

“I Don’t Know Whom to Call for Help” :

Barriers and Opportunities in the Re/Integration of Southeast Asian Migrant and Trafficked Women in the UK.

A report by SEEAC



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About SEEAC



Members of the SEEAC community during a photography workshop in Battersea Park (October 2022).

Southeast and East Asian Centre (SEEAC) is a community organisation for and by migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum from Southeast and East Asia and people of these heritages living in the UK. We provide essential community support services on issues around welfare, immigration, employment, healthcare access, racism and discrimination, mental health, as well as gender-based violence and exploitation. Based on our experiences as a user-led grassroots organisation, we also deliver advocacy and campaigning work to address intersectional challenges faced by marginalised and under-represented groups of the communities, such as precarious migrant workers, asylum seekers, survivors of trafficking and labour exploitation, women and people of marginalised genders.

SEEAC strives to make change in our society so that members of Southeast and East Asian communities in the UK can live without social exclusion and isolation, to be free from discrimination, exploitation and poverty, and to be able to make positive contributions to wider British society. Southeast and East Asian communities consist of people with backgrounds from countries and regions including but not limited to Brunei, Cambodia, China, East-Timor, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, North and South Korea, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. These are vast and diverse communities with different experiences, yet also face similar issues and shared experiences as “Asian Other” ethnic groups in British society. With the experience and expertise of some established community leaders and organisations, we aim to provide support to members of a wide range of communities by reaching out to some of the most under-represented groups.

SEEAC is a registered community interest company by guarantee (CIC).

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List of Abbreviations

ESA Scotland	East and Southeast Asian Scotland
ESEA	East and Southeast Asian
FDWA	Filipino Domestic Workers Association UK
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FLEX	Focus on Labour Exploitation
FPAR	Feminist Participatory Action Research
GAATW	Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women
GP	General Practitioner
ILO	International Labour Organization
NHS	National Health Service
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
NRPF	No Recourse to Public Funds
ODW	Overseas Domestic Worker
SEEAC	Southeast and East Asian Centre
TARA	Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UPR	Universal Periodic Review

Preface and Acknowledgements

This report reflects the research conducted by SEEAC in the United Kingdom (UK). It voices the lived experiences of migrant and trafficked women from Southeast Asia in the UK out of a process of feminist participatory action research (FPAR) which was conducted by and with migrant and trafficked women themselves. At SEEAC, we are grateful to have engaged in a research process using FPAR for two reasons: First, because it gave us the opportunity to develop research skills ourselves; and, second, because it has produced findings that arise from the authentic experience of migrant and trafficked women from Southeast Asia. We also acknowledge the contributions of our community members to the research. We hope that through this kind of exposure to FPAR, they are able to share their experiences with their fellow community members.

Since 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we began participating in the consortium project “From Southeast Asia to Europe: Strengthening Migrant and Trafficked Women’s Rights to Inclusive Re/Integration,” coordinated by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) based in Thailand. It gave SEEAC a wonderful opportunity to learn about and equip ourselves with skills to connect, work and learn together with other partner organisations and researchers in eight countries, all reflecting on our own experiences as newly-established, majority-migrant-women-led organisations, and, most importantly, to evidence the life journeys and aspirations of women who have experienced labour migration and trafficking.

I would like to express my gratitude to all who have made this work possible. First of all, GAATW, for its trust, its financial and non-financial resources, and its continuous support and encouragement. I particularly thank Bandana Pattanaik, Borislav Gerasimov, Milena Stateva, and Maya Linstrum-Newman for their tremendous support in what I would describe as an empowering process of collective work. Secondly, I extend my appreciation to all consortium partners with whom we shared caring and supportive co-learning spaces: the Batis Center for Women and Blas F. Ople Policy Center and Training Institute (Philippines), the Centre for Social Work and Community Development Research and Consultancy, and the Institute for Development and Community Health/LIGHT (Vietnam); La Strada Foundation (Poland); Ban Ying (Germany); FairWork (Netherlands); Comité Contre L’Esclavage Moderne (France), and The Voice of Domestic Workers (United Kingdom).

On behalf of SEEAC, I would like to express our gratitude to partner organisations

and individuals. Our research benefitted from collaboration with the Filipino Domestic Workers Association UK (FDWA) and East and Southeast Asian Scotland (ESA Scotland), who made it possible for us to be alongside migrant and trafficked women in their communities. Most importantly, the core success of this research is due to all the women who participated by giving their time, sharing their life experiences and aspirations, and who showed tremendous trust, care and courage. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge and appreciate the dedicated work of our staff and volunteer team at SEEAC who worked on this project in different stages of the research and report writing: Chau Bao Nhi Nguyen, Chung-Ah Baek, Ha-Chau Ngo, Luisa Pineda and Nova Fransisca Silitonga.

I sincerely hope this report provides valuable evidence and is used as a tool for anyone who wishes to advocate and work collectively to struggle for rights, recognition, participation and representation of migrant and trafficked women.

Mariko Hayashi
Executive Director, SEEAC

Executive Summary

The journey of Southeast Asian migrant and trafficked women to the UK is fraught with challenges, hopes and opportunities. This report documents the experiences and aspirations of these women, with narratives from 28 female participants from Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia. Through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, we gained a window into their unique experiences and perspectives on “integration” within British society. Their stories bring to light a range of multifaceted challenges:

1. They often face **persistent legal and economic barriers** in the UK.
Not all migrants and trafficked women find a smooth transition into the economic realm of the UK. All too often, they are trapped in exploitative working conditions, and their uncertain legal status compounds these problems, leading them into unsafe employment, stagnated or decreased salaries, and preventing them from voicing their rights to access essential support.
2. They constantly navigate **a complex landscape of social integration**.
Beyond economic integration, social integration presents its own set of challenges. Cultural gaps, societal perceptions, and feelings of isolation act as formidable barriers. Although they bring rich traditions and diverse backgrounds, their ability to socially integrate is stymied by the absence of platforms where they can share their stories and create mutual understanding. The women’s accounts depict an overwhelming struggle for social recognition and acceptance.
3. The COVID-19 pandemic had – and continues to have – a huge impact on their lives. **The pandemic exacerbated their vulnerabilities**, with many facing job losses or reduced working hours, thus compounding their financial difficulties. Furthermore, the pandemic heightened feelings of alienation, primarily due to reduced personal interactions and community engagement.
4. For many, UK-based, Southeast Asian **community networks served as an anchor of hope and resilience**. Amidst their struggles, the sense of community was a vital source of strength and belonging. Our interviews highlight that support groups and community-driven initiatives were platforms that not only provided a feeling of unity and belonging but also empowered the agency of migrants and trafficked women, allowing them to advocate for themselves and

others.

