



solace
women's
aid

Housing status research report 2016

The Price of Safety:

How the housing
system is failing women
and children fleeing
domestic abuse



Executive summary

Solace Women's Aid (Solace) has conducted research into the housing pathways of women and children survivors of domestic abuse who have come through Solace refuges. This research highlights systemic unfairness and discrimination against women and children fleeing domestic abuse in London.

Our research shows that many perpetrators of domestic abuse remain in the family home whilst survivors and their children are forced to move frequently between temporary and often unsuitable housing, resulting in increased financial cost and poor recovery from the original trauma women and children experienced in the family home. The impact of such numerous moves throughout the survivor journey can be far reaching: children moving school many times; survivors unable to establish new friendships and networks, find work or continue with training and education; financial instability and forced reliance on welfare benefits.

Of the 121 women who came into and exited the Solace refuges in 2015, 22% had a secure tenancy on arrival whilst only 13% had a secure tenancy on departure. However some women arrived without a tenancy and gained a tenancy on leaving the refuge. 87% of women left the emergency shared accommodation provided in refuges for continued temporary accommodation.

A previously transparent and effective pathway has been disrupted by changes to housing regulations, housing benefit and the shortage of

accommodation in London. The lack of a clear process for survivors fleeing their homes due to domestic abuse not only causes uncertainty and disruption but also incurs huge costs due to properties often sitting empty whilst housing decisions are made; by perpetrators remaining in properties which are family sized units whilst survivors and their children can be cramped into one room. Delays in offers of rehousing lead to the 'clogging up' of emergency refuge spaces thus incurring a further cost to the public purse.

Solace recommends:

- 1.** A secure and consistent pathway for women fleeing domestic abuse into refuge and onto secure accommodation
- 2.** Survivors with secure tenancy status at the time of fleeing domestic abuse should maintain their status after fleeing. Therefore a pan London process should be put in place to ensure this happens consistently in all cases.
- 3.** All Social Landlords should adopt a 'zero tolerance' approach to dealing with perpetrators who are tenants and use all available civil and criminal powers to remove them from the property.
- 4.** All Social Landlords should be required to train staff in good practice to ensure they identify and effectively support those experiencing domestic abuse.

Introduction

Despite women survivors of domestic abuse and their children, in the UK, being users of specialist voluntary services for over 40 years, there have been limited longitudinal studies into service users' experiences beyond the point of crisis intervention. The Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) and Solace Women's Aid (Solace) '*Finding the Costs of Freedom*' report focused on the process of rebuilding lives after ending the relationship/abuse, particularly in terms of the long-term support needs of women and children. The '*Finding the Costs of Freedom*' study followed 100 women and their children who had used a range of domestic violence services over a three year period (2011-2014), interviewing them four times. The study took place in the context of economic austerity and significant funding cuts to the public sector and in particular the violence against women and girls sector. These cuts have had a devastating and disproportionate impact on women and children fleeing domestic abuse, reducing their access to social housing provision (CWASU, 2014).

The '*Finding the Costs of Freedom*' report identifies that for many women who have experienced domestic abuse, home is no longer a place of safety. Many women and their children have to leave their home to find refuge elsewhere. The report also identifies that rights to rehousing for women fleeing domestic abuse (Hague and Malos, 2005) are currently being eroded. This erosion not only serves to prolong and complicate the process of recovery and

Funding cuts have had a devastating and disproportionate impact on women and children fleeing domestic abuse, reducing their access to social housing provision (CWASU, 2014)

rebuilding lives but also extends the period of trauma. The '*Finding the Costs of Freedom*' report identifies housing as an integral aspect of the process of rebuilding lives. Interviews conducted with survivors and key workers highlight the difficulties faced with housing and the current lack of a pathway to secure accommodation.

Rights to rehousing are currently being eroded which not only prolongs and complicates the process of recovery and rebuilding lives but also prolongs the trauma (Hague and Malos, 2005)

Solace conducted research into the housing situation of women and children who had fled domestic abuse and moved into Solace's refuge accommodation from January 2015 to December 2015. The focus of this research is on women's housing status before fleeing domestic abuse and moving into a refuge, and their housing status on leaving the refuge.

