



**SUPPORTING AND
EMPOWERING
REFUGEES**

ASAP

ASYLUM
SUPPORT
APPEALS
PROJECT

Women seeking asylum: Safe from violence in the UK?

Helen Baillot & Elaine Connelly

June 2018

Contents

Executive Summary	3	Chapter Six: Safety Within The Asylum Support System.....	34
Introduction.....	6	6.1 Responsiveness to immediate safety concerns – an inconsistent approach.....	35
PART ONE: SETTING THE SCENE		6.2 Beyond immediate safety needs – sustainable solutions?.....	38
Chapter One: About this study.....	7	6.2.1 Access to refuge provision	38
1.1 Underpinning principles.....	7	6.2.2 Safe, alternative accommodation – Initial accommodation	39
1.2 Methodology	8	6.2.3 Safe, alternative accommodation – Moving regions.....	40
1.3 Report Structure.....	9	Chapter Seven: Exiting the Asylum Support System ...	42
Chapter Two: Women, Asylum and Asylum Support..	11	7.1 ‘Moving on’ – exposure to destitution after grant of status.....	42
2.1 At the intersection: ethnicity, immigration status and abuse	11	7.2 Exposure to abuse after refusal of asylum.....	44
2.2 Women and asylum	12	Chapter Eight: Good Practice	45
2.3 The asylum support system – an overview	12	8.1 Advocacy	46
Chapter Three: The Asylum Support System	14	8.2 Specialist agencies – finding common cause.....	46
3.1 What does asylum support policy say about women?.....	14	8.3 Communication	47
3.2 Access to the asylum procedure	16	8.4 Joint working	49
3.3 No choice accommodation / frequent moves.....	16	8.4.1 Case conferences.....	49
3.4 Accommodation standards.....	17	8.4.2 Referrals	49
3.4.1 Conduct of accommodation provider staff.....	17	8.4.3 Outreach	51
3.4.2 Shared accommodation	18	8.4.4 Acting on recommendations.....	51
3.4.3 Mixed sex environments	19	8.5 Women’s voices within the process.....	52
3.5 Life on a limited income	19	Conclusion	54
PART TWO: ENSURING WOMEN’S SAFETY IN THE ASYLUM SUPPORT SYSTEM		Recommendations.....	55
Chapter Four: Disclosures Of Abuse.....	21	Bibliography	58
4.1 How frequent are disclosures?.....	21	Endnotes.....	60
4.2 When are disclosures made?	22		
4.3 Barriers to disclosure of abuse	23		
4.4 Perpetrators	27		
Chapter Five: Access To The Asylum Support System .	28		
5.1 Pathways into the asylum support system.....	28		
5.2 Access to section 98 support (Initial Accommodation)	29		
5.3 Access to section 4 support.....	31		
5.4 Assessing destitution	32		

Executive Summary

If a woman seeking asylum seeks to leave an abusive relationship she is likely to be wholly dependent on the asylum support system for accommodation and financial support.

People seeking asylum in the UK are not entitled to mainstream benefits and the vast majority are not allowed to work. If they are destitute while waiting for a decision on their asylum claim, the only form of state support available to them is via a parallel housing and benefits system known as asylum support which provides a basic subsistence payment of £37.75 a week and 'no choice', usually shared, accommodation. This system is administered by the Home Office, with subcontractors such as G4S and Serco in charge of the housing provision.

This research report explores the extent to which this system ensures the safety of women who are facing domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence. The findings are based on data from an online survey (158 respondents), semi-structured interviews with professionals (14 respondents), and interviews with women seeking asylum (2 respondents).

Disclosure

In line with previous research, we have identified multiple barriers to disclosure. Prime amongst these are women's fears that reporting abuse will have a negative impact on their immigration status. Perpetrators often use these fears as a tool to isolate and control women.

Just over 50% of respondents told us that they dealt with disclosures of domestic abuse at least once a month. Almost 10% of respondents dealt with such disclosures more than once a week.

For other forms of abuse, including sexual violence and sexual exploitation, 40% of respondents had dealt with disclosures once per month or more in the past year.

Women can be at risk of abuse and violence at any stage of the asylum support system. We found that disclosures most commonly occurred prior to women entering asylum support; or when women are living in destitution after their asylum claims have been refused. However, women who have been recognised as refugees and granted leave to remain can find themselves vulnerable to abusive situations as they are at high risk of experiencing homelessness and destitution when they exit the asylum support system.

Access to asylum support

Women seeking asylum who are fleeing exploitation and abuse are likely to be destitute and will need to enter the asylum support system. The only government-funded advice available for women is delivered via a national telephone advice line. Our findings indicate that this service does not have adequate capacity to deal effectively with enquiries from women who may be facing escalating levels of risk in situations of abuse.

Where women make applications for asylum support, there is little evidence that Home Office decision-makers give adequate consideration to their previous histories of abuse. Repeated requests for evidence of their destitution, which may not just be difficult but dangerous to obtain, continue to be made. This can cause delays in women accessing safety.

Responses to reports made while women are living on asylum support

Once women are living within the asylum support system, there is evidence that their reports of abuse will be taken more seriously.

However, this is not consistently the case. Some accommodation providers appear not to have adequate regard to the provisions of the Home Office's current policy on responding to reports of domestic violence by women seeking asylum.

Most commonly, safety concerns will result in women being moved to alternative accommodation, sometimes to a different area or region. Where women are moved to ensure their safety, our findings demonstrate that the Home Office and contractors apply a limited understanding of what might constitute 'safe' alternative accommodation. Little or no consideration appears to be given to:

- The inappropriateness, for women fleeing abuse and violence, of being placed into mixed sex Initial Accommodation;¹
- Women's access to support services, including but not limited to those provided by specialist violence against women organisations;
- Access to ongoing healthcare and schooling for any dependent children in the family;
- The risk of women becoming socially isolated. This not only risks undermining a woman's wellbeing but makes her more vulnerable to returning to an abusive situation.

Exiting the asylum support system

Women exit the asylum support system either when they have been recognised as being in need of protection and granted refugee status or other form of leave to remain; or when their asylum claims have been refused. In both cases, they are vulnerable to homelessness and destitution, which in turn can expose them to abuse and exploitation. There is a particular risk of sexual exploitation when women have no alternative but to rely on friends or acquaintances for accommodation.

Good practice

Our research sought to highlight gaps in policy and practice and also to provide an insight into good practice in this very complex area of work. Elements of good practice that require further investment include:

Advocacy

Women continue to require significant advocacy to access safety. Currently this is mostly provided by staff in the refugee voluntary sector, where resources are limited.

Improved communication between the Home Office, contractors and statutory and voluntary sector organisations

Channels of communication between the agencies who are supporting women, the Home Office, and accommodation providers are not always clearly defined. For example, not everyone fully understands the role of the Home Office's Safeguarding Hub and local safeguarding teams.

Joint working

There is scope for improved joint working across the statutory and voluntary sectors. This includes between the refugee voluntary sector, and violence against women organisations.

The Home Office and accommodation providers should listen to, and act upon recommendations made by agencies who have an ongoing relationship of trust with women.

Ensuring women's voices are heard, and inform the actions taken to protect them

Those responding to a disclosure of abuse can only assist a woman to find sustainable, safe solutions if they listen to her views on the level of risk she is facing, and how to safely exit from her situation.

We hope that this report and its recommendations, can go some way to encouraging the implementation of as many of these areas of good practice as possible. And that the voices of women themselves are at the heart of any new initiatives to develop a system that responds adequately to their safety needs.

Summary of key recommendations

1. The Home Office should ensure that women seeking asylum are firmly included in UK cross-Government efforts to address violence against women and girls, and any future cross-Government strategy on ending violence against women and girls should reflect this.
2. The Home Office should publish a revised policy that addresses the domestic violence and abuse experienced by women seeking asylum, as a priority, and monitor its implementation. The revised policy should provide an effective and consistent response to domestic abuse, at all points of the asylum support journey.
3. The Home Office should consult and review all key asylum support policy instructions to ensure that these policies explicitly respond to the needs of women who are experiencing or at risk of all forms of gender-based exploitation or abuse.
4. The Home Office should work with accommodation providers, ensuring they act to reduce women's exposure to all forms of gender-based abuse and exploitation and feel safe in their accommodation.
5. The Home Office should ensure that no woman faces homelessness and destitution when exiting the asylum support system after being granted refugee status or another form of leave.
6. The Home Office should amend the current UK cross-Government action plan to end violence against women and girls to include the above recommendations.

Please see pages 56-58 for the full set of recommendations.

Introduction²

Since 2014 Asylum Support Appeals Project and Refugee Council and a range of partners including Scottish Refugee Council and Rights of Women, have sought to ensure better outcomes for women seeking asylum who have experienced or are at risk of violence and abuse after arriving in the UK.

This work builds upon progress made under the Women's Asylum Charter,³ established in 2008, that has led to a welcome high level recognition of the importance of a focus on gender in the asylum decision making process. Improvements in recent years include the publication of guidance for asylum decision makers on gender in asylum claims,⁴ training for decision makers on gender-based persecution, the provision of childcare asylum interviews across the UK, and training for Home Office screening officers on responding to disclosures of sexual violence.

As the UK prepares to ratify the Istanbul Convention on combatting and preventing violence against women and girls, these developments are recognised as crucial to meeting the state's obligations to guarantee women's safety and protection from violence.⁵

However, the focus on gender has predominantly been in the context of the asylum decision making process. Little consideration has been paid by the Home Office and its contractors to the importance of ensuring that the system of financial support and accommodation for people seeking asylum in the UK (the asylum support system) considers women's needs and experiences.

Similarly, the critical question of how to prevent and respond to the violence experienced by women seeking asylum after arrival in the UK has received little attention and women in the asylum system are notably absent from

wider UK Government efforts to address Violence Against Women and Girls. Stakeholders working with the Home Office on issues affecting women seeking asylum were not consulted before the publication in 2016 of the latest UK Government strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls.⁶ Disappointingly, the published strategy includes only three short paragraphs referencing asylum and the accompanying 95 point action plan does not include any commitments to taking action to guarantee women asylum seekers' safety and protection from violence.

Although inexplicably absent from the UK Government's strategy and action plan mentioned above, since 2014 the Home Office has been working on a revised domestic abuse asylum support policy, in consultation with stakeholders, which has potential to lead to a significantly improved response to the violence experienced by women seeking asylum.

We hope that this current research can inform the further development and implementation of workable systems, policies and practices that prioritise the safety of women. More generally, we hope that our findings provide a holistic view of the safety needs of women seeking asylum, many of whom will have already experienced violence in their countries of origin and during their search for refuge. We hope that this research will assist the UK and devolved administrations in their efforts to protect women and girls from further violence in the UK while waiting for a decision on their asylum claim.

PART ONE: Setting the scene

Chapter One:

About this study

Since February 2018, we have been exploring the extent to which current Home Office asylum support policies and practice keep women who disclose or are at risk of abuse, safe from harm.

This work has been commissioned as part of ongoing advocacy around Violence Against Women and Girls with the Home Office and other stakeholders.

Gender-based violence experienced prior to arrival in the UK is often a feature of women's claims for asylum. However, this research considers the forms of violence and abuse that women may face during their time in the UK.

1.1 Underpinning principles

Our research is situated within an understanding of violence against women and girls that takes account of the gender-related reasons behind this violence; and the impact of gender on the form that this violence takes.

As per the Istanbul Convention,⁷ we recognise that violence against women includes, but is not limited to physical violence nor to domestic abuse by a spouse or partner. Rather, we understand it to be *"a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."* (Article 3a, Istanbul Convention)⁸

While we recognise that men too experience many forms of violence, including domestic abuse, in this report we focus on violence perpetrated against women and girls. This is because in the UK, as in many countries around the world, women are *"twice as likely to have experienced*

domestic abuse as men...[and] over five times as likely as men to have experienced sexual assault since the age of 16".⁹

Similarly, we note that across the EU, there is a high prevalence of the different forms of abuse we explore in this report, regardless of a woman's ethnic origin or immigration status.

*"One in 10 women has experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 15, and one in 20 has been raped. Just over one in five women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence from either a current or previous partner, and just over one in 10 women indicates that they have experienced some form of sexual violence by an adult before they were 15 years old."*¹⁰

Women seeking asylum are, however, more likely to have experienced gender-based violence because of their past experiences of persecution and conflict; and the precariousness of their economic and social circumstances during flight from their country, and after arrival in the UK.¹¹

We used the following definitions in our data collection activities:

Domestic abuse

Abuse perpetrated by partners or ex partners, or other family members living in the same household. This can include physical abuse, sexual abuse and mental and emotional abuse (threats, verbal abuse, racial abuse, withholding money and other types of controlling behaviour such as isolation from family or friends).

Sexual violence

Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting.

Women seeking asylum:

Sexual exploitation

The sexual abuse of an adult in exchange for attention, affection, food, drugs, shelter, protection, other basic necessities and/or money. This could be part of a seemingly consensual relationship.

We note that where women have dependent children, they are often their primary care givers. This can affect women’s ability to report, exit and recover from abuse, and can raise child protection concerns.

Woman who identify as LGBTQI+ including trans-women are firmly included in our analysis; and we suggest that the safety considerations outlined are applicable to all applicants who identify as women and live within, try to access, or exit, the asylum support system.

1.2 Methodology

Our findings are drawn from two primary datasets, with insights from existing literature integrated into our discussion throughout.

We provide more detail about our primary data below.

Online survey (n=158)

We created an online survey that was distributed via email, to all members of the Asylum Support Appeals Network of organisations and advisers around the UK. We encouraged recipients to share the survey link with their contacts and through any other relevant networks.

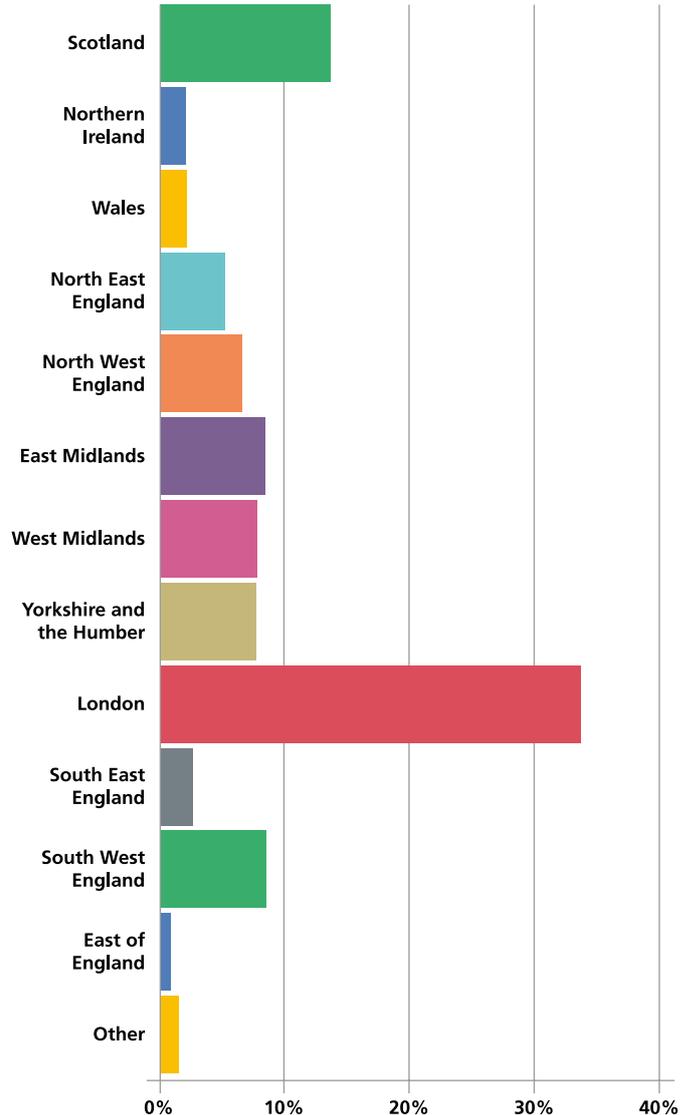
158 people responded to our survey, the majority of whom worked within specialist refugee organisations (52 respondents) or for charities working with refugees amongst other client groups (58 respondents).

Only 23 respondents (15%) were working within services that had a focus on women domestic abuse or other violence.¹²

Responses were gathered from across the UK, giving our findings a geographical spread across the different ‘dispersal regions’ where the Home Office accommodates and supports people who have sought asylum. The highest number of respondents were based in London (34%) and Scotland (14%), with the responses from all other regions being 10% or under.

Not all survey respondents answered every question, therefore we specify in each chart taken from the survey the number of responses upon which the data is based.

Where is your place of work



Semi-structured interviews with professionals (n=14)

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in total, by phone, with fifteen people working in a variety of locations around the UK.¹³

Location	Number of interviews conducted
London	5
Scotland	4
North-West England	1
West Midlands	1
Yorkshire & Humber	1
North-East England	1
East Midlands	1

Thirteen of our interviewees volunteered for interview having completed the survey.¹⁴ Two interviewees were identified by the research team through snowball sampling during the research.

Most interviewees worked in the voluntary sector, either within specialist refugee organisations or organisations with a focus on supporting women affected by gender-based violence, including rape and domestic abuse. All had significant experience of working with women who were at risk from abuse or exploitation in the UK.

Type of organisation	Number of interviews conducted
Specialist refugee organisation	9
Specialist organisation working on gender-based violence	3
Immigration advice provider	1
Healthcare provider	1

Interviewees were asked to reflect upon two to three cases where they personally had supported or advocated on behalf of women who disclosed that they were at risk from domestic abuse or other forms of harm.

One of the commissioning agencies provided additional anonymous case studies drawn from casework files.

All case studies have been fully anonymised to safeguard the confidentiality of individual women.