5. There is evidence of **a lack of support from both state and non-state entities**. The policies and actions of the government played a key role in the protection and integration of the migrant and trafficked women who engaged in this research. Moreover, NGOs were instrumental in providing immediate help, be it in the form of legal assistance or shelter. The collaboration between state and non-state actors is identified as a crucial component in ensuring the comprehensive wellbeing and integration of migrant and trafficked women.

SEEAC, in collaboration with partners, is engaged in a two-fold mission to actively advocate for migrant rights both at the international and at the community levels. That is why this report includes a summary of some of the actions that have already resulted from the research process which created it—both our influence of policy arenas at the UN Human Rights Council and elsewhere (for example, calls for visa policy reforms, establishment of legal routes for migrant workers, and the championing of international conventions), and our grassroots community engagements (including workshops tailored for women on health and relationships) which have emerged as powerful tools to engender belonging and empowerment.

Introduction

Women from Southeast Asia have been migrating to the UK (and other parts of Europe) for decades. Apart from migrating to the UK due to periods of British occupation and/or war, women from across Southeast Asia have been coming to the UK to fill in the labour shortages in institutions such as the National Health Service (NHS).¹ However, their experiences have received relatively little attention from many of the stakeholders who shape and implement the policies that impact their lives. This is why SEEAC was delighted to participate in the consortium project “From Southeast Asia to Europe: Strengthening Migrant and Trafficked Women’s Rights to Inclusive Re/Integration,” led by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), and why we were especially pleased to use feminist participatory action research (FPAR) to explore and document the experiences and aspirations of Southeast Asian migrant women living in the UK.²

During the collective work within the consortium, we developed several broad questions for all partners to address in their country-focused research:

- What is the role of states and other stakeholders in supporting and protecting migrant and trafficked women?
- What are the opportunities and barriers for integration/reintegration of migrant and trafficked women?
- What are women’s own agencies, experiences and narratives about their journeys and lives?
- How do crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic impact migrant and trafficked women’s well-being and security?

These questions therefore provided the framework for the specific questions we identified for SEEAC’s research in the UK.

The term “integration” has been used repeatedly in British public debate on issues of immigration, and migrant communities have been the central subject of the topic. However, narratives of migrants themselves are often absent in the debates, as the predominant ideas of “integration” are based on the discourse of the host society. Based on the key questions collectively developed with the consortium

¹ See: <https://www.migrationmuseum.org/boat-people-over-history/> (Accessed 1 September 2023); <https://heartofthenation.migrationmuseum.org/map/> (Accessed 1 September 2023).

² See: <https://www.gaawt.org/resources/publications/1254-sea-europe-research> (Accessed 31 August 2023).

partners and the context of the UK in which SEEAC works, we set out to amplify the voices of migrant and trafficked women and to offer our findings to further resource advocacy work for and by these women.

It is important to mention that there are very diverse experiences among women from Southeast Asian countries living and working in the UK. There are many women who are working as so-called “high skilled workers” or “professionals” in various industries. However, in our FPAR we focused on experiences of women who are in more precarious and vulnerable working situations or hoping to work in feminised sectors such as domestic work, care work, beauty or hospitality, some of whom have experienced multiple marginalisation within Southeast Asian migrant communities in the UK.³ Also, while Southeast Asian communities are very diverse, consisting of at least 11 national/regional groups with very different identities, our research, because of limits on time and resources, focused on the experiences of women from Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia in the hope that these represent, at least to some extent, the experiences of other Southeast Asian migrant women.

To further focus our research, we identified four main areas of migration experience for Southeast Asian women who have come to the UK, and developed the following research questions related to each area (see Appendix A).

1. Impact of the UK’s immigration system on “integration”

What does “integration” mean to migrant or trafficked women in the UK, and what would make migrant and trafficked women feel “integrated” in their communities and workplaces? We explored experiences and challenges of those with limited immigration status including those who are undocumented and in legal process for determining their status, as well as in precarious work. We also examined the impact of the UK’s policies on immigration and trafficking/modern slavery on their current and prospective livelihood.

2. “Integration in the labour market”

Do migrant and trafficked women find jobs easily, what jobs do they find and how? Do their skills receive recognition? Are they able to use their skills? We explored how work plays a role in migrant and trafficked women’s integration by looking at their experiences relating to work, the solutions they wish for and the solutions actually available to them.

³ By ‘precarious and vulnerable’, in this context we refer to employment situations characterised by minimal job security, low wages and limited access to social protections.

3. Support for migrant or trafficked Southeast Asian (specifically Vietnamese, Filipino or Indonesian) women in the UK

What does it mean to be a migrant or trafficked Southeast Asian woman in the UK? How important is it to be able to access support that meets language and/or other socio-cultural needs? We explored availability and accessibility of support or resources catered for the specific needs of Southeast Asian women and what kind of support and services they would like to receive.

4. Aspiration and hopes for the future

What are the aspirations of migrant and trafficked women? What would they like to do and/or improve in their life and what would they need to realise their aspirations? Last, but not least, we asked migrant and trafficked Southeast Asian women in the UK about their aspirations and hopes for the future.

Context

In order to understand the experience of migrant and trafficked women in the UK, it is essential to understand the context of the UK immigration system, hence the description and commentary which follow. There are very limited legal routes available for people from Southeast Asia to enter and continue to stay in the UK, especially for those seeking employment in sectors such as domestic work, cleaning, catering, beauty or other services industries. Figure 1 shows some but not all of the common visas used by people from Southeast Asia to enter or stay in the UK for work. As it indicates, there are strict requirements on employment, minimum income, and qualifications. Some visas are valid for only a short period of several months and are non-renewable inside the UK requiring applicants to leave the country before reapplying for their visas.

Very few legal routes for labour migration to the UK:



- **Skilled Worker Visa** - must have a job with a UK employer approved by the Home Office AND earn at least £25,600/year or the 'going rate' for the specific type of work. You can earn less, if your job is on the shortage occupation list (but must earn at least £20,480 or £10.10/hour).
- **Health and Care Worker Visa** - for qualified professionals (i.e. doctors, nurses, health / adult social care professionals)
- **Overseas Domestic Worker Visa** - for domestic workers visiting the UK with their employers. Temporary visa up to 6 months and non-renewable.
- **Seasonal Worker Visa** - temporary visa up to 6 months in agriculture or October - December for poultry, non-renewable.
- **Graduate Visa** - must graduate from UK universities.