Background

Domestic abuse is a key cause of homelessness, particularly for women. Official statistics show that in 2008/9, 6,820 households were accepted by local housing authorities in England and Wales as being owed a main homelessness duty on the grounds of domestic abuse (AVA, 2011). This equates to 13% of all acceptances (Quiglar and Pleace, 2010).

According to recent research, the likely cost of temporary accommodation across London in 2014/15 is close to £663m

(Centre for Housing Policy, University of York)

However, a number of research studies, have found that domestic abuse is a much more common cause of homelessness than Government statistics imply as these statistics only tell us about acceptances and not about applications (AVA, 2011). For example, the *Rebuilding Shattered Lives: the final report* by St Mungo's (2014) found that nearly 50% of their female clients had experienced domestic abuse, with a third of women claiming that their experiences of domestic abuse contributed to their homelessness.

If a woman cannot safely stay at home and can show she meets the eligibility criteria under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 (HA1996) and the

Homelessness Act 2002, she should be able to approach a local housing authority for assistance. Although this is still in place, the majority of women and children are placed in temporary accommodation, including those with a previous secure housing tenancy.

As social housing has become less available, restrictions have increased and many abused women are excluded or turned away. This has been made more complex by each authority trying to protect its position with their own procedure for allocating housing (AVA, 2011). In addition, cuts to legal aid for housing related matters may prevent some victims from leaving as they will not be able to afford the advice or representation they need (AVA, 2011).

Nearly 50% of St. Mungo's female clients had experienced domestic abuse, with a third of women claiming that their experiences of domestic abuse contributed to their homelessness (St. Mungo's, 2014)

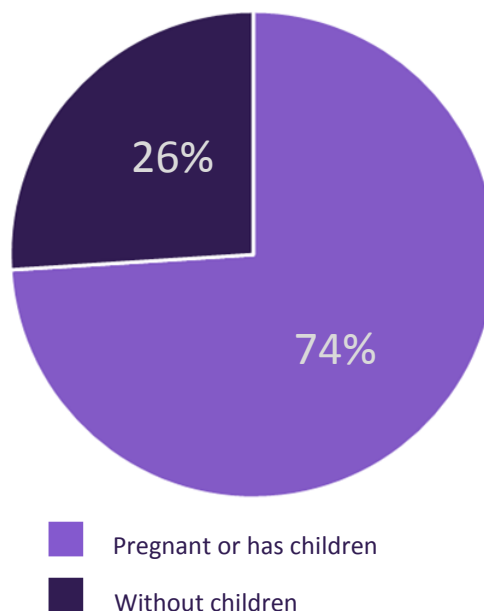
Methodology

Data was collected from 11 refuges run by Solace Women's Aid in six different boroughs across London. The data includes service users who left the refuge between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2015 following a period of support. This produced a total sample size of 121 women, 74% of whom were pregnant or had children.

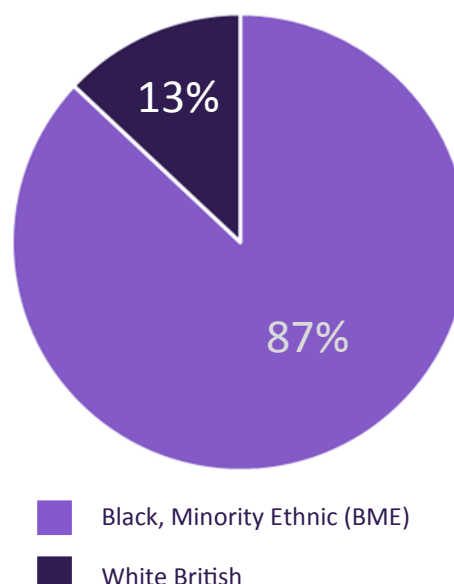
The data was collected using an email based survey, which sought data on tenancy status and details before and after fleeing domestic abuse. All refuge staff were emailed with an Excel spreadsheet alongside guidelines on how to complete it to ensure it was easily understood and completed by recipients.

This method reduced time, lowered cost and eliminated the need for manual data entry (Granello and Wheaton, 2004). While Granello and Wheaton (2004) identify low response rate as a potential limitation of using an email based survey, this was avoided by getting refuge staff to complete the spreadsheet. The data was analysed using Excel to filter data and produce graphs and statistics.

