International Women's Day: Delivering Justice for Black, Minoritised and Migrant Victim-Survivors

A Parliamentary Briefing from Southall Black Sisters on Legal and Policy Reforms to Address Violence Against Women and Girls

Executive Summary: Key Parliamentary Asks

> "*We carry the bruises, the fear, the court dates, the immigration stress and still we stand. Justice should not be heavier on the survivor than on abusers.*"
> **– Tina, victim-survivor***

> *"It was like a light seen in the dark. I was going through domestic abuse in my marriage. I reached out to Southall Black Sisters and they ensured my child and I were safe. The support we received has completely touched me.*"
> **– Laila, victim-survivor***

International Women's Day (IWD) is an important moment for Parliament to reaffirm its commitment to tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG). Yet Black, minoritised and migrant (BMM) women and girls continue to face disproportionate levels of violence and significant barriers to safety and justice, including institutional racism, class inequality and hostile immigration policies.

Drawing on more than four decades of frontline experience supporting BMM victim-survivors, Southall Black Sisters (SBS) urges MPs and Peers to ensure that responses to VAWG address these structural inequalities.

We ask parliamentarians to raise the following issues in debates and discussions on VAWG, including during the annual parliamentary moment when Minister Jess Phillips MP reads the names of women killed through domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG:

- Abolish No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and extend the combined model of the Domestic Violence Indefinite Leave to Remain (DVILR) route and the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC) to all victim-survivors regardless of immigration status
- Withdraw the immigration white paper, earned settlement reforms and the proposed refugee framework
- Remove the UK Government's reservation on Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention
- Make the Support for Migrant Victims (SMV) scheme permanent and adequately funded
- Introduce a full firewall between statutory services and Immigration Enforcement
- Implement Banaz's Law recognising 'honour'-based abuse as a statutory aggravating factor in sentencing
- Recognise abuse-related suicide as murder
- Implement the recommendations of the InVisible Women report
- Launch a national public inquiry into femicide in the UK
- Ensure long-term, ring-fenced funding for specialist 'by and for' services supporting BMM victim-survivors

These reforms are essential to ensure that strategies to tackle VAWG deliver justice for the most marginalised women and girls.

Further detail on these asks is provided in the annex below.

Annex: Detailed Briefing and Analysis

The month of March marks International Women's Day (IWD). It serves as an important reminder to celebrate women's achievements and to renew commitments to advancing women's rights and gender equality across the world.

Yet violence against women and girls (VAWG) remains an epidemic of staggering proportions. Rooted in patriarchy, it continues to devastate lives globally. The UK is no exception, and urgent action is needed to address its scale and impact.

Black, minoritised and migrant (BMM) women and girls are disproportionately affected by VAWG. They also face additional structural barriers to accessing safety and justice. These barriers include institutional racism, class inequality, and hostile immigration policies such as the restrictive No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition.

Despite the scale and urgency of the crisis, myths, misinformation and disinformation about VAWG remain widespread in public discourse, including in sections of the media and among political leaders. Such narratives distort public understanding and undermine effective responses.

Too often, governments have responded with piecemeal reforms that fail to address the structural drivers of violence. When these root causes remain unaddressed, reforms risk leaving behind the very women who face the greatest barriers to safety and justice, including BMM women and girls.

The current government has committed to halving VAWG within the next decade. This is an ambitious and welcome pledge. Parliament therefore has a vital role in ensuring that this commitment is realised in practice and that all women are able to access safety, justice and support.

As a leading 'by and for' organisation, founded in 1979 to address domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence in BMM communities, Southall Black Sisters (SBS) welcomes this commitment. With more than four decades of frontline experience, we are keen to work with members of both the House of Commons and House of Lords to ensure that responses to VAWG are not one-size-fits-all. Policy must reflect the lived realities of women who face intersecting forms of discrimination.

Effective responses must therefore be trauma-informed, culturally competent, and attentive to structural inequality. This is essential to ensure that all women, including those most marginalised, are able to access safety, justice and support.

As Parliament marks IWD this March, debates on tackling VAWG provide an important opportunity to renew political commitment. They should also serve as a reminder that meaningful action on VAWG requires confronting the structural inequalities that enable violence to persist. These considerations must remain central to parliamentary discussions on VAWG not only during IWD, but throughout the year.

In this context, the annual moment in Parliament when Minister Jess Phillips MP reads the names of women who have been killed through domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG carries particular significance. It is a stark reminder of the human cost of inaction and of Parliament's responsibility to strengthen its response to VAWG.

Against this backdrop, SBS is sharing the following campaign asks. We encourage MPs and Peers to raise these issues during parliamentary debates and discussions on VAWG. These proposals seek to ensure that structural discrimination is recognised and addressed as a central component of any

meaningful strategy to end VAWG.

We also invite parliamentarians to work with us to progress these reforms through relevant legislative and policy opportunities as they arise.

- **Abolish the restrictive immigration condition of NRPF and extend the combined model of the Domestic Violence Indefinite Leave to Remain (DVILR) route and the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC) to all victim-survivors regardless of immigration status.** This would guarantee temporary access to public funds and safe accommodation while victim-survivors apply to regularise their immigration status. **Extend the MVDAC from three months to at least six months** to provide migrant victim-survivors with the breathing space needed to stabilise their circumstances after escaping abuse and consider their next steps, while encouraging refuges to accept referrals instead of turning victim-survivors away.

