

Written evidence from Savera UK [EAP0014]

Savera UK is a specialist organisation with national remit, which campaigns to eliminate 'honour'-based abuse (HBA) and harmful practices including forced/child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), as well as providing confidential, life-saving services to those at risk, regardless of age, culture, sexuality or gender. The organisation also works with key partners to conduct research, deliver training, raise awareness and provide one-to-one support to those at risk.

Harmful practices and HBA cover a wide range of behaviours deemed to be 'dishonourable' in the eyes of perpetrators, from simply dressing outside family cultural norms to refusing a marriage. Those who practice HBA and other harmful traditions, believe what they are doing right and often do not consider the practices as harmful or abusive. Their concern is about how they will be seen by extended family or the wider community if they do not protect the practice and adhere to those believed as cultural norms.

The consequences for those at risk can be grave - including physical and psychological trauma, abandonment and even death.

After four long years, The Domestic Abuse Bill finally became law on Thursday 29th April, after receiving Royal Assent. The changes in the law are ground breaking and will change the way domestic abuse is tackled in this country.

Sadly, the Domestic Abuse Bill falls short concerning HBA and harmful traditional forms of abuse and also the rights of migrant women, which are not protected by the Domestic Abuse Bill. Many migrant people (the majority of whom are women) are afraid to speak out about their abuse because they fear detention and/or deportation.

Savera UK clients groups include mainly women, who are referred to us or contact us directly for help, as a result of them being at risk of HBA and harmful practices. A disproportionate number of them are asylum seekers.

What is the nature and extent of UK asylum claims based on discrimination or persecution relating to the protected characteristics?

The nature of asylum claims are varied for those, but can include political, fleeing a war torn country and in the case of many of Savera UK's clients, being at risk of HBA/V and harmful practices, where they experience threats/risk from their family or from community members because of perceived 'dishonour', which includes anything from having a relationship outside the family approval, getting a divorce, premarital sex, pregnancy, conversion of religion and expressing a sexuality or gender identity that differs from their community's norm. When in a marriage a client may be pressured by the community to remain married. In some cases clients may be seeking asylum for a different reason but may also be at risk of HBA alongside that,

one is when they come to the UK under a spouse visa and the threat is to return them back if they do not comply with the in-laws norms. Most threats come from both sides of the family. Others are those who come to the UK to study, but wouldn't return due to the cultural expectations that they have not chosen for themselves.

Are those with certain protected characteristics more or less likely to be granted asylum in the UK?

It would be difficult to know how more or less likely to be granted asylum compared with others of different protected characteristics.

However, Saveria UK finds that asylum claims are more likely to be granted when there is a criminal aspect, such as if the client's sexuality is considered a crime. There is a strong reliance on evidence from those who are seeking asylum, which can be difficult to provide in cases of HBA. For instance, there are often networks of people who engage in coercive controlling behaviour or intimidation and they may ostracise the victim. Providing evidence in these cases is particularly difficult as even by seeking this evidence can increase the risk to the client. If authorities were to ask questions within the community to gain further evidence, this would also increase the risk to that victim, as the community would then be aware they had reported to the authorities and this could be perceived as further 'dishonour'.

Other examples of where risks could be managed more effectively is when the decision maker sees the perceived risk to be in one city, for example in Leeds, and so moves the client to another city, for example Merseyside area. Due to the nature of the communities that HBA it is prevalent within, contacts easily span from city to city. In these cases we feel extra consideration should be given and further training around cultural awareness could improve these services. This cultural awareness would also assist when choosing where clients are placed in asylum accommodation. As an example, placing a single mother of Muslim heritage next to a mosque, where there would be many people of Muslim faith, could increase her risk. Neighbours or the local community may question why there is a single woman living alone, and could make enquiries about her and her family.

What is the nature and extent of the dangers for those with protected characteristics who are seeking asylum in the UK?

In extreme cases those at risk of HBA may also be at risk of becoming a victim of an 'honour' killing. In these cases the victim is killed after their family or community perceive they have brought 'shame' to them, to rectify the family/community's 'honour'. Others, can be kidnapped and imprisoned and may never be found. Also for the person, suicide is a significant risk, if they know they will be returned back to their home country.

The asylum process for individuals with protected characteristics:

Are individuals with certain protected characteristics more at risk of harm or unfair treatment when going through the UK asylum process?

They could face prejudice, racism and misogyny from authorities. There's also more risk of harm if the potential risks are not recognised. In our experience authorities use a strict grading system when determining risk, however with HBA you have to make predictions and plan for the worst case scenarios. This includes considering how actions will affect the client and if there will be repercussions or implications for either them or their family.

