Violence, Deportation or Destitution? How a 20-Year Campaign Has Added Another Option for Women Fleeing Abuse: Safety

By Ros Wynne-Jones

When Farida arrived at Southall Black Sisters (SBS) in West London last year, she was destitute. She had spent the previous few nights sitting at bus stops, and the nights before that, staying with strangers. A teacher from rural Pakistan, she had arrived in Britain as a 25-year-old bride, to live with her in-laws. "It was an arranged marriage with a British man," Farida says. "He was kind and I could feel that I was falling in love with him.”

Within weeks, however, it became clear that Farida's in-laws had brought her to England not as a wife, but as a domestic slave, forcing her to do heavy manual labor as well as the household chores. Her husband was mostly absent from the family home. “The family was doing building work on their house,” Farida says. “Every day, my job was to break walls with heavy machinery and even break up rocks with a hammer for the foundations. If I didn’t, they would beat me. I had to do all the housework and make the dinner even after all the building, and if I didn’t finish it they were angry and used to hurt me. My mother-in-law would go crazy and start shouting and throwing things at me.”

When Farida fought back, her in-laws threw her out on to the street. “They told me I would be deported and that no one would help me because of my immigration status,” Farida says.

**DDVC: 20 YEARS IN THE MAKING**

Until April 1, 2012, Farida's in-laws would have been right: her stark choices would have included violence, deportation, or destitution. Because Farida was in the UK on a spousal visa, she was subject to a two-year “probationary” period during which time she had “no recourse to public funds,” no benefits, no access to a safe place to stay, no help. But two years ago, Southall Black Sisters won a 20-year campaign for a Destitution Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC). This concession meant that when Farida arrived at SBS, welfare agencies were immediately able to help her, providing a refuge as well as legal aid.

The DDVC has been hard won. It is the result of two decades of lobbying, demonstrating, applying political pressure, constant Judicial Reviews and legal cases, and making the voices of abused women heard in the media. It has been a campaign of attrition, won by SBS, and supported in recent years by other UK women's organizations, including Eaves and Rights of Women. Since 2010, Unbound Philanthropy has made grants to these organizations in support of their communication with the general public about the issues.

**UNWAVERING COMMITMENT**

The first breakthrough came in 1999 under the Labour Government with the Domestic Violence Rule, giving victims of abuse Indefinite Leave to Remain. This policy grants permanent residency in the United Kingdom, with the right to work, study, and receive benefits—a key step on the path to full citizenship. But SBS felt this policy still left women too vulnerable. Over the next 13 years, campaigners repeatedly lobbied Parliament; held meetings with Members of Parliament, Ministers, and civil servants; appeared at select committees; ran letter-writing campaigns; and highlighted women’s stories in the media and across hundreds of forums.
In 2007, SBS started the Campaign to Abolish No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), which became a coalition of 30 organizations. In 2009, the Home Office, the government department overseeing immigration, launched the Sojourner Project, a temporary pilot project testing a form of the DDVC by supporting women who are subject to the NRPF policy in an area of London. The project was run by Eaves, an organization that supports vulnerable women who have experienced violence, and which was campaigning with SBS on the issue.


It was Conservative Home Secretary Teresa May who agreed to the long-term solution of the full DDVC. Under this policy, abused women who enter the UK on spousal visas are allowed a temporary stay of three months while they “regularize” their stay, and have access to basic welfare benefits and social housing. “We could hardly believe it was true,” remembers Hannana Siddiqui, Director of SBS, a veteran of the 20-year campaign.

The DDVC meant that when Farida found herself thrown on the streets after she had confronted her husband about his family’s violence and became bruised by his assault, she had somewhere to turn. “I had no papers, no passport, no right to be in the country without my husband, and I was too ashamed to call my parents in Pakistan,” she says. “All my suitcases of jewelry, crockery, and clothes that had come from Pakistan had been confiscated as ‘dowry’ by my in-laws.”

Knowing no one in England, she went to the house of a woman whom she often spoke to on the bus, who let her stay a few nights. She then started sitting in the bus stop at night. The police picked her up there and took her to SBS. “SBS helped me in every way they can,” Farida says, smiling widely. “At every step. I was so relieved.”

Now, on the second anniversary of the DDVC, SBS says it has been extremely successful in helping abused women like Farida, but that there is still much further to go. “The definition [of who can be helped] is still very narrow,” says Poonam Pattini, manager of the walk-in advice center at SBS. “It only works for women on a spousal visa, and if you don’t fall exactly into that category it doesn’t apply. All women should be entitled to equal access to safety and justice, whatever type of visa they are on.”

Parveen’s Story

Parveen, a 27-year-old woman from rural Pakistan, arrived in the United Kingdom a year ago on a student visa with her husband Karim, whom she had met at university. They had married against the wishes of her parents and she had been disowned. “It was a love marriage,” Parveen says. “I loved him very, very much. The first two months we were here, his behavior was very kind. Then, I got pregnant and his behavior totally changed. He told me to get an abortion or he would divorce me. In Islam, abortion is a very big sin, but he forced me to abort my baby at seven weeks. I don’t have anyone else. No relations, family, friends, nothing. I can’t go back to Pakistan; my brother and my father told me they will kill me. I am from a high-profile family related to local politicians.”
Karim was very stressed about money. He hit me many times, slapped me, strangled me with my headscarf. He was forcing me to have sex with him. I was very frightened to have an abortion again. He kept saying, 'I divorce you.' He knows I love him so much I don't want to leave him."

Parveen found out Karim had become engaged to a British girl, and she told the girl's family, who broke off the engagement. "Then my husband tried to kill me. He put his knife to my throat. I was pleading with him. He hit me with belts."

Parveen went to the police, and Karim was arrested. He is currently on bail. Parveen's student visa has only days to go. "I am expected to go back to Pakistan," she says. "If I go, they will kill me. If I stay, my husband will kill me. The only way is suicide. I tried suicide last Friday. I took 25 medicines. I woke up in hospital."

The law is still failing women like Parveen. Because she is not on a spousal visa, the DDVC does not apply. For now, SBS is paying the rent on a bed and breakfast for her, without which she would be destitute.

Parveen's story is in stark contrast to Farida's, who is on the receiving end of the DDVC. "Yesterday I got my leave to remain," Farida says after describing how she came to SBS, her hand hiding a shy smile. "My feet have got earth underneath them now. I am on stable ground." This is what the DDVC means. "I can get education, choose a career. I am going to do teacher training."

Farida looks up. "I know I am very lucky. There are many ladies like me, many who can't even speak English, being abused by their husbands and in-laws. They all need help too. I hope people can help them."

The names of women (and that of "Parveen's" husband) telling their story have been changed to protect their identities.

**Ros Wynne-Jones** is an award-winning journalist who writes for British national newspapers about UK and global poverty, and social justice issues.

For more information about the Destitution Domestic Violence Concession, please see Hannana Siddiqui's article, "Ending the Stark Choice: Domestic Violence or Destitution in the UK," published in opendemocracy.net on December 3, 2013.