



## **'Changing our Heads'**

**Evaluation of the partnership between Shpresa Programme and Solace Women's Aid to develop a specialist service for Albanian Speaking Women experiencing violence in London**

**Final report**

**May 2016**

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*It's important to remember that Albania was an isolated country for so long. Even after explaining the system to women, they don't understand what Social Services is, they don't know what other agencies do. Say we'll make a referral to Social Services, women don't know what that is. It's a different culture. There all these different nationalities in London, and of course you can't have a service for every one. But [Albanians] are new to the world here. It's not like there are generations of Albanians here. Knowing what services are available, what are your options, I don't think any woman in Albania would think there's a refuge to help. It starts with the education. A lot of women have only stayed with husbands because of their parents... [The Albanian community] is newish in this country, at this stage it's important to be a specialist project (Support worker).*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## FOREWORD

Shpresa is a dynamic and innovative organisation developed within the Albanian speaking community, and run by and for Albanian speakers.

Following the domestic violence killing of a woman in the community, Shpresa identified the need for a project which could both support individual women and build confidence in the community in dealing with violence against women and girls.

Shpresa partnered with Solace Women's Aid who provided specialist training and support. This report shows the achievements of this partnership, ensuring access to support for Albanian speaking women and supporting and enabling capacity building within the community. As this evaluation shows, the project was a huge success.

Funding ended in September 2015. Tragically, two Albanian speaking women have been killed by their husbands since then, underscoring the vital need for targeted and specialist support within the community.

We are aware that many other newly arrived communities do not have access to services or support. Specialist projects like this provide the dual benefit of ensuring trust and safety within the community as well as quick access to specialist support.

We now know that two years is not long enough to establish a new project in a newly arrived community which is working to establish itself in a new country. At the time of writing, we are actively seeking further funding for this project to continue for another two years and very pleased that we have secured half of the funding needed for continuation of the project from Trust for London.

All communities need support, but where there are issues of trust and uncertainty about systems at the same time as abuse and violence within the family, women are left without anywhere to turn. Funding for specialist BME services is vital, as the issues and needs described in this report show.

Thank you to CWASU, and in particular Maddy Coy and Nicola Sharp-Jeffs for making this report possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2012, Shpresa programme, an Albanian community organisation, developed a partnership with Solace Women's Aid (Solace), a specialist VAWG support service, to engage Albanian Speaking Women (ASW) in London around experiences of violence and abuse. There are three elements of support and intervention in the project:

- workshops on domestic violence, delivered by an Albanian speaking worker, which are incorporated into Shpresa's women's support group sessions (the ARISE project);
- individual casework, also delivered by an Albanian speaking worker based at Solace (the Empower project); and
- workshops with children and young people about domestic violence.

While some organisations provide specialist support for women from Eastern European communities who are experiencing violence (see Thiara, 2015), this project is the first to combine the expertise of an Albanian community organisation and a VAWG service provider. This meant a knowledge exchange between the two organisations, extending the skills and capacity of Shpresa staff and volunteers about domestic violence, and of Solace about the needs of Albanian speaking women (ASW), was core to the partnership. The project was funded by Trust for London and the Henry Smith Charity.

In September 2013, the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) at London Metropolitan University were commissioned by Trust for London to evaluate the project. The evaluation brief required a focus on what lessons can be learned from this model of provision – a small community organisation acting as service commissioner - to inform the development of sustainable services for women from newly arrived communities in London. This final report is based on two years of delivery of the project, from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2013 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2015. As a small scale process evaluation, the children's workshops were not included.<sup>1</sup>

The report:

- sets out the background to the partnership between Shpresa and Solace;
- provides an overview of the project context by summarising what is known about Albanian communities in the UK and on Albanian-speaking women and violence;
- outlines the evaluation methodology;
- presents evidence of how the project met its objectives; and
- offers reflections on this model of partnership for future commissioning.

The title of the report - 'Changing our Heads' - refers to the way that workers spoke about the process of challenging attitudes and values, and also speaks to changes in practices that were necessary by each organisation in this new partnership.

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<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, a number of issues relevant to the partnership have emerged from our interviews with staff. These include discussions around age appropriate workshops, as SOLACE's resources are aimed at over 11s and Shpresa hoped for work with younger children. A challenge was also identified in engaging teenagers who may not wish to be associated with the Albanian community and thus would not access groups led by an Albanian organisation. The targets for this part of the project were also felt to be ambitious. One possible development identified by SOLACE was for young people to become peer educators and co-deliver the workshops.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Both organisations and stakeholders perceive that the project ‘opens a door’ into specialist support for Albanian-speaking women, as the link with Shpresa creates trust and Solace provide expertise on forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG).
- The project uncovered different forms of VAWG experienced by Albanian speaking women. Having started off addressing domestic violence, 1-2-1 support and the group workshops were expanded as women came forward for support with a range of violences. That the project is understood to offer support to women experiencing violence without specifying which form also enables women who have not yet named their experiences to access the service.
- The target (n=350) for women attending the group workshops (ARISE project) was exceeded by 15 per cent (n=404).
  - Integrating the domestic violence workshops into other topics (e.g. children, education) meant women were more willing to stay for sessions on domestic violence.
  - Delivery of the workshops was changed towards the end of the project from a six week programme to two or three all day sessions, as women reported that their drop off in attendance after the first two sessions was because husbands and partners pressured them to stop going.
  - Women report significant changes in their understanding of domestic violence, including its different forms, how culture is used as justification, men’s entitlement and women’s inequality, and their right to say no to sex.
- The target (n=75) for individual casework (Empower project) was exceeded by 27 per cent (n=95); the provision of support clearly fills a much-needed gap for Albanian-speaking women.
  - Women receiving one-to-one support describe themselves as ‘lucky’ and have only positive things to say about the Empower project.
- Developing and managing the partnership has required energy, time and willingness to have open conversations. It has been a learning process for both organisations.
  - Learning has been issue-based (about violence experienced by Albanian women) and organisational.
  - Ethics and shared standards are essential, given the power inequalities experienced by BAMER community groups.
  - Differences in expectations can be managed with a clear project plan and regular reflection meetings.
  - Open communication channels between workers and managers should be created.
  - Planning for the future should take place ahead of the end date for the initial partnership, and involve workers delivering the support to women.
- There is strong consensus across women who engaged with the service, workers and local stakeholders about the need for a specialist project for Albanian speaking women. It also clear that Shpresa programme should remain a key partner in the project, as they are anchored in the Albanian diasporic community.
  - Individual casework lends itself more straightforwardly to being embedded within a larger specialist VAWG organisation, but women report that accessing the group workshops depends on the relationship with Shpresa.

## DEVELOPING THE SHPRESA/SOLACE PARTNERSHIP

### About Shpresa

Shpresa (meaning 'hope') was established in 2002. It is a user-led organisation which aims to enable the Albanian community in London to participate fully in society through education and training activities.

There are currently 10 paid staff (four full time equivalent) and around 45 volunteers, and services are provided in various boroughs across London.

### About Solace

Solace Women's Aid was formed in 2007 following the merger of Camden, Enfield and Islington Women's Aid.

The organisation aims to bring to an end the harms of all forms of VAWG Solace employs over 100 staff and has over 50 volunteers. In addition to the Shpresa Programme, Solace has formal partnerships with: the London VAWG Consortium; Jewish Women's Aid; the Traveller Movement; Barnet Asian Women's Association; Asha Projects and the Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DVIP).

The aim of the project was to deliver linguistic, cultural and gender sensitive services to address the impacts and contribute to reducing violence against women in London's Albanian speaking community. More specific objectives were to:

- raise awareness and inform women of their rights and so ensure women seek support to protect themselves and their children through the **ARISE project**;
- provide specialist one-to-one information, advice and casework support for Albanian Speaking Women (ASW) experiencing violence, ensuring take-up of specialist services to address safety and wellbeing through the **Empower project**; and
- prevent VAWG through educating women, children and young people and building skills for healthy relationships.

Shpresa have a track record of contracting larger, mainstream organisations to work alongside them in developing services for ASW. In 2008, they developed a partnership with the Women's Therapy Centre to provide therapeutic services for women in the Albanian community, in recognition of the absence of culturally specific support around emotional health, particularly for survivors of sexual violence. One unexpected finding from the evaluation of this project was the silence and gaps around domestic violence, which led to the Women's Therapy Centre running sessions for women. The potential for the partnership model to be developed specifically to address domestic violence was identified in the evaluation report.

*It helps having an agency at outside comes to deal with these issues. It is like bringing specialist in on the issue... they give women a sense of security. They say it is not just in our country [that domestic*



*violence takes place]* (Woman's Development Worker, Shpresa Programme).<sup>2</sup>

The vision here, repeated with the Solace partnership project, was to embed support in mainstream organisations that specialise in specific issues and over which, at the end of a period of joint working, the larger agency takes ownership.

The murder of a woman known to Shpresa in 2007, by her ex-husband, had also motivated the organisation to address domestic violence. As with mental health difficulties, domestic violence was described as an issue not acknowledged or discussed amongst Albanians. The ambition was to develop a discrete awareness-raising project aimed to enable women to know that 'no-one should live in fear', and to make specialist support available.

