

NOWHERE TO TURN 2019

Findings from the third year of the No Woman Turned Away project

REPORT SUMMARY

The full report is available at
www.womensaid.org.uk/research

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The No Woman Turned Away project

The No Woman Turned Away (NWTa) project has been funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) since January 2016. It provides specialist support to women who face barriers in their search for a refuge place after fleeing domestic abuse, alongside dedicated monitoring and evaluation work. Between the 12th of January 2018 and the 11th of January 2019, the project received 510 referrals (491 individual women). 320 went on to receive support from the NWTa caseworkers and 309 of these women finished their support in this time.

This report is based on three types of data sources:

- ▶ Quantitative data collected by the NWTa specialist practitioners between the 12th of January 2018 and the 11th of January 2019 via Women's Aid's data collection software On Track¹ (based on the 309 women who finished their support in this time).
- ▶ Qualitative interviews with 17 survivors of domestic abuse, 16 of whom faced barriers to accessing a refuge space.
- ▶ Artwork (drawings, photographs, poems and collages) created by these survivors which documents their search for a refuge space (see an example on the next page from our participant Ally).

“Little bits
by little bits,
they kept
reinstalling
that hope.
And the more
hope I had,
the more
courage I
had.”

Gita

¹ On Track is the Women's Aid case management and outcomes monitoring system.

Love with my arms wide, tame the
ghosts in my heart that fear wild
and wish me dead. Shoulders
have my ash to the wind
Lord forgive all of my
sins



309 women were supported by the **No Woman Turned Away** project this year

Where did they sleep while waiting for a refuge space?



What happened while waiting for a refuge space?

59 experienced **further abuse** from the perpetrator

21 were **physically assaulted**

20 women **called the police** out to respond to an incident



17 survivors created artwork and took part in interviews for this report

"You feel like you've got nowhere to turn."

"They kept me going. Little bits by little bits they kept reinstalling that hope. And the more hope I had, the more courage I had."

What happened to the 309 women?



Part 1: Experiences of seeking refuge

Women supported by the NWTAs specialist practitioners have a range of needs that may act as barriers to accessing safety due to insufficient availability of specialist refuge spaces. The five most common challenges for women seeking a refuge space were: ties to a local area, mental health support needs, disabilities, having no recourse to public funds (NRPF)², and supporting four or more children. Many women faced more than one barrier. Several women spoke of the impact that this had on their sense of self-worth.

A large proportion of the women (41.1%) supported by the NWTAs project were from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds, reflecting the barriers that women from BME backgrounds continue to face when trying to access places of safety.

Where did women stay while they waited for a refuge space?

Almost half of the women who were supported by the NWTAs project (44%) sofa-surfed with family, friends and even strangers while waiting for a refuge place. While many women felt gratitude towards their hosts, sofa-surfing commonly caused overcrowding, put strain on relationships, and sometimes led to additional abuse from the host.

13.6% of women spent time in emergency accommodation, where women tended to feel unsupported. Mixed-gender hostels were especially problematic. Some women (3.9%) paid to stay in a hotel, but this was considered inappropriate; women spoke about the lack

of support in hotels and the inability to feed themselves and their children sufficiently without kitchen facilities on a limited budget.

Twenty-two women (7.1%) slept rough while they were waiting for a refuge space. Five of these had their children with them and one was pregnant.

What happened to women while they waited for a refuge space?

Almost a fifth of the survivors (19.1%) supported by the NWTAs project experienced further abuse at the hands of the original perpetrator. For some women (6.1%) this resulted in physical injuries and some (6.5%) called the police out to respond to an incident while they were waiting for a refuge space. In addition, due to the threat of further harm from the perpetrator, almost a fifth of women (17.5%) told their NWTAs specialist practitioner that they were scared to go outside while waiting for a refuge space.

Interviews revealed that the lack of accommodation options that many survivors experienced was frequently tied to severe financial difficulties (see image on the top right from our participant Lasma), exacerbated by economic abuse experienced prior to fleeing. For many women this meant that they struggled to feed and clothe themselves and their children.

