

# DOMESTIC SERVITUDE

## A Veiled Modern Slavery Trend

Stories of migrant women survivors of Gender-Based Abuse  
unveiling consequences of Domestic Servitude, following  
awareness raising across Greater Manchester

July 2021



## Acknowledgements

We would like to start by thanking the amazing and courageous women who took the time to participate to the awareness raising sessions on Domestic Servitude (DS) and to the group consultation meetings that took place between February 2021 and April 2021 in Greater Manchester, braving the pressure of the second COVID-19 lockdown. This was very much appreciated, considering the sensitivity of the topic and the vulnerability of participants who have already been through other forms of Domestic Abuse. We are grateful for your contribution during discussions, as sharing and discussing your personal experiences helped enlightening the significance of exploring the subject of Domestic Servitude further.

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## Author

Dr Peggy Mulongo

Head of Health and Wellbeing Programme (NESTAC)  
Lecturer in mental health / Equality, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) Lead  
(University of Central Lancashire)



[peggy@nestac.org.uk](mailto:peggy@nestac.org.uk) | [PMulongo@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:PMulongo@uclan.ac.uk)

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Programme Challenger is Greater Manchester's partnership response to serious and organised crime and modern slavery



We can only tackle modern slavery and protect victims from further harm if we understand what it looks like and how it happens. Our community partners play a key role in this, and we are grateful to NESTAC and the women they work with for sharing their experiences to help us do this.

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## Introduction

Migrant women who enter the UK may have travelled from some countries where rules and traditions of their respective societies may become major factors of embarrassment, leading to secretive practices in the host country. This is particularly true when these customs emphasise gender imbalance, where it is acceptable for women to be disempowered by their male counterparts in certain communities, the latter believing they are intellectually, physically, and mentally superior.

This report specifically looked at migrant women survivors of Gender-Based Abuse (GBA), who disclosed experiences of Domestic Servitude (DS) when raising awareness of this subject, a remarkably hidden form of Modern Slavery. It is important to highlight differences between DS and Trafficking, as both could easily overlap, although being two distinct crimes of exploitation. DS survivors might have not been trafficked and may have entered the UK as workers, brides or visitors. Indeed, some are married to their perpetrators and have valid visas, while others are hidden, physically but often emotionally tortured, and do not speak-up because they are frightened of their immigration status. Women are also brought over as visitors to their relatives' homes and treated as unpaid domestic helpers. DS is often overlooked, as it occurs in a subversive and secret way, behind closed doors.

When raising awareness on Domestic Servitude, many women in this report declared they have been kept captive in their own homes, often acting as domestics while experiencing Domestic Abuse, but did not realise that being treated as a domestic was also considered as a crime. They admitted often remaining silent due to scare tactics used by their partners or relatives. They also disclosed feelings of isolation, unable to develop friendships and mistrusting others, admitting feeling ashamed, depressed, anxious and having suicidal ideations. Additionally, all women recognised that their cultural and traditional beliefs further prevented them to show their expressions and their emotions.

Information provided in this report recounts solely women's accounts related to Domestic Servitude, which have been brought together to help the reader understand the impact of this serious but hidden crime on its victims. This may overlap with experiences of Domestic Abuse and easily be ignored if there is a lack of awareness, as demonstrated by this report.



## Context

Numerous discussions and awareness raising sessions on Domestic Servitude involving migrant women survivors of Domestic Abuse led to the narrative of this report. These meetings took place during the national lockdown between early February 2021 and end of March 2021, using NESTAC digital platforms to engage directly with these vulnerable women across Greater Manchester.

Four online sessions were delivered to 28 women, and the workshops aimed to raise their awareness on Domestic Servitude in general, and on one of the most hidden types of Domestic Servitude that relates specifically to Partner/Relative exploitation. These workshops further helped to explore women's understanding of this crime and discuss how best Domestic Servitude could be prevented in their current living environment. A fifth session was added during the consultation process, where guest speakers from the Modern Slavery Co-ordination Unit were invited to provide further information and answer to participants' questions.