Individual interviews with women who had experienced abuse (n=2)

We approached six voluntary sector organisations with whom we had pre-existing working relationships to ask if they could identify women who might be willing to speak to us about their experiences of disclosing abuse whilst living in or trying to access the asylum support system.

The research team developed an information sheet for potential interviewees, and a budget for interpreting and a small cash token of appreciation was included in our project costs. A full risk assessment was drawn up and agreed prior to women being contacted.

We asked staff to contact women in the first instance to check that they would be happy to participate. This resulted in four of the agencies passing on contact details for women whom they had supported. However, in two cases, the details provided were out of date, and it was not possible to make contact with the women.

Three other agencies were unable to put us in contact with any women, due to the sensitive nature of the research.

Thus, in the time available to the researchers, we were only able to carry out two individual interviews.

We therefore recommend that further engagement is undertaken with women to better understand their experiences within the asylum support system; and to include women in discussions around the findings of this report and ongoing advocacy work.

Participative approaches such as those taken in previous research with women who have suffered abuse could inform this work.¹⁵

Quotes from our interviews with the two women are identified by the names Claire and Ruth and have been fully anonymised to remove references to countries of origin, language and dispersal region in order to safeguard the women's privacy.

1.3 Report Structure

We have divided our report into two parts.

Part one provides contextual information on the legislative and policy framework that underpins the asylum support system. We very briefly summarise the existing policy and research work that has tried to ensure that women's experiences are reflected in the UK refugee status determination system. We then analyse current asylum support policy through the lens of women's needs and experiences, drawing on relevant data that emerged from our interviews.

In part two, we present our substantive findings on the extent to which the asylum support system ensures women's safety if they disclose that they are at risk from abuse, violence or exploitation.

Part two starts with a chapter on disclosure and then goes on to look at the different stages of the asylum support system: in Chapter Five, we explore women's access to the system, either when they seek to enter it for the first time, or to re-enter it after a refusal of asylum; in Chapter Six, we discuss current responses to disclosures of abuse made while women are living within asylum accommodation; and in Chapter Seven, we highlight women's potential exposure to harm when exiting the asylum support system, either after a grant of status or the final refusal of asylum.

Women seeking asylum:

We conclude this part by reflecting upon the potential for further developing good practice to ensure that reports of abuse are dealt with appropriately at all stages of the system.

Chapter Two:

Women, asylum and asylum support

This work has taken place against a backdrop of significant research and campaigning that has sought to improve understanding of the experiences of women who claim asylum in the UK; and against the long history of activism in the UK and her constituent nations around societal and service responses to women who have experienced domestic, sexual and other forms of abuse.

We cannot do justice to either bank of research in this short report. However, below we explore in brief some of the key elements that help us to contextualise and analyse our findings.

2.1 At the intersection: ethnicity, immigration status and abuse

Women's rights have increasingly occupied a central position in international and national human rights movements.

Central to this has been the recognition of the serious harm inherent in 'private' forms of abuse, often committed against women and children by partners or other family members, within their own homes. Domestic abuse has been principal amongst these. Sexual violence too has become ever more visible, as has the trafficking and sexual exploitation of women.¹⁶

From the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to strategies put in place by the UK,¹⁷ Scottish¹⁸ and Welsh¹⁹ Governments, women and children benefit from international, national and local protections from violence and abuse that, less

than fifty years ago, would likely have been unthinkable radical.²⁰

Despite these advances, scholars have warned that focusing only on gender can obscure the multiple factors that can compound or otherwise influence women's vulnerability to, and means of coping with, violence, abuse and discrimination.²¹

For example, women of colour living in a white-majority society such as the UK, and who have only limited access to economic resources; may face more difficulties than white, economically independent women in claiming their rights to live free from violence and abuse. Organisations may, even unconsciously, put up barriers that prevent women perceived as being from 'different cultures' from accessing their services.²² Abuse may be excused or ignored because it is perpetrated within cultures seen as being 'other'.

The women whose cases we reference in our findings occupy a number of such 'intersections'. Most, if not all, will be relative newcomers to the UK and do not yet have settled immigration status. Their economic and social rights are therefore circumscribed by the various legislative and policy frameworks that limit the rights of people seeking asylum, and other migrants.

Most, if not all of the women whose accounts and stories we highlight are women of colour, from a wide range of black and minority ethnic groups.

Finally, the women whose experiences of abuse have informed our study are generally economically disadvantaged in their lives in the UK. As people who have sought, but not yet been granted asylum, they are unable to work to support themselves, and must rely on state welfare provision to feed and clothe themselves and their families. Even women who have been granted refugee status may face barriers in finding paid work.

Women seeking asylum:

In undertaking our work, we hope to highlight some of the ways in which these intersecting factors come together when women experience, or are at risk of experiencing, abuse while waiting for a decision on their asylum claim; and what this means for service provision by all agencies involved.

2.2 Women and asylum

The 1951 Refugee Convention, signed in 1951, makes no mention of persecution on grounds of gender.

“The term refugee shall apply to any person who [...] owing to well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

(1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 1A)

Over the past twenty years, however, there have been significant national and international efforts to ensure that the UK asylum process recognises that gender-based abuse can constitute persecution; and that women who go through the asylum process are able to present their narratives as effectively as possible.

As noted in our introduction, this has resulted in notable successes and improvements. Home Office asylum decision-makers benefit from specific guidelines around gender issues in the asylum claim²³ and many have attended training provided by specialist organisations. Case law such as the House of Lords judgements in *Shah and Islam*²⁴ and *Fornah*²⁵; has laid the ground for the recognition and validation of the specific forms of abuse faced by women and girls who seek asylum in the UK.

After significant lobbying, the Home Office now publish gender-disaggregated data on the number of women entering the asylum process and the outcomes of their applications, including appeals. The Home Office provides childcare for asylum interviews to enable parents to attend Home Office interviews without their children.

Significant efforts have been made to improve the response to disclosures by women of sexual violence at screening. This included an awareness-raising training programme for screening officers and a Home Office funded pilot project known as the EPIONE project²⁶ which involved referrals to the Refugee Council’s specialist therapeutic service.

While there continue to be concerns about the ways in which women’s claims are presented and assessed by decision-makers, and, at appeal, by Immigration Judges;²⁷ and ongoing and passionate debates about women’s treatment whilst in detention; we welcome all of these incremental and positive developments.

Yet, to date far less attention has focused on the asylum support system. Some existing reports with a broad research remit do contain significant findings that relate to women’s experiences of life in the UK asylum process.²⁸

However, our review of literature found that few had as their principal focus a gendered analysis of the asylum support system.²⁹ We hope that this present work will be a valuable addition to what remains a relatively limited bank of research.

2.3 The asylum support system – an overview

The asylum support system is administered by the Home Office, with private sector contractors (currently G4S, Clearsprings and Serco) delivering housing provision. It is, in effect, a parallel housing and benefits system specifically for people seeking asylum and, in some limited circumstances, for those whose claims have been refused. It is the only form of state support available to people who have sought asylum as they are, in most cases, unable to work and so are wholly dependent on this form of support.

Legislative framework

Since the coming into force of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act in April 2000, people whose refugee claims have not yet been decided by the Home Office are excluded from accessing public funds. This effectively blocks their access to mainstream welfare or housing provision.

Permission to work can be granted in exceptional circumstances but allows access only to jobs on the UK’s shortage occupation list.

People who have claimed asylum in the UK, and who would otherwise be destitute, can apply to the Home Office for provision of accommodation and/or financial support.

“Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 enables the provision of support to asylum-seekers or dependants of asylum-seekers who appear to the Secretary of State to be destitute or be likely to become destitute within 14 days.

An asylum seeker is defined as a person who has made a claim for asylum which has been recorded by the Secretary of State but which has not been determined.”³⁰

A system of initial accommodation, provided under section 98 of the 1999 Act, enables people to be housed while their applications for longer term section 95 support are under consideration:

“Section 98 of the 1999 Act provides that the Secretary of State may provide or arrange for the provision of support for asylum seekers or dependants of asylum seekers who appear to the Secretary of State to be destitute or likely to become destitute pending the consideration of their support application under Section 95 of the 1999 Act.”³¹

Initial accommodation can be made available to certain categories of people who have not yet registered their claim for asylum, including:

“asylum seekers whose individual needs appear to require special consideration”³²

Asylum accommodation is provided on a ‘no-choice’ basis.³³ The ‘dispersal’ system allocates people to accommodation providers based in identified regions around the UK, on the basis of bed space availability rather than the personal preferences of the person seeking

asylum. Private contractors provide asylum accommodation through a series of commercial contracts known as COMPASS, agreed with the Home Office.

People who have found accommodation with friends or family can apply for financial support, known as ‘subsistence only’ support.

People whose asylum claims have been refused and do not have dependent children aged under 18 living with them will have their asylum support terminated 21 days after the date of the final decision on their claim. However, a person in this situation may be eligible for limited, non-cash support under section 4 of the 1999 Act. This is the case if a person meets strict eligibility criteria. In summary, the criteria allow support to be given to people who are unable to return to their country of origin because they are medically unfit to travel, because they still have an outstanding immigration matter with the Home Office or because they are taking steps to return but require support while they are in the process of doing this.

For all forms of support, applicants will be expected to provide proof that they are destitute.

In the next chapter, we explore the extent to which the ‘asylum support system’ makes provision for the needs and experiences of women.

Chapter Three:

The asylum support system

KEY FINDINGS

- Home Office asylum support policies overwhelmingly reference women in the context of their needs in pregnancy.
- There are very few references to women in the policies outside the context of pregnancy.
- There are very few mentions of gender-based violence outside of the current DV guidance which is itself written in a gender neutral way. The few mentions of gender-based violence contain very little recognition of its disproportionate impact on women and give very little guidance to caseworkers about how to make safe and sensitive decisions on support cases where this is factor.
- Certain aspects of the asylum support system can have a different, or disproportionate impact on women, particularly those with childcare responsibilities. These include:
 - Being allocated accommodation in any dispersal region, without consideration given to a woman's own preferences ('no-choice' accommodation);
 - Sharing accommodation with unrelated adults;
 - Living on a low income;
 - Financial dependency on spouses.
- Concerns were raised about the gender sensitivity of some accommodation provider staff, particularly with regard to respecting women's privacy when making housing visits.
- Safety concerns relating to women who live in shared asylum accommodation with unrelated adults are dealt with inconsistently and are sometimes dismissed or minimised.

With the legislation above providing the statutory framework for the Home Office administered asylum support system, day-to-day decision-making on applications for support, or notifications of changes to people's circumstances, is governed by a series of Home Office Asylum Support Instructions.³⁴

Here, we provide some analysis of the extent to which these documents consider the specific needs of women

generally, and then of women who may be at risk from abuse or harm. We go on to highlight certain aspects of the asylum support system that disproportionately affect women, drawing from our datasets.

3.1 What does asylum support policy say about women?

The terms 'woman/women' are mentioned 89 times in the 345 pages of Asylum Support Instructions, primarily in the context of pregnancy. If the references to pregnant women are discounted, then woman/women are mentioned just eight times.

Pregnancy:

81 of the references to women in asylum support policy are to pregnant women. The majority of these (53) are in relation to healthcare considerations that must be taken into account when dispersing pregnant women and can be found mainly in the *Healthcare Needs and Pregnancy Dispersal Policy*.³⁵ There are also 22 references to their entitlements to small amounts of additional financial support during pregnancy and the first years of a child's life. There are six references to the need for extra consideration when decisions are being taken in regard to granting or stopping support to a pregnant woman. There is no discussion of abuse or the risk of abuse to women within these references.

Visibility of women who are not pregnant:

Outside of the pregnancy context, there are six references to the terms 'woman/women', referring to statutory regulations governing whether a woman is entitled to support or not as a dependant of another asylum seeker.

There is one reference to the situation of a woman who has separated from an 'estranged' partner who has been granted some form of leave to remain in the UK. In this scenario, caseworkers are instructed to accept on 'face value' that a woman can no longer access any support via the estranged partner. There is no mention of abuse or the risk of abuse in this context.

Finally, there is one reference in a section on '*Racist Incidents*'³⁶ to the fact that the Home Office and accommodation providers are advised not to allocate 'vulnerable premises' to households, including those comprising single women.

Gender based harm: Domestic Violence

Chapter 23 of *Asylum Support: Policy Bulletins Instructions*³⁷ deals specifically with incidents of domestic violence for people already accommodated within the support system. This is the only section of the policies that deals in any level of detail with a form of gender-based violence. However, the instruction is 'gender-neutral'. Women are not identified as being more vulnerable to this type of harm than men, despite a wealth of evidence that this is the case (see 1.1 above).

There are five other references to domestic violence in other policies. Four of these policies give brief guidance to Home Office caseworkers on actions to take when someone who is already on support experiences domestic violence. Again, the references are gender neutral.

The policy on the application of section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, is the only policy that identifies 'females' as being primarily affected by domestic violence.³⁸

Other forms of gender-based harm:

Other types of violence and harm that we would identify as being gender-based are referenced five times outside Chapter 23. The gender attributed to a potential victim of such abuse is either male or neutral.

For example, Chapter 24 of *Asylum Support: Policy Bulletins Instructions*, requires the Home Office to take into account the special needs of an asylum seeker and his family members when offering section 95 or section 98 support if, amongst other criteria, he is:

*"a person who has been subjected to torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence who has had an individual evaluation of **his** situation that confirms **he** has special needs."*

A similar provision is referenced in the Asylum Support Instruction relating to eligibility for section 4 support.³⁹ This document informs decision-makers that, for section 4 applications made by people who have suffered these forms of violence, pregnant women, and potential victims of trafficking, "*reasonable efforts should be made to decide the application within two working days*".

The policy that deal with breaches of conditions for people currently on support also references vulnerable groups as requiring particular attention if a decision is being considered to stop support.⁴⁰ The policy on section 55 decisions references the need to show sensitivity when dealing with a case where rape or torture is known to be a factor.⁴¹ Finally, the policy on allocation of accommodation references gender-based violence in the context of two specialist agencies who offer services to survivors.⁴²

Our analysis shows that, on paper, the Home Office asylum support policies pay attention to the needs of pregnant women. However, the challenges that women face in relation to experiences, or threats, of gender-based violence are not given the same consideration and prominence. Where types of gender-based violence are highlighted there is only one mention of its disproportionate impact on women. The particular risks of abuse and exploitation posed to women

Women seeking asylum:

living in destitution are not discussed and there is little guidance given to support caseworkers to make safe and sensitive decisions on support cases for women in these circumstances.

3.2 Access to the asylum procedure

Several elements of the asylum support system have emerged, in our data collection and through a review of the literature, as presenting challenges for women. This is regardless of women's experiences, or otherwise, of gender-based violence whilst in the UK.

Prior to even contemplating an application for asylum support, women must lodge a claim for asylum. This first step in accessing the asylum system, and by extension, asylum support system, emerged as potentially problematic for women.

People who wish to register a claim for asylum from inside the UK must attend a screening interview, in person, most usually at the Asylum Intake Unit in Croydon (also known as the Asylum Screening Unit). However, guidance suggests that people whose health or other specialist circumstances would prevent them from travelling to Croydon can benefit from procedures that enable them to be 'screened' locally.⁴³

Where women disclose that they are fleeing abuse, we have found some evidence of good practice, including procedures that enable local screening, so women avoid having to travel long distances on their own, sometimes with their children:

"The safeguarding team at the Home office have responded well and given the woman "a vulnerable women's appointment" to claim asylum locally instead of London"

Survey respondent 134 – North West England

However, one interviewee noted that even if referring agencies successfully arrange for screening to take place locally, delays in screening appointments in her region leave women who have children reliant upon support from social services, themselves overstretched in terms of budget:

"the whole process takes many weeks sometimes months and this means social services are not always willing to pay for them in No Recourse to Public Funds accommodation..."

Interviewee 7

Another survey respondent noted that women who attend the unit in Croydon without an appointment, and are not assessed as being destitute, can be turned away with no apparent attempt to confirm that they have a safe place to which they can return, despite guidance to the contrary.

"Women who have been turned away by the Asylum Screening Unit when attempting to claim asylum on the day as they are not deemed destitute and therefore not eligible for a walk-in appointment... This is an area of concern as gatekeeping at the ASU can result in potential victims of trafficking and vulnerable asylum seekers being left at risk of exploitation."

Survey respondent 26, London

3.3 No choice accommodation / frequent moves

Asylum accommodation is provided on a 'no choice' basis. People living on asylum support have no tenancy rights in the properties allocated to them, and can be moved, sometimes at short notice, within the accommodation 'estate' of an accommodation provider. This can include moves between dispersal regions.

While the upheaval involved in moving frequently affects both men and women, concerns were raised about the impact of moves on women with children, and on women who are pregnant, for whom access to healthcare provision and children's schooling is particularly important:

"Every time we move, [my children] have to change school... My children suffered a lot at that time."

Claire

Charlotte's story

Charlotte was living in asylum accommodation with her young child.

She reported problems with hygiene in the property. A Housing Officer from the accommodation provider began to visit the property, with no notice given of his visits.

Charlotte told an advocacy worker that he was entering her room unannounced, knocking and then coming in immediately. This made Charlotte feel threatened. Initially, he didn't introduce himself and wasn't wearing a badge.

Charlotte contacted the accommodation provider several times by phone to report this, but nothing happened. It was only when an advocacy organisation raised the issue with the Home Office that a female housing officer took over her case.

"I would like to see it that men are not allowed to enter women's room, I don't think that it's appropriate at all [...] women need to have information and power over their own space. You can't have random men wandering up, knocking your door and wandering in [...] They say that they need to check if people are there, but I don't think that it should be men who check, particularly as many women have suffered violence, sexual abuse and trafficking."

