Briefing: Supporting Victim-Survivors from Kurdish Community

Coaction Hub: July 2026

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INTRODUCTION

The Coaction Hub is a partnership between AWRC and Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse (STADA) which aims to strengthen the Coordinated Community Response (CCR) to improve responses to Black and minoritised survivors of domestic abuse and harmful practices. The project critically examines models of the CCR, such as MARAC, Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews (DARDRs) as well as risk assessment to determine their effectiveness and explores alternative options. With an aim to improve support responses through training, mentoring, best practice toolkits, and strategic multi-agency collaboration.

CONTEXT

Coaction Hub's DARDRs Strand

Keeping with the ethos of collaboration and co-production, the Coaction Hub is continuing to create a safe and inclusive space for partners to contribute to and shape Phase 2 of the DARDR strand of work. With our partners from a range of by and for agencies in this space, discussions highlighted the need for a series of papers and briefings exploring the nuances within different communities through an intersectional and anti-racist VAWG lens. Our partners highlighted the limited visibility of certain communities from the VAWG lens. They also pointed out how sometimes certain communities are often homogenised, which obscures important differences in experiences of abuse and access to support.

Why this Briefing

Within Coaction Hub's DARDRS Space, a few by and for agencies working with Kurdish and Iranian victim-survivors noted that Kurdish women are often presented as a monolithic group. This can overlook the diversity and complexity of their experiences and support needs.

The discussion also emphasised the need to strengthen visibility and inclusion of other marginalised groups, including Jewish women, Roma, Gypsy and Traveller women, and Eastern European communities, whose experiences of VAWG remain underrepresented in reviews and policy responses. Therefore the aim of these briefings is to strengthen understanding of the complexity and diversity within and across communities, and to inform more survivor-centred, needs-led responses.

Therefore, this paper is part of series briefings on specific communities. In this paper we will focus on Kurdish victim-survivors. This paper was produced with insights from our partners representing the Kurdish community. This paper explores Kurdish women's experiences through an intersectional VAWG lens. We will also explore implications for how DARDRs recognise and respond to these experiences. We are particularly thankful to Zerrin from Roj Women's Association, Nazira Mehmari, IKWRO (Womens Rights organization) and Sazan Salih from Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women's Organisation.

Brief Overview of Kurdish Communities

Kurdish communities currently reside in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria and are widely recognised as the world's largest stateless ethnic group. The Kurdish people faced oppression by the countries occupying Kurdish territory which led to many leaving or becoming refugees. Many Kurds left Iran after the Islamic revolution in 1979, then after the USA's war in Iraq in the 1990's and early 2000 and again during the genocide of the Yazidi people by ISIS. Large numbers of Kurds migrated to Europe following conflict, persecution and displacement in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria.

Germany is home to the largest Kurdish diaspora population in Europe. Significant Kurdish communities have also settled in the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, the Netherlands and Belgium.[1] Kurdish communities are diverse, spanning countries such as Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, with distinct languages, migration histories and political contexts.[2]

The experiences of Iranian and Iraqi Kurdish women have been shaped by distinct political and historical contexts. The death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini in Iran in 2022 drew international attention to the experiences of Kurdish women. The subsequent "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement highlighted both the struggles and activism of Kurdish women. It also drew attention to their long history of resistance to gender inequality and oppression. Iraqi Kurdish women have experienced conflict, displacement and migration. Kurdish women in Rojava have gained international recognition for their activism and leadership on women's rights. Kurdish women in Turkey have long been involved in efforts to challenge gender inequality and advance women's rights and participation in public life.[3]

In the memoir, “Girl With a Gun”[4], Diana Nammi, founder and Director of IKWRO, reflects on her experiences as a Kurdish woman in Iran, including political repression, conflict, displacement and activism. While no single story can represent the diversity of Kurdish women's experiences, her account highlights how conflict, migration and struggles for equality have shaped the lives of some Kurdish women.

Kurdish Communities in the UK

Many Kurdish people in the UK trace their origins to Kurdish regions across Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. For the first-generation immigrants from Kurdish communities in the UK, they have experienced a sense of loss and displacement linked to migration from their homeland, particularly given the history of conflict and political marginalisation across the Kurdistan region as well as experiences of conflict, persecution, forced displacement and trauma. However, experiences can vary widely.[5] It is important not to generalise, as Kurdish communities are diverse in background, migration journeys, and levels of political engagement.

