

MIGRANT WOMEN AND THE DOMESTIC ABUSE BILL



#STEPUPMIGRANTWOMEN
#PROTECTIONFORALL

The Domestic Abuse Bill has been described as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address this crime affecting more than 2 million people per year in the United Kingdom, and which women are more likely to experience. However, the Bill continues to overlook one of the most vulnerable groups affected by this form of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG): migrant women.

Domestic abuse disproportionately affects migrant women as they face multiple, structural and overlapping barriers to protection and justice. Migrant women currently find it virtually impossible to access protection when experiencing domestic abuse. Barred from accessing public funds and therefore refuges, fearful of reporting to the police and other services due to fear of facing detention or deportation, migrant women often face an impossible decision: to become destitute and homeless or to remain with an abusive partner.

The Government has the opportunity to make the Domestic Abuse Bill truly transformational and to enshrine protection for all survivors, regardless of their immigration status. The following powerful testimonies illustrate the multiple barriers migrant women face when escaping violence and the urgency to ensure migrant women are protected from domestic abuse.

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LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN'S RIGHT SERVICE (LAWRS)



Before I begin, I would like to dedicate my words of strength and resilience to all women who have been or are in an abusive relationship.

No one deserves to be mistreated in their own home. It is with a lot of pain and tears in my eyes that I open my wounds, not all healed yet. It is as if they were bleeding again when telling this story, which deeply marked my soul.



I am Brazilian, a mother and a nurse. I chose a name to represent myself. You can call me “Phoenix” because that’s exactly how I feel: *Reborn from the ashes*.

It all started in 2015 when I met a man through my family. He was here in England and I was in Brazil.

In 2016 we started dating. In 2017 we got engaged in London. In 2018, I arrived here with my eldest son who had just turned 5 at the time, and with so many dreams. I would finally be by the side of the person I loved. But all of my dreams, plans and expectations

became a sad and endless nightmare. My 3-year story was nothing but a play, where I was the main character

of neglect and abuse. As if this was not enough, I was also the victim of humiliation, public ridicule, stalking, threat and harassment from my perpetrator’s ex-wife. What was supposed to be normal, was completely inhuman and cruel. He and I never lived together after I arrived. Our marriage was never consolidated. We met once a month. I was living with 6 people and my son and I shared a room and the same bed. Three months later, the pill

failed, and I was expecting a baby. My world had just collapsed.

I went into shock.

I spent my pregnancy isolated from everything. It was cruel, it was painful, it was long-suffering. With a month to go before the baby was born, he rented a flat, but he never came to live with us. Each day that passed was worse than the previous one. He came home drunk in the late hours and his behaviour towards me became more and more violent. 15 days after my baby's birth, I discovered he had another relationship. After that, I was reported to immigration control by his ex-wife.

One day, he arrived drunk at night again and I refused to open the door. He wanted to get in and got more and more violent. He threatened to call the police. I was scared, and I called them first. That was when I stumbled on the first obstacle. I was informed by the police that it would not be possible to remove him from the house, as the contract was in his name. And they directed me to seek help from my local council. It was very difficult, starting with communication. I was refused several times by other agencies because of my immigration status.

I felt trapped, like a wounded and helpless animal. No job, no money, with no immigration status, not speaking English, nothing. I had nothing to cling to. My passport had been taken away from me. My two-months-old baby still didn't have a birth certificate. It was very humiliating. My joy of living was gone. And I found myself talking to death several times. I was referred to the Latin American Women's Rights Service. There, I met an angel, who was responsible for getting me up, restructuring little by little. Together, we were rebuilding each foundation, with great dedication, love and exceptional

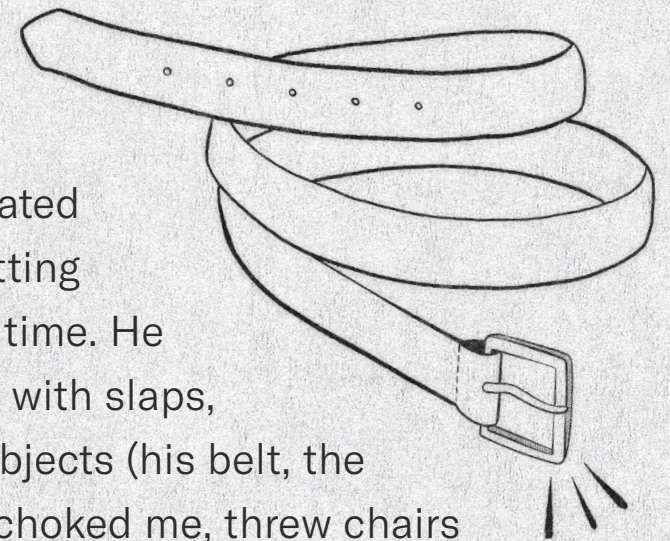
work. She gave me strength, support and protection. She referred me to an immigration lawyer, who helped me to regularise my immigration status. My eternal gratitude to those who directly and indirectly gave me life again.