Many women spoke about the immense negative impact that the days, weeks or months of trying to seek refuge had on their

² More information on NRPF is available here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-funds--2/public-funds

wellbeing and that of their children, and how this added to the trauma that they experienced from their abusers (see the image below from our participant Aisha). Both physical and mental health were commonly affected, and some reported suicidal feelings and even suicide attempts which resulted from their struggles.

How many women were accommodated in a refuge?

Despite the specialist support provided by the NWTa project, in many cases the barriers faced by women were insurmountable. Of the women supported by the NWTa specialist practitioners, 22.3% were eventually accommodated in a suitable refuge space. 22 women (7.1%) gave up the search and remained living with the perpetrator and eight women (2.6%) returned to the perpetrator. For one woman, the outcome at case closure was that she continued to sleep rough. Finding a refuge was harder for those with multiple support needs: just 18.3% of women with two support needs found a suitable refuge space, compared to 27.4% of women with one support need. Only 11.7% of women with NRPF were accommodated in a suitable refuge.



No money, no home.

That moment when you are lying in bed and don't know you are crying until you realise your pillow is wet.....



Part 2: Survivors' experiences with statutory services

Survivors' experiences with local housing teams

For many survivors of domestic abuse the first point of contact before approaching a refuge is a local housing team. Teams have a duty to assist those fleeing domestic abuse³. Of the 309 women who were supported by the NWTA project this year, 145 (46.9%) contacted a housing team. At least 49 of these (33.8%) were prevented from making a valid homelessness application. Reasons given for this included housing teams ignoring guidance which states that local connection rules do not apply in cases of domestic violence⁴, suggestions by staff for the victim to return to the perpetrator instead and recommendations to call the National Domestic Violence Helpline (NDVH).

Many survivors spoke about the devastating impact that long waiting times, unsympathetic treatment, NRPf rules and disregard of housing officers' duties had on their mental health and journey outcomes (also see image on the right from our participant Rowan).



Rowan said, "My picture is a mess on purpose ... because that's what my head and my life is like and has been for a long time."

³ See Part VII of the Housing Act 1996, available here: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/52/contents, the Homelessness Act 2002, available here: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/7/contents, the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, available here: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/52/contents and *Nowhere to Turn, 2018* www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications/nowhere-to-turn-2018/

⁴ Homelessness Code of Guidance 2018, available here: www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities/chapter-21-domestic-abuse

Survivors' experiences with social services

Apart from housing teams, many survivors of domestic abuse also deal with social services. They have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area who are 'in need', and to promote the upbringing of these children by their families. In addition, social care teams have the duty to provide assistance to adults requiring care and support due to a disability, illness or mental health condition⁵.

Of the women supported by the NWTAs specialist practitioners, 87 (28.2%) contacted social services while they were searching for a refuge space. Social services failed to meet their obligation to safeguard women and children in 25 (28.7%) of those cases. In most of these cases, social services refused to accommodate both the mother and the children, however in some cases they offered to accommodate the child but not the mother, neglecting their duty to house children with their mother whenever possible.

While some of the women interviewed received satisfactory support from social workers, many survivors spoke about how overstretched social workers were struggling to meet their duty.

Survivors' experiences with the police

While survivors do not always choose to report domestic abuse to the police, many do deal with police officers to safeguard themselves and their children, or to formally report their experiences of domestic violence. 113 (36.6%) of the women supported by the NWTAs specialist practitioners contacted the police.

Several of the women who took part in interviews spoke of the quick response that they received when they called the police out in relation to an incidence of domestic violence. Some women also spoke about the excellent support and aftercare that they received.

However, there were inconsistencies in the response that survivors received from the police, and some officers appeared to lack knowledge about domestic violence. When police did not respond in an adequate way, participants' journeys tended to take a negative turn, with participants understandably feeling incredibly let down (image below provided by our participant Alya).



⁵ See the Care Act 2014, Part 1, available here: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/contents/enacted

Part 3: What support is needed and what is offered by the NWTa project?

What type of support do survivors receive from the NWTa project?

On average, women received four hours and ten minutes of support from the NWTa specialist practitioners. This ranged from 15 minutes to over eight hours. This support was provided on a daily or almost daily basis over an average time span of 20.5 days. However, this time span ranged from just one day to 140 days. The majority (40.6%) of specialist practitioners' time was spent on the telephone with survivors and liaising with professionals and advocating on behalf of the survivor (23.8%).

