



Somerset & Avon
rape & sexual abuse support

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To: House of Commons Public Bill Committee (by email)

Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support submission to the Nationality and Borders Public Bill Committee: November 2021

About Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support (SARSAS)

We are a specialist support service for people in Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, North Somerset, Somerset, or South Gloucestershire, who have experienced any form of sexual violence, at any point in their lives. This includes women seeking asylum who experience a high level of rape and sexual abuse.

We also campaign and educate to prevent future sexual violence occurring.

Introduction

SARSAS makes this submission to highlight the harm that many of the proposals within the Nationality and Borders Bill would cause to women subject to gender-based violence. As a specialist women's organisation, we reject claims made that its proposals would assist vulnerable women and girls. Instead, we submit that the Bill in its current form would cause harm and would greatly undermine the Government's commitment to addressing violence against women and girls.

At a time when there are important national conversations happening about how to prevent and address gender-based violence in our society, we are clear that the Nationality and Borders Bill in its current form will harm survivors and lead to greater exploitation and victimisation of women. We support the written and oral evidence already provided by Women for Refugee Women, and we ask Bill Committee members to reconsider the proposals outlined below.

The Government's promises to address violence against women and girls

The Government's Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy, published in July 2021, committed to 'bring[ing] about real and lasting change', recognising that VAWG is 'still far too prevalent and there are too many instances of victims and survivors being let down.' At the same time, there are important national conversations happening about the need to address the scale of abuse towards women and girls in our society, illuminated by the tragic murders of Sarah Everard, Sabina Nessa and far too many others. The Government has sought to reassure women and girls and the specialist women's organisations like ours that support them, that this issue is being taken seriously. The Home Secretary has stated: "Women and girls have said enough is enough and the Conservative Party agrees." As a specialist by and for sexual violence service

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*we state however, that **these commitments are gravely undermined by proposals in the Nationality and Borders Bill**. If the Government is to fulfil its promises made in the VAWG strategy to continue ‘to work with violence against women and girls sector specialists’ and ‘continually improve and learn from [our] experiences, data and insight,’¹ we ask that it take heed of SARSAS’s concern/warnings about this Bill.*

SRASAS is already troubled by the fact that the Government is unable to meet international standards in responding to VAWG by ratifying the Istanbul Convention nine years after signing, largely due to its treatment of migrant survivors in the UK, as highlighted by the Step Up Migrant Women campaign.² Our concern is that the Government’s record on addressing VAWG will be eroded even further should it proceed with this legislation in its current form. We are concerned that its proposals will create further difficulties for women and girls subject to abuse, and the organisations supporting them in the UK.

Whilst the Equality Impact Assessment accompanying the Bill alleged that proposals could ‘advance the equality of opportunity for ‘a cohort of females,’³ we set out some key ways in which they would cause harm to women and girls and increase the risk of gender-based violence.

We outline below our concerns regarding four key measures within the Bill related specifically to VAWG. However, we also support broader opposition to the Bill from a cross-section of society, based on its punitive and discriminatory proposals towards all those seeking refuge in the UK in desperate circumstances.

Four ways the Nationality and Borders Bill will harm women and girls:

1. More barriers for survivors of gender-based violence to proving a well-founded fear:

Clause 30 has been highlighted by Women for Refugee Women as one of the most damaging, yet under scrutinised aspects of the Bill in relation to women fleeing gender-based violence. The introduction of a restricted definition of ‘particular social group’ will harm women subject to gender-based violence because this ground in the Refugee Convention is frequently relied upon by survivors in order to obtain refugee status. The proposed definition will mean that two criteria must be met in order for an applicant to show that they are a member of ‘particular social group’, rather than one (as is currently the case). This would represent an additional hurdle for those seeking to obtain refugee status and would disproportionately impact women.

We repeat the statement made by Women for Refugee women that:

¹ See page 83 of HM Government (2021) Tackling Violence against Women and Girls:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1005630/Tackling_Violence_Against_Women_and_Girls_Strategy-July_2021-FINAL.pdf

² The Council of Europe’s convention on preventing and combating violence against women and girls is internationally regarded as the “gold standard” for responding to violence against women and girls (VAWG), and the biggest hurdle to ratification, is the absence of any provisions for migrant survivors that would comply with Articles 4(3) and 59 of the Convention (these articles outline obligations to ensure that survivors have access to protection and support without discrimination regardless of immigration or refugee status)

³ New Plan for Immigration Overarching Equality Impact Assessment of policies being delivered through the Nationality and Borders Bill:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1018188/Nationality_and_Borders_Bill_-_EIA.pdf

“This change was not heralded in the consultation and is an unexplained regressive step that, coupled with the change in the well-founded fear test, will result in more women being wrongly refused asylum.”