Participants to this consultation originated from the South-Asian and African countries, namely Pakistan (9), Bangladesh (3), Eritrea (2), Nigeria (6), Gambia (2), India (2), Kenya (2), and Democratic Republic of Congo – DRC (2). All women were subject to domestic or sexual abuse, and majority had immigration restrictions, as they entered the UK either with a spouse visa (totally dependent on their partners), or illegally via different routes including women asylum seekers, potentially becoming easy targets for exploitation, particularly by men and/or relatives residing in the UK.

The key themes and stories that derived from women's conversations during Domestic Servitude awareness sessions revealed the secretive and dangerous nature of this silent, hidden type of crime, its crossover with the classic, known types of Modern Slavery, or how it further intertwines with Domestic Abuse, Human Trafficking, and other forms of Gender-Based Abuse. Such findings emphasise a pressing need to raise awareness of Domestic Servitude perpetrated by partners and relatives and address this. They further help to detangle the different abovementioned terms, considering existing borderlines between them and provide clear descriptions of each term that would educate and remove confusion to both professionals and victims.



## Key themes

The main themes that emerged from women's accounts during Domestic Servitude awareness sessions were guided by the following questions:

- 1. What is your understanding of Domestic Servitude?**
- 2. What are the main barriers, if any, that victims of Domestic Servitude may face which would stop them seeking help?**
- 3. How would the victim find a way out?**
- 4. What would you suggest as actions to ensure protection and prevent Domestic Servitude in your communities?**

The above questions opened doors to discussing a variety of subjects when raising women's awareness on Domestic Servitude. Participants shared personal experiences, the main ones encompassing cultural and traditional beliefs that normalise Domestic Servitude, double victimisation experienced when seeking help, the role of police in Greater Manchester in protecting victims, no recourse to public fund, immigration and Domestic Servitude, and the impact of Domestic Servitude on women's mental health. Women further deeply reflected on the impact of disobedience and its long-term consequences that always result to social exclusion and fear of misfortune.

Overall, three key themes emerged from these discussions as follow:

- 1. Demystifying a hidden and steady destructive process of exploitation – from a routine norm to an illegal act.**
- 2. The fear of reporting and seeking help.**
- 3. Empowered... The magic wand.**

The dominant collective message that clearly came out of all discussions was the lack of trust of the criminal justice, many of the women feeling abandoned and misunderstood, stating they have been victimised not only by their perpetrators, but also by the system in place when attempting to shout for help. To improve outcomes for victims of this silent type of Domestic Servitude, it is essential to encourage safe platforms where women can learn, converse confidently with relevant stakeholders, and understand the role of the relevant services in place.

The above is crucial for victims to develop trust and open-up when they become more aware of the type of exploitation they are victims of and can put a name on a crime.



## Women's voices

Below are some of the pertinent statements collected from the 28 women during the online meeting discussions, where many of them shared personal experiences.



*"I have been tortured emotionally, sometimes physically by my husband who kept me captive in the house just after I arrived in the UK. I faced Domestic Violence. I was not allowed any freedom, had to do all the housework for everyone in the house and I could not even imagine this was a crime, I could not imagine I could ask for help."*

