homeless on the streets or homeless on someone else's sofa/armchair before they learnt about the partner organisations and were able to access SMV resources. This is a very fragile period when women are susceptible to returning to the abuser and at high risk of intensified abuse and violence as the abuser's power is strengthened.

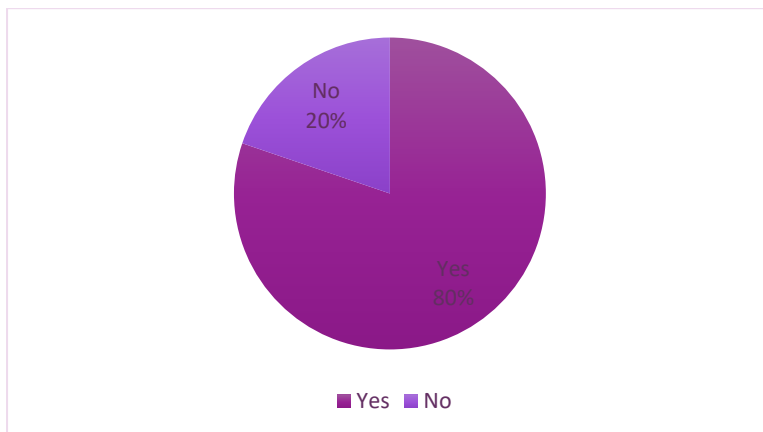
Further shortfalls in subsistence allowance were highlighted by the pro-formas. Recipients of the SMV support were asked whether the amount of funding for personal and food expenses had been enough. As Figure 6 shows, two thirds (n= 64) replied 'no' and 'not really' and even though one third (n=26) answered 'yes', more than half of these still used the open text box to note items that they could not afford with the SMV allowance.

Figure 6: Was the amount of funding you have had for food and personal expenses enough?



This was echoed in responses to the question 'Did you face financial hardships?' As Figure 7 shows, 80% of respondents (n= 73) answered 'yes' to this question and used the open text field to identify lack of food, especially for children, clothing and toiletries.

Figure 7: Did you face financial hardships?



The majority (68 of 91) pro-formas provided detail on financial hardships particularly noting a lack of funds for clothing, toiletries, medicines, travel costs, heating bills and being able to meet the cost of immigration applications. Some women had alternated between buying food and toiletries. Others reiterated points made in the interviews on not being able to pay for travel costs and the added strain of not being housed near a supermarket or not having access to a fully equipped kitchen to store and prepare food. Just over one third (n= 23 of 68) stated they had not had enough money for food – they noted reliance on food banks, food donations, friends and trying to survive on one meal per day.

*I fell pregnant before marriage. I used to eat leftovers from my friends and I did not have any money to buy any multi vitamins or anything like that which I needed for my pregnancy.*

*1 meal per day. Supermarket was far away and I had to walk far and carry heavy food back so that I didn't have to waste my money on transport.*

*It was expensive to buy food and I had to skip some meals.*

*Not enough money for food. There is no kitchen at my accommodation and eating out is expensive. I had to buy a large meal at lunchtime to last the rest of the day. I couldn't afford to buy fruit or anything healthy.*

*The money helped with food. I would sometimes struggle to make ends meet. I would not have enough for other essentials/toiletries, food or travel costs. On a few occasions my Housing Support workers would not give money on time, and I would wait for two weeks for my payments. I sometimes did not have enough to eat due to this delay.*

Around a quarter of those that responded to this question referred to not having or being able to buy clothes and shoes (n=17 out of 68) and 15 per cent of the respondents (n= 10 out of 68) raised concerns about not being able to feed their children or manage on the subsistence because they had children.

When asked about outstanding needs, only four women left this part of the pro-forma blank. Another 15 stated that there were no outstanding needs and four explained that this was because their immigration application had been resolved and they were receiving Universal Credit. Others talked about unresolved immigration applications, welfare and housing needs, a desire to work and take English classes, and ongoing need for emotional support. Immigration status was the primary unresolved issue at the end of the SMV support period. Of those that identified unmet needs (n= 72), one third (n=25) had unresolved immigration issues where they were awaiting a decision on an application, yet to make an immigration application, or about to appeal a Home Office decision. Just one woman had made arrangements to return to her country of origin. Another made clear that she could see no alternative but to return to her abuser. A quarter of those that identified unmet needs (18/72 = 25%) talked about financial needs, in most part because they had not yet gained welfare benefits and also to meet other expenses like travel costs. Thirteen referred to accommodation needs either in terms of being homeless or the need for appropriate housing including specific requests for refuge accommodation and access to a kitchen. Three women referred to needing dental or medical treatment. Several women



noted practical and emotional needs through generic statements about needing 'support' or references to wanting to work, access a gym, or access English classes.

*I need normal life back again. I need my friends, my work, the gym. I have high aspirations but they have all been killed. I am scared for my future. I need answers and support. I feel lazy and useless at the moment.*

### Accommodation

For five out of six partner organisations the offer of accommodation at the weekly SMV pilot rate was only possible because of the housing networks they had developed over decades of work in their local areas. It was temporarily feasible because of the drop in bed and breakfast demand in the immediate aftermath of Covid lockdown and some of the arrangements had to be renegotiated in Quarter 3.

Partner organisations secured vastly different forms of accommodation with the budgets assigned to them. Some women were housed together in a block of studio flats and some in ensuite rooms at the same guest house. At the other end of the spectrum, however, a couple of women raised concerns about the quality of their accommodation, particularly hygiene, cleanliness and maintenance. One woman described dire housing conditions where the property was clearly not being maintained - bathroom taps and pipes were leaking or blocked, she could not relax in the kitchen because of the pressure on shared facilities, and she even talked about a rat infestation that was tearing into the food in the cupboards. Presumably the quality of this accommodation relates to the very low amounts of rent available from the SMV budget.

Unfortunately, one of the partner organisations was not able to secure temporary accommodation at the weekly allowance rate and therefore, during Quarters 1 to 3 they used their budget to book emergency accommodation for one to three nights to get women out of abusive households. The organisation's advocates then used the three days or so to help women identify medium to long term accommodation through family and friends' networks. For this partner organisation, the SMV fund was mainly used to give women subsistence funds that could make them a little less dependent on the people they were forced to rely on for accommodation.