Kurdish communities in the UK are diverse in terms of ethnicity, language, faith and migration histories. They include Muslims, Yazidis, Christians, Alevis and people with no religious affiliation, highlighting the importance of avoiding assumptions about identity or experience.

Domestic abuse and Victim-Survivors from Kurdish Communities

Discussions of Kurdish women and violence against women and girls in the UK often reference the murders of Heshu Yones and particularly of Banaz Mahmod. These cases played an important role in raising awareness of so-called 'honour'-based abuse and exposing failures in professional responses. However, they should be understood within the wider context of violence against women and girls and should not define or be seen as representative of Kurdish women's experiences. (for more info see Annex 1).

Nazira Mehmari, Operational Manager at IKWRO Women's Rights, one of Coaction Hub's partner organisations, reminds us:

" 'Honour'-based violence does not occur in isolation. In contexts such as Iraqi Kurdistan and other regions, it is shaped by wider systems of power (including religious leader's power), patriarchy, and gender inequality. Therefore, greater attention should also be paid to the influence of religious and community leaders, whose authority can shape responses to abuse and affect women's access to protection and support."

While research specifically on Kurdish LGBTQ+ victim-survivors remains limited, studies from South Asian communities have shown that LGBTQ+ individuals may be at increased risk of so-called 'honour'-based abuse where family honour is closely tied to expectations around gender and sexuality. These dynamics may also be relevant in some Kurdish contexts, particularly where expectations around gender, sexuality and family honour influence how abuse is experienced, disclosed and responded to. Professionals should avoid assumptions and recognise the diversity of experiences within and across Kurdish communities.[6]

> *Hussain (2025) reminds us that violence against Kurdish women should be understood through the lens of patriarchy and gender inequality, rather than through cultural explanations alone.*

- Kurdish communities are shaped by wider patriarchal norms and gender inequalities. These can influence women's experiences of abuse, autonomy and access to support. They may also shape expectations around gender roles, family responsibilities and women's behaviour.
- Some Kurdish women may experience multiple and intersecting forms of violence against women and girls. For example, campaigner and activist from Kurdish ethnicity Payzee Mahmod, the sister of Banaz Mahmod, has spoken publicly about her experiences of FGM, virginity testing and child marriage, highlighting how women's experiences of abuse are often shaped by overlapping and interconnected forms of harmful practices.

- Victim-survivors' experiences can also be shaped by multiple intersecting factors, including coercive control, immigration status, transnational abandonment, language barriers and family dynamics.
- Also, within some families preferences for sons over daughters can lead to the marginalisation of girls and reinforce unequal gender norms.
- Expectations regarding marriage, relationships and family honour can, in some cases, contribute to coercion, risk of forced and child marriage.
- Girls may experience pressure to conform to family expectations regarding behaviour, strict notions of being ‘dutiful’ including expectations not to marry outside particular culture, race, sect, or faith groups.
- Refusal of a marriage proposed within the extended family, or attempts to seek separation or divorce, may in some cases lead to coercion, threats or abuse from family members seeking to enforce family expectations or notions of 'honour'.
- Community responses can play an important role in shaping victim-survivors' experiences. Where abuse is minimised, denied or condoned, survivors may experience isolation, stigma and a loss of community support, even after the immediate risk has been removed.
- In some cases, women may also experience coercive control involving multiple perpetrators, further limiting their autonomy and ability to access support and safety.

CASE STUDY

Domestic Abuse, Coercive Control and Transnational Abandonment

Coaction Hub is grateful to the Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women's Organisation (KMEWO), for sharing this anonymised case study of a Kurdish survivor who experienced domestic abuse, coercive control and transnational abandonment.

Background

M.S, a woman from Kurdistan, sought support from the Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women's Organisation (KMEWO) in July 2023, reporting a distressing incident of violence and abduction. Her husband forcibly relocated her and their daughter to Kurdistan. After confiscating their passports, he left them without legal documents and financial support.