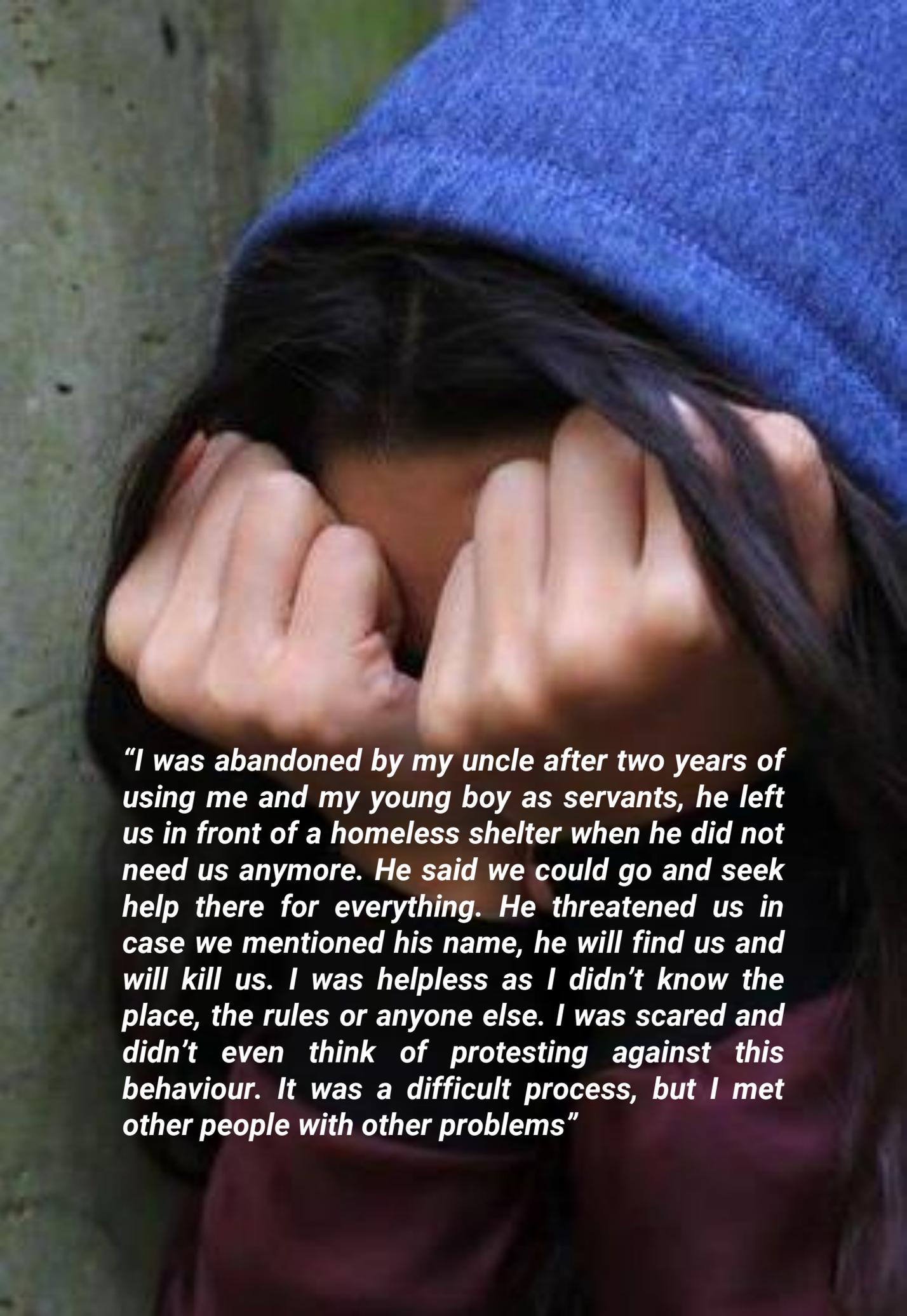
*"I was beaten up by my husband when I was not giving food on time or when any house chores was not done as he wanted. If he finds me resting during the day that means I am lazy and good for nothing, and will punish me in different ways and lock me up. It was surprising to see this kind of behaviour from a man who was born and brought up in the UK, and he knows UK laws and cultures. I did not know this was a crime and had a name until we discuss Domestic Servitude."*

*"I was already prepared by my own parents that the priority for me as a wife is to obey everything my husband will ask me to do. This is not only for me, but for all the girls in my community. My mum told me that my main role is to do the housework, please my husband all the time and look after the children. My husband made me leave the house everyday for a few hours and stay in the garden because he was inviting other women and his guests over. I will cook for them and put the food on the table for them everyday before I go to the garden. It doesn't matter how good or bad the weather is. He made her hand over my money and didn't allow me to work or keep any contacts with my friends or family. I was allowed supervised phone calls with my family back home or anyone else here, to say everything was okay. I accepted everything, because I was told by people around me that it was okay."*

*"I arrived here on a spouse visa to follow my husband, with my two children. I was subjected to Domestic Violence and kept under house arrest, not even allowed to go out to the shops alone. Most days me and my children were locked when my husband went outside. I didn't have my passport, any money or phone. I was told that my job was to keep the house tidy, cook the food, look after the children and my husband, this is the way it is. The diploma I got back home is not important especially in the UK, because it will change you into a different woman if you follow that route here. My husband threatened to harm our children if I disobeyed or tried to complain. You mean I have been victim of Domestic Violence and Servitude?"*