Whether short or medium term accommodation, the nature and condition of the accommodation across the regions made a huge difference to how far the women could stretch their weekly subsistence allowance. Where women did not have access to a kitchen or cooking facilities they really struggled to eat within the weekly allowance and frequently requested top ups. Joy was originally placed at a bed and breakfast by social services but she had to use all her weekly subsistence allowance on take away food because there was no kitchen at the accommodation. Not only did she find this a very expensive way to live, one

that swallowed up the bulk of her weekly subsistence money, she struggled to find take away food from Kenya so had problems feeding her daughter. In any case, this is a very unhealthy option for women that have been denied food, light and exercise as part of the abuse.

The women who had access to a kitchen, ensuite rooms and/or their own studio flats seemed to fare much better, as they could cook for themselves or cook with other SMV women in similar situations. In these instances, they could make the weekly cash go further. Even then, they needed cash up front to purchase spices and dishes to set up their kitchens and cook the food to which they are accustomed.

The SMV pilot recipients had experienced violence and acute levels of isolation, with their immigration status making them even more dependent on abusive spouses and families. This combined experience led them to engage in various forms of 'safety work' (Kelly, 2017). Sadly, for some women this meant they simply would not leave their accommodation for fear of being found by abusers, particularly if they had been housed in the same area. Others felt insecure about the many people coming in and out of their hotel and would not use the shared bathroom at night. A mother of two complained that she could not use the bathroom at night because it was located on a different floor and she could not leave her two small children alone in the hotel room. Another woman explained that each evening she would lock her door, place a large suitcase in front of it and not leave the room until the next morning, even if she needed the bathroom. In stark contrast, one of the women at the focus group offered a joyous description of her ensuite room and the value of this for her sense of bodily autonomy in the aftermath of violence and abuse.

Where women were placed in studio flats or shared houses, they also talked about having to use part of their weekly cash allowance to pay for service charges, electricity and gas bills. One woman said she had gone without heating because she could not find the money to pay these charges out of the weekly subsistence. It is not an exaggeration to say that every single day women were making impossible choices between eating, feeding their children, clothing themselves, and heating their rooms. Choices that will only be exacerbated by the cost of living crisis.

Moreover, up until the availability of underspend funds in Quarter 4, very few women were placed in supported accommodation (even though this is an expectation for most other women fleeing violence and abuse) as the rent for this was three times the SMV budget. Although women were incredibly grateful just to get a bed to sleep in, the accommodation for Quarters 1-3 often wasn't appropriate for the kinds of high emotional and practical support needs characteristic of migrant survivors of abuse whose isolation and dependency has been exacerbated through abuse and as a result are mostly unfamiliar with local areas, systems and processes. The interviews with survivors and practitioners make clear that

shared supported accommodation worked best for migrant women as these spaces offered them opportunities to meet other women in a similar situation, build friendships, enjoy group walks and other leisure activities, share resources to eat better, and even recycle clothing (a housing project run by one of the partners had what it called 'a woman's room' where women can donate things they are not using such as unwanted clothing). A confidential supportive environment also seems to be an essential need given the points above about women doing 'safety work' and all the references to post-separation abuse which exacerbated women's insecurity and anxiety.

### The real cost of freedom

One of the key reasons that women could cope on such low levels of subsistence is because of the array of services and social capital garnered by the partner organisations, which had not been costed into the SMV programme. As well as sourcing toiletries and clothing donations, they had organised food parcels, supermarket vouchers, access to local food banks, and also occasional hot meals. Two of the partner organisations had also been able to give out laptops and phones, due to additional funding they received during Covid lock downs. The women also referred positively to extensive advocacy support provided by staff at the partner organisations as well as their wise words, life affirming support group meetings, developmental support group activities, referrals to counselling services, access to English classes, information on other educational/professional opportunities, and support to apply for volunteering positions.

By way of example, Joy received simultaneous support from three services – a Shakti advocate, a counselling service, and an education/access services. The advocate was essential for helping this woman understand her immigration status and make an appropriate immigration application, to apply for Universal Credit, source decent housing, food, clothing and toiletries, had helped her to register with a GP and get a school place for her daughter. She also referred her to a local counselling service *and* found her an educational institution to do a course. The counselling service had been important for helping her to not blame herself for the abuse. The educational course enhanced her skillset and employability. This chimes with points made by the majority of women at the focus groups that asked for the right to work and the right to study in order to rebuild their sense of self-worth after abuse that made them feel less than human, and to enable them to regain dignity and independence in cultural contexts where they were projected as 'bad women' for having left husbands and in laws.

Importantly, advocates supported women to report the abuse and also challenged local authorities to make provision for those women that were entitled to local authority services such as DDVC cases and women with children. This is where the SMV programme funds became essential for women that do in fact have recourse to public funds but where this was being denied. Whereas some support workers were able to get DDVC paperwork

completed within days and faster Universal Credit applications, on the whole, they had to use the SMV funds to support women whilst they waited on the Universal Credit to come through or they housed women with children while they fought with social services to assume responsibility under section 17 of the Children's Act. In some DDVC cases, welfare benefits were not provided to the women until eight weeks after she had left her husband and required persistent interventions from advocates.

The women involved in this study expressed immense praise and gratitude for all these services. The pro-formas enabled us to capture what women valued most about the support they had received: 86 responses to the question 'what is the most helpful thing someone has said' suggest that women valued three broad categories of sentiment: forms of reassurance; specific reassurance about their safety; and forms of validation. The majority of responses (70%, n=60 of 86) included praise for the way that project workers provided hope for the future whether that was by letting them know everything will be OK and that they will be supported through this difficult time or through the provision of advice that made them aware of actual legal avenues for redress and the availability of material resources. Around a fifth (n=16 of 86) commented on forms of validation that affirmed their decision to leave the abuser and his family, told them they are valuable and good people and good mothers. Thirteen per cent (n=11 of 86) were reassured when told that they could get access to a safe place to stay and they would not have to return to husband/family or be found by husband/family. Project workers literally walked alongside women through these experiences, speaking with them on a daily basis, helping them build knowledge and skills to navigate the location and systems around them. Clearly the reassuring words of project workers went some way towards restoring women's sense of self-worth that had been significantly undermined by the abuse and violence.

