



# THE RIGHT TO BE BELIEVED

Migrant women facing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in the 'hostile immigration environment' in London

Cathy McIlwaine, Lucila Granada and Illary Valenzuela-Oblitas  
King's College London and the Latin American Women's Rights Service  
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**“I put up with too much abuse. He mistreated me, he hurt me, and I had to think twice before telling the police. But I am not afraid anymore. I have been stepped on for too long and now I stand up for myself. I have rights and I am free.”**

*Ana, from Bolivia*

# INTRODUCTION

**V**iolence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is widely acknowledged to affect Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and migrant women disproportionately in the UK and beyond (Anitha, 2008; IMKAAN, 2017; Loya, 2014; McIlwaine and Carlisle, 2011). This relates to the ways in which the risk factors that precipitate gender-based violence intensify as well as how women face more complex barriers to safe disclosure and reporting. In the context of the hostile environment for migrant women in the UK, the threat of destitution, detention and/or deportation looms large over them, especially when their immigration status is insecure and when they have 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF – where they are unable to access any state support). Recent research in collaboration with LAWRS with Brazilian migrant women in London, for example, found not only that over 80% had experienced some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime, but that more than half never reported or disclosed it in London because they thought nothing would be done about it, or because they lacked information, felt too ashamed to discuss it, or due to their fear of being deported. Among the 21% of women who had experienced a serious episode of violence, only 49% reported to a formal source with the remainder disclosing to family and friends (McIlwaine and Evans, 2018, 2019).

This report is part of the Step Up Migrant Women Campaign which was established by the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS) and is currently supported by 38 organisations from

the women and migrant sectors. This project and campaign aim to build a strong evidence base working with women with insecure migrant status who have experienced Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and who reside in London. Led by migrant and black and minority ethnic (BME) women, the project and campaign propose to increase awareness about the challenges faced by migrant women survivors of VAWG when seeking help from statutory and voluntary organisations, to influence key decision-makers at London and national levels. This is to ensure that the rights of victims of VAWG take precedence over control of immigration status so they are able to report violence safely and obtain support without fear of destitution/ detention/deportation. It also aims to influence the main organisations and local authorities working in the field so that they provide appropriate services and support to migrant women survivors of VAWG.

The report outlines the evidence base underpinning the campaign derived from research with migrant women who had experienced insecure immigration status and gender-based violence. It entailed a survey with 50 migrant women, most of whom used services of specialist migrant organisations as well as semi-structured interviews with 11 migrant women with current or previous insecure immigration status (see Appendix 1)<sup>1</sup> and with 10 representatives from organisations supporting them.<sup>2</sup> In addition, two focus groups were conducted with a group of stakeholders from migrant organisations and with migrant women service users.

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<sup>1</sup> Although we provided space for identifying as transgender or other, all those surveyed identified as female. However, we interviewed a transgender woman and transgender women's voices are represented in one of the focus groups.

<sup>2</sup> These were: Kurdish Middle Eastern Women's Organisation (KMEWO), London Black Women's Project, The Magpie Project, Southall Black Sisters, Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO), IMECE Women's Centre, Women for Refugee Women, Kiran Support Services, Asian Women Resource Centre and the Latin American Women's Rights Service.

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The women surveyed and interviewed came from 22 different countries across Asia, Africa, and the Americas (see Appendix 1).<sup>3</sup> In terms of the findings from the survey, three quarters (76%) were aged between 18 and 39 with a further 18% between 40 and 59 and only 3 women aged over 60. Thirteen women were undocumented (26%), with more than a third waiting for the outcomes of visa applications from the Home Office (36%), two were asylum seekers, four were refugees, three had a spousal visa, six had another form of temporary residence and three had permanent residence. Most women had previously held a family visa (26%) or a spouse visa (14%). The women lived across 17 different London boroughs.<sup>4</sup> All the women had some experience of insecure immigration status currently or in the past.<sup>5</sup>

The definition of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) that we use in this report draws on the benchmark of the 1993 UN Declaration of the Elimination of Violence against Women in Article 1: 'Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life'. Article 2 continues that it may occur in the 'family, community, perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs' and may refer to assault, sexual abuse, rape, female genital mutilation and other 'traditional' practices, as well as sexual harassment, trafficking in women, and forced prostitution (UN 1993). Central to these definitions is that VAWG occurs not only in the private sphere thus challenging its invisibility and its associated impunity but also that it occurs across borders and transnationally (McIlwaine and Evans, 2018) which is especially important when we are discussing migrant women (McIlwaine and Evans, 2019). It is also recognised that experiences of VAWG are not one-off occurrences, but that they are multiple and invariably experienced simultaneously (Walby and Towers, 2017).

In brief, the research shows that gender-based violence experienced by migrant women is hugely diverse and

experienced multiple times by multiple perpetrators in ways that are exacerbated by having insecure immigration status. For example, 78% of women experienced psychological violence within the home much of which is underpinned by manipulation of immigration status by intimate partners. In addition, 68% of women had experienced physical violence perpetrated by intimate partners, with almost two-thirds (62%) suffering financial abuse, and 46% the victims of sexual violence. The complexity of this violence is heightened among migrant and BME women in London as they endure not only a wide range of different types of VAWG, but are also afraid to report.

This is because of threats from perpetrators where almost two-thirds (62%) of women said their partners had threatened deportation if they reported the violence. In turn, more than half of women feared that they would not be believed by the police because of their immigration status (54%) or that the police or the Home Office would support the perpetrator over them (52%). Acknowledging that the sample was sourced via specialist migrant organisations, still almost a fifth of women did not formally report their experiences of VAWG, mainly linked with their vulnerabilities and multiple fears as migrant women with insecure immigration status, such as fear of deportation (24%) or lack of access to information and not knowing where to go (18%).

Reflecting the title of the report, which are the words of a Moroccan woman called Mona, when asked about what changes women felt were important for the police to take on board in order to support migrant women who reported violence, the most commonly cited was to be believed (26%) followed by not having to report immigration status (23%). This was also identified when reporting to social services. Indeed, incidents of institutional violence were common, highlighting the need for an intersectional approach to understanding and dealing with migrant women who have experienced gender-based violence.

As Mona stated, "I have the right to be respected, to be supported" regardless of her immigration status.

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<sup>3</sup> Those surveyed and interviewed came from the following countries: Albania, Algeria, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Libya, Mauritius, Malawi, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Sri Lanka and the United States.

<sup>4</sup> Barking and Dagenham, Brent, Camden, Croydon, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey, Havering, Hillingdon, Lambeth, Newham, Redbridge, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest and Wandsworth.

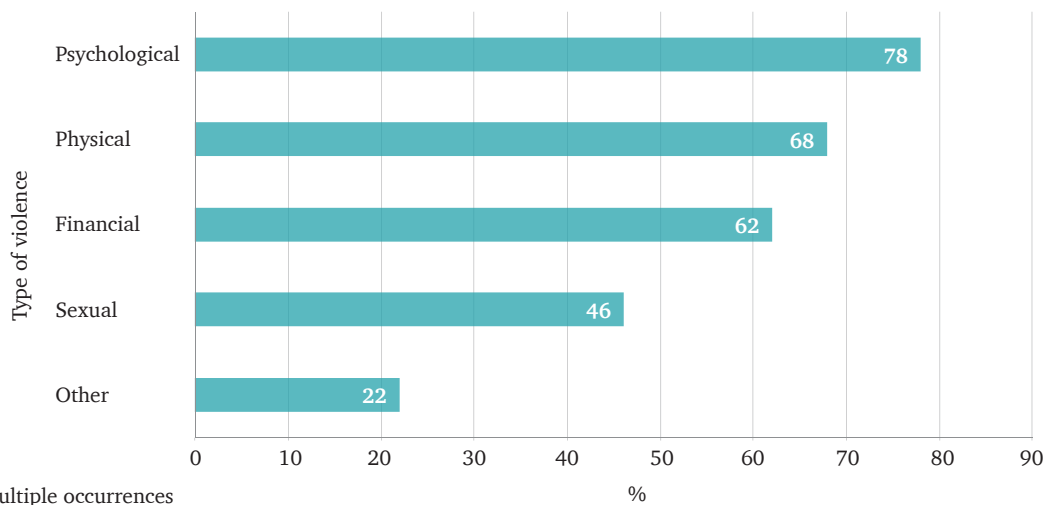
<sup>5</sup> People with 'insecure immigration status' are those whose status is temporary or insecure due to waiting for a decision about their permission to stay, or because they are dependent on their partner's, spouse or other family member's status. Their stay is usually limited, they may be undocumented or do not have legal rights to stay (Equalities and Human Rights Committee, 2017; Safety4Sisters, 2016).

# **INCIDENCE AND NATURE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS (VAWG) EXPERIENCED BY MIGRANT WOMEN**

**MANY MIGRANT WOMEN WERE UNAWARE  
OF WHAT CONSTITUTED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE  
BEFORE ENGAGING WITH SPECIALIST MIGRANT  
ORGANISATIONS, ESPECIALLY REGARDING  
PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE**

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Figure 1: Incidence of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in the home (%)



Note: multiple occurrences  
Source: Author survey (n=50)

**W**hile most women surveyed and everyone interviewed were aware of what gender-based violence referred to because they had been accessing services of a specialist organisation, it is also important to acknowledge that many were unaware before they engaged. Indeed, it was extremely common for women to contact an organisation for assistance with an issue ostensibly unrelated to VAWG, but for their gender-based violence to emerge when they began to tell their stories (see also McIlwaine and Evans, 2018 on Brazilian women in London). This was especially the case with psychological violence as noted by Service Provider A:

“One of the issues is controlling, they don’t know that controlling is domestic violence. They feel, sometimes, that it is natural, that it is normal for men to control the family, the wives, everything, it becomes part of the culture of the family. But, in reality, we have to tell them ‘You are a human being, like him! You should be treated as a human being, equally, not as second! ... Your rights should be respected, and you always need to have space for yourself. And he has to understand!’ But sometimes, they even, at the beginning, for some women, it is hard to talk to them in this way. But later on, they understand, they open up, and they tell us their pain, their issues.”

**Psychological Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in the home was the most commonly experienced type of VAWG identified by 78% of women.**

Bearing this caveat in mind, all migrant women included in the survey experienced some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime and all reported

suffering multiple forms. However, intimate partner violence (IPV) within the home emerged as the most commonly experienced broad type. More specifically, psychological violence in the home perpetrated by an intimate partner was the most common form of violence experienced by 39 of the 50 women (78%) (Figure 1).

**Psychological Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in the home is hugely diverse.**

Psychological IPV in the home is diverse and entails numerous forms of coercive control that are usually experienced simultaneously. These include husbands/partners preventing women from leaving their homes and keeping them in domestic servitude, preventing them from working, from seeing friends or family as well as verbal abuse, manipulation and deceit. For example, Mona, 41, from Libya (but who had a Moroccan passport) was married to a man who, it transpired after they married, also had another wife and children. He controlled Mona in a wide range of different ways as she notes:

“He asked me to wear the Islamic scarf ... I didn’t like that. And he was like ‘if you don’t wear it, you are not going out’, so I had to wear it to go out. I’m not allowed to have friends, no female friends, because he used to say ‘they will change you’. He used to say ‘I’m your friend’, so when he gets home from work he takes me out. He even restricted my contact with my family, ‘don’t call them always, don’t speak to them always’ and this and that, and he would get angry at me if in front of him I was talking to my sister on the phone, or WhatsApp, he was like ‘no, your husband’s here, so you have to be with him, talk to him...’”