After a two year consultation, Shpresa researched VAWG organisations in London and approached them with an offer to develop and deliver support to ASW. After interviews, Solace were selected as partners on the basis of their track record with minority communities (e.g. the Bangladeshi and Traveller communities), their perceived passion for the project and the wide range of services they offered including refuges, legal advice, and counselling. Solace in turn were interested in the model because they shared a commitment to capacity building with BME organisations, and recognised ASW women as under-served by current provision. These shared values were considered the foundation of the partnership.

Shpresa used both social media – the organisation has a strong Facebook presence – and Albanian television and radio channels to publicise the project. The aim was to 'break the stigma' associated with domestic violence, reinforce a message that it is not acceptable behaviour and offer a route to support for women.

## STAFFING

A groupworker and caseworker were recruited specifically for the project. Both were Albanian women who did not have VAWG experience, but brought transferable skills. Both underwent intensive training on domestic violence. Identifying workers from minority communities who have the requisite range of skills for such complex work has been previously noted as difficult (Coy & Kelly, 2011), and should be factored into the development of similar projects.

While the intention was for the caseworker to be based at Solace and sit within their team of advice workers, whilst Shpresa took responsibility for the group sessions, both the caseworker and group worker are now employed by Solace. Over time, however, each has found it more productive to spend a proportion of their time at Shpresa, as ASW appear to find the organisation easier to approach. The wider services offered by Shpresa (including volunteering opportunities, employment support and mentoring activities for children and young people) mean it is known and trusted within the community. Being located nearer pockets of the London Albanian diaspora, and the homely, mother-tongue atmosphere are perceived as more inviting to women. At the same time, the caseworker benefits from being located within a team of advice workers at Solace, with access to a range of specialist

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Madill, E. (2009) *An Evaluation of the provision of a holistic therapeutic service for vulnerable women refugees and asylum seekers* London: Shpresa Programme.  
[http://www.shpresaprogramme.com/documents/women%27s\\_project\\_evalaution\\_2009.pdf](http://www.shpresaprogramme.com/documents/women%27s_project_evalaution_2009.pdf)

provision for women experiencing violence (e.g. solicitors, counsellors). There are, then, important lessons for similar partnerships about dual locations of community specialist workers.

Before turning to the evaluation findings, the project is contextualised through an overview of the Albanian community as relatively recent migrants to the UK and the evidence base on Albanian-speaking women and violence.

## ALBANIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE UK

Although migration from Albania to the UK has been documented throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 1991 census recorded just 338 Albanians known to be living in England (IOM, 2003, cited in Koinova, 2013). Conflicts and persecution following the breakup of the former Yugoslavia led to 'the first generation' of an Albanian diaspora in the UK, which grew steadily during the 1990s (Kostovicova, 2003: 54), but no precise figures exist.

The most recent census data records 13,415 respondents whose country of birth was Albania, with just over half (52%, n=7,009) living in London. Twice as many people (28,446) gave their country of birth as Kosovo, with three quarters (76%, n=21,516) living in London (ONS, 2013a). Given that ethnic Albanians comprise the vast majority of the Kosovar population, it is reasonable to assume that significant proportions of these identify as, and speak, Albanian. 2011 census data appears to support this: a total of 32,425 people in England and Wales whose main language is Albanian are recorded, with 71 per cent (23,006) of these based in London (ONS, 2013b). There is limited information about the gender breakdown of the Albanian diaspora in the UK, but it has been estimated that initially around two thirds were young men (Kostovicova & Prestreshi, 2003). Later work suggests that a 'family amnesty' may have levelled out this imbalance (Vathi, 2010).

Changes in the political regime in Albania have also shaped the status of women, with implications for women who migrate to the UK. The post-war communist government sought to achieve equality for women in education and employment, with limited progress in that while women's employment levels increased, it was concentrated in 'female' professions and at the lowest ranks. These advances were reversed after the collapse of communism, as gender equality became associated with a discredited regime, and women were pushed back into the home (Vullnetari, 2009). Discrimination remains evident, with a 'continued anchoring of women through family responsibilities' which entrenches financial and social dependence on men (Stecklov et al, 2010: 938).

It is therefore unsurprising that Kosovar Albanian women report living in the UK as 'liberation' from these discriminatory mores, particularly valuing the possibility of economic independence (Kostovicova & Prestreshi, 2003). Yet the gendered patterns of migration from Albania affect how women arrive in the UK and everyday life once here. Few women migrate independently, as men typically make these life-changing decisions (Stecklov et al, 2010). Men who are new migrants often work long hours, leaving women isolated at home with limited opportunities to meet people and form support networks (King & Vullnetari, 2009; Thiara, 2015). Albanian families in London have been noted to reproduce unequal household gender relations (King et al, 2006). To what extent this differs from households in majority communities is not explored.

## ALBANIAN-SPEAKING WOMEN AND VIOLENCE

There is a limited knowledge base on VAWG in Albania, but key findings include:

- prevalence surveys indicate that half of women aged 18-55 in Albania have experienced domestic violence in the last 12 months;
- the vast majority of women do not seek support from formal agencies;
- Albania is the top country of origin for women identified as potential victims of trafficking into the UK.

Recognition of violence against women as cause and consequence of gender inequality was driven by women's organisations in Albania during the social changes of the 1990s (Haarr, 2013). Currently there is a national strategy on Gender Equality and Domestic Violence. A 'Law on Measures Against Violence in Family Relations', introduced in 2007, was followed by a significant increase in reporting, as women became more confident that action would be taken (Amnesty International, 2010; Haarr, 2013). The focus of research and policy is on domestic violence, although trafficking of Albanian women for sexual exploitation has also attracted international attention.

The most recent prevalence survey (Haarr, 2013) indicates that over half of women aged 18-55 (53%) reported experiencing domestic violence in the last 12 months, with a slightly higher proportion (59.4%) having ever experienced violence from intimate partners. This is higher than for women living in the UK. Men from rural areas are more likely to be abusive to their partners, possibly related to norms 'about a man's right to exert control over his wife, and weaker sanctions' (Burazeri et al, 2005: 200; see also Van Hook et al, 2000). Similarly women in rural areas are more likely to report experiencing domestic and sexual violence (Van Hook et al, 2000; Haarr, 2013). Women's help-seeking actions also demonstrate the challenges associated with providing support to Albanian-speaking women. Fewer than 1 in 10 women had sought help to cope with or escape violence, and mirroring research from the UK, the vast majority (90%) turned to family (Haarr, 2013). Divorce remains women's preferred option to escape violence, rather than criminal or civil proceedings (Amnesty international, 2010). Studies consistently note that domestic violence is currently perceived to be normal and inevitable in Albania (see, for example, Van Hook et al, 2000).

Ethnically Albanian women were subject to sexual violence during the conflict in Kosovo during 1998-1999 (Iacupino et al, 2001). Women who migrate to the UK may have experienced rape in this context as well as been assaulted by intimate partners.

Trafficking for sexual exploitation is another form of VAWG associated with the Albanian diaspora, and as monitoring data shows, is a significant issue among women supported by the Empower project. Albania was identified by UNODC (2006) as a key country of origin in trafficking flows. 'The subaltern role of women' in Albania, combined with poverty, has been identified as facilitating trafficking (Monzini, 2005: 98). Data from the National Referral Mechanism shows that in 2013 and 2014, the top country of origin for potential victims of trafficking in the UK was Albania, with 351 women and girls referred in 2014 (NCA, 2015). As we note later, the proportion of trafficked women referred to the ASW project was more than expected at the outset.

**This evidence base has significant implications for how to develop, and promote, support services for Albanian-speaking women in London. It underscores the need for proactive outreach to women, and the importance of support that is rooted within Albanian communities, bringing knowledge and understanding of how family and community norms – which are profoundly gendered - act as barriers to seeking help.**

## EVALUATION METHODS

As a process evaluation, tracking the development of the partnership model between Shpresa and Solace Women's Aid (Solace), the focus has been on exploring the opportunities and challenges that arose from combining the expertise of both organisations. Data is drawn from interviews with:

- the caseworker (x3) and groupworker (x2);
- Shpresa director (x2);
- CEO of Solace Women's Aid (x1) and strategic and operational managers (n=4);
- Albanian women who received support from the casework service (n=6) and;
- stakeholders in local agencies (n=6, with one interviewed twice).

Almost a fifth (19%, n=76) of women who attended the group workshops returned an evaluation questionnaire. Monitoring data and case studies supplied by Solace were also analysed to build a profile of women who engaged with the project. Details of the data sources can be found in Appendix 1.

An interim evaluation report completed in February 2015 raised a number of questions about the delivery of the project, which were addressed by Shpresa and Solace. The questions and subsequent adaptations are noted throughout this final report.

## GROUP WORKSHOPS: THE ARISE PROJECT

***Objective: to raise awareness and inform women of their rights and so ensure women seek support to protect themselves and their children.***

*Women see things differently after the workshops. Women get answers to their questions (Shpresa worker).*

*The information given by Shpresa staff, it is a must know for all the women (Q40).*

### DEVELOPING AND DELIVERING THE WORKSHOPS

The ARISE project initially comprised six workshops on domestic violence, which were slotted into Shpresa's existing group work programme. This represents a departure from how topics are usually decided, since typically Shpresa consult with women over what would be most useful and relevant to them. The workshops were designed as a programme for women who had experienced violence, although it is clear from women's feedback that some attended to learn more, as an awareness-raising exercise.

