



CONFERENCE REPORT

Tuesday 2nd November 2021

Digitally Via Zoom

The Scottish Women's Convention

**REFUGEE &
MIGRANT WOMEN**



Suzanne Conlin

SWC Board Member

“Although Scotland has a long history of supporting refugee and migrant women, we felt now is a really important time to have a conversation, with everything happening in Afghanistan which will increase the number of refugee women that come into the country.

It’s a complex issue and, for me, listening to the women speaking tonight, I think we do tend to talk about this subject as one group of people. Actually, it’s not one group; it’s many groups of people, ethnicities, and immigration statuses depending on how people came to be in this country.

At this conference, we want to understand the experiences of refugee and migrant women in this country, what we can do to help, and how we tell politicians what needs to change. We need real voices of women that have experienced that to tell us how we can improve things for women coming into the country in future years.”

5 Key Points

- The Home Office processes retraumatise refugees and asylum seekers, and systematically disadvantage them.
- No recourse to public funds (NRPF), the fact that children are not entitled to the Scottish Child Payment, and that asylum support is only 50% of other statutory rates, means that many people are being pushed into destitution.
- More needs to be done to protect women asylum seekers and refugees experiencing domestic abuse, including spreading more information about the Destitution Domestic Violence (DDV) Concession.
- We need to challenge and reframe harmful narratives by listening to women’s stories.
- Women are keen for a network where they can share support, experiences, and best practice on this topic.

Esther Muchena

Esther is the Service Manager at the Scottish Refugee Council, with 16 years' experience working with asylum seekers and refugees. She is currently running a helpline alongside family and destitution services. Her background is in psychology and mental health, giving her a good understanding of trauma informed and culturally competent practices.



Esther began by giving an overview of the Scottish Refugee Council and its remit.

- It is a charity that works with asylum seekers and refugees all over Scotland.
- The Scottish Refugee Council provides advice, advocacy and support to help people rebuild their lives in a sustainable and meaningful way. They work with communities and community groups, speaking out against an unjust asylum system and campaigning for policy changes that make a positive difference to people's lives.

A key topic was the issue of no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

- Asylum seekers, people with insecure immigration status, people who overstay their visa, or people with a spouse visa and their dependents can all be subject to NRPF.
- "In a nutshell, it's a barrier to people accessing statutory benefits, including homelessness accommodation... so destitution is a real problem."
- There can be exemptions for individuals who have experienced domestic abuse, victims of human trafficking, or families who have been referred to social work, but there are still many women who slip through the net.
- Asylum support is less than 50% of the statutory rates, and children are not entitled to the Scottish Child Payment which is unjust.

Highlighting the trauma many refugees experience before arriving, she described how the Home Office processes create uncertainty and exacerbate mental health problems.

- "When they arrive in the UK, they don't understand the asylum process itself, how to navigate it, the complexities. They're not aware of the services there to help them, so they are disadvantaged from the start."
- Being forced to tell their whole story as soon as they arrive can be retraumatizing and is often used against them if they tell the story slightly differently later.
- They are given no choices about their accommodation, meaning many women are isolated and unable to connect with communities or vital support networks.
- Many women face stigma for their parenting methods and fear having their children taken away from them.

She ended by encouraging women to work together to influence policies at a UK, Scottish and local government level.

- "It's good as women to form these partnerships and share and learn about other organisations that are doing good, so our influence can have a wider scope."



Shulamite Ezechi

Shulamite is the founder and CEO of ANYiSO, a charity that supports African, ethnic minority women and children to live free from abuse. She served on the Refugee Women's Strategy Group and is on the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (BAME). She is also a board member for North Glasgow Community Food Initiative Glasgow and an ambassador for Migrant Voice, UK.

Her contribution focused on the barriers her community experienced over the pandemic.

- Many rely on ANYiSO for translation and interpreting so they can access other services but, without being able to access services in person, this was not possible.
- “They couldn't even come to the premises or offices to access our support, so that became a huge challenge as they can't even express themselves on the phone. The English language barrier makes it so difficult for them to express themselves or reach out to organisations that could help them, so no one is there.”
- Many of the women did not have the digital equipment or skills to be able to access services or groups that moved online or onto Zoom.
- “The level of isolation became so high because they couldn't even go to organisations in the community where they can meet and spend time with friends.”

