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**Women seeking asylum:
Safe from violence in the UK?**

Executive Summary

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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 other 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 the 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.

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.

Patricia – 2017

Patricia had claimed asylum with her family. Her husband was the main applicant on both the asylum claim and the family's 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.

Summary of key recommendations

1. The Home Office should ensure that women seeking asylum are firmly included in 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 cross-Government action plan to end violence against women and girls to include the above recommendations.

To read the full and more detailed recommendations and to download the report, see

www.asaproject.org/about/womens-project or
www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/women-seeking-asylum