Status of service users



Ethnicity of service users



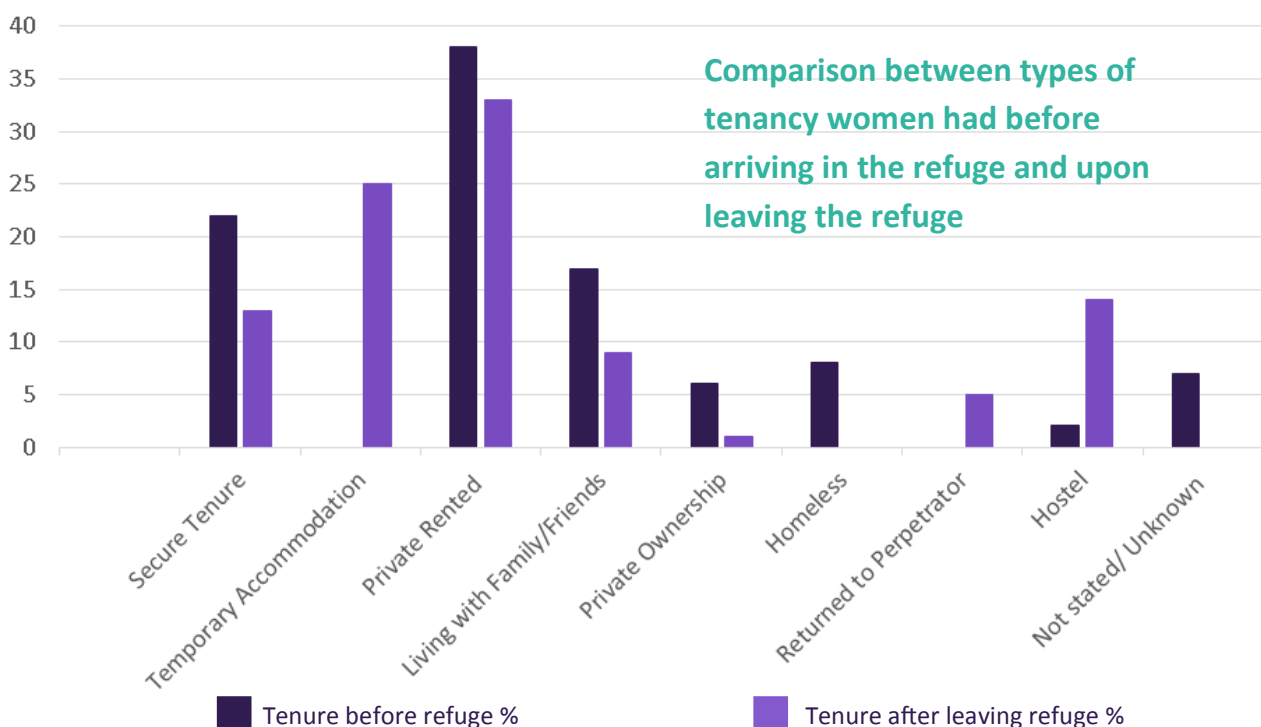
Analysis

Housing situation after fleeing abuse

A comparison of tenure types prior to fleeing abuse and upon being re-housed shows that a large number of women face insecure housing after fleeing domestic abuse. The bar chart below demonstrates that there is a significant increase in short-term temporary accommodation upon being re-housed, compared to a greater number of women having secure tenures and private rented accommodation prior to fleeing. The data shows a 41% decrease in the number of women and children housed in secure tenancies after a period in a refuge compared to those with secure tenancies prior to fleeing. Analysis of service user data for the 22% of women that held secure tenures at the time of fleeing, provides evidence of the disadvantage many women and children face in their housing situation after fleeing domestic abuse. This is particularly pertinent in the London context as women's experiences continue to be shaped by the chronic shortage of social housing. This is exemplified by the following two quotes: from the 'Finding the Costs of Freedom' report:

Getting people rehoused is an absolute nightmare. There's just no housing stock
(Key-Worker)

