

Understanding the Needs and Experiences of Black and Minoritised Women Facing Sexual Exploitation

A briefing from the STAGE Project
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Executive Summary

This briefing on the experiences of Black and minoritised women who have been subject to sexual exploitation is based on learning from STAGE, a partnership supported by the National Lottery Community Fund that seeks to explore and highlight the nature and extent of sexual exploitation of adult women across our communities.

STAGE brings together charities Changing Lives, The Angelou Centre, Ashiana, GROW, A Way Out, Together Women, Basis Yorkshire and WomenCentre to provide trauma-informed support for women who have been groomed for sexual exploitation across the North East and Yorkshire. STAGE has supported over 500 women and aims to share the learning from their experiences to create systemic change.

Women who have experienced sexual exploitation face multiple barriers to support. Black and minoritised women face additional challenges and exclusion from services due to systemic racism and lack of cultural competence across various sectors. Women with insecure immigration status and those with no recourse to public funds are particularly vulnerable.

Key findings

The rising cost of living is putting women at greater risk of exploitation and makes it harder to leave exploitative situations. Women with insecure immigration status are unable to achieve independence through work without risking losing their legal aid and the rising cost of Islamic divorce is preventing many women from escaping exploitation within marriage.

Many Black and minoritised women experienced sexual exploitation and abuse within the marriage, not only by their partners but also by their in-laws. A common form of control is withholding of contraception and forced pregnancies.

Intimate image abuse is used as a method to control and threaten women, often taking advantage of cultural values such as threatening to share photos of women without their hijab or niqab. These types of intimate image abuse that are not inherently sexual are not prohibited by law, leaving women without adequate protection.

Black and minoritised women from the LGBTQ+ community that were sexually exploited because of their sexual orientation or gender identity have experienced further discrimination in safehouses.

By and for services can be immensely valuable due to their deep level of understanding and cultural competency, but there are also challenges associated with the location of services within communities, the fear of information being passed to women's families or communities, and access to interpreters.

Women are not consistently referred to the National Referral Mechanism for support due to a lack of understanding amongst police and other first responder services.

Women with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds are actively targeted and exploited, with perpetrators using the threat of deportation to maintain control. Fear of deportation and previous negative experiences with the police both have a detrimental effect on women's confidence to disclose their abuse.

Women with no recourse to public funds are often unable to access safe refuge accommodation.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Introduction of a statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation to ensure a consistent understanding and recognition of the ways that sexual exploitation continues and presents itself in adulthood.

Recommendation 2: The income threshold for legal aid in immigration cases to be reviewed annually to ensure that it is uprated in line with inflation.

Recommendation 3: The legal definition of intimate image to be broadened to include specific cultural examples, including but not limited to images of women not wearing a hijab or niqab who normally would do so in front of non-mahram men.

Recommendation 4: All funding for services supporting women who have experienced gendered violence, including those specialising in sexual exploitation, to include ringfenced funding for by and for services.

Recommendation 5: Police and Crime Commissioners and deputy mayors for policing and crime to scrutinise their local police force's understanding of and response to modern slavery and the NRM to fully understand what is causing the gaps in NRM referrals.

Recommendation 6: The Home Office expand the protections set out in the IE Migrant Victims Protocol to include the implementation of a firewall to ensure that immigration information of victims of sexual exploitation shared between the police and the Home Office is used solely for safeguarding and not for immigration enforcement.

Recommendation 7: The Home Office to commission a national review of the NRM investigating its efficiency and effectiveness to address the long delays in waiting times, and cases of women supported by the NRM being called to attend Immigration Reporting Centres, with the aim of reducing the number of women being unnecessarily called to these centres.

Recommendation 8: DLUHC to provide funding to local authorities for suitable and safe refuge accommodation and any other costs incurred by supporting individuals and families who have experienced abuse and exploitation with no recourse to public funds, including the option of single-gender and self-contained housing.

Introduction

The STAGE project, supported by the National Lottery Community Fund, brings together charities Changing Lives, The Angelou Centre, Ashiana, GROW, A Way Out, Together Women, Basis Yorkshire and WomenCentre to provide trauma-informed support for women who have been groomed for sexual exploitation across the North East and Yorkshire.