"I worry about the impact of the constant moving around, I would get people settled in an area sooner, so I think if you have children or you're pregnant, there shouldn't be multiple moves, this should be where you're going to be until you have a decision"

Interviewee 4

"You've got very vulnerable people, all staff working with them should be conducting selves with highest standards of behaviour"

Interviewee 4

One survey respondent noted that s/he had reported to an accommodation provider:

"Staff in accommodation and their total disregard for the woman's privacy."

Survey respondent 52 – North East England

Another *"had supported a group of women who told the Home Office about the housing providers coming into their private rooms when they were partially clothed without knocking or asking permission."*⁴⁶

One survey respondent, who had personal experience of living on asylum support, expressed herself thus:

"It was abuse of power. This [...] welfare officer comes and opens your room and leaves door wide open before you move out of the accommodation. Just to embarrass you."

Survey respondent 92 – West Midlands

3.4 Accommodation standards

Our interview questions focused on women's safety from gender-based violence. Yet, several interviewees raised more general concerns about women's wellbeing within asylum accommodation.

3.4.1 Conduct of accommodation provider staff

Two of our survey respondents noted in their responses that they were aware of allegations of abuse by accommodation provider staff.⁴⁴ Without further details, these cannot be substantiated.

However, there were indications that staff conduct, even when not meeting a threshold of harassment or abuse, could be improved. Given the high prevalence of past experiences of violence and abuse amongst women seeking asylum, this is critical.⁴⁵

Women seeking asylum:

Previous research has raised similar issues.

“An advocate knew of instances of sexual harassment between the male staff and female asylum seekers or bullying, raising real issues of abuse of power. There are also concerns about housing officers entering unannounced into women’s rooms which raise serious issues of privacy.”⁴⁷

Charlotte’s case illustrates some of these points in more detail.

3.4.2 Shared accommodation

COMPASS contracts allow accommodation providers to house unrelated people together, and this extends to single parent families. Families in this situation will be allocated separate and lockable rooms but will normally share washing and kitchen facilities.

While this was not the focus of our research, the difficulties and tensions inherent in asking unrelated adults to share a living space emerged as a strong theme, supported by evidence from previous research.⁴⁸ Safety in shared accommodation is a major concern for trans-women, as for other people who identify as LGBTQI.⁴⁹

29% of our survey respondents⁵⁰ had dealt with incidents of abuse where the perpetrator was another resident in asylum accommodation. Where further details about such incidents were provided, there was evidence of inconsistencies in approaches to dealing with reports of this nature.

“We supported someone to make a complaint about their housemate in S95 accommodation when they felt at risk as a result of frequent male guests coming to the accommodation and threats from the housemate. They did respond to the complaint and did surprisingly act quite sensitively to this. They issued a warning to the housemate and let our client know that she should get in touch if anything happened again.”

Survey respondent 40 – London

More commonly, there was evidence that such incidents were ignored or minimised by accommodation providers.

“when an individual was experiencing physical violence towards herself in her shared accommodation, she called the police. The accommodation providers told her that it wasn’t that bad and told her not to call the police again even though she had been punched to the ground and kicked.”

Survey respondent 137 – North East England

“Several cases of women threatened by other tenants, or by men from whom the women were running away. The response was usually non-committal, or wait and see, or that the things get better by themselves.”

Survey respondent 38 – East Midlands

Even where relationships between residents have not deteriorated to this point, women who have previously experienced abuse from male perpetrators can feel unsafe in shared accommodation if unknown men are allowed access to the home by other residents.

“We have raised safety concerns relating to female Potential Victims of Trafficking living in asylum support accommodation, and their safety in relation to unauthorised male visitors and threats and actual violence from housemates. On some occasions we have had no response, and on one occasion were advised that the woman would be abandoning her asylum support provision if she left out of fear for her safety.”

Survey respondent 29 – East Midlands

“We brought to their attention that some of the women have experienced violence in the past as a result they are afraid to be amongst men. Especially when they are living in women only accommodation and some others inviting male visitors does create a problem.”

Survey respondent 98, South West England

3.4.3 Mixed sex environments

Although some single-sex Initial Accommodation (IA) units do exist; and in some regions, Initial Accommodation is offered in individual flats or accommodation units rather than in hostel-type spaces, concerns were raised by our survey respondents and interviewees about the appropriateness of some IA provision. These most commonly related to the difficulties of living in mixed sex environments for women who have suffered any type of gender-based violence.

“There are no women only spaces to enable women’s safety. Mixed sex environments can be problematic with high prevalence of sexual violence experiences.”

Survey respondent 32-London

“If a woman is a victim of sexual violence and is placed in accommodation with men and shared facilities, she is likely to be very afraid”

Survey respondent 153 – London

One survey respondent felt that these fears and risks could lead women to avoid taking up an offer of Initial Accommodation.

“I have supported women who would like to apply for accommodation through the Asylum Support system and who are told to apply for S98 accommodation – the women are too scared to take this accommodation offer and have remained in a potentially exploitative or vulnerable situation to avoid Initial Accommodation.”

Survey respondent 34

3.5 Life on a limited income

As noted above, women seeking asylum do not have access to mainstream welfare benefits. Women living on section 95 support will be provided with £37.75 per person per week for them and their dependants.⁵¹ Pregnant women, babies and children under three receive small additional payments to assist them to buy healthy food.⁵²

Previous research has noted that women living on asylum support, particularly those who have children to care for may go without food or other essentials in order to meet their children’s needs.

“The mothers told us that they often had to decide between whether to provide food for their children or pay for other essential living needs. One mother told us ‘... with that money you have to buy the soap, the cleaning materials, bus pass money, everything comes from that money so we have to sometimes cut on the food’”⁵³

Difficulties in ‘making ends meet’ are most evident for women living, sometimes with their children, on section 4 support. This is a cashless form of support, where people are provided with a payment card (ASPEN card), topped up each week with £35.39 per family member, that can be used in the same way as a debit card to pay for goods, but cannot be used to withdraw cash.

There is ample evidence that people who live on section 4 support face a multitude of barriers to meeting their basic needs.⁵⁴ ASPEN cards can only be used in shops that accept debit cards, and so people cannot access cheaper foodstuffs e.g. from local markets; and struggle to access public transport.

“They give me a card and I get £35 a week. You know how expensive things are. Even if you buy four things, you have spent the money. If you are financially strong, you are less tense and stressed. Living on a low income adds to all the stress and tension.”

Ruth

Women seeking asylum:

In trying to overcome the limits placed on their income, women may enter into risky and potentially exploitative situations:

“In order to access money, two of the mothers told us that they attempted to exchange their vouchers or Azure payment for cash payments. This involved approaching friends, but also strangers [...] Trying to exchange their vouchers or Azure payments for cash left some of the mothers open to exploitation.”⁵⁵

“the little money they get together with the fact they cannot work, makes them hugely exposed to exploitation/being used in order to survive”

Survey respondent 75 – London

Finally, asylum support does not make provision for separate payments to women and men within family units. One adult in the family is provided with a single weekly payment that covers the whole family's entitlement, accessible only by a single ASPEN card issued in the name of the main applicant for support. Such a system, of a single familial payment, can leave women from all backgrounds open to financial abuse and has been heavily critiqued in the context of the roll-out of Universal Credit.⁵⁶

There are indications that this can indeed be the case for women seeking asylum.

“in most cases the perpetrators are still living with the victims. many suffer financial abuse as well”

Survey respondent 98 – South West England

“Financial abuse was also recorded in asylum-seeking communities, with women being prevented from signing for the asylum support payments in order that the men could maintain financial dominance over them.”⁵⁷

The risks to women who are left destitute after refusal of their asylum claim are explored in more detail in Chapter Seven below.

PART TWO: Ensuring women’s safety in the asylum support system

Chapter Four:

Disclosures of abuse

4.1 How frequent are disclosures?

We asked practitioners from a range of organisations across the UK how often in the past year, if at all, they had dealt with women seeking asylum who disclosed that they had suffered, or were still at risk, from violence or abuse in the UK. Only 15% of our total survey respondents worked in organisations or services with a focus on working with women facing gender-based violence.⁵⁸

Their responses are below.

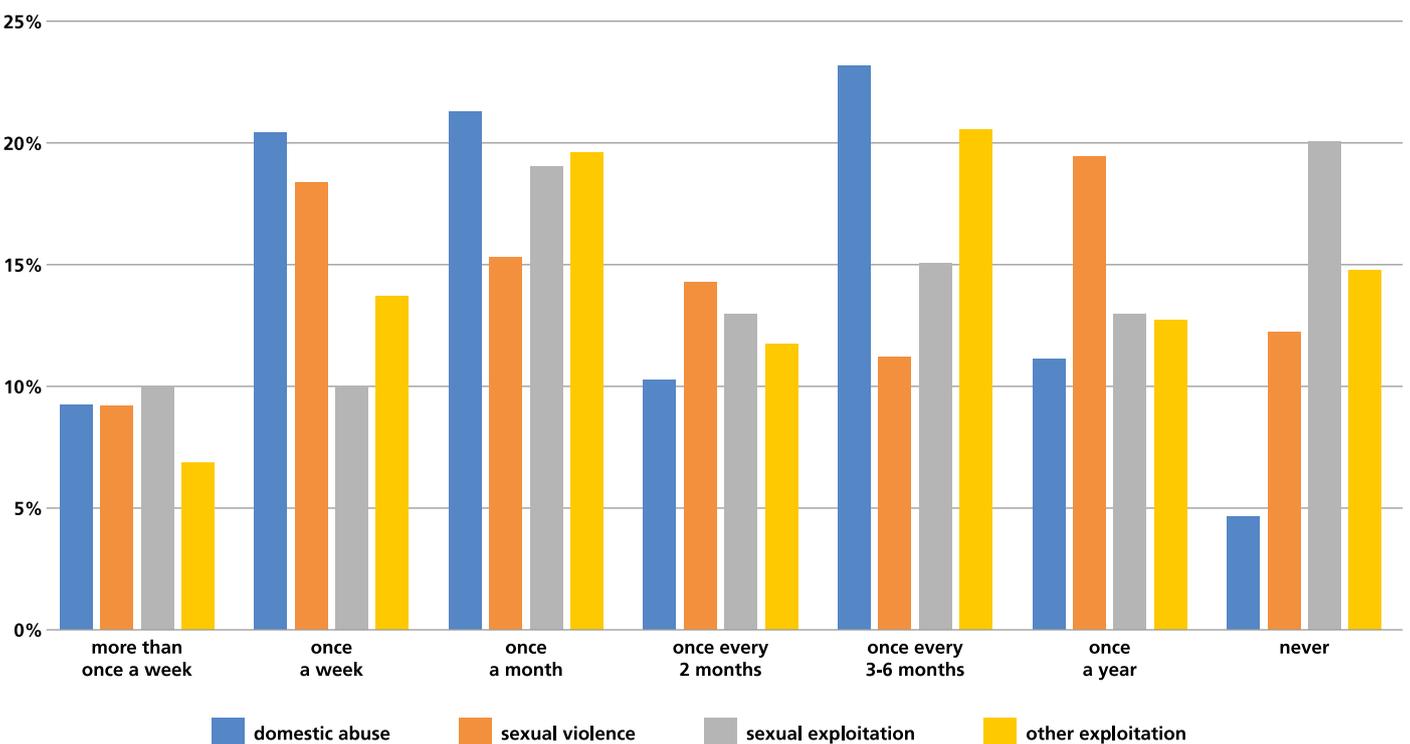
Domestic abuse was the form of abuse most frequently disclosed to the professionals who responded to our survey. Just over 50% of respondents told us that they

dealt with disclosures of domestic abuse at least once a month. Almost 10% of respondents dealt with such disclosures more than once a week.

However, at the upper end of the scale, disclosures of all forms of abuse identified in our study occur at comparable levels of frequency.

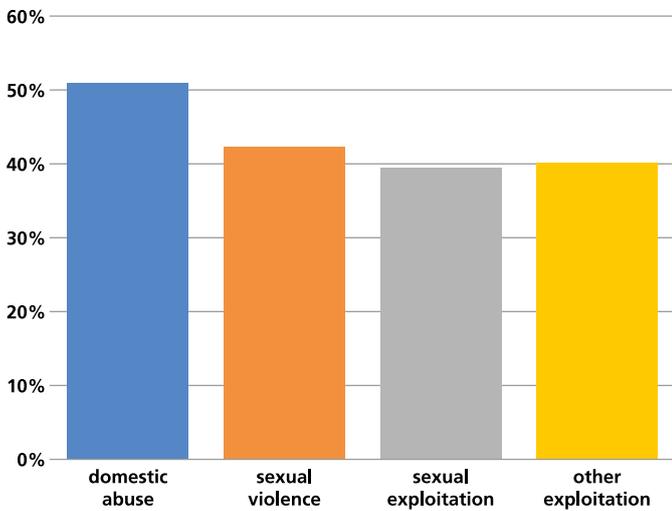
We note here the potential links between these different types of abuse and harm, for example between domestic servitude and exposure to sexual violence and abuse. This confirms the importance of taking a holistic view of women’s past and current experiences when assessing their safety, particularly in the context of forced migration.

Frequency of disclosure in the last year – all forms of abuse (111 respondents)



Women seeking asylum:

% of respondents dealing with disclosures once per month or more in the past year (all forms of abuse)



“There was one woman, she came, was put with a family [...] she was looking after children and at night the husband was taking advantage of her, she can’t tell the wife because of fear of getting kicked out ... they pass to another family, when children reach school age, she is no longer needed, pass to other family, sexual abuse by other men or by husbands of family, and no family there to help her. It’s like a uniform experience of abuse. They have no privacy, they live in the living room, any man who is hanging around in that accommodation exploits them ...”

Interviewee 13

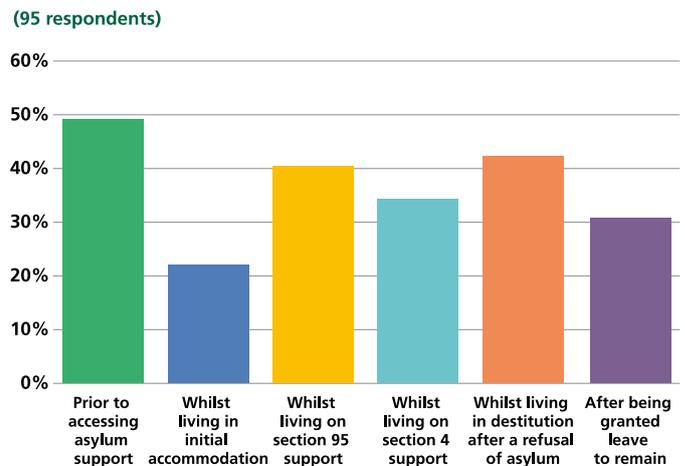
4.2 When are disclosures made?

Our survey findings indicate that disclosures of abuse can occur at all stages of the asylum support process.

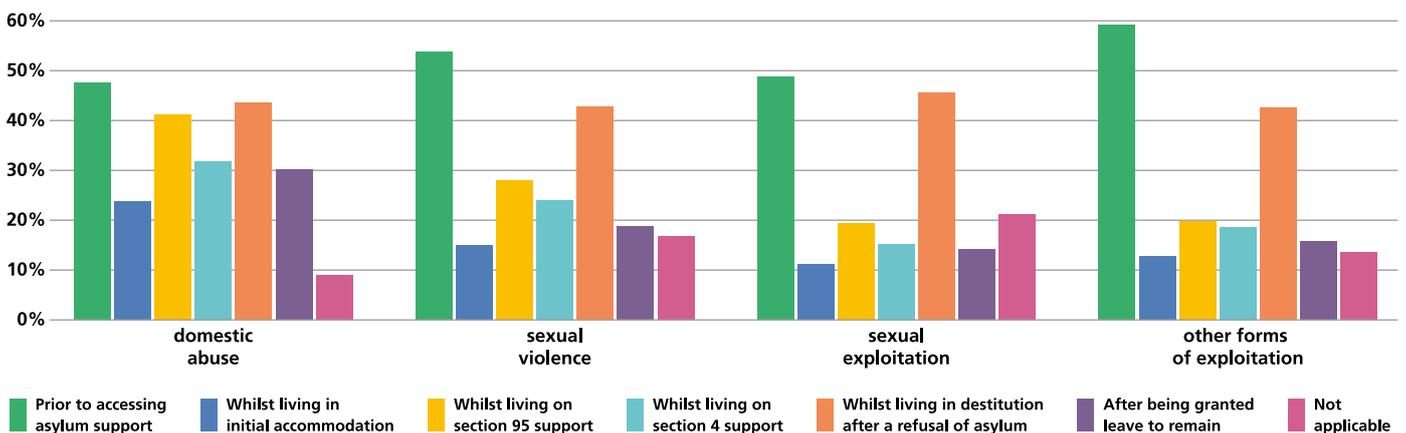
For all forms of abuse, our respondents had dealt with disclosure most often when working with women who were trying to access the asylum support system. This highlights the importance of processes that can assess and identify risk at an early stage.

Disclosures were then most frequent for women living in destitution after having had their asylum claims refused. However, particularly for domestic abuse, there are clear indications that the risk of abuse is very real for women while they are living on the various forms of asylum support (section 98, section 95, section 4). Moreover, for women who have recently been granted leave to remain, experiences of homelessness can again place them in situations where they are exposed to abuse, as we explore in Chapter Seven below.

At what stages of the asylum support process has a woman disclosed domestic abuse (95 respondents)



At what stages of the asylum support process has a woman disclosed to you that she is at risk from violence or abuse (tick all that apply)



4.3 Barriers to disclosure of abuse

EU-wide data suggests that, of the one in five women who have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime, only 14% of women reported their most serious incidence of intimate partner violence to the police.⁵⁹

Women seeking asylum, and other women subject to immigration control, may face additional barriers that impede or prevent them disclosing abuse and from accessing services and seeking safety. This was confirmed by our interviewees. We summarise these additional barriers below.

