

BREAKING  
THE  
VIOLENT  
SILENCE

TRANSFORMING THE LIVES OF WOMEN  
WHO SUFFER DOMESTIC ABUSE

*Al-Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Centre*

# **BREAKING THE VIOLENT SILENCE**

---

## **TRANSFORMING THE LIVES OF WOMEN WHO SUFFER DOMESTIC ABUSE**

---

**SOUAD TALSI MBE**

Founder Of Al-Hasaniya  
Moroccan Women's Centre

---

with an essay by

**LUCY HADLEY**

Head of Policy and Campaigns at  
Women's Aid Federation of England

© Al-Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Project Ltd.

May 2021

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	5
CURRENT LEGISLATION AND ITS IMPACT UPON WOMEN .....	11
OUR ORGANISATION: AL-HASANIYA .....	15
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND YOUNG GIRLS .....	21
THE VITAL ROLE OF PARTNERSHIPS IN OUR WORK .....	24
AL-HASANIYA CASE STUDIES .....	26
FATIMA'S STORY .....	27
KHADIJA'S STORY .....	32
AICHA'S STORY .....	36
AFTERWORD .....	40

## INTRODUCTION

---

**T**hroughout history women have stood and worked alongside their male counterparts. They have fought in battles and played an equal part in active struggle. Yet despite the progress of feminist movements and human rights campaigns, and the financial independence which many millions of women have achieved across the globe, women are often silent breadwinners, their voices muffled.

When Al-Hasaniya applied for a grant to document the deadly violent silence which so many women endure due to domestic violence, we were hoping to be able to share our experiences with the public and raise awareness of the issue. We wanted to bring attention to the fact that all is far from well, especially amongst women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, women who often find themselves isolated and without support.

Migration is rarely smooth, free from obstacles and difficulties, even for those who choose to emigrate for love or work. Leaving one's home and the emotional support of an extended family can be overwhelming. In some cases it can leave the migrant vulnerable to exploitation. Sadly, women from all different backgrounds across the globe suffer from violence. However we do believe that women who are far from home are particularly prone to such suffering as they are alone, without the support of their family.

UN Women's *Ending Violence Against Women* campaign paints a terrifying picture of the endemic and global problem of domestic violence. It details empirical studies which confirm that the vast majority of women who are harmed or killed are known to the perpetrator. The availability of data on violence against women and girls has increased significantly in recent years, and data on the prevalence of intimate partner violence is now available for at least 106 countries worldwide.

But no one could have imagined the scale of the increase in domestic violence which the world has witnessed since the beginning of 2020. The sudden outbreak of Covid-19 hit women especially hard, and the UN Women's research states that the increase of those suffering violence has been alarming and worrying.

According to the UN Women's own data:

**Globally, 35 per cent of women have at some time experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, or sexual violence by a non-partner.**

This figure does not include sexual harassment. Some national studies show that the number could be as high as 70 per cent of women, and that rates of depression, abortion, and acquiring HIV are higher in women who have experienced this type of violence, in comparison to women who have not.

- **Calls to helplines have increased five-fold in some countries** as rates of reported intimate partner violence increase because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Restricted movement, social isolation, and economic insecurity are increasing women's vulnerability to violence in the home across the world.
- **By September 2020, 48 countries had integrated prevention and response to violence against women and girls into their COVID-19 action plans**, and 121 countries had adopted measures to strengthen services for women survivors of violence during the global crisis. However more efforts are urgently needed.
- **137 women are killed by a member of their family every day.** It is estimated that of the 87,000 women who were intentionally killed in 2017 across the globe, more than half (50,000) were killed by intimate partners or family members. More than a third (30,000) of the women intentionally killed in 2017 were killed by their current or former intimate partner.
- **Less than 40 per cent of the women who experience violence seek help of any sort.** In most countries with available data on this issue, amongst women who do seek help most turn to family and friends. Very few turn to formal institutions, such as police and health services. Less than 10 per cent of those seeking help appealed to the police.

Their report *Access to Justice for Women & Girls during the Covid-19 Pandemic* (August 2020 England and Wales) and the report published by Women's Resource Centre (June 2020) have examined the impact of the pandemic on family and criminal courts, specifically for victims and survivors of *Violence Against Women & Girls* (VAWG). Both reports paint a very grim picture, and call for an urgent overhaul of all services, including

increased vigilance and support for those unlikely to be able ask for help. According to the Women's Resource Centre's report, women and young girls from minoritised communities are likely to suffer compounded anguish due to the current inequalities in service delivery. Such inequality is a fundamental obstacle to achieving an equal access to justice for all. The report concludes that structural inequalities in welfare, and access to health services and the criminal justice system, greatly exacerbate the situation causing greater suffering, and in exceptional cases death.