As within the wider community, these problems have had a profound effect on people's mental health, but Shulamite explained the additional barriers faced by those within migrant communities.

- “Most of them don't even know when it's a challenge. To us, what we know of mental health is when someone is mad on the street, so issues when someone is depressed or stressed, it's not counted as mental health issues.”

She detailed how she has been supporting those struggling financially over the pandemic.

- “The level of poverty went so high. People struggled with money, and those that were able to get a voucher couldn't even use them for the things they needed.”
- “At some points, we couldn't even reach out to people because we had an inflow of people coming from all different areas to access our foodbank.”
- She started delivering food directly to people's homes because she found that many were unable to attend the foodbank in person due to childcare issues, especially when the schools were closed during the lockdown.

Finally, she emphasised the need for better and more appropriate support.

- “I think something has to be done for people to live normally again, be able to be supported, be able to access our services to help them.”
- “When we talk about refugees and asylum seekers, we forget they have families... nobody is considering childcare support, so they are able to work or get to appointments, so that's another huge challenge for a lot of women.”

Girijamba Polubothu

Girijamba has worked with Shakti Women's Aid for 24 years and is the current CEO. Her background is in community education and has previously done bilingual work with Fife Racial Equality Council, Fife Advocacy Project, and Citizens Advice Bureau. She now sits on the SWC board and is a member of the Safe Lives Advisory Group, and the Scottish Women's Rights Centre Advisory Group.



She began by explaining the work that Shakti Women's Aid do.

- They are one of two Women's Aid branches in Scotland dedicated to supporting black and minority ethnic women and children experiencing domestic abuse.
- Unlike many other organisations, they work with survivors of familial abuse and honour-based violence.
- Among their staff team, they speak 20 languages and supported women of 83 different ethnicities last year alone.

She went on to explain about the lived realities for women with NRPF.

- Between April 2020 and March 2021, Shakti Women's Aid helped 153 women with NRPF, but Scotland as a whole does not actually keep statistics on how many women have NRPF and there are many services that refuse to help these women.
- "When women have no access to public funds, they have no accommodation, no substance money, no living money, and none of us want to put our children through poverty and homeless... so sometimes the weight of honour placed on women prevents them from leaving an abusive relationship."

Migrant and refugee women often face multiple additional barriers when seeking help for domestic abuse.

- "They are being told by the perpetrators that if they report it, they will be deported back to their country, and that creates the fear in them."
- Further to this, they are often worried about being separated from their children, especially if they have an insecure immigration status.
- The language barrier and subsequent discrimination by services are huge issues and she explained "we hear from our service users about their experiences, and if they're treated badly, it puts a halt to their accessing services as they're no longer confident to seek any help."

She highlighted the discrepancies in services across Scotland but emphasised that we can all play a part in helping women wherever we are.

- "My only suggestion to all of you is, if you do come across a woman that has no recourse to public funds, please help. It's hard work to find that help, but if you as an agency put your heart in, you will find a way to get that woman housed and all that."

Speaking about the fact that there are still women they are unable to help, she discussed real examples of the toll that it takes on those volunteering and working with these women.

- “There are occasions where we’ve had women who leave the abusive relationship, they have no housing, no benefit and although the worker is trying, it’s not enough. When they are in a crisis mode, women go back to the abuser and, in most cases, once they go back the abuse escalates. She may only have one chance to leave, and I feel as an agency we’ve let her down.”
- “There is a negative impact on the women service user, but it also has a very negative impact on the support worker as well. You listened to her story. You watched her cry. You’ve told her you will help. You forget about the system, that’s not how you think as a frontline worker. You think you’ve let her down, and it does have a negative impact on mental health, and that is what we as frontline workers face day to day.”

Girijamba concluded by discussing the national campaign against NRPF.

- Shakti has been campaigning on this issue for over 20 years and finally, in 2012, changes were made to allow victims of domestic abuse who arrive in the UK on a spouse visa to apply for funds.
- However, this does not go far enough.
 - Without an experienced immigration lawyer, a woman is still unlikely to be successful in a claim.
 - This concession needs to be extended to women on any type of visa experiencing domestic abuse, not just spouse visas.
 - The ‘Supporting Migrants with Domestic Violence Fund’ only gives women short-term grants, often leaving them destitute after the twelve weeks.
- “Our campaign for NRPF continues, and we hope we will see the day where everyone has equal rights and is safe in Scotland... It’s not just about saying every migrant is welcome, welcome is easy, but about what will happen after that.”



