



A ROOF, NOT A HOME

The housing experiences of Black and minoritised women survivors of gender-based violence in London

OCTOBER 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a widespread issue with global estimates showing that 1 in 3 women experience physical and/or sexual violence by a partner or non-partner throughout their life time.¹ In the UK, statistics show that in 2018, an estimated 4.8 million (29%) women aged 16 to 59 years experienced some form of domestic abuse at some point in their life.² One of the major causes of women's homelessness is relationship breakdown due to violence, with a disproportionate number of homeless single mothers reporting experiences of abuse.³ According to government statistics, between January and March 2019 a total of 6,020 households became homeless due to domestic violence.⁴

“

I needed more understanding from the local authorities, I did not leave my home on a whim, but because my husband threw me down the staircase in front of my son. I had to leave. But they couldn't understand that at the council. [...] they could have helped me with interpreting and advice, I did not have anything when I left my house, we went through hunger and cold, I did not know what would be of my life, I could not understand life.

(Brazilian woman, survivor)

”

This report addresses the housing experiences of Black and minoritised women survivors of gender violence, drawing on the first year of the Women Against Homelessness and Abuse (WAHA), a 2-year project funded by Trust for London and jointly run by Latin American Women's Aid (LAWA) and London Black Women's Project (LBWP) under the OYA consortium of by and for Black and minoritised women's refuges. Both LAWA and LBWP have a longstanding history of 60 plus years working with minoritised women and run refuges and advice centres for women affected by different forms of gender-based violence.

The WAHA project is aimed at addressing Black and minoritised women's intersecting pressures of poverty, homelessness and gender violence, through promoting changes in housing policy and practice in the UK using a rights-based approach. Hence, it is a policy focused, but is also a frontline project advising women and acting on their behalf to help them access and achieve safe and appropriate accommodation, in an environment free from violence and intimidation. The project also endeavours to build the capacity of professionals, with the goal of ensuring all homeless women are treated fairly and with dignity. WAHA's ultimate goal is to work with policy-makers and practitioners to effect change in the way the housing needs of vulnerable women are met. We envisage a world where no woman will be forced to endure violence for fear of becoming homeless, and where minoritised women fleeing violence are able to access their right to safe, suitable and stable accommodation without that process furthering the cycle of abuse.

“

I was worried because I had no place to go. I went to the council, but they did not tell me about women's refuges. I said I suffered from domestic violence, but they told me they could send me outside of London.

(Somali woman, survivor)

”

1.WHO (2013). Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non-Partner Sexual Violence. World Health Organization.

2 ONS. 2018. 'Domestic Abuse in England and Wales: Year Ending March 2018'. ONS.

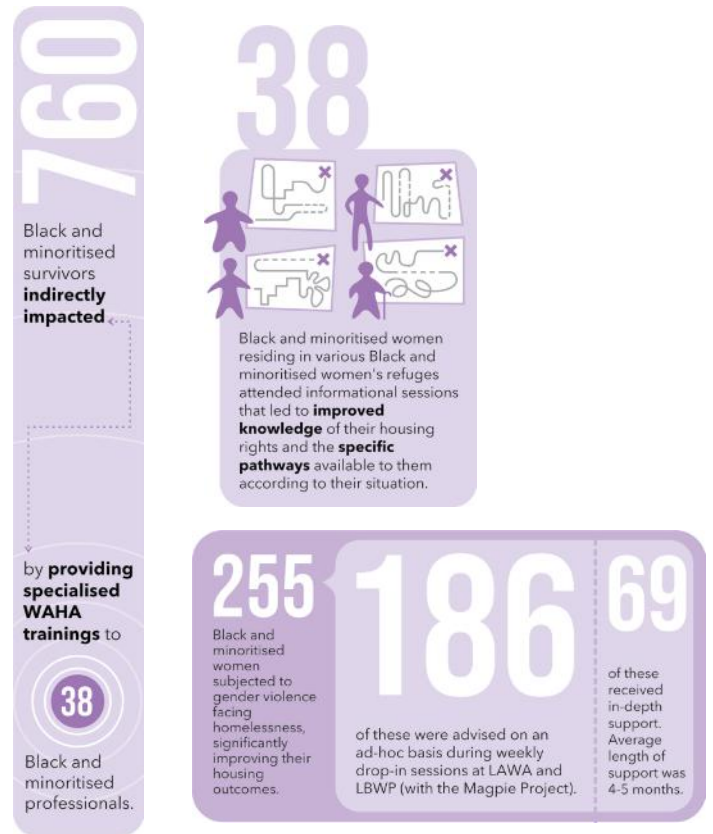
3 MHCLG (2019). Causes of Homelessness and Rough Sleeping - Rapid Evidence Assessment. London: MHCLG.

