



Migrant Women: Failed by the State, Locked in Abuse

'We have been locked up by abusers and family, we have been locked up by the Home Office and now we are locked up again – how much can we bear?'
- asylum seeking woman who is a member of the Safety4Sisters Migrant Women's Group

COVID-19 is not only a public health crisis but a human rights one. We are told to “stay home” to keep safe. For women Safety4Sisters work with, they are trapped with abuser(s) in conditions ripe for increased violence. Families are forced together with little respite. Economic and psychological impacts of restrictions cause untold stress. For migrant black minority ethnic (BME) women, many of whom have insecure immigration status or language barriers, escaping violence is even more difficult and they remain trapped in life-threatening situations.

Women fear reporting will lead to immigration detention

Many migrant women cannot contact authorities for help as they fear reporting to the Home Office which may negatively impact their immigration cases, resulting in detention and/or deportation. This is a threat abusers instil as a significant form of coercive control and meets their experiences of years of the hostile environment. As a result, we are deeply concerned that women will not come forward to escape the increased violence they face during the pandemic.

No recourse to public funds keeps women experiencing violence

Migrant women are told by abusers and the state alike that their insecure immigration status means they have no recourse to public funds i.e. cannot access state welfare and housing support¹. Local authorities and central government view women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) because of immigration status entirely through the prism of immigration rather than as survivors of violence. Consequently, women face a stark choice: to remain in violence or leave and risk destitution and possible deportation. Without a clear message from central and local governments, women will fear coming forward. Despite both Priti Patel and Beverley Hughes raising issues of domestic abuse, they are yet to state there is support for all women escaping violence, regardless of immigration status including access to the newly established emergency accommodation released under COVID-19 measures.

A week into the lockdown, our advocate supported a woman with a 3-year-old child to leave her abusive husband - after social services told her to stay but 'remain vigilant'. The police, whilst temporarily removing the husband from the property, failed to move her to a place of safety stating COVID-19 lockdown guidelines which they interpreted as meaning, and so expressed to her, that she should not move out and so her husband was free to return. As violence against women increases under lockdown conditions and with an already at least 16 killings of women by men in three weeks², such responses risk women and children's lives

COVID-19 pushes migrant women further into poverty and destitution

Many women we assist are asylum seekers living on £37.25 ³per week or are destitute without any money at all. This means they cannot buy in bulk or buy the more expensive brands which

¹ At present, only women on spousal visas who experience domestic violence can access the destitute domestic violence

² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/15/domestic-abuse-killings-more-than-double-amid-covid-19-lockdown>

³ Please note that universal credit is £102.47 a week and Job Seekers' Allowance is £74.35 weekly for people over 25.

are often the products left on shelves. Women report skipping meals as they have run out of food or say they are observing religious fasting more rigorously to manage lack of food. One survivor didn't have money for phone credit so was out of contact with us for 2 weeks until she borrowed some money from a friend. During this time, her mental health seriously deteriorated, and she is currently thinking of taking her own life. A survivor of violence, she says, *"This just feels like the time to go – what have I left? I cannot go out. I cannot use the usual methods I had to take my mind away from my hell!"*

Abuse during COVID-19 frays social networks and exacerbates mental health issues

Many migrant women in northwest England, who experience multiple discrimination and violence, had poor mental health even before the pandemic. Restrictions have led to more acute isolation, lack of contact with support agencies, and increased ability of abusers to prohibit contact with family members, friends and colleagues. Women report feeling helpless to maintain control over their lives and maintain social networks. Lockdown conditions are heightening previous experiences of trauma. Women say they are scared to go out for fear of racism and being blamed for COVID-19, as experienced over the Manchester bombings. Whether terrorism or a pandemic, migrant women fear the violent repercussions of global crises.

Services working with migrant women escaping violence struggling to survive

Small BME and migrant women's organisations like Safety4Sisters have been severely underfunded and under-resourced for years due to austerity. Funding is short-term and piecemeal, making sustainability fragile. The recent government announcement of a £2 million fund for domestic abuse helplines and online support is welcome but woefully inadequate. In recent weeks, we have seen a huge increase in workload as we deal with women in increasingly distressed states whose cases are complicated by many refugees denying access and lack of clarity whether women from outside Manchester can get access to emergency COVID-19 provisions.

Demands for action

Urgent action needs to be taken by the government, nationally and locally, to ensure all women - regardless of immigration status - are protected in this time of unprecedented crisis:

1. Put in place a firewall so women coming forward to the police – or any other public service - do not have their data shared with the Home Office. This must be clearly communicated with migrant women; they must be assured that they are safe to report violence.
2. Abolish no recourse to public funds for all women escaping violence.
3. Issue clear guidance on where to house migrant women and about the suspension of healthcare charges.
4. Launch a communications campaign that is accessible and produced in different languages to ensure all women experiencing violence know what help is available irrespective of immigration status.
5. Include migrant women in safety and protection measures outlined in the Domestic Abuse Bill and the proposed Greater Manchester Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy and make these documents public.
6. Adequate funding for VAWG services including BME and migrant women's organisations to ensure all women can access lifesaving services.

For more information, please contact: Sandhya Sharma info@safety4sisters.org
Safety4Sisters works to support migrant women across the North West who have experienced gender-based violence and who have no recourse to public funds or state benefits.
<https://www.safety4sisters.org/>
