

# NOWHERE TO TURN 2020

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

## REPORT SUMMARY

### Report author

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## Introduction

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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 dedicated support to women who face barriers in accessing a refuge space. Alongside the practical support offered by the NWTa specialist practitioners, we are continuing to conduct detailed monitoring and analysis of survivors' experiences. This report analyses survivors' journeys based on quantitative data collected by the NWTa specialist practitioners between the 12th January 2019 and the 11th January 2020 using Women's Aid's data collection software, On Track<sup>1</sup>.

A total of 423 referrals (408 individual women; i.e. there were 15 repeat referrals) were made to the NWTa specialist practitioners between the 12th January 2019 and the 11th January 2020. 243 women engaged and finished their support between the 12th January 2019 and the 11th January 2020. The analysis of quantitative data in this report relates to these 243 women.

### Full report

The full report is available at:

[www.womensaid.org.uk/research](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/research)

**Published by:** Women's Aid Federation of England, a registered charity in England & Wales (1054154) and a company limited by guarantee in England & Wales (3171880)  
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### Help and support

For help and support, you can access Women's Aid's direct services, including our **Live Chat**, the **Survivors' Forum** and the **Survivor's Handbook**, at [www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support)

### Dedication

This report is dedicated to the survivors whose journeys while seeking safety from domestic abuse are documented here.

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

# 243 women were supported by the No Woman Turned Away project this year



**43%** of the women who were supported were **Black and minoritised women**, reflecting the **barriers and structural inequalities** that they face when escaping domestic abuse.

## Where did the 243 women sleep while waiting for refuge space?




**17**  
women **slept rough**

**1** woman slept rough **with her son**



**2** women who slept rough had a physical disability



**93**  
women **sofa-surfed**



At least **17%** of those who approached their local housing team were **prevented from making a homelessness application**.

## What happened while waiting for a refuge space?

**43** women were **scared to go outside**

**39** experienced **further abuse** from the perpetrator

**20** spent time in **hospital**



**10%** of women had **no money to pay for essentials**



**8%** experienced abuse from an **additional** perpetrator

## What happened to the 243 women?



**25%** secured a **place in a refuge**



**14%** found **emergency accommodation**



**10%** remained **living with** or **returned to the perpetrator**

# Part 1: Challenges for women seeking refuge

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## What barriers did women face?

As detailed in the previous three No Woman Turned Away (NWTAs) reports<sup>2</sup>, the most marginalised women tend to face the greatest barriers in their search for refuge provision<sup>3</sup>, with intersecting structural barriers and inequalities (e.g. poor agency responses, immigration policy context) impacting on women's ability to access appropriate safety and protection. The five most common challenges for women seeking a refuge space continued to be:

- ▶ mental health support needs;
- ▶ ties to their local area;
- ▶ disabilities (including mental health disabilities);
- ▶ having no recourse to public funds (NRPF)<sup>4</sup>; and
- ▶ fleeing with four or more children.

Many women had more than one support need. Like last year, almost half of the women supported by the NWTAs project were from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds (105 out of 243; 43.2%), reflecting the systemic racism that Black and minoritised women continue to face when trying to access places of safety.

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

Over a third of the women (38.3%) sofa-surfed while they waited for a refuge space. Others stayed in emergency accommodation (11.9%) or hotels (8.2%). Seventeen women (7.0%) slept rough whilst waiting for a refuge place. This included sleeping in their car, a church, in a storage unit at work, and on the streets. Two women who slept rough had a physical disability. One woman slept rough with her son.

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

Almost a fifth (17.7%) of women who were supported by the project told their NWTAs specialist practitioner that they were scared to go outside (i.e. temporarily leave the place where they were staying) while waiting for a refuge space, often due to the threat of further harm from the perpetrator. Almost a sixth (16.0%) of the survivors supported by the NWTAs project experienced further abuse at the hands of the original perpetrator.

On the 1st April 2019 we began recording the number of women who experienced abuse from an additional perpetrator and found that this applied to at least 15 (8.3%) of the 180 women who ended their support between then and the 11th January 2020. We also began recording when women were unable to pay for essentials during their search, and found that since the 1st April at least 18 (10.0%) out of the 180 women that were supported during this time were not able to pay for essentials whilst waiting for a refuge place.

## What did we find out about survivors' encounters with statutory services?

**Housing teams:** Of the 243 women who were supported by the NWTAs project this year, 104 (42.8%) contacted a housing team. At least 32 of these (30.8%) were prevented from making a valid homelessness application.

**Social services:** 63 women (25.9%) contacted social services while searching for a refuge space. The responsible teams failed to meet their obligation to safeguard women and children in at least 18 (28.6%) of those cases. In at least eight of these cases, social services refused to meet their duty to house children in safe accommodation. Half of the affected families had NRPF.

<sup>2</sup> *Nowhere to Turn, Nowhere to Turn, 2018* and *Nowhere to Turn, 2019*

<sup>3</sup> Please see *Nowhere to Turn, 2018* for a detailed explanation of the barriers women face when accessing refuge; also see *Nowhere to Turn, 2019*, both at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/no-woman-turned-away/>

<sup>4</sup> More information on NRPF is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-funds--2/public-funds>

## Part 2: The impact of the No Woman Turned Away project

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### What kind of support did women receive?