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**Domestic servitude** often entailed forced reproductive labour as well as imprisonment. One service provider spoke of one of their clients from India who had been locked up in her husband's house with no food, was forced to sleep on the floor and work all day cooking and cleaning (Service provider J). Other types of coercion reported by women and the service providers included **forced marriage and forced abortions**, the latter especially when the sex of the unborn baby was discovered to be female rather than male. Tania, 29, from Bangladesh spoke of how her husband tried to force her abort her first child (a boy) because he did not feel ready and her second because she was a girl:

“You know ... the reason it's like that, like according to our culture, they prefer a baby boy, heritage, the father's name ... although in my case, my husband was not ready to have children, but he forced me to abort my children, which I didn't because as a mother I can't do anything ... So many times I experienced physical violence when I was pregnant, because he didn't want any children. But I wasn't ready to abort”.

Another extremely common type of psychological and emotional abuse was **gas-lighting** where the abuser manipulates situations to distort victims' perceptions and memory in ways that undermine self-belief and self-esteem.. Katia, 41, from Peru spoke of how her British husband began his abuse in this way which he then followed up with deliberately isolating her on the outskirts of London where she had not friends or family such that she felt she had been kidnapped:

“He hid it, it was very subtle, such that I thought it was my fault ... for example, I had put the baby's nappies in the rucksack and when I asked for them he said they weren't there, I said they were, he said they weren't. I thought that I was the problem, that I was the bad one ... he did it to make a case for easy divorce ... now I realize that he isolated me, you know he kidnapped me”.

Much psychological violence experienced by migrant women relates to what is referred to as '**honour-based violence**' and harmful practices.<sup>6</sup> While these are commonly exercised by extended family members

and the wider communities, they also form important forms of psychological violence perpetrated by intimate partners who use the threat of shame and dishonour to manipulate women and prevent them from reporting (see also below). For example, Aisha, 33, from India spoke of how she discovered that her husband was gay after she married him (she was his third wife) and his emotional violence towards her revolved around trying to hide this from his family and the wider community because of the forms of intolerance of homosexuality involved. Aisha was then emotionally abused and later abandoned, leaving her with undocumented status in the UK.

“After two or three weeks I found out that my husband did not want to get married. I found out after that my husband is gay ...he wants the divorce. He tells me that the marriage is not working now. Slowly, slowly, he became emotionally violent to me, saying you are not leaving this house. I can't tell my people I'm struggling here, I can't get help from them ... He forced me to call my parents and tell my parents he doesn't want me and my parents told me to get help from other people. After he cancelled my [spousal] visa, he booked my ticket, he called me and said 'don't come to my house, I cancelled your visa, you are illegal in this country.'”

### **One of the most common forms of gender-based psychological violence related to manipulation of immigration status by intimate partners**

Aisha's case relates to the other major form of gender-based psychological violence perpetrated by intimate partners through manipulating immigration status or what one service provider referred to as '**status VAWG**' as a way of exercising power over women (Service provider I). This was widely identified by service users and providers and is acknowledged as a widespread and important form of gender-based violence among migrants everywhere (see McIlwaine, 2010; McIlwaine and Evans, 2018). It is also closely related with many other types of VAWG as the threat of reporting women to the immigration authorities means that women will often be forced to endure violence than be reported and face potential detention, destitution and/or

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<sup>6</sup> 'Honour-based' violence (HBV) can be defined as “any form of violence perpetrated against women within a framework of patriarchal family and social structures. The main justification for the perpetration of HBV is the protection of a value system predicated on norms and traditions concerned with 'honour'” (Gill and Brah, 2014: 73). It is widely contested on grounds that it is *not* an honourable act and because it has tended to become racialised. It is therefore important to acknowledge it as a form of gender-based violence and a harmful practice as well as not to condemn entire cultures by association with such practices.

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deportation (see also below). One service provider spoke of a case where an intimate partner controlled his wife in extreme ways in relation to her mobility and working practices as well as physical violence because she was dependent on him for her spousal visa:

“That’s the power holding the women [with insecure migration status], normally they say they will do that but it never happens, that’s why they (the men) control them. But in the meantime, women are experiencing abuse, they are under surveillance. When they are even going to work, men trap them via their phones, drop them, take them back from work, phone them, one of the women’s husbands even phoned her boss. He wanted to know everything she does, she is this 26-year-old, she was from Uzbekistan, she was working as a maid in a hotel and she was petrified of him and her friend even said ‘look, this woman has got no-one. Even her employers knew she was coming with bruises every day before it was reported.’” (Service provider J)

Another aspect of this manipulation was referred to as **‘bureaucratic abuse’** by Service Provider C where immigration documents were withheld or lied about by partners as a tool of power:

“I think it might even be a subcategory of abuse, which is bureaucratic abuse, if you like, in terms of not allowing the mums access to their passport and immigration documents, they don’t put in an application for leave to remain, they say they have put in an application, they haven’t.”

This type of ‘bureaucratic abuse’ also relates to **perpetrators ensuring that partners on spousal visas do not have any trace of their residency in the UK** as a form of control and power and to keep them entrapped. Service Provider A identified this:

“The problem every woman who comes to us on spouse visa is that they have their name nowhere, the men are very clever, they don’t register her, they don’t put their name on a Tenancy Agreement, or a gas bill, or electricity bill, they don’t have bank statements. So, clearly they will not go near the police because they deport [them] ... Even if she is legal, if she has a visa, they scare them about everything, even if they [IPs] are having all the control [over the women].

**Almost two-thirds of women had experienced economic and financial abuse on the part of intimate partners in the home.**

Many aspects of the psychological violence identified above are closely interrelated with economic and financial abuse which are other forms of coercive control. Indeed, many women experienced specific forms of financial abuse which relates to refusing, restricting access to money and/or misusing it, but also wider types of economic abuse which “incorporates a range of behaviours which allow a perpetrator to control someone else’s economic resources or freedoms. Economic abuse is wider in its definition than ‘financial abuse’ ... [and] can also include restricting access to essential resources such as food, clothing or transport, and denying the means to improve a person’s economic status (for example, through employment, education or training)” (Women’s Aid, 2019, 7).

Specific financial abuse was identified by 62% of the women surveyed (Figure 1) and again took multiple forms. While much of this abuse entailed husbands refusing to give any money to their wives and children for food and rent and/or controlling bank accounts and refusing access to bank accounts, it commonly involved men withholding welfare benefits. Estela, 31, from Mexico, for example, had arrived in the UK on a domestic service visa but was coerced into marrying her boyfriend when she got pregnant in order to stay in the country when her employers refused to renew her visa. She spoke about the financial abuse she suffered where her husband withheld the welfare support that was supposed to be for them as a family:

“He did not support me [economically], he was being paid housing benefit at that time and spent all the money ... I had to pay all the rent and was frustrated with the fact that I have to pay all the expenses and have the baby”.

This was corroborated by Service Provider C who also noted that **husbands also took out loans in women’s names:**

“The financial abuse is ... a lot of the dads, for instance, if the dad is British and the mum is not, they are claiming the child’s benefits and taking it, or they are taking out loans in the name of the mum, or they are not allowing the mums to have access to any money”.

Some women also spoke of economic and financial abuse exacerbated by gambling problems. Nalini, 39, from India, spoke of her ex-husband’s gambling problem:

“Because before I was working as healthcare



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assistant in Charing Cross hospital, I was earning money. Dad used to work part time here, part time there because he likes to gambling, and he would spend his money on it. And me, whatever I was earning I was running a home but he is there to look after the kids ... gambling destroyed our family. He was addicted to gambling ... I couldn't give him my wages because I paid the rent, I was paying for everything, I was running the home."

Nalini's ex-husband was also physically violent towards her which, combined with the financial abuse, led to her to seek help.

### **Transnational marriage abandonment emerged as an important form of intimate partner violence**

Related with immigration status and manipulation among intimate partners and 'honour-based violence' (see also below) is the malicious abandonment of women by their husbands transnationally, known as transnational marriage abandonment or stranded spouses. This refers to the purposeful abandonment of foreign national wives in their home country by their husbands who are nationals or residents of another country "and is essentially a gendered phenomenon that forms part of a continuum of violence and coercion experienced by women at the hands of abusive and exploitative husbands and their families" (Patel and Anitha, 2016). This was identified as an issue by half of the service providers, primarily those working with South Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African women. Service Provider A discussed this:

"Many, many women are taken back, you know, the husband planned it. When the relationship breaks down and the man is not happy, they make a scenario, they tell them [the women] 'We are going to visit your family!', he pretends that everything is OK, he pretends for a while that they are OK, giving her money, taking her out, and he plans that 'We are going to visit our family!' When they get there, especially, we have many, many cases in Kurdistan like this, when they get there, they've taken away her every belonging, her passport, or ID card, and then tell her 'That is it! I don't want you anymore!' They drop her there, they come back, straight away they call the Home Office saying, 'My wife divorced me, she no longer wants to be here, and she went back!' ... and then goes on to block everything in a places like Kurdistan or Iraq, it is not easy to get a visa and come back. Even if you get the visa, it is not easy to get here. when they call us ... 'Please, this is what happened, I married this man, I was living at this address, I was NRPF, I had a visa for five years, but now he took everything from me,

passport and everything, he divorced me, he told me to go to the solicitor there"

This type of abandonment creates other forms in the countries where women are left (often with natal families) where they may face stigma and other challenges trying to seek recourse because the cases cover more than one legal system. In turn, if they manage to return to the UK, they face further rejection and violence from their community and former husbands who have treated them as 'disposable' (Anitha et al. 2016; also Patel and Anitha, 2016). Service Provider J recalled the problems these women face:

"We have an inbox full of emails from women from Pakistan saying, 'my husband took me on holiday and he said he was going to come back for me but he didn't', or when they do come back they have other women here ... The problem is when women are out of the jurisdiction of this country, police and foreign officers cannot do very much ... Some of them have been married before so it is like a 'serving wife', she doesn't cook well then send her back, she doesn't speak English very well then send her back. That's what they do and that's what needs to be stopped".

### **Physical violence perpetrated by intimate partners was the second most commonly experienced form of VAWG in the home and was often preceded by psychological violence.**

Physical violence was experienced by more than two-thirds of women surveyed (Figure 1). This include a huge range of types such as throwing items, pushing, slapping, hitting with and without weapons, among many others. It was often preceded or accompanied by psychological violence. For example, 40-year-old Aretta from Nigeria recalled how:

"it started with cursing and everything and later it escalated to, I think the last time, he hit me. And I was with the baby, and he doesn't care, like shouting, making the baby wake up in the middle of the night and all that, I was traumatised."

Service Provider A discussed this complex interrelation between psychological and physical violence in relation to one of their clients:

"One woman, she was on NRPF [No Recourse to Public Funds], she was home, the husband going out, he locked the door ... and one day, the husband went home, and he started beating her and she was crying, she said 'Why are you beating

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me?’ ... because she was alone and isolated and she wanted to do something, she put the music on and she was dancing in her bedroom ... and he saw that she was dancing alone at home, he went back and beat her ... because she was dancing!’”

Another important aspect also identified by this Service Provider was that this woman’s husband had tampered with her phone and inserted spyware without her knowledge. This is a key form of gender-based ‘**tech abuse**’ where technologies are exploited to harass or control individuals especially as a form of violence against women (Tanczer et al, 2018).

### **Almost half of women had experienced sexual violence perpetrated by intimate partners in the home.**

As with psychological violence, sexual violence among intimate partners or **marital rape** was often not considered to constitute violence by women with many assuming that it was their husband’s right to have sexual relations regardless of whether they consented (marital rape was criminalised in the UK in 1991 although it remains legal in other countries around the world including China, Nigeria and India). For instance, Service provider E reported:

“Because almost every single rape case is that we’ll ask, ‘Did you experience rape at the hands of this perpetrator?’ They’ll say ‘No!’ And then we’ll say, ‘Were you ever forced to have sex when you didn’t want to?’ ‘Yes!’ And then we say, ‘That is that!’ and they [they say] ‘No, no! Because he is my husband! It is part of my obligations to provide that for him! So I don’t see that something he did to me, that is just part of my job.”