Many women reported that the support from the NWTa specialist practitioners was invaluable. As one of our participants put it:

"Between my friends, the Shelter lady and the woman from NWTa on the phone, they kept me going. Little bits by little bits, they kept reinstalling that hope. And the more hope I had, the more courage I had."



Gaps in provision

There continues to be a substantial shortfall of refuge spaces, reflecting the widespread, unsustainable pressures on the domestic abuse provision sector. There is a shortfall of 1,715 bed spaces⁶, and almost 60% of referrals to refuge were declined in 2017-18.

Interviews for *Nowhere to Turn, 2019* revealed that some survivors of domestic abuse feel that the "system" is not "caring" and not "protecting" them. The gaps in provision are not limited to refuge provision, but are reflective of widespread, unsustainable pressures on the domestic abuse service provision sector.

Finding a suitable refuge is particularly hard for those most marginalised by society, with limited specialist care available. Survivors' desire for finding a suitable refuge that could support their needs was a key theme in the interviews we conducted, as well as the artwork provided by participants. In addition, many survivors placed great value on the specialist support they had access to, having found a refuge (see image below from our participant Emma).

⁶ Council of Europe (2008): "...safe accommodation in specialised women's shelters, available in every region, with one family place per 10,000 head of population." (p. 51), see *The Domestic Abuse Report 2019: The Annual Audit*. Bristol: Women's Aid, available at: <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Annual-Audit-2019.pdf>

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

Nowhere to Turn, 2019 details the often harrowing and long-drawn-out experiences of women seeking refuge accommodation. Many of them rely on their social connections and even strangers to find a safe place to live. Women who do not have social connections are faced with the possibility of becoming street homeless.

While waiting to be accommodated in a refuge, many survivors encounter often insurmountable financial difficulties. Many go hungry and struggle to feed and clothe not only themselves, but also their children. Local housing departments, social services and the police continue to offer inconsistent responses, and our report points to the need for further and more consistent training of professionals.

Our report shows the way in which a professional responds on first disclosure can have a huge impact on a survivor's wellbeing and their future journey, and the importance of offering the right response the first time.

Survivors benefit from specialist support, including specialist refuges (for example BME specialist refuges), and their continued funding is paramount in the struggle against domestic violence.

A domestic abuse bill would offer an opportunity to reform the ways in which survivors of domestic abuse are supported by improving the statutory response and raising awareness. However, new legislation would need to be delivered alongside increased availability of specialist support and through a sustainable funding model that can flex to meet any increase in demand resulting from the bill.

Finally, the report highlights the indispensable and life-saving work provided by the NWTAs specialist practitioners, who are continuing to work tirelessly to support survivors of domestic abuse into refuges (see image below by Nidhi and her teenage daughter).



Recommendations for the government

- ▶ Provide sufficient bed spaces in specialist refuges to meet the level of demand nationally.
- ▶ Ensure that migrant women, including those with no recourse to public funds, do not face discriminatory treatment which prevents them from safely escaping domestic abuse and having fair access to services.
- ▶ Ensure that domestic abuse, from early intervention and prevention to support, is a strategic priority within local authorities and statutory services, with robust measures of accountability.
- ▶ Ensure that sufficient women-only spaces are available in emergency hostels.
- ▶ Ensure effective mechanisms and sanctions are in place to shift the onus on stopping the abuse onto perpetrators.
- ▶ Continue to fund the No Woman Turned Away project.

Recommendations for local authorities

- ▶ Ensure services are commissioned that ensure the right response the first time round.
- ▶ Ensure women with language support needs can access statutory services.
- ▶ Ensure that local housing and homelessness teams are abiding by the Housing Act 1996, the Homelessness Act 2002, and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.
- ▶ Ensure that there are clear links between local strategies for domestic abuse and homelessness.
- ▶ Increase availability of information about domestic abuse and local domestic abuse services.

Recommendations for statutory agencies

- ▶ Ensure women with language support needs are supported adequately.
- ▶ Ensure that domestic abuse is truly 'everyone's business', identifying it as a key priority area for staff training and development and a strategic priority in terms of safeguarding the well-being of local communities.