Since STAGE began in 2019, we have supported over 500 women affected by sexual exploitation, many of whom have existing vulnerabilities, including experiences of stigma, discrimination, and disadvantage. STAGE supports diverse groups of women across the North East and Yorkshire, with two thirds (65%) of those supported being from Black, Asian, and ethnic minority communities.

This briefing is based on learning from the women supported through STAGE. We present evidence obtained through a series of workshops with project staff that highlights systemic racism, cultural incompetence, and lack of trust in services and statutory agencies, all of which prevent Black and minoritised women who have experienced sexual exploitation from accessing support. We aim to capture the additional challenges and experiences more commonly faced by Black, minoritised and migrant women, whilst acknowledging that this term encompasses a wide range of ethnicities, cultures and experiences.



What is Adult Sexual Exploitation?

Sexual exploitation of adults is a form of sexual abuse that is poorly understood and rarely recognised across many sectors. Whereas understanding and responses to child sexual exploitation (CSE) have improved, particularly since the statutory definition of CSE was published in 2017, women whose vulnerabilities have been exploited for the advantage of others are still often described as 'prostitutes' or 'making poor choices', rather than people who have been subjected to horrific forms of sexual abuse and do not receive the support that they deserve and are entitled to.

Sexual exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a person into sexual activity. This is often done in exchange for something the individual needs or wants (e.g. money, food, shelter, drugs) and disproportionately advantages the perpetrator (e.g. financial advantage, increased status). In some cases, the perpetrator will be instrumental in creating the need, thus making the individual dependent on them (e.g. encouraging drug use to create addiction). It can result from grooming over a period of time, where the perpetrator makes the other dependent on them emotionally, physically and/or financially.

Sex work and sexual exploitation should not be conflated. While sex work may be consensual, this is not the case for sexual exploitation. A person cannot consent to a sexual activity if they see no reasonable alternative to engaging in the activity or have a reasonable belief that not engaging in the activity would result in negative consequences for themselves or others. This does not, however, deny that exploitation occurs within sex work, or that people who engage in any form of sex work are at risk of exploitation.

Recommendation 1: Introduction of a statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation to ensure a consistent understanding and recognition of the ways that sexual exploitation continues and presents itself in adulthood.

Cost of Living

The current cost of living has made it more difficult for women to escape exploitative situations and in some cases has caused women to return to their abuser, continuing the cycle of abuse. Black and minoritised women are more likely to be disproportionately affected by the rising cost of living, due to the multiple disadvantages they are faced with, and thus, are at higher risk of being forced into debt. One woman supported by STAGE reflected that “at least when I was being exploited, we weren’t worried about this” regarding money and food for her children.

Some of the women we support have managed to achieve financial independence after leaving exploitative situations by taking on work. This represents an important step forward for the women we support however, after overcoming significant barriers to joining the workforce, those with insecure immigration status have lost access to legal aid. This combined with the rising cost of living has left women in increasingly difficult financial situations, despite the actions they have taken to achieve independence. As a result, we have seen an increase in women returning to STAGE services for food vouchers, hardship funds and sanitary products despite now being employed.

Recommendation 2: The income threshold for legal aid in immigration cases to be reviewed annually to ensure that it is uprated in line with inflation.

Alongside the rising cost of living, the cost associated with Islamic divorces has also increased. While women have been able to access civil divorce, this does not hold the same cultural significance and therefore women may still feel tied to their perpetrator or be seen as married by family and community members. Due to the sudden increase in cost, women who had arranged payment plans previously are now unable to access an Islamic divorce and are further trapped in exploitative situations.

Sexual Exploitation in Black and Minority Ethnic Communities

Exploitation Within the Marriage and Reproductive Rights

The nature of the relationship between those who have experienced or are experiencing sexual exploitation and the perpetrator(s) can vary significantly from person to person, but an essential feature is an imbalance of power. Cultural and religious factors can normalise and contribute to certain power imbalances.

