

Services for abused Asian women are vital – but few and far between. **Caroline Thorpe** visits a specialist refuge

Tahira's fingers are never still. They rake through the charms dangling from her mobile phone, worrying the cascading adornments for all their worth. She is as fragile as you can imagine a person can be.

The abuse that two months ago brought her here, to a specialist refuge for Asian women who have suffered domestic violence, is distressingly fresh. Her tiny frame strives to contain her emotions as she talks about escaping her abusive family. 'It's like a big world that's opened up to me now,' she says. She is 16.

It seems altogether wrong to call Tahira fortunate. The terrible reality is that in a sense she is (see box). Though domestic violence affects a quarter of women during their lifetimes, in 2004 there was less than one refuge place per 10,000 people according to Home Office figures. Refuges specifically offering sanctuary for Asian women are even harder to find.

'There are very few specialist refuges in comparison with mixed refuges, as it were,' says Rubia Bhola, residential scheme manager at the refuge, run by Asra Housing Association which, she says, was the first in England to only accept women from the Indian sub-continent. 'Specialist refuges only account for quite a small percentage in terms of general refuge space.'

As a result, the refuge's available places, for six women and 10 children, are always full. 'As soon as we have a vacancy we have referrals coming in, and we often have to decline referrals because we're full,' says Ms Bhola. 'There's a real demand for specialist services, for Asian refuges.'

Ms Bhola – who has spent 11 years working with domestic violence victims, eight of those with Asian women – says Asian women's cases are often particularly complex. 'There are a number of issues specifically affecting Asian women who experience domestic violence,' she says.

One of these – abuse within forced marriages – has caught national media attention recently. Just last month a Leeds man was jailed for life for the murder of his teenage wife, who he had married by arrangement.

Ms Bhola says it's not always the husbands who bring violence to arranged marriages. Often it's members of the victim's own family. 'It can start at quite a young age for some women and it's not necessarily the case that the parents have found someone and the women are saying "no, I don't want to marry him".'

'It's usually the case that there's always been this constant pressure that

the woman will be forced into marriage. She may be sent abroad to marry somebody within the family or community. Examples would be within the Bangladeshi, Indian or Pakistani community where parents will consider sending women back [to the Indian sub-continent]. So there's always the threat that they might be sent back and not returned until they are married.'

The picture is further complicated where honour crimes come into play. In these instances, women are abused by family members who deem them to have brought shame on the family, perhaps by marrying outside the community. Ms Bhola says the refuge takes in 'a lot' of young women who are experiencing violence from their immediate family.

Extended problem

It doesn't end there. The women who come to Asra's two Asian women's refuges are often escaping more than one perpetrator. A common scenario is for women to be abused both by their husband and their in-laws, who Asian couples often live with. Even if they don't live together, there is often considerable contact with extended families, says Ms Bhola. 'We've had cases where women are escaping their mother-in-laws, sister-in-laws who have been quite abusive. And that's both verbal and physical abuse.'

Such complex needs may be why refuge staff have seen increasing rates of self-harm among those they've supported in the last few years. The women themselves offer various explanations: the violence itself, forced marriage, not being accepted for who they are (sometimes linked to sexuality), and pressures from their families and communities.

Added to this is the fact that Asian women can find themselves more isolated from help than other domestic violence victims. Language barriers, lack of financial independence and restricted movements can all hamper efforts to access support.

'If an Asian woman has a job, that Asian household would expect her to be dropped off and picked up. She will have no time



Protected places

New beginnings

Nanaki is in her early 20s and has two young children. The youngest was born while she was at the refuge, where she has lived for seven months.

'I'm Sikh, my husband was Muslim, my family disapproved so I moved in with my in-laws. There were lots of problems with my mother-in-law.

'I went to a centre to talk about my problems and they referred me to the domestic violence co-ordinator. They referred me to the [Asra] refuge.

'I was pregnant when I came here. They talked to me about how I was feeling. I was confused. I was working part-time and I was picked up and dropped off. My bank card was with my husband so I had to ask him for money.

'I'd been with my partner for 10 years. We had an Islamic marriage ceremony five years ago and when I got pregnant with my son, we had the registry office ceremony.'

'They made sure I didn't know anybody in the borough before I came here; [my husband] has no family here, so I felt safe.

'But at the time that didn't really matter. No matter where you go you're just apprehensive. But there are people here who speak the same language, cook the same foods. There is a community.

'It's not just given me my confidence back. It works for me to focus on all the good things, everything goes more smoothly.