Discussion

Role of the Government

The speakers were asked “How do we make the current support services clearer, and what do we want the government to change? What message do you want to get to government?”

- **Girijamba:** “The Destitution Domestic Violence (DDV) Concession is not being exercised properly, and more awareness is needed to hold agencies accountable for not using the legislation. We were told every housing department was sent this legislation, but we didn’t find that they knew. The Scottish Women’s Convention can take a leading role in contacting the Government and maybe something that we can do is consult with the women.”
- **Esther:** “I want the Government to learn from the positives that have happened during this time of covid as we’ve managed to refer everyone who is destitute to homeless accommodation. That provision is still there, but we suspect it might be removed after winter. Secondly with regards to government strategy in reference to NRPF, we wish the government can reduce and end destitution.”
- **Shulamite:** “One area I wish and hope they look into is the Government allowing asylum seekers to work. This will alleviate their problems a little if they can work, earn money, give a sense of belonging and productivity, and help solve their own problems without waiting for the Government to do it.”

Adding to this, a woman from the Poverty Alliance spoke about the challenges of access to legal representation and the need for a greater commitment from the Scottish Government to raising people out of destitution.

- She suggested more formalised partnerships between organisations supporting refugees and legal services.
- “It is within the Scottish Government’s power to act on because they already have the power to create new benefits; that’s why the Scottish Child Payment is there. It’s not good enough, quite frankly, for them to say children of asylum seekers are not able to have that support.”
- “Asylum Seeker Support is £39 which is far below the poverty line. I know as I’ve been there before. I understand the argument, that we’re not part of the system so we don’t have access to the system, but we have to have the duty of care for people... At today’s cost of living, the cost of food and transport, honestly. how do you expect a family to put clothes on the back of their children?”

Empowering women to speak up

One woman contributed as a service-user at Shakti.

- “It’s nice to hear the professionals speaking, but we don’t want anybody speaking for us, we want to sit at the table. We need a seat at the table because no one can express it like us.”
- “I had a very good case worker. She worked tooth and nail and, despite the fact I was older, she was like my mother. She’d say, ‘come on, let’s go here, let’s go there, we are not going to stop,’ and this is what we need.”
- “When we went to these meetings, she’d say ‘you speak for yourself.’ People who have been through domestic abuse, we need that. I don’t need someone talking for me, I want to talk for myself. You can use all the pretty, fancy words, but the survivor can only speak their own language.”

The speakers responded to the topic of empowering service-users to raise their own voices.

- Girijamba added that Shakti always encourage funders to come and meet their service-users so they can tell their own stories themselves – “I so strongly believe it’s the voices of the service users, they are the best informed and they know what they want... We at Shakti have service users as staff. We have been there and that’s why we fight.”
- Shulamite agreed that “people that have been through those challenges are the best ones to share their voices... I think the Scottish Women’s Convention can do something about it. It would be a good idea for us to discuss issues that affect us and review those policies as we wear the shoes.”
- Esther raised that “when inviting women into these spaces, consideration needs to go into language, travel costs and childcare... these are the main things that affect engagement, and we don’t want the same conversation with the same ten women.”

Domestic abuse, the DDV, and legal aid

A woman from Hemat Gryffe Women’s Aid gave her insights from working with BME and migrant women experiencing domestic and familial abuse.

- She explained how a woman’s immigration status determines the support they are entitled to, and “that makes the support workers job with the charity more difficult, because the first question we have to ask women is their immigration status, which seems a bit unfair.”
- She expanded on the DDV, that it is a valuable mechanism that cancels a woman’s spouse visa for three months, during which time they get access to housing and welfare benefits while they apply for their own right to remain.
- “I definitely agree with that and believe refugee and migrant women are being left behind and something has to be done at strategic level.”
- She also shared that, during her PhD, she worked with Police Scotland to produce a leaflet with information about escaping domestic abuse while on a spouse visa which are now being distributed at UK airports.

One woman who has been involved with the Maryhill Integration Network for more than 20 years shared her experiences from hosting refugees in her home.