For example, STAGE has supported women from Southeast Asian communities who were not only subject to abuse from their partners, but also their relatives. These women were subjected to mental torture, forced domestic labour and sexual abuse on a daily basis by their partners and in-laws. The men and their families further entrenched the power imbalance and abuse by threatening to communicate false information to the women's families, the nature of which could have placed them at risk of so-called honour-based abuse (SCHBA).

A further means of control reported by several Black and minoritised women supported by STAGE is withholding of contraception and forced pregnancies. Women who have experienced sexual exploitation are at higher risk of being exposed to sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies and other gynaecological issues, but a feature of this form of abuse seen more commonly amongst Black and minoritised women is that it is more likely to come not just from the women's partners, but also their wider family, particularly mothers-in-law. For example, one woman's mother-in-law put immense pressure on her to procreate, even keeping track of her menstrual cycle.

Further information on the impact that sexual exploitation has on women's reproductive and wider health can be found in STAGE's briefing *Experiences of accessing healthcare amongst women who have experienced sexual exploitation*¹.

Intimate Image Abuse

Women experiencing sexual exploitation are often harmed further through the use of technology. Not only are online platforms used for grooming, but the sharing of intimate images without consent is often used to humiliate and control women and to contribute to their ongoing

¹ STAGE (2022) *Experiences of accessing healthcare amongst women who have experienced sexual exploitation*. Available online: [Experiences of accessing healthcare amongst women who have experienced sexual exploitation](#)

exploitation. For example, one woman supported by STAGE had photos and videos taken of her being raped which were then sent to friends of the perpetrator and their wider community with a price tag attached and a message stating “she’s available”.

In addition, perpetrators are using online platforms and social media applications, to form relationships with women facing multiple disadvantages under false pretences and take advantage of these existing vulnerabilities.

Case study

STAGE was involved in two separate cases of an 18 year old Indian and a Pakistani woman that were groomed online by men and left the UK to go to their respective countries to get married. The STAGE caseworker completed the relevant paperwork, such as risk assessments and safeguarding alerts, and reported the case to the police, but no action was taken due to the women’s age and their perceived capacity to make such decisions. The police did not even consider that they had been groomed for the purposes of sexual exploitation and abuse, and they have yet to return to the UK.

Black and minoritised women are also more likely to experience intimate image abuse that takes advantage of cultural and religious values to control and blackmail women. Women have shared instances of perpetrators threatening to send intimate images to male members of their family unless the women do what the perpetrator says. The consequences of such intimate images being shared would often go beyond humiliation and could mean the women being excluded from their family and community or put them at increased risk of so-called honour-based abuse.

Differing cultural values can also mean that what constitutes an ‘intimate image’ varies between communities. For example, some Muslim women supported by STAGE who would normally wear hijabs or niqabs in front of non-mahram men have had images taken of them not wearing these. This is extremely intimate for some Muslim women and can have a detrimental impact on their wellbeing and physical safety. These images have been used to further coerce and manipulate women by perpetrators threatening to send them to men in their family and communities, which could place the women at further risk of SCHBA. Another woman had images of her doctored to make it look like she had a beard and in poses that depicted her as ‘crazy’. Her husband shared these with her family saying, “You’ve made me marry a man, she’s not a full woman, and she’s crazy”.

Protections for victim-survivors of this form of intimate image abuse are extremely limited under current legislation. Under Section 44 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, it is an offence to disclose or threaten to disclose private sexual photographs or films without the consent of the individual who appears in them and with the intent of causing that individual distress. For many Black and minoritised women, coercion, blackmail and exploitation can take place through the disclosure of private images that are not inherently sexual but are nonetheless intimate, therefore they are not protected by this legislation.

We welcome many of the recommendations made by the Law Commission in its 2022 report *Intimate Image Abuse*², but it does not go far enough to protect Black and minoritised women. In the report, the Law Commission considered expanding the range of intimate images that it would be illegal to share without consent but concluded that it would be too complicated to define. While we acknowledge that the subjective nature of what constitutes an 'intimate' image makes it difficult to clearly define in law, we believe that women would be better protected if some specific examples were prohibited in law, such as sharing images of women not wearing a hijab or niqab who would normally do so with the intention of causing distress.

