

# Shakti Women's Aid Roundtable Report

**Housing**



**NRPF**

**Shelter**



**Disability**

**Work**



**Social  
Security**

**Public  
Services**



**Children**

**Asylum**



**Schools**

**Welfare  
Reform**



**Wednesday 1st May 2019**

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## Introduction

Shakti Women's Aid helps BME women, children, and young people experiencing, or who have experienced, domestic abuse from a partner, ex-partner, and/ or other members of the household. They also work closely with the Scottish Government, Police Scotland, NHS Scotland, and other statutory and voluntary services. Shakti provide training and consultancy for agencies working with BME women, children, and young people. Shakti Women's Aid are based in Edinburgh and have outreach staff in Dundee, Stirling and Fife. They can also offer limited support to BME women, and their advisers, all over Scotland by phone and email.

They help women to stay as safe as possible, whether they decide to stay with or leave whoever is abusing them. Shakti give advice and information about options and choices, and issues which may affect BME women. These include forced marriage, female genital mutilation, immigration rights, and 'honour-based abuse' from family, household and community. They help women and their children find a safe place to stay (temporary refuge) while they decide what to do.

Shakti work closely with other services to make sure that women and children are as safe as possible, as well as assisting staff in other services who are working with BME women. They train staff in other organisations, including the police, health and social workers, and give opportunities to students and others through work experience placements. Shakti work with others to improve laws, protection and services for BME women, children and young people who experience domestic abuse.

As part of the Scottish Women's Convention's ongoing work on homelessness and housing, roundtable discussions were held with the organisation and women they work with on the 1st May 2019.



## Women's Experiences

### Refuge

Women living in refuge made clear that they felt safe and secure where they were living. It is, however, important to note that living in this type of accommodation is completely different to the homes they have left, therefore it is only natural for it to be difficult to adjust.

*"It takes a bit of time to get used to. We have to let the staff know if we're going to be out after 10pm and it can be easy to forget the time, if you're at the library studying or out with friends."*

The lack of Wi-Fi provision is also an issue. Women have to rely on mobile data to access the internet, or video call their families in other countries, which can be very expensive. Those who are studying while living in refuge are also at a disadvantage, as the lack of Wi-Fi means they are unable to carry out much of their course work where they live. Instead, they have to go out to the library or a café with internet access, which is not always their preferred option.

### **Temporary Accommodation**

Experiences of temporary accommodation were extremely mixed. Some women have their own bathrooms, white goods, furniture etc. Some, on the other hand, are housed in a Bed and Breakfast (B&B), with only shared access to a toilet and kitchen and no more than a bed in their room. Shared accommodation can be single sex or mixed sex, which is far from ideal for women who have left abusive relationships.

*“I’m the only woman in the hostel. I have to share a kitchen with men, and am not allowed to go in when they are there. I also have to share a bathroom and they don’t clean up after themselves. I feel extremely lonely and isolated - I’m struggling to sleep as a result. My doctor has given me sleeping tablets, as well as anti-depressants, and even then I can only sleep for an hour or so at a time. If I had my own space, or at least shared space with other women, things would be a lot easier.”*

The lack of amenities make things very difficult for women and their children. Those in B&B accommodation are often given a small room with no way of heating food apart from a kettle, and no way of keeping food cool or fresh as they are not given a fridge. Despite the name, breakfast is no provided.

*“I first went into temporary accommodation with my young son in winter. We had no way of getting hot food which was far from ideal. I didn’t like sending him to school in the freezing cold without something hot to eat but I had no choice.”*

It would be extremely beneficial for women living in temporary accommodation to have guaranteed access to a kitchen, or even a microwave or toaster, in order to be able to prepare hot food.

*“Food is a big part of our culture. It’s a big thing if we are unable to prepare meals and share food with others. It’s another way to make women feel isolated.”*

As well as an inability to make or heat up food in this type of accommodation, it is also difficult for women to wash their clothes, as there are no washing machines. Accessing a laundrette can be expensive, if there is one nearby, and time consuming.

*“It’s easier just to hand wash everything in the bath, then try to dry it in a small room. It’s not very hygienic.”*

In temporary accommodation, gas and electricity is often provided via a pre-paid meter. Women are often given little to no information about how to use these. Frequently they do not have money to be able to top up, especially if they are waiting for benefits to be paid. There are emergency grants available, however the process for obtaining any money this way is described as *“humiliating.”* Women are subject to lengthy questioning for small sums of money, which is very tiring, especially when there is a language barrier.

*“I have never had to ask for money before - my husband paid all of the bills when we were married. Leaving an abusive relationship is difficult and emotional, so by the time you get into some form of a house you’re exhausted. It seems like a lot of effort to have to go through lots of questions to get a few pounds, but then the money is needed to be able to heat the property.”*

There is seen to be a real lack of empathy on the part of individuals in the housing department to women who have left abusive relationships. There is almost an expectation that they will just know what to do in this situation and have little to no regard to the trauma that they have experienced. Their housing needs and requirements are different to others, and it is imperative that this is recognised.

There are ways in which women who are living in temporary accommodation's lives could be made easier during their time there. A TV, for example, can provide some company and entertainment, however if a woman can get a TV, the cost of a licence is out with the reach of many. It was suggested that a waiver of the licence fee be introduced for women who have left abusive relationships and who are in temporary accommodation, so that they are able to watch television. This is a way to combat isolation and loneliness, to an extent, for many.

*"You need friends and family round you at a time like this - for support, for comfort and for company. I just didn't have anyone and the lack of entertainment where I was living made things even worse. It's difficult to make friends when you're living in a hostel or a B&B. The level of loneliness cannot be underestimated."*

Some of the accommodation that women are housed in is far away from services, shops and support networks. Women commented on having to walk for twenty minutes to get to a supermarket and there being little to no public transport available. They are then limited in what they are able to buy, because they have to carry their shopping back again. There are shuttle buses available in some housing situations, which will take individuals into the city for 9am and bring them back after 5pm. This is useful for those who work during those hours, but not so for others.