It is our experience that women seeking asylum that are subject to gender-based violence already face a number of barriers to obtaining refugee status, and the Government must not add further hurdles to their obtaining protection.

2. The creation of a two-tier system:

It is wrong to differentiate between refugees based on their mode of arrival or when they apply for asylum.

We object to Clause 10 of the Bill. As a specialist VAWG organisation, we are incredibly concerned by plans to exclude women from a path to settlement and public funds because of how they arrived in the UK and how quickly they were able to make their claim.⁴

- *As outlined by the ‘by and for’ specialist VAWG organisation Southall Black Sisters in their response to the New Plan for Immigration, Clause 10 **takes no account of the “desperate circumstances in which many women...are forced to flee** from their countries of origin, or of how the experience of gender-based violence shapes their journey to the UK and determines the extent to which they can adhere to complex and changing immigration rules on arrival.”⁵ We know that prior to and after arriving in the UK as a result of gender-based violence, many survivors do not know their rights and/or are deliberately deceived about asylum and immigration law. In many cases, survivors who arrive in the UK struggle to access the appropriate information or support in order to make an immediate claim. Women escaping gender-based violence must not be punished in these contexts.*
- ***The proposal contradicts long-standing evidence about the difficulties that women face in disclosing gender-based violence, abuse and trauma.** It is widely understood by specialist women’s organisations that the process of disclosing a history of violence and abuse is often incredibly difficult for survivors and can take an extended period of time. As explained by Women for Refugee Women in their oral evidence to the Bill committee: “Women who have been traumatised, because they have been violated, raped and all that, cannot provide that evidence straight away. They need time to heal, to be protected, to access mental health support. They need time to understand the system.”⁶ It is unacceptable that women be penalised for a delay in this context. (It is for this reason that we also object to Clause 16 and Clause 17 which specify that if a person fails to provide evidence within a specified period their credibility could be damaged, and to*

⁴ A woman who arrives in the UK via a ‘safe third country’ or who is unable to make herself known to authorities ‘without delay’ (and is subsequently recognised in the UK as a refugee) would fall under ‘Group 2’. As a ‘Group 2’ refugee, she would have no automatic path to settlement, even where it is proven that she has a well-founded fear of persecution. She would have restricted family reunion rights and limited access to public funds. Clause 10(5) also allows the Home Secretary to set the length of any limited period of leave for ‘Group 2’ refugees, such that they may be indefinitely liable for removal. Temporary protection status could afford a person no more than 30 months of leave - according to the New Plan for Immigration - after which they will be reassessed for return or removal.⁴

⁵ Southall Black Sisters (May 2021) Lessons not Learned: The Home Office’s New Plan for Immigration represents an escalation of the ‘hostile’ environment policy, not a break from it: <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/news/lessons-not-learned/#:~:text=Lessons%20Not%20Learned%3A%20The%20Home,not%20a%20break%20from%20it&text=The%20Plan%20is%20primarily%20focused,and%20those%20seeking%20asylum%20themselves>

⁶ HC Deb (23 September 2021) col 107 [https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-09-23/debates/122e6daf-470b-49c5-a05e-4daba0170c73/NationalityAndBordersBill\(FourthSitting\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-09-23/debates/122e6daf-470b-49c5-a05e-4daba0170c73/NationalityAndBordersBill(FourthSitting))

Clause 23 which encourages decision-makers to give ‘minimal weight’ to later evidence ‘unless there are good reasons’, which is undefined in the Bill and therefore left entirely to the discretion of the Home Secretary.)

- The Government’s explanatory notes on the Bill state that temporary protection status ‘may only allow access to public funds in cases of destitution’. **Institutionalising women’s precarity and destitution through ‘temporary protection status’ creates conditions that are ripe for abuse and exploitation.** We already know that living in a state of limbo in the UK without routes to settlement and being excluded from the welfare safety net traps women in harmful and abusive situations⁷ and puts them at risk of escalating violence. The Government’s own draft statutory guidance framework for domestic abuse reports that survivors’ lack of access to public services and funds⁸ can create dependency on others, which is often exploited by abusers to exert control over them. This was affirmed by research by Women for Refugee Women in 2020 with women seeking asylum, which found that 35% said that destitution forced them to stay in a relationship they would not have otherwise stayed in: 38% of those who stayed in an unwanted relationship were raped by their partner, 41% experienced another form of sexual violence, and 35% were physically abused.⁹ The creation of such a temporary protection status will create conditions that coerce women into withstanding abusive relationships and environments to avoid destitution, homelessness and the fear of return to countries where they have fled danger.¹⁰
- Furthermore, **restricting access to public funds would lead to further pressure on specialist VAWG services** who are already struggling to meet the demand for support from migrant survivors with insecure immigration status and/or subject to the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition, who are at heightened risk of abuse. As it stands, figures from Women’s Aid for England and Wales shows that in 2019/20, almost 4 in 5 migrant women subject to NRPF were turned away from a refuge¹¹ and this group makes up a large cohort of service-users of specialist ‘by and for’ services for black and minoritised women. During the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act in Parliament, the Government acknowledged that there is a gap in protection for women with insecure immigration status and subject to NRPF, and established a temporary Support for Migrant Victims scheme. However, it has capacity to support a maximum of 500 women over a 12-month period and many women remain without protection. This clause would only worsen an already urgent problem created by immigration policies.¹²
- Restrictions to family reunion rules for those with temporary protection status will also disadvantage women seeking to join a spouse, putting more women at risk of being compelled to make dangerous journeys.