The target for the workshops was 150 women in year one and 200 in year two (total 350). An intensive period of recruiting women to the workshops took place at the inception of the project, through outreach to community locations where Albanian women were not already in contact with Shpresa.

Introducing discussions about domestic violence into the workshop programme was met, according to staff, with some initial scepticism and resistance. Some women reported fearing that they would be 'betraying' the community if they spoke out about violence.

*What we faced in the community when we started to work on DV, men called, asked are you trying to destroy families, personally insulting about our own families. We see this reflected in the group as 'manpower mentality'. [We have to] challenge some resistance women show to talk about the issue... we are managing the community and the mentality (Shpresa worker).*

Integrating the DV sessions into other subjects (e.g. children, education) means women were more willing to participate. They were intended as a guided reflection space to open up and unpick women's perceptions and experiences as well as deliver 'education' and information. Enabling women to feel comfortable in this context means watching body language carefully, to avoid any feeling targeted. In addition, the complexity of resistance and reluctance from some women meant that group dynamics had to be managed especially carefully so that dominant voices do not silence others. At the end of the project, Shpresa workers reflected that delivering information differently - using videos, YouTube or PowerPoint Slides might also cultivate more interaction.

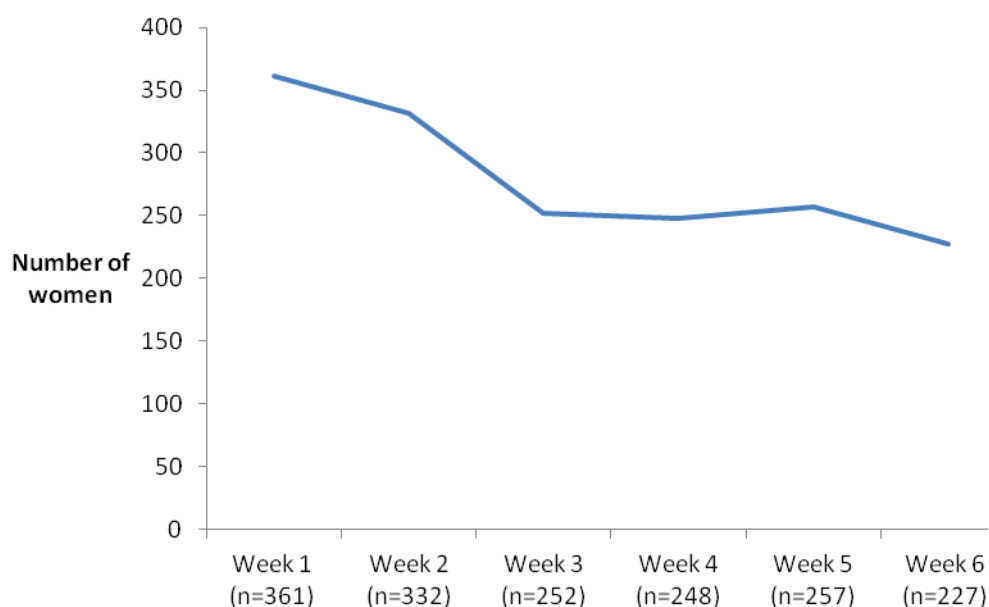
The workshops began with a focus on domestic violence, but midway through the project were extended to explore other forms of VAWG, to reflect that women came forward with experiences of sexual violence outside of intimate partner contexts, including trafficking and sexual exploitation. This aligns the workshops more closely with the experiences of women seeking individual support, as well as approaches which locate domestic violence with a continuum of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and the experiential links between its different forms (Kelly, 1988).

### PROFILE OF THE WOMEN WHO ENGAGED WITH THE WORKSHOPS

Monitoring data collected by Solace on women who attended the workshops shows that all were Albanian-speaking, with an age range of 18-65 years. Workshops were delivered in eight boroughs covering West, North and East London.

The target of 350 women to attend workshops over the two years was met (n=361 for those initially recruited for the six week programme). However, attendance drops off sharply over the six week period, with 361 women present at the first session and 227 by the sixth.

**Figure 1: Women’s attendance at the ARISE workshops**



The biggest drop in attendance took place between weeks two and three. Whilst recognising that workers had to overcome women’s initial reluctance to discuss and explore domestic violence, it was important to begin the core work of how violence is understood and recognised within the first two sessions, as well as offer safety information and support options.

There are multiple possible explanations for the sharp drop off in attendance. For instance, women may gather sufficient information in the initial sessions; or it may be that once discussions on domestic violence deepen, women opt out. There are two distinct groups here then: women who attend only the first two workshops, and those who go on to attend all six.

The interim evaluation report made two suggestions to address this: one option to address this was to develop a two step process of delivering the workshops: naming and defining violence and providing safety information in the first two sessions, and a more reflective space in the next four for women who want to engage with more in depth discussions. We also recommended asking women about the reasons for the drop-off in attendance. When Shpresa workers did so, they learned that husbands and partners were pressuring them not to return, particularly when they had attempted to talk about some of the content at home. Fear led to women dropping out.<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of the project then, delivery was trialled as two or three all day sessions. A further 43 women participated in these workshops, taking the total number to 404.

Almost a fifth (19%, n=76) of women completed a post-workshop programme questionnaire that was returned to the evaluation team<sup>4</sup>, a participation rate higher than in many evaluations. Two thirds (68%, n=52) described themselves as Albanian; 12 as Albanian from Kosovo (16%); seven as Kosovan (9%); two as White European (3%); two as Muslim (3%) and one (1%) as British. Almost three quarters (73%, n=55) were not in paid employment, with only three women (4%) working full time, 10 (13%) part time and three students. The vast majority (88%, n=61)<sup>5</sup> had at least one child. That so many women were not in paid work,<sup>6</sup> mirrored among women receiving individual casework support (see next section), shows that gender inequality in Albanian communities is evident in women's everyday lives. In the gendered patterns of Albanian migrants, men typically work outside the home, and thus develop skills, confidence and language. In short, they have more freedom. Only six women who completed questionnaires reported being able to speak English.

Feedback from women via the evaluation questionnaires supports the change in delivery mode. When asked what, if anything, they would change about the workshops, 19 women (37%) stated that six sessions was too many and some struggled to balance them around other commitments. While attendance was shown to drop off sharply over the 6 week period across the whole sample, two fifths (41%, n=27) of the women who filled in the questionnaire reported attending every session. Another 24 women (36%) attended four, five or 'most' of the workshops.

## OBJECTIVE: RAISING AWARENESS AND INFORMING WOMEN OF THEIR RIGHTS

*You'd see a lot of women admitting their husband is an abuser, just by listening in the workshops. At the beginning they would say my husband shouts at me, that's his right, and now they understand he's an abuser. You'd see it was eye-opening for women (Support worker).*

As a result of the workshops, women reported:

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<sup>3</sup> Only one woman reported on the evaluation questionnaire being afraid. Almost all others (97%, n=72 of 74 who answered this question) said they had no concerns for their safety while participating in the workshops.

<sup>4</sup> Women's views on the domestic violence workshops were explored in two ways: a focus group with 14 women at Shpresa and questionnaires distributed by the groupworker to women. These questionnaires were available in English or Albanian, in both hard copy and online formats. Seventy six completed paper questionnaires were returned to the evaluation team, and one woman completed the online version.

<sup>5</sup> Seven women did not indicate whether they had children.

<sup>6</sup> This also reflects Solace's wider service user profile.



- being able to identify domestic violence and its different forms;
- understanding that domestic violence is not justified by Albanian cultural and community norms.

Almost half of women (48%, n=35)<sup>7</sup> wanted to take part in the workshops for information, including about women's rights. Meeting other women in the Albanian community was important for a fifth (19%, n=14), as was the relationship with Shpresa (14%, n=10) and that the workshops were delivered in Albanian (6%, n=4). Again this demonstrates that it is not just awareness-raising sessions on domestic violence that matter, but that they are anchored in the Albanian community. Women's isolation and loneliness is a powerful lever to encourage them to attend the sessions, and trust in Shpresa provides the gateway in.

Women in the focus group had attended one domestic violence workshop and liked it precisely because it offered an opportunity to speak openly about an issue that is taboo in their community. Some noted how uncomfortable this could be though, using the same language: 'it's not easy to discuss - domestic violence is a taboo'.

In both focus groups with women and workers, domestic violence was explicitly located in the turmoil and flux of moving from Albania to the UK, with poverty, shifts in power between women and men, and poor housing all offered as explanations for men's abusive behaviours. The enhanced freedom of living in the UK was perceived to make it more possible for women to escape violent partners, both because women have 'more rights' but also the practical option of separation and financial independence through employment. Changes in understandings of violence focussed on new awareness of emotional and psychological abuses: physical assault was more commonly recognised as violence, but elements of gendered coercive control (Stark, 2007) e.g. micro-management of housework had been more challenging for women to process.

Similarly, in the questionnaire responses, over half of women (52%, n=37) reported learning about the different forms that domestic violence can take, with many listing psychological, physical, sexual and financial. This contrasts with women's understandings of domestic violence before the workshops, with two fifths (39%, n=27) perceiving that it was physical assaults and a further four women (6%) that it was 'family fights' and three (4%) that it was explicitly 'a man's right'.