They were together at his house in Kurdistan, however, after an argument, the perpetrator sent both M.S and her daughter to her family's house without financial support, making them even more vulnerable.

Regrettably this was not the first incident of abuse. M.S has been systematically experiencing domestic violence from 2021 when she arrived at the UK, including physical abuse during pregnancy, controlling behaviour, and financial exploitation. Consequently, M.S suffered severe physical and emotional trauma, raising concerns for her and her daughter's safety and well-being.

Journey to Safety

M.S found herself alone and abandoned in her family's house. Her husband had taken drastic measures, contacted solicitors and left her in a vulnerable position. It was at this critical moment that she reached out to the Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women's Organisation for assistance.

Recognising the urgency of the situation, we took immediate action. We reached out to Rights of Women, seeking advice and guidance on how to best support M.S. This marked the beginning of an intensive collaboration aimed at securing M.S's safety and the well-being of her daughter.

KMEWO's Senior VAWG Advisor contacted the British Consulate in Erbil, advising M.S to do the same. This collaborative effort between KMEWO and the Rights of Women was essential to address the complex legal faced by M.S. KMEWO initiated communication with the Consulate Case Manager for the Middle East, who sought to confirm the British citizenship of M.S's child through medical records. Meanwhile, the survivor was advised to apply for a new Iraqi passport, a process that took several weeks to complete. Before turning to KMEWO, M.S had contacted the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) department in Kurdistan, but due to pressure from her husband, she had withdrawn the case. KMEWO provided the necessary support to encourage her to reopen the case and obtain a reference number.

Once M.S secured her new passport, we guided her through the process of applying for a replacement Biometric Residence Permit (BRP). With the BRP in hand, KMEWO advised M.S to contact the Embassy for her child's Emergency Travel Document (ETD).

Throughout this challenging journey, KMEWO maintained constant contact with M.S, providing emotional and practical support. Simultaneously, Rights of Women assisted M.S in obtaining a Subject Access Request from the Home Office. This proved crucial in preventing her husband from cancelling her spousal visa, as the Home Office was already informed of the case through Rights of Women. KMEWO offered M.S a support letter to present to UK Border officials upon her arrival in the country. On the 3rd of October 2023, she and her child safely returned to the UK.

Soon after their return, KMEWO assisted M.S in finding emergency safe accommodation and applying for the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC), which was granted on the 17th of October. M.S was then advised to apply for Universal Credit to help with her immediate financial needs. Working together with the Local Council we secured accommodation for M.S in her sister's city, ensuring that she would be close to her family, according to her wish.

Being aware of the challenges she faced and would face, we also offered M.S the opportunity for counseling to help her cope with the trauma. As she does not speak English, we advised her to consider attending online English Language (ESOL) classes to help her rebuild her life and regain her independence.

M.S's journey from desperation and isolation to safety, support, and hope was a milestone to the dedication and collaborative efforts of KMEWO, Rights of Women, Home Office and other Local authorities. Together, they helped M.S and her child escape a dangerous and harming situation, demonstrating the power of advocacy, compassion and commitment to those in need.

> ***"He locked me in, I kicked the front door very hard and he was obliged to unlock it as he was scared of neighbours to call the police"***
>
> *-The Survivor in her own words*

M.S's case illustrates the tragic impact of domestic abuse. Her courage and the dedicated support from KMEWO and Rights of Women, ensured her safety and protected her rights.

KEY THEMES FOR PRACTICE

Transnational abuse and abandonment (TMA):

TMA is a form of domestic abuse in which a spouse deliberately leaves their partner stranded overseas, often by confiscating passports or immigration documents, with the aim of ending the relationship and undermining their immigration status. UK law recognises TMA as a form of domestic abuse, and victim-survivors may be eligible for support and routes to return to the UK.

This case shows how perpetrators can use cross-border movement, immigration systems and geographical separation as tools of coercive control. The victim-survivor was taken outside the UK, had her identity documents confiscated, and was left without financial support. The transnational dimensions of abuse can often be overlooked in mainstream understandings of domestic abuse.

Language barrier and navigating complex systems:

For some Kurdish women, language barriers can affect their ability to access support, understand their rights and engage with statutory agencies. This underlines the importance of specialist by and for organisations, which can offer support in women's preferred languages and help bridge cultural and institutional barriers.

