

## **LIVING AT THE EDGE: Southall Black Sisters and CWASU publishes evaluation report on Support for Migrant Victims pilot on domestic abuse and NRPF**

In May 2021, Southall Black Sisters (SBS) commissioned the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) at London Metropolitan University to produce an independent evaluation, '[Living at the Edge](#)', of the Home Office's Support for Migrant Victims pilot programme (SMV pilot). The [SMV pilot](#) is led by SBS in a UK-wide partnership with BAWSO, Shakti Women's Aid, Foyle Women's Aid, Ashiana Sheffield and Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid.

The SMV pilot scheme was set up as a result of our concerns about the plight of migrant women facing a stark choice between domestic abuse, and deportation and destitution due to their insecure immigration status and the no recourse to public funds (NRPF) condition. Our amendment for legal reform to end this stark choice had cross party support during the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. The pilot started in April 2021 and in the absence of a longer-term solution, it has been extended twice, and it is now set to end in March 2025.

The SMV pilot offers 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). CWASU assessed the first year of the pilot (April 2021- March 2022) and took a multi-method approach to the data collection. This report contains an integrated analysis, including Outcomes Monitoring Data on 299 beneficiaries of the SMV pilot that had exited the scheme by end March 2022.

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. This particular group of women displayed complex and high support needs. However, due to financial restrictions, it was not possible to pay Universal Credit rates for rent and living costs. 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.

Although a specialist refuge are more suitable and safest place to house women, most were placed in a hotel or bed and breakfast accommodation, particularly at the beginning of the pilot. 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. Some women who were entitled to alternative sources of support such as from social services for women with children or benefits via the Destitution Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC) often experienced long delays. The SMV allowance was not enough on its own and needed to work in conjunction with a large number of, often unfunded, wrap around services provided by the partner organisations. Women highly valued the support they received from holistic specialist 'by and for' services.

The data revealed a distinct reduction in women's sense of fear and desperation but not the same reduction in anxiety, as anxiety and material restrictions continued so long as their immigration applications were pending. They needed much longer than the time allocated by the fund (12 weeks) to think through their 'options' and make an application to stay in the UK.

The report raised concerns about the current immigration laws. Immigration controls strengthened the power of abusers, exacerbated women's dependence on abusers and women's immigration status was a constitutive part of their experiences of physical, emotional and sexual violence. Some women had been deceived, commodified and forced into domestic servitude. Abusers exploited women's immigration status, women's lack of awareness and ineligibility to access support services due to the NRPF condition. Women's dependency on abusers was intensified by the lack of access to

work and education. For many, immigration status had been a significant barrier to help seeking; and needed to be resolved in order to escape abuse and aid recovery.

Key recommendations from the report, which we call on the Government and other agencies to adopt, 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.

Contacts for further information:

Hannana Siddiqui [hannana@southallblacksisters.co.uk](mailto:hannana@southallblacksisters.co.uk)

Asmita Sood [asmita@southallblacksisters.co.uk](mailto:asmita@southallblacksisters.co.uk)

4 August 2023