Figure 1. Major legal routes for labour migration in the UK

The restrictive nature of these visas often results in precarious employment situations for migrants. Many find themselves without a clear, legal path to remain if their job sector is not recognised or included in the shortage of occupation lists, or if they fail to meet the income requirement. Short-term and temporary visa schemes contribute to this instability, often linked to an increased risk of labour exploitation and modern slavery. The limited legal immigration routes often lead to irregular entry or overstaying in the destination country.

The financial burden associated with visa applications poses another significant challenge. According to research published by Migrant Voice in 2022, a single person is expected to pay at least £2,593 for a 2.5-year visa, and the application fee for settled status, known as Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), is £2,389. Consequently, an individual on a 10-year route to settlement could end up paying over £50,000 to try to obtain indefinite status in the UK. These fees can result in debt, destitution, workplace exploitation, and adverse effects on physical and mental health, often leading to the loss of immigration status along the way.⁴ High visa fees are particularly burdensome for families, as are prolonged waiting periods for visas before migrants have the right to work.

With regards to trafficking, the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in the UK provides a critical framework for identifying and assisting potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking. However, its operational complexities often limit the effectiveness of the system. For one to be recognised as a victim through the NRM, referrals must be made to the Single Competent Authority, part of the Home Office, by ‘first responder organisations’. These include police forces, certain Home Office departments, and charitable organisations.⁵ This procedure can be daunting for migrants, who may experience retraumatisation, feel uncomfortable or unsafe about interacting with law enforcement, and/or struggle to access culturally competent assistance. Furthermore, there is also lack of transparency on the process of selection of first responder organisations and a significant reliance on NGOs for referrals. This leads to capacity issues due to the high volume of cases, often making it challenging for these organisations to accommodate the demand.

Figure 2, published by the Home Office, displays the NRM referrals by nationality and age group of potential victims in 2021.⁶ This data highlights that Vietnamese individuals represent the second largest non-British nationality group referred through the NRM. Once a referral has been made, a ‘reasonable grounds’ decision is typically made within five working days. Identified victims of modern slavery are then entitled to a minimum recovery and reflection period of 45 days. However, the subsequent ‘conclusive grounds’ decision, which definitively determines victim

⁴ <https://www.migrantvoice.org/resources/reports/destroying-hopes-dreams-and-lives--230422122311>

⁵ For first responder organisations in England and Wales, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms/guidance-on-the-national-referral-mechanism-for-potential-adult-victims-of-modern-slavery-england-and-wales>; for those in Northern Ireland and Scotland, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms/national-referral-mechanism-guidance-adult-northern-ireland-and-scotland>

⁶ Source: Single Competent Authority (SCA) and Immigration Enforcement Competent Authority (IECA) (2021)/Note(s): Excludes potential victims with an unknown age at exploitation. There are separate categories for dual-nationals. (see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2021/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2021>).

status, can take anywhere from 45 days to over two years, leaving potential victims in a state of long-lasting uncertainty.⁷

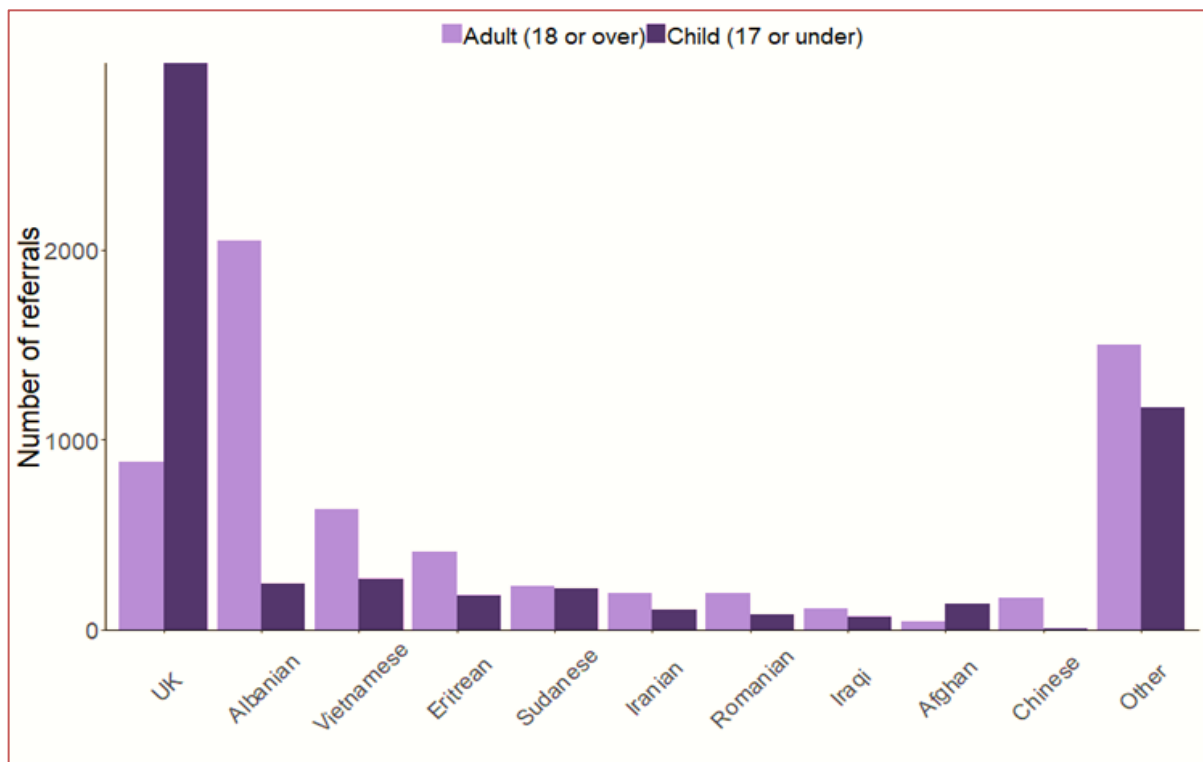


Figure 2. Number of NRM referrals by nationality group, 2021

It is important to note that, while crucial, the NRM system can deter potential victims from seeking assistance, further exacerbating the hostile environment they face. Many encounter long delays in decision making, the risk of detention and deportation for undocumented workers following a negative decision, no guaranteed secure status even after a positive decision, no right to work while in the NRM, and a lack of pre-NRM legal advice. Moreover, negative decisions can damage the ‘credibility’ of other immigration applications that individuals may file in the future. Although NGOs like Migrant Help provide support – such as accommodation, referrals to community befriending services, bus passes, and clothing – to help potential victims gradually become independent, the collective issues highlight the need for a comprehensive reform of the NRM system to better support victims of modern slavery and human trafficking.