Again, women usually only acknowledge such relations as rape after engaging with a specialist organisation. Katia, 41, from Peru was one such; she recalled how her British husband had raped her soon after she had arrived in London and when she was pregnant:

“We had relations, but I didn’t want to have them as I was afraid of something happening [to the pregnancy]. In the end we did, but he forced me into it. I didn’t report it, where would I go?”

**Child sexual abuse** was also reported as widespread and something which affected their subsequent relationships and attitudes towards gender-based violence (see also McIlwaine and Evans, 2018). For instance, Mafalda, 34 from Brazil spoke about how her uncle abused her on multiple occasions before she was 10 years old but that she kept it a secret:

“I haven’t told anyone because I was afraid they were not going to believe me. Well, that is part of the abuse. The abuser says things to you like “nobody is going to believe you if you say it. If you say something, you are going to make others suffer for what you are doing”. They make you feel guilty about what happens. So I never opened up to my mum and dad, even though they were always very supportive with me, but I just couldn’t tell them.”

### **Intimate partners also perpetrated violence outside the home, especially psychological and physical.**

Intimate partners also perpetrated violence outside the home, especially psychological (18%) and physical (12%), but also financial violence (8%) and sexual (6%). This often involved ex-partners in situations where they continued to harass their partners after they had separated. For example, Estela from Mexico recalled how her ex-husband continued to harass her after 18 months of separation:

“I didn’t know what to do, I was so anxious I could hardly endure it, I cried all the time of anxiety. I felt that he would come back and that again was going to be the same! I said, I do not want that, I felt desperate, crying, anxiously, I was crazy- so I went back to the therapist and I felt calm. They told me not to open the door, don’t open it.”

### **Non-Intimate Partner Violence (NIPV) within the home was often associated with honour-based violence among extended family members.**

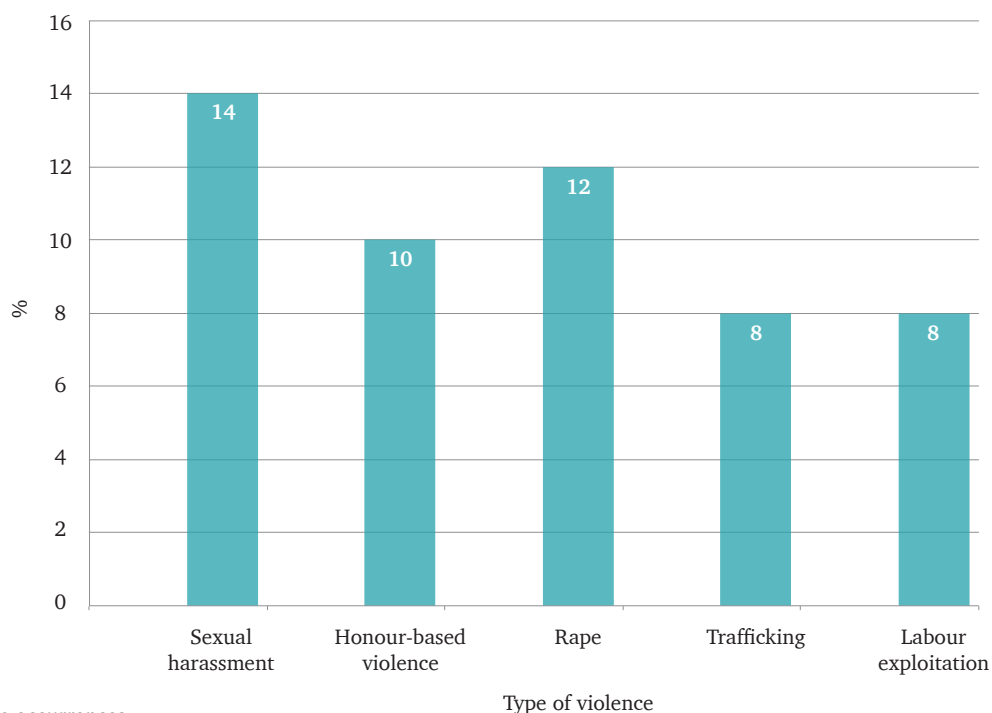
While most gender-based violence was perpetrated by intimate partners, and although Non-Intimate Partner Violence (NIPV) within the home was much less frequent overall, it was still something that fundamentally affected women’s lives. The most common was sexual harassment (14%), honour-based violence (12%) and rape (10%), with 8% experiencing gendered forms of trafficking and labour exploitation (Figure 2). While these cases were not as frequent as IPV, many were extremely severe when they occurred and often entailed violence perpetrated by in-laws on collusion with intimate partners.

For example, one woman from India (included in the survey) elaborated on her experience of **domestic servitude** fuelled by various types of honour-based violence:

“My husband and in-laws were always controlling and they treated me like a slave and I have to do all their work but they never satisfied. Husband and his family were abusive most of the time and

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**Figure 2: Incidence of Non-Intimate Partner Violence (NIPV) within the home (%)**



Note: multiple occurrences  
Source: Author survey (n=50)

blamed me for whatever bad happened to them. Always disrespectful and my in-laws behaviour was intolerable sometimes. Physically also they hit me. They threaten me if I said about reporting them to social services; they will deport me to my country and took my daughter from me.”

Some South Asian women also spoke of their specific experiences of **dowry-based violence**, especially when the dowry is not paid:

“Women who end up getting married the dowry is provided to the husband’s family, but in case, if a woman is married to the person against that woman’s family, in that case a woman’s father didn’t provide any dowry to the husband’s family. But later on when the woman marries the husband, she gets abuse from that family because the family-in-law are upset because they are not getting the dowry from the daughter’s family. So I believe these are also reasons for abuse, and I believe it basically comes from the family” (Service user focus group).

These types of ‘honour-based’ abuse situations usually involve the intimate partner acting with their extended families in London and back home as discussed by Service Provider I:

“We deal with a lot of abuse on the part of extended family members often linked with forced marriages; this can be physical and emotional

violence. It is unbelievable that women are often afraid to report gender-based violence because of what their extended family in London will say but also their family back home. Young women don’t have the confidence to step away from abusive relationships ... what they do know is that they can’t go back there [home], because they’re damned if they do and they’re damned if they don’t ... ‘I need to listen to him because he will tell my parents and my family back home what I haven’t done, which will be incredibly shameful for me. And if I left him then I definitely can’t see them, because now I’m used goods.’”

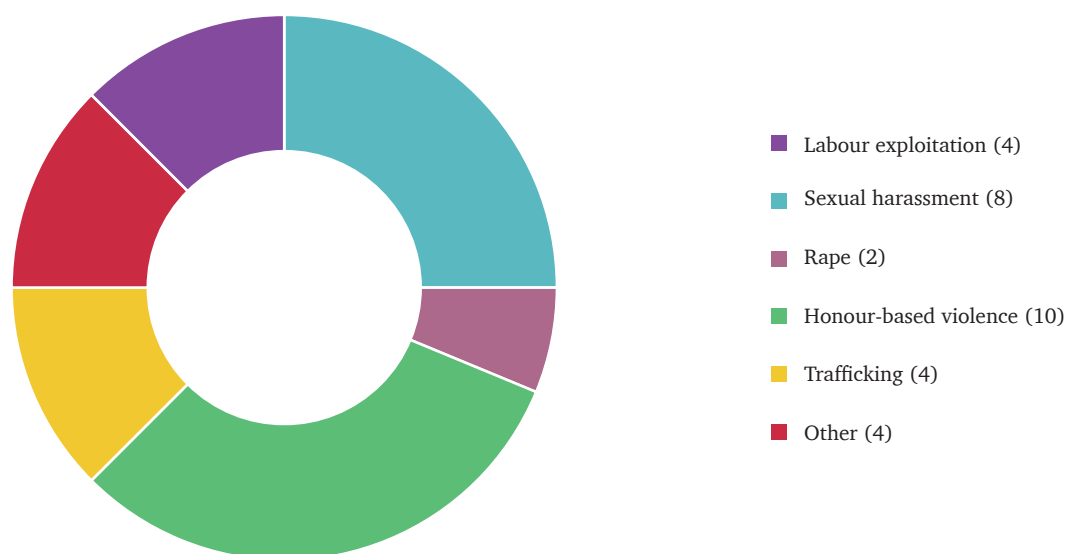
‘Honour-based’ violence also involved **labour exploitation and trafficking** as also noted by Service Provider H:

“this is where the trafficking comes in, then there is potential for her to be re-trafficked as a bride to anybody back home, because she now has nothing in the eyes of the culture, which is simply, you know, she’s no longer a virgin, she may have a child, and basically, nobody is going to touch her ... I have one case at the moment; husband says ‘if you don’t go to my sister’s house and do what she tells you to do’, which is basically cook and clean for her all day, and look after her children, which to me is a forced labour”.

While it was most commonly associated with the South

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Figure 3: Incidence of Non-Intimate Partner Violence (NIPV) in the public sphere (%)



Note: multiple occurrences  
Source: Author survey (n=50)

Asian and Middle Eastern women and organisations that supported them, it occurred among Latin Americans as well, as Service Provider G noted:

“We have forced abortions, forced marriages, young women being banned from the house or made homeless when they are minors. So we see different forms of violence linked to harmful practices and aiming to protect the honour of the family over the rights of young women.”

### Non-IPV violence outside the home was less common but important.

Non-IPV violence outside the home was less common but still important and interrelated with wider insecurities experienced by migrant women (see below). The most commonly cited was various types of ‘honour-based’ violence outside the home (10%), as well as sexual harassment and stalking (8%) trafficking (4%) and gendered exploitation in the workplace (4%) with 1 case of rape (Figure 3).

Among those who identified the violence as ‘other’, this included a Bolivian woman who spoke of how she was harassed by the owner of the flat where she had been living:

“He broke into my room and took all my stuff outside without my consent or even informing me about it, when I arrived to the place that I was renting all my things were lying on the floor by the door”.