Identifying the behaviour as abuse

Recognising behaviour as abuse, particularly when it takes the form of coercion or controlling behaviour from an intimate partner or family member, can be an issue for all women, regardless of their immigration status or cultural background:

“it’s recognising that they are experiencing domestic abuse, one of the first questions women ask is they’re not sure if they are experiencing domestic abuse, particular when they are not experiencing violence but a level of coercion or controlling behaviour.”

Interviewee 14

It may be particularly difficult for women whose home countries do not have a legislative framework that recognises and seeks to prevent and punish ‘private’ forms of abuse.

“After I explained everything to them, they told me what your husband has done is a crime and we can help you and your children to find a safe place to live. Because my husband misbehaved and started hitting me, that’s why. They told me it was a crime.”

Claire

Lack of awareness of legal systems, rights and support services in the UK

Women may be unaware, or struggle to access agencies or professionals that can provide support.

“At that time, I didn’t know what kind of help I could get.”

Claire

“It’s difficult for a woman with good English to understand how all different services coordinate...it’s just more complicated ... if you put all the new domestic violence policies into the criminal justice system, migrant women lose out because you’re presuming that they’re ok to use criminal justice system but most of them it’s too scary because of implications about immigration, whether police listen to them as opposed to husband who has better English ...”

Interviewee 7

In the context of asylum, women may be a dependant on their partner’s asylum claim and be unaware that they have the right to lodge their own request for international protection.

Fear of being removed from the UK and mistrust of authorities

Coercive control exerted by the perpetrator, combined with women’s insecure immigration status, can contribute to feelings of fear, particularly around the possibility of being removed from the UK.⁶⁰ This fear can manifest itself in an unwillingness to report abuse to authorities.

“I saw this woman and she said in the beginning that she did not want me to contact the Home Office as she was terrified it would go against her asylum case, I tried to reassure her that they’re quite separate, asylum support and asylum, immigration...quite separate but she didn’t want me to get the Home Office involved...”

Interviewee 12

Women seeking asylum:

"One woman, when I was doing outreach work in IA, she would whisper in case somebody heard her ... 'nobody can know, they will send me back' ... and no matter how I explained things to her."

Interviewee 8

"Women are always under the fear that they will not be believed and therefore returned to country of origin where they are also at risk."

Survey respondent 157 – West Midlands

Perpetrators may actively encourage and manipulate these concerns to silence and control women.

"they'd rather stay with it and belong to the perpetrator because of the fear of being sent back home and perpetrator using that as a huge power game, 'I'm going to phone Home Office and tell them and they'll send you back' ... and when they have no family and no support and are faced with that controlling behaviour, it's very difficult..."

Interviewee 8

"our members who work with women who are refugees or migrants will talk about perpetrators using isolation and women's insecure immigration status to prevent women being able to access support or look for help, that is used purposefully to undermine women's ability to think that they would be able to get help or support or that they would be deported if they were to raise this as they are dependent for their immigration status on husband ..."

Interviewee 14

Health issues, particularly mental health and the impact of trauma

The effects of gender-based violence are wide ranging and can be physical, emotional, psychological and social.⁶¹ This can affect women's ability to disclose, even more so if they have experienced forms of sexual violence.⁶²

The impact of trauma was confirmed by our interviewees.

"It is difficult to talk about it. The wounds are still fresh."

Claire

"she's quite switched on and her English is reasonable but because of her trauma it's difficult for her to advocate for herself"

Interviewee 9

As we explore further below, there are ongoing issues around women's ability to access the support services they may need to recover from their experiences.

"People are not getting their needs met, from a mental health perspective, making them very vulnerable, if there is conflict in the house or any kind of abuse, they are not given any space at all to deal with what has historically happened ... level of mental health support nowhere near sufficient [...] to deal with things they have experienced ..."

Interviewee 11

Shame and guilt

Feelings of shame can affect or prevent disclosure.⁶³ Women often worry about how they will be perceived by family or community, particularly within cultures who put a lot of importance in marriage and family life.

"A lot of the presenting issue is 'I'm being punished because I have left this man, how am I going to be presented as a woman?' Marriage is for life, understanding cultural diversity as how will she be perceived as a woman, how are women presented there?"

Interviewee 8

"It was not a good relationship, I had to face domestic abuse, and when I complained, my mum said it's OK. In [my country], we always blame the woman. It is always her fault."

Ruth

If violence has been perpetrated by someone other than her husband, married women may be reluctant to report it for fear of their husband leaving them or being ostracised by the community due to taboos around sex and gender.⁶⁴

"A woman who was sexually abused on her way travelling while husband and children travelling in another vehicle and amount of stress she had when she came here to talk about that without husband knowing and getting referrals and assistance [...] when sexual abuse is by somebody else and husband not aware and the risk she's taking in terms of how her family life can still go on...but she needs help."

Interviewee 13

We do however advocate caution in identifying the shame of disclosing as being specific to women from certain cultures. Women born in the UK frequently delay disclosing experiences of sexual violence for similar reasons of shame and fear.⁶⁵

Transnational risk

Women may not fear only for their safety, but for the safety of children or other family members living in other countries, whom, they are told, may be harmed or disadvantaged if they report abuse.

"I did have a woman who called the police [...] but she got threats that her mum would be made homeless if she went to the Police, she withdrew from Police and they recorded her as not cooperating [...] the whole support system collapsed because of a threat to her mum [...] you have to look beyond the violence that's there, there can be multiple perpetrators, some women have children they've left behind that they're trying to protect at same time as themselves."

Interviewee 7

"Husband's family back in their country were quite powerful people ...safety of child back home was a big concern, she somehow tried to secure her family are aware of situation in UK and try to keep that child safe from his family [...] ultimately we don't know the outcome..."

Interviewee 13

'Hearing' disclosures: service provider responses

Disclosure of any important, traumatic or shameful event is a two-way process. If the first person within an organisation fails to respond appropriately, this can impede any further disclosures in the future.

"when they get a response, it is dismissive or unsympathetic or doesn't believe them, that reaffirms what they will have been told throughout their experience with an abusive partner and I think that it such a hugely undermining and soul-destroying experience for women that it's no wonder that they don't look for support again"

Interviewee 14

Women seeking asylum:

People need time to “establish a sufficient level of trust and confidence to reveal the potentially painful and shaming details of their experiences.”⁶⁶

Therefore, disclosure of abuse may emerge only after a sustained period of working with a woman.

“Domestic violence was witnessed directly. Then domestic violence was explicitly disclosed verbally later, sexual violence was hinted at.”

Survey respondent 39 – Scotland

“Women [...] may take years to disclose the full extent of their experiences”

Survey respondent 123 – Wales

“That time was really difficult. I never told them about what was happening. They ask me ‘how are you?’. I said, ‘I am good’. I couldn’t tell them, but they realised that I am in a bad situation. All that time I was sitting in the women’s group, always in the corner, sitting alone, feeling sad. [Group worker] realised that I was in a bad situation.”

Claire

Indicators for abuse may be very subtle and the disclosures may be only in part, which can present challenges for agencies who are supporting women or advocating on their behalf.

“I’m pretty certain that it was non-consensual without it being said in so many words ... she kind of said I don’t know how it happened, it’s someone that she met, someone offered to help carry her bags and then something happened but then she became pregnant.”

Interviewee 9

“women won’t say ‘I was raped’, they will tell you it in a very respectful, polite way”

Interviewee 8

This highlights the importance of sustained training and support for all staff working in frontline roles across the statutory and voluntary sectors, who may find themselves as the ‘first responder’ to a disclosure of violence or abuse. A fragmented system, with only certain staff members empowered to react to disclosure, cannot hope to ensure women’s safety.

“I think that because of the fragmentation in asylum support services and no one point of presentation for people, you find out that different organisations might have different responses to presentations. I think the risk is depending on the depth of training staff and organisations have, as without it, some useful information might actually be missed [...] If the right environment is not created to facilitate that disclosure it might never happen.”

Interviewee 10

“it’s fragmentation of not just clinical care but all support services, having to replicate it each time they move, introduces delays and new people and people who did have safety issues, they need a period of trust building really, you can’t just keep doing that repeatedly.”

Interviewee 4

We reflect further on the importance of inter-agency communication and improving information sharing and collaborative working in Chapter Eight, below.

4.4 Perpetrators

We asked respondents to our survey to indicate the identity of perpetrators in cases involving women at risk from abuse. However, we did not ask for details of the specific incidences of abuse attributed to each type of perpetrator and so our findings here provide only a general indication.

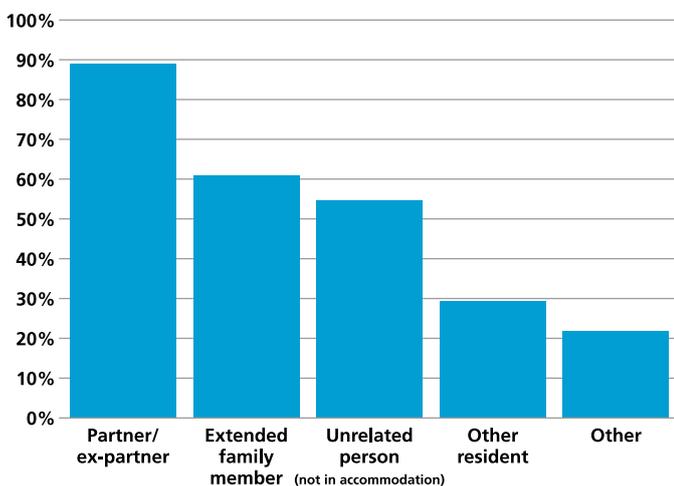
90% of our survey respondents had dealt with cases involving a perpetrator who was a partner or ex-partner. 60% of respondents had worked on cases where extended family members were the perpetrator(s) and in 54% of cases, it was an unrelated person (not living within the same accommodation). Where respondents ticked 'other' and chose to add a comment, some indicated other types of perpetrators. Traffickers were most frequently mentioned (7 times). Other responses included employer, gang member, accommodation provider, and staff member at detention facility.

Several respondents explained that it could be difficult to identify perpetrators, or fully understand the dynamics within families. One interviewee spoke of her sense that, although some women accessing asylum support claimed to be living separately from a perpetrator, they might come back into contact with that person at a later date, when dispersed from the relatively controlled environment of Initial Accommodation.

"if we don't know the true nature of a woman's relationship, we can't do any kind of risk assessment around that."

Interviewee 4

Who were the perpetrators in the cases you have dealt with? (n=110)



As previous work has demonstrated, coercive, shadowy relationships may be 'survival strategies' for some women, especially if they are living in destitution, and so can be difficult to identify and tackle.⁶⁷

In other examples from our data, despite very serious criminal offences being committed, it was unclear whether any attempts were made to bring perpetrators to justice.

"Client disclosed this as an historic situation in which a man offered to bring her food following a major operation and then routinely raped her and told her that she was illegal even though she had a pending asylum claim and if she reported him they would detain and deport her. He was violent and eventually it was on a hospital visit when a nurse noticed bruises and it was exposed. The client was too afraid to lay charges."

Survey respondent 148 – London

The current asylum support policy on domestic violence advises that accommodation providers should:

"warn offenders of the possible consequences, including prosecution and loss of their accommodation and support"

This contrasts sharply with the relevant policy instructions on racist incidents, which assign to the Home Office a far more active role in supporting a criminal justice response:

"The Home Office is committed to [...] Considering the full range of civil legal remedies against perpetrators of racial harassment, and to playing its part in their appropriate implementation."

While in the context of intimate partner violence, it may not be appropriate for the Home Office to intervene directly, we suggest that the current wording of the policy does not recognise the severity of this type of harm.

Chapter Five:

Access to the asylum support system

KEY FINDINGS

- The national Home Office funded asylum support telephone advice line does not provide an adequate pathway into asylum support for women who are at risk of violence and abuse in the UK.
- Women can face barriers in accessing section 98 support, even where they have fled documented situations of abuse and exploitation.
- Abuse can escalate at the point when a woman takes steps to leave an abusive situation. Delays in access to section 98 or section 4 support can therefore leave women vulnerable to further abuse or violence.
- The stated ‘two-day’ time limit for deciding on section 4 support applications from people with particular vulnerabilities is not consistently met when women who are at risk from abuse or exploitation apply for this support.
- Home Office guidance to decision-makers on assessing destitution does not make allowance for the difficulties that victims of domestic abuse and other forms of violence may face in gathering evidence to support applications for support.
- Repeated requests for evidence of destitution evidence are sometimes made, even where a woman has disclosed a history of abuse that makes gathering this evidence extremely difficult.

Our findings indicate that there is a lack of uniform good practice when women who escape abusive situations seek to enter the asylum support system.

We highlight some of the continuing issues below.

5.1 Pathways into the asylum support system

Asylum support advice is available to all people seeking asylum via a national, government-funded, asylum support telephone helpline.⁶⁸ Since 2012, this service has been provided by Migrant Help. Migrant Help is the only charity receiving Home Office funding to assist people seeking asylum into the asylum support system. All asylum support applications, enquiries and requests to amend support, whether or not completed with the assistance of Migrant Help must be submitted to the Home Office via Migrant Help.

People who may be eligible for support but have not yet applied to enter the asylum support system, can use the advice line to seek advice on their circumstances and lodge an application for either section 98, section 95 or section 4 support.

Telephone advice helplines have been successfully used for many years as means to report or seek advice on gender-based violence – for example, the National Domestic Violence Helpline or local Rape Crisis Helplines. However, these have a narrowly refined remit and are staffed by women who have received in-depth training on working with survivors of abuse.

By contrast, in the asylum context, one clear finding is that the current government-funded telephone advice service lacks capacity to respond rapidly to enquiries. This can have particularly adverse consequences for women who are at immediate risk of harm.

Numerous interviewees spoke of the long waiting lines on the existing asylum support telephone advice line:

“we’ve been in the sixties [clarified this can mean over an hour of waiting time] and they’ll say that it’s free calls, which it is, but it ties up our volunteer time”

Interviewee 2

“the waiting time on the phone is horrendous.”

Interviewee 12

“there’s the asylum helpline but my colleague rang other day and she was 70 in the queue, we ring it often but [...] have to wait forever”

Interviewee 11

“A lot of people find it very difficult to go through Migrant Help, a lot of people find it hard to talk on the phone and wait for an hour and a half on the phone for Migrant Help”

Interviewee 3

These long waiting times could exacerbate women’s ability to disclose, given the already numerous barriers to disclosure we highlight in Chapter Four above. Even if a woman has already disclosed abuse and has the help of an advocate, the telephone delays may mean that she doesn’t receive the quick response that she needs. It is critical to note that where a woman is living with abuse, the point at which she decides to seek help to try to exit that situation is the most fraught with danger. Being able to wait for over an hour on a telephone is not an option for some women.

“this is the most difficult time and greatest likelihood of increased risk to woman and her children is the time when they are considering leaving abusive partner, this is the time when women are most at risk if they are experiencing violence, that is likely to escalate at that time.”

Interviewee 14

All of this can be problematic for women who are already living on asylum support and seek to exit an abusive situation. But for women who are not within the system and in more precarious living circumstances, this could be a barrier to even making the first steps towards safety.

5.2 Access to section 98 Support (Initial Accommodation)

If a woman, often with the help of a specialist refugee agency, does manage to access the asylum support advice line, her first point of entry into the system is likely to be a request to enter Initial Accommodation, provided under section 98 of the Immigration and Asylum Act. This request can be made over the telephone, if a woman has already claimed asylum, or can be made verbally when the woman attends her screening interview at the unit in Croydon, if she is destitute at the point of claiming.

As noted above, pregnant women do benefit from some consideration in current guidance around enabling ‘vulnerable persons’ to access this support. Whilst there is also some guidance to decision-makers on how to integrate assessments of vulnerability to abuse or exploitation into their decision-making around applications for entry to initial accommodation, it is mainly focused on health needs and victims of trafficking. Our data imply that this can result in women who have fled abusive situations being denied immediate entry to Initial Accommodation provision, putting them at risk.

“If it’s an Initial Accommodation request to get the woman out of a dangerous situation we have had mixed responses. Usually Initial Accommodation has been granted immediately but on a couple of occasions the Home Office have questioned whether the woman is essentially making it up in order to get accommodation”.

Survey respondent 91 – North-West England

Women seeking asylum:

“Several times raised concerns about women sleeping rough whilst attempting to access S98 support who are at risk of sexual exploitation or currently exchanging sex for place to sleep. When these concerns are raised s98 has generally been granted swiftly but the women will have been trying to access s98 [...] for several days beforehand and not deemed to meet the evidence threshold for destitution.”

Survey respondent 26 – London

One case study provided to us illustrated a lack of clarity surrounding the roles and boundaries of other statutory services in providing support to women who are at risk of abuse and find themselves destitute. This echoes our findings in Chapter Eight below, about the importance of inter-agency communication and co-operation.

Jane's story

Jane had been trafficked to the UK and had been involved in prostitution.

She was referred to a specialist voluntary sector agency by Community Police who came across her when she became homeless. They were concerned that she was vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation.

Workers within the specialist agency met with Jane and raised additional concerns around her mental health due to erratic behaviour.

Having accommodated Jane through charitable funds for one night while they sought information on her immigration status, the specialist agency contacted Migrant Help who advised that she had an ongoing asylum claim.

Migrant Help facilitated an application for Jane to go into local Initial Accommodation. In letters accompanying her request for IA, workers highlighted her vulnerability, her possible mental health concerns, her experiences of abuse from clients and on the street.

After several hours at 5pm that day, the Home Office responded to say that they were unable to accommodate Jane due to her mental health needs and advising workers to contact social services for accommodation and support.

