

Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: migrant women

Summary of engagement

Monday, 27 June 2022

Background

1. As part of the Equality and Social Justice Committee's inquiry into '*Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: migrant women*', the Citizen Engagement Team proposed a qualitative approach to engagement. This comprised a series of focus groups with migrant women with experience of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV hereafter), and those working at organisations who support them.
2. Five focus groups took place between 9 May – 8 June 2022, involving contributors across three Senedd regions – North Wales, South Wales Central and South Wales West.

Contributors

3. All focus groups involved contributors with experience of VAWDASV and those working at organisations responsible for supporting them.
4. Contributor composition varied and included parents and women without children. Contributors had varying degrees of fluency in English, with some supported by interpreters during sessions. The immigration status and length of time contributors had been living in the United Kingdom also varied.
5. Participants were sourced through, or with support from, a number of organisations including the Bevan Foundation, Bawso, CLPW Community



Interest Company Portuguese Diaspora from Wales, South Riverside Community Development Centre and Vesta.

6. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the programme of engagement.

Format

7. Five face-to-face focus groups took place, with one focus group taking place online on Microsoft Teams.

8. The format of engagement was largely comparable between sessions, but varied slightly to meet the needs of contributors.

9. Whilst some contributors shared their personal experience of VAWDASV, discussion predominantly focused on the barriers to accessing support services, and solutions to those barriers. The following themes emerged from the discussions.

Barriers

No recourse to public funds

10. Many contributors, but predominantly staff working for organisations who support migrant women with experience of VAWDASV, explained that no recourse to public funds is a significant barrier for many.

“... we will get a referral from the police to say this person, for instance, has fled from her marital home, but she’s on a spouse visa. There’s definitely a barrier there as the refuge would ask; “has she got access to public funds, because we’d have to apply for housing benefit for the client and her children.””

Contributor, Cardiff

“We know many women from different backgrounds, different nationalities, who are unable to claim settled status because, for example they were kept at home, they weren’t allowed to work, they weren’t allowed to put their name on any bills, they got pregnant every year just to keep them at home. So there are many strategies by abusers to keep women at home without any language and therefore they can’t claim settled status.”

Contributor, Wrexham

11. The ramifications for an individual deemed to have no recourse to public funds are far-reaching, and extend beyond the obvious challenges associated

with being unable to access benefits and housing assistance, according to some contributors.

12. These challenges are particularly acute for migrant women fleeing VAWDASV, as they are often navigating a complex system against a backdrop of language barriers, poor mental and physical health, and a lack of awareness of the support available.

“Sometimes they’ll be at the refuge for 16 weeks; sometimes for a whole year, but she can only have that support for that funding for 16 weeks . . . so who pays for her to live in the refuge after 16 weeks?”

Contributor, Cardiff

13. Housing assistance and sourcing appropriate accommodation, were themes intertwined with discussion on access, or lack thereof, to public funds. This was further exacerbated by the lack of capacity at some refuges, which was considered a significant issue by many contributors.

“The first thing they ask is, “has she got status?”. If she has no recourse to public funds, Housing Options won’t touch her. Social services, the same thing. I’ve had a social worker tell me they would have to separate the children from mum because they only have a duty of care to the children who were born here. Once the mum has status, she can reunite with her children. So that means, potentially, that children would have to go to a foster home and the mother would have to find somewhere to live until she has her visa issues sorted.”

Contributor, Cardiff

14. Some contributors explained that the standard of accommodation in which women are often placed is unsafe and in poor condition. One contributor, who works in a role supporting migrant women with experience of VAWDASV, gave an example of a pregnant asylum seeker with no recourse to public funds.

“She cries every day saying she’s not comfortable where she is. The accommodation is terrible. There’s smoke in the kitchen, doors are broken and she doesn’t feel safe. She doesn’t know who the accommodation manager is because she’s just been put there and no one has come to see her. Because she has no recourse to public funds, I can’t apply for benefits or accommodation for her . . . She’s grateful she’s not on the streets, but the house is very bad.”

Contributor, Cardiff

Language

15. The majority of contributors across the programme of engagement agreed that language barriers posed a significant issue for many migrant women wishing to access services.

16. Whilst a range of support mechanisms was considered necessary in order to meet the different needs and circumstances of migrant women, their accessibility was considered imperative. As an example, whilst there were varying levels of awareness amongst some contributors of the Welsh Government's Live Fear Free Helpline, some queried its effectiveness in practice.

"So, I wonder about that helpline – how many languages are being offered on the helpline? The time it takes to earn trust for someone to feel empowered to use that helpline is massive. We've seen people who are just on the end of a three year programme which was actually an 'into work' programme...we've now gained their trust enough and helped them understand their rights enough, that they're opening up so that we can help them with other things."

Contributor, Cardiff

17. Some contributors also explained that difficulties can arise when a migrant woman with a language barrier wishes to report an incident of VAWDASV. Where the language barrier is significant and an interpreter is required, caution must be exercised where the interpreter is a familial connection, or a member of the community, due to risks including breach of confidentiality and/or misrepresentation (whether intentional or otherwise).

Expert support

18. The need for those providing support to be well-trained and culturally sensitive was considered imperative, according to many contributors. In addition to ensuring that support workers have the necessary skill and expertise, a number of contributors explained that the importance of continuity of support could not be underestimated.