*Everything will be alright.*

*You are safe here, you will be fine.*

*Don't worry, we will try to help you.*

*A lady from the mental health facility I attended told me that my life is valuable and that gave me the strength to continue to live.*

*L always checks up on me. So, I wake up every morning to see L's text: "hi, how are you?"*

*The workers have said 'we are here for you' and helped me a lot.*

*We believe you and we want to help you.*

*There is support available and you are not alone.*

*The worker I spoke to said "don't isolate yourself" because she was worried about my mental health. This changed my life and opened up a whole new world to me.*

*I was told that I was worthy, and I have the right to stand up for myself.*

*A said she would help me and I felt like a pressure had been lifted off my shoulders. My friend and my caseworker told me that he (husband) won't be able to find me, and that I deserve to live a happy life. I was scared to leave my husband and speaking to them helped.*

A second question asked 'What is the most helpful thing someone has done?' and all 91 responded: 46 per cent (n= 42 of 91) praised the caseworkers at the partner organisations for the range of advocacy and emotional support they had provided, especially through regular, often daily, check ins. Orla stated that the sort of care and kindness that she had expected to get but was severely lacking in her marriage. Other valued actions were: access to subsistence, then welfare benefits; accommodation; immigration solicitors; being enabled to set up bank accounts, complete paperwork for NI numbers and for the DDVC; supported with their children and access to school; access to doctors; help to make police reports; interpreting and translation; explaining processes and systems. Providing orientation to areas was especially key where women have had to move location in this context where women are new to the country and have been isolated because of the abuse.

*What Foyles support worker did - gave opportunity to take things into my own life, gave me a lifeline. Calling the police and long-term guidance on how to stay calm and keep myself safe. As well as providing legal and various assistance! All relevant departments work together to keep me and my child safe and healthy. Great thanks!*

*Shakti helped me by checking on me time to time and offering some financial support even that is not what I expected. I feel cared and stronger.*

*When they gave me a room to stay in. I am so grateful because I needed my space to think and be myself again. This is all I want. My own place to be. I cried when I first went to the [name of hotel] and brought me there by taxi. No one had ever done anything like that for me. SBS helped me to help myself.*

*A knows that I get confused so she explains things well. I didn't have a phone so she printed maps for me and showed me how to go places.*

*My caseworker moved me to an accommodation. I was scared I would be homeless if I left him. When I saw that there are people who are helping me, I felt brave and wanted to be independent and away from him.*

*You have funded me in my most difficult time and helped me believe I am important and cared for. Thank you so much.*

*More than the money, everyone at SBS was friendly, loving and caring. This is what I wanted from my husband but all of you gave this to me. I am so blessed to have people like this. Money can be earned, but your kindness was so great.*

Almost all respondents refer to getting some kind of 'help to' by which they are referring to the work of advocacy staff at the partner organisations. Around a half (45 out of 91 respondents) were grateful for help with accommodation – somewhere to live, refuge, somewhere to go to get away from the abuse. Five women made a specific note of the support they received to leave the violence and abuse. One fifth (n= 19 out of 91) were grateful for financial support and 16% (n= 15 out of 91) attached most value to being connected with an immigration solicitor or advice on making an application to stay in the UK.

By looking across the data, we compiled the following list of assistance and advocacy provided by the partner organisations that had not been fully costed within the SMV programme, were provided in kind by the partners, and were required to make the programme work well.

Access to food

- Food parcels including cupboard items
- Access to food banks
- Some ready meals
- Supermarket vouchers

Access to other essentials

- Toiletries
- Clothing
- Shoes
- Old / recycled mobile phones
- Lap tops
- Taxi or train fare to the accommodation
- Bus fares to attend support group sessions
- Pick up and lifts to appointments

Access to accommodation

Negotiation with local housing providers to source appropriate accommodation within budget

Refuge accommodation provided where they had spaces

#### Advocacy and support

Information on and access to their rights

Accompanying women to appointments with the police, solicitors and other agencies

Initial immigration advice, attend appointments with lawyer, help to process the information, support woman to make a decision

Applications for DDVC

Applications for welfare benefits

Applications for small grants from local charities

Teaching basic skills e.g. catching the bus, using an oyster card

Orientation on the local area

Appointments booked for them – GP, lawyers, social services, schools

Support group sessions [though some contribution was made towards this from the underspend in Q4]

Referrals to counselling services [though some contribution was made towards this from the underspend in Q4]

Referrals to professional development courses and educational services

Although the Home Office funding was based in part on the expectation that SMV beneficiaries would access in kind wrap around services through the partner organisations, the breadth and importance of all the additional uncosted support needs stating in full. It is also important to note that not all women were able to access these wrap-around services as some of the partners covered a huge geographical space where women were housed a great distance from the organisation's central hub and therefore too far from its support group, counselling and developmental activities.

## Expanding and constraining women's 'space for action'

We use the concept of 'space for action' (Kelly, Sharp & Klein, 2014) as one that is increasingly recognised by the domestic abuse sector to describe the effects of ongoing abuse, where its unrelenting nature means that women have little volition to exercise autonomy. Many have a sense that the abuser is omnipresent and come to believe the perpetrator's negative evaluation of them and their capacities. It is in this narrowing of life and options that women's 'space for action' is diminished. The concept was intended to encompass the effects not just of the actions of abusers but the wider context, including law and policy, which can either expand or narrow space for action. Immigration controls and the NRPF condition clearly fit into this framework – above we have seen how these are a key feature of the abuse as partners and family members use women's immigration status to control them and undermine them. We've also seen how immigration controls continue to inhibit women's freedom after they have left the abuser(s) and thereby continue to diminish women's space for action. This section explores the data on the ways that immigration status is connected with a narrowing of women's space for action and then the women's own messages on how their space for action can be expanded.

As explained in the previous sections, the women were asked to complete the pro-formas at the beginning and end of their engagement with the SMV pilot. Participants were asked to rate, with a range of 1 to 4 (1 indicating not much and 4 indicating very), how fearful, anxious and desperate they were feeling at the beginning of the intervention. They were asked the same questions on exiting the programme. This data shows that on entering the scheme, a large majority (78 of 91) felt 'very fearful'. Another 11 felt 'quite fearful'. One woman was only slightly fearful, but she noted that she had been away from the violence and abuse for quite some time before seeking SMV assistance. Another answered 'not much' yet even she refers to being afraid at two other points on the questionnaire, specifically afraid of the impact on her immigration status of reporting the abuse and, in one of the open text spaces, she refers to being frightened of the impact on her children. Similarly, 75 of 91 respondents at entry point stated that they felt very anxious and 13 felt quite anxious but although the other 3 claimed to only be slightly or not really anxious, they had either been out of the relationship for a while or they talked more about fear than anxiety. In response to the question 'how desperate were you?', all but one (90 of 91) opted for the higher numbers suggesting high degrees of desperation.