*I thought it was only physical violence, beating, slapping (Q56).*

*I thought that it is normal for the men to shout at raise a hand, also I thought it was my culture (Q42).*

*I have never thought before about psychological violence (Q2).*

Almost all women (95%, n=69) reported that their understanding of domestic violence had changed. The most common change was recognising domestic violence and its different forms (30%, n=18), followed by: 'knowing more' (20%, n=12); support organisations (15%, n=9); and how to protect/defend themselves (12%, n=7). Almost one in five women (18%, n=11) referred to a newly acquired understanding of their right to live free from violence.

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<sup>7</sup> Not all women answered each question and percentages are calculated from the base rate for each question.

*Now we understand that we have our rights. We have the right to have a friend, we have the right to go to school, to go to work (Q56).*

*Now I have a clear picture of all kinds of abuse which we experience. Now I can respect myself more (Q8).*

New awareness of sexual violence and consent was reported in response to several questions, with women noting an understanding of their right to refuse unwanted sex.

*Now I am more informed about my rights, I know I may say no (Q54).*

*Domestic violence has different forms; psychological violence, or there is also sexual violence when i.e. the husband wants to have constrained sexual relations, it is violence but it is difficult to be accepted. Culture and violence are separated (Q56).*

*I understood more about it, that if I want to say no to my husband I can (Q41).*

The learning women reported also reveals the importance of unpicking how gendered power inequalities are understood in the Albanian community. A fifth (21%, n=15) made explicit reference to 'culture' in how their understandings of domestic violence had changed: specifically that men's violence had been normalised.

*For us DV is part of our culture, men have always rights (Q26)*

*I have been able to understand and differentiate culture from violence. I know where to get help and identify violence in the family (Q42).*

*Abuse was confused with the culture of the man to be aggressive and demanding in all aspects (Q40).*

While women reported that men's violence was justified by entitlement and inequality, perceiving that this is 'normal' is not the same as believing that it is acceptable. What it suggests is the difficulty of imagining an alternative life free from the violence that has been normalised. In turn this underscores the need for specialist support which enables women to realise their rights to live without violence.

One of the most transformative ways in which the workshops succeeded in raising awareness about domestic violence was evident in how women discussed the content with family and friends. Over 80 per cent of respondents (86%, n=62) reported that they had discussed the workshops with friends and family. A third (35%, n=19) had shared details about how to seek support for domestic violence if needed, and a further 13 per cent (n=7) about the different forms of domestic violence. This is clear evidence of the value of the workshops in opening up spaces to talk about violence in the Albanian diaspora, and cascading out into communities should be factored into understandings of impact of this form of awareness-raising.

In the interim report we raised the question of whether the workshop content could be widened to include other forms of VAWG, since casework data indicated that women referred to the project were experiencing multiple violences (see next section). Workers began to address this and explore overlaps between domestic violence and other forms of abuse towards the end of the workshop programme. If the project is continued, assessing the extent to which the workshops offer a space to explore multiple forms of VAWG will be important.

#### OBJECTIVE: ENSURING WOMEN SEEK SUPPORT TO PROTECT THEMSELVES AND THEIR CHILDREN

As a result of the workshops, women reported:

- knowing where to seek specialist support;
- being confident to advise friends to speak out and seek support.

The workshop that was identified as most useful was on help-seeking (23%, n=15).

*How to protect ourselves, how to seek assistance, which are the free helpline numbers (Q50).*

Over half (59%, n=43) said that before the workshops they did not know where to seek support, and would have turned to the police (31%, n=20), family (19%, n=12) or friends (16%, n=10). Just two women (3%) said they would approach Shpresa. In contrast, following the workshops, a fifth would seek support from Shpresa (20%, n=14), specialised domestic violence organisations (17%, n=12) or Shpresa and Solace (16%, n=11). Only six women offered the police here. This suggests that women have been enabled to identify sources of specialist support, and shifted from knowing how to seek help as a last resort via the police, to knowing where to go for longer term support where they have space to think about their needs and those of their children. Shpresa is also increasingly recognised by women as a source of support around domestic violence.

*Shpresa programme and Solace as they have Albanian workers (Q41).*

Again the likelihood that this knowledge will be more widely shared within a small community needs to be acknowledged in terms of impact. The second most useful workshop was one which shared information about how to protect children (n=7), reinforcing the importance of motherhood to ASW and how this is an effective route to encourage women to seek support.

*All, but especially the one for how to protect the children (Q49).*

*How they can help you and your children, even in safe houses (Q17).*

Four women reported discussing gender equality and women's rights as the most useful session. Combined with how domestic violence was understood as men's entitlement to be in control of the home and women's bodies, it is clear that exploring with women how violence is rooted in inequality between women and men is a key to transforming perspectives.

There was also a significant shift in what women reported their response to a friend experiencing domestic violence might be, as Table 1 shows.

**Table 1: What women would suggest to friends**

<b>Suggest to a friend before</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Suggest to a friend now</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Stay and give him another chance	16	24	Speak out and get help	17	29
Call the police	15	22	How to get help	9	15
Contact Shpresa	10	15	Contact Shpresa	5	9
Don't know	5	8	Contact Solace	5	9
She knows what is best	3	2	Contact Shpresa and Solace	5	9
Speak to family	3	2	Call the police	5	9

Before attending the workshops, the most likely response to friends experiencing violence would be to give the perpetrator another chance/and or put up with it for the sake of the children, or calling the police.

*Give him another chance, do it because of your children and because he may change (Q45).*

Following the workshops, women would advise friends to tell someone – ‘speak out’ – and seek specialist support. None reported that they would now encourage a woman to remain silent or put up with the situation.

*Now I would suggest something else: to seek assistance, to speak about her problems, to save herself and her kids (Q56).*

Although five women still stated that they would recommend their friend call the police, many more would suggesting contacting Shpresa, Solace or both (total 27%, n=15). Overall, responses demonstrate increased confidence in naming violence and help-seeking, crucially, to specialist services.

All women who answered the question (n=75) reported that they would recommend attending the workshops to a friend.

When asked if there was anything else that they wanted to say about the workshops, the most common theme (n=14) was the importance of trust, with a Shpresa staff member leading them in a familiar environment.

*I trust Shpresa programme and attended because of them. It is easy for us women to open up our talk with someone we know and trust (Q41).*

*Workshops to be organized in places we already know, for example at Shpresa programme and with people we are in connection from long time ago (Q47).*

Shpresa's role in the partnership is, therefore crucial. Women take part in the workshops and feel comfortable enough to confront and explore community and cultural norms, particularly around the position of women and men's entitlement and domination because they trust Shpresa. Information in the Albanian language – verbal and written - was also highlighted as an enabling context.

#### **WORKSHOPS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

While these workshops are not included in the evaluation, a number of issues relevant to the partnership have emerged. These include discussions around age appropriate material, as Solace's resources are aimed at over 11s and Shpresa hoped to work with younger children. A challenge was also identified in engaging teenagers who may not wish to be associated with the Albanian community and thus would not access groups led by an Albanian organisation. The targets for this part of the project were, on reflection, thought to be ambitious. One possible development is for young people to become peer educators and co-deliver the workshops. The Empower project, and ARISE workshops particularly, underscored to Shpresa the importance of challenging the attitudes and behaviours of Albanian men. They recognise that this work needs might be best targeted at young men.

#### **SUMMARY**

Opening up spaces to talk about domestic violence in the Albanian community is important for both the short term goal of recruiting women to the workshops, and creating a context in which women will continue to seek support beyond the remit and life of this project. Feedback from women demonstrates that the objective of raising awareness and informing women of their rights and so ensuring women seek support to protect themselves and their children has been met. Knowing how to recognise violence, protect themselves, seek help and enable friends to seek help were all reported as key learning from the workshops. This is strong evidence that the workshops transformed women's ability to name and define violence in their own lives and for women they know. Developing and delivering the workshops has also led to Shpresa programme reflecting on their 'family approach' to work within the Albanian community. This project has resulted in a move towards challenging unequal gender relations; what they refer to as 'manpower mentality'.

## INDIVIDUAL CASEWORK: THE EMPOWER PROJECT

***Objective: to provide specialist one-to-one information, advice and casework support for Albanian Speaking Women (ASW) experiencing violence, ensuring take-up of specialist services to address safety and wellbeing***

- 95 women were supported through individual casework. This is 27 per cent over the target.

It is notable, however, that while the targets for year one (30 women) and two (45 women) assumed a higher take up in the second year, in reality this worked the other way round. In year one 50 women were supported, 67 per cent over the target, with a further 45 women in year two and seven women from year 1 receiving ongoing support in year two (total 52 women). This has implications for setting up new projects where because of demand for the service, the support work very quickly becomes intensive.

- 88 per cent of women (n=84) identified as Albanian, and 12 per cent (n=11) as Kosovar;
- 77 per cent of women (n=73) had children, with a total of 130 children;
- 19 London boroughs were represented; only seven women (14%) lived outside London; and
- Only 15 women (16%) reported speaking English.

### OPENING THE DOOR TO SPECIALISED SUPPORT

The challenges for supporting ASW experiencing violence, particularly from intimate partners, mostly reflect those documented in the research evidence base.

