

"EARNED SETTLEMENT" PROPOSALS

Stories of how these dangerous proposals would affect migrant victim-survivors or VAWG.



INTRODUCTION

This storybook shows the **impact that the UK's immigration system has on women and girls facing gender-based violence and abuse.**

Drawing on our frontline experience supporting thousands of migrant women each year, **we have created four composite stories that reflect the vulnerabilities faced by migrant victims and survivors of violence against women and girls (VAWG).** These stories illustrate how the **immigration system empowers abusers to entrap, isolate, silence and control women.** They emphasise how a woman's right to live free from violence and abuse is routinely treated as secondary to her immigration status by the state, the police and support services. **The women and girls who we support face these intolerable circumstances every day.**

The **government's Earned Settlement proposals will increase these dangers for migrant women, effectively punishing victims and survivors for the actions of their abusers.** Common experiences like being forced into debt or having to rely on public funds will be penalised with cruel extensions to settlement and blocked routes to safety.

A world in which we prevent VAWG is only possible if we recognise and uphold the human rights and dignity of all women and girls, without discrimination.

SONIA

Sonia came to the UK with her children on a **spouse visa** after marrying her British husband. She left her job and extended family behind, **believing she was starting a stable new chapter.**

Within months of arriving, the abuse began. At first, it was **emotional** and **financial control**; her husband restricted her access to money, monitored her phone, confiscated her passport, and told her she was "**lucky**" he had brought her to the UK. **When she started questioning his behaviour, he reminded her that her visa depended on him.**



SONIA



As the violence escalated, Sonia became **increasingly isolated**. She had **no independent income and no recourse to public funds (NRPF)** because of **her immigration status**. Her husband prevented her from working and her husband repeatedly told her that **if she reported him, she would be deported and separated from her children**. He told her the authorities would believe him because he was British and she was not.

One night, after a serious assault on her witnessed by her eldest child, Sonia fled the house with her children. She left with only a small bag and her children's birth certificates, and **sought help from a local service which referred her to a specialist organisation**. It was there that she first learned that what she was experiencing was domestic abuse and that she had rights.

SONIA

However, escaping the violence did not mean escaping insecurity. **Sonia was not entitled to public funds**, including housing benefits and most forms of welfare support. The refuge that took her in could only offer a short stay while emergency funds were sourced. **She was constantly anxious about where she and her children would go next.**



Sonia then applied under the **Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC)**, which would allow her **temporary access to public funds** while she applied for indefinite leave to remain under the domestic violence rule. But the **process** was **complex, time-limited**, and required **evidence** she struggled to obtain. **She had no access to joint bank statements, a tenancy agreement, or documentation controlled by her husband.**

SONIA

While waiting for a decision, **she was unable to secure long-term housing.** Local authorities kept trying to shirk their duties because of **her immigration status.** At one point, she faced the prospect of going back to her husband because she was unable to demonstrate eligibility for government support and **felt completely powerless.**

To her, the message was clear: safety is conditional.

The **psychological toll was immense.** Sonia felt she had to **prove** she was deserving of protection; she worried constantly that a small mistake in her application would result in refusal and removal from the UK. **Her children began to display signs of trauma,** struggling in school and fearing instability.

SONIA

Under the proposed "**earned settlement**" changes, women like Sonia and their children face **even longer routes to secure status**, higher financial thresholds and stricter compliance requirements.

Any gaps in employment, periods of homelessness or reliance on public funds could be framed as a **failure to "contribute"**.

The years Sonia spent **surviving abuse** and **navigating immigration insecurity** would not count as evidence of resilience, but **as reasons to subject her to further precarity and insecurity**.