The report adds that the state response to VAWG, from criminal justice through to health and welfare, tends to be piecemeal, with voluntary sector specialist women's support services run on a shoestring.

Our organisation can certainly confirm that this is indeed the situation.

Our staff support our vulnerable clients with little support or recognition. The experiences and needs of disabled, Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME), migrant, homeless, and destitute women and girls are marginalised and often invisible. There persists a culture which places emphasis on the victim's behaviour, rather than examining what drives a perpetrator to abuse.

\* <https://www.womenscentrecornwall.org.uk/news/items/access-to-justice-for-women--girls-during-covid-19-pandemic>

\* [https://forumcentral.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Comparative\\_ExecSum.pdf](https://forumcentral.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Comparative_ExecSum.pdf)

The problem has recently been further compounded by the Home Secretary's Domestic Abuse Bill, which seeks to couple domestic violence with extremism. Our organisation has joined with several other women's groups in campaigning for the recognition that all violence against women is unacceptable, and that religious or far-right extremism must not impact on the delivery of services to those seeking help and refuge. It is the case

that violence encountered by women may at times be due to extremism, erroneous religious narratives, and white supremacy ideologies, but in the overwhelming majority of cases which we have dealt with the violence stems from the perpetrator asserting control.

Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted BAME citizens, who are much more likely to become seriously ill or lose their lives. We have witnessed this at first hand. The number of enquiries and calls for help which we received between the months of March and June 2019 were tripled within the first three months of the pandemic in 2020.

There are many reasons why minoritised women may not report abuse and seek help, such as:

- No family support in the UK
- Language barrier
- Inability to navigate the system
- Immigration status and fear of deportation
- Erroneous religious narratives
- Ethnic traditions and customs
- Lack of adequate resources to educate, empower and inform this client group
- Psychological control
- Inequality in service delivery due to racism, ineffective available support, and insensitive handling of the victim.
- Women may fear that reporting abuse to the police could involve interactions with others which may place themselves and loved ones at increased risk of contracting Covid-19



In these unprecedented times never has the call to end violence against women and young girls been so urgent. We know that even in developed Western societies, where information and help is readily available, some sections of our communities are not getting the help that they need, and for a variety of reasons.

We want to help shed a light on this insidious social disease. For we believe that we all have a duty to fight against domestic violence, wherever and whenever we encounter it.

The violence must stop, and it must stop now.

**CURRENT LEGISLATION AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN  
AND YOUNG GIRLS FACING VIOLENCE IN THE UK :  
The Legal and Policy Framework for Tackling Violence against  
Women and Girls**

LUCY HADLEY

Head of Policy & Campaigns

at Women's Aid Federation of England

.....

**T**he commitment of the government to ending violence against women and girls lies in how effective their laws, strategies, policies and funding are in tackling it. It also lies in an integrated approach to tackling violence against women and girls as a form of discrimination against women, which is rooted in gender inequality and other forms of oppression. Specialist services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, like Al-Hasaniya, deliver life-saving work to support and empower women experiencing

all forms of VAWG – including domestic abuse, sexual violence, FGM (female genital mutilation), so called ‘honour-based’ abuse, and forced marriage. They need national government and public sector agencies to deliver a joined up and consistent response to VAWG, which protects and supports all women – including those facing discrimination due to their race, ethnicity, immigration status and other identities.

So how effective is the current government’s approach?

The UK is signed up to critical international conventions which recognise VAWG as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women. The landmark Istanbul Convention commits governments to adopt an integrated approach to eliminating violence against women – including prevention through eradicating prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices which are based on women’s inequality, and delivering equal protection and support for all victims.

But whilst the UK signed this landmark treaty in 2012, it is still yet to ratify it into our law. The long-awaited Domestic Abuse Bill, currently progressing through the House of Lords, will finally enable the government to do so. But at Women’s Aid we remain concerned that the UK will not be compliant with critical parts of this agreement. Women and children experiencing violence and abuse are routinely turned away from the specialist support services which under the Convention they are entitled to, without discrimination on any ground.

Organisations led ‘by and for’ Black, minoritised and migrant women continue to campaign against the exclusion of women with insecure immigration status from the Bill - fighting for critical amendments which will guarantee women with ‘no recourse to public funds’ access to support, welfare systems and legal tools on an equal basis, and ensure that women can safely report domestic abuse without fear of immigration enforcement.