*"I was leaving with my husband and his family in the same house. I was made to do all the work in the house for everyone, and I could not leave the house. If I say I am tired, my 'in law' will insult me, beat me up, saying I was good for nothing. When I became pregnant, my husband lost interest in me but made me sleep with some of his friends who paid him for this, during my pregnancy. I could not go out to talk to anyone even if I could, but I could not speak English and if I leave them, I don't know where to go because I could not read and will get lost if I go far. One day when I managed to get help and report to the police, my husband was held back for 24 hours for questioning. After this he abandoned me and my child and someone told me to seek asylum. Since then, my life is a misery, as I am still nowhere. I cannot trust the police, I am not educated, my husband is, therefore this means he is saying the truth."*

*"My aunty paid for my ticket and got me a visa to come here and stay with her. She said I will have a better life here if I help her out and can get a job to help my family too. Instead, I spent nearly five years in her home, captive, telling me that I have to work first for her to reimburse the money she spent to bring me over. I became like a domestic for my own aunty, and her teenage children (my cousins) treated me very badly. One of them attempted to rape me. I could not get any help because aunty said if I stay outside for more than five minutes, I will be arrested by the police and I will go to prison and there, it is even worst as I have no immigration paper, I can stay in prison forever. I was afraid to ask people even if they were nice to me, because I will be arrested... I had no life, and I still have no life since I left them, as no one seems to care... I have not talked about this to people until now, who can help? Is this Domestic Servitude? Many things like this is seen as normal in my community."*

A close-up photograph of a person with long, dark hair. They are wearing a blue, textured hooded garment. Their hands are pressed against their face, covering their eyes and nose, suggesting a state of distress or despair. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

***“I was abandoned by my uncle after two years of using me and my young boy as servants, he left us in front of a homeless shelter when he did not need us anymore. He said we could go and seek help there for everything. He threatened us in case we mentioned his name, he will find us and will kill us. I was helpless as I didn’t know the place, the rules or anyone else. I was scared and didn’t even think of protesting against this behaviour. It was a difficult process, but I met other people with other problems”***



## We cannot report because of fear, lack of trust

- All the women agreed that information about rights of women victims of abuse or servitude is not accessible easily.
- They all spoke about how their partners or perpetrators frighten them into submission and keep them captive with false fears.
- Not knowing English language is also an important factor in increasing the isolation or trying to defend themselves when police are involved, and the perpetrator is present. They will keep silent.
- Scare tactics are used to keep women imprisoned. For example, taking documents away as they land in the UK, false information about deportation and the role of the police are used.
- Emotional blackmail is used to keep them under control. Constantly shaming them about their family position and honour.
- They are made to feel obliged about getting a place to stay and food to eat.
- They are threatened with bad consequences, misfortune, 'fatwa' (a nonbinding legal opinion on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority) by their families back to their home countries if reporting perpetrators.
- Perpetrators are often those supporting families back to the home countries, therefore free to act as they wish.
- Immigration status is used to control women. It is used as a tool against them, as it is often their weak point, used like a sword of Damocles on their heads.
- Dependency on their partners for visas and all other official paperwork makes it easier for the women to be trapped.
- Women were threatened to be reported to the police if they disobeyed their partners / relatives' demands, or the demands of their friends. They are told that they are illegal in the UK, and they could go to jail if they are reported.
- Financial independence is also a big factor. They often have no recourse to public fund. For those entitled to work, they are refused this right by their perpetrators who do not allow them to work outside or have any exposure with the world outside their homes. Earning money or even spending money independently isn't allowed as it could be a threat for the perpetrator.
- Women felt very disheartened and disappointed that the Home Office did not consider their distress, as they often struggle to communicate, or deal with the fear relating to disobedience, resulting often to providing initially a non-coherent account.

- They also feel like authorities see them as inferiors, illiterate, particularly if they do not speak English.
- Many of the women would struggle to open-up to a male police officer or any male authority, resulting in their stories not been captured fully.
- They all agreed that they are not considered as full human beings, often belittled due to lack of immigration status or language barrier.
- UK citizens' perpetrators have enough power to lie to the police and other authorities, even in their presence, to gain the cause. Perpetrators know they cannot defend themselves, even when they speak English.
- They all agreed that they are unable to take any step further, fearing a backlash, mainly due to their immigration status.
- Women who have been brave enough to challenge their perpetrators and leave are facing uncertainty in housing, depend on food parcels, struggle mentally, experience financial difficulties and problems accessing legal help, due to their insecure immigration status.
- Children are often used to blackmail mothers in case they want to report, often threatened to be sent back to their home country and be separated from their children.
- Barriers of culture and social disgrace are always put on the woman, she is made to carry this burden all her life. Reporting to the police would only make the situation worse.