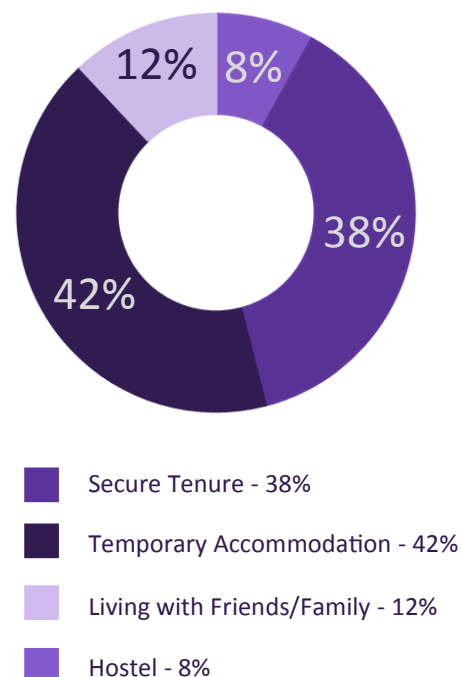
I've spoken to the Housing Officer and she explained to me that basically there isn't any housing in [borough] for a family. They are really short, so I'll have to stay where I am (Service User)



Loss of secure tenancy status

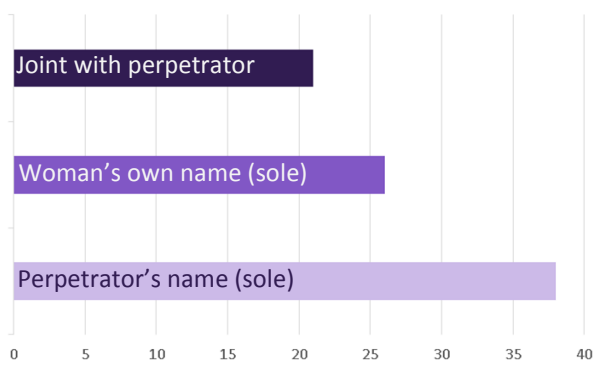
Of the 27 service users living in a secure tenure at the time of fleeing only 38% of those rehoused received an equivalent secure council or housing association tenure following a stay in the refuge. 62% ended up in a situation of housing insecurity through temporary accommodation, having to live with family or friends, or living in a hostel. These findings show that women rehoused following a stay in a refuge receive an inconsistent response to their housing situation, with many women losing their security of tenure post-refuge. This housing disadvantage is exemplified by the vast majority of key workers interviewed in the *'Finding the Costs of Freedom'* report, who have observed that accessing housing is becoming more and more difficult due to lack of stock and changes to the benefit system. One key worker, in the *'Finding the Costs of Freedom'* report, explains the entrenchment of barriers to women and children fleeing domestic abuse:

Tenancy status after leaving the refuge for service users with secure tenancy status before fleeing domestic abuse.



With housing now because of the cuts and the changes to housing benefits – they were always difficult but you could get somewhere with them. But now you can actually see how they are actually struggling themselves; they always used to try to put barriers before, but now those barriers are... ..stronger...

The perpetrator remains in the home



In 31% of the cases examined where the secure housing tenancy was in joint name with the partner, the perpetrator still lived in the property, despite women having rights to the property they fled from.

Name on tenancy for women at point of fleeing domestic abuse (%)

The high number of perpetrators remaining in the property, despite women having joint rights, is consistent with the findings within the *'Finding the Costs of Freedom'* report which emphasises that in practice Local Authorities and Housing Associations are reluctant or unable to remove the perpetrator. They potentially have the ability to remove perpetrators by remedies such as anti-social behaviour orders. If such action was pursued by landlords, this would enable women and their children to either move back into the property or for the tenancy to be utilised to obtain a transfer or exchange for another property. This reluctance to remove the perpetrator is highlighted by one service user's account of her experience with a local authority in the *'Finding the Costs of Freedom'* report:

And then when I built up the courage to finally leave, all the housing kept saying to me was 'go home, you've got a house that's suitable for you and your family'. And I was like well take him out. And they were saying we can't do that, it's his tenancy, go home. And I spent a year and a half fighting them

This situation is not only the case in secure tenures. When the parameters are extended to include all types of tenure, in 35% of cases the perpetrator remained living in the property. In 87% of these cases the perpetrator still lived in a property which previously housed a family with 1 child or more.

Safety vs. security?