Particularly with new legislation, there is growing concern that the situation for asylum seekers could worsen, affecting those identified as potential victims of trafficking and modern slavery as well. The Nationality and Borders Act (2022) and

⁷ It was discussed during an information session by one of the first responder organisations.

the Illegal Migration Act (2023) have profound implications for asylum seekers. Already the journey of asylum seekers in the UK presents a unique array of challenges. These include: long, complex, and often opaque processes; a lack of legal support; the possibility of detention; limited access to employment; and the threat of being returned to the dangerous situations from which applicants are trying to escape. The Nationality and Borders Act, in particular, has been criticised for its punitive approach, making it a criminal offence to arrive in the UK without permission, and differentiating between refugees based on their method of arrival rather than the validity of their claims. Both Acts are regarded by many as exacerbating an already difficult situation for asylum seekers, and potentially for trafficked women. It is therefore essential that the complexities of navigating the immigration system are addressed to create a more humane and supportive system for those seeking safety in the UK.

The 2019 Home Office Indicators of Integration Framework represents a milestone in facilitating the integration of migrants into society. The framework, which focuses on enhancing strategies, monitoring services, and evaluating interventions, acknowledges integration as a mutual responsibility benefitting all communities. It covers four primary domains: work, education, housing, health and social care, and leisure; social bonds, bridges, and links; language and communication, culture, digital skills, safety, and stability; and rights, responsibilities, and citizenship.⁸ However, the current immigration system often contrasts with the Integration Framework. Restrictive visa conditions, high costs, and the hostile environment for undocumented migrants significantly undermine the framework's goals. The complexities of the NRM for victims of modern slavery and human trafficking further exacerbate these challenges, inhibiting effective integration.

The success of the framework requires the collaboration of all stakeholders, including the host community and migrants themselves. The government could revise immigration policies to align more closely with the framework's goals by reducing restrictions and financial barriers. NGOs and employers can supplement statutory services by providing additional support in education, health and social care, and community integration. Culturally competent services, especially in language and communication, are pivotal for integration, requiring investment in resources and training. Indeed, the effectiveness of the UK Integration Framework heavily relies on cooperative efforts and a more accommodating immigration system, an insight evidenced significantly by our research findings.

⁸ Source: UK Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019 (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1074688/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019-horr109.pdf)

Methods

Our research aimed to examine the experiences of migrant women from Southeast Asia living in the UK. The research employed two qualitative methods for data collection: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). In preparation for the interviews, pilot FGDs were conducted with Vietnamese migrants based in Scotland to test sample questions and gather feedback from participants. These methods facilitated a detailed and thorough exploration of the research questions while ensuring the safety of participants and informants and the protection of their personal data.

Following the pilot interviews, the research then engaged a total of 28 migrant women from Southeast Asia. These participants were recruited from service users and networks of SEEAC, and two organisations – the Filipino Domestic Workers Association UK (FDWA) and East and Southeast Asian Scotland (ESA Scotland) – both of which have worked closely with SEEAC for years in supporting East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) migrant communities.⁹ Participants were carefully selected based on nationality, location, immigration status, and occupation. The study included three Indonesian, 14 Vietnamese, and 11 Filipino women.

More than half of the 28 participants resided in London or nearby areas in South East England, while the rest lived in or around Glasgow, Scotland. Their immigration statuses were diverse, including undocumented individuals, asylum seekers, and those with valid visas (both temporary and indefinite status). As for employment, participants held various jobs, primarily in domestic work, but also part-time roles in residential care homes, bookkeeping, and gardening.

The data collection team, consisting of four female researchers from Vietnam, Indonesia, and Japan, conducted five individual interviews and five FGDs with groups of varied sizes and nationalities. FDWA supported the research team with the coordination and facilitation of a FGD with Filipino women, whereas ESA Scotland helped SEEAC conduct interviews with women in Scotland.

Given the sensitive nature of the research participants' immigration statuses, the interview questions were mostly focused on their experiences of community activities and their daily life experiences. In particular, the pilot group interview provided a better understanding of the community and the level of sensitivity

⁹ FDWA is a grassroots and self-organised group for and by Filipino migrant domestic workers, including survivors of trafficking and modern slavery; ESA Scotland was founded as the first organisation dedicated to lobbying on racial equality and anti-racism for East and Southeast Asian people in Scotland.

around the situations of the Vietnamese asylum-seeking community in Scotland, leading to modifications in some group interview questions. Additionally, two key informants from FDWA and ESA Scotland were also interviewed, offering valuable insights into their respective organisations' work and experiences supporting migrant women in the UK. The informant from FDWA helped frame some interview questions to better understand the situations of women.

Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the research and their rights to refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the interview at any time. The data collection team also sought their verbal consent for the interview results to be used in publication and research without disclosing any of the participants' personal data. To safeguard their safety, privacy, and emotional well-being, the team used pseudonyms for all participants during the process – and in this report. This fostered a comfortable environment for open discussion of their experiences and perspectives, and has ensured confidentiality and adherence to ethical research practices.

The research process was not without challenges. One was the dispersed nature of Southeast Asian communities in the UK, which made it difficult to reach out to and coordinate with participants who had minimal contact with local NGOs or community-led organisations. Some participants also had limited access to communication technologies, such as the Internet, smartphones, and laptops. Therefore, it took some time to reach out and build trust with the women who would be our participants.

Language barriers posed a challenge, particularly for newly-arrived migrants in the UK. This was especially the case for Vietnamese women in Scotland and Indonesian women in London. Therefore, the data collection team included researchers proficient in Vietnamese, Indonesian, and English to communicate with participants and interpret during the interviews.

Respecting participants' emotional boundaries was another concern, as some interview questions touched on sensitive and potentially traumatising topics. The team adopted a feminist participatory approach to ensure participants' comfort and privacy during the interviews. Furthermore, the researchers had themselves migrated from countries (such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Japan) for education, work, or family reunion and had firsthand experience of the UK immigration system. This helped establish rapport and empathy with the participants, and created a safe space for open and honest conversations.

The data collection team also faced several challenges and limitations during the data collection process. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly delayed the research

schedule and influenced the interview format. Due to COVID-19 related restrictions imposed on group gatherings, the pilot group interviews and key informant interviews were conducted online. One benefit of the online format was that participants could choose to stay anonymous without showing their faces. This created some sense of safety for those participating in the interview for the first time. However, most interviews were conducted face-to-face after restrictions eased in the summer of 2021. Follow-up questions for several women were then asked via phone/video calls.