Without these critical changes to the Bill, we will continue to see migrant women face insurmountable barriers to accessing their rights to protection and support. The legislation also must go far further to deliver the changes survivors need across housing, the family courts, social security and many more. The Bill must also be underpinned by sustainable funding for all life-saving specialist support services, including those led ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised women, if it is to make a real difference to survivors’ lives.

COVID-19 has laid bare the lack of protection and support for women and children experiencing domestic abuse and demonstrated the urgent need to improve responses. But we fear that the government is going backwards. At the end of 2020 a highly concerning decision was made – without any consultation or scrutiny – about the future of the UK’s response to violence against women. After over a decade of cross-party consensus on the need for an integrated VAWG strategy, the Home Office have decided to deliver a ‘separate’ domestic abuse strategy. This undermines our international obligations to provide a joined-up response and ignores women’s lived experiences of violence and abuse – these are not isolated crimes, they are connected and underpinned by women’s inequality.

Services led ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised women have expressed serious concerns about the ‘othering’ impact of dividing the strategies for the women they support. For example, a girl who is threatened with a forced marriage is already experiencing a highly controlling and abusive family, and may face rape and domestic abuse by a spouse. Where will she fit within these two strategies? The government’s decision will fragment responses and risks undermining funding for organisations like Al-Hasaniya – who work across all forms of VAWG.

We fear this decision will undo decades of work to build understanding about what drives violence against women and girls, how to prevent it, and work towards a coordinated, consistent response for all survivors.

Al-Hasaniya provides a lifeline for women experiencing all forms of violence, and works day in day out to build their independence and empowerment – supporting women’s equality and freedom. We need the government to do the same, and deliver a strategy which protects and supports all women equally.

## OUR ORGANISATION : AL-HASANIYA MOROCCAN WOMEN'S CENTRE

---

**A**l-Hasaniya was founded in 1985, as a direct response to the language barriers faced by many migrant tax-paying Moroccan women resident in the UK, when trying to access healthcare through the NHS. Al-Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Project Ltd aimed to bridge the gap between statutory providers and patients. It came to play a significant role in shaping the health services for the Arabic-speaking inhabitants of West London, which subsequently set the precedent for other London boroughs.

Since then Al-Hasaniya's initial project has evolved to support Arabic-speaking women London-wide, developing a programme designed to serve the health, welfare, educational and cultural needs of Moroccan and Arabic-speaking women, helping them to access services which may otherwise be denied them due to cultural, language and social barriers.

In 2010 Al-Hasaniya received the Guardian Charity Award and in 2017 it was recognised by the United Nations. It acquired membership to the UN Non-Governmental Civil Society and was bestowed special consultative status within the UN Economic Social Council (ECOSOC).

Today Al-Hasaniya's work strives to tackle the root causes of poverty, disadvantage and inequality experienced by the Moroccan and Arabic-speaking community in London. Through a predominantly user-led approach, Al-Hasaniya provides a space for women to develop confidence, self-empowerment, and self-expression.

Ultimately Al-Hasaniya enables women to integrate and participate fully in their communities outside the centre, helping to prevent the problems which these women have encountered from perpetuating in future generations. To this end the centre's work has recently developed to include children and men from the Moroccan and Arabic-speaking community. This is of particular importance when it comes to tackling violence in the home against mothers and young girls.

One of the core projects of our centre is the Domestic Violence Project, an overstretched frontline service which often saves lives. Throughout our 35 years of serving Moroccan and Arabic-speaking women we have supported users experiencing many kinds of violence. Whether physical, verbal, financial, emotional, or sexual, the violence is unacceptable.

It must now be brought to the attention of the public so that we can educate and inform policy, to prevent the problem repeating in the next generation. The aim was and is to support these women, who are often regarded as victims, so that they can become survivors: educated, happy, and independent.



## 35 YEARS AT AL-HASANIYA

---











## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND YOUNG GIRLS

---

**V**iolence in the home is one of the most pervasive human rights violations of our time. And whilst the devastating effects of domestic violence on women are well documented, far less is known about the impact on those who are from BAME communities in the UK.

As an organisation which supports those who often come under the radar, we know that Moroccan and Arabic-speaking women are in effect a minority within a minority. A poor command of the English language, difficulties encountered when navigating our legal systems, and confusions around immigration status, often leave victims of domestic violence too scared to risk leaving the perpetrator to seek help and protection.

