

**Migrant women's experiences of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in the
'hostile environment' in London**

Cathy McIlwaine, King's College London and Illary Valenzuela-Oblitas, Step Up Migrant Women and Latin American Women's Rights Service

Introduction

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

These are the words of a migrant woman survivor of gender-based violence called Mona from Morocco who had experienced long term abuse at the hands of her partner yet who was afraid to report it because of her insecure immigration status. When she eventually did pluck up the courage to report to the police, they did not believe her story. Only when Mona went to a specialist migrant women's organisation was she able to receive the support she badly needed.

Mona's story was revealed as part of a recent research project undertaken as part of the Step Up Migrant Women campaign which was established in 2017. Led by the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS) together with 39 migrant and black and minority ethnic (BME) women's organisations in London, the project aims to increase awareness about the challenges faced by migrant women survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) with insecure immigration status when they seek assistance from statutory and voluntary organisations. It also aims to inform local and national decision-makers in providing appropriate services and support for migrant women survivors of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). A key aspect of the campaign was to conduct research that provides an evidence base from which to inform the campaign and policy-making around this neglected issue, especially the Domestic Abuse Bill. Indeed, although many of the specialist organisations are aware of the challenges faced by women survivors whose immigration status is insecure, detailed information based on robust research has been missing. The research that we discuss here is the first attempt to provide this evidence base among this specific group of women from a wide range of backgrounds and country origins.

In terms of context, migrant women from many different countries have long been recognised as experiencing disproportionately high levels of gender-based violence inside and outside the home, linked with a range of complex factors that revolve around gendered power relations, exclusion and discrimination (IMKAAN, 2017). In a hostile immigration

environment such as that prevailing in the UK today, women with insecure status are especially severely affected. With ‘No Recourse to Public Funds’ (NRPF – which prevents access to any state support) together with the threat of being detained, deported or ending-up destitute, women such as Mona are often too afraid to disclose and report the violence they experience. Indeed, previous research conducted in partnership with LAWRS found that more than 80% of Brazilian migrant women in London had experienced gender-based violence in their lifetime, and that over half (56%) did not report or disclose it (McIlwaine and Evans, 2018, 2019).

Methodological framework and profile of women surveyed

The research involved a survey with 50 migrant women, most of whom used services of specialist migrant organisations. While some women completed the survey online, others did it face-to-face especially in cases where some translation was required. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 migrant women with current or prior experience of insecure immigration status¹ and with 10 representatives from migrant/gender support organisations.² We also carried out two focus group discussions, one with stakeholders from migrant organisations and another with service users.

The survey sample included women from 22 different countries across Africa, Asia and the Americas who resided in 17 different London boroughs.³ In terms of the profile of the women who completed the survey, three quarters (76%) were aged between 18 and 39 with a further 18% between 40 and 59 with only three aged over 60. A quarter of the women were undocumented (26%), with more than a third waiting for the outcomes of visa applications from the Home Office (36%), two were claiming asylum, four were refugees, three had a spouse visa, six had some other form of temporary residence and three had permanent residence. Most women had previously held a family (26%) or a spouse visa (14%).⁴

Therefore, the definition of Violence Against Women and Girls that we used in the research draws on the benchmark of the 1993 UN Declaration of the Elimination of Violence against

¹ All those surveyed identified as female even though we provided an option for identifying as ‘other’. We did, however, interview a transgender woman.

² These were as follows: 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.

³ These included: 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.

⁴ All the women had experience of insecure immigration status. Those with ‘insecure immigration status’ are people whose status is temporary 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 the legal right to remain in the country (Safety4Sisters, 2016).

Women and included all types of physical, sexual and psychological violence in the private and public domains of households, workplaces, public space, and within and beyond the state.

Incidence and nature of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) among migrant women

Gender-based violence experienced by migrant women emerged as hugely diverse and was experienced multiple times by many different perpetrators. All of the women surveyed had experienced some form of violence, with psychological intimate partner violence within the home being the most common identified by 78% of women. Gender-based psychological violence perpetrated by intimate partners specifically related to immigration status was also commonly discussed and was widely used as a tool of manipulation and exercise of power by perpetrators. For example, Aisha from India spoke of her abuse and subsequent abandonment by her ex-husband:

“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.’”

The second most frequently experienced type in the home was physical violence perpetrated by intimate partners (among 68%), with almost two-thirds (62%) suffering financial/economic abuse, and 46% being victims of sexual violence.