4 Crisis (2014). Nations Apart? Experiences of single homeless people across Great Britain. London: Crisis.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In the first year of the WAHA project we have directly supported a total of 255 Black and minoritised women subjected to gender violence facing homelessness, significantly improving their housing outcomes. Most of these women were advised on an ad-hoc basis during weekly drop-in sessions carried out at LAWA and LBWP (the latter in collaboration with the Magpie Project) (n=186). A total of 69 Black and minoritised women received in-depth support through high-level case work to address their complex housing needs. The average length of support given to each of these cases has been of 4-5 months in order to guarantee positive outcomes, due to the complexity of cases and local authorities taking protracted amounts of time to respond to requests and make decisions. We have also indirectly impacted 760 Black and minoritised survivors by upscaling the skills, knowledge of housing law and sharing best practices among 38 Black and minoritised professionals who attended WAHA trainings.

Through informational sessions we have also contributed to improve the knowledge of housing rights of 38 Black and minoritised women residing in various minoritised women's refuges, where they were explained their housing rights and the specific pathways available to them according to their situation.



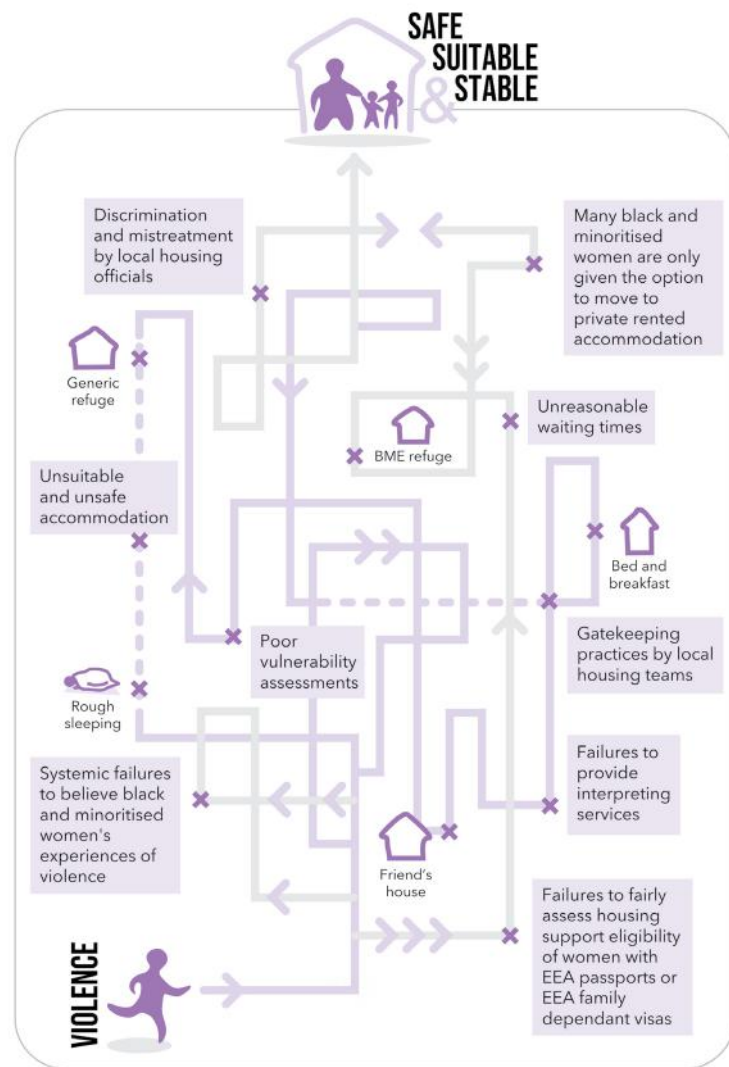
KEY FINDINGS

The findings build on the in-depth analysis of 69 housing cases of Black and minoritised survivors supported through the WAHA project for an average of 4-5 months. It also draws on interviews and focus groups carried out with Black and minoritised refuge residents (38) and refuge workers (6) from LAWA, LBWP and Asha. Our research reveals a range of housing issues experienced at the different stages of Black and minoritised survivors' journeys, from leaving their abusers, moving on from refuges, to issues arising even after they have been re-housed.



Black and minoritised survivors are faced with complex structural barriers to access safe and stable forms of accommodation. They are often at high risk of homelessness and re-victimisation at different stages of their journeys of fleeing violence; not only at the point of exiting a violent relationship but rather for an extended period thereafter. Their journeys reveal a cycle of abuse that goes beyond the violence perpetrated by their direct abusers; this abuse is furthered by systemic and institutional failures and discrimination in the ways in which public authorities (the police, and housing authorities in particular) deal with their cases of violence. The re-victimization experienced by minoritised survivors plays out not only in terms of poor welfare/housing provisions and structural sexism but is also compounded by intersecting structures of oppressions based on race, immigration status, language barrier, class and/or disability.