The initial refusal of entry to Initial Accommodation came prior to any official diagnosis or assessment of Jane's mental health needs. There appeared to be a lack of understanding of the appropriate threshold to refer Jane to the care of Social Services, and no attempt to facilitate this.

“I'm a social worker and have worked in that for four years before coming here, so I knew very well that Social Work would not pick this up, and certainly not at 5pm – her mental health needs were not that severe, there were no signs of psychosis, no severity to them as far as she presented at that point [...] that gatekeeping, taking one thing from that letter and using it as a way to deny that support in an inappropriate way, there was no way that she would be picked up by social services in this case particularly when duties lay with Home Office...”

Further representations were made to challenge this decision, and Jane was able to access Initial Accommodation out of hours on that day. Advocacy from a worker in a specialist refugee organisation was crucial in ensuring that Jane had a safe place to sleep that night.

“this particular client – she had no awareness of what she was entitled to, I'm not sure how she could have accessed that service without support from somebody, she wouldn't know where to begin or how to explain what her status was over the phone to somebody.”

5.3 Access to section 4 support

As mentioned in Chapter Two, section 4 of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act makes provision for support and accommodation to be provided to people who have been refused asylum, but who cannot reasonably be expected to return to their countries of origin.

Where a person lodges an application for section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act support, current Home Office guidance urges decision-makers to come to a decision within two days for people deemed 'vulnerable'. It appears that this target is not consistently met.

"Homelessness and at risk of sexual exploitation whilst waiting for a decision on section 4 application. We find the two day guidance for section 4 decisions where there are significant vulnerabilities are rarely met."

Survey respondent 26 – London

"When we have been applying for section 95 or section 4 support and have raised safeguarding of a woman as an issue it does not seem to result in the application being looked at any quicker."

Survey respondent 91, North West England

In the context of section 4 support, this is made all the more acute by the fact that women cannot typically access any form of interim accommodation or financial assistance – for example, access to Initial Accommodation – while their applications are under consideration.

Alice's case study below illustrates a way in which these barriers to immediate support can be overcome, if discretion is applied.

In her case, the Home Office did, in recognition of her and her child's very vulnerable situation, allow her access to section 98 Support while her application for section 4 support was being considered.

Yet, this initial flexibility seems to have been undermined by a later failure by the Home Office to make allowance for her history of abuse with regards to repeated requests for evidence of destitution. Alice had to go through the rigours of an asylum support appeal before she and her

child were finally able to move onto a more sustainable form of support.

In Marie's case, it took the Home Office over three months to process her section 4 application and fully set up her support. This period of time included 22 days of further delay after the Home Office had formally decided to grant her support. During this time a charity used its own funds to provide Marie with refuge space. They informed the Home Office that this support was time limited but a decision had still not been taken on her section 4 application at the point at which they had said that they would no longer be able to support her.

Alice – 2017

Alice separated from the father of her child in 2014 due to domestic abuse.

She subsequently lived in accommodation provided by a 'friend' who later started to harass her. When she reported him to the Police, he stopped paying for her rent and she was evicted.

Although Alice had been refused asylum, she and her daughter were admitted to Initial Accommodation and asked to complete an application for section 4 support.

Alice applied for section 4 support, providing detailed evidence of the abuse that she had suffered at the hands of the father of her child. She also supplied proof that due to outstanding proceedings around child custody in the family court, she could not leave the UK.

The Home Office asked Alice to provide further information two times. She sent this promptly on both occasions, but six weeks after applying for support, her application was refused.

The refusal letter gave no indication that the Home Office had considered the particular vulnerability of Alice and her daughter, either in the processing of the application or the refusal itself.

Alice successfully appealed against the refusal of support and was granted support two months after she first applied.

Marie – 2018

During her time in the UK, Marie has experienced different forms of gender-based violence, including domestic abuse and threats of forced marriage and honour killing. There is substantial Police involvement in her case.

Marie applied for section 4 support in January 2018. She had made fresh submissions to the Home Office concerning her asylum claim, and these were still under consideration.

At that time, she was living in a charitably-funded refuge space and was receiving a small amount of financial support every week, also from charitable funds. The charity agreed to pay for the refuge until mid-April 2018, pending a decision on section 4 support.

Marie has significant mental health problems and is at high risk of suicide.

While Marie was living in the refuge, her advocacy worker requested that the Home Office explore dispersal to a region where she did not have any social networks given that she was deemed to be at risk from family and the wider community. However, when her time in refuge came to an end, no decision had been taken on the section 4 support application.

Section 4 support was granted at the end of April, however at this time the designated accommodation provider did not appear to have identified a suitable property.

Marie was only offered accommodation 17 days after her support had been approved. However, she was mistakenly taken to a men's hostel. She was moved immediately but was left without any financial support for 5 days due to administrative errors. In total, Marie waited for 22 days before her section 4 support was fully in place.

5.4 Assessing destitution

The process of establishing whether a woman has an ongoing asylum claim or has made a new application (a further submission) to the Home Office after refusal of her claim is relatively rapid. Therefore, we can assume that many of these delays and barriers stem from the Home Office's processes for assessing whether a woman is destitute.

As we note above, Chapter 24 of the Asylum Support Policy Bulletin Instructions does require the Home Office to take into account the specific needs of asylum seekers who have experienced torture, rape, or other forms of physical, psychological or sexual violence when allocating support.

However, the Policy Bulletin Instruction on 'Assessing Destitution'⁶⁹ makes no mention of the safety considerations that should apply when assessing applications for support from women who have fled abuse or exploitation. There is a tick box on the current ASF1 form⁷⁰ to note that the case has involved domestic violence, yet this comes only after a series of questions on destitution.

We note elsewhere that perpetrators purposefully isolate women, both physically and in terms of their knowledge of their situation. This can mean that women are unable to provide evidence requested of them, precisely because they have previously been living in a situation of exploitation or abuse.

"The Home Office look for proof – for papers that provide evidence. They don't look at the violence that people have experienced and the situation that they are in. If I knew what was going to happen, I might have been able to provide more evidence, but I didn't know."

Ruth

Our respondents felt that the evidence requested of women can be significant, and could even prevent someone from continuing with the application process.

"I worry that it takes so long and the information that female clients are required to provide – a letter from host, proof of host's utility bills, tenancy agreements for clients. This is extremely off putting to someone who is living in fear and being exploited. Is it really necessary that a woman has to provide all these documents?"

Survey respondent 41, London

"they will still ask the same questions to prove destitution as someone who's not experienced [gender-based violence] – historical address history, financial history [...] if somebody who has been trafficked and slaving in house, how do they know all the details you are looking for? [Do you need] a supporting letter from the abuser?"

Interviewee 13

"I dealt with a woman in domestic violence situation and we were helping her to get onto [asylum support], it was so distressing for her, she wasn't able to manage it, so in the end she continued to stay in that situation... there needs to be more questions around 'do you feel safe', 'is it ok to talk' 'would you like me to make another time for you'"

Interviewee 12

In at least one case recounted to us, repeated requests for evidence of destitution actively increased the risk to a woman who was trying to escape violence from her extended family.

"We raised that a woman was experiencing domestic violence from her extended family with whom she lived, and there was a risk of escalation if they discovered she had claimed asylum. Sought s.95 accommodation on this basis and asked the Home Office never to send correspondence to the client's home address. Home Office refused s.95 accommodation and (despite repeated requests by letter and over the phone) sent a further 5 letters to the client's home address. The Asylum Support Tribunal found that the client was experiencing domestic violence and should be granted s.95 support."

Survey respondent 39, London

Chapter Six:

Safety within the asylum support system

KEY FINDINGS

- Women who are at risk from abuse, and who are already living within the asylum support system, are, in some cases, able to access alternative accommodation to ensure their safety. This is particularly the case where women are fleeing domestic abuse by a current or ex-partner.
- Other options e.g. evicting a perpetrator from accommodation; putting in place additional security measures; are less commonly used.
- However, there are inconsistencies in the response to reports of domestic abuse, and in the application of the existing policy on domestic violence.
- Responses to women experiencing other forms of gender-related abuse or harm are even less consistent.
- Our data suggest that alternative accommodation offered by the Home Office and accommodation providers is not always safe and suitable. Our evidence suggests that this is because:
 - Women seeking asylum are rarely able to access refuge provision;
 - Initial Accommodation continues to be used as an alternative accommodation option, despite evidence that it is neither safe nor suitable for women fleeing abuse;
 - Assessments of women's safety in alternative accommodation rarely, if ever, consider women's access to services including health care and schooling for children; nor their potential isolation in new dispersal areas;
 - Isolation can be a risk factor in a woman returning to abuse. This is not currently given adequate consideration when identifying alternative accommodation.

In Chapter Three, we discussed some of the structural ways in which women may struggle to feel safe within the asylum support system.

Here, we explore the extent to which the asylum support system responds to and ensures the safety of women who disclose that they are at risk of gender-based violence whilst living on asylum support.

Much of our evidence in this chapter relates to the ways in which the only Asylum Support Policy Bulletin Instruction that focuses on a form of gender-based violence – domestic abuse – functions in practice.

We also reflect throughout on the responsiveness, or otherwise, of the asylum support system to other forms of violence and harm.

In this vein, we note that our findings and commentary below come with an important caveat: That every woman's situation, and wishes, will be different. A 'one size fits all' approach cannot encompass the full range of women's experiences. Policy and practice in the asylum support system must enable each woman to express her views and ensure that these inform the actions that are subsequently taken to ensure her safety, to the extent that the system allows.

6.1 Responsiveness to immediate safety concerns – an inconsistent approach

Asylum Support Policy Instruction Bulletins – Chapter 23 – Domestic Violence

The accommodation provider must ensure that a victim and any children are transferred to alternative accommodation that is safe and secure.

The accommodation provider does not require prior consent from the Home Office in order to transfer a victim and any children to alternative accommodation that is safe and secure for them, when the victim believes they cannot in the interests of their safety return to their previous accommodation.

If the Home Office decide [...] that an offender should be evicted [...] the accommodation provider, must evict that offender.

In many of the cases recounted to us, immediate safety concerns around a woman, and where applicable her children, focused on the need for her to access safe, alternative accommodation. This may well be the most suitable course of action. But evidence from the domestic violence sector indicates that a sole focus on assisting a woman to leave her family home can overshadow the need to tackle, and shift the onus of responsibility, onto perpetrators.

“The response women received from the council required that they and often their children move out of their home. It questioned the validity of their experience, did not challenge their partner’s entitlement to remain in the family home despite his abusive behaviour, or offer any safe alternatives to moving out (e.g. tenancy transfer or additional home security measures).”⁷¹

With regards to asylum support, we were told of only one case where a perpetrator was made to leave accommodation:

Through Home Office and [accommodation provider] and they moved the husband out of the property to protect her.

Survey respondent 145 – Yorkshire & the Humber

There is little other data available within which we could contextualise this, or similar cases, to better understand whether the Home Office and accommodation providers do regularly consider enforcing the eviction of a perpetrator to ensure the safety of women and children.

Similarly, if women do wish to remain in their homes even after reporting abuse, there appears to be little clarity on what, if any, safety measures accommodation providers should or will provide.

“I did ring them up and ask about the security of current accommodation, but they were disputing the fact that it was not secure [...] but every time I go I can just walk in, so whether they’ve done anything since ... there was nothing after the incident to say we’ll sort out security in accommodation”

Interviewee 7

In almost all of the cases reported to us, there was a focus only on moving women away from abusive situations.

In this context, some women can, and do benefit from swift moves to alternative accommodation.

“Several times a woman has raised concerns after fleeing domestic violence and the woman has not felt safe in her accommodation. Of what I can recall Home Office has moved her every time I have raised concerns.”

Survey respondent 84, Scotland

Women seeking asylum:

"We have raised concerns when a woman is at immediate risk and needs accommodation to mitigate against the risk. When the woman has been in Home Office accommodation they have been reasonably quick to respond and also [accommodation provider] have been quick to respond to move a client who is at risk (eg when there's domestic violence in the relationship)."

Survey respondent 91, North West England

"In cases of domestic violence, where perpetrators are also accommodated in asylum support, we have found that the safeguarding response has been quick in terms of changing accommodation"

Survey respondent 29, East Midlands

"They offered to rehouse the victim and made sure children were protected and safe"

Survey respondent 47, North West England

There is some evidence that even where perpetrators are not living with the victim, but belong to the wider community or family, the Home Office will work with partners to ensure a woman's safety through offering relocation.

Erica – 2015

Erica was studying in the UK when she became aware that her family wished to force her into marriage.

She sought asylum on that basis. The Police were involved with her case and supported her to seek legal remedy against the forced marriage.

Shortly after Erica was placed into asylum support accommodation, the Police and accommodation provider became aware that people from her home country had been seen in her area, asking about her whereabouts.

The asylum accommodation provider immediately arranged for Erica to move to another location. Erica's safety needs were prioritised several times by the agencies involved in her case.

However, there were indications that in some cases, particularly where there may be a lack of 'proof' of abuse, that women, and sometimes children, are not always moved as soon as a relocation is requested.

The contrast between Erica's case – where the Police, Home Office and accommodation provider worked together to ensure her safety – and Patricia's situation, as recounted below, is striking:

Patricia – 2017

Patricia had claimed asylum as part of a family unit, with her husband as the main applicant both for the substantive asylum claim and the application for asylum support.

When Patricia first presented to a local drop-in service, run by a specialist voluntary sector agency, she explained that she wished to get her own asylum support, separate from her husband. It was only during later conversations that Patricia disclosed she had been experiencing domestic abuse.

Although the agency to whom disclosure was made alerted the Home Office to the domestic abuse, Patricia was unwilling to report this to the Police or to a specialist domestic abuse agency. The Home Office requested proof of the abuse before granting any relocation.

Patricia remained in the abusive relationship for several months, unable to exit the situation. She was unwilling to escalate the matter to the Police, and therefore could not obtain the 'proof' of abuse required by the Home Office.

Finally, Patricia's children's school alerted social work to problems within the family. It was only once social work contacted the Home Office that a move to another dispersal region was arranged. The move to another region was exactly what Patricia had requested initially.

Throughout the time that she was pursuing her independent claim for asylum support, Patricia's husband was using intimidatory tactics to try to prevent her from leaving the family home with their children.

As Erica's caseworker commented:

"Erica had so many different people and support. That was really helpful – my worry is that it is not really often that women have so many."

Interviewee 5

Certainly, our findings tend to show that swift action to safeguard women is not consistently taken.

Concerns around a lack of responsiveness to reports of domestic abuse, and an incomplete understanding of existing policy, appear to be particularly acute with regards to the role of accommodation providers.

"Generally, we have found that safety concerns raised with subcontractors are escalated as incidents to Home Office as subcontractors report they cannot take action to make any changes to accommodation unless authorised by Home Office."

Survey respondent 26, London

"Reported risk of domestic violence – asylum accommodation providers advised that we should talk to the Home Office. They recorded the incident, but no further action was taken."

Survey respondent 54, East Midlands

"Serco generally say that we have to contact the Home Office to get a woman moved who is danger from violent partner or family."

Survey respondent 134, North West England

"High risk domestic violence concerns, I requested a relocation due to a significant safeguarding risk to the mother and her 2 children. It took a lot of chasing to get the relocation request looked at and around 10 days to get them moved."

Survey respondent 30, London

As we describe in Chapter Three above, we were also provided with case studies highlighting apparent failures to respond where women were facing manipulation, threats and abuse in shared accommodation, from other residents.

This appears to be the case even where these behaviours clearly have a gendered element.

"A transgender woman was unsafe as targeted by men in Home Office accommodation. I raised it with the subcontractor and initially they did not respond usefully but did after [charity Chief Executive] got involved with the Home Office at a senior level ... the Home Office took over and moved the client to a self-contained accommodation."

Survey respondent 142 – London

Concerns about the safety of someone who had been sexually exploited being in unsafe and inappropriate accommodation who was worried about being recognised by people who used to exploit her, and being exploited again. The request to be moved to secure accommodation was refused 3 times despite evidence being provided.

Survey respondent 132 – East Midlands

6.2 Beyond immediate safety needs – sustainable solutions?

Asylum Support Policy Bulletins Instructions – Chapter 23 – Domestic Violence

If an accommodation provider receives a request for help from a victim of domestic violence, and the victim and any children need alternative accommodation, the provider should offer alternative safe accommodation immediately [...]

If, exceptionally, this is impracticable, or does not accord with the preference of the victim for accommodation with support, then the provider should either refer the victim to a refuge or consult with the local authority about the action to take. At the same time, the provider should inform the victim that the reasonable costs of alternative accommodation can be met by the Home Office [...]

Whilst the Home Office is not allowed to have regard to a person's preference as to the locality of accommodation to be provided, the victim must be consulted regarding their safety in areas that may be considered [...]

6.2.1 Access to refuge provision

We are aware that women from all backgrounds may struggle to access specialist refuge spaces after exiting abusive situations due to the pressure on resources in the sector.⁷²

While women identified as potential victims of trafficking may be placed in specialist supported accommodation, our findings confirm that women seeking asylum are rarely, if ever, able to access or even contemplate refuge spaces.

"I have never had a case where woman was able to access refuge as an asylum seeker."

Interviewee 6

"Currently trying to get the Home Office to agree to fund the stay of a refuge as the woman has many danger areas and a support network she developed where she is now, have yet to hear back from anyone regarding this possibility."

Survey respondent 153 – London

"[Home Office] have suggested the woman moves accommodation, I have asked them to pay for woman to go in a refuge and they have said they don't do that."

Survey respondent 134 – North-West England

A crucial barrier appears to be that the provisions of the Home Office's current asylum support policy on domestic violence are not widely known, externally and internally, and so women seeking asylum are perceived as being ineligible for refuge support. Moreover, although the current domestic violence policy indicates that refuges might be funded by the Home Office on an exceptional basis, there is no guidance in the policy on how a refuge could apply for this funding in practice.