Our domestic violence project works within the Angelou partnership. Angelou is a partnership of 10 specialist organisations which have come together to support women and girls experiencing domestic or sexual violence. It is a tri-borough project, and is a frontline service which finds itself overwhelmed and oversubscribed. With each new wave of migration within this client group we see an increase in calls from victims of violence

However, nothing could have prepared us for what happened in 2020. The pandemic which descended upon us without warning, separating us from loved ones and destroying livelihoods and mental health, severely impacted those women who were already socially, financially and emotionally vulnerable.

We have never in living memory witnessed a surge of violence such as the one which we have seen during the period of the pandemic, and imposed lockdown and confinement. Calls to domestic violence helplines increased fivefold in the first few weeks of the lockdown in the UK. At the very beginning of the pandemic we called upon the statutory and voluntary sectors alike to prepare for the worst. We predicted a surge in domestic abuse, as vulnerable women were suddenly confined inside the home with their abusers. In response to Covid-19 we were advised that our homes were the safest place. But for so many women and young girls home was never safe.

Between April and June 2019 our centre dealt with 43 domestic violence cases which needed full intervention and the removal of the victim to a safe house. During the same period in 2020 we saw the number triple to 103 cases which needed police and legal intervention, in addition to which we had over 200 enquiries. We were overwhelmed, and we had to act.

So we secured extra funding and reinforced capacity to ensure that anyone who called our centre, regardless of where they lived within the UK, could access our services. We were no longer willing to deny access to help and

support simply because a woman lived outside a catchment area. These were extraordinary times and they demanded extraordinary measures.

According to the UNWomen for every three months of lockdown an additional 15 million women around the world were expected to be affected by violence, leaving support services, counselling, and shelters for survivors severely strained. Recognising the enormity of the pandemic of domestic violence, the UNWomen has put aside a \$25m UN fund to tackle the problem worldwide. A drop in the ocean no doubt, but a very welcome package to help deal with the impact of such devastating violence.

Faced with this new wave of violence and untold suffering, we want to help educate, empower, and engage all who are concerned with this issue, and initiate a dialogue so that we can explore how we might better support our women and young girls in the future.

## THE VITAL ROLE OF PARTNERSHIPS IN OUR WORK

---

**A**s a charity supporting mainly migrant women we are often faced with the challenge of how best to advise and support women suffering domestic abuse in the UK, without undermining their legal rights in their home country. The women who come to our centre experience multiple belonging. They belong to two countries, the UK and their country of birth, and so any action taken to safeguard them here in the UK must always be measured against any potentially adverse effects in their home country. This is of particular significance in cases relating to international marriage, or children with dual nationality.

We quickly learned how vital it is to know and understand how family laws operate in the countries from which our clients originate. It is also important that we maintain a dialogue with the relevant consular and

diplomatic services. Over the years we have built a network of partnerships which are crucial to our work, as women are often abandoned abroad with no immediate support to enable them to return to the UK. This is of particular concern for women with limited leave to remain as the spouse of a British national, a client group whose numbers are increasing.

The Souss Massa centre in Morocco is a not-for-profit organisation which supports the wellbeing of clients who are unable to support themselves, particularly those who find themselves in a legally contentious position. The centre was established in Agadir in the South of Morocco, to support and help the local community. Our partnership with this centre has meant that its founder Zaina Idhali, a lawyer by profession, has undertaken to help and ensure justice for clients from the UK who find themselves stranded in Morocco through no fault of their own.

Many have been abandoned with their children, or during pregnancy, simply because the British husband has decided he no longer wishes to continue with the marriage. Immigration status often poses a problem for those finding themselves with limited leave to remain in the UK, based solely on their marriage to the British partner, when they are abandoned in Morocco without any documentation.

Through helping to facilitate the process of ensuring the renewal of all necessary documentation before applying for entry clearance to the UK, Zaina Idhali's expertise, compassion and dedication has been invaluable in helping us achieve justice for these women. The Souss Massa centre and its founder are fundamental to our work supporting victims of domestic violence and abuse who often find themselves facing a very unknown future. We are deeply grateful.



## AL-HASANIYA CASE STUDIES

---

**I**t is impossible to convey the suffering of women who have experienced domestic violence, and it cannot be easy to recount such experiences. But we feel it is important to share these stories, so that the experiences of these women can hopefully one day become a thing of the past.

## FATIMA'S STORY

---

**F**atima was referred to our Arabic-speaking domestic abuse service by a local childrens' centre, due to concerns about her welfare. Fatima turned to the centre because she was homeless, and on arrival she detailed to the staff her multiple experiences of traumatic domestic abuse, both in her native Arab country and in the UK. She had on more than one occasion fled her home in the UK in fear for her life.

