

Better
Housing
Briefing

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**Black, minority
ethnic and
refugee women,
domestic
violence and
access to
housing**

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Key messages

- 1 The specialist women's domestic violence sector and its black and minority ethnic service users are not consulted enough by statutory services. There is an absence of clear guidelines for involving them in policy, service development and evaluation
- 2 There is low recognition of domestic violence within housing policy, which can disproportionately affect black and minority ethnic women
- 3 There needs to be provision to meet women's housing needs
- 4 There needs to be an evaluation framework that assesses how women's housing needs are being met and the ways in which housing will be sustained
- 5 There should be mandatory and specialist domestic violence training for the statutory sector, linked to performance indicators and frameworks
- 6 A comprehensive, (w)holistic approach to ending violence against women needs to be developed, which ensures an adequate and sustainable investment in violence prevention work.

Introduction

Obtaining dependable data on black and minority ethnic (BME) housing needs is difficult. There is national evidence, however, that people from black, minority ethnic and refugee (BMER) backgrounds find it difficult to access services, and are less likely to be aware of services and housing options available to them ([Netto *et al.*, 2001](#)). This is a particular problem for more vulnerable individuals, such as older people, homeless people and victims of domestic violence. BMER women in particular are relatively invisible to the Supporting People guidance measures because of lack of monitoring of gender and ethnicity ([Thiara and Hussain, 2005](#)). The position of BMER women escaping domestic violence is exacerbated by barriers to reporting abuse, which also include protecting family honour and normalising and accepting violence. There is also a lack of specialist refuge spaces available for women, and immigration legislation denies women with insecure status access to public funds. We therefore know very little nationally about the number of women from BMER communities becoming homeless as a result of domestic violence.

During the 1970s, feminist organisations campaigned against domestic violence, eventually bringing about acknowledgement that it was grounds for homelessness. Twenty years later the law was repealed, under Part VII of the new Housing Act 1996 which broadened the definition of homelessness to include women experiencing domestic violence. Domestic violence is currently defined as violence or threats of violence from a person who is associated with the person under threat. The local authority has a duty to help women who cannot live in their home (permanently or temporarily) because of violence ([Morley *et al.*, 2002](#)). The 1996 Act was followed by the Homelessness Act 2002, which introduced major changes to the statutory scheme of help for women who are homeless as a result of domestic violence, and made important changes to the arrangements for allocating local authority housing. The Act does not set out a new statutory framework for either homelessness or housing allocation, but it makes substantial changes and minor amendments to the main legislative provisions that are still contained in the Housing Act 1996.

Along the way, positive measures have been undermined by the lack of sustainable funding to women's organisations. This has particularly affected specialist providers for BMER women. In a mapping exercise that included 551 London-based women's organisations, it was found that 73 per cent of BME organisations reported a funding crisis between 1996 and 2000, and that 62 per cent of BME organisations had closed or moved location ([Soteri, 2002](#)). These figures show that by 2000, BME organisations were under threat, overworked, under-resourced, and had an insecure existence ([Soteri, 2002](#)). Since Soteri's assessment six years ago, this picture has

not changed. A study published in 2006 revealed that there are many women *'staying in "hidden", informal and marginalised homeless accommodation situations'* (Reeve *et al.*, 2006, p. 5). Women's homelessness continues to be ignored in strategic and policy-making structures, and their needs and concerns excluded from these agendas. At the same time, a shift in resourcing from specialist to generic services is taking place without appropriate consultation with the specialist women's sector or their service users. Although there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that the consolidation and sustainability of services for women by women would be beneficial, this is not taking place. A change in direction is necessary to bring about meaningful change for women.

Ten years ago, Anwen Jones (1998) undertook a study on the experiences of women's homelessness and found a dramatic increase over the ten-year period from 1980 to 1990. Residency in hostels among homeless women increased; the number of homeless women living rough in London increased; and the average age of homeless women fell below twenty-five years. Jones's study found that the experiences of homeless women were diverse. However, he noted a common thread: a history of violence that often began in childhood. His research also explored women's housing needs, and identified that it was crucial to reduce long-term stays in hostels, because they are detrimental to women's mental health and future housing prospects. He also saw a need for more settled move-on accommodation and permanent housing.