> "*I just want them to understand [that] often a migrant woman who's going through domestic violence … doesn't have anywhere to go. And it takes lots and lots and lots of courage to leave an abusive household and come out of it. And even if coming out is of no help, then Government, it is immigration [that] forces [us] to stay in abusive household. How can you deny me … the rights of domestic violence victim as a domestic violence victim?*"
>
> **– Karima, victim-survivor***

> "*Migrant women and girls come to the UK with so many dreams, and it is the UK Government's duty to ensure they feel safe and protected. I want to see an example being set so that women like Harshita are safe in the UK.*"
>
> **– Sonia Dabas, sister of Harshita Brella**

- **Withdraw the immigration white paper and the proposed earned settlement reforms, which would extend settlement qualifying periods and introduce additional financial barriers.** These changes would disproportionately harm victim-survivors of VAWG and exploitation. Existing protections must be retained, and the combined MVDAC-DVILR model must be extended to all victim-survivors regardless of immigration status. Access to public funds must not be used as a basis to lengthen settlement pathways. **The government must also withdraw its new refugee framework, which would grant temporary protection for only 30 months, after which individuals' need for sanctuary would be subject to continuous reassessment.** If the UK Government deems their country of origin "safe", individuals would be required to leave. This approach would trap refugee women and children in a cycle of insecurity and anxiety, severely undermining their ability to rebuild their lives.

- **Remove the UK Government's reservation on Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention.** Removing the reservation would require the UK to provide a route to an autonomous residence permit for eligible migrant victim-survivors whose immigration status depends on an abusive partner, ensuring that immigration dependency on an abusive partner does not trap women in violent relationships or prevent them from seeking help.

- **Make the Support for Migrant Victims (SMV) scheme permanent and funded at a level commensurate with need so it can operate as national bridging support for migrant victim-survivors.** This should sit alongside extending the MVDAC-DVILR model to all victim-survivors regardless of immigration status, ensuring that immediate accommodation and subsistence support are available while victim-survivors access public funds and regularise their status.

- **Introduce a full firewall between police, other statutory services and Immigration Enforcement.** This would ensure that migrant victim-survivors can report abuse and seek support without fear that their personal information will be shared for immigration enforcement purposes. We welcome the government's commitment in the VAWG strategy to introduce a firewall based on victim-survivors' consent. Any firewall must be robust enough to command the confidence of victim-survivors and frontline services, and we look forward to working with the government to ensure it delivers this in practice.

- **Implement Banaz's Law by recognising 'honour'-based abuse as a statutory aggravating factor in criminal sentencing, supported by clear statutory guidance for public authorities.** This would strengthen prevention, improve institutional responses, and increase accountability for perpetrators. During consideration of the Crime and Policing Bill, the proposal secured cross-party backing from over 50 MPs in the House of Commons when championed by Kirith Entwistle MP, as well as support from Peers in the House of Lords when led by Baroness Doocey. The proposal honours the memory of Banaz Mahmod, murdered in an 'honour' killing in 2006, and is led by her sister Bekhal Mahmod with the support of SBS.

> "*Banaz was a bright, courageous woman with dreams and potential, but these were stolen from her. No one else should have to endure the fear, violence and ultimate loss that she faced. I hope that the government will urgently take action to introduce Banaz's Law so that my sister's tragic death is not in vain.*"
>
> **– Bekhal Mahmod, victim-survivor and sister of Banaz Mahmod**

- **Recognise abuse-related suicide as murder and introduce sentencing ranges comparable to those available for murder. Encouragement or assistance of suicide and self-harm driven by abuse should also be treated as an aggravating factor in sentencing.** This would recognise the profound psychological harm inflicted through coercive and abusive behaviour. The proposal has already received cross-party support from over 50 MPs in the House of Commons when advanced by Kirith Entwistle MP during consideration of the Crime and Policing Bill. It has also received support from Peers in the House of Lords when led by Baroness Doocey during consideration of the Bill. The Liberal Democrats have now tabled an amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill to enable Parliament to debate whether suicides in cases involving victim-survivors of abuse should be investigated as homicide.

> "*The response from the police has been utterly appalling. From the outset we were told they don't usually investigate suicides and there was no case as Michelle had not reported domestic abuse when she was alive. It is therefore a huge relief that the abuse Michelle experienced has been recognised as a significant factor in her decision to end her life.*"
>
> **– Shaun Case and Anthea White, siblings of Michelle Sparman**

- **Accept and implement the recommendations of the InVisible Women report, produced with seven bereaved BMM families within the Killed Women network in collaboration with SBS.** The report identifies systemic failures and sets out reforms required across policing, social services, health, education, courts, inquests, domestic abuse-related death reviews, and data transparency.

> "*The system failed her. Social services. NHS. Education services. Police.*

Everybody let her down."

– Bereaved family member, InVisible Women

"*The agencies so many of us hope to be saved by, aren't working in that mode. They don't see a lot of women, especially, I think, of Black and Asian minority backgrounds, as figures who are abused in the same way as their white counterparts.*"

– Bereaved family member, InVisible Women

- **Launch a national public inquiry into femicide in the UK**, with particular attention to the disproportionate impact on BMM women and girls.

- **Ensure long-term, sustainable and ring-fenced funding for specialist 'by and for' services supporting BMM victim-survivors.** Funding should be commissioned at levels commensurate with identified need, informed by refreshed national research, to ensure that all victim-survivors can access tailored and holistic support regardless of race, background, or immigration status.

As a frontline organisation with decades of experience supporting marginalised women and advocating for systemic change, SBS is committed to ensuring that the voices and lived realities of BMM women inform the development of law and policy.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide further information or to meet with MPs and Peers to discuss these proposals and how we can work together to advance them.

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* Identities of victim-survivors have been anonymised for safeguarding purposes.