- “The whole situation is getting so much worse. The backlog, I gather, is about 25,000, and the Home Office is not coping with appeals... For a person to be destitute for 6 years, as this lady that stayed with me was, is disgraceful.”
- “I did have a lady stay with me, and she became a great friend. Her husband was violent, and she managed to separate from him while she was here. She had two small boys and he was sent back to Greece. I thought that because she had experienced dreadful domestic violence that she would be surely allowed to stay, but she was not. She was deported to Greece under the Dublin Convention and the husband found her again and beat her to death.”

The speakers shared their reflections on these contributions.

- Esther informed the conference that the Refugee Council are starting a new project in January, focusing on getting new asylum seekers access to legal representation and addressing the shortage of immigration lawyers with expertise in women’s issues.
- She went on to say, “Unfortunately the system is becoming more and more restricted. Sometimes people are refused asylum because they don’t get the help they need from the lawyer to represent themselves well. Sometimes it happens because of complex trauma and mental health, so people can’t present correctly the first time... and the fact that people are denied simple things like food, shelter and dignity while they try to re-apply for live to remain in the UK is unjust.”
- Girijamba added, “Not many solicitors take on legal aid cases, that’s the biggest problem.” She explained Shakti have developed a strong relationship with an immigration solicitor in Edinburgh and they used to work with another solicitor who has now retired: “She helped us with so many cases where the women were abandoned in other countries. She did it with her passion and commitment; she didn’t benefit from it in anyway as these kinds of cases take a lot of work and you don’t know what the outcome is going to be.”
- Girijamba confirmed that the woman should never have been sent back to Greece. “When it’s domestic abuse, the woman’s visa is taken away from the husband, but the woman needs to know her rights and she needs very good back up from an organisation that understands what is there and that’s very important... It can all depend on your care worker and organisation you are approaching.”

Empathy, collaboration and tackling harmful narratives

One woman spoke about the need to change the narratives we use around migrants and refugees, and to create better networks for women to communicate.

- “We have to move away from this thing where we use these words to describe women, people of colour, ethnic minorities... we are here to work together, for so many different reasons.”

- “We have to do better. We can communicate as a group. Let’s try and share where we can find programs that can help women and children with education, health, disabilities, food, housing, or clothing. We’ve all got these links, on our desks, in our notebooks, in our emails, in our colleagues, and in our brothers and sisters. If we can work together better, I’m sure we can help each other.”

Esther concurred, saying “I agree, sometimes for me it’s even difficult to say the word ‘asylum seeker’ as, at the end of the day, we are people with the same needs and aims in life. We just want to be heard, to belong, and for our children to be happy, but sometimes in our sector these names are used to demonise people and highlight people’s immigration status. ‘Illegal immigrant’, for example, it should never be used because nobody who arrives in the UK is illegal and people are here for a reason.”

One woman who has been working with Women’s Aid spoke about the need for more diverse representation.

- “Since 2000, the BME community has increased significantly and has diversified, but unfortunately when we are accessing or dealing with gender-based violence, we are often looking at it from a South Asian perspective. We know that domestic abuse, forced marriage and childhood marriage from the black African community can mean a totally different thing, so not many women from the black community come forward, probably because they don’t identify with what has been described.”

Girijamba agreed that there is sometimes the impression that Shakti is only for South Asian women but emphasised that her team is very diverse and “we do try as much as possible with a significant number of African women; we don’t want to generalise.”

Esther also added “we need to diversify and look at not just what the organisation provides, but what people believe that organisation provides as that can often be seen as a barrier, so we need more information going round the communities.”

Finally, one woman who works with women from the African community reiterated the need to hear and engage with women’s stories to meaningfully represent and support them.

- “There are good organisations out there that do a fantastic job, but sometimes they get it wrong because of the assumption that refugees are all the same. To believe what the women are saying is crucial. By not believing what the women are saying you are judging them before you even know where they are coming from in their journey.”
- “Sometimes they come one day, and they tell you a bit of their story, then they tell a bit more another day. People end up saying they are lying, but they are not liars. We need to listen more to them. We need to ask the right questions. We need to work with the frontline leaders that are supporting these women, as they have built trust with them over the years. There is no way you can support anybody without understanding where they are coming from.”

Thank You!

The Scottish Women's Convention would like to thank all of those who attended our conference, as well as those who contributed via email. We would also like to thank our speakers for providing their wealth of knowledge and experience, as well as brilliantly contributing to our broader discussion. The SWC will use all the voices gathered to feed back to policy makers regarding this timely and vitally important subject.

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Please note our staff are in the office Tuesday to Thursday
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