In addition, if asylum is declined because the Home Office believes there is a lack of risk, the victim may then be sent back to an area where there is risk and threat that they will be killed even if the client was advised not to return to the same area of the clients. Women are highly at risk of being murdered regardless.

Are particular protected characteristics given priority in the asylum process?

As a charity working in the community with people of a particular protected characteristic, it is difficult to comment on how our clients are prioritised compared with others of different particular protected characteristics going through the asylum process.

In our experience criminally recognised offences are more likely to be granted asylum (FGM, forced marriage). As stated above, where it's more difficult to provide evidence such as with HBA, it is more difficult to provide evidence and thus be granted asylum. (Authorities need understand that for HBA cases returning to their home country is considered a death penalty, even if they don't return their named city/village.)

What challenges do those with protected characteristics face on the basis of those characteristics if they are granted asylum in the UK?

They often face further prejudice and misunderstanding, a lack of cultural awareness, and if they have a limited understanding of English this impacts how they can access support or understand information been given to them. There is also often a lack of understanding about what support is available. We have found there is also a need for more specific services, for example LGBTQ+ services for culture/faiths/spirituality specific group.

Other challenges they may face is that if they are granted asylum they may find themselves wanting to retain some part of their culture but at the same time they must be aware of the risk involved. They may need support in determining how they can be involved with communities, if at all, and to what extent that would put them at risk/threat. Savera UK tries to make sure that we do not signpost or refer to faith/specific support groups of same culture background unless we are 100% sure clients will not be facing any discrimination or risks

What specific issues do those with certain protected characteristics face?

Prejudice, racism, sexism and a lack of cultural awareness. They also face a lack of resources that would help them achieve goals such as getting a job. This is particularly the case if the client is a female of an ethnic minority who has sought asylum and has limited understanding of English. They will also face threats and segregated and isolated from their community if their asylum claim is as a result of

HBA, which would be considered to bring 'shame' and 'dishonour' on the community or the family.

Do current domestic and international laws and conventions governing the UK's asylum process provide effective protection against discrimination for those with protected characteristics?

Currently FGM and forced marriage are criminalised in the UK, however there is still a substantial lack of understanding and education around these topics. This can result in authorities failing to recognise when someone is at risk or even failing to listen to the voices of those who are advocating for those at risk.

For clients at risk of HBA/V, there is no legislation in place which offers protection. In the recent Domestic Abuse Bill HBA was not mentioned or recognised and if it is not recognised in legislation the framework for understanding the practices is less likely to be there.

Ultimately if there is a lack of understanding discrimination will prevail and authorities must educate employees and encourage they approach the topics sensitively and with care, particularly when clients are not in a position to advocate for themselves.

How is the Government addressing any discrimination or specific dangers for those with protected characteristics in the asylum process, and what more could be done?

We don't have an understanding of how the Government is currently addressing issues in terms of discrimination or specific danger for those with protected characteristics.

What could be done more:

- Reconsidering all risk, threat and the consequences of those seeking asylum and the impact that may have if the Home Office refuse their asylum claim and they return to their birth country
- Many of our clients suffer huge trauma and could take them more than one meeting to be able to tell their story and explain what has happened to them. With the Home Office meeting only a one-off, this could impact on their asylum claim as they may not have been able to give their story fully. This is be something the Home Office could look at reviewing
- We understand that solicitors only get appointed to those claiming asylum after their Home Office interview. This may be more efficient and helpful if it is provided before their interview with the Home Office, so that they can get help and support to prepare them for the interview
- Have a case worker that can be appointed so they can have one Home Office person they can liaise with during their asylum claim

How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected those with protected characteristics who are seeking asylum?

We have found there are significant delays in claims being processed, however that can result in clients having more time to gather evidence and support while remaining in the country.

The difficulty some have faced as things moved towards digital as a result of the pandemic is access to services. Clients may not have access to a phone, computer or the internet. If they do have access, they may not have enough of an understanding of English to be able to operate the systems. The service not providing interpreters for those for who English is a second language. Particularly Savera UK clients, as a result to their HBA risk, there is a fear that using online/digital services will risk their identity being disclosed. There is also a lack of support as a result of drop-in centres being suspended e.g. no refund of expenses - if this is not offered, clients will not be able to attend support services.

What measures are needed to support people with certain protected characteristics arriving via the Afghanistan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme route?

Our organisation does not have an in depth understanding of this scheme, however we are aware of the Syrians Refugee Scheme. As part of this clients are provided with assistance in settling into their new home and with administrative tasks such as signing them up to a GP, finding work and looking at the local school if they have children. Where there is a resettlement scheme in place there is more structure than for those who are not able to be part of a scheme.

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