Kurdish women's experiences of abuse, risk and access to support are often shaped by multiple intersecting factors. Victim-survivors may need to navigate complex immigration, legal and statutory systems as part of their journey to safety.

Role of By and For Organisations

- By and for organisations play a critical role in guiding women through these processes, advocating on their behalf, and helping to address barriers that might otherwise limit access to safety, justice and longer-term support.
- The case shows how domestic abuse can affect children and the importance of recognising and responding to their safeguarding and support needs.

We are also thankful to Zerrin from (Roj Women's Organisation) who is a specialist IDVA with community knowledge. Zerrin shared key points when supporting Kurdish victim-survivors:

- While Kurdish women may face multiple barriers to safety and support, it is important not to view them solely through the lens of victimhood.
- From my experience supporting Kurdish women within the VAWG sector, one key message I want professionals to understand is that Kurdish women should not be viewed solely through the lens of so called 'honour'-based abuse. While honour based abuse can be present, many of the women I support experience forms of domestic abuse that are similar to those experienced by women from all communities, including coercive control, emotional abuse, economic abuse, sexual abuse, and immigration-related abuse.
- What often makes their experiences more complex are the additional barriers they face when trying to access support. These can include language barriers, social isolation, insecure immigration status, financial dependency, fear of losing their children, and limited understanding of their rights within the UK.

- For women who have recently arrived in the UK, their abusive partner may be their only source of information, support, and communication, which can increase vulnerability and make it much harder to seek help.
- I have also found that professionals can sometimes focus heavily on cultural explanations rather than the abuse itself. It is important that services remain culturally informed while ensuring that the focus stays on the harm, risk, and safety needs of the victim.
- An anonymised example from practice: a Kurdish woman on a spousal visa who experienced domestic abuse but felt unable to leave due to language barriers, a lack of family support in the UK, financial dependence and fears about her immigration status. These intersecting factors created significant barriers to accessing safety and support.

CASE STUDY

Learning from a DARDR Involving an Iranian Kurdish Victim

This DARDR[7] shows how domestic abuse can intersect with migration, racism, mental health and social isolation, shaping the experiences of both victim-survivors and their children. It also brings to attention her son's experiences of racism , and the wider structural factors shaping the family's life in the UK.

V1 , was an Iranian Kurdish woman, her husband killed her in 2011.
She had experienced domestic abuse, including coercive control, threats and violence which were not properly identified or addressed by agencies over several years following her arrival in the UK with her husband and child, seeking asylum from Iran.

Use of experts from by and for services:

The DARDR initially invited a representative of a local by and for organisation to join the panel, however they were unable to attend any meetings. As a result, expert advice and guidance regarding issues arising from the family's cultural background was obtained from the Iranian Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO). IKWRO are also experts in domestic abuse and harmful practices, and so bring not only an understanding of the family's culture, but also much needed expertise around issues of domestic abuse and harmful practices. Expert panel members are crucial to understanding the experiences of victims, including the barriers they may have faced in seeking support. Therefore, in relevant cases, this role is not an add on, but an integral part of the DARDRs[8].

Cultural and structural learning

IKWRO provided cultural context which enabled identification that professionals had not fully understood cultural dynamics, including family expectations and community pressures relating to both domestic abuse and mental ill health. Iranian law and culture also make it very difficult for a woman to divorce, with women risking losing custody of their children and they are often financially dependent on their husbands.

There was insufficient use of professional interpreters with a reliance on friends and the child, who was a victim in his own right. Where interpreters were used, IKWRO highlighted that a male interpreter could reinforce the husband's perspective and cultural norms.

Their feedback was instrumental in helping the panel understand the barriers of Iranian Kurdish families, particularly regarding domestic abuse, gender roles and the stigma of mental illness. IKWRO stressed the importance of culturally-competent risk assessments and the dangers of relying on family or community members as interpreters.

Key Systemic Failures:

The report highlights persistent failure to recognise domestic abuse, despite repeated threats, use of knives and incidents where the victim and her child had fled the home in fear.