Our findings further indicate that Black and minoritised women tend to leave their abusers only after long periods of experiencing violence or after violence escalates, with this being mostly due to isolation and unfamiliarity with the UK system. Most Black and minoritised women reported having decided to leave their houses following severe incidents of abuse which resulted in them being in contact with public services, in particular, the police, GPs, or local councils. It is therefore crucial that public authorities are sufficiently equipped to fulfil their duties under homelessness legislation, provide information to Black and minoritised women and make appropriate referrals based on a diverse pathways approach. Specific findings are listed below:



- △ Failures to provide interpreting services and accessible information to Black and minoritised survivors on their housing rights and referrals to appropriate support services, in particular, by and for Black and minoritised specialist services and refuges.
- △ Police failures to comply with their 'duty to refer' homeless minoritised survivors to local housing teams.
- △ Police failures to make appropriate use of Domestic Violence Protection Notice (DVPN) and Domestic Violence Prevention Order (DVPO) to remove perpetrators from a house at least until safer accommodation is made available for Black and minoritised survivors.
- △ Local housing teams failing to properly inform Black and minoritised women about their housing options as victims of domestic violence, failing to properly consider experiences of violence, and rejecting homelessness applications based on local connection (which is not applicable to these cases): together amounting to a pattern of 'gatekeeping'.
- △ Systemic failures to believe Black and minoritised women's experiences of abuse, particularly if they are not related to physical violence, and demanding further proof of violence where there is no legal basis to do so.
- △ Failures to fairly assess housing support eligibility of women with EEA passports or EEA family dependant visas.
- △ Poor vulnerability assessments, carried out on a discretionary basis and failing to properly take account of the vulnerability caused by domestic violence and Black and minoritised women's intersecting needs and oppressions.
- △ Discrimination and mistreatment by local housing officials based on race, immigration status, and lack of, or low-levels of English literacy, particularly towards Black and minoritised women attending appointments by themselves.
- △ Moving Black and minoritised women and their children (before and/or following periods in a refuge) to unsuitable and unsafe forms of accommodation with people with diverse support needs, such as mixed gender B&B style accommodation, for longer than the statutory maximum of 6 weeks.
- △ Many Black and minoritised women are only being given the option by local authorities to move to private rented accommodation, therefore, being faced with issues regarding welfare benefits and/or racial discrimination in housing viewings, unaffordable rent and unsuitable housing options in unsafe areas and/or poor conditions (e.g. disrepair, damp, mould, lack of space and/or basic facilities).
- △ Black and minoritised women are facing unreasonable waiting times for responses from local housing authorities, often having to visit the local council on several occasions before they are assessed.