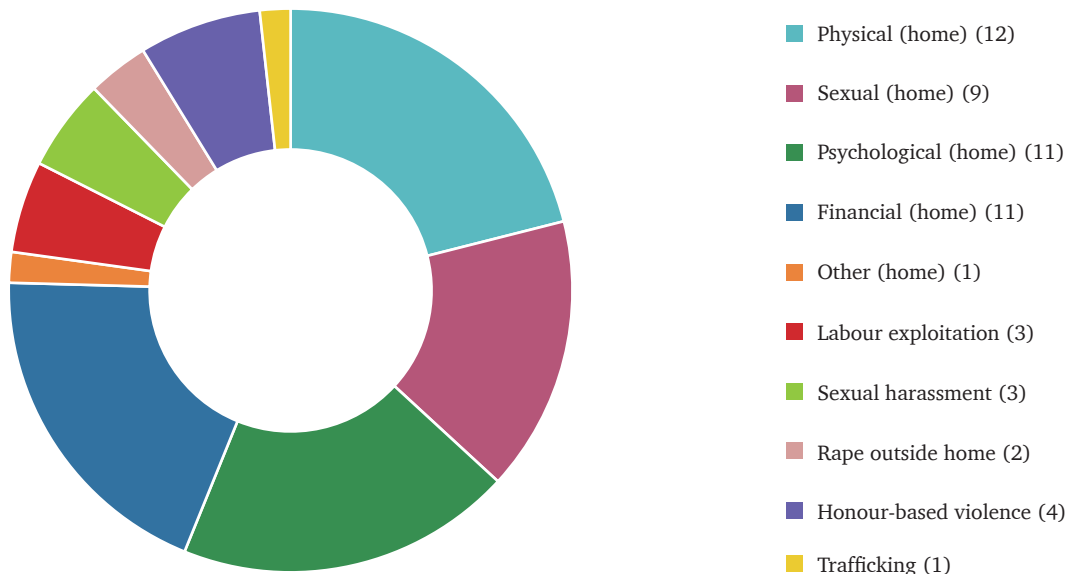
**Landlord violence** was mentioned by other women. Service provider B stated that one of their clients was experiencing physical violence from her landlord: “She has been terrified to call the police, her landlord said ‘If you call the police, I am going tell them this and this and this, that you don’t have papers, so good luck!’” This must be contextualised within the wider context of the hostile environment where landlords are required to check immigration documents of all renters through the Right to Rent requirements (JCWI, 2015). Not only can this make landlords less likely to rent to those without a British passport, but it also gives them considerable power over tenants potentially putting women with insecure status at particular risk.<sup>7</sup>

As with all types of violence, those that occurred in the public sphere also overlapped. For example, Eduarda, 46, from Brazil discussed how she had been sexually assaulted while working as a chambermaid in a hotel by a co-worker. After a period of verbal abuse, this co-worker physically and sexually attacked her one day:

<sup>7</sup> 42% of landlords noted that the Right to Rent requirements made them less likely to rent to someone without a British passport, with 27% reluctant to engage with those with foreign accents or names (JCWI, 2015, 11).

## THE RIGHT TO BE BELIEVED

Figure 4: Incidence of all types of VAWG among women with no visa (number)



Note: multiple occurrences  
Source: Author survey (n=14)

“I was in a room cleaning and he was in the room beside me. I was doing the bed and he came running into the bedroom and grabbed me like this [points to her stomach]. I told him to stop but he would pulled me tighter for a while. I told him ‘let me go’ and he wouldn’t stop. His eyes were staring at me and he was breathing heavily. I tried moving my legs and he held my arms down. I was in pain and he kept pulling my legs against his. He pushed me on the bed and didn’t try to take off my clothes but to bite me instead. I told him to stop, I couldn’t move. He came on top of me, held my legs up in the air. Everything hurt. While I was praying I got to kick him in the stomach and he fell out of the room and stared at me in anger.”

Eduarda managed to break free and flee to the reception area where she called one of her Brazilian colleagues.

### **Vulnerability to multiple types of VAWG perpetrated by multiple partners is closely linked with insecure immigration status.**

The discussion above illustrates that women with insecure immigration status face multiple types of gender-based violence perpetrated by multiple people. This can be further illustrated by the fact that the 14 women with no current visa had experienced a huge range of different types of violence inside and outside the home. Most had experienced physical

(12), psychological (11), financial (11) and sexual (9) violence in the home, but several women had also experienced other types outside the home as well (Figure 4). For example, one Moroccan woman included in the surveyed who had previously been on a spousal visa but who was currently undocumented reported how she had experienced physical, sexual, psychological and financial abuse at the hands of her former husband. She spoke of how her husband was ‘always shouting at me with loud and bad behaviour in his own native language, so no-one else can understand what is going on’. She had also been sexually harassed in the street in London and had a very difficult experience with the police when she was pregnant following an incidence of violence by her husband where they did not understand her and were very reluctant to help.

### **Most recent experiences of VAWG had occurred in the UK within the last year and had entailed prolonged suffering.**

When discussing their most recent experience of gender-based violence, the vast majority (78%) of women stated that it had taken place in the UK, with the remainder taking place in a range of countries reflecting the origins of the women who were surveyed such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Peru, Mexico, Albania among others. Most women reported having experienced it within the last year (68%) or within the previous two years (a further 14%). Their experiences

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| <b>Table 1: Length of time women endured VAWG</b> |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| <b>Length of time violence endured</b>            | <b>% (number)</b> |
| Up to six months                                  | 22% (11)          |
| Six months to one year                            | 26.5% (13)        |
| 1-2 years   | 16% (8)           |
| 2-5 years   | 22% (11)          |
| More than 5 years                                 | 12% (6)           |
| <b>Total</b>                                      | <b>100% (50)</b>  |
| Source: Author survey (n=50)                      |                   |

tended to be prolonged with more than a quarter suffering from between 6 months and a year (27%) and more than a third suffering for between 1 and 5 years (38%); six women had been experiencing VAWG for more than 5 years with 11 experiencing it for up to 6 months (see Table 1).

### **Children of women who have experienced VAWG are also adversely affected**

Gender-based violence among intimate partners fundamentally affects the lives of children who live with the abuse. Recent research in the UK has shown that 60% of children feel they are to blame for the abuse and 52% have behavioural problems. In addition, a quarter of children exhibit abusive behaviour and 62% exposed to domestic abuse are also directly harmed. Yet only half (54%) are known to children's social care (CAADA, 2014: 1). In the current case, the main effects related to undermining children's psychological well-being, potentially leading them to copy the violence and sometimes experiencing abuse at the hands of the perpetrators. In relation to the latter, Ana, 51 from Ecuador stated:

"I was abused by my partner ... I did not call the police, because I didn't know what to do, I was afraid because of the papers, and he threatened me. He said that if I did anything, that he was going to call the migration. They would remove my papers and my daughter's .... And then he abused my daughter ... but he was taking advantage of my status, he said they would take my daughter, take the girl".

Another service user, Nalini, 39 from India spoke of the effects of VAWG on her daughter via her school:

"My child has a problem, because of me my child is getting violent, because of me and my husband ... she wrote a letter at school saying she wanted to kill herself ... They [school] contacted me saying your child is saying she doesn't want to stay with her dad, she doesn't like her dad, she wants to kill herself, she is disconcerted because of family situation. The child loves me a lot and they see their mom and dad fight, they get scared, it hurts them, it is dangerous for the kids."

Service Provider E noted how children can also mimic perpetrator's violent behaviour:

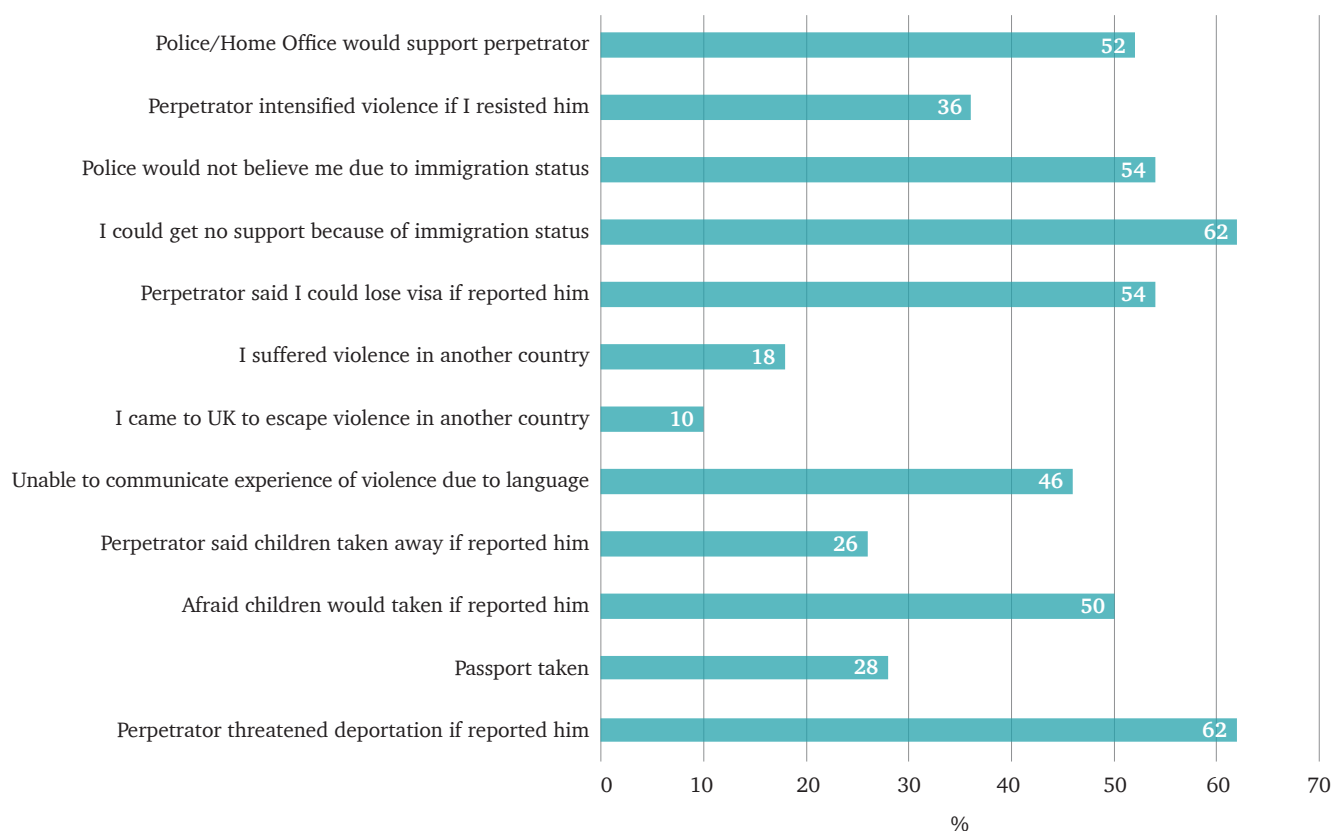
"It is very common that, in our risk assessment we discover that children are witnessing abuse on a regular basis, and for them to experience it at times ... and even something that I as person find really difficult is when ... a woman comes to us to do X, Y, Z ... and she comes with her child, and when you can see their mimicking of ... perpetrator's behaviour, in really small children, it makes me realise really how long they must have been exposed ... We had a woman here, I can't remember what exactly they were doing, a form, and her young son, really, really young son kept on pushing her against the cupboard and holding the door shut ... mimicking the behaviour".

# **MULTIPLE CHALLENGES FACED BY MIGRANT WOMEN SURVIVORS OF VAWG**

**MIGRANT WOMEN FACE MULTIPLE CHALLENGES  
AND VULNERABILITIES**

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**Figure 5: Challenges faced by migrant women who experience VAWG**



Note: multiple occurrences; these challenges relate not only to reporting but wider challenges women face; not all women had children which means that those reporting fear of having children taken away is probably higher than 26%.  
Source: Author survey (n=50)

**M**igrant women who had experienced VAWG faced multiple challenges and fears, some of which relate to reporting which is discussed below, but some of which relate more broadly to fear and insecurity of living with insecure immigration status. All these challenges are invariably experienced simultaneously by women within short periods of time. Many women spoke of feeling trapped as a result of their multiple vulnerabilities and because they could not return home either because they could not afford to or because of the shame and dishonour that their return would create. These vulnerabilities were described by two service providers:

“[one is] vulnerable everywhere, everyone has power over your life, with the extra dimension of being a migrant if they turned against you” (Service provider focus group).

“When they start talking about one issue and we tell them what we do, we give them a leaflet, straight away they say ‘Oh! I have this problem, I have that problem! I don’t know what to do!’ Most of the time we’d end up with multiple issues, not

just one, and we always end-up with domestic violence (Service Provider A).