- Agencies treated the situation primarily as a mental health issue, assuming that managing the perpetrator's illness would resolve risks to the family.
- There was a systematic neglect of the victim's victimisation and of the child's exposure, with little direct enquiry into their experiences of abuse or coercion.
- Risk assessments focused overwhelmingly on self-harm and suicide, rather than risk to others. Yet we know that self-harm and suicide in the context of domestic abuse are high-risk factors for homicide.
- Immigration systems compounded the vulnerability of the victim and her child, and restricted access to timely and adequate domestic abuse support.
- Opportunities to refer to domestic abuse support, as well as MARAC and safeguarding pathways, were repeatedly missed.
- Access to support was structurally hindered by language barriers, fragmented systems and immigration rules.
- Domestic abuse was described as normalised and rarely disclosed, with reporting seen as bringing shame.
- Strong gender norms positioned the victim as subordinate and responsible for maintaining the marriage and caring for her husband.
- Cultural stigma and gender norms intersected with migration status to compound isolation and silence abuse, with services failing to adequately respond to this context, likely due to limited understanding of these intersecting needs.
- The child's safeguarding needs were minimised, framed as a 'child in need' rather than 'at risk of significant harm', and shaped by migration, racism and exposure to domestic abuse.
- Structural systems failed to recognise and respond to intersecting vulnerabilities, resulting in fragmented support and missed opportunities for prevention.

Key themes for Practice–Expert Panel member:

Within DARDRs, Expert Panel Members can contribute specialist expertise on the intersecting factors shaping victim-survivors' experiences. Coaction Hub's DARDR work demonstrates that their involvement can enhance the quality of reviews by identifying contextual risks, structural barriers and community-specific issues that may otherwise remain unrecognised, leading to more nuanced analysis and recommendations. This has also been evidenced by the rich perspective brought to the DARDR concerning V1 by IKWRO, as is shown in the example above.

CONCLUSION

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

This briefing highlights the importance of embedding specialist knowledge and cultural expertise within the wider Coordinated Community Response (CCR), including key structures such as MARAC and DARDRs. This includes understanding the diversity of Kurdish communities, the practical barriers victim-survivors may face, and risks such as transnational abuse and abandonment. By and for organisations play a vital role in providing this expertise and supporting victim-survivors to access safety and support. Without this knowledge and understanding, opportunities to identify risk, respond effectively and safeguard victim-survivors may be missed, leaving women at greater risk of harm.

ANNEX

By Discussions on domestic abuse and so-called 'honour'-based abuse often reference the case of Banaz Mahmod, an Iraqi Kurdish woman murdered in 2006 by family members in a so-called 'honour' killing. Her murder exposed serious failings in the police response to so-called 'honour'-based abuse, including failures to recognise risk, respond appropriately to repeated reports of violence and threats, and safeguard her from harm.

On five occasions, Banaz reported alleged rape and violence, threats to kill and an attempt on her life by her father to the police, and even named the suspects who later murdered her. In 2008, the former Independent Police Complaints Commission found serious failings in the police handling of the case. Subsequent investigations by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) identified significant shortcomings in the handling of her case and how victim survivors have been dismissed.[9]

The murder of 16 year old Heshu Yones in 2002, had already shown similar patterns of coercive control, ‘honour’ based abuse and severe barriers to disclosure within the home. Heshu had relationships outside of her religion, for which her father, Abdalla Yones, subjected her to months of beatings before stabbing her 17 times because he feared Heshu was too westernised. Abdalla Yones never adapted to life in Britain and the cultural tensions it placed on his family; he wanted his daughter to observe his interpretation of strict tradition, but she wanted a more liberal life. Prior to her murder, Heshu Yones had disclosed abuse and threats from her father, yet opportunities to safeguard her were missed. Initially, the police did not recognise her death as a so-called 'honour'-based killing and focused on suspects outside the family. It was only after intervention from Kurdish women's rights activists, including Diana Nammi, that the investigation shifted and her father was

prosecuted for her murder.[10] In sentencing Abdalla Yones (father) for the murder of 16-year-old Heshu Yones, Judge Neil Denison described the case as "a tragic story arising out of irreconcilable cultural differences between traditional Kurdish values and the values of western society".[11]