**EMPOWER WOMEN**



# Empowered: If you had a magic wand, what would you change?

**N** – *“I would ask help from police and social services. Better service in a good way.”*

**S** – *“I would run away from the hell; I would run from the torture. Go far away and start a new life. If I could run away, I would go to the police or social services, maybe other groups that help.”*

**J** – *“I wouldn’t marry that man if I could go back to my previous life. I would change the rules of the Home Office and society. I would go to the Social services for help, any women’s organisation as well.”*

**K** – *“I would make everything right, there would be no more trouble in my life, it would be like a fairy tale. I would change the nature/ personality of my ex-husband, change him to be caring and loving man to me. I wouldn’t like to break the marriage if I could. I would ask the magic wand to take me somewhere nice.”*

**M** – *“I would like to abuse my ex-husband like he abused me and then disappear into the ground. I would like to show him how much he hurts me and then go away forever. Didn’t have any support available. Didn’t have anyone to support me as I didn’t know anyone. I want to teach him a lesson so that he doesn’t do the same to anyone else again.”*

**G** – *“I feel the same as ‘M’. I would get someone to help me to be strong. If I got even one person to help me, I would be stronger to oppose him. I didn’t know where to go for help. I would have stood against him if I had the support. I tried my best to hold on to the marriage, even if I was tortured emotionally, but couldn’t survive anymore. I complained to police who didn’t give me the required protection, they kept my husband for 24 hours. When he came out, he abandoned me and left me destitute. I didn’t get any more support from the police, and I claimed asylum on advice of a solicitor. I would like men like my husband to get severe punishment which stand out as an example and deters others to do the same to women. I think these men can do this to migrant women because they are British, permanent residents, etc. Sometimes I wish that I and my daughter die. I now suffer from severe depression.”*

# What stopped you from going to the police?

**G** – *“I didn’t have information about the police. I might have gone if I had the courage and support from someone, I would definitely ask the police to help.”*

**N** – *“I was afraid for my immigration status. Didn’t know how to approach the police, was scared.”*

**S** – *“I wanted to save my marriage. Family scared me. Immigration status was used against me.”*

**J** – *“I wanted to fix my marriage. When I did go to them, I didn’t get any help. It may be because I have no recourse to public funds (NRPF), on my visa. I don’t have any faith in the police as they didn’t take my husband into custody even though he was a wanted man.”*

**K** – *“I went to the Council and asked for help, was refused due to NRPF. Went to the police after that, where I waited all day with my child for someone to see us. I was then taken to a hotel by the social worker, where the police came to see us at midnight. No woman police was present. I had to show him marks on my body. Then they rang my husband to come and talk to them. Nothing came out of my complaint. Social services sent me back to my husband, because I was on a spouse visa.”*

**M** – *“Neighbour called the police. I was scared that I would be arrested and deported as I didn’t have status. I was beaten up badly, so the police offered to drop me to the hospital, I didn’t want to press charges against my partner, as I wanted to save my marriage. Calling the police wasn’t my priority as they wouldn’t believe me anyway, and that would end my relationship, also he would hurt me again badly.”*

**G** – *“I had reported all my husband’s misdeeds to the police, they didn’t believe me. I said that why did they want to know if they didn’t want to help?”*

# Who would you feel confident to ask for help?

**N** – *“The government, the departments. Police, social service. There should be a complaint system.”*

**S** – *“Policy makers. They should make sure that the vulnerable people have access to laws. There should be one law for all, not based on immigration status.”*

**J** – *“The MPs. They should help in implementing the laws.”*

**K** – *“The queen. The law makers.”*

**P** – *“The authorities. The police. The social services. Why should status have any implications on security of anyone. I blame the whole world for how women are viewed and how insecure we are. Our families, the doctors, the society and everyone else who has access to our plight should help.”*

**R** – *“Police. They should have the correct laws to protect us as we divulge all our experiences to them, but they don’t do the needful.”*