"I tried to get her into specialist domestic abuse South East Asian domestic violence refuge, initially I was told that because she had No Recourse to Public Funds they couldn't do that"

Interviewee 7

"Until recently (I think) there has been no provision for women to be able to move to Refuges. The support and safety that can be provided by a refuge should not be restricted to those with recourse to public funds, it is dangerous and leaves women in risky situations."

Survey respondent 91 – North-West England

Lack of access to refuge provision can leave women, living in dispersal accommodation that is typically 'known' in the wider community, vulnerable to further abuse from the perpetrator:

"Woman with NRPF cannot access refuge accommodation. It is very difficult sometimes when there are no safe choices. I have had experience when a partner was moved from asylum accommodation, but they kept on going back to persuade the woman to take them back."

Survey respondent 152, Scotland

"Asylum accommodation is not appropriate for individuals who have experienced gender based or domestic violence. Often there is a risk that they may be in mixed accommodation, in accommodation where they are living with others from their community who may be judgemental about this history and addresses are not private."

Survey respondent 158 – London

Women are also unable to benefit from the specialist advice and support services offered by refuge staff. Such as legal advice on criminal and civil legal remedies, drawing up a safety plan, and psychosocial support for both women and children.

Another interviewee noted that agencies external to the asylum support process may perceive that women who have been accommodated in alternative Home Office accommodation, including Initial Accommodation, are safe and so do not require any further advocacy around their living conditions:

"It's really unusual for women to access specialist accommodation, usually [initial accommodation] is considered a place of safety [...] other services do have the perception that it is a supported hostel, which it isn't, it's a living accommodation and that's about it really but other services seem to have perception that it is staffed 24/7, women have a key worker, they are getting therapy, but it's not that sort of hostel ..."

Interviewee 4

Given that Initial Accommodation, in some regions, is provided in mixed sex hostels; and that perpetrators and other community members may have lived there previously, or otherwise know of the address, this assumption is particularly erroneous. Despite this, Initial Accommodation does indeed appear to be an 'alternative' accommodation option offered to women exiting abusive situations. We explore the implications of this below.

6.2.2 Safe, alternative accommodation – Initial accommodation

Asylum Support Policy Bulletins Instructions – Chapter 23

It is preferable that a victim seeking alternative accommodation should not resort to using Home Office Initial Accommodation.

Current asylum support policy explicitly discourages the use of Initial Accommodation to accommodate women fleeing domestic abuse.

It would seem though that women who are already living on asylum support are frequently offered a space in Initial Accommodation, as a first response, if they need to leave their accommodation due to safety concerns, This is evident in Freya's case, below. Freya's situation also illustrates the concerns many of our respondents raised about women's increased visibility and vulnerability in mixed sex environments.

“there is a risk that they may be in mixed accommodation, in accommodation where they are living with others from their community who may be judgemental about this, history and addresses are not private.”

Survey respondent 158-London

Freya – 2016

Having fled abuse in a situation of domestic servitude, Freya was accommodated by the Home Office. Freya had poor mental health and had attempted suicide in the past.

She felt very visible in her dispersal area and reported concerns that people from her country were stalking her and knew where she was living.

An advocacy worker from a specialist charity helped Freya to report her concerns to the Police and to the Home Office. However, this led to Freya, at very short notice, being moved to Initial Accommodation in another dispersal region:

“she was very upset [...] It was from one day to the next. She was put in a van with other people who I guess were going to be moved [...] she was all of a sudden in a hotel with men [...] She was terrified, crying because she was so stressed and upset and people knew exactly where she was. I tried to contact the Home Office but it is really difficult to get hold of the safeguarding team [...] It didn't matter how many times I called or emailed.”

Freya was eventually returned to her original dispersal region and was granted leave to remain.

Freya's case highlights the limited conception of 'safety' that appears to be employed by the Home Office, and accommodation providers, when considering the location of any alternative accommodation. We discuss this in more detail below.

6.2.3 Safe, alternative accommodation – Moving regions

It may well be that, as in Patricia's case above, a woman feels that she will only be safe in a region far away from her previous abuser. However, without a commitment to ensuring that women have an opportunity to express their views and explore their options, this cannot be assumed.

“The complexity of community as both a longed-for resource as well as sometimes a site of oppression for women was not always acknowledged by providers”⁷³

Instead, our data indicates that women who are living on asylum support will, if their reports of safety concerns are believed, most frequently be moved to a different 'dispersal' region, with little or no effort made to connect or reconnect her, and any children, to the services she might need.

“Reporting of domestic violence through the safeguarding channel with Home Office and the housing provider. We had to make an additional request for relocation that was not automatic. The women and her children (victims) were removed to new accommodation in a different town, disrupting their schooling and support arrangements, the father (perpetrator) remained in the accommodation.”

Survey respondent 136 – Yorkshire & Humber

“[It] is an issue with women being moved to other areas far away when they are deemed not being safe as they are removed from support networks and being isolated which increase women's vulnerability.”

Survey respondent 84 – Scotland

Women's fears about losing the few support networks they have managed to create in the UK can even prevent them from exiting abusive situations, as was the case for Yvonne in the case study below.

Yvonne – 2017

Yvonne was living in asylum accommodation. Her partner, who was a UK national, was abusive. He had been able, on at least one occasion, to enter her asylum accommodation and physically assault her as the lock was not secure.

Following the assault, Yvonne received specialist advice from a local charity, and was referred into the MARAC process by the Police. Her advocacy worker contacted the Home Office and her accommodation provider to request that she be moved into alternative accommodation within the same dispersal region, as her son was attending nursery and Yvonne had a college place.

"[accommodation provider] would say they would move her but couldn't guarantee it would be in same area so she just wasn't confident enough to do that, she didn't want to move away from the little support that she did have ..."

The Home Office and the accommodation provider were unable to confirm that Yvonne could remain in her dispersal region. Yvonne chose not to pursue a relocation request and remained in her accommodation.

"It's a blanket policy, they said 'yes, we'll move her but on our terms so anywhere' [...] there's more at stake for women asylum seekers, they have so little support as have no family... they're even more isolated [...] it shouldn't be a random thing that you lose everything to protect yourself ..."

Isolation in a new area is not a marginal concern. For women who have been subject to ongoing abuse, isolation as a result of moving away from the area or town that they know, can mimic the effects of abuse.

"Perpetrators work to purposefully isolate women so if the system enables that, that undermines women's autonomy and agency even further..."

Interviewee 14

There is evidence that regardless of a woman's immigration status, isolation can also have a detrimental impact on women's wellbeing, and mental health.

"Many women wrote about multiple and interrelated losses that they struggled to cope with. These losses related to the physical and emotional loss of the family home, furnishings and belongings; to the loss of friends and family and the sense of belonging to an area or community that felt familiar. Women talked about the loss their children experienced as a result of moving school and leaving friends. This sense of loss was reinforced by feelings of social isolation and loneliness that women talked about after being moved into a 'strange' area where they had no support."⁷⁴

For women who, in the act of seeking asylum, have already left their homes and sometimes family members behind, this can have an additionally severe effect. The resulting social isolation can leave women at risk of returning to an abuser if they cannot sustain life alone elsewhere.

"[moving away] doesn't mean that it's going to make women safer always [...] if she is in an area where she has social support, where she is more likely to sustain her decision and get support to do so, that is probably going to increase safety in long run."

Interviewee 14

Chapter Seven:

Exiting the asylum support system

KEY FINDINGS

- Women who are left homeless when asylum support ends following a grant of status are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.
- The move-on period does not allow sufficient time for women to move into safe and suitable accommodation, nor to access the benefits to which they are entitled.
- Women who are living in destitution following refusal of their asylum claim are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.
- While living in destitution, whatever the structural reasons for this, women are at particular risk of sexual exploitation.
- As at other stages of the asylum support system, women can find themselves in transactional, exploitative relationships.

Women will usually exit the asylum support system for one of two reasons. The first is when women are granted some form of leave to remain. The second is when women who are not living with dependent children have their support terminated following a final refusal of their asylum claim.

After being granted leave to remain, women are theoretically empowered with the same rights as UK citizens with regards to accessing mainstream support systems. If a woman's claim has been refused, her only eligibility for any government support will be if she meets the criteria for a section 4 support application (see above).

Yet, while the structural reasons for this might be different, women in both positions can be vulnerable to destitution. This in turn can expose them to abuse. Women who are destitute are at particular risk of exposure to sexual exploitation, including through transactional relationships. We examine the reasons for this, and the implications for policy and practice, below.

7.1 'Moving on' – exposure to destitution after grant of status

"I think a lot of the women that are granted leave to remain, refugee status, because it's been a long period of going through the system, a few have said to me they're more stressed than they've ever been, battling this system that is just so complicated, it's really difficult for them to access services"

Interviewee 3

Asylum support is designed to cease 28 days after a person is granted refugee status or another form of leave to remain. This is known as the 'move on period'. In this time, newly granted refugees are expected to apply for, and access, mainstream benefits and find suitable housing. A body of research has shown that this is an insufficient length of time if homelessness and destitution is to be avoided.⁷⁵ Men and women become destitute, but women are more at risk from specific types of abuse and violence. Moreover, while a grant of status does confer permission to work, refugees experience multiple barriers to labour market participation including lack of recognition of existing qualifications and non-fluency in English.

Recently granted refugees can therefore find themselves in a uniquely vulnerable situation at the point at which they exit the asylum support system.

Despite this, in 2011 the government ceased funding of specialist integration support for refugees, leaving people to navigate the complexities of the benefits and homelessness system largely on their own.⁷⁶ The only exception to this is in Scotland, where the Scottish Government have continued to fund work around housing for refugees; and have led on the development and implementation of a national Refugee Integration Strategy.⁷⁷ Non-governmental organisations and parliamentarians⁷⁸ have lobbied for the resumption of this service but also highlight the consequences of ending support before another source of income has been received. Recently comparisons have been made with the support provided to refugees arriving through resettlement schemes, which has been acknowledged by government in its recent green paper *Integrated Communities*.⁷⁹

Homelessness

For the reasons outlined above, the majority of newly granted refugees will have no alternative than to present as homeless to their Local Authority, despite the fact that this homelessness is almost entirely predictable. One of the main issues highlighted in the aforementioned research is the lack of funding to find accommodation in the private rental sector, given that asylum support is only provided on the basis a person is destitute, making saving for a deposit impossible, as having such funds would make a person ineligible for ongoing financial support. Access to welfare

benefits, in particular delays built in to the design of Universal Credit, result in most refugees experiencing a gap in income. We conclude therefore that both the homelessness and benefits systems are less than responsive to the needs of women who have experienced or are at continued risk of abuse.

"I worked with a pregnant woman who was absolutely terrified of being relocated, she went to the Council, they're saying 'we're not going to have you, we're moving you out of [urban area] [...] if we offer you something and you don't accept it we'll discharge your duty, then you will be intentionally homeless, and we might have to involve Social Work'. [...] all that for a woman terrified of separation, who really doesn't know her rights... there's not been a lot of understanding about her vulnerability, about her background, her experiences, that made her in theory more vulnerable than an average person"

Interviewee 3

Moreover, as research from Ireland highlights that these barriers to accessing statutory rights and services can lead women into 'hidden homelessness', whereby they rely on friends and acquaintances for accommodation and other assistance.⁸⁰ This in turn can expose women to further violence and abuse.

Rachel – 2016

Rachel is a young woman in her early 20's who sought advice from a specialist refugee charity as soon as she was granted refugee status by the Home Office. She really wanted to go to university and get a job.

She was homeless because her asylum support and accommodation had ended. She was unable to access temporary homeless accommodation as she wasn't in priority need and was placed on the waiting list of women's hostels in her locality.

During this time, she was sofa surfing with people in her community. One night, while at the house of someone with whom she was sofa-surfing, she was raped and became pregnant.

Rachel was then assisted to make a homelessness application to the local council and they accommodated her because she was pregnant. But her plans have been put on hold because she is now a single parent of a child.

"this is something that sadly I've seen happen quite a lot with homeless young female clients, they are sofa surfing and become pregnant ... it's very difficult for them to talk about the circumstances, I interpret it to be that they're in a really vulnerable position, they don't have the same control over their circumstances as if they had their own room and own bed to sleep in..."

“the move on period from NASS accommodation does not provide enough time to access mainstream benefits and housing support – homeless refugee women [are] at greater risk of violence”

Survey respondent 117 – London

This was the case for Rachel.

7.2 Exposure to abuse after refusal of asylum

Our focus in this project is on women who are trying to access or are living within the asylum support system.

However, we recognise the substantial evidence from previous studies that the Home Office’s policy of removing asylum support from people without children if their asylum claims are fully refused, leaves women in an extremely vulnerable position with regards to the strategies they may need to use to survive on the streets.⁸¹

Sexual exploitation emerges as a significant element of women’s experiences.

“destitute women are sometimes subject to sexual exploitation in exchange for resources such as housing or food”⁸²

“women are more likely than men to be involved in commercial sex work [...] In other forms of transactional relationship, women are also at much greater risk of coercion, entrapment and violence.”⁸³

“the ways some women survive includes prostitution and forced relationships.”⁸⁴

Our interviewees reiterated concerns about women’s vulnerability to all forms of abuse and exploitation if they are unable to access the asylum support system.

“When I stayed at other people’s houses, they made me do all the house work.”

Ruth

“I did have a woman once that sticks in my mind, [...] this particular woman came and said she was sleeping with men to get a roof over her head”

Interviewee 12

“if a woman doesn’t have children and becomes a failed asylum seeker, the battle begins then, without fresh new evidence, without case being reconsidered, you’re destitute, you’re on street and vulnerable to exploitation of every kind. Unfortunately, the system puts people in a situation where they’re desperate and they’re vulnerable ... As a woman you’re particularly vulnerable and that can lead you down any path, trafficking...if you don’t have a support system, anything can happen to you...”

Interviewee 6

These concerns persist even where women are in fact eligible for section 4 support, largely due to the delays in decision-making that we identify in Chapter Five above.

Chapter Eight:

Good practice

KEY FINDINGS

The following elements of potential good practice in ensuring women's safety from violence and abuse emerged through our research. We suggest that these would provide a strong basis for the development of good practice throughout the asylum support system.

Advocacy

Women who are at risk of violence or abuse often require specialist assistance and advocacy to access safety.

Currently much of this advocacy is provided by voluntary sector agencies, principally specialist refugee agencies, who have limited resources to do this.

Specialist agencies

Work with women, and resulting advocacy, would be strengthened if specialist refugee organisations and organisations from the women's sector including specialist domestic abuse and sexual violence organisations, explored new opportunities to work together and share expertise.

Communication

Good communication between statutory and voluntary sector agencies is crucial if women's needs are to be met. The Home Office Safeguarding Hub could be a useful mechanism for responding to disclosures of abuse but must review procedures for receiving and responding to referrals.

Working in partnership

Joint working can only be enabled if the Home Office and other statutory agencies commit to taking into account the views and opinions of specialist refugee and violence against women organisations from the voluntary sector.

Existing forums such as Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences could be better utilised by the Home Office, accommodation providers and other stakeholders where a woman has been referred into this process following a disclosure of domestic abuse.

Women's voices

Specialist voluntary sector organisations, from the refugee and violence against women sectors, have a key role in ensuring that women are able to express their views, and have their needs considered when decisions are taken about their current and future living arrangements.

The Home Office, and contractors, should aim to put women's views at the centre of their responses to safety concerns raised before, during and when exiting, the asylum support system

In the chapters above, we have highlighted the multiple ways in which current asylum support processes can leave women at risk from abuse and exploitation whilst living in, trying to access, or exiting the asylum support system.

Here, we draw out from our data some elements of good practice that could address these gaps in policy and practice. While many of these are addressed primarily to the Home Office and asylum accommodation providers, some apply equally to specialist voluntary sector organisations.

8.1 Advocacy

A theme that has emerged very strongly from our data is that women regularly require extensive advocacy to access living arrangements that keep them safe.

"If women have advocacy support from people with specialist knowledge, the women do get the support."

Interviewee 8

"The policies and procedures are not consistently applied. Any deviation as a result of safety concerns is not welcomed and/or able to be resolved through practices and procedures. More often than not – the status quo for all asylum seekers prevails unless a woman has access to specialist resource."

Survey respondent 79-Scotland

"If she hadn't had any support [from our organisation], I think she would have had children taken away and she would, if she didn't have that support, legal information and access to these kinds of services, she would have struggled."

Interviewee 6

"Many women have little understanding of their rights, and without strong advocacy, find it extremely difficult to access the support they need, challenge bad decisions and leave harmful environments. [...] people who have the weakest voice will be least able to access the support they need."

Survey respondent 50 – London

However, it is important to acknowledge that many of the agencies that provide this advocacy are within the voluntary sector and continue to face significant resource restraints.

"I think there are many women who are at risk or suffering abuse or exploitation that do not dare tell anyone or have told someone but their situation cannot be changed within the current system [...] all services are very overstretched and overly reliant on volunteers."

Survey respondent 138 -Yorkshire & Humber

While in an ideal situation, women would feel secure and empowered enough to access the asylum support system on their own, our findings suggest that this is far from being the case. Specialist advocacy should not only be recognised as vital, but also adequately funded by national and local government.

8.2 Specialist agencies – finding common cause

Many of the insights into the asylum support system that we present above have been provided by specialist refugee charities. This may be a result of our data sampling: nine of our interviews were with specialist refugee agencies; while only three were conducted with organisations whose specialism is some form of violence against women. It is also testament to the specialist knowledge required to advise accurately on asylum support policies and entitlements.