The problem for BMER homeless women is particularly acute. A study on women in refuge accommodation in 2007 found that, on average, BMER women stayed forty-four more days in specialist refuges than women who accessed mainstream refuges. Furthermore, twenty-one refuges turned away 2300 women who requested support, because they were full. This rejection figure was much higher for BMER women who attempted to access specialist refuges. Only 25 per cent of women who stayed in refuges went to council housing upon leaving the refuge (Women's Resource Centre, 2007).

There is a reduction in resources available to BMER women. Research conducted by the Women's Resource Centre on the state of London-based BMER women's organisations, and findings from the *Thirty-Second Report of the Working Group with the Voluntary Sector (2006)*, found that London-based BMER women's organisations have experienced long-term instability. The workforce situation is particularly acute. Forty per cent of the groups have no full-time paid staff, and 36 per cent have no paid staff at all. Although the demand for services has increased and workloads have doubled, there is little support in terms of stable and core funding.

Lack of consultation in policy development and implementation

1

The concept of 'inclusiveness' remains at a rhetorical level. Indeed, rather than encouraging inclusion, over the past two decades women's voices have been pushed to the periphery of the policy-making process.

Research by Gudnadottir *et al.* (2007) found that women were under-represented in local strategic partnerships (LSPs) and also in the local area agreement (LAA) process. For example, women's organisations represented 7 per cent of the total voluntary and community sector, but only 1.8 per cent were represented on LSPs. A gender-specific perspective at local level was not demonstrated in these approaches to community involvement in local government. There is a lack of appropriate representation of women survivors of domestic violence within frameworks for public consultation. Additionally, there is a failure to recognise women survivors as a specialist group requiring service provision that encompasses the whole person, including their surrounding life context. This is a major cause for concern demonstrated by the lack of synergy that exists between decision making, policy development and formulation and strategic implementation, which excludes women as central in the processes and serves to increase their marginalisation.

Research on the housing needs of BMER women conducted by Roehampton University and Newham Asian Women's Project (NAWP) in 2008 found that an overwhelming number of respondents identified the need for improved consultation with the BMER women's sector (Banga and Gill, 2008, pp. 2-18). One respondent said that *'BMER women lack voice, their needs are not accounted for'*. Another respondent commented that *'it has not been about services to suit women and children's needs, it has been about women and children having to fit services'*.

Resources 1

Coy, M., Kelly, L. and Ford, J. (2007) *Map of Gaps: The postcode lottery of violence against women support services*
www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/pages/resources.html

EVAW (2007) *Making the Grade? The third annual independent analysis of government initiatives on violence against women*
www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/data/files/evaw_mtg_uk.pdf

In 2007 the UK Government scored just 2 out of 10 in an assessment of government action to tackle violence against women, and the Northern Ireland Government scored 1 out of 10. The Crown Prosecution Service scored top marks for the third year running, and recently published a Violence Against Women Strategy.

Mouj, A. (2008) *A Right to Exist - A paper looking at the eradication of specialist services to BAME women and children fleeing violence*
www.imkaan.org.uk/pub/?id=34
 Imkaan is a national second-tier organisation. It highlights the needs and concerns of black, Asian, minority ethnic and refugee (BAME) domestic violence refugees, outreach and advice services across the UK. These services provide support and safety to women and children from BAME communities who are subject to violence and abuse from their spouses and family members.

2 Low recognition of domestic violence in housing policy

The debate on how to house homeless women needs to address three issues: (1) the cost of homelessness; (2) the need for ongoing comprehensive support services; and (3) the need to address gender inequality of access to good quality housing. [Walby \(2004\)](#) suggests that *'the demonstration of the scale of the impact of domestic violence on society by estimating its cost may enable a wider range of both policymakers and the general public to understand the extent of the problem ... this is consistent with a move towards evidence-based policymaking and the development of transparent comparable measures of the cost and benefits that flow from policy action and inaction. It shows the cost of inaction'* ([Walby, 2004, p. 3](#)). The cost of domestic violence on local authority housing, housing associations, housing benefit and emergency and refuge accommodation is approximately £1.6 billion per annum. Taking all these costs into account, and including all public expenditure, the loss of economic output and the cost of 'suffering', the figure is £23 billion ([Walby, 2004](#)). There is therefore a strategic and economic need for an integrated housing policy.