# What service would you recommend to help victims of Domestic Servitude?

**N** – *“I would like a dedicated social worker to work individually with each woman.”*

**S** – *“A group of women who have gone through the same experience. Support workers, police officers, who are trained in handling Domestic Servitude’s situations. Anyone who is involved in supporting a victim should have prior experience and training.”*

**J** – *“The group may already be there. But migrant women don’t have equal rights. If immigration status wasn’t a factor, then all the groups would work for us too.”*

**K** – *“A support worker, a psychologist, health visitor, Police (not directly involved), legal representative. Mental health of the woman should be given priority.”*

**P** – *“A safe space should be created so that the women can be encouraged to speak with their mind. Language barriers and support should be made available, maybe a social worker who can accompany them to provide confidence. An adult support worker is very important for the woman to lean on.”*

**N** – *“Women with lived experience of torture and trauma. Those who know how they survived the ordeal. It can be a safe space where everyone can have a discussion and find support and solutions together”*

**G** – *“Social workers and support workers.”*

# Questions arising from the sessions, asked by women:

1. How would Migrant women who have experienced Domestic Servitude know about their rights?
2. Who can they contact or go to when they decide to seek help?
3. Why are they often held accountable for their partners/relatives' behaviour?
4. Why does the UK legal system go easy on their UK citizens / residents' partners rather than conducting in-depth investigations, as their lack of support and language barrier often leave us destitute or seeking asylum?
5. Why is there a culture of disbelief, a culture of guilty until proven innocent towards us, or victims of exploitation?
6. Because what we have described in these sessions are a very hidden form of servitude that can easily be disregarded, what more are you planning to do to help us?
7. We are suffering a lot in silence, we did not know what we are going through was illegal, had a name, but now that we know; how are you planning to protect us?
8. What steps can be taken to ensure more accessibility to information?
9. Who could be the first point of contact?





## Recommendations

The following recommendations derived from the discussions during the consultation and awareness workshops:

- It is essential for the police and criminal justice system to raise awareness of the cultural and traditional norms attached to Domestic Servitude, to be able to achieve inclusivity within the diverse types of Domestic Abuse and exploitations acknowledged by the UK Government.
- Women suggested a first point of contact for other women who are newly arriving into the UK, all agreeing that information and support were lacking initially.
- GP – Information on Domestic Servitude to reach GPs' offices, confidential interviews, leaflets should be encouraged. GP could also refer women to existing groups where women can get support.
- GPs should be taught to read body language and approach women who come from the vulnerable countries.
- Consider verifying whether all women are registered with a GP, as in some cases families or perpetrators would not allow this, as some may be entitled to but others not.
- Talking to someone who is from the same country as the victim and who speaks the same language would be helpful. Having more volunteers who are in different stages of health and social care might promote better interventions.
- When you sometimes advertise that victims of Domestic Servitude or other forms of exploitation may talk to neighbours, many women revealed being scared to talk to anyone who may have contact with the perpetrators. This would only result in more violence and torture.
- TV adverts displaying numbers to call could be advertised regularly.
- A call for change in laws and rules regarding migrant women brought into the country under the guise of marriage should also be the way forward, as they are often brought in to become servants. Timely intervention could prevent situations of Domestic Servitude.

- Suggestion was made for social services to be involved for an initial interview with a woman who is new in the country. Even Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) could be delegated with this role. Someone who has the authority to support and is trustworthy, and such support could initially be provided in the first couple of months.
- It was discussed that social services don't help vulnerable migrant women, they only focus on safeguarding children's welfare, sometimes even taking the children away, aggravating women's sufferance.
- Immigration status was also a barrier to access social services, as NRPF status does not give the right to access support. Social services would therefore provide with a temporary relief when the immigration status is uncertain.
- Schools could also be a point of contact for vulnerable women, as mothers could be informed about support available via this network.
- Organisations that work with Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities should contribute to promote information and interventions.
- As women would often hide their fears and trauma due to feeling ashamed of being exposed, BAME Groups in communities are better placed to help identify distressed women in a safe space.

To enquire about this report, please contact

Dr Peggy Mulongo

Head of Health and Wellbeing programme  
NESTAC  
237 Newstead, Rochdale, OL12 6RQ

 01706 868993

 [peggy@nestac.org.uk](mailto:peggy@nestac.org.uk)