SOUTHALL BLACK SISTERS



My name is Fatima and I have been in the UK since the age of 15. I'm originally from Ivory Coast.

I came to the UK to live with my dad. He is the only parent I have. For the past 5 years, my dad has been struggling with mental illness and that has changed a lot in my life. He went from the kindest and most loving dad to a violent man. At first, I thought I could manage it because I'm the only family he's got. I'm the only person who really cares about him so leaving him was not an option for me. As the years passed by, he became more and more violent - not because he wanted to or hated me but it was more his mental illness was getting worse. He was so confused and angry all the time. He would take it out on me. The violence started with slaps, punching and pushing. He used all sorts of objects (his belt, the mop, a stick and other items...) to hit me. He choked me, threw chairs at me, so I started getting really scared; *scared he might accidentally kill me one day.*



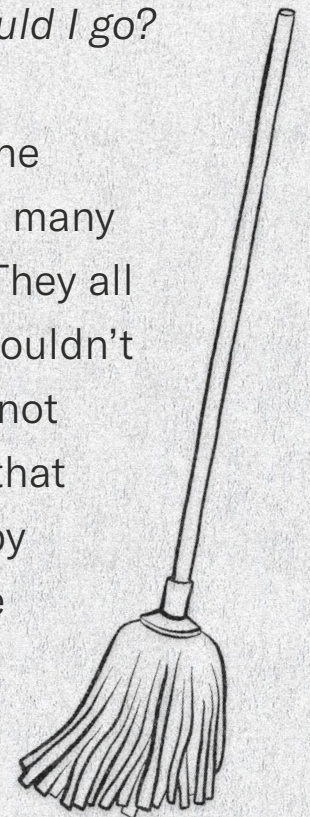
He was so unwell most of the time. He would come to my room in the middle of the night to confront me about dreams he had about me doing things that

he didn't approve of. He would act on those dreams by punishing me. I always told myself that this person was not my dad. Being in this situation was very hard for me, not only because of the violence but because I was losing my dad to this illness. This was the worst part of it all, and why I never pressed any charges against him because I knew he was not aware of what he was doing. I knew he should be treated in a hospital, not locked in a prison cell.

The moment I realised I had to get out of the house and go somewhere safe was the day my dad broke the bathroom door, knowing that I was naked in the shower. I could not stop him from coming in, even though I begged him not to. Seeing the look he gave me made me realise I was vulnerable. The person in front of me wasn't my dad. It made me feel so weak, so scared. I was terrified standing naked. I imagined the worst. He could have done anything he wanted to me in that bathroom.

From that day I started looking into my options. *But where would I go?*

What type of help was available to me? I made many calls to the council, and even the national domestic violence helpline and many other organisations for people who suffer domestic violence. They all said the same thing. I Had No Right To Public Funds so they couldn't and wouldn't help me. Some of them even said it was the law not to help me. I guess that No Recourse To Public Funds means that it is ok for me to be violated, physically and mentally abused by my father. I guess the Government approves of people like me being treated like I was. After being refused by everyone I had no choice but to go back to my dad. During quarantine my dad's illness got even worse, and he would use every



opportunity to hit me. I tried to avoid him. I started spending all my days at the bus stops and sneaking in when it was bedtime. Unfortunately after a few weeks, my dad found out so he started coming into my room when I was sleeping and hitting me with his belt. I was in shock and continued my search for help. In March, I was taken in by the Southall Black Sisters who have been helping me since then.

THE ANGELOU CENTRE



My situation got from bad to worse with being sexually exploited by my ex-husband and other men. I reached a point when I could not take all sorts of abuse anymore and decided to call the police. The police did come to rescue me but soon as they called women's refuge and soon as refuges found that I did not receive benefits they refused to take me and left the police to put me in a hostel which was mixed with men, women, drugs and alcohol.