At the point of exiting the SMV pilot, the numbers had shifted to the lower ends of the spectrum for fear and desperation but not as much for anxiety. Almost 80 per cent indicated that they were not really or only slightly afraid (72 of 91), similarly 81 per cent (74 of 91) were not really or only slightly desperate. In contrast, the figures for anxiety were much more evenly spread as just under two thirds answered not really or slightly anxious (58 of 91) whilst almost a fifth (17 of 91) continued to feel quite or very anxious.



The distance between the entry and exit points is illustrated in Figures 8-10.

Figure 8: Difference in levels of fear between the start and end of the intervention

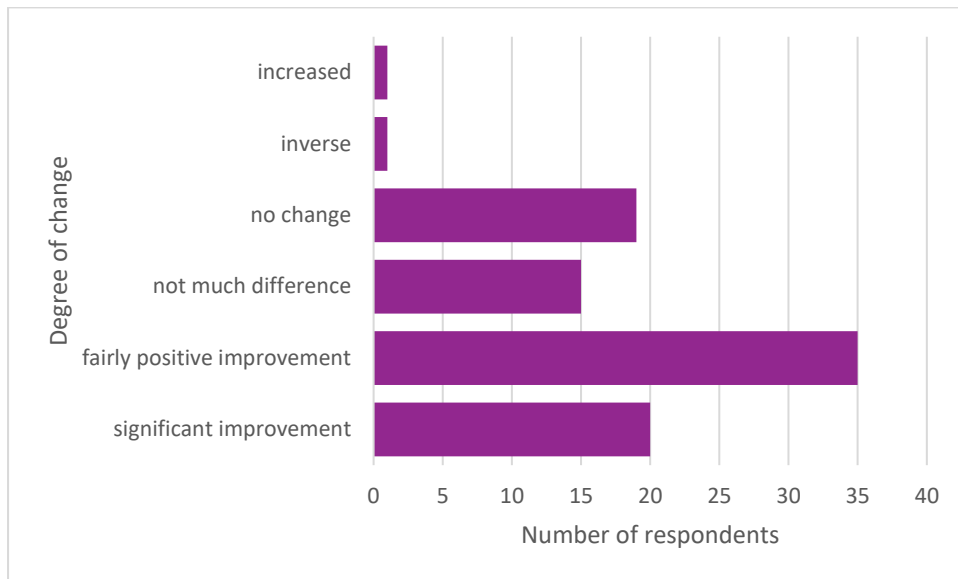
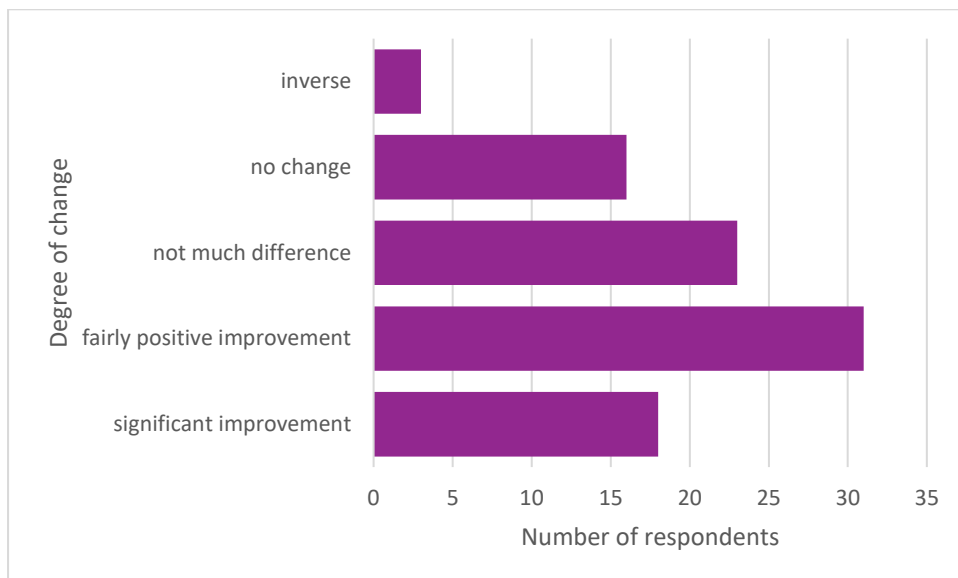
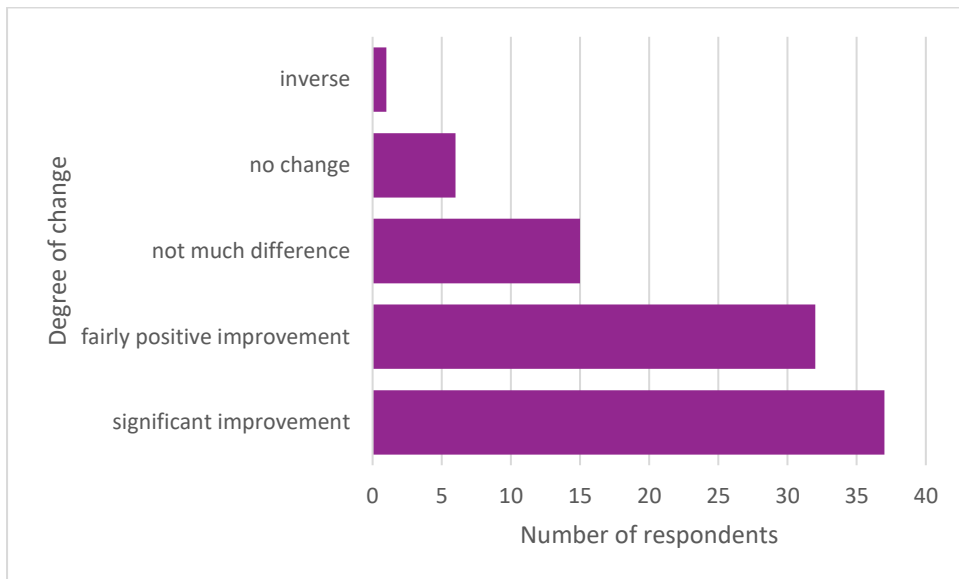


Figure 9: Difference in levels of anxiety between the start and end of the intervention.