CLAUDIA



Claudia met a man online who lived in the UK, and they began a long-distance relationship. He travelled to visit her twice, met her family, and they made plans for her to move to the UK. **He promised that they would live together and they would get married before her visitors' visa expired.**

Claudia bought a ticket to the UK, and finally moved in with him. After some time, the relationship began to change. **He became increasingly controlling, limiting Claudia's contact with her family back home and with friends.** He told Claudia that, as she wasn't working, she needed to look after the house and him. When the 6 months of her visitor's visa expired and she became undocumented, the abuse escalated. **Claudia was suddenly only allowed to leave the house if she was with him, and she was under constant verbal abuse.**

CLAUDIA

After an incident of physical violence in which he pushed her against the wall and kicked her, Claudia told him that if he didn't stop, she would call the police. **He told her that the police would not believe her, and that as she was undocumented, they would detain her for breaking the law.**

The relationship continued for over two years, with daily verbal and physical abuse. Claudia's partner would sexually assault her everyday. **She became fearful and distrustful and did not know how to get help.** Claudia was prevented from going to the GP or buying contraception, and became pregnant and had a child.

CLAUDIA

One day, after a particularly violent attack and feeling **fearful of the impact the abuse had on her child**, Claudia waited until her partner went out of the house and called the police. Two officers arrived, asked for her details, and when they heard her accent, they asked for her passport. **When they saw that she had overstayed her visa, they phoned Immigration Enforcement in front of her.**

They told her that she needed to buy a ticket and go back to her country, and did not take her report for domestic abuse.

Claudia fled her house with her child, and stayed at a friend's house. From there, she was able to reach out to a specialist organisation and **get support to regularise her immigration status through the parent visa route, access public funds and leave her abusive partner.**

CLAUDIA



If the **“Earned Settlement”** changes proposed by the Government are implemented, **Claudia would face additional penalties to her settlement route directly due to the abuse she experienced.**

As Claudia was made undocumented by the perpetrator for a period of over 6 months, **she would automatically receive an additional 20 years on top of her 10-year settlement route.** It is also likely that, had this model been in place at the time, **the punitive and hostile nature of these policies might have discouraged Claudia from reporting abuse,** leaving her and her child trapped in an unsafe, abusive situation.

ANA



Ana is from a small village and was looking for work abroad to support her family after her father passed away. She arrived in the UK on a **6-month domestic worker's visa, after being promised safe employment, accommodation, and support** by an intermediary connected to her employer. Ana was told she would work for a family in their home, looking after young children.

Upon her arrival, **her employer confiscated her passport.** She was subjected to long working hours and expected to do all the household chores, such as cooking and cleaning, as well as look after the children. **Ana was threatened and verbally abused** if she did not do things up to her employer's standard. **Ana was not given any days off, her movements were restricted, she was not paid and was not allowed to own a phone.** After a while, one family member began to **physically and sexually abuse** her after everyone else went to sleep.

ANA

After a year, Ana **escaped the household with no money, documents or knowledge of her rights.** With no legal advice and limited English, Ana relied on informal networks for survival. She had met another woman from her country who advised her that she had a room that she could live in. Shortly after, **she was once again coerced into exploitative work after she was told she needed to start contributing to household expenses.** Later on, she began **shoplifting under the threat of homelessness and violence.** At the time, Ana felt she had no alternatives, and she was scared because she did not have access to her passport or know whether she was allowed to be living in the country.

Ana was arrested for shoplifting goods valued at under £50. During police custody, **no risk assessments were completed to see if she was a victim of violence or exploitation.** She didn't always have access to an interpreter and had to get by using broken English. Because of this, the account of her story was treated as inconsistent.

ANA



Ana felt extremely shameful about the sexual violence she experienced and didn't dare tell police about what had happened. **She had limited legal support and did not understand her rights.** She was advised by her solicitor to plead guilty to avoid a custodial sentence. **She received a criminal conviction and at no time was her victimhood recognised.**

Following her conviction, **her data was shared with the Home Office,** and she was **classified as an "immigration offender"**. Soon after, she was detained in an immigration removal centre and served with removal directions. It was only when she was there that she was able to speak to a professional, where she disclosed the details of what had happened to her. **Ana was told she could be referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as she was a victim of trafficking.** She had no idea what this meant.

ANA



After the referral to the NRM, **her criminal conviction was used to cast doubt on her credibility. Delays in decision-making left her in detention for a long time**, and her mental health was deteriorating rapidly. She felt suicidal and extremely isolated. She received a negative conclusive grounds decision. **The decision cited her “late disclosure” and “criminal behaviour”**, despite **both** being recognised as features of trafficking cases as per Home Office’s own guidance.