Fatima was assessed by our Arabic-speaking Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA). She explained that she had been abused by her first husband whilst living in her native Arab country. She detailed instances of severe physical, verbal and sexual abuse, during which her husband had raped her, beaten her on an almost daily basis, and regularly demeaned her using profane language. Fatima recounted that her husband would behave

in this way in front of their children, which had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

Due to the cultural traditions of the country Fatima was forced to wear the veil, and she was not allowed out of the house without her husband. But she eventually managed to flee to the UK, leaving her children behind in the care of relatives. She explained that she had hoped to make changes in her life, and find safety and security. Her plan was to settle in the UK, and then bring her children to the UK to live with her.

Fatima went on to explain that she had been unable to speak English, she had limited savings with no income - nor recourse to public funds, due to her insecure immigration status – and because of this she felt vulnerable. She was essentially destitute. In the city in which she was living she made acquaintance with members from one of the Muslim communities and was introduced to a man who proposed to her. Fatima craved safety, stability and protection, and she believed that she had found it.

The couple were married under Islamic Sharia law (a marriage which is performed by an Imam at the mosque, under the jurisprudence of Islam, and is not legally binding). Following the marriage Fatima's second husband also turned out to be abusive. Fatima detailed physical, verbal, sexual and financial abuse. She explained that she was traumatized. Her husband was controlling and would not allow her out of the house. He would regularly rape, beat and insult her. She explained that she was terrified of him, as her husband was a powerful member of the community and was linked to people of influence. She said she felt trapped, with no way out.

Fatima once again managed to flee, and she settled in another part of the UK. Once again she was introduced to a man, whom she married under Islamic law. She explained that she wanted to settle down, and she believed the many promises which her new husband made to her. But Fatima

subsequently discovered that her husband was already legally married in the UK, and he had children with his legal wife. As his second Islamic wife Fatima did not have any legal rights in the UK.

Fatima detailed how her husband would make abusive comments about her figure and weight. She told how he would take her along to events, where he would ask her to relate her story of abuse in her native country and her resulting destitution, to beg for alms. He would then force her to hand over the money which she had been given. Fatima said that her husband set up a Go Fund Me page which raised over £2000. Once again, he pocketed the money.

Fatima was also subjected to a form of pimping by her husband, who would advertise her services and profit from her financially. She also detailed how he would rape and threaten her.

Fatima's mental health deteriorated, and she said that she started self-harming. She described using broken glass to cut herself. When her husband saw the wounds he would threaten her, saying that if a professional saw the wounds on her arm she would be sectioned and then deported.

Fatima said she began to feel hopeless. She felt there was no way out. When our IDVA met Fatima she was expressing suicidal thoughts. She recounted how she would wander aimlessly in front of the buses, with no regard for her safety or life.

She also described how she had temporarily lived with her mother-in-law, and younger brother-in-law. She said that her mother-in-law was a matriarch, who ran the house under a strict regime. After 6pm Fatima said she was forbidden to leave her bedroom, as her mother-in-law did not want her younger son to see her. She said she was not allowed to use the bathroom or kitchen. She would sometimes beg to use them, but her pleas would be ignored.

Fatima's in-laws then moved her to live with her sister-in-law, where for the first month she was not allowed to leave the house or even approach the window. She said that she was a prisoner, and she had to seek permission before doing anything.

Fatima went on to explain how her husband then took her back to his mother's home, where he locked her in the basement. She said he would bring her food and water, but he would not allow her out or to interact with anyone else. As a result of being locked up Fatima developed an infection on her leg, which left her in extreme pain. She said that the whole family came together to discuss whether or not they would let her seek medical treatment. This was because they were in fear of the abuse being discovered.

Shortly after this incident, Fatima said that her husband told her she must find a way of leaving the country. He said that the UK was 'his' country, and that Fatima 'didn't belong here.' As a result Fatima ended up on the streets. She was too afraid to stay in the same neighbourhood where she had lived with her husband, as he held a significant position in the community. She was also afraid of her husband because he had told her that he had connections to terror organisations in the UK, and Fatima said that he had appeared to sympathise with terrorist organisations based outside the UK.

## COMMENTARY

We can clearly see how several factors led to Fatima being vulnerable. She did not understand the English language or have knowledge of the support systems in the UK, and she had little money, which made it much easier for men to take advantage of her. The cycle of abuse was repeated multiple times and for a variety of reasons, such as the effects of trauma, the desire to feel safe and secure, the need for support, and fear. We know that perpetrators exercise their power to try and control their victims, as is evident in Fatima's story. Her husbands used their knowledge of the English

language and the UK, their financial security, and a manipulative distortion of Islamic practices, to entice Fatima and then abuse her. These men isolated Fatima, forced her to become dependent, and used her mental health and immigration status to keep her under their control.