Women who migrated from small towns and villages fear being tracked down by perpetrators and/or families in London. While the size of the capital provides reassurance – ‘you can be safe here’ – navigating it can be overwhelming. Independent living where men have been in control of decision making and had more opportunities to interact outside the home is a ‘big transition’ and some women need support with everyday activities like going shopping, as well as regular proactive checking in.

*[We say to women] this is a different country, there are options/opportunities places you can get help, and we give examples. You can see life can change, you don't have to live with violence and suffering, you have rights (Shpresa worker).*

The centrality of motherhood to ASW means that concern for children can be a route to encourage women to seek support. However, this requires careful balancing, since it can send a message to women that the children matter more than they do, and mentioning the possibility of losing children if they do not leave may scare women into denying that violence is happening.

ASW have 'grown up with men's right to dominate' – there is an assumption that women live with violence, including rape, since men have an entitlement to their wives' bodies. Workers describe awareness-raising as 'changing your head'. This has also been an emotional and attitudinal journey for workers in order to develop the project. It also represents a shift in approach for Shpresa as an organisation, as they have historically taken 'a family approach', and in this project have had to adapt to working with women using an analysis of gender inequality within the family and in wider community norms.

*We have to tell [women] they have rights, not culture-based... We have to give lots of information – what is allowed, what is not, rights. We inform a lot (Shpresa worker).*

The following case study illustrates how these issues play out in practice.

## CASE STUDY 1: ROZA

Roza was married to a man in Albania who she did not know. Her father negotiated the union. Her husband moved to England and she followed months later, happy to be starting a new life. On arrival in London, her husband told her that he was already married, and she was to sell sex for his gain. When she refused, he became violent, raping and hitting her frequently. The abuse escalated when she became pregnant. Roza was kept prisoner in a room and forbidden from contacting her family in Albania or London. After a particularly vicious attack when she was heavily pregnant, a neighbour called the police and Roza's husband was arrested. After leaving hospital, Roza went to live with family and was referred by Victim Support to the Empower project.

*When I spoke to case worker from Solace, I felt really good because it was the first time that I could express myself in my own language. All the time that I had spoken to professionals, they had to use an interpreter but it was completely different speaking directly to her... I was very scared and upset, but the case worker would phone me regularly to make sure I was OK. I would look forward to her phone calls because it gave me reassurance and made me feel that I was not on my own.*

Roza was referred for counselling. The caseworker also supported her with travelling around London to various appointments, as she found the size and scale of London 'overwhelming'. When she made an application for asylum, the Home Office insisted she be dispersed outside London, but Roza wanted to stay near family in the city, as she did not speak English and was afraid of being unable to read letters or communicate if her baby became ill. Finding safe and stable housing was a priority when her husband was released from prison, but complicated by Roza's status as an asylum seeker. With limited options, the caseworker secured an emergency safety phone which offered Roza some protection. After a year and a half, and her family unable to support her any longer, Roza was dispersed seven hours away from London. Telephone calls from the caseworker lessened her isolation and anxiety. Within days, the Home Office approved a move back to London on the basis that the Empower project provided essential support.

Now settled in London, Roza attends counselling and a mother and child group, as well as Shpresa workshops and English classes. Her asylum application was refused, and while awaiting an appeal, support from the Empower caseworker is a lifeline.

*The case worker has changed my life. I can see light for my future. My life has changed. I am no longer scared but much more confident. Without the support from the "Empower project" I could not have achieved any of these things.*

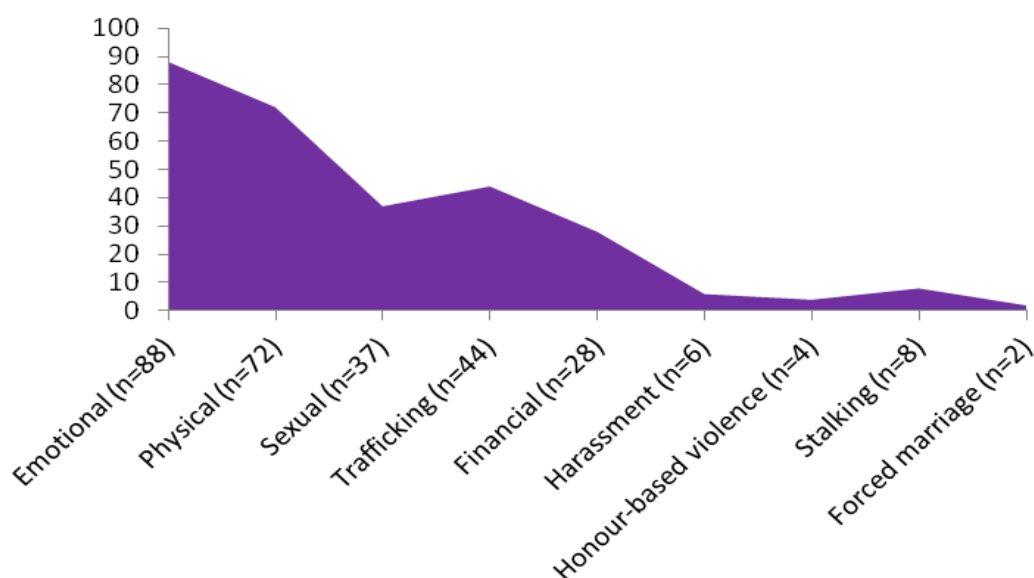


## A PROFILE OF THE WOMEN WHO ENGAGED WITH THE EMPOWER PROJECT

Figure 2 shows that almost all women engaged with the Empower project (n=88, 93%) had been subject to emotional abuse, with over three quarters (76%, n=72) reporting physical violence and almost two fifths (39%, n=37) sexual violence.

One finding that surprised Solace and Shpresa was the proportion of women who had been trafficked, primarily for sexual exploitation (46%, n=44). For almost all women who had been trafficked (95%, n=42), sexual exploitation was the purpose, with two trafficked for domestic servitude. This indicates that the project fills a gap in provision for Albanian women who have been trafficked into the UK. However, the caseworker reported that women's journeys are complex, as some were trafficked from Albania into Europe and then travelled to London on their own volition. Nevertheless, the emotional impacts of trafficking and implications for immigration/citizenship status were issues for which women were seeking support.

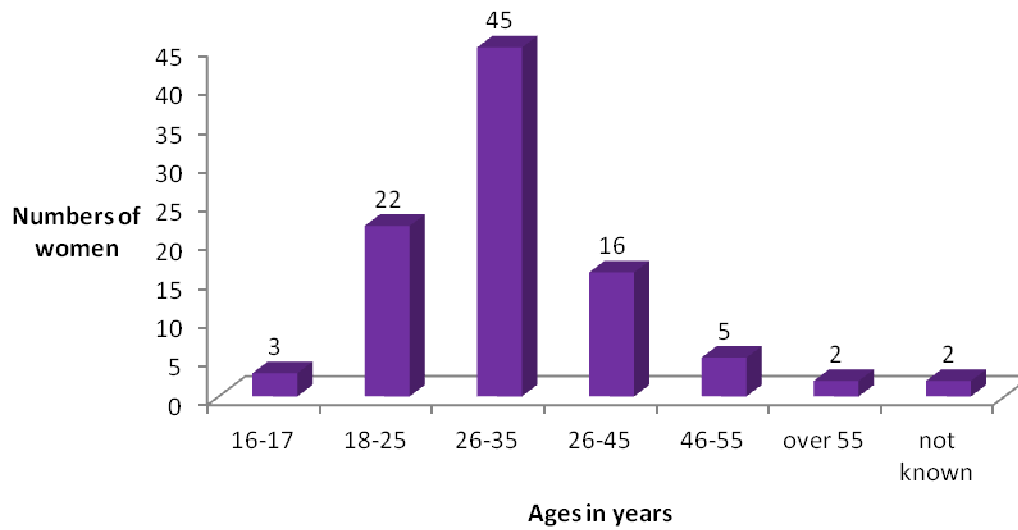
**Figure 2: Forms of violence experienced by women engaged with the Empower project**



As the data on physical, sexual and financial abuse does not specify the perpetrator, it is not possible to comment on what proportion of women identified primarily as having experienced domestic or sexual violence or trafficking. It is therefore more useful to record data by forms, since women may have experienced more than one: trafficked women may have histories of violence from intimate partners and sexual violence from those that bought sex from them; honour-based violence can include physical, emotional and sexual violence. Further research is needed to understand the connections between forms of violence in women's journeys to London and their experiences once arrived.