Research by the [Women's Resource Centre \(2007\)](#), on the state of funding for women, found that the lack of suitable housing to move on to meant that women stayed in refuges for longer periods of time. This lack of housing also influenced whether or not women returned to abusers. Women who had no housing to move on to tended to return to abusers, putting themselves in danger and becoming high-risk cases when they reapproached services. Every bed that is occupied longer than the stipulated period means that one more woman in need of emergency refuge accommodation is denied immediate refuge space. There is an increased risk of further violence and/or homelessness for every woman who leaves the refuge with no suitable housing to move to.

There is further evidence that BME women who try to gain access to housing experience racism and sexism on both institutional and personal levels. These attitudes affect both the BME women's access to housing and the type of housing that is allotted to them ([Gilroy and Woods, 1994](#)). [Chahal \(2000\)](#) suggests that minority ethnic groups who are social housing tenants tend to live in the most deprived areas and are over-represented in deprived inner city areas. Approximately 60 per cent of the tenants of BME housing associations come from BME communities ([Chahal, 2000](#)). However, such housing associations can be more vulnerable to changes in their annual income, whether generated from rental income or through other financial changes, which affects their long-term viability ([Women's Resource Centre, 2007](#)). Low priority is given by local authorities to funding initiatives that benefit BME groups ([Southall Black Sisters, 2008](#)). For example, research by [End Violence Against Women \(EVAW\)](#) contains geographical maps showing how women face a 'postcode lottery' in their attempts to access specialised support services. It paints a bleak picture. A third of local authorities in the UK have no specialised support services, and fewer than one in ten have specialist services for BME women ([Coy et al., 2007](#)).

It is crucial we have a policy framework involving key, women-only service providers, embedded within a framework with the fundamental goal of ending violence against women. The framework must be developed from the 'grass-roots' up. It must be linked to and draw upon the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, the Human Rights Act 1998, the Children Act 2004 and the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. It must address authorities' compliance with various equalities legislation, and should include the following: (1) local authorities

becoming accountable to women's organisations through systematic monitoring and dialogue, and addressing failure to meet legal duties, requirements and responsibilities; (2) monitoring how the specific duties under the various Acts are being carried out (i.e. race equality impact assessments), and devising action and development plans to ensure failures are addressed; (3) producing more specific data on the housing status of women fleeing domestic violence; (4) creating better anti-racism policies, which include both professional and institutional good practice guidelines; (5) developing effective domestic violence policies by drawing on the experience and expertise of service users and key specialist organisations; (6) encouraging better multi-agency working with the third sector, drawing on examples of good practice; and (7) meeting women's housing needs by establishing protocols with local authorities and housing associations.

On 18 July 2008, at the High Court, Southall Black Sisters (SBS) won a major victory against Ealing Council. The court found that the council had failed to pay proper regard to equalities legislation (in particular the Race Relations Act) when making its decision to cut the entire funding of SBS, who provided specific services for BMER women, and to use it instead for the provision of a generic domestic violence service in the borough. The success of SBS shows how the system can be used to challenge insufficiencies in local government response ([Southall Black Sisters, 2008](#)).

Provision to meet women's local housing needs

3

The number of women becoming homeless due to domestic violence may have decreased over the past ten years. Figures suggest that the number of homeless households who lost their last settled home due to violent relationship breakdown with a partner decreased from 18 800 in 1997 to 8260 in 2007 ([P1E Data, 2007](#)). However, women's need for (w)holistic services has increased, due to gaps in provision and lack of funding for non-statutory services ([Women's Resource Centre, 2007](#)). Changing approaches to domestic violence after the introduction of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 and its articulation in the National Domestic Violence Strategy have compounded the situation. Specialist provision to BMER women has been adversely affected. Refuges across the country know that the supply of housing to meet the needs of women fleeing from domestic violence is inadequate ([Women's Aid, 2008](#)). In the current housing climate, arguments for the expansion of the housing supply in the public sector are made rarely, if at all.