Recommendation 3: The legal definition of intimate image to be broadened to include specific cultural examples, including but not limited to images of women not wearing a hijab or niqab who normally would do so in front of non-mahram men.

By and For Services

Services run by and for Black and minoritised women are immensely valuable yet face numerous barriers to supporting women who have experienced sexual exploitation.

Even the term 'Black and minoritised' does an imperfect job of summarising the multitudes of different ethnicities and cultures represented within the group. Many women prefer to receive support from specialist services and members of staff of the same race or cultural background as themselves due to the deep level of understanding and cultural competency, but this will not always be possible particularly in smaller organisations.

On the other hand, some women identify receiving support from members of staff from the same cultural background or community as themselves as a source of anxiety and, in some cases, the reason why they stopped

² Law Commission (2022). *Intimate Image Abuse: a final report*. Available online: [Intimate-Image-Abuse-Report.pdf](#)

accessing the service. This is due to fear that information would get back to their family or community. This applies to both specialist support for those experiencing sexual exploitation and to interpretation services.

“I think the difficulty again is having somebody interpreting from that community and then the trust in that person, the confidentiality will be held by the interpreter.”

The location of services presents a similar issue. While placing services physically within targeted communities can make by and for services more accessible for some women, for others there is a fear that being seen accessing sexual abuse and exploitation services could lead to questions by members of their community, rumours and shame, and increases the risk of further abuse. Most organisations will offer a range of communication methods to make their services as accessible as possible, however it may still be necessary for women to physically attend buildings (e.g. in order to access a group session). In areas where there are multiple services by and for Black and minoritised women it may be possible to refer between services to overcome these issues, but many areas do not have any by and for services at all, let alone multiple services that can work together in partnership.

Ultimately women require options and a flexible, person-centred approach, but by and for services are not always able to provide these options due to lack of funding, particularly when they are required to compete for funding pots with larger providers. For a number of years STAGE has called for a statutory duty to provide specialist services for women experiencing sexual exploitation, and in addition to that we recommend that all funding for women’s services, including those for sexual exploitation, include ringfenced funding for by and for services.

Recommendation 4: All funding for services supporting women who have experienced gendered violence, including those specialising in sexual exploitation, to include ringfenced funding for by and for services.

STAGE has immensely benefited from the participation of by and for services within the partnership. We encourage further knowledge sharing and collaboration to ensure cultural competency across the third sector.

National Referral Mechanism

Some women supported by STAGE have been also referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) by first responders to access support. The NRM refers to the framework used to identify potential victims of human

trafficking and modern slavery and refer them to the Salvation Army and its network of subcontractors to provide them with specialist support such as access to secure accommodation, weekly subsistence, and emotional and practical help.

Once a referral has been made to the NRM, a decision is made within five working days regarding whether there are reasonable grounds to believe that the person is a victim of modern slavery. Following this, the evidence is considered to determine whether there are conclusive grounds for recognising them as a victim of modern slavery. A positive conclusive grounds decision is required for those with insecure immigration status to become eligible for discretionary leave to remain. Unfortunately, this process can take several years and be further complicated if other immigration processes such as claiming asylum are running concurrently, leaving women in a state of limbo. Such delays have a detrimental impact on survivors' wellbeing and their trust in the government. Despite the long wait it is still often beneficial for women to be referred to the NRM as they are then entitled to at least 45 days of specialist support while a decision is made.

In order to be referred to the NRM, a referral will need to be completed by 'first responder organisations' which includes statutory and non-statutory organisations such as police forces, local authorities and the Salvation Army. However, many STAGE caseworkers have interacted with police officers that were not aware of the NRM and thus failed to refer or signpost individuals that were at high risk of exploitation. The Home Office provides extensive resources on modern slavery and the NRM, and the College of Policing offers specific courses to support police and other law enforcement officers in spotting the signs of modern slavery, yet more needs to be done to ensure widespread awareness and effective implementation of the guidance and training across the entire police force.

Recommendation 5: Police and Crime Commissioners and deputy mayors for policing and crime scrutinise their local police force's understanding of and response to modern slavery and the NRM to fully understand what is causing the gaps in NRM referrals.