Awareness of the social housing shortage often means women are very hesitant to give up tenancies or can feel they have little choice but to return to the secure tenancy and the perpetrator. This can lead to some women prioritising housing security for her and her children, over her own safety. One keyworker summarised the dilemma women face in choosing between secure housing and safety from abuse in the *'Finding the Costs of Freedom'* report:

A lot of women I work with have a secure tenancy. They really don't want to leave the secure tenancy. But then often they might not have a lot of choice. And some women will prefer to – like to sit it out, and take massive risks ...than leave it

As well as facing a more insecure housing situation, women fleeing domestic abuse face further disadvantage in terms of housing, such as smaller properties, higher rent and poor low quality temporary housing. Two service users explain the disadvantage they faced with housing in interviews in the *'Finding the Costs of Freedom'* report:

I lost my home, I would have had to downgrade because of what he did and I thought no way, why should my children be without a garden because of him, you know because of what he did to us?

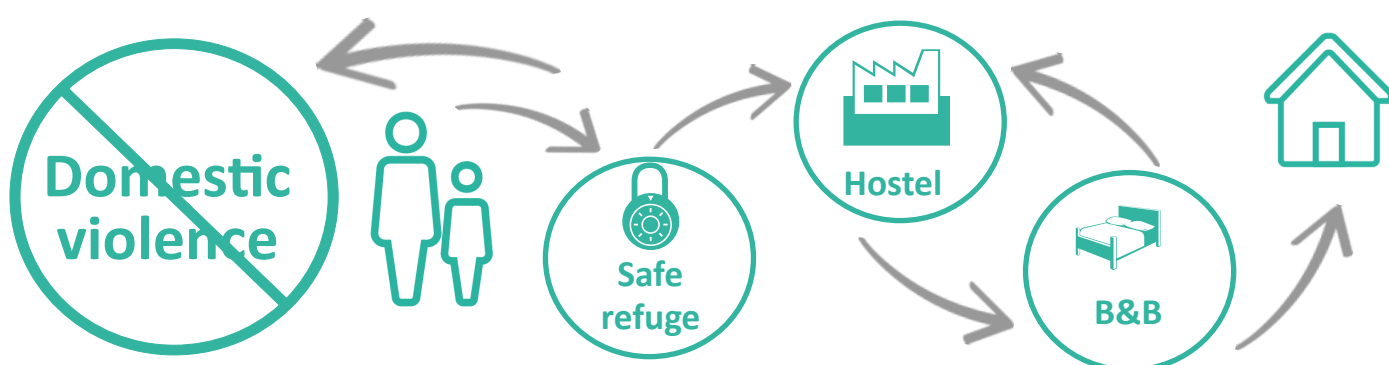
I was shocked with the lady I spoke to at the counter; she said my daughter should be sleeping in the living room and I should be thankful that they give me a house

Impact of multiple moves

Not only do women and children fleeing domestic abuse often find themselves in a worse housing situation than prior to fleeing, the process of re-housing was complex and often traumatic. In the majority of cases women and their children were unsettled for significant periods of time. Therefore, becoming settled was often a long and difficult process. The 'Finding the Costs of Freedom' report found that the vast majority (87 of 100) of participants had moved house to end the abuse: of this group 38 had moved once (44%), 27 had moved twice (31%), 12 had moved three times (14%), five had moved four times (6%), five had moved five or more times (5%). The emergency and temporary nature of some of these moves was unsettling, especially when the goal was to become settled and independent, as explained by one participant in the 'Finding the Cost of Freedom' report:

It's been really up and down, because you think, oh, finally I'm in a refuge, things will get better, and then it's just no, you have to move from the refuge, and then you're still trying to get housed

I think that's all (my son) needed; a little bit of security and stability, you know. Just to know that we're not going nowhere again



The case studies completed by refuge staff detailing the re-housing process for a single service user in the designated time period reflect the absence of tailored responses to survivors of domestic abuse and their children. This is compounded by a lack of understanding of the nature of domestic abuse within certain Local Authorities, particularly regarding safety and risk. This is evidenced through our research which highlights that women presenting as homeless to Local Authority Housing departments reported that housing officers were unsympathetic and seemed ‘uninterested’ in their domestic abuse histories or alternatively did not understand and/or assumed that women lie. Of the 330 service users who responded to Solace’s 2015 service user survey, 42% of those presenting to Local Authority Housing Services reported they found them unhelpful. This is exemplified by the following case study collected from a Solace refuge:

Case study

A service user approached a Local Authority in November 2014 and was accepted for the home finders’ scheme. After refusing two properties in unsafe areas and being accepted and then rejected for another property, the service user was forced to make a homeless application to the borough with the support of her refuge worker. The service user was kept waiting all day with no overnight emergency accommodation offered. It was agreed she could stay in the refuge for two nights until she was eventually offered temporary accommodation. However, her homeless application was then refused as the housing officer contacted the perpetrator, without the service users’ knowledge. He said that the service user was still living with him and that there was no domestic abuse. The housing officer used this as conclusive evidence that she had somewhere else to stay. Refuge staff were not consulted despite having proof that the service user had been residing at the refuge. These issues were compounded by the fact that the service user’s first language was not English and she had difficulty understanding English. A better understanding of domestic abuse and the use of acceptable processes for domestic abuse for housing staff would be beneficial. As a result of the way this case was dealt with, refuge staff had to help the service user obtain a housing solicitor to enable her to access her legal rights. This took time, caused distress and anxiety to the service user and caused the ‘blocking’ of an essential emergency refuge space. Fortunately, due to the support from the refuge staff and solicitor, the woman was finally accepted and placed in temporary accommodation.

Conclusion

This research report provides evidence of the inconsistent, difficult and often disadvantageous housing situation women and their children fleeing domestic abuse currently face across London. Firstly, for many women their housing status becomes more insecure as a result of fleeing domestic abuse. Of the 27 service users living in a secure tenure at the time of fleeing, only 38% received an equivalent secure tenure upon being re-housed with 62% experiencing insecure housing. In contrast, many perpetrators remained within secure tenancies, despite having perpetrated abuse, with majority of those properties being family sized units. In addition, women often face unreasonable difficulties in the re-housing process as exemplified in the case study example. Equally, women and children are often required to move at least two or more times in the re-housing process, which has significant negative impacts on women and children's well-being.

The *'Finding the Cost of Freedom'* report, highlights that women and children fleeing domestic abuse have been negatively impacted by welfare reform and a shrinking number of affordable homes, leading to a longer and more uncertain re-housing process, often with multiple interim temporary moves. The unfairness of this was not lost on many women who felt, not unreasonably, that they were being penalised for trying to end abuse in their lives. As these changes take deeper root, and those advising on options discuss the possible costs of leaving, we are left asking how many

more women will feel they are forced to trade secure housing for safety in the future.

Two years on from *'Finding the Costs of Freedom'* research, this further research highlights that women's housing situation continues to be problematic for those fleeing domestic abuse. The recommendations made in 2014 remain as pertinent as ever with women continuing to face huge barriers in their quest for safety and recovery. Women continue to receive inconsistent treatment across different Local Authorities within London.

The lack of a fair and transparent housing pathway across the whole of London not only causes distress and disruption to the lives of survivors and their children but also incurs huge costs due to properties sitting empty whilst housing decisions are made; perpetrators remaining in properties which are family sized units whilst survivors and their children can be cramped into one room; the lack of a clear streamlined process results in the 'clogging up' of refuge bed spaces which incurs a cost to the public purse. According to research undertaken by the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York, the likely cost of temporary accommodation across London in 2014/15 is close to £663m. In this climate of austerity and given the shortage of housing in London, it is vital that a clear and fair pathway is developed to ensure women and children are best supported to recover from abuse and into independent lives.

Recommendations

We need:

- 1** A secure and consistent pathway for women fleeing domestic abuse into refuge and onto secure accommodation.
- 2** Survivors with secure tenancy status at the time of fleeing domestic abuse to maintain their status after fleeing. Therefore a pan London process should be put in place to ensure this happens consistently in all cases.
- 3** All Social Landlords to adopt a 'zero tolerance' approach to dealing with perpetrators who are tenants and use all available civil and criminal powers to remove them from the property.
- 4** All Social Landlords to be required to train staff in good practice to ensure they identify and effectively support those experiencing domestic abuse.

To secure this we recommend a 'Task and Finish' group is established involving refuge providers as well as the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance, to work with key London personnel, including the Mayor's Office and London Councils to address the issues identified and to recommend solutions.

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