Findings

The UK government has implemented various policies and frameworks to support the integration of migrants into society. The “Integrated Communities Action Plan” and the “Indicators of Integration Framework”, both developed by the Home Office in 2019, aim to promote social cohesion and ensure that migrants can fully participate in society. These focus on improving English language skills, providing access to employment and education, and fostering a sense of community cohesion. Despite these efforts, Southeast Asian migrant and trafficked women in the UK remain vulnerable and marginalised, facing various forms of exploitation and abuse that cannot be addressed by policy frameworks alone. To ensure their safety, protection, and empowerment, it is important to understand the opportunities and barriers that these women encounter in integrating into society in their real lives. Our research, which gave voice to the authentic experiences of migrant and trafficked women from Southeast Asia in the UK, indicates that careful attention and action are required in the five areas detailed below.

1. Legal and social barriers to economic integration

Migrant and trafficked women in the UK have various goals, such as working legally, developing new skills, and reuniting with their families. Economic inclusion, particularly secured through employment opportunities and workers’ rights, is a pivotal aspect of their integration into host societies. However, legal and social barriers often prevent them from achieving stable employment, fair pay, and respectful treatment, which significantly impacts their sense of belonging.

1.1. Impact of immigration status

Immigration status often poses a significant barrier to achieving these goals. Mila, whose asylum application is in process without being granted permission to work, expressed interest in pursuing multiple career paths, including working as a DJ, hairdresser, or makeup artist. Yet, she emphasised the importance of work permission: “The only support I need is that I’m [legally] allowed to work. With the documents that allow me to work, everything will be easy.”

Women with rejected asylum claims or applications for discretionary leave to remain after the NRM, as well as many women with ongoing asylum applications or in the NRM, are not allowed to work, which leads to feelings of exclusion. Zoe, unable to work or study for six years due to her immigration status, said,

“Sometimes I feel useless. I can do nothing. I don't have permission to do anything.” The inability to work not only affects their sense of belonging but also their capacity to support their families, further exacerbating feelings of exclusion and disempowerment. Mila adds:

I haven't worked here, but I really hope I can work . . . I couldn't do anything for my family. I want to pay the debt of my aunt. I don't know when I can pay her back. I don't go to work because I am not allowed to work. This is stated in my ID.

1.2. Exploitation in the workplace

Even when migrant women find work, many face exploitation due to a lack of documentation such as valid visas and contracts. Sara described her experience of an unfair work system:

In terms of pay, they're not paying me properly. Compared with the other lady . . . Let's say she was given 16 or 17 pounds per hour, as for me they just pay me 12 pounds per hour. The other lady, even if she doesn't work, because she's legally staying here, she's being paid. For me no work, no pay . . . I don't have any choice. I have to go to work if not I cannot pay my rent. So for me, it's still exploitation.

1.3. Childcare responsibilities and limited English skills

Social challenges, including childcare responsibilities and limited English skills, also impede these women's integration process. Kate highlighted her struggle:

Having a young kid means that I don't have time. No one helps me look after the kid. I really want to work. Going to work means I can interact with other people. I want to work in restaurants, maybe in the locals' one. Therefore I need to learn English to find a job.

Migrant women with limited English skills often resort to jobs with minimal language requirements, such as kitchen staff, domestic workers, or nail technicians. While these jobs provide some level of economic inclusion, they may not offer the best conditions for successful integration, as they are often situated in isolated environments and/or have limited interactions with other migrant workers, thereby restricting their exposure to the broader community.

1.4. Discrimination based on stereotypes

Another challenge is discrimination embedded in society, intertwined with the stereotypes that marginalise them. Nadine said, “You cannot [be] fully integrated if you’re not accepted, you’re ‘irregular,’ outsider, you can’t have this, have that. Even when we’re regular they still say we only seek benefits and get the work . . .” She added:

We pay taxes. But do they like to do the cleaning, or caring, or restaurant, personal assistant? She [house manager] manages the house, cooks the food, organises the playdate . . . It’s not as simple as that.

Nadine’s comments show that respect and recognition beyond immigration status are key to cultivating a more inclusive society.

2. Barriers to social integration

Migrant women face social exclusion due to various reasons, including fear of deportation, restrictive working conditions, and childcare responsibilities. Undocumented women, burdened by their insecure status, often socialise within limited trusted circles of friends, colleagues, faith communities, or grassroots organisations.

2.1. Lack of knowledge about access to social systems

The lack of knowledge about how to access social systems, such as healthcare, is a barrier to social integration. Some migrant women, like Angie, are aware that the NHS primary healthcare is free for everyone, regardless of immigration status.¹⁰ However, in practice, some General Practitioner (GP) surgeries ask for proof of identification such as passport and proof of address (e.g., bills). Indeed, Angie shared her experience of helping another undocumented woman understand her rights and access to healthcare:

People don’t understand that primary healthcare here is free. Even me, I was scared to go because every Filipino who are undocumented say they [hospital/clinic staff] will catch you, until

¹⁰ See: <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/gps/how-to-register-with-a-gp-surgery/> (Accessed 31 August 2023).

someone from Doctors of the World told me healthcare is a human right . . . We need to educate people better on this so that they will not be scared.

2.2. Language barriers

Language barriers are a common hindrance for migrant and trafficked women in accessing legal and social services. This highlights the essential role of interpreters as gatekeepers. For instance, Tracy expressed her relief when she hears her native Vietnamese language from interpreters during her doctor visits, as she does not speak English. In this sense, providing cultural and linguistic support can considerably facilitate women’s interactions with foreign systems and services.

2.3. Limited opportunities for social participation

Domestic duties and long working hours prevent women from having much spare time for themselves or integrating in society through leisure activities, social gatherings, or cultural events. For asylum seekers in accommodation provided by the Home Office, the situation is even more challenging, as stated by Mila:

. . . I’m exhausted with taking care of the kid, I also don’t have money and don’t have family support. My life is so difficult. I’m also waiting for decisions of my asylum application . . . I have waited for 2 years but got no updates. I lost interest in eating . . . Sometimes I feel so desperate but I don’t know whom to call for help. I don’t know which organisations to reach out for help.

3. The continuing impact of COVID-19 on integration

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching consequences on societies worldwide, with vulnerable communities often bearing the brunt of its impact. Migrant and trafficked women in the UK faced a plethora of challenges during the height of the pandemic, exacerbating their already precarious situations, and the consequences continue to make life challenging for integration.