I spent the whole day in the council, and in the end I was told I was not eligible because I was not disable, I spent two nights sleeping on the floor of a shop with all my luggage, they [Council] didn't bother about where I would go. They said if I can cook, clean and look after myself then I am not vulnerable. They asked me to take my luggage but then didn't bother. They took no responsibility, I know I am not disable but they knew I have PTSD and I'm taking medicine but didn't bother, if I didn't have this space in this refuge where would I be?

(Bangladeshi woman, survivor)

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations presented by this report suggest concrete ways to move forward to ensure the UK complies with its national and international obligations towards all women subjected to violence, regardless of race and immigration status, in a fair and non-discriminatory manner. They are underpinned by national and international legal frameworks the UK has legally committed to:

- ◆ National Homelessness Legislations
- ◆ The Equality Act 2010
- ◆ The Istanbul Convention

They also build on analysis and recommendations contained in the Alternative Bill proposed by Imkaan in the context of recent debates regarding the Domestic Abuse Bill.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES



- 1 **A binding duty should be placed on Local Authorities** to ensure their internal guidance and practices comply with the MHCLG *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities 2018* in order to fulfill their legal duties under the homelessness legislation - *Housing Act 1996, Homelessness Act 2002, Homelessness Reduction Act 2017*. More specifically, they must ensure that:
 - Local Authorities must refrain from requiring survivors of domestic violence to provide further proof of violence in order to be believed and granted support.
 - Local Authorities must have equal regard to all forms of violence against women, regardless whether women have experienced physical violence.
 - Local Authorities must refrain from requiring survivors of violence to prove a local connection in order to make a homelessness application.
 - When assessing vulnerability of Black and minoritised women due to domestic violence, Housing Authorities must fully consider vulnerability arising from structural and intersectional inequalities in full compliance with their public sector duty under the Equality Act 2010 in relation to people with protected characteristics.
- 2 **Local Authorities should refrain from using B&B style accommodation** as a move on option for Black and minoritised survivors, in particular women with dependent children.
- 3 Local Authorities should refrain from housing Black and minoritised women in unsuitable areas, instead ensuring they are **placed in areas where they can integrate** in the local community.
- 4 **The Habitual Residence Test should be abolished** by Local Authorities' Universal Credit assessing women who have been subjected to violence.
- 5 Local housing teams should provide Black and minoritised survivors with the option to **be assisted by an officer who is a Black and minoritised woman** when this is available.
- 6 **Local Authorities should provide comprehensive training** for all its staff dealing with Black and minoritised survivors who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

NATIONAL LEVEL



- 1 Amend the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 to ensure the duty to refer embeds a **diverse pathways approach** inclusive of the by and for Black and minoritised sector.
- 2 The MHCLG *Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities 2018* should become binding and a **robust accountability** structure to ensure Local Authorities' practices should be set up guaranteeing representation of the by and for Black and minoritised expert sector.
- 3 **All survivors of violence should be automatically considered eligible** for safe housing/housing benefit regardless of their immigration status.
- 4 The central government should provide **ring-fenced funding** to by and for Black and minoritised women's refuges.
- 5 The government should **reassess caps on Local Housing Allowance** to ensure it realistically matches the cost of rented accommodation.

POLICE



- 1 The police should be provided with **comprehensive training** on how to adequately respond to cases of Black and minoritised women subjected to violence.
- 2 The police should make appropriate use of Domestic Violence Protection Notice (DVPN) and Domestic Violence Prevention Order (DVPO) to **remove perpetrators from a house** at least until safer accommodation is made available for Black and minoritised survivors.



In collaboration with
the OYA consortium

Supported by