These cases highlight how failures to recognise coercive control, understand so-called 'honour'-based abuse and respond appropriately to disclosures can result in missed opportunities for protection. They also raise important questions about institutional accountability and safeguarding responses. When services rely on simplified understandings of communities, there is a risk that women's experiences become culturalised, with greater attention paid to culture than to patterns of abuse, gender inequality and coercive control. Imkaan and the Centre for Women's Justice (2023) highlight that Black and minoritised women continue to face racism, bias and barriers to accessing support. The introduction of a statutory definition of so-called 'honour'-based abuse further reinforces the importance of ensuring that responses recognise the full range of perpetrators, risks and experiences faced by victim-survivors, rather than reducing abuse to culture or community.

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GLOSSARY

Yazidis:

A small minority community indigenous to Mesopotamia, united by a distinct ethno-religious identity, faith, traditions, and cultural practices. Many Yazidis are ethnically Kurdish and speak Kurdish, though Yazidi identity is separate from Kurdish identity, and not all Kurds are Yazidi. The community has faced severe persecution and displacement, including the ISIS genocide against Yazidis in 2014. *(https://www.nadiasinitiative.org/the-genocide?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=23308374472&gbraid=0AAAABB4aEged2rGIbnoxFjoghektA9Ln-&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIo4L1kJeslQMVEplQBh3z5Rq1EAAYASAAEgJlXPD_BwE)*

Alevis:

A distinct religious and cultural community, primarily found in Turkey and among Kurdish and Turkish diaspora communities. Alevism draws on Islamic, Sufi, and Anatolian spiritual traditions and has its own beliefs, rituals, and practices. Alevis have historically faced discrimination, marginalisation, and violence, and many continue to advocate for recognition, equality, and protection of their rights. Alevis have historically faced discrimination, marginalisation and violence, and many continue to advocate for equal recognition, legal protection and the full enjoyment of their rights.

SERVICES SUPPORTING KURDISH WOMEN

AWRC

https://www.awrc.org.uk/

Based in Harlesden, the AWRC is a specialist women's organisation offering independent 'by and for' needs-led support services to Black, Minority and Ethnic (BME) women and girls experiencing abuse across London. Established in 1980, our mission of tackling violence against women and girls and challenging systemic discrimination and patriarchal violence is propelled by our commitment to intersectional feminism and values deeply rooted in empowering BME women.

BAWSO

https://bawso.org.uk/en/

BAWSO is a leading Black and minoritised women's organisation supporting survivors of domestic abuse, harmful practices, trafficking and exploitation. It also supports Kurdish women living in Wales

Roj Womens Association

https://rojwomen.org.uk/

A London-based charity supporting Kurdish and Turkish women through advocacy, wellbeing, counselling, advice, ESOL, health promotion and support for women experiencing domestic abuse and social isolation.

IKWRO Women's Rights Organisation

https://ikwro.org.uk

A specialist by and for organisation supporting women from Middle Eastern, North African and Afghan communities, including Kurdish women, affected by domestic abuse, harmful practices and other forms of VAWG.

IMECE

https://imece.org.uk/

A specialist by and for organisation supporting Turkish, Kurdish and Cypriot Turkish women experiencing violence against women and girls, including domestic abuse, forced marriage and so-called 'honour'-based abuse. IMECE also delivers advocacy, counselling, IDVA services, training and prevention work.

KMEWO

https://www.kmewo.com

London-based by and for organisation providing advocacy, domestic abuse support, mental health services, welfare advice and community-based support for Kurdish, Middle Eastern and North African women.

Women's Aid

https://womensaid.org.uk/

The national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children, coordinating responses to domestic abuse through practice for almost 50 years. Founded out of the Women's movement in the 70s and 80s, it takes an intersectional, survivor-led approach and works with and for women and children across a federation of local services.

The Angelou Centre

https://angelou-centre.org.uk/

A safe, confidential organisation run by and for women, children and young people from Black and minoritised communities in the North East of England, supporting survivors of violence, abuse and unfair treatment. Alongside refuge housing, it offers holistic support including counselling, therapy, skills courses and rights advocacy to help women rebuild their lives with choice and voice.

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