### **Almost two-thirds of migrant women felt they would not be supported due to their immigration status.**

As already noted above, the majority of women surveyed stated that they felt that their insecure immigration status meant that they would not be supported in dealing with their experiences of gender-based violence (Figure 4). This was the case when women had spousal visas and felt trapped as their dependents as well as when they were undocumented. As Service Provider E noted of their clients: “a lot of the time they’ll just assume that because ‘I am here on a spouse visa, I have no right, to nothing, unless I am joined to him!’”. This lack of support made them feel especially vulnerable as Marisol, from Colombia noted:

“My partner he threatened me with calling the Home Office, that the Home Office will deport me back to my country. I felt nervous, all day with depression, I felt desperate if he called the Home Office, even if he didn’t call, because I would be



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deported. I think that profoundly that he wouldn't do it but still I felt fear and anxiety. I had to stay with him because I think that I depend on him. He has threatened my family and has been verbally abusive in the UK ... I have a temporary visa of 2.5 years I have been refused spousal visas several times so was undocumented for 6 years. I was very vulnerable."

### **Almost two-thirds of women said their perpetrator had threatened deportation if they reported the violence.**

Just as in the case of Marisol above, 62% of those surveyed stated that their perpetrator had threatened deportation if they reported the violence. In a similar situation, Isabela from Brazil stated:

"I came to the UK in 2015 from Brazil. I was convinced by my British ex-husband that I had a spousal visa, but he had refused to apply for one as soon as I arrived to the UK. I continued to undergo domestic violence from my then husband threatened me repeatedly with deportation. He hid my passport and documents from me. He reported me to social services and told them I was being the abusive one towards our children. I was undocumented and feared reported to the police. He and his mother hid my passport away from me and he told me I would never be believed and that he would take our children away from me. I was refused support from the police and was made homeless and destitute. I was also told I had no custody over my child because I was undocumented".

This was linked with the fact that **more than half of women stated that the perpetrator of the violence they had experienced had told them they would lose their visa if she reported him (54%)**. In addition, **more than half of women feared that they would not be believed by the police because of their immigration status (54%)** and **more than half felt that the police or the Home Office would support the perpetrator over them (52%)** (Figure 5).

**Language barriers** also emerged as important for almost half of the women and there was evidence of women stating that they experienced more violence if they resisted the perpetrator (see below) (Figure 4). Language problems also resulted in complex misunderstandings with some women reporting how they had ended-up being arrested by the police in the place of the perpetrators because they could not explain what had happened to them (see also

McIlwaine and Evans, 2018). It also led to children becoming involved in complex negotiations with the police as in the case of Ana from Ecuador whose daughter had to translate for her when they went to a police station to report another assault perpetrated by her ex-husband. Although the police dealt with the situation well in the short-term and managed to sort a restraining order, Ana said that her daughter suffered deep psychological damage and had to see a counsellor, and her husband ended-up returning home:

"The experience was super bad because I never had anything to do with the police before. Because of the issue of language, it was my daughter who had to translate. She in shock and crying because she saw everything. And I was crying, we were both crying, and we had to talk about what happened."

### **The multiple barriers faced by migrant women must be situated within a framework of intersectionality.**

A framework of intersectionality allows for understanding how migrant women experience multiple oppressions because of their immigration status, race, ethnicity, socio-economic position and sexuality (IMKAAN, 2017). Service provider B summarised this:

"Women of colour, women from minority ethnic backgrounds, they are facing different levels of oppression, on top of the violence that they experience at home, they might be experiencing or usually are experiencing violence from the state ... obviously being patrolled and questioned everywhere they go, so if you are facing multiple levels of oppression, then, racism and discrimination ... you are not going to tell anyone, and like, women today mentioned earlier, the shame attached to it as well, because they come from backgrounds where women need to keep their mouth shut ... they are a possession of the men in the family, so they are facing multiple barriers, even just coming out, it is not easy for so many reasons, the language as well ... they don't know their rights, they have friends who tell them 'Oh! If you go to the police, you'll be detained', so it is getting incorrect advice as well, from friends, so I think there are so many different layers."

As indicated above, these challenges directly affect the extent to which they report the gender-based violence they are subjected to and the ways in which they seek help.

**DISCLOSURE AND  
REPORTING OF VAWG  
AMONG MIGRANT WOMEN**

**D**isclosure and reporting of gender-based violence are very difficult for migrant women, especially when their immigration status is insecure. At the outset, this is exacerbated by the fact that women do not necessarily acknowledge that what they are experiencing constitutes violence (see above).

**While disclosure rates to friends and family were high, stigma and shame undermined the process.**

Informal disclosure of gender-based violence entails discussing the abuse with friends and family as part of the wider process of acknowledging that this is an important and serious issue affecting women's lives. While three quarters of women surveyed (76%) discussed their experiences of VAWG with family and friends, this can be an extremely difficult process for a wide range of reasons. Regardless of their nationality and ethnic background, many women spoke of the shame in admitting that this had happened to them and the repercussions for herself and her wider family. Shame was especially widespread among women from communities where 'honour-based' violence was more widespread. One woman who participated in a focus group comprising those from south Asian backgrounds discussed what shame of disclosure meant to her:

"But I want to describe the shame. I believe the shame means... if we are trapped by the type of abuse we are facing from our husbands and family, I say the shame for me is that, I am feeling ashamed to disclose what they do to me, to share it with my own family. Why is it? My family, most people will think, if there are two sisters in a family, if for example, the elder sister is happily, continues in the marriage life, but the younger sister, like for example is me, I had a problem with my husband ... So people will think 'Oh, the eldest sister is doing well, but why is she not continuing ... the sister isn't working, so she is working, so that means that woman has some kind of extra marital relationship with other people, that is why the husband is not going to be nice with her.' So in that case I think the points [of shame] basically comes to the woman."

**When gender-based abuse is associated with divorce the shame is intensified and can also entail further acts of 'honour-based' violence** being perpetrated against women as reported by Service Provider D:

"and the stigma of divorced women, the stigma is another big factor ... because women are terrified of how she will be treated, looked at and even physically abused if she goes back to her own

community, her own family ... it is shame, it is always there ... especially if the man divorces you he'll claim that there is something wrong with you ... if you leave him, he claims that you are not a good wife, 'You've left your husband, what are you looking for?' ... Because ... a husband is like a man marrying you is doing you a favour, he's giving you a title, he's giving you status, he's giving you, like, you have to put up with everything, that is the mentality, even amongst the educated people."

**Migrant women experience multiple incidents of gender-based violence before formally reporting.**

Also, in addition to the range of barriers to reporting outlined below, migrant women also wait much longer to report gender-based violence than women more generally. This relates to experiencing many incidents of violence before reaching out for assistance. For example, Service Provider G noted:

"Our case workers have very informally tracked the number of incidents that undocumented women have presented before being able to report to the police and it was about twice of what is said that women would normally take. The average I think for all women is 35 incidents of violence, but really this is just the tip of the iceberg. With the different immigration bills that came in ... and every statement against the sense of entitlement of migrant women ... this is making it harder for women to report. It can be years or it can be all of their lives".

Women themselves discussed how they only called the police as a last resort; for example, Ana from Ecuador said that she waited for two years after her husband first hit her, but she experienced three year of psychological abuse prior to this before she called the police for the first time.

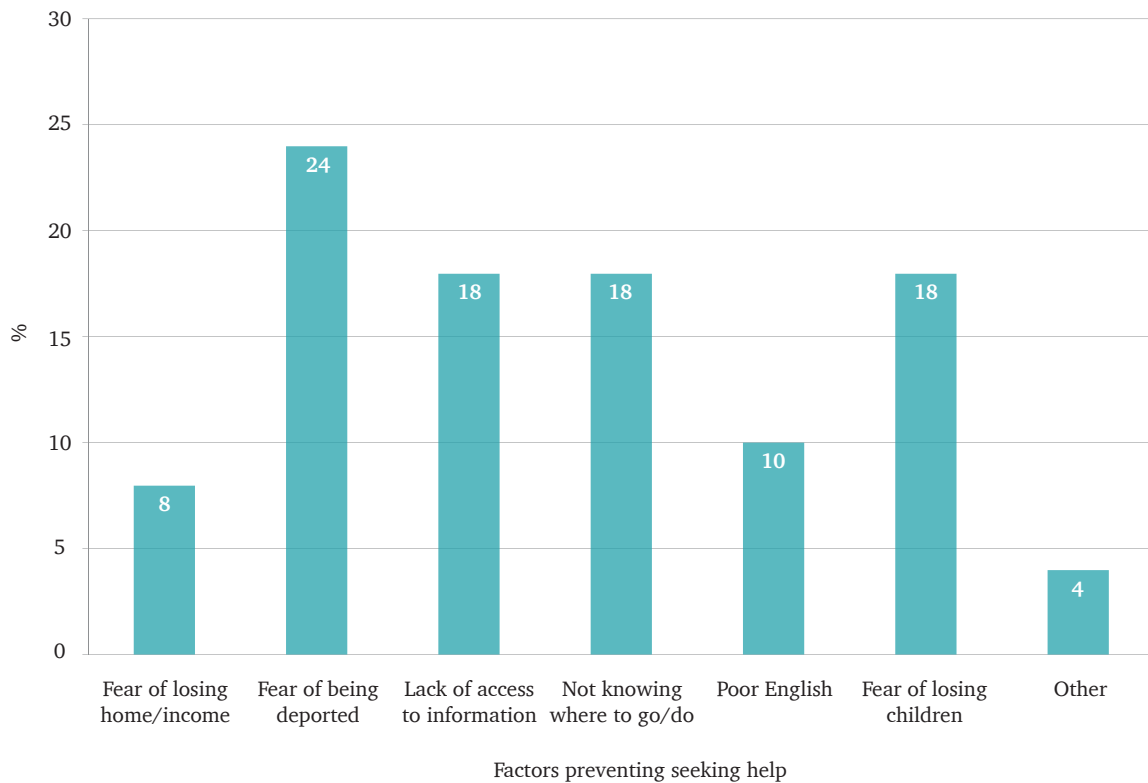
**Almost a fifth of women did not formally report their experiences of VAWG.**

While the majority of women surveyed ended-up making formal reports of their experiences of gender-based violence, 14% did not report at all. When reflecting on why they have not reported now or in the past, a range of issues emerged, mainly linked with their vulnerabilities and multiple fears as migrant women with insecure immigration status. This is summed up by Katia from Peru:

"Women who have experienced violence need freedom. I believe that word encompasses everything. Freedom to be able to speak about

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Figure 6: Factors preventing migrant women reporting VAWG



Source: Author survey (n=50)

everything, to be able to move, because when one is a victim of violence you are locked up, you cannot even move, you are imprisoned, you can't meet people, you don't know your rights."

### **The most commonly cited factor preventing women from reporting VAWG was fear of deportation.**

Almost a quarter of women surveyed stated that fear of deportation prevented them from or made them afraid to report VAWG which was linked with their insecure immigration status (Figure 5). This is summarised Samira from Bangladesh:

"As a migrant woman, we feel scared. If I go there [organisations or social services] they will ask whether I am here legally or illegally, I'm here illegally, so maybe they are going to call the police, they are going to try to deport me. So it's upsetting for the migrant woman to get help or seek the help from the professionals or the police".

### **Almost one-fifth of women identified lack of access to information and not knowing where to go as preventing reporting of VAWG.**

Lack of access to information and not knowing where to go was cited by 18% of women surveyed respectively as affecting their reporting of gender-

based violence. This is further exacerbated by the language barriers they face (identified by 10%) and fear of losing home and/or income (8%) (Figure 5). Service Provider E discussed how even after women have reached the point of wanting to exit an abusive relationship, they are faced with so many challenges that affect their reporting.