"[Support worker] has been at [support organisation] for a number of years and it's amazing they've had a trusted person in place for that long. It's rare. Usually, it's one, two or three years of funding. People earn their trust and then leave. We need to look at it from a community asset point of view."

Contributor, Cardiff

19. Mental health support for migrant women, or lack thereof, was a theme which permeated much of the discussion amongst groups, when discussing support more generally. In particular, some contributors explained that mental health professionals, whilst well-meaning and evidently skilled in their field, will often lack an understanding of cultural nuances. This is often compounded by language barriers.

Capacity issues

20. Contributors with experience of VAWDASV who had accessed support were grateful for the support they received. However, staff responsible for providing the support explained that they were overwhelmed, worked excessively long hours and did not feel they had the necessary resources to support women effectively. This, in turn, could often have a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of staff.

“We had a crisis on a Friday and no one has accessed the National Referral Mechanism . . . the crisis today, she needs to go to court at 3:00pm but she doesn’t have any childcare. The DDVC (Destitution Domestic Violence Concession) requires her to get biometric checks and the nearest office is Cardiff, so someone has to go with her. We don’t have staff to work through the night. We work 24/7.”

Contributor, Swansea

“We know the system is overwhelmed. We know that there are not enough social workers because they have so many cases they are actually unable to provide the quality of the service. With regard to working with other nationalities, they are not skilled . . . they have no cultural awareness.”

Contributor, Wrexham

“I worked through the night. I then went out to do a welfare assessment, then Sunday I was in the police station [supporting a service user].”

Contributor, Swansea

Inheriting cultural norms

21. Some contributors explained that many women will not recognise that they may be in an abusive relationship, due to the cultural, societal and religious

landscape in which they have been raised and in which they continue to live. One contributor explained that this lack of awareness and understanding of what abuse means, in its various guises, will often apply to the perpetrator of abuse.

“Women, yes they live in the UK but in the house they are Ugandan, they have no clue . . . they ask “my husband is beating me and is this normal?”

Contributor, Swansea

22. Contributors said that it is important to work with community groups and schools to educate both adults and children, and challenge practices which may be commonplace in some communities.

“Socially, it’s unspoken. There are certain things you do without being told because you’re brought up to not ask questions, not shame the family, not say anything in the community that would cause an uproar. In terms of domestic violence in particular, a lot of women would sooner stay put than leave. A lot of the time people are looking for damage limitation, because when they separate from their partner, they have to live with the stigma of separation and divorce.”

Contributor, Cardiff.

“We came from different communities . . . it is hard to talk to people from the community because you would feel judged by them.”

Contributor, Swansea

Digital exclusion

23. Some contributors explained that whilst it is important that a range of support services are on offer, which can be accessed in a variety of ways, digital exclusion is a significant barrier for many.

“Digital exclusion is massive, especially if we’re talking about control. A helpline isn’t necessarily the one they can get access to. We see it here all the time, where people are handing us their phone and it’s in a different language, and they’re asking us which option they should click on for example. So when you watch someone trying to navigate an online banking screen or something else, and it’s not in their mother tongue, you realise there are so many ‘click throughs’ in place.

There's two strands – how do you get people to know enough to get people to report on behalf of somebody, and how do you get people to self-report. They're very different and they take time."

Contributor, Cardiff

Solutions

Awareness raising

24. All groups discussed the necessity for greater awareness raising as a way of overcoming some of the barriers mentioned. This was largely discussed in three contexts:

- The need for migrant women who move to Wales to understand their rights and the support available, including any associated eligibility criteria. This was considered particularly important for women who may be considered more isolated by, for example, not having children. This could mean they are less likely to be made aware of the support available, through for example, schools and public health bodies.
- The need for communities to understand what is meant by VAWDASV, in all its various guises to include, for example, financial abuse.
- The need for institutions, such as the police and public health bodies, to be better skilled at recognising the sometimes inconspicuous nature of VAWDASV. This can help improve trust in these institutions.

25. Most contributors agreed that effective awareness raising involved using a variety of channels to reach people with varying needs and abilities, who may consume information in different ways. This included advertising support available on buses, through community groups, traditional media such as television and radio, as well as social media. Contributors also emphasised the need to ensure information is available in different languages.

Education

26. Some groups explained that greater educational resources, delivered through different channels, should be made available to migrant women to ensure they are better equipped to report instances of VAWDASV. This included, for example, greater access to English language classes, and an increased awareness of the benefits of greater financial independence. Due to inherited cultural norms, many migrant women are often heavily reliant on their husbands for financial support.

27. Discussion on the importance of education led some contributors to assert that men and boys should also be exposed to this education, so they are able to recognise and understand VAWDASV and be part of the solution.

Funding

28. Many contributors who worked for organisations who support migrant women with experience of VAWDASV, discussed the need for increased funding. One contributor explained that they will often need to provide immediate help and intervention, but the resources are not available.

29. When discussing the role of the Welsh Government, some contributors working at organisations supporting migrant women experiencing VAWDASV, explained that greater support is needed for women who have no recourse to public funds. A comparison was made with the situation in Scotland, with a contributor explaining that all victims are supported by the Scottish Government. Despite a number of meetings with the Welsh Government, one contributor said the following:

“... they have not taken this on board ... They would rather victims go back to perpetrators ... they are signatories of the Istanbul Convention and they need to start to commit to what they have signed up to.”

Contributor, Swansea