3.1. Financial insecurity and community reliance

Migrant women, especially those without valid visas or formal employment contracts, faced severe financial challenges during the pandemic. Limited access to public support or job retention schemes aggravated their difficulties. Sara, a part-time carer, shared her experience:

During the pandemic, for two months they [employer] didn't pay me. Who helped me? The church helped me. Sister [redacted] was the one paying my rent . . . If not for these people in the church I don't think I will survive my life here.

3.2. Vulnerability to labour exploitation

The pandemic made migrant women more vulnerable to labour exploitation, as finding alternative employment became increasingly difficult. Nadine described the story of a woman who endured exploitative work conditions due to her employer's fears of COVID-19:

This person called, been in that situation for nine months. She asked for help because she had no day off, and was not allowed to go out because of fear of Covid and the employers being senior . . . the child [of the elderly person she was taking care of] was away for holiday, she couldn't just leave them . . . She waited for the son to come back, then immediately got out when the son came back.

3.3 Healthcare access and support networks

Access to healthcare and support for migrant and trafficked women was negatively impacted during the pandemic. Mila detailed her experience of contracting COVID-19 and receiving inadequate assistance:

When I got Covid, I got some symptoms like I can't breathe properly and I can't taste, I told the man in charge of my accommodation. He said that he would inform the Home Office of my case.¹¹ The Home Office said they would send me a test kit on the following day. I told them that because I was afraid to spread the virus to others, so I just left the kit outside of my room. But no one came to take the test on the next day, so I had to throw it away. I waited for them at the gate

¹¹ As it is spoken by the informant. Usually, it would have been the NHS providing test kits.

for one day. I didn't know how to contact them because they called me with an untraceable phone number. They also provided me [with] some food, they left it outside my room . . . but I couldn't eat because they were all the canned food. At that time I was so sick. I stayed on the bed for two days. I sweated a lot, had a headache and a fever. The canned food is the only support from them.

3.4 Isolation and loss of social connections

The loss of social connections during the pandemic not only adversely affected the mental well-being of migrant and trafficked women, but also disrupted their support networks. Mila illustrated her isolation during the lockdown:

At that time my moods were unstable. I suddenly felt happy, then suddenly felt sad. I broke many things in my flat. Everything I saw . . . I just wanted to throw them away. I didn't know what happened to me. I didn't eat anything . . . just drank water. I lost many weights [sic]. Later when I felt more positive, I gained weights [sic] again . . . At that time I didn't tell my situation to anyone else. I have many friends . . . but when I need help, I don't know who to reach. I'm used to being alone.

4. Empowerment and integration through community support

As described above, migrant and trafficked women face numerous challenges while striving for integration into their host societies. Yet, many found empowerment through positive workplace experiences, referral networks, and community-building initiatives.

4.1. Positive experiences in the workplace

Several women in the study established connections with their host communities by means of their jobs, which often involved working for employers from diverse backgrounds. These women reported feeling content with their employment and valued the constructive working relationships they had established, as they were often treated with warmth and familiarity, akin to being part of the family.

Alex: I worked at a takeaway for one year, and last year, now a domestic worker. My work is good . . . I am pleased working with (her) current employer; I have been working with this employer for one year and two months, and they are never mad at me.

Jenny: I found this [current] job from an agent. I live together with my employer, the Vietnamese family. They are perfect ... This Vietnamese family is very nice. They told me they wanted me to work with them as a family and not as an outsider.

4.2. Role of referral networks

In such challenging circumstances, referral networks have proven to be crucial in helping women secure employment opportunities. Over half of the women interviewed mentioned referrals from friends, previous employers, or agencies as popular and effective ways of finding jobs. Organisations like FDWA contribute by creating job referral networks, organising workshops on labour rights and salary negotiations, and offering safe spaces for women who feel unsafe in their working conditions.

4.3. Initiative and community-building

Women in this study demonstrated their agency and resilience through self-organisation and advocacy for their rights. They often formed support groups, rather than relying solely on state authorities or NGOs for assistance. Their experiences reflect a strong drive for social integration. Angie noted, “I’m not a trained community organiser but I see how they work in Church. I see what they did and use it here when it’s needed.” Her passion for community work allows her to maximise her skills and empower herself as an essential member of society.

These communities also play a vital role in educating women about their rights. Renée discussed her unfavourable working conditions and how the support from her community enabled her to advocate for better conditions:

I used to work eight hours but they paid me while they were not here. When they came back, I worked 13 hrs. I realised it’s not right . . . I learned this from the community – before I used to do whatever they want.

In particular, the role of user-led grassroots organisations in empowering and supporting each other works hand in hand with individual agency within a broader network, as demonstrated in Renée’s case, where she was able to demand her rights from her employer, thanks to the support and knowledge she acquired from the community.

While the cases above highlight the importance of individual responsibilities and community-building in integration efforts, it is crucial to recognise that these actions alone cannot overcome the structural challenges that exclude these women from society.

Consequently, it is imperative to establish policies and systems that prioritise the needs of migrant and trafficked women, such as policies that protect their labour rights and ensure equal access to education, healthcare, and social services. Involving relevant stakeholders, such as civil society organisations, including migrant-led groups, in the design and implementation of these policies is essential to ensure their effectiveness and relevance to the community’s needs.

By working collaboratively, we can create a more just and equitable society that upholds the rights and dignity of all its members. Only through systemic changes and comprehensive support structure can we ensure that these women can overcome the challenges they face and thrive within society.

5. The role of state and non-state actors in the protection of migrant and trafficked women

Both state actors (including the Home Office, local authorities, public healthcare providers) and non-state actors (such as civil society organisations, individual stakeholders, and many more) are crucial for the protection of migrant and trafficked women. However, these different actors, based on their own policies and practices, approach support for these women in various ways—ranging from holistic to hostile.

5.1. Lack of adequate support from state actors

The majority of migrant and trafficked women who participated in this research had some experiences with state authority which had been negative. Women in the asylum seeking process reported minimal support from the Home Office, including

limited financial support without the right to work. The majority of asylum seekers do not have the right to work in the UK and so must rely on state support. Cash support is available, and is currently set at £40.85 per person, per week, which equates to £5.83 a day for food, sanitation, and clothing. There is “extra money” to buy healthy food for an asylum seeker and either pregnant or a mother of a child under the age of three. This amounts to £3 per week for a pregnant mother, £5 per week for a child under 1 year old, or £3 per week for a child aged 1-3 years old. Therefore, despite the support, the provided living conditions remain inadequate. Eliza expressed her experience as follows:

With 37 pounds as financial support for my daughter, I couldn't afford her nappies and milk.¹² I have never received support for my kid's nappies and milk. Since she was born, I received milk donation once in the hospital.