"just remember on top of that, that fear [of perpetrator], and also ... all the various barriers, even including things like language barrier, that inability to access information, accessing things like citizen's advice, is not an option for our women, they'll bounce back immediately to us ... so just even in terms of accessing that advice and 'What are my entitlements? What are my rights?', and even being able to ask that question, because a lot of the time they'll just assume that because 'I am here on a spouse visa, I have no right, to nothing, unless I am joined to him!'"

### **Half of women were afraid of having their children taken away if they reported VAWG with almost one-fifth stating the threat would prevent them from reporting.**

Fear of losing their children was identified as one of the major challenges in their lives by 50% of women surveyed (Figure 5). More specifically, 18% of women

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stated that this was a reason for not reporting gender-based violence (Figure 6). All the women interviewed spoke of this in their testimonies as did the service providers. Both perpetrators and the authorities threatened women with taking their children away as Mona from Libya discussed:

“Because for me, I was scared that they might take my children, that’s why I didn’t want to call them [police]. Because my husband is British, my children are British, so I’m the odd one out, and this is what they made me feel”.

Some women reported that social services had explicitly threatened to take their children away from them despite this being unlawful.<sup>8</sup> For example, Aretta who was Nigerian stated that they suggested this as well as encouraging her to return to her abusive husband:

“They ask you to even go back to that situation. That they will take your child. That’s what they say, ‘don’t worry, we’ll take your child, you can go back to your husband. Back to your partner’. How would you ask anybody to go back to violence? ... They need to realise what they are doing to women. We have fragile hearts, we can’t stand all this. It’s too much”.

Service provider C spoke of how this fear dominated women’s lives whether it was real or imagined:

“About three or four times a week I hear ‘Oh! I didn’t know you could go to a foodbank. I thought that if you went to a foodbank, the children would be taken away!’ or ‘I didn’t know you could seek mental health support. I thought they’d take the children away!’ or ‘I didn’t go to the children centre because I was worried they’d take my children away!’ or ‘I didn’t tell anybody I wasn’t coping very well...’ So, there is this threat (real or imagined) of having your children taken away hanging over every decision that these mums make, and it is terrifying, absolutely terrifying”.

Many aspects of all these fears affecting reporting are reflected in what Service Provider H calls the ‘Four Ds’ referring to disbelief, destitution, detention and deportation (see Box 1).

In addition, several women and service providers

**noted that women were afraid to report because of the treatment they had received from the police in the home countries** as stated by Service Provider F:

“The other reason why women may not report it, is because back in your own country you wouldn’t report to the police, because there is a fear of what may happen to you as an individuals, so they have that fear of what the police might do, they have a vision of what the police is like here ... because back home, the police may rape them, subject them to abuse, call them liars or whatever ... and for the women who step on the stairs of the police or the courts is a massive step, because you never do that in your life”.

**More than two-thirds of women reported VAWG to the police with almost 40% being treated well but a quarter treated badly.**

More than two-thirds of women surveyed reported abuse to the police (68%). This high rate is partly linked to the fact that most respondents had received support from specialist organisations who assist women in reporting to the police. However, the act of reporting, even when supported by a specialist organisation does not mean that women’s experiences were always favourable. Indeed, although 39% stated that they were treated well, a quarter were treated badly and a further 36% were neutral about their treatment (see below).

Among the positive examples was one service user, Nina, 28, who was transgender and from Brazil. On arriving on London after fleeing abuse from her family back home, her only economic livelihood option was sex work where she experienced violence at the hands of some of her clients. She discussed how on one occasion: “I called the police and they came to my flat. They treated me well, wanted to do justice”. Similarly, when her ex-boyfriend slapped her in the face she again called the police who were very helpful and sign-posted her to a service provider who were able to help her; although the police asked for her immigration documents but did not do anything when she could not produce them. She said that he police were not discriminatory against her.

**Among those reporting poor treatment from police, the most common was being denied support followed by not being believed.**

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<sup>8</sup> Local authorities have a duty to provide accommodation and financial support for families with NRPF related to safeguarding the welfare of children in need as part of Section 17 of the Children’s Act 1989. However, it has been noted that some social services offer to take the child into care instead of providing support for the family as a while under section 17 despite this likely to be unlawful if there are no safeguarding concerns beyond destitution of the parents (<https://www.project17.org.uk/media/68058/Risks-to-accessing-support.pdf> accessed 12/4/19).

**Box 1: The four Ds: barriers faced by migrant women in reporting their experiences of VAWG**

Well, the way I look at it, the challenges for these women are the four Ds. One is **DISBELIEF** at the beginning of the process, by the Home Office. Which means that it has other consequences that come with it. If they are refused or if their asylum claim is rejected, so essentially a barrier is being placed and they are being disbelieved about their story.

And that can lead to **DESTITUTION**, if the support is removed from them. Which means that they are vulnerable or made more vulnerable by the circumstances of not having a roof over their heads, not having anything to eat, becoming essentially homeless. So many women stay in relationships that are violent or have experienced sexual abuse because of the fact that they are made destitute.

And then refusal can also lead to **DETENTION**, which can make women very vulnerable because it's indefinite, the nature of detention, so they don't know when they're coming out, and also just the mental strain that detention has on every woman who is detained.

And then obviously the fear of **DEPORTATION**.

Well, the women are very scared of the police or any enforcement agencies. So it's hard for them to go and report a crime, or report something that's happened to them. And I guess, also they feel that statutory organisations, whether it's the council or social services, are not really supporting them in the way they should.

**Source: Service Provider H**

In terms of the specific types of poor treatment women experienced from the police, the most common was being denied support (46%), followed by not being believed (36%). Almost a third of women also experienced problems with not being allowed an interpreter or feeling they had been discriminated against because of their race (32% respectively). More than a quarter of women had had their residence status questioned (27%) with four women reporting having been arrested themselves (Figure 7).

These types of treatment are exemplified in the case of Katia from Peru who stated that her ex-partner who was British used the police to manipulate her and ending in her arrest, despite the fact he was the abuser (see also McIlwaine and Evans, 2018):

'The police arrested me after believing my ex-partner's side. He had kept a diary and presented that as evidence. I had no evidence of the domestic

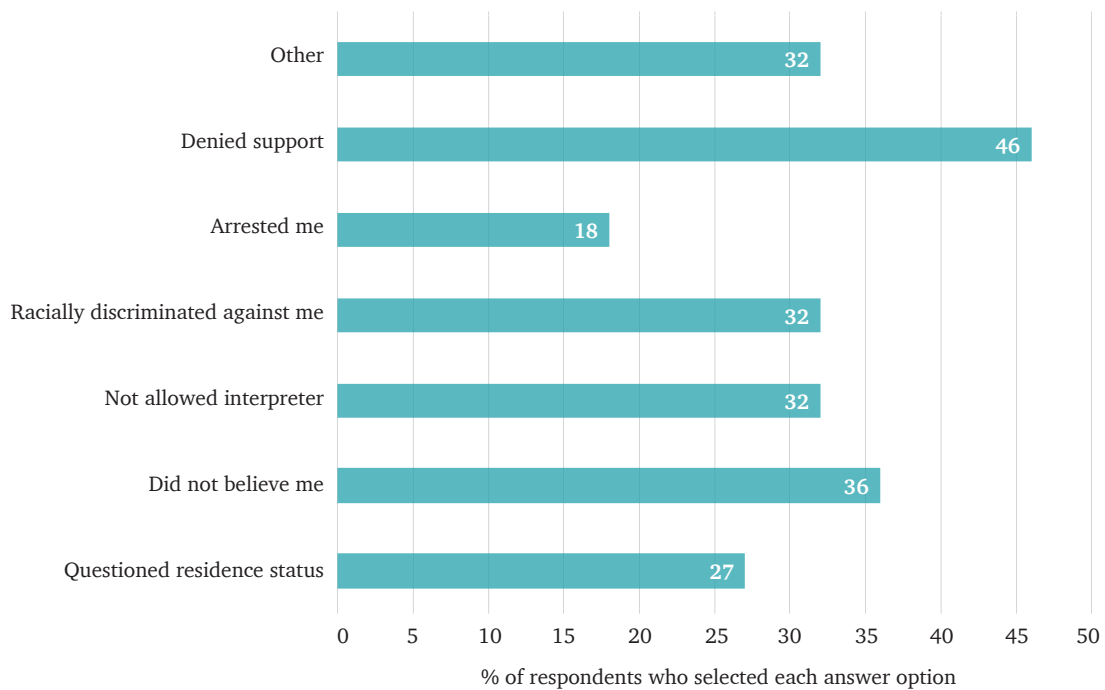
violence I was a victim of and I could not present what they wanted, so the police never believed me. They made comments to justify his abuse towards me. When he called the police, I was never told to give my side of the story and the police never investigated any further. I was arrested and spend a night in the police station and questioned over my migration status. My ex-partner had planned everything, inch my inch he used the system that he knew about and I didn't, he is British and made me look as the perpetrator, I was just defending myself from him.'

Estela from Mexico also spoke of her difficult experiences in reporting to the police and the effects on her well-being the intensification of the violence as a result:

'I called the police 3 times and had been victim of his physical and psychological violence. The police

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Figure 7: Types of poor treatment experienced from the police



Source: Author survey (n=50)

had not arrested him and he could escape. The police told me they were not here to play games. I felt I was not believed but as if I was bothering them. They said that I should not call them if it wasn't urgent. I said, 'I will never call them back, but if something happens to me, you will be responsible'. My perpetrator came back after that and I was brutally hit, and almost broke my nose. I had to go to the hospital. It took 4 times for me to be believed by the police and for them to offer that he would go to court and be charged".

Mona from Libya recalled a traumatic situation when her ex-husband tracked her down via her Gumtree and Facebook use, reflecting the tech abuse noted above, and visited the hostel where she was hiding, breaching a non-molestation and kidnapping her youngest child while she was at the doctor's, as well as assaulting a woman who tried to prevent him from taking the child. Mona complained that although she called the police they were reluctant to help:

"It's very difficult, because every time that you want something they're like 'oh, you don't have recourse to public funds, we can't do anything' ... At that time, they didn't want to help me fully. Even when I was asking ... you know, I can't move from one property to another, I was moving for two weeks, every day a new place, and they were saying that I don't have benefits, I can't get a place".

### Service providers reported positive and negative experiences of reporting to police.

Most of the service providers spoke of both positive and negative experiences with the police. The positive stories tend to revolve around the need to build-up personal relationships with sympathetic police officers who are trusted to treat migrant women with respect and dignity as Service Provider G noted:

"Of course we have good practices as well, some police officers do understand that the priority is the safety of the victim and that is fantastic and that happens, especially with those police officers whom we have built a relationship with and we do the reporting because we clarify from the start what their rights are and what they should be doing".

Yet, it was common for women to discuss negative experiences when they reported gender-based violence to the police on their own without the backing of a specialist organisation. Service Provider F stated:

"But women go on their own and perhaps when the police come to an incident, this is really kind of a gamble and it depends on the police officer that appears. We had women who were told 'go back, sort out your status and then report. You can't report now because you are undocumented and you have no rights.' We had women who were completely mistreated and told 'I'm not going to

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take your report because you shouldn't be here and you kind of brought this to yourself and we are not going to house you for free."