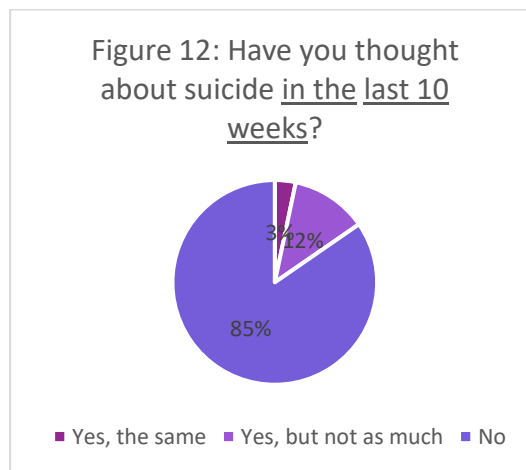
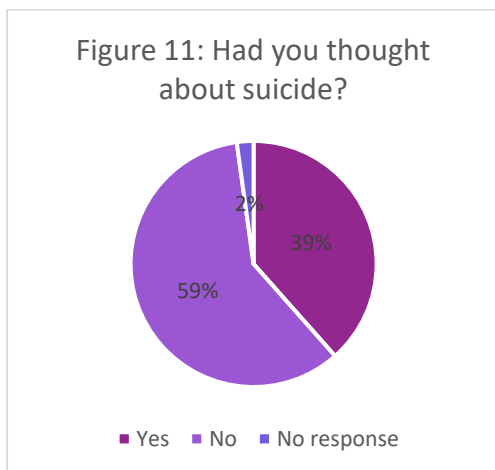
As can be seen from Figure 9, the responses are more spread out and by way of explanation, of the three women in the 'inverse' category that stated their levels of anxiety had increased over time, one was still sleeping rough and anxious about lack of food and money to support herself, while the other two showed an increase in levels of anxiety because their entry interview marked slightly lower levels of anxiety than others but there is little explanation for why this was the case.

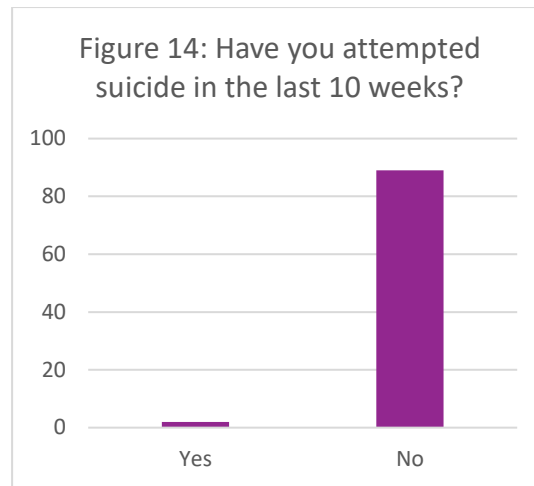
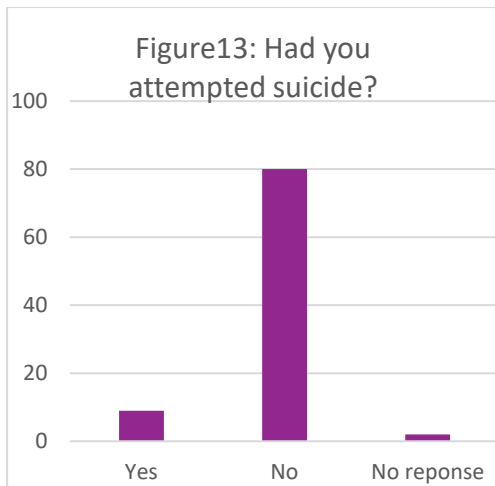
Figure 10: Difference in levels of desperation between the start and end of the intervention.



As with levels of fear, most women showed a considerable decline in levels of desperation but those at the inverse/no change end identified key emotional or support needs and referred to ongoing feelings of sadness and suicidal thoughts.

We also asked the SMV beneficiaries about whether they had thought about or attempted suicide at point of entry and exit. The following figures show considerable decline in suicidality, both thoughts and actions. Figures 11 and 13 are responses at the point of entry and Figures 12 and 14 are the responses at the point of exit.





Clearly the fact that some of the respondents did continue to have suicidal thoughts and attempt suicide is of serious concern and some of the respondents wrote comments next to their answers to these questions.

*I still worry sometimes that I will be sent back to Bangladesh.*

*I have anxiety about my future.*

*But I was not in a good state of mind and I would find myself walking towards the balcony in my room and looking at knives in the kitchen, it wasn't until I told my case worker about this that I realised I was in a bad place. I went to the GP for anti-depressants after this.*

*When SMV payments stopped I still didn't have benefits coming in as they had rejected my application.*

*I worry about the future and what will happen to me. What will my husband do if I divorce him, what if he doesn't agree to the divorce.*

The pro-formas also contained two open text questions on the woman's state of mind before she contacted the partner organisation and her state of mind after she had received support. Most respondents used the space to express their feelings. The words that women used to describe how they felt before accessing support were entirely negative, sometimes desperately so. As the following extracts illustrate, the replies consistently referred to distress, fear and lack of safety, anxiety and worry, sadness, hopelessness, loneliness, confusion, desperation, feeling overwhelmed, material deprivation, depression, and suicidal ideation. Each sentence represents a different respondent.

*I was very scared, lonely because I was not allowed to go out, helpless and stressed out.*

<i>I felt tortured and I had suicidal thoughts, I thought my life had ended and I will not get justice.</i>
<i>I was very nervous and anxious about my situation. I was worried about my Immigration status. I felt unsettled and not knowing what was going to happen to me. My husband kept me away from people and not being allowed to have my own finances.</i>
<i>Feeling insecure. I was so scared. I use to cry all the time.</i>
<i>I feel low after the abuse I have been put through.</i>
<i>I feel scared and worthless because I was told I was nothing and my husband doesn't want me.</i>
<i>I was very scared. I am pregnant and was not well. I did not have a doctor and my husband would leave me with no food or money.</i>
<i>I was feeling like my life was a mistake. Everything and everyone was an enemy or detrimental to my safety. Financially I was desperate and extremely anxious about my financial stability.</i>
<i>The police brought me to a safe place after my partner viciously assaulted me. I had injuries and was very low because my partner was very abusive to me. My mind was everywhere, all over the place I did not know what way to turn. I found it difficult to get to sleep because I have nightmares and terrifying dreams and have so much fear in me.</i>
<i>I was scared, scared of everything. Scared to spend money in case there was no more money from my husband. I couldn't work and relied completely on him. In 6 months he gave me only £200, I was desperate. I had no hope.</i>
<i>I was terrified in my husband's house; I was afraid of everything. I had a feeling of being completely alone in this world.</i>
<i>I was worried about how I would support my kids when I left my husband. My husband controlled us financially and emotionally.</i>
<i>All over the place and suicidal with no real hope for the future. Trying to do what I can to survive day to day.</i>
<i>I was very upset and scared. I was homeless and stayed in a homeless shelter in a room without a lock. I was so fearful I hadn't slept. I was so afraid of sleeping on the streets. I also had the trauma of abuse. When I arrived, I was still scared that I may be told to leave I couldn't rest or sleep. I felt hopeless and helpless.</i>
<i>Confused and anxious as I was hopeless with my baby and had nowhere to go. I was in a very desperate place and was intending to go back to my abuser as social services refused to help me with my child.</i>