On average, the 243 women who were supported by the NWTAs project received six hours and twelve minutes of support from the NWTAs specialist practitioners. The largest part (27.5%) of specialist practitioners' time was spent on the telephone with survivors<sup>5</sup>. This year we saw a significant increase in time spent on email support (24.4%)<sup>6</sup>. Unsurprisingly given the nature of the NWTAs project, the most common topics were 'housing', and 'referral and signposting'. All women were supported in these areas. Emotional support (34.6%) and safety planning advice (23.5%) were also frequently given over the phone.

### How many women were accommodated in a refuge?

Of the women supported by the NWTAs specialist practitioners, 24.7% were eventually accommodated in a suitable refuge space. There were inequalities in refuge access depending on the specific barrier that women faced. Women with an older male child (6.3%)<sup>7</sup>, and those with drug use support needs (0.0%)<sup>8</sup> were the least likely to find suitable refuge accommodation.

## Conclusions

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This report highlights how survivors of domestic abuse, especially those who are most marginalised, continue to face a range of barriers to accessing safety. Whilst waiting for refuge, women face the very real possibility of homelessness and many experience additional abuse, either from the perpetrator or from other people who abuse survivors' vulnerable situation. Statutory services continue to offer inconsistent responses.

The current Covid-19 crisis has brought the barriers that survivors face in accessing

safety into sharp focus. The shortfall in refuge spaces, and the sustained funding challenge that refuge services have faced for years, are now acute concerns.

As this report is published, the domestic abuse bill is progressing through parliament. Through the bill, the government is set to deliver a legal duty on local authorities to deliver support to survivors of domestic abuse in accommodation-based services. This duty must be backed by a sustainable funding commitment for women's refuges that have

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<sup>5</sup> *Nowhere to Turn, 2019* reported that last year 40.6% of specialist practitioners' time was spent on telephone support.

<sup>6</sup> *Nowhere to Turn, 2019* reported that last year 11.6% of specialist practitioners' time was spent on email support.

<sup>7</sup> 1 out of 16

<sup>8</sup> 0 out of 8

the expertise to meet the support needs of women and children, including expert services led 'by and for' BME women and other marginalised groups.

The bill must deliver equal protection and support for all women experiencing domestic abuse, including migrant women, who too often face insurmountable barriers to accessing refuges and safe housing. As well as guaranteeing that all survivors are in 'priority need' for housing, the bill must ban damaging

local connection restrictions on women who need to cross local authority boundaries to access safety, and remove 'residency requirements' for survivors who need a safe home in a new area.

This report, once again, highlights the indispensable and life-saving work provided by the NWTAs specialist practitioners, who are continuing to work hard to provide support to survivors of domestic abuse in their search for a safe space to live.

## Recommendations

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### Recommendations for the government and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)

#### Funding

In addition to immediate measures to ensure refuge services can cope with Covid-19, a sustainable funding solution to ensure the national network of services can flex and respond to demand is required. We make the following recommendations:

- ▶ Deliver an emergency package of funding and support to ensure refuge services can operate safely during Covid-19, including: compensation for any income lost by refuges through loss of rental income or arrears during the pandemic; testing for Covid-19 and providing personal protective equipment (PPE) to refuge staff; and a guarantee that no refuge service will close during the pandemic.
- ▶ Make a commitment to a long-term investment of £173.8 million annually to ensure the national network of refuge services is sustainable, safe and can meet the needs of all survivors and their children. The level of funding must be reviewed in light of anticipated increase in demand for refuge resulting from Covid-19 and include dedicated funding for refuges led 'by and for' BME women, disabled and D/deaf survivors, and LGBT+ survivors.
- ▶ Ensure the continuation, sustainability and development of the NWTAs project.

### **Tackling homelessness as a result of domestic abuse**

- ▶ Ensure local authorities are required to house all survivors escaping abuse in safe and suitable accommodation, with ongoing support delivered by specialist services. This will require additional funding and clarification that all survivors escaping domestic abuse, including those with no recourse to public funds, are automatically in priority need.
- ▶ Ensure that homelessness strategies and supported housing strategies are developed and align with violence against women and girls (VAWG) and domestic abuse strategies on both a local and national basis, and that efforts to tackle homelessness have a gendered response and meet the specific needs of survivors.
- ▶ Develop a 'whole housing approach' to tackling domestic abuse which ensures access to a full suite of housing options, availability of suitable move-on accommodation, and incentives for agencies and organisations to work together more collaboratively.

### **Tackling systemic discrimination against domestic abuse survivors with no recourse to public funds and/or an insecure immigration status**

- ▶ Immediately abolish no recourse to public funds conditions and follow the Welsh government's direction to local authorities on ensuring access to shelter for those with insecure immigration status.
- ▶ Establish a 'firewall' to separate immigration control from the public services that survivors seek help from, alongside safe and confidential reporting systems for those with an insecure status.

## **Recommendations for local authorities**

- ▶ Ensure that domestic abuse, from early intervention and prevention through to support, is a strategic priority within local authorities and statutory services, with robust measures of accountability.
- ▶ 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 women can access information on domestic abuse and emergency housing in multiple languages and formats.
- ▶ 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 domestic abuse is a key priority area for staff training and development and a strategic priority in terms of safeguarding the well-being of local communities. This training should be delivered in collaboration with specialist domestic abuse organisations, such as Women's Aid and Imkaan, with quality assurance and key points of accountability built in.