**A quarter of women wanted police to believe them when they reported VAWG with another quarter requesting not having to reveal their immigration status.**

When women were asked about what changes they felt were important for the police to take on board in order to support migrant women, the most commonly cited was to believe them when they reported (26%) followed by not having to report immigration status (23%). Other issues that arose were the need for translators and language assistance (16%), more cultural understanding (12%) and information (9%). These views are reflected in the words of a woman from the Ivory Coast included in the survey: "They need to trust with the women story, and not be put in detention without taking the facts of their experiences of abuse they suffered". Service Provider E stated that **the lack of belief in women's reporting among the police allows perpetrators to act with impunity:**

"when violence and abuse have happened, women have called the police, and nothing has been done, the perpetrators is believed and the woman is never supported, or ... the perpetrators have been arrested but released. So, they make a bit of a mockery and so the family or the husband or whoever the perpetrators are, actually laugh at the women in their face, by saying 'You called the police, nothing happened to me, so do it again!'"

It is no surprise therefore that almost **three-quarters (73%) of women felt that those with insecure immigration status and who suffered violence were less likely to report to the police than those with documentation.**

**Police discretion to report victims of VAWG to the Home Office needs to be removed.**

Several service providers reported on the need to remove the discretion they are afforded to report women who have been victims of VAWG to report their immigration to the Home Office. This was summed-up by Service Provider G:

"First of all, we need to ensure that victims are able to trust the police. Through this, we need to have clear understanding that the police have no clear duty to report victims of VAWG to the Home Office (HO). We need this information to be publicly available, we need police officers to understand this and victims to know this as well. We need clear rules in terms of when and how the police officers are able to contact the HO. At the moment it is at discretion of the individual police officer and this is causing a lot of problems. We need to have rules around this."

It was widely agreed that women have a right to receive support and to safety regardless of their immigration status when they report violence. Trust in the police needs to be nurtured so that migrant women do not fear them as Service Provider B stated:

"women shouldn't be criminalised for reporting violence, and shouldn't live in a society where they are scared of the police, actually, that they don't trust ... nobody should be turned away on their immigration status, the Istanbul Convention says that as well."

**Women's organisations were the most important place to report VAWG after the police.**

Almost half of women (47%) turned to specialist women's organisations working with VAWG issues after they had reported to the police. Other important places where migrant women turned to report were health service and local authorities (Figure 8). Among women as a whole, **77% reported VAWG to specialist women's organisations**, although it is important to acknowledge that most of the women included here were accessed via specialist women's organisations.

More generally, specialist organisations emerged as extremely **valuable in advocating for women with local authorities and social services**, especially in terms of explaining 'honour-based' violence and other challenges faced by women as noted by Service Provider D:

"we work with local authorities, we advocate with local authorities, sometimes they have lack of understanding 'Oh! She went and left her son

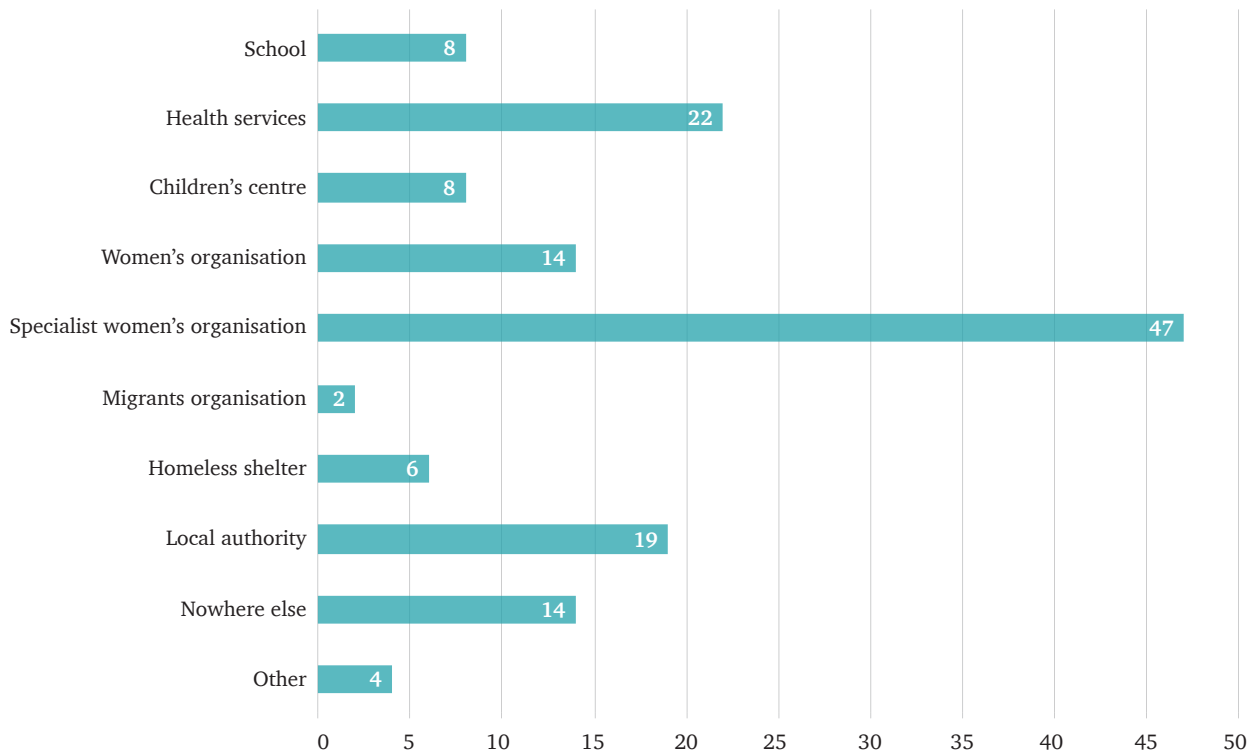
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<sup>9</sup>In December 2018, the National Police Chief's Council set out new guidance outlining a national position on information sharing with immigration enforcement in relation to victims of crime who are identified as being undocumented. This ensures that when someone reports a crime, the police will treat them as a victim and never check a database only to establish a victim's immigration status. Although police should raise immigration status with enforcement officers, they will not take on enforcement themselves.  
<https://stepupmigrantwomen.org/2018/12/07/npcsc-guidance-we-need-still-need-an-end-to-data-sharing-practices/>



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**Figure 8: Other organisations where VAWG was reported in addition to the police (% of respondents who selected each answer option)**



Source: Author survey (n=50)

or daughter for eight months, for twelve months!' No, no, she didn't leave, she was stranded. We advocate, we tell them about the culture, how it works ... 'honour-based' violence".

They are also able to provide **non-judgmental support, safety and understanding** for women as stated by Service Provider F:

"It is very important because ... in a way, when the women come to us, they disowned their family or were disowned by them, they're disowned by the community, we end up being their family and their community in a way because this is the only place they know that will accept them, not judge them, and they're able to fulfil, to learn what their rights are here, and they'll be given a voice, they are given a voice here, and so therefore it is really important to work with them, because we understand the background, the cultures, and a lot of women often said 'Here I don't have to explain myself! I can talk about things and you understand it, whereas if I go anywhere else, I have to explain myself, so imagine if you go to social services, having to explain difference, a culture, this or that, to tell me that I can't get help, that is why I didn't do it!'"

**More than a fifth of women had been turned away when seeking help with VAWG, especially from social services.**

It is also significant that more than a fifth of women had been turned away when seeking help with VAWG (21%) with a further 21% not sure, especially from social services. As with reporting VAWG more widely, the reasons identified by the women themselves and service providers revolve around assumptions around no recourse to public funds and immigration status and stereotyping. For example, Service Provider B stated:

"They automatically assume, if you are Eastern European, it must be a trafficking case, this must be happening, they make assumptions and that guides their approach, they are very rude to many women I am working with from African countries, they say 'We're taking the children away!', and that is their first response, to many of the clients that come from an African background. One woman who came today, she went social services two years ago, just saying 'I need some help!', because of violence, the partner has left her now, she is stuck in a property she can't afford, and they said, 'If

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you want us to help you, we'll help you by taking your kids away!' because she didn't have any understanding, so she now 'I am never going in there again!'

Aretta from Nigeria spoke about her traumatic experiences with social services when a social worker accused her of having a sham marriage, to 'go back home' and even to take her baby away:

"No, they even said, because I had a previous marriage before, they were like 'oh, did you trade them? You left your first husband to help you get to your new husband'. I was like 'excuse me, who does that?' ... They tell you to go back home. They say you are desperate and you have to go back home. And they were questioning my marriage with my husband. They said 'oh, you are desperate, that's why you married a British man' ... they never believe you, 'oh, you were lying, no violence.'"

Because Aretta was suffering from high blood pressure, the stress of the situation with social services made her ill; she ended-up in hospital and explaining to the medical staff that she was scared of her social workers:

"They were like 'why are you scared?' I said, 'I'm not scared from the violence I'm coming from, I'm scared to face the social worker, because they are stressing me, I can't give explanations of my own story' ... They were almost killing me. I told that person, because when I got to the limit I was like 'you are supposed to help me, you are killing me. You are killing me because you see this says I am dead inside.'"

Service Provider F discussed how **rejection by social services can lead to women losing their children (see above) and being further exploited:**

"They go underground, and they befriend people who exploit them further, sexually, economically ... actually, some of them end up on the streets, in fact, one woman who had a child and social services actually gave the child to the perpetrator, she is married a white British man, she is a doctor, she is African, had the child, he has the child now ... she was subjected to violence and abuse ... she said 'Please, just let me sleep here! I haven't got anywhere to go!' ... desperation! So ... I can imagine some of these women are just sleeping outside, particularly single women, who have nowhere to go, or they are getting into prostitution because it is a way of survival, it is a way of having to have a roof over your head."

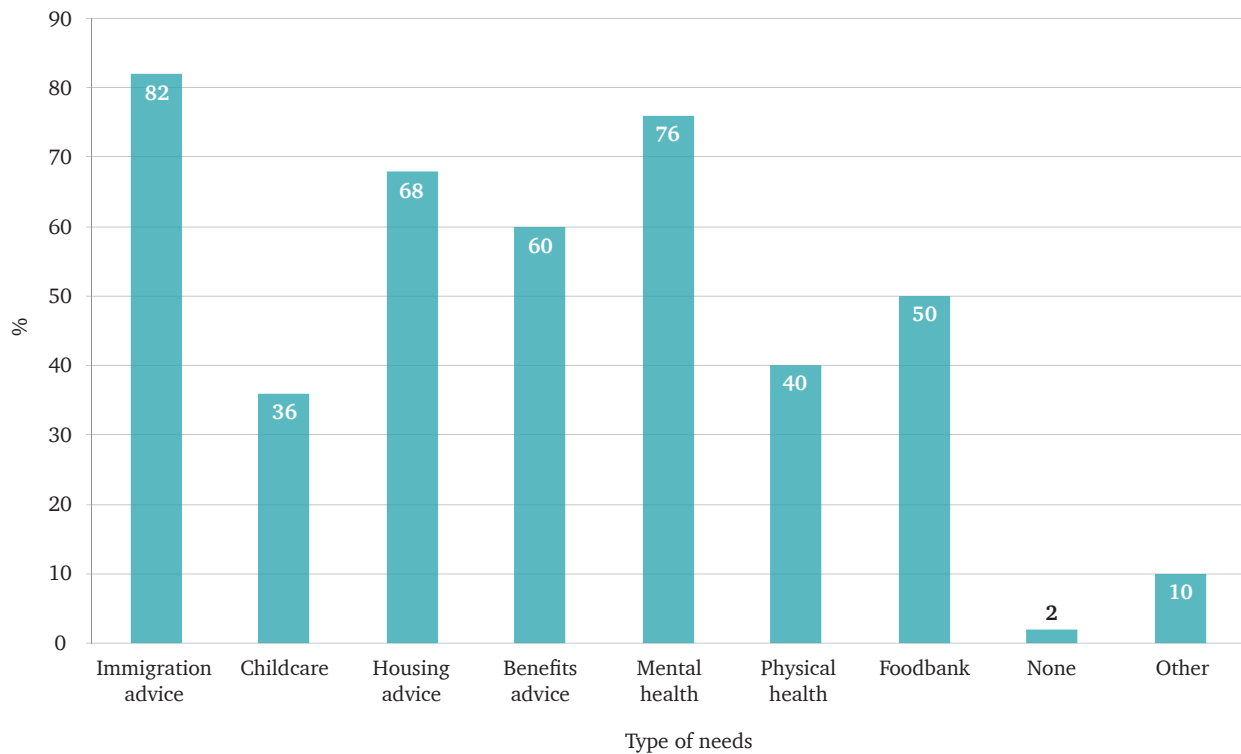
**One-third of the women surveyed contacted a refuge when they experienced VAWG.** Among the reasons they did not contact one, was lack of knowledge about their existence or a perception that they would not be able to get access because of their immigration status. A woman from Bangladesh who was surveyed discussed her experiences with social services and a refuge:

"Social services provided me with emergency accommodation for 1 day but when I arrived there was no booking and I had to return back to my home. They informed me since I had no recourse to public funds (NRPF) there was little they could do. I had to wait to apply for DDVC (Destitute Domestic Violence Concession)".

