

EVAW - 4 Nations Report launch

The report is highlighting that whilst the government rhetoric is that tackling domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG is 'everyone's business', and that all government departments, have an important role to play. There is a reality that cumulative welfare policies and reforms are actually not working as part of the support system for women who have experienced abuse, but are often failing to meet the needs of survivors, and are also facilitating further hardship and leaving some of the most marginalised women, with no access to support.

I'll specifically focus on the situation of survivors of sexual violence and their interactions with the social security system, as well as those women with insecure immigration status whose safety and support needs are not being met due to the no recourse to public funds conditions placed on them.

Rape Clause exception to two child tax credit limit – still in place for new children:

- a widely criticized policy that forces victims of domestic and sexual violence to disclose that their third, or subsequent baby was conceived as a result of rape or coercive control, in order to avoid losing their child tax credits.
- This continues to ignore that many women will never disclose rape to anyone, for reasons including trauma, self-protection, shame, and fear for others – including their child. And to force them to do so is cruel.
- The demand for a woman to have left the perpetrator in order to claim tax credits reveals a complete lack of understanding of the coercive and controlling behaviour that underpins this crime, and the life-threatening risks facing women and children who do leave. It also only applies to children conceived through rape if they are the third or subsequent child; if someone's first or second child is born under such circumstances, the two-child limit will still apply if they go on to have more children, is concerning.
- Whilst the DWP confirmed that it would use a third-party referral process, which means women would not necessarily have to report to the police, many women's support groups in Wales and Scotland are boycotting the third party referral system due to their concerns about the whole policy.
- BMA refusal to cooperate with the clause – the terrible ordeal women are being put through in order to access benefits they are entitled to.

Prevalence:

- In the wider context, there's been a huge increase in women reporting rape and sexual abuse to the police, (an increase of 173% in the four years to 2018) – but we also know that rape remains a very under reported crime with the majority of victims not accessing the criminal justice system. EVAW has been campaigning to ensure there is adequate funding for specialist services and counselling for rape survivors, where we see huge demand but services at crisis point because funding has been slashed.
- We know that coping with sexual violence and abuse has a massive impact on survivors' ability to work – survivors routinely say the trauma makes every day activities including work impossible – however we don't have a system that is

adequately resourcing access to long term specialist counselling and support that helps women to recover from trauma, rebuild their lives, and re-engage with work. This is especially the case for specialist services run by and for black and minority ethnic women, who have been acutely affected by funding cuts and who also have a context of often serving a national population, but not always being considered to be priorities for local commissioning.

- There is a high prev of SV in a DA context. Those women are routinely subject to CC and less likely to be in employment.
- That can extend to reproductive control - where women do not have control of their own fertility due to the abuse from a partner – which is an unexplored and unaddressed area which will have huge impact on the SS system. But we do not see in the DA Bill explicit measures to address sexual violence and it's impacts.

National VAWG Strategy

The Home Office has recently refreshed this - it is supposed to have a collaborative cross government approach to preventing and tackling abuse

- But In fact, the DWP do not appear at all in the action plan – which speaks volumes.
- The situation of specific groups of women such as Migrant women and those with insecure immigration status is also not mentioned at all in the VAWG strategy.

Similarly in the draft domestic abuse bill there are a real lack of legal measures to protect and support migrant and BME women experiencing domestic abuse.

Women whose immigration status is insecure or dependent on a spouse, partner, or relative, where the expectation is of financial dependence on the sponsor, are especially vulnerable to economic abuse. Where access to household finances is being denied, a victim's situation is compounded by restrictions on their access to welfare or recourse to public funds as a route to safety. And research has indicated that women in this situation remain in abusive relationships for longer.

If you have insecure immigration status you can find it virtually impossible to access refuge space and other welfare support in order to escape violence and abuse (we know BME refuge providers will often accommodate women with no recourse at their own expense because they do not want to turn women away, but this is not sustainable)– women also find it difficult to rent privately because of requirements on landlords, and are faced with a reality of becoming destitute and homeless or returning to the perpetrator as a result of these policies which create a hostile environment for survivors of abuse.

Abusive partners often leverage immigration status as a tool of coercive control, by using the threat of deportation to prevent victims from reporting violence and confiscating victims' vital documentation and paperwork.

Current immigration and welfare rules create a clear hierarchy of support and safety for migrant women - only those with spouse visas can make applications under the DV rule and access the DDVC which allows them access to welfare support for 3 months in order to regularize their immigration status. Those on other types of visas or who are

undocumented - this includes students, EEA nationals, those seeking asylum are not currently eligible for this support.

We know that women in this situation are facing widespread discrimination, often appallingly treated as immigration offenders before victims of abuse. If they approach local authorities even when they are fleeing abuse with children, they can be inappropriately refused help with emergency accommodation, and find social services offer to accommodate the children but not mothers. This is resulting in a high incidence of women with NRPF experiencing homeless and rough sleeping.

This is why in addition to widening the eligibility for the DDVC to extend to all migrant women who've experienced domestic abuse, we are recommending the inclusion of a Non-discrimination principle, in the domestic abuse bill. This would positive duties on all pub authorities to appropriately support and protect all victims of domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG regardless of characteristics including immigration status, race or nationality. This would be in accordance with the Istanbul Convention, which the domestic abuse seeks to ratify, as the convention stipulates we should have policy responses which reduce scope for abuse and enable survivors to access support when they need it.