*"If you do get the shuttle into town for an appointment or something then you have to go in first thing and won't get back until later on. You're left hanging about the centre until you can get back, which can impound feelings of anxiety and compromise women's safety."*

Women and their families can be housed in temporary accommodation for anything up to two years, with most waiting 18-24 months to obtain permanent housing.

In order to secure a permanent home, those living in Edinburgh are required to 'bid' for houses on a weekly basis. It is expected that this will be done online, which can be difficult when there is no Wi-Fi where they are living, or if English is not their first language. Individuals can bid for up to three properties, however each must be in a different part of the city. Women are encouraged to "*do their research*" prior to bidding for properties, to ensure that they are seeking housing in the areas most suited to them.

Some areas are in higher demand, such as Leith, as they are considered to be more multi-cultural and so the women whom Shakti assist are more likely to want to live there. This means that they will have to wait longer to obtain accommodation. It may also be the case that family and friends are in particular parts of the city, so it is important they are close to them. This is especially the case if women rely on these support networks to assist with childcare.

The length of time that individuals can be housed in temporary accommodation means that children are enrolled in a school in that area. The trauma that they have witnessed always has an impact, therefore it is essential that their young lives are not uprooted in any way.

This means that if women are offered permanent accommodation in another part of the city, they often prefer to keep their children in the school they have settled in, so as not to disturb their routine. They are offered no assistance in order to accommodate this.

*“The Local Authority don’t take this into consideration - they say that it’s my choice to keep my kids where they are, so I have to pay for their transport. My daughter has to take two buses to get to school and I get no help to pay for that. They don’t seem to understand that moving her would have a hugely detrimental impact on her life.”*

While there is housing which is perhaps more readily available in other parts of the city, women made clear that they did not want to live there due to incidents of racism they had experienced.

*“Racism, Islamophobia - we see it all the time. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a minority of people, but it’s still horrible to be spat at, hit with eggs or tripped up, all because of the colour of my skin or my headscarf. I don’t want to feel unsafe where I live, so I avoid bidding in those parts of town.”*

Women noted that offensive, racist words and phrases are used in common parlance in Scotland, without thought to how they will be offensive. They spoke of a feeling, amongst some, that they should not be entitled to any support with housing because they are not ethnically Scottish, with little to no regard of those women’s circumstances and experiences.

Safety is a priority for women who have left abusive relationships. Many have moved from other parts of the UK in the hope of a fresh start and, as such, do not know the area well. It is important that these women are housed more centrally, where it is busy and they are close to services, shops and schools etc.

*“I was offered a house in a small town outside of Edinburgh. It was lovely, but I didn’t feel comfortable living there because I didn’t know the area or where anything was. I felt safer in the city.”*

### **Permanent Accommodation**

When women do eventually enter into permanent accommodation, they often face further barriers before they are able to properly settle into their new home.

Many rely on support via the Community Care Grant for furniture, carpets and white goods. There is a long waiting period, however, from securing the funds and ordering the items to their delivery. Shakti encourage women to take up a tenancy as soon as it is offered to them due to issues round Housing Benefit, namely being unable to claim for two separate properties (their temporary/refuge accommodation and their permanent accommodation). The delay means that women can wait up to 6 weeks for their homes to have beds, a sofa, washing machine, fridge and cooker.

Women commented on the lack of communication and joined-up thinking by the Housing Association or Local Authority once tenancy has been secured.

*“All of my furniture came, then a week later the guys came to lay the carpets. Why couldn’t it have been the other way round? It would have saved a lot of hassle. I’m trying to build a settled home for me and my kids - after everything we’ve been through it would be nice not to have more worry and stress once we’ve got a house.”*

## **Other Issues**

Shakti have noted that some of the permanent accommodation offered to women by the Council has asbestos, despite being signed off as clear from this dangerous material.

*“There’s such a housing crisis in this city, it’s as if the Council are just trying to push people into any property to get the numbers down. Proper health and safety checks are not being carried out.”*

Similarly, some of the properties being rented had exposed pipework, which carries a risk of burning, especially for children.

Women have commented on the lack of information around Housing Benefit and the move from temporary to permanent accommodation. They are not being advised of the need to complete a new application, which, in turn, is leading to threatening arrears letters through no fault of their own. Those who have previously been under financial control are also unaware that they have to pay Council Tax, as it is not something they have had to deal with in the past. The situation is made even more difficult for those women who do not have English as their first language.

*“How are you supposed to know you need a new claim, or have to pay Council Tax (which means another application for support with that) if you’ve never been in the situation before? It’s as if the people we’re dealing with don’t care that we’ve left horrendous, traumatic situations - so many are just unwilling to help.”*

Some women are in work while they are going through the process of leaving their home and onto temporary then permanent accommodation. They often have to take time off from their jobs to attend appointments, or to wait for furniture, repairs etc. Employers are not always willing or able to accommodate this, which can mean a loss of earnings.

It is also important to note that many of the women Shakti support have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) due to their status. They have to go through channels such as social work, or the asylum team at Edinburgh City Council, in order to attempt to get any support.

*“It’s a battle to get anything, especially for single women. There’s a bit more support for those with children but it’s still not great.”*



The SWC would like to thank the women who participated in this roundtable. This discussion took place to inform the organisation’s current programme of work on Housing and Homelessness, which culminates with a conference in Glasgow on Saturday 8th June. This will look at key issues which have been raised over the last six months.

For more information about the conference, or to read any of the reports from roundtables with other organisations, visit our website:

<https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/content/conferences/>