Conversely, the words that women used to describe their situation, feelings and sense of self after the intervention were largely positive, with consistent references to a sense of safety, increased confidence, to feeling better and feeling good, to increased awareness of systems and rights, an improvement in material security, hope and even excitement.

<i>Now, I am very comfortable and I have peace of mind.</i>
<i>I am very hopeful now, I feel very confident and I am looking forward to a better future.</i>
<i>I am feeling very grateful and happy – and my state of mind is better, and I want to continue with my career I feel motivated. I am not suicidal.</i>
<i>Safe but still concerned about immigration and how to support myself financially.</i>

<i>Happier and safer but still anxious</i>
<i>I feel a lot better now and free. I feel independent within myself.</i>
<i>I feel safe in the accommodation and feel supported.</i>
<i>I am happy in new accommodation and I have made friends.</i>
<i>The provision of a home and financial support gave me a sense of security and improved my confidence. I feel much more able to seek help and advice</i>
<i>It has provided me with peace of mind and the ability to be able to look after myself</i>
<i>I feel better informed and more trusting of the process. I was so glad of the support and would recommend it. I feel excited about my future and am in a new relationship. My children are well settled in school and I hope we can stay here and be happy together with no upheaval.</i>
<i>It made a difference; I was at least able to give my daughter snacks to take to school. We could feed ourselves. I feel much stronger and safer- he doesn't know where we are, my anxiety is less. I haven't really grieved for my mum yet and I still have work to do on that. I have more peace of mind and my daughter is happy that no one shouts at us anymore.</i>
<i>I cannot tell you how grateful I am. Without it I would be on the streets and I don't know what I would have done. I would be alone and scared. Now I have had help to have somewhere to live and money to live on. People have shown me kindness and that they care about me.</i>
<i>With the support I am getting, I see a light at the end of my tunnel. I cannot clap with one hand- I could not save myself alone. SBS gave me time to find my spirit and build my strength. I want other women in this situation to get the same help I am. Who "feels it knows it"- you have to be in my shoes to know how I feel. SBS is like my family. I don't have a husband and kids for security, so they gave me security.</i>
<i>I feel better, I have not spoken to him or seen him in so long. I feel that I am free. I have a friend that also has been supportive of me and she helped me to contact you. I am starting to learn English and I have my own bank account now, I feel happy</i>
<i>The support kept me and my child safe and prevented me from going back to perpetrator</i>

However, there were also still references to an ongoing anxiety about their future security because of pending immigration decisions, reflecting the power hold of immigration controls over their attempts to grow their space for action. Some were also feeling held back by a lack of employment, educational opportunities and ongoing struggles through family courts. Some of the responses to the question at the point of exit were wholly negative, noting continued anxiety, fear and sadness: a clear illustration of the fact that short term subsistence and accommodation is not enough to completely turn their situation around and move them to a place of autonomy and freedom. In fact there were two references to women feeling like they had no option but to return to their husbands/families and other references to suicidal thoughts.

Much of this chimed with the discussions in the individual interviews and focus groups as women's reflections on the abuse led them to talk about feelings of sadness, isolation and loneliness. Many described symptoms of trauma – anxiety, being in a constant state of high alert, problems with sleep – for which several had been taking medication and one had been

hospitalised. They also complained of body aches and pains related to the deprivation of light and food. Their accounts of abuse involved enforced isolation and surveillance – many of them were not allowed out of the house or contact with family members, not allowed to build friendships, and specifically told that they could not have anyone visiting them. Alya stated that she was not allowed to close the door on her bedroom, and she discovered a device in her bedroom, which she believed was intended to record all her telephone conversations. She became physically ill after two years of being denied sunlight because she had been imprisoned within the home. Her in-laws reluctantly allowed her to take short walks but only around the back garden, where they could keep an eye on her. Despite becoming unwell she was not taken to see a doctor. For many women, the surveillance dimensions of the abuse exacerbated their lack of knowledge of the country and the local area, as well as knowledge of their rights and their immigration status.

Almost all the women that were interviewed talked about being forced into domestic servitude where they were made to do all the housework and to cook for the entire extended family. A couple of women noted that this was the case even where their husbands made clear that they didn't want to know them or to be in the marriage; one woman described her husband's absolute contempt for her, he wouldn't look at her and seemed physically repulsed by her, yet he still expected her to wash his clothes and cook his meals. Alya underlined the dehumanising experience of domestic servitude as she was expected to cook all the meals for the entire extended family but was not allowed to eat at the same time as them, or at the same table as them. When she helped herself to a piece of fruit, they made sarcastic comments and then hid the fruit bowl. She was not invited to join the family when they shared fast food deliveries. This treatment is akin to the treatment of house servants back in Pakistan and India where lower castes are tied to families and expected to be available to them 24 hours a day but prevented from sharing washing eating and sleeping spaces on the grounds of purity and pollution. It is a structured form of dehumanisation.

Most of the women that participated in the focus groups and interviews did not have any access to resources because they were not allowed to work, or had their wages taken from them, or did not feel able to look for work because the abuse had completely undermined their confidence. Only three (out of thirty) referred to workplaces and they were able to save some money, which helped them a lot when they were finally able to leave abusive partners and families. Access to paid work could expand their space for action in this way.

The discussions with survivors were very emotional – many of the women cried during the interviews and focus group sessions as they recounted the way they had been treated. One woman described herself as a 'caged animal' as she had been imprisoned inside the home and could only catch glimpses of the world through her bedroom window. Another recognised that she had internalised the abuse and began seeing herself as less than human,

as not deserving of the same rights as others. A third woman described how she had lived in a perpetual state of fear so much so that she didn't leave her bedroom unless her children could accompany her to the bathroom or kitchen as they were her only safeguard against physical and verbal abuse. Fear and low self-esteem were key descriptors.