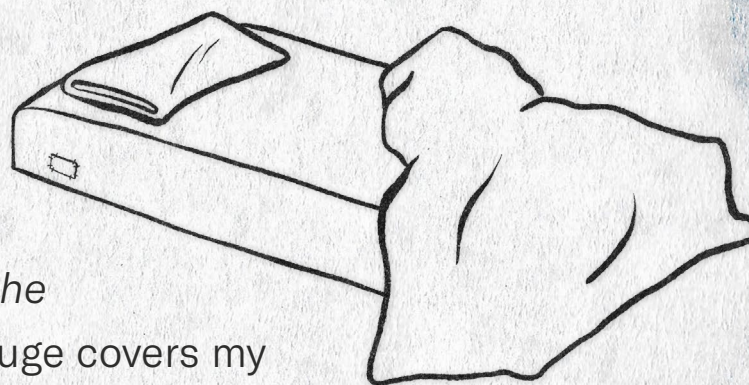
As Muslim woman it was hard, and I was crying every night, but I did not have choice because that was the

only way I could escape from my husband's house. Soon as Angelou Centre women's refuge accepted me,

I felt relief because I was far away from the

perpetrator, living in a safe place, the refuge covers my culture needs, staff speaks my language, no judgement,

staff listened and believed me. The Angelou centre has allowed me to get independence, I have learned so much about life, joined college, I am learning every day and I am doing well. I have my autonomy back, I feel safe and less anxious about my future, I can now finally focus on getting help and getting



better. I have made many friends in the house, participated in activities, I have met many women from different cultures, religions and we live in harmony at the refuge. We go on courses together and help/advise each other with homework. We taste all sorts of food that we cook and share our lives, experiences and hopes for the future. I love it here at the refuge, *it is my home, it has honestly made a massive difference in my life.*

LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN'S AID (LAWA)



Before I share my experience of abuse, I want you to know that I am writing to all women, those who I do know and those I do not even know, to all these women, sisters who are living with this invisible abuse.

By telling my story I want to become the voice for those who are so scared to speak, for those who decided to speak when they needed the most but they were unheard and even sometimes silent by those who meant to help.



My abusive relationships started over ten years, and yet, I can still vividly remember and feel my pain, my struggles, the times I was abused by my first partner, and then by the second one. I remember how I learnt to walk over eggshells and minefields so I wouldn't make them explode *as I would be the one ended dead.* That was my battle while at home with my abusers. But the battle didn't end there. At home, I was facing a battle squad but outside I was facing an army that saw

me as the enemy, I was the foreigner, a danger for the established system, for that reason, I did not deserve support. I was a danger to those men who promised love, those who encouraged me to leave my family, friends, a promising career back home to start a new life in the name of love. I married my beloved husband in my country and then, I joined him in the UK as he was a British citizen. I came as a tourist without knowing that I could have regularised my immigration status as the spouse of a British National, but he never told me. I didn't speak the language enough to ask, I was not curious to ask but why I should be, right? That was the first sign, the starting point of the several abuse incidents.

The abuse escalated, at this point, my immigration status had changed and I was without status and because of this, I didn't seek help. I *felt like I didn't exist, I felt alone*. My option was to escape, to go back to my country. There, I had a life, there, I felt safe. At this point, I also had a child, so I booked a flight and I took my child with me completely oblivious that by doing this I would put my life in a bad position. At the airport, I was detained and placed in an immigration centre, my child was taken away from me. Until now, I haven't got my child back.

I never lost hope and I continued believing. After I was released from the detention centre I could not stay in the country. Besides, I was told that I didn't have the right to get legal advice due to my immigration status. I went back to my country, once there, I met someone else, a British national, again I believed and I was happy because I could return and fight to have my child back. That was far from reality. I came with a fiancé permit, I got pregnant and again I was abused this time by my fiancé. Once my child was born my partner took my child away with the support of children social services. According

to my partner I was emotionally unstable, incapable of looking after my child. I went to court for both my immigration and family case. In Court, I felt that I was the one to be blamed. At this point, I was destitute and pregnant but I had to leave the family home due to the domestic abuse. Whatever organisation I approached they said I was not entitled to receive support. I was not entitled to remain in his home, I was not entitled to make a homeless application, and *I was basically left on the street despite being two months pregnant.*

I learnt about LAWA and I called the organisation for support. They listened to my story, they advocated on my behalf and because of that I was provided with emergency accommodation. None of this was my fault, but I grow from it, I will smile again, I will find joy, the anger and fear will pop their head in some times but I will fight so I get the control of my life back and this has been with the support of LAWA.

HILLINGDON WOMEN'S CENTRE



My name is Andreina, I was born in Argentina.

I never knew the love of a family. In my house I always came second, first because my father was everything to my mother and later because I no longer had either of them. At 23, luckily that changed. I met a man who cared about me, he was only 3 years older than me and he loved me like no one ever loved me. He worried about me and used to care for me by calling me every 30 minutes and sending me 50 messages a day. After only 2 weeks of

relationship, he travelled from Europe to find me, he could not live without me. His love overwhelmed me, I wondered if he was for me and tried to slow down, but he could not bear the pain that I caused him with it. So, I settled down with him. The pain that I caused him made me follow him in every step so as not to hurt him.