Although there are benefits to being referred to the NRM, particularly in terms of eligibility for support, it is crucial that the NRM is not used as a blanket response to the needs of women experiencing sexual exploitation, particularly those with insecure immigration status. For example, if the exploitation is taking place within an intimate partner relationship women may also be eligible to apply for a destitute domestic violence concession, meaning they can claim public funds such as Universal Credit while applying to settle in the UK – a process that tends to be much quicker than the NRM.

Exploitation and LGBTQ+

Differences in cultural values within and between ethnic communities can result in further trauma for LGBTQ+ women who have been sexually exploited. Women have shared experiences of being housed in safehouses with fellow nationals that do not approve of LGBTQ+ people and relationships, meaning they are forced to hide their sexuality to avoid being discriminated against. These women were targeted because of their sexual orientation and then were not able to access a suitable trauma-informed environment where they could recover from their experience.

Case Study

An Iranian LGBTQ+ woman was locked in a basement by her father, a high-ranking member in the army, who allowed others to sexually abuse her because of her sexuality. She was able to claim asylum in the UK but was then placed in a safehouse with people who shared the same views as her father, which she found to be re-traumatising.

This highlights the importance of providing a range of refuge options for women fleeing abuse and exploitation. While some women may benefit from a shared environment and the ability to easily access group support, others would be better supported in self-contained housing with floating support staff.

Experiences of Migrant Women

Immigration Abuse

'Immigration abuse is a form of perpetration that uses the 'insecure', 'uncertain' or 'unknown' immigration status of an individual (or their dependents) to threaten, coerce, exploit and/or subjugate them (or their dependents) as part of a pattern of control and/or abuse and violence.' Domestic Abuse Commissioner³

Many women who access support from STAGE have been targeted and trapped in abuse because of their immigration status. The threat of deportation and the fear of being caught by the police and their information passed to the Home Office renders them vulnerable to further abuse. Perpetrators of sexual exploitation can manipulate the complex vulnerabilities of women with insecure immigration status, as one STAGE caseworker highlighted: "Women fear the police and they fear the Home Office, when they are in this situation day in and day out, they're told if you step out of line, if you don't do as I say, I will call the police and you know what would happen. You'd get locked up. You'd be in detention, or you will get deported, so it's just extremely difficult because women live in fear."

This fear has, unfortunately, in some cases been confirmed through women's interactions with the police. For example, one woman supported by STAGE was trafficked to the UK and her abuser married her. He shared intimate images of her, wanted to sell them to friends and members of their community and threatened her with an imitation firearm. The woman reported her experiences to the police but then felt unable to proceed and decided to withdraw her statement. Rather than considering that her withdrawal may be a sign of further abuse and coercive control, the police officer told her "I'm gonna report you to the Home Office, I think you're abusing the system." She was subsequently left unsupported by the system that should have protected her and told us that her abuser and others associated with him knew where her family were and were threatening her elderly parents.

³Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2021) *Safety Before Status*. Available online: [Safety-Before-Status-Report-2021.pdf \(domesticabusecommissioner.uk\)](https://www.domesticabusecommissioner.uk/Safety-Before-Status-Report-2021.pdf)

“They know where my family are and they’ve been threatening my parents, my parents are elderly, we are poor.”

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s *Safety before Status* report, published in 2021, outlines several recommendations to tackle immigration abuse, including the need for a long-term funding solution and pathway to support for victims of domestic abuse with insecure immigration status following the Migrant Victims Pilot. We welcome these recommendations and the Government’s commitment to ensuring that migrant victims of domestic abuse are supported effectively⁴, but would also like to see this support offered to victims of sexual exploitation who do not fall within the definition of domestic abuse but who nonetheless are subject to immigration abuse.