In most part, these feelings are a stark contrast to how women were feeling at the time of the interview or focus group. Having left the abuse behind, they talked about feeling safe. More than half the women at the first focus group used the phrase 'feeling good' and the majority of participants used the interview space to express gratitude for the support they had received. There were a number of particularly eloquent responses, including one where a survivor described the support as a vital space for 'healing, realisation, reflection and growth', as enabling her to take the first steps to wanting to live, to get to know herself and shape her future aspirations and pathways into education and work, to define her life on her own terms. Clearly her space for action had been expanded. Another woman contrasted feelings of sadness and loneliness with motivation and inspiration. Women described the partner organisations and their weekly support groups as places of possibility, where they could meet new people and learn new things. An interviewee in Scotland had been introduced to painting through support group activities and she was delighted to discover a particular talent in this area. This is a direct contrast to the complete denial of women's intellectual and bodily autonomy by abusive partners and in laws. At the second focus group, a participant simply used the word 'freedom' when asked how she was feeling – reflecting Evan Stark's (2007) argument that the outcome of domestic abuse support should not just be safety, it should enhance freedom.

Women at the focus group sessions were particularly pleased to have connected with each other. They felt they had started to form a family, which is very important in a context where they didn't know anyone in the UK and could not return to their countries of origin because of the risk to their lives. One woman referred to the support group space as a 'little piece of happiness'. There were other flashes of delight; a London interviewee described her joy at being picked up in a taxi and provided with accommodation after a series of frustrating calls to statutory services and other women's organisations.

*I asked them, "I'm homeless I have nowhere to go," and they offered me the help. They said, "Monday come to this address, we will come and get you at the hotel." From that day, the feeling when you find someone that can help you and you're not hopeless, you're not homeless, it like gives you strength and a little hope and safety and security that someone will take your case and help you with the future.*

Unfortunately, many women expressed 'mixed feelings' - it was clear that they were still plagued by trauma and anxiety and these issues were exacerbated by their unresolved immigration status. One of the interviewees said that she regretted leaving her country of

origin because of the impact on her daughter – she was more concerned about her daughter having been exposed to the abuse than her own subjection to verbal and sexual abuse, coercive control and physical violence. At the time of the interview, even though the woman was in hiding, the family courts had granted her ex-partner weekly telephone contact with her daughter, and he was using that space to manipulate and confuse her daughter. This had significantly damaged her relationship with her daughter. This is a clear example of the need for domestic abuse services to support women to rebuild their relationship with their children (see also Morris, 2009). Moreover, practitioner interviews suggested that many women are returning to or remaining with abusive partners / families because of concerns about disrupting children’s lives and putting them through the material and emotional consequences of exiting the abuse.

Indeed, not everyone we met was through the worst of it. One of the focus group participants was visibly nervous. She stated that the violence continued to haunt her through the day and night. Coupled with her unsettled immigration status, this was making her anxious and depressed. She had a panic attack during the focus group session as she listened to other women recounting their experiences of violence and abuse. The Advocacy Manager had to take her to hospital for emergency assistance.

A woman at the second focus group was similarly desperate – she described ‘feeling stuck’ because of her immigration status and the added anxiety of how she would feed and raise her children. Four months after leaving her abusive partner, there was no clarity on the kind of application she could make to resolve her immigration status. She was particularly aggrieved that she was not entitled to make a DDVC application despite the fact that her experiences of abuse and violence were almost identical to the DDVC women around the table. But also, her husband had managed to hide her documents to obstruct her ability to seek legal advice and make any application to stay in the country. She further explained that while she was living with her husband, she didn’t sleep at night because of fear of what he would do next, yet after leaving him she was still not able to sleep because of the uncertainty of her immigration status and the shadow it cast over her future. She highlighted the way that immigration controls mirrored the domestic abuse that she had experienced - she is still awake at night, still restricted in her movements, still experiencing high levels of anxiety and uncertainty. In similar vein, another woman at the second focus group suggested that not only did the participants share histories of abuse, they shared fears about the future in relation to the insecurity of their immigration status.

When asked whether they know when the SMV support comes to an end and what their plans were, none of the non-DDVC women were able to think of what could happen next as they simply didn’t have other options. Indeed, those options are non-existent where women have no friends or family they can rely on, where they don’t have the right to work or the right to welfare benefits. This is incredibly worrying given that, at the two focus group



sessions, only a small minority were entitled to DDVC while most participants had far more complex immigration cases and knew they would have to wait much longer for a response to their immigration claim. A couple of women had not been able to make an immigration claim. One woman's immigration application had been going on for 7 years. It was clear across the interviews that the timescale for the SMV funding simply wasn't long enough even for a straightforward DDVC case – by way of example Ajanta entered the as a dependent of an EEA national in June 2021 and was subjected to physical and emotional violence. She called the police in September 2021 and left with just her coat and her slippers. Despite making an immediate application for DDVC, she only just started receiving her benefits at the time of the interview, March 2022, because the DWP finally accepted that she was eligible for pre-settled status. This meant that she had to be supported by the SMV funds for 5.5 months or 22 weeks even though the original agreement on the maximum period of assistance was just 12 – 16 weeks for complex cases but only 6 weeks for a DDVC case.

Immigration controls and the NRPF rule thus exacerbated the power and control that abusers and their families are able to exercise, severely restricting women's space for action. While many were able to identify ways that the SMV pilot, and especially the support from the partner organisations, had expanded their space for action, very few were able to feel safe or free in the shadow of insecure immigration status and unresolved immigration applications.

### Women's messages for government

We asked the women at the interviews and focus group sessions what, if anything, they would like to tell the government. Their key message was that women need to have access to proper rights and services because their abusers are emboldened by the lack of rights for women without leave to remain in the UK. They argued that abusers in the UK know their power, that they can abuse with impunity because they can hold the threat of deportation over the heads of women and children that are subject to immigration controls in the knowledge that their victims do not have recourse to resources to protect themselves from abuse. Equally, women trying to get away from abuse and violence should get access to as much support as possible and several participants noted that without such access, they could be at serious risk of being murdered.