There were some instances in which the responses of 'mainstream' violence against women organisations were not deemed to have been helpful:

“we went to [specialist domestic abuse charity] and said ‘[access to refuge for women seeking asylum] is a huge problem’, and we were told that they’ve got enough on their plate with fighting for funding [...] I get frustrated with workers day to day but if they’re not being given direction from above, they’ll say ‘sorry we can’t do anything, just go to no recourse team’.

Interviewee 7

“the refuge didn’t support her with that, just told her to go to the Council so somehow ball was dropped at that point as well ... refuge was maybe under resourced or maybe she didn’t know to communicate it properly to them or they didn’t check up on her... I was really shocked that she came out of refuge and then was homeless for months...”

Interviewee 9

One of the women we spoke to highlighted initial barriers to speaking to someone about abuse because of a lack of interpreting support, although this was eventually resolved by a bi-lingual worker:

“I used to go online. I found details of [domestic abuse charity] but there were no speakers [of my language], there was one woman who was there once or twice a week and one day I finally got the chance to speak to her.”

Ruth

Equally, interviewees highlighted the skills and knowledge around violence against women and dealing with disclosure that are crucial for workers who may come into contact with cases of abuse and exploitation:

“It is very difficult as a frontline worker, as a therapist, as advocacy, very difficult working with women who’ve experienced [sustained violence and abuse].”

Interviewee 8

Overall, we suggest that both sectors should invest in joint working, perhaps following models of good practice that are already in place in some regions. For example, Glasgow & Clyde Rape Crisis Centre already fund a sexual violence advocate who works only with women seeking asylum and women refugees.⁸⁵

At a minimum, specialist refugee agencies should ensure that frontline staff receive training on gender-based violence and are equipped to respond to disclosures. Similarly, specialist domestic abuse and sexual violence charities should ensure that their services are accessible through providing training and awareness raising to their staff on the specific issues facing women seeking asylum and their rights and entitlements with regards to asylum support.

8.3 Communication

The need for better communication by the Home Office, was highlighted at all stages of the asylum support system.

The Home Office has introduced a ‘safeguarding hub’ mechanism to undertake ‘intervention work’ for people who are deemed ‘vulnerable’. This includes signposting and communication:

“Intervention work by Safeguarding Staff is undertaken when the specific issues of a vulnerable person need to be shared with both internal and external partners with the intention of raising awareness of additional support which the Safeguarding Staff believe should be considered. This could also be described as sign-posting work.”⁸⁶

Responses regarding the role of the safeguarding teams were varied. Some participants praised the prompt response from local safeguarding teams and appreciated having a dedicated point of contact for raising concerns.

“the Safeguarding team in [dispersal region] seem to be only ones who can push for your case, if you cc them when you are doing something ...”

Interviewee 13

Women seeking asylum:

“Now that there is a safeguarding team within the asylum support teams we have been able to successfully escalate concerns through this team.”

Survey respondent 26 – London

“we have seen a good improvement with safeguarding forms being forwarded to providers, health team from Home Office staff”

Survey respondent 107 – Scotland

However, other interviewees were either unaware of the Safeguarding Team, or felt that communication was still piecemeal.

“We’ve got generic safeguarding email but I don’t really know what happens with that, sending an email doesn’t actually safeguard somebody, it’s the actions that arise at the other end that do.”

Interviewee 4

“The safeguarding team are like ‘OK, we take over’, and we as an organisation, never know what happened.”

Interviewee 5

“I have no experience of safeguarding team, don’t know who they are and how they look at safeguarding nor how they prepare their caseworkers to think about safeguarding, I don’t have any interaction with them on that part”

Interviewee 8

“Safeguarding protocols for women living in asylum support accommodation are not transparent”

Survey respondent 136 – Yorkshire & Humber

Crucially, there appears to be no standard agreement for feedback to the referring agency on the outcomes of safeguarding referrals. As in the second example below, this lack of communication can cause significant difficulties for referring agencies in terms of ensuring women’s safety.

“I had one case where a very vulnerable young woman had been trafficked and was markedly affected by it, she just disappeared from [Initial Accommodation] now it turned out in the end that what had happened is she’d been offered a place in a safe house through the National Referral Mechanism but nobody told us [...] That could have been communicated to us either by the agency taking her to the safe house or by the Home Office [...] I almost had a nationwide safeguarding alert out for this woman and it turns out that she was being safeguarded but nobody had told us ...”

Interviewee 4

Lack of communication is not an issue only for the Home Office. One interviewee recounted an incident where a woman disclosed domestic abuse during her time in Initial Accommodation. This was flagged up directly to social work in her dispersal region, but no contact was made with the family until a crisis incident involving their son’s wellbeing.

“Health team in Initial Accommodation had referred to social work in dispersal region – nothing happened with that until there was an incident involving the son... What was worrying was response from social work in terms of not responding to initial referral...”

Interviewee 13

We reflect more below on the importance of including a range of statutory and voluntary partners in joint working to ensure women’s safety from abuse and violence.

8.4 Joint working

Communication is only one element of a more general requirement for improved partnership working between the Home Office, contractors, other statutory agencies and the voluntary sector. We discuss below four elements of joint working, all of which would benefit from further investment. These are:

- Case conferences;
- Referrals;
- Outreach;
- Acting on recommendations.

8.4.1 Case conferences

Reference is made within the current asylum support policy instruction on domestic violence to a model of joint working: a case conference, convened by the Home Office “urgently and usually within one week of the date that the Home Office received a first report of domestic violence.”

Such case conferences should involve: “Representatives of the accommodation provider, social services and agencies with relevant knowledge of the case or services to offer.”⁸⁷

This, it seems, would complement rather than replace the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences that are standard where reports of domestic abuse are made to Police or Social Work.

However, none of our interviewees were able to tell us about a Home Office-convened case conference around any report of violence or abuse.

“Case conference? No but that would have been good.”

Interviewee 7

Only two of our interviewees spoke about their experiences of working with women who were going through the MARAC process, but neither could reference a time when the Home Office or any subcontractor had taken part in a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference.

The extent to which the Home Office and subcontractors are invited to participate where a MARAC is convened, and whether or not this provides a productive space for inter-agency working would be a useful focus for further research in this area. This could also be a forum for the Home Office to play a role in supporting, where appropriate, a criminal justice response to perpetrators.

8.4.2 Referrals

Our evidence suggests that neither accommodation providers, nor the Home Office systematically refer women who are at risk of abuse to specialist services, either in the refugee or violence against women sectors, for ongoing support. This gap is particularly acute when women have been moved to alternative accommodation because of safety concerns.

“They are acting [...] in terms of putting someone into safe accommodation but anything to follow that, there doesn’t seem to be a very clear guidance for staff... in terms of referring them to third sector like ourselves, thinking of referring to other agencies in terms of signposting or referring to social work, they think their job is done as soon as they take that person out of that accommodation, but what is the support for that person? Financial support, lawyers, any of those kind of things... it’s not definitely implemented automatically.”

Interviewee 13

“The Home Office only give me the house, but that was it. After that, I was going to my lawyer and different organisations to help me. Home Office gave me the place, but it was my lawyer who sent me the taxi. [Community Organisation] they help me with everything [...] I didn’t know the roads or where I am going.”

Claire

Women seeking asylum:

As we noted at 6.2.3 above, access to appropriate support can be crucial not only for women's wellbeing, but to ensure their longer-term safety, and ability to resist pressure to return to a situation of abuse.

"I would just like [them] to take everything into account, not just physical safety [...] Every time they have moved anyone that we haven't been able to prevent, we are trying to get hold of other women's organisations so that they have some support network but it is really important to understand that – it is safety in a different kind of meaning. And very often, these women are suicidal and the last thing that [they] need is to feel completely isolated and alone in a new place."

Interviewee 5

Such support does not always need to be highly structured – several interviewees, and one of the women we spoke to, noted that simply being able to attend a local mother and toddler group had provided significant help during their experiences.

"At first when we came, I was lonely, I stayed at home, I was depressed, I felt so bad [then] I came to know about the community women's group. At that time, there was a meeting every Friday, every week. They always call me to come, to listen to what I have to say, they discuss."

Claire

As in Elise's case, and in many of the other case studies we have encountered, much of the multi-agency liaison is undertaken by voluntary sector agencies who themselves are stretched in terms of resourcing and geography.

Elise – late 2017

Elise and her son had been living in the UK for some years with Elise's partner, who was abusive. Elise had complex health conditions but was repeatedly prevented from seeking healthcare by her husband.

When she managed to leave her husband, Elise was assisted by social work and a local charity to lodge a claim for asylum. Although she was working with a legal representative and a support worker in one city, after claiming asylum she was transferred to Initial Accommodation 50 miles away. She was later dispersed to a region over 100 miles from where she had initially sought support.

Her advocacy worker from a specialist refugee charity has attempted to link her into services in her new region, but with limited success.

"I was trying to get her support, I was keeping in contact with her all over the phone ... but she has very little English, all issues around domestic violence that have never been dealt with properly ... most of the support was around practical issues of getting to doctors, getting to drop in and things like that, sorting out food bags etc..."

She's missed out on the emotional support [although] she had horrendous years with her husband in very abusive relationship..."

8.4.3 Outreach

We described above some of the barriers that women, and the agencies who assist them, may face in trying to access the government-funded asylum support advice line. In contrast, interviewees generally spoke very positively about their 'in person' dealings with local staff from the same voluntary sector agency that runs the advice line.

"They were really really helpful, they supported her for the application ... we work closely together..."

Interviewee 6

"Two local officers who are face to face, they're really good."

Interviewee 11

It appears that such interactions often occur in the context of outreach activities by Migrant Help, where they share office space with other voluntary sector refugee organisations.

"We have a good relationship [...] they are doing outreach, it is fantastic, it has solved a lot of issues for us, they can talk to women in private and they are responders for the National Referral Mechanism."

Interviewee 12

This model of working therefore appears to be positive and could be developed further.

8.4.4 Acting on recommendations

At one level, there are indications that significant Police or criminal justice involvement in women's lives can be influential in ensuring a swift and appropriate response from the Home Office and accommodation providers (see for example Erica's case in Chapter Six above).

"The police were in the contact with the Home Office. If the police understand the dangers and take it seriously, they have had a really good impact on the Home Office, but as you can see in other cases where the police have not been on board or not understood the dangers, then the response is not so good."

Interviewee 5

However, voluntary sector organisations were less confident that their views, based often on significant work with the woman in question, were given sufficient weight by the Home Office or accommodation providers. In one case recounted to us, a failure to listen to an organisation's recommendations almost led to a woman being relocated back to the city where abuse had taken place:

"If they could try to be a bit more flexible and listen to organisations and women. Like ... the woman who was going to be moved to [UK city], the perpetrators are in [same UK city] and the Home Office didn't seem to have any idea of that. If they listened to other people maybe they could have a better solution."

Interviewee 5

Despite this, the voluntary sector organisations we spoke to were all keen to work jointly to ensure that women can access sustainable safety, suggesting that there is ample opportunity to develop better referral and follow-up pathways.

Women seeking asylum:

"People who work in our sector know what they're doing, there is a view that charities are namby pamby, but we're very realistic [so] if we're saying something it's because we experience it every day, so listen to what we're suggesting, let's work more together rather than creating all this extra work ..."

Interviewee 12

Others noted that their knowledge and expertise could facilitate the Home Office, and accommodation providers to assess and ensure women's safety.

"It's me who arranges the meetings with the local councillor and Police liaison officer, we do so much stuff that's helping them, if they listened to us it would make their lives easier as well..."

Interviewee 11

8.5 Women's voices within the process

"You do have to listen to the woman but you have to get her to the safe place to say it to someone she trusts"

Interviewee 7

Two strands of our data come together in this final point.

At the beginning of this report, we provided an overview of some of the intersecting factors that may make it particularly difficult for women seeking asylum to disclose that they are experiencing, or at risk from, abuse or exploitation.

It is firstly therefore important that services across all sectors ensure that their model of delivery is accessible to women and allows them the time to discuss or disclose any risk they may be facing.

We have noted that all frontline workers should be given sustained training and support to deal with potential disclosures of abuse. To support this, we also suggest that services from all sectors should ensure that there are sufficient opportunities for women to access advice and support on a face to face basis, as this offers additional benefits in terms of 'hearing disclosure' from women who may be hesitant to discuss intimate matters.

"If organisations like us are able to give that kind of one to one, actually explain what the pathways are, make those phone calls with the women, that makes a really big difference [...] it's much easier to speak to someone in person."

Interviewee 3

"You could pick up a lot of things when working face to face ... you got a sense there was something going on, you just don't get that over the phone"

Interviewee 12

Secondly, with regard to service responses once a woman has disclosed that she is at risk, we end this chapter with a call to ensure that women's own views inform all work undertaken in the name of their safety and wellbeing.

Abuse works to disempower women. This makes it vitally important that women are given as much opportunity as possible to discuss and understand their options before decisions are taken about what support they can or should access, and where they should live.

"We would try not to work from the perspective of telling women what they need to do because that is what they're trying to get away from."

Interviewee 14

This said, we recognise that within the asylum support system as currently structured, women's choices, and the ability of service providers to accommodate these, remain constrained. For example, the fact that asylum accommodation is offered on a 'no choice' basis remains true for all people living on asylum support and is unlikely to be over-turned wholesale.

Yet, even introducing simple measures to ensure that women are informed about decisions taken in the name of their safety, would be beneficial. Currently, as in Claire's case below, it seems that the Home Office and accommodation providers can fail to empower women when responding to disclosures of abuse, even where their intentions are to move women to a safer situation.

"When we moved to [new area within dispersal city], the Home Office didn't tell me where they were taking me. They were very straight. We won't give you an option. We just got into a vehicle. They didn't tell me where we were going. I had three children with me. We were so scared. We were terrified. It was a very dark time."

Claire

Specialist organisations who have built up a relationship of trust with women can and do play a role in enabling women to have their voices heard and to express their wishes.

"It's hard to get feedback from women as they are often limited by language and don't want to speak up. If you work with organisations, they can help to support that. It's not that women don't want to say it, they are just not sure how to."

Interviewee 1

However, there is a clear need to put in place further mechanisms whereby women can confidently express their wishes; and have some reasonable expectation that these will be considered by the various agencies who might be involved in their cases.

This is not a concern that is unique to the asylum context.

"The most often cited comment was that [women exiting abusive situations] were 'just told' where they were going to be moved to and when; they did not feel they had any option or any say in the decision."⁸⁸

Conclusion

With this report, our aim has been to explore the realities of women's experiences when they attempt to leave situations of abuse and find safety within the UK asylum support system.

As the administrator of the asylum support system, the Home Office is key to making sure that the system improves its performance in this area. ASAP and the Refugee Council have been engaged in dialogue with the Home Office for four years on this issue and we are aware that there is a genuine desire for improvement.

In this report, we have highlighted the principal failings of the current asylum support policy and practice on domestic violence. However, while domestic abuse, as in all populations, is one of the most prevalent types of abuse faced by women and children, our findings indicate that other forms of abuse and harm can put women seeking asylum at risk. This includes, but is not limited to, the heightened risk of women being sexually exploited whilst they are destitute including after being granted leave to remain, or while living in insecure or unsuitable accommodation. Policies that aim to ensure women's safety must cover all stages of the asylum support system.

Finally, we note three central and overlapping themes in the cases we have highlighted in this study.

Firstly, a sense that women's concerns and needs are often overlooked by agencies involved in arranging safe accommodation or deciding upon applications for support. Women's voices continue to be absent from decisions concerning their lives. This can sometimes lead agencies to put in place accommodation and support arrangements that do not, in fact, ensure their long-term safety from abuse and harm. Linked to this is a sense that a limited conception of safety is used when the Home Office and

contractors respond to reports of abuse. Moving a woman to another house, in a different area is no guarantee that she will be able to escape further abuse.

Secondly, specialist voluntary sector organisations have a key role to play in responding to disclosures of abuse. Not only might they be the 'first responders' to disclosure, but where a support agency has an ongoing relationship of trust with a woman, they will likely be well placed to ensure that that woman's voice is heard, and her needs met. Such agencies include both the specialist refugee voluntary sector, and specialist organisations working with women who have experienced violence. Organisations from both areas of expertise could benefit from identifying more opportunities for structured joint working.

Finally, this is an area where the Home Office and contractors have a real opportunity to develop and promote good practice. Simple interventions – for example, agreeing standard communication protocols between key agencies who are providing support for a woman – could provide a unique and robust safety net that would mitigate the intersecting elements of insecure immigration status, limited economic power and gender that continue to affect the lives of women seeking asylum in the UK today.

Recommendations

A) A new Home Office approach to domestic violence experienced by women seeking asylum

1) The Home Office should publish a revised policy that addresses the domestic violence and abuse experienced by women seeking asylum, as a priority.

The revised policy should provide an effective and consistent response to domestic abuse, at all points of the asylum support journey. This can be achieved through:

- Recognising the serious nature of this crime and the Home Office's role as a key responder for women seeking asylum.
- Widening the scope of the policy to include women who are not already accommodated in the asylum support system, and also those who may have been refused asylum and may be eligible for asylum support.
- Prioritising support applications, or requests to change the support package, from asylum seeking victims of abuse.
- Providing guidance as to the definition of 'safe, alternative accommodation', acknowledging the possible need for this to be within close proximity of specialist support services; and that relocation to another area may not always be in the best interests of women and may therefore have implications for their safety.
- Acknowledging that Initial Accommodation cannot be considered 'safe, alternative accommodation', particularly where no single-sex provision is available.
- Providing guidance on sensitive and safe assessments of destitution, including at point of initial contact with the Asylum Intake Unit and linking to the guidance on Assessing Destitution.