It is also vital that women experiencing sexual exploitation can seek protection and justice from the police without the fear of deportation hanging over them. The Home Office has repeatedly rejected calls for a firewall to prevent immigration status information from being shared from the police to the Home Office⁵. They have outlined an alternative proposal to establishing a firewall to be implemented through an IE Migrant Victims Protocol which would ensure that no immigration enforcement action is taken against victims while investigation and prosecution proceedings are ongoing, or while they are receiving support to make an application to regularise their stay⁶. However, this would not offer adequate protection for women facing multiple disadvantages who often are unable to access support from statutory services, and therefore would not be protected by an investigation, prosecution proceeding, or application to stay. We urge the Home Office to reconsider their position and to consider further options such as restrictions on data sharing between the Home Office and police to ensure that it can be done for safeguarding purposes but not for immigration enforcement.

Recommendation 6: The Home Office expand the protections set out in the IE Migrant Victims Protocol to include the implementation of a firewall to ensure that immigration information of victims of sexual exploitation shared between the police and the Home Office is used solely for safeguarding and not for immigration enforcement.

⁴ [Home Office response to 'Safety Before Status' report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

⁵ [Home Office and Police data sharing arrangements on migrant victims and witnesses of crime with insecure immigration status \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

⁶ [Home Office and Police data sharing arrangements on migrant victims and witnesses of crime with insecure immigration status \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

Experiences with the Home Office and Police

Migrant women supported by STAGE who have taken their cases to the police have expressed that they feel unsupported by the justice system, particularly if their case results in the decision to take no further action (NFA). As highlighted in the STAGE report *Experiences of accessing justice amongst women who have experienced sexual exploitation*⁷, cases are sometimes dropped due to unavoidable reasons such as a lack of evidence or because a suspect could not be identified, but there are also several cases where women feel that they were not believed or that the police could have done more. Regardless of the reasons for discontinuing investigations, the way that the decision is communicated to women is crucial, as many women report feeling used by the process and then abruptly dropped, often with no further contact. This can have a significant impact on migrant women's perception of the justice system in the UK and can have a negative impact on future engagement. Following an NFA decision, one woman supported by STAGE told her caseworker "But I'm in England. In England they should be helping me. You know, this is what I expect in England, that I wouldn't be treated like this, that people would be there to support me and they're just not."

STAGE has previously recommended that each police force area should have independent support services offering holistic support for victims working alongside dedicated police liaison officers in order to both increase rates of reporting and improve the experiences of engagement with the police. Given the additional fears and stigma that migrant women experiencing sexual exploitation face, where such roles or similar exist, it is important that they can understand and address cultural sensitivities and the unique challenges faced by those with insecure immigration status. Ideally this would be achieved through funding to bring by and for organisations for migrant women into partnership with police.

Some women supported by STAGE are subject to Immigration Bail and thus may be required to attend an Immigration Reporting Centre. The locations of these centres are limited and women are often required to travel long distances. One woman supported by STAGE had severe health conditions including pain in her back and legs, yet she was expected to report in person four times a month. To access the nearest reporting centre, she had to take four buses and two trains in total, which was particularly difficult due to her existing health conditions. The STAGE caseworker supporting this woman pushed for a doctor's note, contacted the Home Office and challenged the Bail conditions, however she was still expected to attend the reporting centre twice a month. This woman was supported under the NRM and had Temporary Permission to Stay.

⁷ STAGE (2023) *Experiences of accessing justice amongst women who have experienced sexual exploitation*. Available online: [Experiences of Accessing Justice](#)

Home Office guidance states that “an individual should not be required to report unless there is a reasonable suspicion of liability for removal, the individual has been served with a notice of liability to administrative removal or deportation from the UK, or a claim is being considered for inadmissibility action⁸.” However, many women supported by STAGE who have been granted Temporary Permission to Stay are still required to report to the Home Office.

Recommendation 7: The Home Office commission a national review of the NRM investigating its efficiency and effectiveness to address the long delays in waiting times, and cases of women supported by the NRM being called to attend Immigration Reporting Centres, with the aim of reducing the number of women being unnecessarily called to these centres.

No Recourse to Public Funds

STAGE caseworkers described the women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) as ‘the most vulnerable women we work with’. In order to access public funds, such as Universal Credit and housing assistance, individuals and families have to meet certain immigration conditions. Most people subject to immigration control have no recourse to public funds⁹. Local authorities can provide accommodation and financial support to people with NRPF however they are given no additional funding to cover these costs. We therefore support the NRPF Network’s call for the government to provide financial compensation to local authorities for costs incurred by supporting individuals and families who are restricted from accessing public funds by their immigration status.