Three asylum-seeking women who are housed in accommodation provided by the Home Office also mentioned living in a confined space, which is especially difficult for their children. However, the Home Office did not accommodate their desperate requests to move to alternative accommodation suitable for their children. Mila explained:

I want to reunite with my husband and have him help taking care of my kid. This place is so small that my baby doesn't have space to crawl. I wrote to the Home Office many times to ask their permission for me to move out. I haven't got my own place but I don't even know the reasons why.

Living in such small spaces has had negative impacts on their physical and mental well-being, given their difficult or traumatising migration journeys. This kind of living arrangement further exacerbates physical and social isolation, as Kate described:

The stress also comes from the memories about the migration journey to be here. It is really hard to say. Then when I arrived at the Unit, I thought about that experience more. My room in the mum and baby unit is so small that [it] makes me feel more suffocated.

Legal processes are frustrating and tedious and could take months to years without any updates from solicitors or the Home Office. The vast majority of women seeking asylum have limited access to legal support, are unaware of their legal rights and the legal aid system, and assume that solicitors are charity workers. Although

¹² The 37 pounds in financial support mentioned was specific to the time of the interview in 2021.

solicitors are available, they are not always accessible to these women. Seeking one is usually facilitated by non-government organisations such as Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance (TARA) in Scotland.

Fatima: Only the solicitor can help us to solve the issues in my current life because he will help connect us with the Home Office. But it is really hard to reach him. I tried to raise my requests to him many times but I haven't got any response.

Eliza: I have my solicitor. However, my asylum application has been there for four years without any progress or updates. I don't know what happened and I think the solicitor is just too busy for me to reach him. I can only get information about my asylum application from my solicitor. I usually wait for one week to receive his reply.

Migrant and trafficked women also encounter challenges in receiving status, even after going through the NRM. Discretionary leave to remain can be refused even after women are identified as victims of trafficking or modern slavery, and this often leads to them losing their status and becoming undocumented.

Due to multiple factors with their immigration status, including lost Home Office licences for visas, the women who were unfortunate to experience detention as a result were also subject to undue strain on their mental health.

Zoe: Well, it was very stressful and depressed when being there . . . Because there's staff, the security staff in the detention centre is not friendly at all. Yeah, they treat us . . . Only a few people were okay. But most of them they treat us like [a] criminal . . . they look down on us...

5.2. Fear and distrust of state authorities

Apart from the immigration process, the majority of participants expressed fear of the police or authority, even in cases of emergency such as robbery or hospital care. For undocumented migrant women, due to their insecure status, the fear of immigration law enforcement is very strong, and this deters them from accessing much needed statutory services such as the NHS.

One undocumented woman lost her job as a carer three times during the pandemic because she was not vaccinated, due to her fear that her immigration status might be revealed if she used the NHS service. Another woman who works

as a domestic worker shared her experience of being extremely scared of being reported to the police when the house she works at was broken into. Nevertheless, the UK government's vaccination programme was accessible to all migrant women. Some of them received information that anyone can get vaccinated without an inquiry into their immigration status, while others were able to receive vaccinations due to pamphlets from their community. This ensures protection from the virus and equal access to healthcare. SEEAC facilitated a community-based vaccination drop-in centre in cooperation with local authorities, so that migrant communities felt safer to receive information about and access to the COVID-19 vaccination.

It must be noted that some participants recalled staff members working for the Home Office, detention centres, GPs, or social services as "friendly" or "welcoming", as stated by Eliza: "When I gave birth to her [her baby], I could see the doctors and nurses were so kind. They took good care of us." However, others pointed out disrespectful attitude and discrimination, making migrant women less inclined to reach out to services and access their rights:

Bella: Sometimes the interpreter scolds me and doesn't help explain what is said. That affects the quantity and quality of the information I receive. When it comes to legal stuff, just a small mistake can make my story become totally incorrect.

Eliza: My GP isn't welcoming and friendly. That affects my access to healthcare. However I don't know English and have no one to [ask for] help. I asked the GP how I could get someone to help me book an appointment. They just told me they didn't know. They refused to help me. They told me to visit somewhere else but I don't know where to go.

Nadine, one of the leading members of FDWA, recalled an unpleasant interaction with the police while rescuing a trafficking victim. The policewoman showed a lack of understanding of the issues and resistance to supporting the victim while not trusting her story. She believed the treatment was due to her identity as a migrant woman. Nevertheless, she also recalled a fond memory of her first job as a waitress for an award ceremony which 250 police officers attended:

. . . I said to him [employer] "The party will start at 3, but I have two friends outside who just ran away from their employer." He said "You call them because it's going to rain, tell your friends to come in and feed them." . . . That was my first experience and made me realise

it's not too bad. It was my first experience with white people, they welcomed me and these two victims of trafficking.

Embassies are often not considered a trustful source of information and support by these migrant women. They commonly think the embassy would not provide guidance or assistance on immigration status (particularly those seeking asylum) or socio-economic problems. Some women who have had extended interactions with their respective embassies in the UK claimed they were uninformed, not responsive, unwelcoming, and resistant to change.

Darcey. They're making it complicated . . . The embassy has loads of rules. There's a curfew [at a shelter provided by the embassy], you need permission [to go out], but you need a job, someone might call you any time for interviews etc.

This accommodation agreed by the government [embassy] only has one bedroom, double bed with a tiny sitting room. They don't want people to stay long. During Covid there were a lot of people who wanted to leave their home because of domestic abuse but people couldn't stay there. But the embassy used it for training like baking or flower making . . .

They don't want to include us in the meeting because they know we will complain. The secretary was supported to come here and was asking to meet with community leaders, but we were not invited. (He didn't come in the end due to Covid situation).

When asked about having contact with her embassy and if she would seek help from them, Zoe replied: "No, I don't think they will help me for my immigration status."

5.3. The importance of civil society organisations

Non-profit organisations play an essential role in supporting migrant or trafficked women. User-led, also known as *by-and-for* and grassroots organisations, usually offer limited but more catered support to Southeast Asian women. Because of these organisations, women are connected to solicitors, interpretation services, English classes, and access to healthcare. They are also exposed to education on their rights and seek employment opportunities through various workshops. In

cases of emergency, they are offered accommodation and, more importantly, have an empathetic and supportive community around them in times of distress. These organisations cannot replace state actors in supporting and protecting these women, but they operate effectively on the ground while offering solidarity, which state agencies lack.

