

Shakti Women's Aid Written Briefing Social Justice and Social Security Committee – 3 March 2022

The fight for women's equality and social justice has been a long one, and still continues today. Last year Shakti Women's Aid celebrated its 35th anniversary, an incredible milestone in our aim to end gender-based violence towards 'Black Minority Ethnic' (BME) women and children fleeing from domestic abuse, forced marriage and honour-based violence.

The word 'Shakti' is derived from Sanskrit and can be translated as 'strength', particularly feminine strength and empowerment. It was a title decided by our founding members, being particularly symbolic of the organisations aims and objectives.

Shakti's definition of domestic abuse is wider than most, a more holistic one where it not only recognises perpetrators can be a partner or ex-partner, but also other family members, in-laws and in some cases community members.

Shakti Women's Aid came into being in September 1985, when a small group of black women applied, with the help and support of Edinburgh & Lothians Women's Aid, to the (then) Edinburgh District Council, for funding to set up a refuge for BME women and their children fleeing from domestic abuse. In April 1986 the Edinburgh District Council Housing Department approved funding for office premises and two part-time workers, and by September 1986, the workers were in post.

Black Minority Ethnic women often experience additional barriers and require more complex, specialist support. It was recognised early on that a specialist refuge accommodation was needed to allow BME women to overcome additional barriers such as communication, religious and dietary practices and racial discrimination. This last point is unfortunately still a reality for many BME women living in Scotland, from individual racism and people on the street, to structural racism such as immigration laws and other discriminatory practices which exist within mainstream service provision. In June 1987, the first refuge for BME women in Edinburgh was opened.

Since then the demand for Shakti's service has increased considerably and has seen Shakti grow from a few workers to over 25 staff. This increase can hopefully be attributed in part to more women becoming aware of our services and of the intolerance of domestic abuse in society, as well as their right not to endure forced marriage and other so-called honour-related crimes. The number of women we have supported over the years and the variety of their backgrounds has steadily increased; we now support migrant women from all continents, of diverse social and economic backgrounds.

Shakti's diverse team and Board of Directors work together with survivors and professionals, changing lives and attitudes. Our multilingual team works directly in Edinburgh, the Lothians, Fife, Tayside and Forth Valley.

In May 2016 we celebrated being awarded a silver LGBT Charter Mark from LGBT Youth Scotland, illustrating our inclusiveness of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,

Transgender community. This involved creating our very own LGBT specific promotional material, running a social media campaign looking at influential BME LGBT activists and liaising closely with local LGBT groups to ensure that our service is as inclusive and aware as we strive to be. Our MAITRI LGBT project still continues to date and we hope to achieve the prestigious gold award very shortly.

One of our biggest and most distressing challenges in recent years has been the marked increase in contact from women who, due to discriminative immigration rules, have 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF), meaning they have no access to social housing or benefits and are often not allowed to work. Increasingly these women and children don't have the right to access many public or voluntary agencies when in crisis. We are continually restricted in how we can support these clients as our funding does not allow us to help women with NRPF, meaning they have nowhere to turn to for basic and essential support – depriving them of food, shelter, and a safe space where they can be heard. Their options are to return to their abusive partner or live on the streets, forcing them and their children into a very dangerous and unpredictable life. Over the years we have seen considerable improvement in Edinburgh locally and there have been some steps taken by the Home Office with the introduction of the Domestic Destitution Violence Concession for some victims and survivors of domestic abuse holding spouse visas. Furthermore, in May last year, the Home Office has started to run the pilot Support for Migrant Victims project where Shakti Women's Aid has been appointed as the sole organisation in Scotland to manage applications for this support.

In Scotland domestic abuse victims and survivors from the BME communities continue to face many structural barriers. On average BME women have to approach 17 agencies before they get the specific service suited to their needs. Unconscious bias and institutional discrimination still exist. Many BME women fear not being believed by statutory organisations when they approach them for support. Women are particularly worried when they have to appear in court as witnesses or the accused as they feel the COPFS and solicitors minimise their concerns and there is not a real sense of care or protection for them.

Language barriers remain a large obstacle and there is a lack of independent and professional interpreters. Support services have a poor understanding of BME issues. BME targeted assessments (health, counselling, social and legal) either do not exist, or are at a very poor standard. Support services' understanding of BME issues is very poor. Risk assessments and safety planning for BME women is often inaccurate and incomplete. Existing risk assessments do not assess the role of honour, family and community.

Concerns of institutional racism, feelings of embarrassment, fear of officials, distress over experiences of safeguarding are commonly expressed. A non-judgemental culture of belief and trust needs to be adopted to encourage a two-way dialogue in all cases where safe spaces can be provided for a victim. All service providers need to be aware of their own prejudices and bias. Unconscious bias may lead to racial profiling leaving others feeling discriminated against and harming their mental wellbeing.

We want to eradicate gender-based violence and believe this must include all women, regardless of their ethnicity and immigration status. We believe that preventing these women from accessing services is a breach of their basic human right to be safe and live a life free from violence and fear.