Non-Intimate Partner Violence within the home was often associated with abuses perpetrated by extended family members, relating to sexual harassment (14%), so-called ‘honour-based’ violence (12%) and rape (10%), with 8% experiencing gendered forms of trafficking and labour exploitation. An important aspect of both intimate partner and extended family violence against women was around domestic servitude as discussed by Rani from India:

“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 ... 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.”

In addition, non-intimate partner violence outside the home was less common but important. The most common was ‘honour-based’ violence (10%), as well as sexual harassment and stalking (8%) trafficking (4%) and gendered exploitation in the workplace (4%) with one case of rape. Eduarda from Brazil, for example, spoke of how she had been sexually assaulted while working as a chambermaid in a hotel by a co-worker whom she eventually managed to kick and escape from.

It also transpired that women with insecure immigration status faced multiple types of gender-based violence perpetrated by multiple people. For instance, the 14 women with no visa had experienced a huge range of different types of violence inside and outside the home including physical (12), psychological (11), financial (11) and sexual (9) violence in the home.

Most recent experiences of violence had occurred in the UK within the previous year and had entailed prolonged suffering. Almost 80% of women stated that it had taken place in the UK, with the rest taking place in a range of countries reflecting the origins of the women.

Disclosure and reporting of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) among migrant women

Migrant women faced multiple challenges and vulnerabilities that intersected with gender-based violence, and which affected their disclosure and reporting of it. While disclosure rates to friends and family were high (76%), stigma and shame undermined the process. This was also related with the fact that women experienced multiple incidents of violence before formally reporting as a service provider 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”

While the majority of women made formal reports of their experiences of gender-based violence, 14% did not report at all. The most commonly cited factor preventing them was, again, fear of deportation (24%), followed by lack of access to information (18%) and not knowing where to go (18%). This is further exacerbated by language barriers (10%) and fear of losing home and/or income (8%).

Their fear is bolstered by threats of deportation on the part of perpetrators; almost two-thirds (62%) of women said their perpetrator had threatened deportation if they reported the violence, with more than half being told by perpetrators that they would lose their visa if they reported it (54%). The other main fear identified by women was fear of having their children taken away if they reported VAWG (50%) with almost one-fifth (18%) stating the threat would prevent them from reporting.

Reporting Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) to the police

Reporting gender-based violence to the police was also affected by insecure immigration status. More than half of women feared that they would not be believed by the police because of their status (54%) with more than half feeling that the police or the Home Office would support the perpetrator over them (52%). Samira from Bangladesh noted:

“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”.

Among the women who did report VAWG to the police (68%) almost 40% said they were treated well while a quarter felt badly treated. Among the latter, the most common was being denied support (46%) followed by not being believed (36%). Women also felt that the police would believe the perpetrators as noted by Katia from Peru:

“The police arrested me after believing my ex-partner’s side ... My ex-partner had planned everything, inch by 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.”

Other forms of reporting Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

Women’s organisations were the most important place to report VAWG after the police, with almost half of women (47%) turning to specialist women’s organisations after they had reported to the police. More than a fifth of women (21%) had been turned away when seeking help with VAWG, especially from social services. The role of specialist organisations is crucial for women as one service provider noted:

“It is very important because ... when the women come to us, they’re disowned from their family ... they’re disowned by the community, we end up being their family and their community.”

Other needs among migrant women who experience VAWG

Many migrant women who left abusers lived in severe poverty in situations of severe food insecurity and in precarious accommodation. They also identified the need for more support around immigration (82%) and mental health (76%), as well as housing and benefits (60%).

It is essential to recognise that the state perpetrates institutional and structural violence against migrant women rooted in the hostile immigration environment and underpinned by racism and discrimination as one service provider noted:

“What I am finding in my experience is that women are very frightened to approach statutory services, partly because ... the hostile environment we are in right now, deters them from seeking help, and reporting violence and abuse.”

Recommendations

Among the many recommendations that we developed as part of this research and of the wider Step Up Migrant Women campaign, the following are the most important:

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.
- Ensure the 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.

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.

Statutory support agencies:

- Establish safe reporting pathways for migrant victims to access support from the police and other statutory agencies, ensuring victims of VAWG and other crimes are able to disclose and report without fear of immigration control.
- Establish a ‘firewall’ to separate vital victim support services from immigration enforcement.

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The report from the research reported here is available here: [Mcllwaine, Granada and Valenzuela-Oblitas \(2019\) The Right to be Believed, LAWRS, London.](#)

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