⁷ Southall Black Sisters (2021) The Domestic Abuse Bill and Migrant Women: Briefing Paper 2: <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/DA-Bill-Briefing-Paper-2.pdf>

⁸ See Paragraph 77 page 21 of Home Office (July 2020) Domestic Abuse Draft Statutory Guidance Framework: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/896640/Draft_statutory_guidance_nce_July_2020.pdf

⁹ Women for Refugee Women (2020) Will I Ever Be Safe? Asylum-seeking women made destitute in the UK: <https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WRW-Will-I-ever-be-safe-web.pdf>

¹⁰ Southall Black Sisters (2021) The Domestic Abuse Bill and Migrant Women: Briefing Paper 2: <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/DA-Bill-Briefing-Paper-2.pdf>

¹¹ Women’s Aid (2020) Nowhere to turn 2020: Findings from the Fourth Year of the No Woman Turned Away Project: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Nowhere-to-Turn-2020.pdf>

¹² Southall Black Sisters (2021) Briefing Paper on the Government’s Pilot Project to support Abused Women with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF): <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SBS-briefing-Pilot-Project-1.pdf>

3. The expansion of accommodation centres which are re-traumatising for women and girls

The expansion of accommodation centres will negatively impact women seeking asylum, many of whom are survivors of rape and other forms of gender-based violence.

- *We object to clause 11 which would expand asylum accommodation centres for people waiting for their asylum claims to be processed, without any time limit (under subsection 8). Many women already wait for claims to be processed for years, and these environments are inappropriate and often re-traumatising for survivors. Being confined to living in closed environments that feel unsafe, with restricted liberty or autonomy to make decisions about their daily routines and company shares many parallels with survivors' previous experiences of gender-based violence of having been imprisoned and controlled.*
- **The lack of privacy that characterises such sites is also harmful for women who have experienced gender-based violence as it hinders survivors' ability to disclose their history.** *The APPG on Immigration Detention notes that in Napier Barracks and Penally Camp, 'the lack of private space was forcing residents to hold sensitive discussions, for example with lawyers, within earshot of other residents and/or staff'. Accommodation centres are the antithesis of environments conducive to the disclosure of gender-based violence including rape and sexual exploitation, let alone recovery. The use of accommodation centres will harm women's ability to get their claims for protection recognised.*

4. Offshore processing and detention of women seeking asylum

We object to the detention and off-shore processing of people seeking asylum, particularly due to the serious risk of gender-based violence occurring in these centres.

- *Previous investigations of detention centres in the UK, such as the Lampard Report (2015) on Yarl's Wood highlighted that between 2007-15, 10 members of staff were dismissed for incidents involving 'sexual impropriety' towards women held there.¹³ The UK government will have even less control over the treatment of detainees in offshore detention centres. Thus, the risk to women of sexual violence and abuse in such centres will be increased. The sexual harassment and violence of women detained offshore by the Australian government has been well documented¹⁴ and it is indefensible that the UK government puts women at girls at risk in this way.*

SARSAS urges members of the Bill Committee to object to these proposals, which will harm women subject to gender-based violence and increase the risk of re-victimisation and re-traumatisation in the UK. The UK government has promised victims and survivors and women's organisations like ours that it is committed to preventing and addressing violence against women and girls in all its forms. However, our expertise and experience tells us that the proposals outlined above in the Nationality and Borders Bill, seriously undermine these commitments.

¹³ Lampard, K. (2016) *Independent Investigation into Concerns about Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre*; <https://www.verita.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Independent-investigation-into-concerns-about-Yarls-Wood-immigration-removal-centre-Serco-plc-Kate-Lampard-Ed-Marsden-January-2016-1.pdf>

¹⁴ See, for instance, Refugee Council of Australia (2020) *Australia's Man-made Crisis on Nauru*; <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/nauru-report/>

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