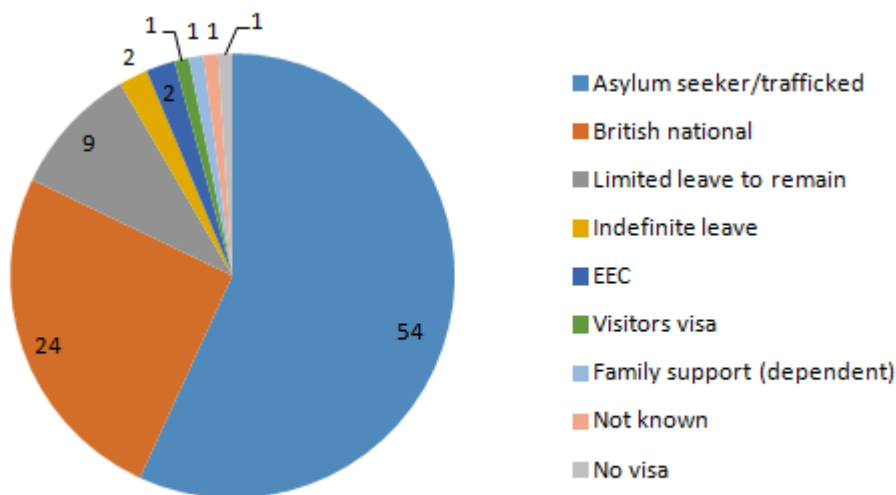
Three quarters (74%, n=70) of women were aged under 35, as Figure 3 shows. This is potentially significant since those under 35 can only access housing benefit for shared accommodation, which may not be appropriate, or feel safe, for women who have experienced violence.

**Figure 3: Ages of women engaged with the Empower project**



The vast majority had no paid work (n=81, 85%), with only 11 women in paid employment and three students. Over half of women (57%, n=54) were identified as asylum seeking or having been trafficked, with a further nine having limitations on their status in the UK (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Immigration status of women engaged with the Empower project**



**OBJECTIVE: TO PROVIDE SPECIALIST ONE-TO-ONE INFORMATION, ADVICE AND CASEWORK SUPPORT FOR ALBANIAN SPEAKING WOMEN (ASW) EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE**

The profile of women shows the layers of social disadvantage experienced by women: multiple forms of violence; limited access to material resources, including social security benefits; uncertainty of immigration status and possibility of dispersal outside London, away from the Empower project.

It is therefore unsurprising that the majority of support provided is practical, aiming to alleviate financial desperation through entitlements: social security benefits; citizenship status; housing; legal advice. Yet emotional support also features strongly (see table 2), with two fifths of women (n=37, 39%) referred for counselling/therapy and 40 (42%) referred to Shpresa’s support groups. Table 2 shows the range of interventions documented on the monitoring database.

**Table 2: Support and interventions with women**

Intervention	N women*
Accessing social security benefits	73
Support with asylum process	56
Referral to Shpresa support groups	40
Referral to counselling services/therapy	37
Homelessness applications	27
Referral to Social Services	25
Referral to Salvation Army for accommodation and food	25
Accessing food vouchers and children’s clothes	24
Accessing solicitors	23
Solace support groups	16
Accessing NASS support	15
Accessing ESOL classes	14
Application for funding from a charitable organisation	12
Support with reporting to the police	10
Support to access ‘in work’ programmes	9
Support at court hearings	8
Referral to MARAC	8
Accessing refuge space	7

\* multiple entries possible in each case

Additional support for children’s needs included: booking doctor’s appointments (where women did not speak English); securing school places; accessing children’s centres, health visitors and therapy for children.

The most common additional need that women reported was with language, with two thirds (63%, n=60) reporting this. Some women call the caseworker when they receive mail that they cannot read, including bills and details of medical appointments, and/or need help completing forms. At the interim report stage we noted that few women were recorded as having been referred to ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes. While there may be other routes to learning English – referrals to Shpresa for example may also result in women being signposted to English classes – the data suggested that few women are routinely enabled to access ESOL. However, the policy context may explain this.

Restrictions to free ESOL classes have been accelerated over the last five years, shrinking eligibility for publicly funded classes to migrants claiming specific, employment based benefits (Robinson, 2013). Those on Income Support – and therefore women who are full time mothers - are excluded, as are asylum seekers until their claim has been recognised or refugee status granted. Given that the majority of women engaged with Empower (85%) are

not in employment, and over half (57%) are claiming asylum, most will not have been eligible for free English classes. A recommendation from the interim evaluation report was for Solace, Shpresa and the funders to discuss extra resources to run tuition in English, as a significant step in enabling women to live independently and rebuild their lives (see also Thiara, 2015), and in doing so free up casework time to focus on more complex advocacy. Shpresa began to implement this recommendation by running English classes through their outreach workers and subsequently secured funding specifically to run English classes for this group of women.

## REFERRALS AND CAPACITY

Referral source data is less than straightforward. While almost a third are documented as having been referred from Shpresa (n=30) and Solace services (n=27) and one in six as self-referrals (n=14), interviews with workers and service users suggest that the pathways to Empower are more convoluted. For example, an ASW woman might contact Shpresa and be informed about Empower, or Shpresa may pass her details to the caseworker who proactively contacts her. This may be recorded as a self-referral or from Shpresa. Women may also approach Solace because they have heard from another organisation that there is a specialist service for ASW, and be recorded as having first called a helpline. We are reluctant to draw conclusions or make recommendations from this data without being able to unpick these pathways.

However, it is worth noting that referrals from outside the partnership organisations (Shpresa and Solace) increased from six in the first year to 20 in the second year. In the interim report, we suggested there was scope to further develop external referral pathways. As the project exceeded its target considerably in the first year, an increase in referrals further stretched the caseworker (see also Thiara, 2015). Solace do not operate waiting lists, so the number of referrals placed unexpected demands on her time. Developing a strong relationship with an Eastern European worker in a generic community advice organisation enabled her to refer some women on.

There are critical questions about how specialist support services manage capacity of caseloads. Recent data from the statutory sector Troubled Families programme indicates that workers hold average caseloads of between 10-22 (OSCA, 2015). Surveys of social workers give figures of 25 for in adult social care and 17 in children's, and nurses in the Family Nurse Partnership initiative around 25 (Hudson, 2015). While not possible at this stage to provide an estimate of the Shpresa worker caseload on any one day, since women reach in and out of the service, given that one worker supported 95 women across two years, it is likely to have exceeded these statutory sector figures. The caseworker post was only 25 hours per week, and a volunteer was recruited to support her.

The caseworker reports that the most demanding and time consuming aspects of her work involve insecure immigration status. This also has an impact on the length of time she works with women, since for many their citizenship status is not resolved within six months. Women with no recourse to public funds require especially intensive support, particularly if they are dispersed outside London and isolated in areas with no Albanian community.

Finally, while a quarter of cases (n=25, 26%) were closed within a month, 39 (41%) were open for six months or longer. This indicates that some women may have needs which are relatively quick to meet, but that a significant proportion requires ongoing support. As the

caseworker notes, without any other specialist support for ASW, women return to the project after initial crises have been resolved, and many cases are kept open when at the point of planned closure a further need emerges. Research with women rebuilding their lives after violence has demonstrated the importance of longer term support (Kelly et al, 2014).

A second case study supplied by Solace illustrates the range of violences that women may experience, and the inadequacy of institutional responses which necessitate intensive advocacy within casework (see also Thiara, 2015).

## CASE STUDY 2: BESIANA

Besiana's husband was verbally, emotionally and financially abusive. His gambling led them to leave Albania for the UK, and did not stop when they arrived. He stole from her and ran up huge credit card debt, before leaving after an argument. One day a man came to the house and demanded £10,000 that her husband had borrowed from him. This man threatened to kill Besiana's children by injecting them with heroin. He returned the following day with another man, and continued the threats, smashing nearby property and cars to intimidate her. Fearing for her safety and that of her children, Besiana contacted the police who refused to help. She then called Shpresa, who referred her to the Empower project.

*In the beginning I doubted as to what she could do for me, because the people who were threatening me seemed really dangerous people.*

The caseworker carried out a risk assessment and sought refuge space for Besiana and her children. When none could be found, she met Besiana at the local council to make a homeless application. After some intense advocacy by the caseworker about the family's safety, the application was accepted and Besiana was able to move.

*We moved to this property but I still needed help. I had to sort out my benefits because they used to be under my husband's name. As my English language is limited and I was not able to do that myself, I went to meet the case worker in her office and she phoned the relevant people and I am now in receipt of all the benefits. At the meeting the case worker also helped me search for schools in the area I had moved in and fill in the application form for my children.*

Besiana is having counselling and was supported by the caseworker to make an application to charitable foundation to fund activities for the children, and household items including beds.

*My life has changed. I am no longer scared from this people and I am so happy I have left my husband now and he does not know where we live. My children are safe as well.*

## OBJECTIVE: ENSURING TAKE-UP OF SPECIALIST SERVICES TO ADDRESS SAFETY AND WELLBEING

*Any time I've called them, they've been there... I'm absolutely happy with them. These type of programmes are very helpful for women... lots of other women from my country doesn't know what to do and don't know their rights. I tell a lot of women from my country about [Empower] (I16, 41).<sup>8</sup>*

Monitoring data and feedback from service users and stakeholders demonstrates that the objective for individual casework has been met.

- Women describe the Empower project as 'the right person in the right place'.
- A wide range of support and interventions, practical and emotional, are documented.
- Stakeholders perceive the project to be a 'lifeline' for Albanian speaking women.

### WOMEN'S VIEWS

Six women<sup>9</sup> were interviewed about their views on the Empower project, including their first impressions, experiences of support and if anything had changed for them as a result. All were overwhelmingly positive, valuing both the practical and emotional support and particularly that this was provided by an Albanian-speaking woman.