I lived happily in Paris, went to university, had friends and a good job. But then, he decided that we should move to London, an unknown place, where I did not speak the language, where my visa and my life depended on him. I started to feel turned off. We moved to a house in the middle of the country, isolated and disconnected. I didn't want to move there, but if I said so, I was going to hurt him. We had a child and the situation got worse. One day I couldn't take it anymore and I asked for a divorce. He had panic and anxiety attacks in front of me and since I did not change my mind, he began to force me to have sex, thinking that this would change my mind.

He was threatening to take away my visa.

I would never see my child again; I will be deported. He prevented me from eating,

because the food was his and I wanted a divorce. He humiliated me with his words. His threats terrified me, so I sought help. Then the institutional violence began.

For the social services it was easier to go against the rights of migrant women

than to investigate him. My son and I lived under

complete torment. And one day, my perpetrator threatened to kill me. It was then that we moved to a shelter, the struggle was long and arduous. The biggest dilemma for the authorities was my visa: apparently,



I had no options to stay, no access to public funds and the constant threat of having to leave my son in the hands of his father. I was officially homeless. I fought in court for the custody of my son, alone. Sneaking on the train to get to the hearings, desperately looking for someone to take care of my child. After a year I had legal representation. I got custody of my child. I embarked on a path of independence, hard but free, and safe from physical, sexual and psychological violence. *For a period of time I lived in a system that abused me emotionally and financially.*

Today I have an Indefinite Leave to Remain. I do volunteer hours and coming home is a pleasure. No more fear or anxiety. The road has been hard, but it has been worth it.

**MIDDLE EASTERN WOMEN & SOCIETY
ORGANISATION (MEWso)**



I came to the UK on a tourist visa.

I met him at a market, and we became friends.

The friendship slowly progressed into a relationship. He asked me to stay here and to marry him. This was the beginning of the destruction of my life. He wanted to consummate the relationship, but because of my religious backgrounds I refused unless we got married. He told me that we first had to wait until he got his British Citizenship, but until then, he said that we could do an Islamic ceremony (Nikah). I refused at first, but he convinced me again. So, I went ahead with the Islamic ceremony with the promise

that we would have a legal one later when his citizenship came through.

He always said he wanted children with me. But as soon as I got pregnant, he lost his temper and said he didn't want it. I was shocked. He wanted me to have an abortion, which I refused. For religious reasons, I couldn't do it. So, he gave me an ultimatum: *I could either get an abortion and stay with him or keep the child and have a miserable life.* He said that if I continued with the pregnancy, then he would abandon the both of us. When he realised, I wasn't going to change my mind, he hit me. He slapped my face and kicked me in my stomach in an attempt to kill the baby. After that, I told him I was going to call the police, and so he left. He really changed in such a short period of time. *He went from being such a nice man to a violent monster.*

I was in pain from when he kicked me in my stomach. So, I went to the doctor and there I met a nurse who could speak Arabic. When I told her my story, she told me that there are organisations in London that can help. I searched and found many numbers and called several of them. The Middle Eastern Women and Society organisation was the one that got back to me. I explained my situation to them, and they told me to contact the police. At MEWSO, they helped me to find refuge, but it was very difficult because of my immigration status.

When I was finally taken to the first refuge, it was in the middle of nowhere. They put me in a room with seven other women. And because I was pregnant, I had morning sickness, which wasn't pleasant for the other women in the room. I was uncomfortable, I didn't know them. I didn't know what to expect. The people running the refuge made me work until I fainted, and they had to call an ambulance. They had no sympathy that I was pregnant.

Then, they moved me to a hotel, it was a horrible experience. It felt like a prison. We were only given rice and pasta with canned food. It was horrible. The rooms were shared again, with one or two people. I initially had one roommate and then a second one came. Honestly, it felt like a prison. I tried to ask for fresh food, as I was pregnant and hungry. They told me that this was the only thing they have which was provided by the Home Office and that it was for everyone. I couldn't take it anymore. I was pregnant and hungry.

I ended up begging the other women there to help me. I felt like I had reached the lowest point of my life. I was embarrassed. *I no longer felt like a human being.* After I gave birth to my son, I was placed in temporary housing, this time a place for myself. I was made to sleep on the floor and there was a mouse infestation. When I complained to the building authorities, they told me that having a mouse infestation in London was common and they couldn't do anything about it. There were mice running around where my new-born son slept. They didn't do anything until I submitted video evidence. Again, there was the issue of food. *I would drink warm water and biscuits to be able to produce milk to breastfeed.*

Now, my hope more than anything is that my son will receive his documents. I don't want him to pay for my mistakes. For mine and his [father's] mistakes.



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