There is a need for fair housing laws to be enforced more proactively. Access to fair housing plays an important role in combating discrimination, but there are many forms of discrimination that occur after housing has been secured. Increased emphasis needs to be given to key aspects of housing law, and to the education and training of frontline housing practitioners. Additionally, awareness-raising training must be given to practitioners who are in employment, recognising that discriminatory practices shift and change ([Banga and Gill, 2008](#)).

If more housing is to be provided, affordable housing targets must be established within national and local housing policy for women who are fleeing domestic violence. New housing projects carried out by housing associations must consider data on domestic violence and take account of the needs of vulnerable women in their planning, development and allocation phases. Women's housing needs must be integrated into wider initiatives, such as local area regeneration plans, and a comprehensive assessment of women's housing needs must underpin these initiatives. Investment in housing, including renovations, should take into account strategic information from the women's housing needs assessment; and all the above activities must be embedded within a framework that embraces gender and race equality duties, human rights, race relations and the goal of ending violence against women.

In recent years supporters of choice-based lettings, for example, have frequently emphasised the principles of customer empowerment, but does this extend to meaningful choice for meeting the needs of vulnerable women? Research by [Brown *et al.* \(2003\)](#) suggests that the notion of housing 'choice' must be challenged. Women who leave a violent spouse or other relative do not have much choice at all, if they are unaware of the services they can access or if they face isolation or violence. In order for their needs to be met, it is paramount that there is a major re-examination of the 'choice' it is claimed that women have.

Resources 2

Reeve, K., Casey R. and Goudie, R. (2006)

Homeless Women: Still being failed yet striving to survive

www.shu.ac.uk/research/crest/downloads/Crisis_Homeless_Women_2006_full_report.pdf

This report suggests that despite advances in homelessness policy and legislation over the past decade, homeless women are enduring traumatic and difficult homelessness situations and experiences. Many are not receiving the assistance they require to help them access accommodation, reflecting the fact that their wider situations, needs and vulnerabilities are not always adequately taken into account by local authorities. As a result, many are sleeping rough, placing themselves in danger of assault and sexual attack; many more are living in a range of hidden and marginalised housing situations.

Southall Black Sisters (2008) *Southall Black Sisters' Victory Against Ealing Council*

www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/

Southall Black Sisters is a pioneering and pre-eminent campaigning and advocacy group for black and minority ethnic women experiencing domestic violence in the UK.

4 A framework to assess how housing needs are met

Hague and Malos (1998) examined inter-agency initiatives as a government response to domestic violence policy. They suggested the possibility that the refuge movement and the voluntary sector would be marginalised and that inter-agency responses could hide the fact that very little work is done on domestic violence (Hague and Malos, 1998, p. 385). Lewis (2005) critically examined the idea of partnerships, and suggested that the 'compact' with the voluntary sector was important for New Labour because it retained 'a commitment to a mixed economy of provision and to contracting for services. It redressed the balance between the old instrumentality and the desire for independence and acknowledged the mediating role between voluntary organisations in the modern welfare state' (Lewis, 2005, p. 123). Policy makers may also be reluctant for each local authority to develop its own response to domestic violence. However, research in Scotland suggests that local initiatives were required for a vibrant, coherent and coordinated approach to addressing housing need (Henderson, 1998).

Recent work on domestic violence services has highlighted eight indicators of good practice:

- defining domestic violence;
- monitoring and screening for domestic violence;
- developing policies and guidelines for communication within and between organisations;
- prioritising safety;
- training;
- evaluating initiatives;
- developing a multi-agency strategy;
- drawing up guidelines for working with domestic violence survivors.