Four of the six women found the project through initial contact with Shpresa, with two referred directly to the caseworker by other organisations. Two women who learned about the project from workers at Shpresa were then proactively called by the Empower caseworker, and both valued this approach. Expectations were minimal or 'zero' at the beginning; women reported wanting 'support' but were unable to believe that such a specialist project existed. One woman said she 'did not have a clue' about what help she could expect and was 'mesmerised' (I1, 46).

The elements that women described as most useful were:

- proactive support – that the caseworker often initiated contact and maintained this with regular check-ins;<sup>10</sup>
- explaining processes and systems to women, 'step by step';
- accompanying women e.g. to court hearings, interviews about asylum claims, housing appointments; and
- feeling comfortable talking with the caseworker on the basis of shared language and heritage.

Two women described how the relationship with the caseworker had enabled them to build strengths, encouraging them to feel more confident and approach other agencies.

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<sup>8</sup> In the quotes from women, the first number refers to the interviewee and the second number their age.

<sup>9</sup> All six were interviewed after the first year of the project.

<sup>10</sup> See also Coy, M., & Kelly, L. (2011) *Islands in the Stream: An Evaluation of Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy Schemes* London: Trust for London.

*I needed someone to talk with who understood me. I felt not alone at all... I have to be strong for my child, they have only me, so I think positive and I will always remember her support. She was pushing me, I feel a bit stronger. The first steps I learned from her... she was the right person in the right place (15, 33).*

*To say that [Empower] has changed my life, that it is too much to say, because life is more complex, but it has improved my mental health a lot and that has made a big change (14, 27).*

This echoes findings from other evaluations of specialist support projects which note how relationships with workers built on empathy and identification can ‘unlock’ a range of positive outcomes (Shuker, 2013; Coy, 2014). It also highlights the need for long term support (see Kelly et al, 2014).

Alongside the advocacy work there is a sense of befriending women. Some described themselves as ‘unable to do things’ and able to call the caseworker ‘with even the smallest issue’. This might be exacerbated by the lack of access to English classes noted above, but it also suggests that the project may be unintentionally cultivating dependency, which is not sustainable for the women or the caseworker. There is a delicate balance here; some women valued a more directive approach which included ‘do this, you will feel better’ and were extremely grateful for the way the caseworker navigated ‘doing things’ for them. Yet women also described the project as ‘like their family’ and as ‘friends’ highlighting that there was overlap between personal and professional engagement with women. This reflects a challenge common to specialist support services, of how to provide intensive relational support, while also enabling women to develop independence. This is a challenge made all the more significant when women belong to a small community and have limited language. The ESOL classes for which Shpresa secured funding are intended to increase women’s independence by developing their language skills and confidence to manage everyday tasks without support of staff or volunteers.

### **STAKEHOLDER VIEWS**

While workers suggested that a small number of women did not want to engage with an Albanian worker because of fears of disclosure within the community, the benefits of shared heritage were felt to outweigh this, a perception echoed by stakeholders. The six stakeholders<sup>11</sup> interviewed for the evaluation identified a range of benefits for ASW, echoing those reported by women: an empathic, Albanian-speaking worker that combines emotional and practical support.

*It’s hugely important [to have specialist support for ASW] because... it is so ingrained in them, they absolutely believe that women should have no rights; they should just take whatever comes to them, violence. So I think there is a lot that has to be done and can be done and hugely important for society – here and in Albania. It’s about empowering them – when I say that it has to be culturally appropriate (Therapist).*

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<sup>11</sup> One was interviewed twice, as she worked closely with the Empower caseworker over the two years of the project.



*It's really hard in the Albanian community for women to come forward and they say they need help... It's a mentality, the way they have been raised, a tradition. They hold it to themselves, if they talk about it to someone, if they tell someone, they feel shame. Sometimes it's fear, they fear the partners. Sometime they don't have information of where to go... they need that confidence and trust... you need to build trust and confidence (Advice worker).*

These responses also demonstrate that professionals with knowledge of the Albanian community distinguish between women's awareness of violence being 'ingrained' and barriers to help seeking: shame, fear and normalisation. Violence as a 'tradition' where women 'take what's coming to them' is not the same as a perception that men's behaviours should be absolved. Rather, it is that such abuses are rooted in notions of men's rights, and specialist support enables women to recognise their own rights to live free from violence.

Asked about the partnership model between Solace and Shpresa, interviewees had varying knowledge. One police officer reported searching for support for ASW on the internet, finding the Empower project and having no wider awareness of how the support was configured. One Independent Domestic Violence Advisor interviewed after the end of the project was also unaware of the partnership or that the Albanian speaking caseworker was delivering a specialist service.

In contrast, a therapist commented on how the combination of both organisations' strengths was vital.

*[Women] wouldn't seek any help if they didn't go through Shpresa – they'd just put up with it... they wouldn't have even known. It's a different way of working for Solace Women's Aid and they have Shpresa to help them... Shpresa have their own strengths but it is hugely important for them to have a professional, specific link – Solace is the most appropriate. I think professional help in different areas is important for Shpresa (Therapist).*

That Shpresa, as a community organisation, enables women to seek support was echoed by the advice worker. Women who were engaged with the Empower project had told her how 'comfortable and easy it was to have support from someone who speaks the Albanian language and understands their background'. Shared language and heritage can, in this way, act as an 'invitation to tell' (Coy & Kelly, 2011).

*Albanian women speak to one another mostly. They find it more comfortable to talk one-to-one with Albanians... The better way is to befriend them, socialise, making them feel really close, to be able to speak. As soon as you are close with them they really do speak up (Advice worker).*

The IDVA similarly described Albanian women's needs as 'cultural', referring to the isolation of newly arrived communities and links with families in Albania who exercised power over women through threats of violence, stigma and ostracisation. She also noted that as the caseworker was part time, responding to immediate crises could be difficult. An advice

worker from another organisation reported taking referrals from the caseworker because they were 'overloaded'.

One police officer reflected that without the Empower project, Language Line would have been used to enable an ASW woman to give a statement about domestic violence, but the presence of the caseworker '*made it a lot easier and less stressful for the victim*'.

A further example of the value of the project stands out. The solicitor summarised two cases where women who had been trafficked faced dispersal out of London, away from the nascent support networks they had begun to build and schools in which their children were settled. After the disruption of constant moves while being sexually exploited, this safe, stable accommodation was deeply precious to women. Legal representatives had proactively investigated any similar support for ASW in the rest of the UK, and having found none, both women's cases rested on the importance of the Empower project for their wellbeing. The caseworker was able to be an expert witness.

*The main argument we put forward was not only [about] uprooting the family to another secure environment, but also the loss of what was to them a lifeline, from people that understand them and speak their language... We were able to prove it was overwhelmingly important why these families should not be deprived of an essential service in their own language... I am absolutely certain that the only reason the women won their cases was because of the service (Solicitor).*

## SUMMARY

Women who received support from the caseworker and stakeholders clearly value the specialist support provided to Albanian speaking women through the Empower project. Some provided examples where the existence of the project made a profound difference to women, in terms of emotional wellbeing, and the stability, safety and security they and their children were able to achieve. Overall, the data demonstrates a need for a specialist service for ASW in London, and especially one delivered in the Albanian language. The culturally and linguistically specific support that the Empower project provides was highlighted by all as essential.

To the extent that Albanian women are accessing support where they would have not previously, the Empower project contributes to legal obligations under equality duties to ensure that the principle of non-discrimination applies to specialist support provision.

## THE END OF THE PROJECT AND FUTURE OF THE PARTNERSHIP

The experience of Shpresa and Solace in developing and maintaining the partnership has been overall positive. Although the intention was to develop a project for Albanian-speaking women that would, in time, become mainstreamed within a specialist VAWG organisation, by the end of the project Shpresa perceived that it was too early to do this. The take up of the service has been higher than anticipated, and it has created momentum among the Albanian community and stakeholders about the range of violence women experience and where they can go for support. While the individual Albanian-speaking casework fits within Solace's extensive range of support services, the group workshops are opening spaces to talk about violence in the newly arrived Albanian diaspora which are in turn essential to enable women to seek support. Women reported that Shpresa's role in delivering these was vital.

At the end of the project, women were either referred to non-Albanian speaking casework services, or where appropriate, cases closed. This caused distress to both workers and women service users, who felt that the demonstrable need for the project is evidence that it should be continued. The caseworker was initially retained one day a week to continue providing support to a small number of women, and subsequently offered a post in Solace's casework team. Solace created a flow-chart visual guide for Shpresa staff to refer into this casework team. The aim is now to secure further funding to continue the partnership.

## WIDER LESSONS FROM THE MODEL

Our starting point, based on the evaluation data, is that this model has considerable potential for developing and delivering specialist support for women from newly arrived communities. The core elements of this specific partnership are replicable: a grassroots organisation with well-established relationships within a community, based on respect and trust, combined with the expertise and experience of a specialist VAWG organisation who can offer women a range of advice and support options.

Both organisations, however, reported concerns about their position in the model throughout the life of the project. These issues illustrate the challenges of partnership working between community groups and organisations of different size and/or background. There are power inequalities which can create tensions, which may not always be resolvable through goodwill and negotiation. Below we set out some of the issues and challenges in terms of what they suggest for future commissioning.

Not all of these arose during the Shpresa/ Solace partnership, and some were averted by negotiation. Identifying possible gains and pitfalls can inform the planning and decision-making with and between partner organisations. Collaborations are ongoing, live processes which require flexibility and openness to critique and change.