Participants were clear that abuse deprived them of human dignity and that they were now deprived of the routes through which to regain this - having a job, an independent income or the opportunity to access further and higher education, including English classes. A strong theme in the focus groups was that earning a living and building a life in the UK could redeem the honour and respect that they had lost by leaving their abusive husbands. Many women talked about wanting the right to work to gain some kind of dignity and respect and also top up their weekly budget. A couple of the women had qualifications or

training from their countries of origin, such as in the health sector, and wanted these converted so they could do similar jobs in the UK. Given the current shortages of staff across sectors in the UK, particularly the health sector, it is incongruous to actively prevent able and willing women to complete the training required to fill these gaps. One of the interviewees supported by the Ashiana project explained that she had been denied a change in visa from being a dependent of a student to becoming a student in her own right, even though she was able to get a place on a degree that could lead her to financial independence. So for this capable and intelligent woman, her attempts to expand her space for action and regain her independence were curtailed by the bureaucratic application of immigration controls.

The first focus group session took place soon after the third lock down was lifted and it was interesting to hear such an urgent demand for English language classes from the women who saw these as essential to get work and also to navigate systems and spaces autonomously. Moreover, while almost all women were deeply grateful for the subsistence and accommodation, many also said a room and food was not enough for them to counteract the abuse and trauma they had experienced – they were bored, frustrated, and sad, especially because the subsistence allowance confined them to their rooms. They did not want to stare out of the window all day, they needed things to look forward to and activities that would support and strengthen their emotional well being. It was clear that where the women had access to support groups they were thriving in these spaces, connecting with other women was vital to countering the isolation that immigration controls had imposed on them – women from the second focus group, for example, talked about how much they looked forward to seeing each other on a Wednesday.

Women also made strong arguments for strengthening the funding and status of the partner organisations because they depend on them to learn about the system and make the right sort of immigration application. This is particularly important given the difference between having rights and knowing about these rights. Many women were not aware of the DDVC rule and other avenues for support to top up the SMV provision and they relied wholly on the partner organisations to realise their rights.

One interviewee remarked that the entire approach and view of them needs to change - the Home Office need to take a more compassionate view of the awful situation that women find themselves in and their desire to attain their independence rather than focus on whether they meet bureaucratic criteria to access support.

*I think what they could change is possibly getting a more sensitive and compassionate programme or immigration office. Maybe they could have something that branches out beyond coming in after a certain amount of time being married to this person, an out of the box category where you have the freedom and the*

*confidence to share “well I came over when I was seven on a one-way ticket because I was fleeing this”. I think what they could do is open up a bit... If I could wish for the Home Office to have one thing it would be the exceptional circumstances. I think that could be looked at a little bit more with more leniency and more compassion. Because exceptional circumstances happen more than you think, they’re not as rare as people think.*

## Recommendations

Our recommendations are drawn directly from the experiences of those accessing the SMV pilot that would expand their space for action to a significantly greater extent. They also recognise the additional contributions of partner agencies to make this project work.

1. *An end to the no recourse to public funds condition for those experiencing domestic abuse.* Our data shows that it is used by abusers and their families as an additional form of control and that this prevents many from seeking help at an early point. It also represents a form of discrimination and inequality in treatment and provision between groups of women and children who are subjected to violence and abuse. Our participants were acutely aware of the unfairness across different forms of visa, but this extends to a comparison with women who are not subject to the NRPF condition. In the interim, two key steps would address this: extend the DDVC pathway to women that are not on spousal visas and extend the DDVC provision to a minimum of six months. There should also be a clear and timely route for women to resolve their immigration status, as this creates unnecessary anxiety.
2. *Extend the DVILR rule to all migrant women experiencing violence and abuse with an insecure immigration status.* This will encourage them to come forward to seek help without the fear of deportation; and reduce anxiety and depression about an uncertain future.
3. *Ensuring access to safe, suitable accommodation, rights and specialist support.* All women fleeing domestic violence (DV)/domestic abuse (DA), no matter their status, should be entitled to go into refuge. To enable this, *SMV funding should cover the full cost of refuge spaces with the same length of stay as other survivors receive which is generally around 6 months.* This would enable women to be placed in safe, confidential supported housing among other women in the same situation, where there is specialist advocacy, counselling and developmental activities available to them and they have access to a kitchen.
4. *Women should have access to information about their rights to protection and support.* From the point of a visa being granted, women entering the country need to be aware of the support available to them if they experience domestic abuse. The information should be in a format that she can understand. Also, some provision is required for those whose documents are taken away from them, hidden, destroyed.
5. *SMV provision should be at the same level as Universal Credit.* It should be equivalent to the rate allocated to women who can apply for the DDVC. The experiences of DDVC and non-DDVC cases are almost identical but only one of them

gets a pathway to remain in the UK and access to adequate welfare assistance to exit the abuse on a long-term basis. All women fleeing violence and abuse should have access to the same provision.

6. *The funding period under SMV, or other provision needs to be for much longer.* Our data shows that 12 or 16 weeks is not long enough for some women to stabilise and be ready to make decisions, for others the complexity of their legal position requires longer to resolve. We recommend support for a minimum of 6 months with the option to extend beyond this in specific cases.
7. *The right to work and study in the UK.* To rebuild their sense of worth and the human dignity that abuse takes away it was important for many that they could access employment and/or education.
8. *Holistic wraparound support.* The data we have presented on the many and complex needs of this group of women shows that they need to access support services which understand not only DV/DA but also immigration law and rights, welfare benefits and experiences of migration. 'By and for services' have long offered such holistic wrap around support<sup>13</sup> that can be responsive to each woman's needs – as the pilot showed they are best placed to offer this.
9. *Improve practice in local authorities and other statutory agencies.* Too many of the women accessing this scheme had been given poor advice or turned away by agencies that could and should have helped them. In particular, government needs to ensure that local authorities are fully aware of and fulfil their obligations under the Children Act. There is a need for clear guidance on this and for it to become part of inspection of safeguarding (both child and adult) by Ofsted and the CQC.

We note at this point that a number of these recommendations would contribute to the government's new women's health strategy. Where women do not have enough food for themselves and their children, are not able to cook healthy food despite wanting to, who are marooned in unsafe accommodation, they and their children are bound to suffer ill health. This report also evidences the way that ongoing anxiety and lack of hope is impacting mental health.

Finally, if government were to implement these recommendations it would go a considerable way to lifting the current reservation on section 59 of the Istanbul Convention, it would show that there are no legal rules which discriminate against migrant women who are victims of domestic abuse.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://www.tavinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Safer-Pair-of-Hands-Report\\_Final-Published.pdf](https://www.tavinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Safer-Pair-of-Hands-Report_Final-Published.pdf)

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