

**Vigil to commemorate Harshita Brella**  
Selma Taha, Executive Director, Southall Black Sisters

Friday, 24th January 2025, 3.30pm, Ilford

Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you for coming out in solidarity to honour Harshita's life and to support her family's call to justice. Our gathering here today, on Brisbane Road in Ilford where Harshita's body was found late last year, is an opportunity for us to collectively remember her and to wish her rest and peace in death. To honour Harshita's life is to remember the person she was. Her family tells us of her vibrance – how she lit up every room she walked into – and of the immense love she had for those around her. They tell us about her hopes and dreams, her aspirations for the full and happy life she had hoped to lead.

This is the life Harshita was unduly cheated out of. Her husband, who was known to subject her to domestic abuse, and who is believed to have fled the UK since her murder, is believed to be the prime suspect. It is also known that Harshita was in contact with local statutory authorities. In the months before her death, Harshita had sought help from the police. However, rather than being met with understanding of her unique needs and being provided the specialist, wraparound support she required, Harshita was let down by the statutory response at each stage. The accommodation she was provided when she fled domestic abuse was unsuitable, making her feel isolated and desolate. She was also issued a Domestic Violence Protection Order (DVPO) that ultimately failed to protect her. Despite being assessed as a 'high risk' victim, Harshita's case was not treated with the urgency and seriousness it merited. This in turn presumably emboldened her perpetrator, leading to her tragic and preventable loss.

Our gathering here today is also a moment of reckoning. Harshita's life, as those of several victims before her, could have been saved had the intervening statutory authorities accurately recognised and assessed the risks and provided a tailored and effective safeguarding response. Far too many victims' lives are currently lost to the epidemic of domestic abuse due to statutory failures. Black, minoritised and migrant victims like Harshita are disproportionately affected due to additional barriers to support such as institutional racism and the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) restrictive condition. Perpetrators routinely weaponise these structural barriers to perpetrate abuse and trap women in abusive relationships. Black, minoritised and migrant women like Harshita thus face 'dual perpetration', with limited avenues for support and relief.

As a migrant woman who entered the UK as a dependent, Harshita was subject to the restrictive NRPF condition that prevents access to most state-funded benefits and housing assistance. At Southall Black Sisters (SBS), we know based on our frontline experience that such women face a stark choice between that of returning to their abusive partner or of destitution and deportation when fleeing abuse. Many are unable to even enter a women's refuge due to their inability to pay rent and living costs.

While campaigns led by SBS over the years have resulted in the state introducing statutory protections and support through the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC) and the Domestic Violence Indefinite Leave to Remain (DVILR) rule, the combined model is not currently extended to migrant victims like Harshita. Victim-survivors on spousal or partner visas are covered, but those on other visa types, such as student, worker, dependent, and undocumented women, are excluded from the full suite of protections.

Migrant victims like Harshita face additional vulnerabilities due to the government's limited, so-called extension of the MVDAC introduced in February 2024. While dependents of work, graduate, or student visa holders are now eligible for temporary recourse to public funds under this measure, this right is

not accompanied by eligibility for settlement under the DVILR. As a result, these migrant victim-survivors encounter a dangerous cliff edge after three months of short-term support, facing deportation in the absence of routes to regularize their status. The disassociation of support from status weakens the combined model, putting victim-survivors at risk of making uninformed decisions about their rights and it exposes them to further harm in both their home countries and in the UK.

Both status and support are needed to encourage migrant victim-survivors to come forward and report abuse. To ensure that all victim-survivors have a chance at safety, we must challenge the state's discrimination against migrant victim-survivors and urge the government to extend the combined model of protections to all victim-survivors, regardless of their immigration status. We must also call on the government to institute a firewall to prevent data-sharing between the police, other statutory agencies, and Immigration Enforcement (IE) to remove the threat of deportation as a barrier to migrant women reporting abuse. The implementation of these measures, along with training delivered by specialist, community-based 'by and for' services, can significantly improve statutory responses to migrant victim-survivors' needs.

Let our gathering here today to commemorate Harshita add momentum to the call for the government to recognize the 'dual perpetration' migrant victim-survivors are unjustly subjected to and hold both perpetrators and its own structures accountable. To demonstrate that lessons have been learned from Harshita's death, as well as from those of other victims before her, the government must commit to equal rights and outcomes for migrant women. Failure to do so will exclude some of the most marginalized, with the least state protections, from the government's goal to halving VAWG and will signal the dispensability of migrant victims. It will also embolden perpetrators, allowing them to believe their actions go unpunished. We must urge the government to reject these notions by adopting a rights-based approach to safeguarding for all victim-survivors, regardless of their immigration status.

I hope our gathering here today also strengthens Harshita's family's resolve as they prepare to fight for justice for Harshita. SBS stands firmly with them, ready to assist and advocate on their behalf in every way we can. While the journey may be long, we hope that many of you continue to offer unwavering support to hold Harshita's perpetrator and the system fully accountable.

On behalf of SBS, I thank you again for joining us today.

As I draw to a close, I would like to ask you all to observe a minute of silence in tribute to Harshita.