Rough sleeping is challenging for anyone who becomes homeless. For a victim of domestic abuse the trauma of homelessness, coupled with the trauma of violence severely increases the vulnerability of the woman. Fatima's mental health further deteriorated through rough sleeping, and she was unable to find any organisations to help and support her.

Fatima described approaching one service, where due to language barriers, cultural differences, and a lack of training, she was unable to find any support. The service worker wanted Fatima to recount in detail her past experiences. When Fatima explained how traumatic she would find this, she says the worker was disrespectful and rude. Fatima says she was not shown any understanding or compassion.

This example highlights the importance of the role of the IDVA worker and Al-Hasaniya as an organisation. When we are dealing with multiple identities and cross-cultural communication, we can see that it is not simply a question of language. Cultural sensitivity and understanding are needed if we are to effectively support the victim. Al-Hasaniya provides a service which is not only delivered in a client's mother tongue, it is also a culturally specific and sensitive service. This ensures a much better engagement. Our clients feel understood and so are able to express themselves, and share their experiences in a safe and reassuring environment.

## KHADIJA'S STORY

---

**K**hadija was referred to our domestic abuse project by the police, after she fled her marital home due to an escalation in abuse. The police had placed her in emergency overnight accommodation, but were aware that she needed further support from a specialised domestic abuse service. The police were already aware of our organisation and had previously turned to us for support, when dealing with clients who did not speak English and required a culturally sensitive approach. We were therefore asked if we could assess Khadija and refer her for further support where needed.

Our Arabic-speaking IDVA met with Khadija for an assessment and carried out a CAADA (Coordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse) DASH (Domestic Abuse, Stalking, Harassment, and Honor-based violence) risk assessment, where Khadia was rated as medium risk. Khadija disclosed that

she had suffered physical, emotional, verbal and financial abuse. She said that her husband regularly hit her, and that she had shown the police the bruises which covered her body as the result of a recent assault.

Khadija also explained that her husband would swear at her, insult her, and belittle her. She said she was financially dependent on him, as he was the sole earner. Khadija was unable to work and did not have recourse to public funds, due to her insecure immigration status. There was also an issue of sexual abuse, as she disclosed that her husband had recorded the two of them having sexual intercourse and had then sent the recording to an unknown person, without her consent.

The IDVA assessed Khadija's needs to be the following:

- Immigration Support, with regard to a pending application for asylum
- Financial support, as Khadija was totally reliant on her husband
- Housing support, with the aim of securing independent accommodation
- Support navigating the Criminal Justice System (CJS), with regard to proceeding with charges against the husband

The IDVA contacted the solicitor in charge of Khadija's immigration case, who informed us that she would not be able to proceed with the case as Khadija was destitute and did not have the funds to pay for her services. The IDVA then began to investigate the possibility of securing alternative legal support.

Khadija was also ineligible for housing support from the council, and several refuges declined our referrals because she had no recourse to public funds. Khadija finally managed to secure safe accommodation when she moved in with friends. But she was forced to move from the home of one friend to another every week, and this caused her to feel unsettled and unsafe.



The IDVA made a referral for Khadija to be supported by Migrants Organise, one of many charities which help asylum seekers. They were able to assess Khadija and provide her with legal support. They assisted her with applying to the council for housing, arguing that as a partner of an EEA (European Economic Area) citizen she had equal rights, and that since her husband had exercised his treaty rights Khadija was therefore also eligible for public funds. The application was accepted, and Khadija was placed in temporary accommodation.

The IDVA also helped Khadija to understand police and CPS procedures pertaining to her case. Due to the language barrier Khadija was unable to communicate with external agencies without the help of an interpreter. When one was not available the IDVA was able to bridge the gap and communicate with the police on behalf of Khadija.

## COMMENTARY

This case presented many other challenges. The police were frustrated in their efforts to help Khadija, as they were unable to unlock the husband's phone due to his refusal to give them the PIN. There was further frustration when the CPS dropped the revenge porn charges due to insufficient evidence.

The lockdown due to COVID-19 caused many trials to be postponed. Khadija's was one such case. Eventually the trial took place remotely, but the case was dismissed from court with no further action. As part of the process of helping to empower Khadija, the IDVA supported her in appealing against the CPS's decision. The decision was subsequently upheld, but it did provide an opportunity for Khadija to voice her thoughts and feelings, and be heard.