'Now I've been offered [accommodation] with Asra. I'm hoping to stay here for another couple of weeks. The new place is lovely. Nice and small

for me and the kids. [The refuge] is just something until you feel much more comfortable. It's been really hard as well, but I've got a future now. I don't think I could put into words how much it's helped.'

Tahira has been at the refuge for nearly two months. She is 16.

'I used to suffer from domestic violence at home. [Leaving] was all of a sudden. I wasn't expecting to leave.

'It was Eid when I left. I went to the police station. Because I'm not from that borough they made me go back to my borough police station.

'At least I've got a roof over my head. My caseworker is helping me to build my confidence, to be independent. They made me feel really welcome.

'At the moment I can't see my friends because my family are back at my home, and they are going to threaten them. Every day is like another day. Every day I wake up alone.

'[Being with other Asian women] doesn't really make a difference because they're from totally different situations. Everyone's doing their own things. Like we don't share the same beliefs. We all talk English with each other.

'But [being here] has helped me a lot because I used to be really scared when I was back home. I didn't know what to cook. I was cooking pot noodles for about two weeks when I got here. Now I cook curries. I can cook. I've been to the library. It's like a big world that's opened up to me now.'

Names have been changed to protect the women's identities.

for herself,' explains Kiron Mahal, Asra's head of housing. For example, one woman at the second of Asra's Asian women's refuges, had never handled money or been on a bus until she arrived there. Many have no idea who owns the home they have just fled or how to navigate the benefits system they may now need to access for the first time.

Lack of experience is particularly acute for women who find themselves caught up in the immigration system. Women must be married for two years before they can be granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK. During this time, they cannot access public funds or, crucially, housing. For what Ms Bhola describes as the 'high numbers of women' who flee domestic violence within the first two years of their marriage, this is a real problem.

Last year the Home Office wrote to all English councils acknowledging the issue. It described 'a small group of women who are currently falling through the safety net', warning that such women are often forced to return home to face further abuse and even homicide.

Asra's refuges do accommodate women without recourse to public money, but doing so strains funds. A week's stay at either refuge costs about £117. The council pays for the support work with Supporting People cash, but – unless the woman has a child – the public purse remains shut for service charges and everyday living costs.

Asra's own fundraising efforts can only make up the difference in some cases, says Ms Mahal. 'It's very limited because obviously we're a housing association and other people's rents can't pay for that sort of thing.'

But, she adds, funding-wise the refuges haven't done badly. The one in Brent, for example, bucked the trend when its Supporting People review came and went with no cuts. However, in a trade-off of sorts, Asra has since started a borough-wide floating support service for any Asian woman, regardless of tenure, who is experiencing domestic violence. 'What we've done is expanded our services rather than [the council]

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taking a real hit on the refuge,' explains Ms Mahal.

'We felt this was a good way of increasing the value of the service to the community. The refuge is a great asset in providing help for Asian women escaping violence,' says Helen Duckworth, Brent Council's supported housing policy manager.

A full-time female Asian worker offers support, advice and information to victims. If they can get out to a safe place, she'll meet them in person. She also gives advice over the phone on a wide range of issues including benefits, finances, housing, legal problems, contact with children and immigration.

For women staying at the refuge, four case workers provide much the same service. Advocacy work and housing advice are routine. Staff say it is important for women to move on from the refuge before they become too dependent on the high levels of support.

But finding accommodation for women with no children can be particularly tricky. 'Local authorities usually look for additional vulnerabilities as well as a domestic violence history,' says Ms Bhola.

Ms Mahal wants more commitment from other housing associations and councils to provide single person accommodation for refuge leavers, 'because otherwise it becomes a bottle neck and we're not providing the service we should'.

Women with children in the refuge benefit from its children's services during their stay. Asra's fundraising pays for a school house in the back garden staffed by a full-time child support worker who provides therapeutic support and creative activities. Most if not all of the children will at least have witnessed physical abuse, if not experienced it first hand.

Whatever their circumstances, the overwhelming emotion experienced by those arriving at the refuge, says

Ms Bhola, is relief. 'Initially it can be really difficult for women because this is probably the first time they've ever had to leave home, be on their own with their children. There are loads of fears around that for women.

'There's an issue about building trust and establishing relationships with staff. And once they begin to do that there is a sense of relief. I mean a situation like Tahira where she's now saying she's actually got a future.'

As soon as we have a vacancy we have referrals coming in, and we often have to decline referrals because we're full. There's a real demand for specialist services, for Asian refuges