**OTHER NEEDS AMONG  
MIGRANT WOMEN WHO  
EXPERIENCE VAWG**

## THE RIGHT TO BE BELIEVED

Figure 9: Other needs among migrant women who experience VAWG



Note: multiple occurrences  
Source: Author survey (n=50)

**A**s identified above, it is important to acknowledge that migrant women who experience gender-based violence also have to deal with a range of other challenges alongside their abuse and related with the exclusions they face (see above). Indeed, it is important to note that many women approach a migrant organisation in the first instance because they are seeking assistance with welfare issues but then end-up disclosing gender-based violence (see also McIlwaine and Evans, 2018 among Brazilian migrant women). All the women surveyed except one stated they had other needs.

### **Immigration advice and mental health support were the two major issues that women needed assistance with.**

The vast majority of women identified immigration advice as a major issue in their lives (82%) along with support for mental health problems (76%). Housing and benefits advice were also important for over 60% of women, with half identifying the need to use food banks (see Figure 9).

All these needs are interrelated and it is no surprise that women who are victims of gender-based violence experience mental health issues, something that is acknowledged globally (UN Women, 2015). This is

exacerbated when they have to deal with the anxieties associated with insecure immigration status as well as the challenges of reporting and securing assistance (see also below).

### **Many migrant women who have left abusers lived in severe poverty, food insecurity and in precarious accommodation.**

All these exclusions and unmet needs result in **many migrant women living in severe poverty and food insecurity** as discussed by Nalini from India who spoke about her mental health, financial problems and precarious living conditions in a hotel:

“Women suffering from domestic violence, I think personally, because I see many families without husbands, single parents suffering from this, even sometimes they don’t have money for food, they don’t have a pound to buy a package of crackers. I saw it with my eyes, it is so harsh because if a woman is suffering from domestic violence, if she separates from husband she is leaving the home with kids and paying the rent and everything, so this woman has to support the entire home, I tell you. They have to release public funds for this kind of women, we suffer a lot. I was depressed, I was near to the death. I saw many women in that hotel that don’t have money, not even one pound for food.

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Yesterday night I was not having the money, whatever money comes goes for the kids. I was having one pound, I buy two pastries for two kids. The reception people know me as well, they know that whatever money she has she pays for the room, otherwise they would throw me out and the kids, then what would I do?”

**Women living in temporary accommodation are especially affected by poverty and exclusion.** Service Provider C spoke of how they now pay bus fares for their clients to visit their organisation because they realised just how financially precarious their lives were:

“We pay £3.00 bus for people who come here, because we were finding that the bus fare was a barrier to entry as well. So, and there is a thing about a catastrophic expense, where having to pay for something means that actually everything begins to deteriorate. For most people that would be, they needed a new boiler, that would be catastrophic, but for these mums it is literally a bus fare. They pay the bus that means they don’t eat that night.”

**Many service users and providers spoke of the injustice of perpetrators being able to stay in the family home and live freely with impunity while the survivors of abuse lived in severe poverty in extremely poor quality temporary accommodation.**

Again, according to Service Provider C:

“Can you even imagine it? So this mum has lost their status, her ability to work, her income, her house, and she said ‘My abuser is safe, he’s in the same house, in the same job, his world has not changed, at all!’ So, I think that is a real worry, and these mums ... the nature of temporary accommodation ... mums are put in these Bed and Breakfasts ... there are children who suffered domestic abuse, and violence in the home, and now they are in these tiny rooms, there are drunk people running up and down the corridor, there are people shouting ... there are people with mental health problems, and one mum said that their children are just cowering behind the furniture because there’s this thin door between them and all this chaos in a tiny room for all of them.”

**The state perpetrates institutional and structural violence against migrant women victims of VAWG rooted in the hostile immigration environment and underpinned by racism and discrimination.**

Migrant women’s interactions with the state, mainly

through the police and social services often becomes another form of violence that they have to endure in addition to the gender-based violence perpetrated against them inside and outside the home (see above). Their insecure immigration status places them in a vulnerable position where the state actively criminalises them when they seek support when they experience VAWG which in turn deters reporting more widely, and where the state acts in ways that are institutionally racist through the four Ds noted in Box 1. This was also noted by Service Provider E:

“Then on top of that, Black and minority women will face racism, so that is part and parcel of reporting and the barriers to reporting as well ... It is harder for them to report for the reasons, one, they are women, two they are minority, three the race element, that go hand in hand for all women who are from minority communities because ... it is not just about your ‘undocumentation’, because it is also about prejudices, discrimination against those women, and not believing them. And often that goes hand in hand with the racism that takes part as well, and the women are now beginning to say that racism is quite open, in public, because the state allows it, the state allows you to be racist openly in the way which the media and the state played a role in talking about how these ‘illegals’ are coming and taking over their hospitals, and taking over the jobs and housing and all of that, in fact that is never true, the truth is that the government needs to blame somebody for their shortfalls.”

This is part and parcel of the hostile immigration environment where the human rights of migrant women survivors of VAWG are ignored or afraid to seek any help (see Box 2). This was noted by Service Provider F:

“So that is one of the areas in which there is a bit of a concern, and the other categories, are major concern, because these women are returning ... to violent, abusive relationships, because they have absolutely nowhere to go. What I am finding in my experience is that women are very frightened to approach statutory services, partly because of the fact of the hostile environment we are in right now, deters them from seeking help, and reporting violence and abuse.”

Even for those who had tried to seek help and regularise their status, the hostile environment is endangering migrant women’s (and often their children’s) lives. Service provider C stated that when women exhaust their immigration options, the state is

**Box 2: Migrant women’s views on their human rights**

Women spoke about their rights to a life without violence and with freedom. More fundamentally, they stated that they wanted to be treated like human beings with dignity and with access to basic legal rights. These are summarised below in the words of women from different parts of the world:

*A woman from India:*

Women are always thought to keep mouth shut if husband is abusing, if mother-in law abusing. We thought that she is your god. Husband can do anything. But please women are the face of the family. She cares for everything. Please treat every women like your mom; give respect to women. She is not here to take your abusive words, your slap, your sexual behaviour.

*A woman from Peru:*

I have the right to feel safe and protected  
I have to have the control of my own life, and don’t let my partner to take over my life with his insecurities.  
I have the right to decide if I want to have sex or not  
I have the right to get divorce from him because he hurt me too much.

*A woman from Morocco:*

I have the right to be respected, to be supported.  
To live away from all the violence.  
The right to be believed.

**Source: Survey respondents’ comments**

less inclined to deport them as this is a costly process:

“When mums come to the end of their immigration journey, and they have no more avenues to go down, they are not being deported. I said to a member of staff ‘What is going to happen now? Will the family get deported?’ I think that single mum with children, it is less likely, but she said, ‘They just starve them out!’ So they can’t even be bothered to deport them! They can’t even be bothered to find them”. This is a harsh reality. The state just withdraws support from a family but does not actively seek them out to deport them. They go underground! They disappear. There is no national register for under 5s, so these children can disappear. It is utterly terrifying! And this hostile environment is making it more likely and it is a massive safeguarding issue ... It does mean that people just go underground, and social services

don’t help them, and housing won’t help, they are relying on churches, friends, about 28 of our families are sofa-surfing ... They are homeless in the worst way – living on the whim of another person.”

In a similar way, Katia from Peru made a plea about the entire British immigration system:

‘All the UK system on migration, I have been locked up in detention centres and they treat you less than human. They have treated me like an animal and I have been sick (physically and mentally). The police, the institutions need to know what causes us to be in this status as I was escaping violence from my home country.’

These women have rights to be heard, to be believed and to be supported regardless of their immigration status. As Aretta from Nigeria says:

**“NO HUMAN IS BORN  
ILLEGALLY, IT’S ONLY  
HUMANS WHO ARE  
PUTTING-UP BARRIERS.**

**THEY ARE GETTING  
OTHERS BARRICADED IN,  
LIKE ‘THIS IS MY PLACE,  
THIS IS MY PLACE.’”**

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## GOVERNMENT:

- End all ‘hostile environment’ policies towards immigrants. Uphold human rights of people above immigration enforcement that is the universal right to access refuge and safety; the right to access healthcare, housing, specialist support and education without discrimination.
- Put an end to data sharing between victims support services and the Home Office for immigration control purposes.
- Ensure the Government’s forthcoming Domestic Abuse Bill fully complies with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention, including explicit recognition of the gendered nature of domestic abuse and its disproportionate impact on women, and ensuring the protection of all women without discrimination on any ground, including race, religion, nationality, migrant or refugee status.
- Abolish the No Recourse to Public Funds Rule. Eligibility for migrant women’s access refuge and state support when fleeing violence should not be determined by the status of NRPF.
- Extend the Domestic Violence rule and the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession to all migrant women.
- Provide legal aid for victims fleeing domestic abuse who require immigration advice and assistance.
- Include the voices and recommendations of migrant women survivors in consultations to inform policy and practice.

## COMMISSIONING:

- Deliver a sustainable funding model to support specialist VAWG frontline services and refuges led by and for migrant and BME women, which provide a critical point of access for BME and migrant victims of violence and are central to delivering safety and protection but which have been decimated by funding cuts.
- Ring fence funding for specialist women organisations.

## STATUTORY SUPPORT AGENCIES:

- Establish safe reporting pathways for migrant victims to access support from the police and other statutory agencies, including employment rights enforcement bodies, ensuring victims of VAWG and other crimes are able to come forward without fear of immigration control.
- Provide clear guidance and training to the police, social services, and other agencies on their duty to prioritise protection of migrant women victims of violence over immigration enforcement, as established by the Human Rights Act 1998.
- Establish a ‘firewall’ to separate vital victim support services from immigration enforcement.



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For more information on the Step Up Migrant Women Campaign see [www.stepupmigrantwomen.org/](http://www.stepupmigrantwomen.org/)

For more information on LAWRS see [www.lawrs.org.uk/](http://www.lawrs.org.uk/)

For more information on Professor Cathy McIlwaine's research see [www.kcl.ac.uk/people/cathy-mcilwaine](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/people/cathy-mcilwaine) and her recent project on VAWG and Brazilian women in London and Brazil see [www.transnationalviolenceagainstwomen.org/](http://www.transnationalviolenceagainstwomen.org/)

\*All names have been changed to protect survivors' identities

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Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS)  
Tindlemanor, 52-54 Featherstone Street, London, EC1Y 8RT  
[www.lawrs.org.uk](http://www.lawrs.org.uk)