(Adapted from Humphreys *et al.*, 2000, p. 3)

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that good practice initiatives such as these must be considered for the BMER sector as a whole. Data on specialist domestic violence services is often unfairly compared to mainstream services, and is assessed on the basis of factors such as cost which do not take account of the real nature of provision. It is imperative that specialist domestic violence services be assessed fairly before 'partnerships' are formed. The criteria for these assessments must be based on the good practice indicators mentioned in the paper.

5 Specialist and mandatory domestic violence training

The authors' work at Newham Asian Women's Project has demonstrated the need for a mandatory training programme that encompasses both general and specialist domestic violence. This programme must be instituted for all statutory services, including the police and criminal justice system, housing, education, health authorities and those working with children and vulnerable adults. In order to create meaningful change, it is important that training is devised and targeted to include decision makers, policy makers, management staff, and frontline providers. The evidence signals the necessity to address and assess institutional cultures in which gender-based violence is not taken seriously, and to delineate ways in which changes could be made to rectify the situation.

Research conducted by [Rai and Thiara \(1997\)](#), [Gill \(2004\)](#) and [Mouj \(2008\)](#) identifies several obstacles to accessing the emotional, informational and instrumental support that women seek from specialist services. According to critics of the 'one-size-fits-all' approach, women have negative views of current policies on domestic violence, especially those of local authorities ([Southall Black Sisters, 2008](#)). Many suggest that the current policy leads to an attitude of disbelief about the seriousness of the abuse on the part of professionals. They describe such professionals' attitudes as rude, judgemental and hostile, leading inevitably to the sense that women's voices are not being heard. There is also an institutional culture that fails to recognise the need for domestic violence action and policy. Research by the [End Violence Against Women Campaign \(2007\)](#) found that a number of government departments failed to put in place a framework and/or processes to ensure that domestic violence was addressed effectively. The report found a general culture of complacency, and discovered that there was minimal emphasis placed on the prevention of violence.

A (w)holistic approach to ending violence against women

6

The Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 (DVCVA) was an effort to identify more robust and effective legal remedies for victims and survivors, and hand out tougher punishment to perpetrators. However, although the Act has precipitated the rapid development of the state's response to violence against women, these efforts have been implemented without regard for the needs of victims/survivors. The 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not only inappropriate, but also dangerous, because BMER women are rejecting a system of interventions that is not meeting their support needs ([Gill and Banga, 2008, pp. 11-13](#)).

Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 funding has led to the rapid introduction of specialist courts, which have called for combined systems of criminal justice and social support. However, research into the effectiveness of such systems remains limited. The criminalisation of domestic violence and the arrival of specialist courts, Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs) and Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) have raised important questions. Are such interventions, together with the legislation in the criminal justice system, adequate to address the problem? Does the co-mingling of services blur professional boundaries and obscure professional mandates? Is this the best that 'safety and justice' can offer? Services within the dedicated domestic violence courts are targeted at both the victim and the perpetrator, but approaches vary and their degree of success is rarely evaluated. There remains a heavy emphasis on encouraging women to prosecute and move into non-specialist services, even though many women refuse to enter non-specialist services because they do not trust them to help them to rebuild their lives ([Gill, 2008](#)).

Conclusion

If women are to secure their safety, protect their children and rebuild their lives, they need access to good quality, safe housing. The evidence suggests that there is a direct correlation between secure housing and surviving domestic violence. This paper has highlighted some of the key gaps in current provisions. It clearly stipulates a need for a comprehensive, integrated approach to the problems of discrimination by gender, which addresses the allocation of housing. This approach will ensure that women have a voice in the policy decisions that affect them. Furthermore, those organisations that support women directly must be guaranteed sufficient resources in order to continue their work. The paper calls for targets to be introduced for monitoring compliance with new policies, for new housing to be built that addresses women's needs and for training to be linked to performance at staff development, structural and developmental levels. A (w)holistic provision is imperative, in which specialist services are protected and developed according to women's needs. We believe that women's homelessness can no longer be ignored. There must be accountability at all hierarchical levels in order to reduce the adverse impact of a weak housing policy, which has continually failed women who are fleeing from domestic violence.

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