### FILLING A GAP IN PROVISION

The clearest lesson from this model is the opportunity to develop a specialised service for women from underserved minority communities. Grassroots community groups are

embedded in diasporic contexts. They understand how to reach women, what can be said and heard, and how to open doors to discussions about VAWG and help-seeking. Larger organisations that already provide a range of specialised services can then offer these to women for whom the community group acts as a gateway. Both partners gain legitimacy; the former within a specific community, and the latter in terms of their ability to respond to diverse victim-survivors. The project is therefore built on a solid foundation of connecting organisations with deep expertise in the needs of women from minority communities who are experiencing violence.

However, it remains important to consult with women who are potential service users. There is value in building in time during project inception for the co-production of community-specific resources. An initial consultation with women could help to refine and adapt materials, as well as the delivery format.

## KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

*Lessons learned over the last few months have been implemented into services we offer for other minority communities in London (Solace manager, July 2014).*

*The tools Solace have developed can be implemented through a community organisation, bringing together the best of each organisation (Shpresa manager, November 2014).*

Synthesising the expertise of a grassroots community-specific group with that of a larger specialised VAWG organisation has two layers of potential learning. If an external evaluation is commissioned, an interim report can reflect on both and make suggestions for change/adaptation, as shown throughout this report.

### *i) Issue-based learning*

Small community organisations stand to gain knowledge about VAWG, perpetrator tactics, impacts on children and available interventions. This enables them to provide a more responsive and confident initial response to women. For example, Solace E offered Shpresa staff places on their Open College Network accredited training programme, building their capacity as an organisation and upskilling the staff team. Shpresa created a directory of resources so that all staff and volunteers had access to information about specialised support services. Shpresa have also started to develop a similar depth of knowledge on trafficking, as they are 'seen as a portal' now for accessing support. This project has also led to a shift in their approach to working within the Albanian communities, from family-centred to how an analysis of unequal gender relations in families and the community is necessary to address and end VAWG. This learning has been about both content and confidence.

At the same time, larger organisations gain knowledge of how violence is understood in specific communities, which deepens their understanding of how gendered hierarchies of power intersect with cultural and community norms. This can inform their wider work with women from minority communities, with approaches to support adapted to the contexts in which women are making decisions.

## *ii) Organisational learning*

Grassroots community organisations, having developed organically through volunteer time and commitment, differ from larger organisations which have sought to professionalise practice and develop service standards (e.g. around counselling, legal advice). Boundaries between professional and personal engagement with women can be in sharp contrast. Smaller organisations can benefit from clearer separation of work and personal time to prevent staff burnout, and there is an important message for women as service users too: that they can and do survive when support is not immediately available, and are trusted to seek emergency help if needed. This also encourages them to recognise and rely on their own strengths and capacities. However, there are potential losses here too. For instance, Shpresa workers and stakeholders noted how significant ‘friendship’ is in the diasporic Albanian community. Social capital is hugely important to workers as members of the minority community, and declining invitations to social events, or establishing appropriate times for service users to call, may be experienced as undoing some of the very things that create legitimacy and engagement. Finding a balance between maintaining the fluid connections and relationships that enable disclosure and help-seeking, whilst protecting the emotional welfare of staff, is vital, but complex.

Small community organisations are also more nimble at implementing change than larger organisations which have more layers of formal procedure. Here is a significant message about the knowledge exchange that this model facilitates: that learning is bilateral, and large organisations have an opportunity to reflect on how layers of decision-making structures can delay adaptations to project delivery. Identifying a lead within each organisation who has authority to make prompt decisions is one potential route to bridging this gap.

## **ETHICS AND SHARED STANDARDS**

There is a perennial tension, not limited to VAWG, between mainstreaming services so that they become more widely accessible and embedded in universal provision, and retaining the specialisation which makes them so valued by service users. Small organisations can fear losing control of a project that they have nurtured, and it being absorbed into the larger organisation at the expense of its community anchors. Developing a philosophy for the partnership is therefore essential. Valuing the voice of grassroots community organisations is a conscious and ongoing process, easy to overlook or take for granted where a partnership is built on a shared vision for service delivery. Small organisations may perceive that since they have commissioned the larger organisation to deliver the project, they hold control. Yet if the project does not develop as planned, withdrawing from the partnership jeopardises its very *raison d’être*: to provide services for women experiencing violence. How community organisations are positioned to exercise their voice without compromising relationships is a crucial component if partnerships are to thrive and have longevity.

The routine use of power in larger organisations also requires conscious reflection. By definition larger organisations are more skilled and able to function in commissioning contexts and with funders. Enabling the smaller organisation partner to participate in conversations about future funding and commissioning is more than inviting them to be present; it is creating space for their knowledge and perspective to be heard and

recognised. This may require larger organisations to relinquish some of the authority they are often accustomed to holding.

### EXPECTATION MANAGEMENT

Differing approaches and processes can create a mismatch in expectations and impressions of capacity and capability. Small community groups can perceive that larger organisations have infinite financial resources to support partnerships and projects. Equally, the porous boundaries on which smaller organisations are often built can create an impression of infinite human resources which might be inadvertently exploited.

Willingness to make partnerships work can resolve this through negotiation, but more formal processes are also necessary. A valuable first step in developing a partnership is a project plan which clarifies all elements of the project, including those necessary to support each organisation to deliver it: e.g. resources that each organisation brings in terms of staff time; how training and knowledge transfer between partners is to be structured; review processes; named organisational leads and progress meetings. Regular spaces for reflection need to be built in too, where activities can be mapped, targets discussed, operational issues negotiated and adaptations decided on. These are in addition to informal and immediate conversations between organisational leads where decisions can be taken swiftly.

### COMMUNICATION

The steps outlined above should create mechanisms for communication between organisations. Creating communication channels between project workers is important too. For instance, choosing where to locate caseworkers is part of project design. There are clear advantages to basing workers in community organisations where they are instantly accessible to women, especially those who may be in crisis. Yet being co-located within the larger VAWG organisation, adjacent to workers with different skills, is also valuable. Being co-located offers opportunities, but can create time management difficulties for workers and gaps in what information is known where about the project. This can be further complicated where there is also a worker delivering groupwork with women, as outreach to recruit women may be more effective from the community organisation. Again, team meetings at regular intervals and with set agendas can alleviate these potential hitches. Management roles should also be clarified when staff are based in different organisations, including clear lines of accountability and responsibility for supervision.

### FUTURE PLANNING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Successful new interventions generate a demand, especially where referral routes with local agencies are established. At the end of the funding, there may be considerable anxiety among workers and service users about whether or not the project will continue. Where projects build awareness of VAWG in newly arrived communities, including offering specialised support, the loss of bespoke pathways when funding ends has implications both for women's safety and for the trust that community organisations work hard to maintain. Being able to sustain routes to specialised support is crucial. Yet the regrettable shift in commissioning practices away from specialised services for minority women makes this particularly challenging.

It is important, then, for time to be set aside to plan whether future funding will be sought, and what strategies are in place to manage any transition stages between the end of the initial project and new delivery. This planning should involve the front line support workers, to build in their perspectives on women's needs and the capacity of the other agencies with which they liaise to pick up specialised support work.

Whether or not the partnership continues is a critical decision. Reaching consensus about the future of the project will require learning from the strengths and weaknesses in what has been achieved to date: is it ready to be incorporated within the larger organisation, is the grass roots organisation wishing to develop the service themselves or is the grassroots community group so integral as a gateway that the partnership cannot yet be dissolved?

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## Appendix 1: Evaluation data sources

<p><b>Service users</b></p>	<p>One focus group with Albanian-speaking women about their experiences of the groupwork sessions (total 14 women)</p>	<p>Questionnaires completed by women who attended groupwork sessions, about their views on the domestic violence workshops (n=76).  Questionnaires were entered in SPSS for analysis.</p>	<p>Face-to-face (n=4) and telephone interviews (n=2) with Albanian-speaking women about their experiences of support from the Empower project. The face-to-face interviews were conducted at Solace with an interpreter.</p>	<p>Monitoring data collected by Solace on women engaged in individual casework and the groupwork sessions.</p>	<p>Two case studies, supplied by the Empower caseworker and adapted for the report</p>
<p><b>Shpresa and Solace staff</b></p>	<p>Interviews with the directors of Shpresa and Solace (May/June 2014 and July 2015)</p>	<p>Three sets of interviews with strategic and operational managers at Solace about the development of the partnership (May and November 2014 and December 2015)</p>	<p>Two focus groups with staff at Shpresa (total eight women including the director). The first focus group explored the inception of the partnership and understandings of violence, including discussion of a hypothetical case study, and the second focussed on the collaboration between Shpresa and Solace (June and November 2014)</p>	<p>Phased interviews with the groupworker (May and November 2014) and caseworker (May and November 2014 and December 2015)</p>	<p>Focus group with four volunteers and one woman service user at Shpresa (September 2015)</p>
<p><b>Stakeholders</b></p>	<p>Telephone interviews with six practitioners who have worked with the Empower project: two police officers; an advice worker (interviewed twice in December 2014 and December 2015) ; an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor; a solicitor; and a therapist.</p>				