This was a painful and disappointing outcome for Khadija. She had made a serious charge of assault, supported by police photographs of her injuries

and detailed medical reports. The IDVA was able to explore this frustration and disappointment with Khadija during support sessions.

This case highlights the need for the CPS to provide support for victims and survivors of abuse, who have undergone the enormously difficult process of proceeding with charges against perpetrators. As a culturally specific service we are also aware of how particularly challenging this is for women from ethnic minority backgrounds. These women often face pressure from within their family to drop the charges. They may believe that going to court is not acceptable within their culture, and that police involvement is sufficient. Our aim as an organisation is therefore not only to offer emotional and practical support, but also to empower these women to hold the perpetrators of these crimes to account.

Today we are pleased to say that Khadija is training to become a carer and is trying to move on with her life, to focus on the positive and learn from her experiences.

## AICHA'S STORY

---

Aicha self-referred to Al-Hasaniya's domestic abuse project. She was suffering severe sexual abuse, alongside physical, verbal and emotional abuse. She disclosed to our Arabic-speaking IDVA that she was in fear of her husband, and said she wished to flee the relationship. But she was unsure of her rights and the options available to her, and so did not know what to do.

Aicha explained that she had first met her husband online, and that she would see him whenever he visited her native Arab country. She said that she felt they had a good rapport. But her family did not approve of the relationship, partly due to the age gap and also due to the fact that her future husband lived abroad in the UK. Despite this Aicha developed strong feelings for him, and the couple married. Arrangements were then made for Aicha to move to the UK to settle with her new husband.

When Aicha arrived in the UK she moved in with her husband and his family. She described how loving and welcoming they were towards her at first. But as time went on, she noticed that her husband was no longer physically affectionate towards her. She said that she would dress in smart clothes and always wear make-up, so that her husband would find her attractive. Then one day she said she came across her husband watching gay pornography.

Aicha immediately confronted him. She asked him what he was doing, and why she wasn't enough for him. She said this was the first time that her husband hit her. He became verbally abusive towards her, and then raped her.

This was the beginning of a long cycle of abuse. Aicha's husband regularly abused her physically and verbally, and regularly raped her. Aicha suffered this prolonged trauma in silence, as she had no one in the UK whom she could speak to about such things. When she did eventually confide in her sister, she told Aicha that there is no such thing as rape between a husband and wife.

## COMMENTARY

After hearing Aicha's story our Arabic speaking IDVA completed a CAADA DASH risk assessment and addressed her immediate needs. Aicha confirmed that she was in the UK on a Settlement Visa, with no recourse to public funds. This meant she would not be able to apply for benefits, or present to the council as homeless if she were to leave the marital home. Furthermore, she disclosed that her husband had made repeated threats to curtail her immigration status in the UK, and he had finally carried out this threat. Aicha showed the IDVA a letter she had received from the Home Office, informing her that her husband had contacted them to declare that the marriage had broken down. The Home Office had given Aicha a deadline

by which date she must either seek legal advice or leave the UK.

The IDVA explored the options which were available to Aicha. This included a safety plan - as Aicha was still living with her husband and family-in-law - and an application for a DDV (Destitute Domestic Violence) Concession from the Home Office immigration services, which would give Aicha access to public funds.

Aicha went ahead with the grant application and her application was successful, giving her the right to apply for benefits, approach the council as homeless, or move into a refuge.

The IDVA began the search for refuge spaces, and after several referrals Aicha was accepted. When she moved into the refuge she told us how safe she felt at last, and described how for the first time in many years she had slept through the night, without crying or feeling fear.

As part of our ongoing support we suggested that Aicha should report the abuse to the police. Aicha initially said that she was too afraid to do so whilst she was still living with her husband. But when she moved into the refuge - a safe location unknown to her husband - she was willing to proceed.

She was supported by her refuge worker to detail the abuse for the report. This required her to not only recall the trauma, but also to share intimate and private matters, which can be experienced as particularly embarrassing and shameful for women from an Arab or Islamic background.

The notion that there is no such thing as rape between husband and wife is a belief which we often hear our clients express. It is frequently voiced by a family member, along with the advice to 'be patient, he will change.' We know very well that without professional help the abuser will not change. But such cultural beliefs are deeply rooted, and we are working hard to change them. Supporting women to better understand domestic abuse is

an important part of our work, as we strive to empower women to hold the perpetrators accountable for their actions.