Intersecting failures across the immigration and criminal justice system produce the double criminalisation of migrant women. Ana’s vulnerability begins with a restrictive domestic worker visa that ties her to her employer, enabling conditions of **forced labour, abuse and control** with no meaningful oversight or access to rights. After escaping, the **absence of safe support pathways** leaves her destitute and dependent on informal networks, leading to further **coercion** and **survival-based offending** which should have triggered protection under the non-punishment principle but instead results in **arrest and prosecution**.

ANA

The criminal justice system's response is marked by a lack of trafficking identification, interpretation and trauma-informed practice. This means **Ana's experiences of exploitation and sexual violence are neither disclosed nor recognised and her credibility is undermined.** Following her conviction, **data sharing with Immigration Enforcement leads to her immigration detention.** Even after referral into NRM, systemic issues persist as her delayed disclosure and criminal record are used to refuse recognition of her victimhood.

The **"Earned Settlement" model** significantly tightens **criminality requirements** for those seeking settlement in the UK. It proposes a **zero tolerance approach to settlement for migrant people who have committed crimes.** This model **fails to recognise victims of trafficking and exploitation,** seeking to punish rather than protect them, **reinforcing cycles of exploitation and harm.**

SAMIRA



Samira was brought to the UK after **being forced into marriage**. From a young age, she faced significant pressure from her family to marry a man she had never met. **Despite repeatedly expressing her objections** and making it clear that she did not want to get married, **she was told she had no choice and that refusing would bring shame on her family**.

Samira met her husband on the day of the marriage ceremony, and she was brought to the UK to live with him and his family. Upon arrival, she became increasingly isolated. **Her husband and his family controlled every aspect of her life, including her finances, movements and communications with others**. Samira was subjected to rape and forced to perform all the domestic labour in the house. **If she did not perform tasks well enough, she would be physically and verbally abused**. They confiscated her identity documents and repeatedly told her that she had no life in the UK without him.

SAMIRA

Her husband would threaten her if she disobeyed him or tried to seek help, telling her she would be deported and returned to her family. When Samira spoke to her family at home and disclosed the abuse, they told her she had to make the marriage work and threatened her with grave consequences if she were to return. Samira was prevented from learning English, forming friendships or accessing education. **She lived in constant fear and felt trapped between the abuse she was experiencing in the UK and the consequences she would face if she returned home.**

After several years, Samira was able to disclose the abuse to a healthcare professional. She explained that she was extremely scared to go home, afraid that she would be punished through violence or forced into another marriage. **Samira was advised to claim asylum in the UK. However, navigating the asylum system brought its own challenges.**

SAMIRA

She had little understanding of the legal process and struggled to recount traumatic experiences during interviews. **Years of control and isolation meant that she had limited evidence to support her account, and the uncertainty surrounding her immigration status caused significant anxiety.** It took her a long time to find a solicitor who would support her case, causing even more stress and limiting the time she had to submit documents. **Throughout this period, she experienced symptoms of trauma,** including nightmares, panic attacks, depression and difficulty trusting others.

Samira continues to wait for a decision on her application.



“Earned Settlement” proposals and recent changes to the Asylum system mean that **Samira will not be able to settle in the UK for up to 30 years,** with her case being routinely reviewed to ascertain if it is deemed ‘safe’ for her to return at any point.

SAMIRA

This ongoing insecurity will exacerbate the **anxiety, precarity and trauma that she has already experienced through no fault of her own**. If the Home Office refuses her application for asylum, they could offer Samira a financial “voluntary return” incentive, a scheme which disregards Samira’s inability to return home safely. **Even if she were to reject this incentive, she could be forcibly removed from the UK.**

Samira’s ability to **appeal** a refused asylum application will now have a **lower chance of succeeding due to the government's overhaul of the appeal process**, which introduces streamlined procedures and appoints new adjudicators to fast-track cases, limiting a person's time and resources to support their claim. **The statutory duty to provide asylum-seeking people with free housing and financial subsistence has been revoked, meaning Samira could become homeless and destitute abruptly.**

**THESE STORIES
MATTER.
THEIR FUTURES
MATTER.**

**SCRAP THE
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CONTACT:

To get in touch about our storybook, visit each organisation's website for contact details.