- Ensuring that the views of women and the professionals supporting them inform decisions about how the Home Office responds.
- Agreeing a funding mechanism across the UK which will allow prompt access to safe emergency housing for women seeking asylum at all stages of the asylum process.
- Including safeguards for women experiencing, or at risk of domestic and other forms of gender-based violence, who have recently been granted refugee status and are transitioning into the mainstream welfare benefits system.
- Clearly setting out the overlap between reserved and devolved competencies, accurately referring to relevant policy, legislation and guidance responding to domestic abuse in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

2) The Home Office should revise the *Asylum Screening and Routing; Assessing Destitution; and Provision of Initial Accommodation* policy instructions so that they reflect the above and, in particular, they include guidance on the sensitive and safe assessment of destitution.

3) The Home Office should take responsibility for making sure that Home Office asylum support caseworkers, staff at the Asylum Intake Unit, and contractors within the asylum support system are aware of the new DV guidance and the other amended policy guidance mentioned above, and understand how they should be applied in practice.

4) The Home Office should take the lead in making sure that all relevant statutory and voluntary sector agencies are aware of the new DV guidance and understand how it should be applied in practice. This work could be led by the Home Office Safeguarding Hub.

5) The Home Office should monitor implementation of the revised DV policy. As a minimum, it should record numbers of reported cases of abuse and the geographical locations of the cases; number of case conferences convened; details of anonymous reports; analysis of outcomes including number of women who accessed refuge provision and the views of women on how their cases were handled. Topline monitoring data should be regularly shared with relevant stakeholders.

B) A new Home Office approach to all forms of violence against women seeking asylum

6) The Home Office should ensure that women seeking asylum are firmly included in the cross-Government efforts to address violence against women and girls, and any future cross-Government strategy on ending violence against women and girls should reflect this.

7) The Home Office should review, with input from stakeholders, key policy instructions including, *Assessing Destitution, Provision of Initial Accommodation, Duty to Offer Support and Asylum Screening and Routing*, to ensure that these policies explicitly respond to the needs of women who are experiencing or at risk of exploitation or abuse.

8) When a woman receives a positive decision on her asylum claim, the Home Office should ensure that her asylum support is not terminated until an alternative form of income has been secured, to reduce the risk of exploitation and abuse caused by her destitution and homelessness. Whilst the move-on period remains limited to 28 days, women refugees should receive a one-off cash payment to assist their transition into mainstream welfare support or work, in line with the allowance provided to resettled refugees.

Enabling disclosures

9) The Home Office should encourage disclosures of violence and abuse by amending the ASF1 support application and accompanying guidance to include an explicit question early in the form. The question should be broad to encourage disclosures of abusive or risky situations which may fall outside the definition of domestic violence. For example, by asking whether or not someone is safe or at risk in their current living arrangements. This would provide the space for women (and men) to disclose safety concerns at the time of application.

10) The Home Office should ensure that there is greater provision of Home Office funded face-to-face asylum support advice as this service model is more likely to enable both disclosure and an appropriate response by the Home Office.

Prevention

11) The Home Office should increase its provision of single-sex, or 'family-only' accommodation units within the Initial Accommodation estate.

12) The Home Office should ensure that, where there is mixed sex initial accommodation, women only spaces or protected times are developed. This would not only lessen the risk of exploitation and abuse but would also facilitate the provision of education sessions around, for example, women's rights, violence awareness and health.

13) Accommodation providers should ensure that staff are adequately trained to recognise the indicators of domestic violence, act on suspicions and respond to disclosures.

14) Accommodation providers should ensure that a female housing officer is allocated to houses occupied by female heads of household.

15) Accommodation providers should ensure that there is clear guidance around the conduct of home visits and that staff comply with these policies.

16) The Home Office should end its policy of allowing accommodation providers to place unrelated single-parent families in the same accommodation.

17) The Home Office should provide an ASPEN payment card to all adult dependents and not just the principle asylum support applicant.

Ensuring a joined-up response

18) The Home Office should clarify and publicise the role and remit of the Safeguarding Hub; with the aim of encouraging more effective joint working between the Home Office, other statutory agencies and the voluntary sector in responding to women at risk of violence and abuse.

19) The voluntary sector should seek opportunities for greater exchange of knowledge and expertise between specialist women's organisations, including domestic violence services, and organisations that support refugees

and people seeking asylum; where appropriate, this should include setting up joint training and referral pathways.

20) Refugee agencies and other organisations that support people seeking asylum should ensure they are able to recognise and respond to signs of domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women, including through the provision of training to frontline staff and the establishment of referral pathways to other specialist organisations.

21) The Home Office should amend the current cross-Government action plan to end violence against women and girls to include the Home Office-led recommendations in this report.

Bibliography

Allsopp, J., Sigona, N. & Phillimore, J. (2014) *Poverty amongst refugees and asylum seekers in the UK: an evidence and policy review* (University of Birmingham: IRIS)

Anitha, S. (2008). Neither safety nor justice: the UK government response to domestic violence against immigrant women. *Journal of Social Welfare & Family Law*, 30(3), pp.189–202

Anitha, S. (2010). No Recourse, No Support: State Policy and Practice towards South Asian Women Facing Domestic Violence in the UK. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40, pp.462–479

Baillot, H., Cowan, S. & Munro, V. (2009). Seen and Not Heard: Parallel Dissonances in the treatment of rape narratives across asylum and criminal justice contexts. *Journal of Law and Society*, 36(2), pp.195-219

Baillot, H., Cowan, S. & Munro, V. (2012). Hearing the Right Gaps; Enabling and Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Violence in the UK Asylum Process. *Social and Legal Studies*, 21(3), pp.269-296

Balaam, M., Kingdon, C., Thomson, G., Finlayson, K. & Downe, S. (2015) 'We make them feel special': The experiences of voluntary sector workers supporting asylum seeking and refugee women during pregnancy and early motherhood.' *Midwifery* Vol. 34 pp.133-140

Bögner et al., D., Herlihy, J. & Brewin, C. (2007). Impact of sexual violence on disclosure during Home Office interviews. *British Journal Of Psychiatry*, 191, pp.75-81

Burchill, J. & Pevalin, D.J. (2014) 'Demonstrating cultural competence within health-visiting practice: working with refugee and asylum-seeking families' *Diversity and Equality in Health and Care* 11 pp.151-9

Burman, E., Smailes, S. & Chantler, K. (2014) 'Culture' as a barrier to service provision and delivery: domestic violence

services for minoritized women' *Critical Social Policy* Vol. 24(3) pp.332–357

Canning, V. (2013). International conflict, sexual violence and asylum policy: Merseyside as a case study. *Critical Social Policy*, 34(1), pp.24–45

The Children's Society (2013) *Report of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Asylum Support for Children and Young People*

Clayton, G., Crowther, T., Kerr, J., Sharrock, S. & Singer, D. (2017) *Through Her Eyes: Enabling women's best evidence at asylum appeals* (London: NatCen, Asylum Aid, Migrants Resource Centre)

Crawley, H., Hemmings, J. & Price, N. (2011) *Coping with Destitution: survival and livelihood strategies of refused asylum seekers living in the UK* (Oxfam / University of Swansea)

Crenshaw, K. (1991) Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review* 43(6) pp.1241-1299

Dumper, H. (2002) *Is it safe here? Refugee women's experiences in the UK* (Refugee Action)

Engender (2016) *Gender Matters in Social Security: individual payments of universal credit*

Fassetta, G., Da Lomba, S. & Quinn, N. (2016) *A Healthy Start? Experiences of pregnant refugee and asylum-seeking women in Scotland* (Glasgow: British Red Cross / University of Strathclyde)

Fuseini, S. (2009) *Experiences of Asylum-Seeking Women on Housing and Health-Care Services in Bradford* (Laurea University)

- Graca, S. (2017) Domestic violence policy and legislation in the UK: a discussion of immigrant women's vulnerabilities. *European Journal of Current Legal Issues*, 22(1)
- Hickey, G. (2011) *Barriers to Support Appeals for Asylum-Seeking Women* (London: Asylum Support Appeals Project)
- Hubbard, A., Payton, J. & Robinson, A. (2013) *Uncharted Territory: violence against migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women in Wales* (Wales Migration Partnership)
- Hunt, L. (2008) Women Asylum Seekers and Refugees: Opportunities, Constraints and the Role of Agency. *Social Policy & Society* 7:3, pp.281–292
- Keygnaert, I. et al (2008) *Hidden Violence is a Silent Rape: Prevention of Sexual & Gender-Based Violence against Refugees & Asylum Seekers in Europe: a Participatory Approach Report* (Ghent: ICRH, Ugent)
- Pillinger, C., O'Doherty, L. & Bowen E. (2017) *Migrant women's experiences of sexual and gender-based violence and help-seeking strategies* (University of Coventry)
- Querton, C. (2012) *I Feel Like, As a Woman, I'm Not Welcome: A gender analysis of UK asylum law, policy and practice* (London: Asylum Aid)
- Refugee Action (2017) *Slipping Through the Cracks – how Britain's asylum support system fails the most vulnerable* (London: Refugee Action)
- Refugee Council (2005) *Making Women Visible: strategies for a more women-centred refugee and asylum support system* (London: Refugee Council)
- Refugee Council (2009) *The Vulnerable Women's Project: Refugee and asylum seeking women affected by rape or sexual violence – Literature review* (London: Refugee Council)
- Refugee Council (2012) *The Experiences of Refugee Women in the UK* (London: Refugee Council)
- Reynolds, S. (2010) *Your Inflexible Friend: the cost of living without cash* (London: Refugee Council)
- Rights of Women (2011) *Silenced Voices Speak: strategies for protecting migrant women from violence and abuse* (London: Rights of Women)
- Scottish Women's Aid (2015) *Change, Justice, Fairness?* (Cowdenbeath: Fife Domestic Abuse Partnership)
- Smith, K. & Lockwood, K. (2015) *Stories of Mothers – asylum support for children and young people living in Kirklees* (Calderdale & Kirklees: WomenCentre)
- Taal, S. (2017) *Destitute and asylum-seeking women in the West Midlands* (Birmingham: Hope Projects)
- Women's Health Matters (2010) *The Mothers in Exile Project* (Leeds: Women's Health Matters)
- Zimmermann, C. et al (2009) *Asylum-seeking women, violence and health – results from a pilot study in Scotland and Belgium* (Glasgow: Scottish Refugee Council)

Endnotes

- 1 Accommodation that people seeking asylum are often housed in while waiting for a decision on their application for asylum support. This is often large mixed hostels.
- 2 This introduction and our exploration of relevant literature owes much to a previous (unpublished) review of the literature carried out in 2016 by Nina Murray, Monica Reeves & Mélanie Bérard (Scottish Refugee Council) and Anna Musgrave (Refugee Council).
- 3 <https://www.asylumaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Charter.pdf>
- 4 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gender-issue-in-the-asylum-claim-process>
- 5 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ratification-of-the-council-of-europe-convention-on-combating-violence-against-women-and-domestic-violence>
- 6 Also see Scotland's Strategy to prevent and eradicate violence against women and girls, <https://beta.gov.scot/publications/equally-safe/>; Wales' Strategy on Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence, <https://gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/commsafety/161104-national-strategy-en.pdf>; and the Strategy on Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland, <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/stopping-domestic-and-sexual-violence-and-abuse-northern-ireland-strategy>
- 7 The 'Istanbul Convention' is the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence
- 8 <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/istanbul-convention/text-of-the-convention>
- 9 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/compendium/focusonviolentcrimeandsexualoffences/yearendingmarch2016/domesticabusesexualassaultandstalking>
- 10 <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report>
- 11 Work by the Scottish Refugee Council noted that 70% of the women they interviewed had experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, with 38% having experienced violence from an intimate partner (Zimmermann et al, 2009).
- 12 Of 153 people who answered this question.
- 13 One interview was a joint interview with two people from the same organisation.
- 14 31 survey respondents initially agreed to be interviewed. Of these, the research team identified those whose experience of working with women facing abuse or harm in the UK appeared, from their survey responses, to be most relevant to our research. We contacted 22 of these respondents by email, of whom 12 took part in the interview process.
- 15 Scottish Women's Aid 2015; Pillinger et al, 2017.
- 16 Men too can of course experience all of these types of abuse. There is evidence, for example, that sexual violence against men is endemic in situations of conflict and detention, but that it remains under-reported. Our focus here however is on violence against women.
- 17 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategy-to-end-violence-against-women-and-girls-2016-to-2020>
- 18 <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/04/5766/0>

- 19 <https://gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/commsafety/161104-national-strategy-en.pdf>
- 20 Dumper, 2003.
- 21 Crenshaw, 1991.
- 22 Burman et al, 2004.
- 23 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/699703/gender-issues-in-the-asylum-claim-v3.pdf
- 24 <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3dec8abe4.pdf>
- 25 <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4550a9502.pdf>
- 26 https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/what_we_do/therapeutic_casework/epione_project
- 27 See for example, Asylum Aid, 2011: <https://www.asylumaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/unsustainableweb.pdf>; Migrants Resource Centre & Asylum Aid, 2017: <https://www.asylumaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Through-Her-Eyes--Final-Report--Nov17.pdf>
- 28 Crawley et al, 2011.
- 29 Exceptions include Dumper, 2002; Refugee Council, 2005, Hickey, 2011.
- 30 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/487402/Asylum_Support_Policy_Bulletin_Instructions_Public_v7.pdf
- 31 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/487402/Asylum_Support_Policy_Bulletin_Instructions_Public_v7.pdf
- 32 Idem.
- 33 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/597382/Allocation-Of-Accommodation-v5_0.pdf
- 34 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/asylum-support-asylum-instructions>
- 35 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/496911/new_Healthcare_Needs_and_Pregnancy_Dispersal_Policy_EXTERNAL_v3_0.pdf
- 36 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/487402/Asylum_Support_Policy_Bulletin_Instructions_Public_v7.pdf
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nationality-immigration-and-asylum-act-2002-process>
- 39 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/682495/asylum-support-section-4_2_-policy-and-process-v1.0ext.pdf
- 40 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/425519/Breach_of_Conditions_v8.pdf
- 41 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/431346/Section_55_v12.pdf
- 42 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/597382/Allocation-Of-Accommodation-v5_0.pdf
- 43 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/700624/screening-and-routing-v1.0ext.pdf
- 44 This was in the context of a survey question that asked respondents to identify, by general category, the different types of perpetrator in cases where they had worked with a woman who disclosed abuse. The survey structure was designed to ensure anonymity therefore it has not been possible to directly link allegations around abuse by accommodation provider staff to specific case studies.
- 45 See footnote 7 above.
- 46 Survey respondent 123 – Wales.
- 47 Querton, 2012 p.68.
- 48 Smith & Lockwood, 2015; Children’s Society, 2013; Dumper 2002.
- 49 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/04/lgbti-asylum-seekers-kate-hendickson-abused-homophobic-housemate-plea-move-ignored>
- 50 32 of 110 people who answered this question.
- 51 People living in asylum accommodation are not liable for utilities bills or council tax.

Women seeking asylum:

- 52 <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>
- 53 Smith and Lockwood, 2015 p. 23.
- 54 Reynolds, 2010.
- 55 Smith & Lockwood, 2015 p. 25.
- 56 Engender, 2016.
- 57 Hubbard, 2013 p.23.
- 58 23 of the 153 respondents who answered the question on their professional role.
- 59 <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report>
- 60 Pillinger et al, 2017.
- 61 Pillinger et al, 2017; Canning 2013; Anitha 2010.
- 62 Bögner et al (2007) found that while all participants within their research experienced difficulties with disclosure during Home Office interviews, those who had experienced sexual violence reported more difficulties in disclosure, were more likely to dissociate during the interview and scored significantly higher on measures of post-traumatic stress syndrome and shame than others who had not experienced sexual violence.
- 63 Bögner et al, 2007.
- 64 Pillinger et al, 2017.
- 65 Baillot et al, 2012.
- 66 Bögner et al, 2007 p.80.
- 67 Crawley et al, 2011.
- 68 <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-helplines>
- 69 This is archived at the time of writing but has not yet been replaced by an updated version.
- 70 This is the current title for the Home Office application form that must be used when people make an application for section 95 or section 4 support.
- 71 Scottish Women's Aid 2015
- 72 <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications/nowhere-to-turn-2018/>
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/26/domestic-abuse-survivors-and-children-sleeping-rough-survey-finds>
- 73 Burman et al, 2004 p.344.
- 74 Scottish Women's Aid 2015 p.48
- 75 https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/1769/28_days_later.pdf https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/7935/England_s_Forgotten_Refugees_final.pdf
https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/1546/Refugees_without_refuge_September_2017.pdf
- 76 The voluntary sector do have specialist projects – for example, Scotland's Refugee Integration Service, and the Refugee Council's Holistic Integration Service. However, there is no UK-wide, government funded support available for refugees.
- 77 <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/01/7281>
- 78 https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/refugees_welcome_inquiry
- 79 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696993/Integrated_Communities_Strategy.pdf
- 80 <http://womenshomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Migrant-women-and-homelessness-The-role-of-gender-based-violence.pdf>
- 81 <http://www.options.co.uk/sites/default/files/rr-coping-with-destitution-survival-strategies-uk-040211-summ-en.pdf>
- 82 Phillimore and Goodson 2010.
- 83 Crawley et al, 2011 p.52.
- 84 Taal, 2017 p.35.
- 85 <https://www.glasgowclyderapeccrisis.org.uk/content/ruby-project/>
- 86 From Home Office PowerPoint circulated to stakeholders in October 2017.
- 87 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/487402/Asylum_Support_Policy_Bulletin_Instructions_Public_v7.pdf, p. 81
- 88 Scottish Women's Aid, 2015 p. 46.



SUPPORTING AND
EMPOWERING
REFUGEES

ASAP

ASYLUM
SUPPORT
APPEALS
PROJECT

Women seeking asylum: Safe from violence in the UK?

Helen Baillot & Elaine Connelly
June 2018