During Aicha's assessment with the IDVA she had described the toll which the abuse had taken on her. She disclosed self-harming, feeling suicidal and experiencing flashbacks of the abuse. The IDVA explained to Aicha the importance of seeking professional help to address her emotional disturbances and psychological pain. Aicha understood and began to see a counsellor. She benefitted greatly from being able to recall her experiences within a safe space, and explore her thoughts and feelings with a compassionate and non-judgmental professional.

.....

*These case studies highlight why we are calling on the UK government to revise its policy within the Domestic Abuse Bill, to ensure that migrant women have the same rights as British women when they are fleeing abuse. Without this change in policy, migrant women in the UK who suffer domestic violence will continue to be failed by our government, and will therefore continue to be forced to remain in abusive relationships.*

## AFTERWORD

---

According to Human Rights Watch, although almost half of the countries which make up the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) have passed laws to combat domestic violence, they have proven ineffective at tackling the problem and curbing the abuse.

Strongly held traditional beliefs - in which men are inherently superior and are the guardians of women - remain entrenched in daily life. These cultural beliefs and traditions travel with both male and female migrants when they leave their home country and settle in the UK. We must not mistakenly assume that migrant women, when they make a new home inside a new Western culture, are relieved of the problems caused by these beliefs. We know very well that this is not the case.

Furthermore, they are possibly in a far more serious predicament than their counterparts in their home countries. This is because they are alone, and do not know how to navigate the system in the host country. The absence of the extended family increases their vulnerability to abuse.

This vulnerability and abuse were the catalyst for founding our small organisation in 1985. Since its inception Al-Hasaniya has been the mouthpiece for Moroccan and Arabic-speaking women and their families. By supporting and empowering these communities, ensuring that they are engaged in the wider society, these individuals are fulfilling their civic responsibility as citizens and accessing their rights.

In the last twenty or so years there has been a string of political upheavals and wars across the Arab world, forcing many women to come to the UK as refugees and migrant workers. At the same time we have seen the faith of Islam misrepresented, and turned into a political ideology which has spawned a violent movement built on erroneous religious narratives. This has led to an increase in horrific abuse against women and young girls.

But nothing could have prepared us for what was to come in 2020. The year saw the world united in fear, despair, uncertainty, and loneliness. The pandemic tore through us like a bullet. A bullet that was silent yet deadly, and where the vulnerable became even more vulnerable to abuse and violence.

As an organisation which prides itself on being a champion for women's voices within our unique community, we knew from the outset that those with limited leave to remain in the UK, or on spousal visas, would be at the mercy of this pandemic and its effects. We voiced our fears, and sadly we were proved right. Minoritised women have been especially affected by the pandemic and the violence it has ignited. There are many reasons for this - and none of them are acceptable.



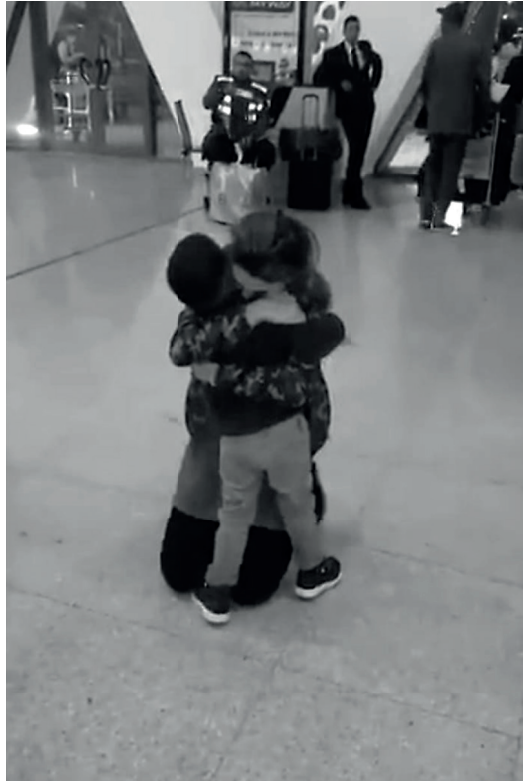
The solidarity which the pandemic created is truly admirable, and we have never before seen our small charities deliver as they have during this crisis. Violence is a social disease which has devastated humanity for centuries, and we all have a duty to do what we can to change the mindset of those who believe that it is acceptable for one human being to control and harm another.

Violence is wrong, and it must be stopped.

Souad Talsi MBE  
Founder of Al-Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Centre  
UK Representative for the Council  
for the Moroccan Community Abroad (CCME)

© Al-Hasaniya Moroccan Women's Project 2021

.....





[www.al-hasaniya.org.uk](http://www.al-hasaniya.org.uk)