Recommendation 8: DLUHC to provide funding to local authorities for suitable and safe refuge accommodation and any other costs incurred by supporting individuals and families who have experienced abuse and exploitation with no recourse to public funds, including the option of single-gender and self-contained housing.

Many vital services who interact with the women supported by STAGE are not fully aware of what NRPF means, as well as the individuals’ entitlements (if any). The significant financial challenges that come from having NRPF can lead to women returning to exploitative situations. People with a positive reasonable grounds decision under the NRM are entitled to weekly subsistence however the amount fluctuates depending on their accommodation status, whether they have dependent children and whether they are simultaneously accessing asylum support. For example, one woman supported by STAGE received £65 a week and was

⁸ [Reporting and offender management \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/614442/Reporting_and_offender_management.pdf)

⁹ [No recourse to public funds - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/libraries/commons/commons-library-research/immigration/no-recourse-to-public-funds/)

unable to access any other funds due to her immigration status. This allowance was so unsustainable that she decided to go back to her perpetrators and asked them to come to the refuge to pick her up. From there, her perpetrators forced her into sex work.

The financial challenges are even worse for women with NRPF who have not been referred to the NRM as they get neither accommodation nor a weekly allowance. This leaves them unable to escape exploitation unless there are services such as charities operating in the area which are able to offer support to people with NRPF.

Case Study

A, an Indian woman supported by STAGE was in the UK on a student visa and therefore had no recourse to public funds. She was experiencing domestic abuse by her partner on multiple occasions, including in front of their child, however, she was accused of 'making it up because her visa was ending soon' by the senior domestic violence social worker. To make matters worse, A was taken to the police station, and the child was left with the perpetrator. She then returned to her abuser's home, where she continues to be abused, because the local authority was unable to provide her and her child with safe accommodation.

Housing and Safehouses

Where known, 19% (17) of women we have supported since January (2023) have had a housing need.

24% (9) of these women have been rehoused inappropriately, which has left them more vulnerable to further abuse.

Several women supported by STAGE who have received housing support under the NRM or from local authorities have reported inadequate and inappropriate placements which have a major impact on their ability to break the cycle of abuse and only contributes to the continuation of their suffering. When women feel unsafe or unable to remain in supposedly safe accommodation, the only option available to them is often to return to their abuser(s). There have also been cases of perpetrators using the women's housing conditions to take away, or threaten to take away, their children.

Case Study

D was fleeing domestic abuse and sexual exploitation and sought housing support from her local council. She was placed in accommodation that was in horrendous conditions – there were rats, no carpet, and the ceiling was falling down. Having left a place where she was subject to physical, emotional and sexual abuse, her only option was to stay somewhere with unhygienic and unsafe living conditions. She was left contemplating putting up with the abuse: 'I might as well have stayed there, why did I come here?'. The situation escalated – her mother and father-in-law were attempting to get her to return to the abusive environment, so they contacted D's family, on behalf of her abusive partner, to make them aware of the council flat's condition.

Placements are often inappropriate for women with alcohol dependency. Women have been housed in various hotels and B&Bs where they were not allowed to consume alcohol onsite. Not only is it unrealistic to expect someone experiencing addiction as a result of horrendous abuse and trauma to overcome that addiction overnight, it is dangerous for someone with severe alcohol dependency to stop drinking straight away. As a result, women have had to leave these so-called spaces of safety. Even supposedly safe spaces have turned out to be dangerous for women. Survivors are being targeted for sexual exploitation and forced labour at properties provided by the local authorities, which are supposedly deemed to provide safe conditions for women and children. One woman was

placed in temporary accommodation where she was expected to work seven days a week (cooking, cleaning etc.) and perform sexual acts on the owner of the property to secure her stay there.

Another aspect to be considered is the appropriateness of placing women in mixed sex accommodation and the importance of allowing survivors to make an informed decision based on their available housing options, which are often limited.



For more information on this report please contact the STAGE Policy Officer, Jess Creaby-Attwood,
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