Zoe: . . . one time I have the charity outside detention centre came to the detention centre to visit us and they support us with like shoes, clothes, winter clothes or give me shoes clothes, and top up my phone for me . . . if we don't have the charity, I don't think the detention centre will help us.

Eliza: The Internet is the very basic need for mental health. However, due to my financial difficulties, I couldn't really access it. Recently I got free Wifi connection from ESA Scotland and that makes me feel less isolated and mentally comfortable, and access to sources of information. I can also learn English myself on the Internet.

Kate: I contacted my solicitor via the help of TARA. Without TARA, I could have been more helpless because we don't know the information. I'm going to labour soon. I need to contact my solicitor about changing my name in the documents into my real name.¹³ I had to contact TARA to help connect me with the solicitor, then the solicitor told TARA to wait for his appointment schedule . . .

Nevertheless, accessibility is an ongoing issue. Some women are not familiar with NGOs or are aware of some but haven't received support. Although some organisations publicly support trafficked women, those who do not wish to identify themselves as trafficked victims are not "qualified" for services and end up receiving nothing. Some support also sometimes ends after receiving a conclusive decision on NRM cases. Furthermore, there is a lack of culturally sensitive support for women from Southeast Asia who are going through the NRM.

Mila: I don't know any organisations that support migrant women or trafficked women. Because I only told the Home Office that I came here because of political reasons. I didn't say I was trafficked. They also asked me if I was bullied or raped during my journey to be here, but I said no.

¹³ She was given a false identity while being trafficked.

Different actors involved in the protection of migrant and trafficked women—ranging from the state, embassies, and civil society organisations—approach support in various ways in the context of the UK hostile environment policies. Overall, the presence of NGOs for migrant women is still not prominent. There is a common misunderstanding or misinformation about the role of civil society and NGOs, depending on social and political backgrounds. SEEAC found it difficult to communicate about our work with some participants not familiar with NGOs or civil society. At the same time, some participants have legitimate concerns about NGOs, including raising questions on their capacity to deliver systemic change. Migrant and trafficked women’s integration, therefore, requires a holistic, non-hostile approach that is intersectional, multi-directional, and multi-dimensional, and inclusive of various circumstances.

Analysis: Structural Inequalities and Integration Complexities

The findings provide an authentic insight into the effects of the broader structural realities faced by migrant and trafficked women. The current policies on labour migration, human trafficking, and modern slavery show how these women are disadvantaged from their arrival in the UK due to the many barriers within the UK immigration system. This, coupled with the challenges of integration and lack of recognition for their work while not having proper rights as workers, can only be solved through shorter and easier routes to regularisation.

During the FGDs, the women expressed their hopes and aspirations for improving their lives and livelihoods through both policy change and practical activities for their empowerment. On the policy level, women wish to see the following: 1) that the “right to work” to be given to those who are in NRM or asylum processes; 2) that “overseas domestic worker (ODW) visa” holders be allowed to change their employers and extend their stay without risking their immigration status; 3) the “regularisation” of undocumented people so that they can contribute to society through working and paying taxes, and not to be exploited due to their status. In terms of practical activities, many women expressed their wish to improve their language skills or understand their rights’ entitlements so that they can engage more with wider British society without being exploited and improve their employability. Women from different nationality groups expressed their interests and willingness to connect with women from different Southeast Asian countries than their home countries, who have similar experiences of migration.

These women are aware of the systemic inequalities, but may not be aware of the wider hostile policies. Apart from these inequalities when it comes to immigration, visas, asylum, and NRM processes, there are also varied levels of exploitation from employers who are often visa sponsors and can give these women no choice but to continue working under undignified conditions. The UK government must also take into account cultural and linguistic backgrounds which can impact on access to services.

Should these women regularise their status, it is still not a guarantee that they can access social protection. For most of these women, access to social services such as healthcare, accommodation, and benefits are not an option as the UK’s temporary visa usually comes with a condition of No Recourse to Public Funds

(NRPF). This is where civil society organisations and community groups fill in the gaps of support for migrant and trafficked women.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the insecurities and overall well-being of migrant and trafficked women. Labour exploitation was evident during this time, as the financial hardships trickled down to the informal sector and most of these workers were not paid on time or at all, especially if they fell ill. It was clear that they needed support without worsening their fears of getting sick, consequently losing their jobs, and being unable to pay their rent and bills. For these women, many of whom are also mothers, childcare was also a challenge, as not all of them can work from home and/or leave their child with a partner, family member, or friend present.

On top of these issues of employment and welfare, racially-motivated hate crimes and incidents targeting the ESEA communities increased in the wake of the pandemic. It is important for civil society organisations, therefore, to establish trust through cultural sensitivity to provide holistic support to service users, including mental health support and community activities online. Access to these types of support were largely limited to those who have the capacity and means to access the Internet and digital technology.

The findings also highlight the need for a gender-sensitive approach in the integration process for Southeast Asian migrant and trafficked women in the UK. These women faced unique challenges, including childcare responsibilities, remittance pressures, and adherence to cultural norms. Traditional gender roles often placed the burden of childcare on women, restricting their opportunities for employment, education, and social integration. The high cost of living in the UK and limited childcare services exacerbated these challenges, resulting in social isolation. To address this, the UK government should develop affordable and accessible childcare services for migrant women to alleviate this burden and support their integration.

Remittance represents another significant challenge for Southeast Asian migrant women in the UK, as they often become the main financial provider for their families back home. The pressure to send remittances can create a cycle of debt and increase the likelihood of accepting exploitative working conditions. Through a gender-sensitive approach, the UK government should recognise this dynamic and support these women's financial stability by establishing secure remittance channels and ensuring fair working conditions.

Furthermore, complex race and ethnicity dynamics as well as class divides can lead to discrimination and negative stereotypes. Cultural norms may also affect

how these women navigate their new environment, often reinforcing expectations to adhere to specific roles or behaviours. Consequently, these factors can make it more challenging for women to access the support and services they need to successfully integrate into British society.

Promoting gender equality and providing targeted support and education are essential for empowering Southeast Asian women in the UK. By implementing gender-sensitive policies for asylum support and integration processes, the UK can better acknowledge and address the unique challenges faced by Southeast Asian migrant and trafficked women.

The design and implementation of policies and support systems should involve relevant stakeholders, such as civil society organisations and migrant-led groups. This approach will not only help remove barriers and stereotypes, but also empower these women to overcome the challenges they encounter, fostering a more inclusive and supportive society.

The discussion on human trafficking needs to be more nuanced and diversified, taking into account the minority status of ESEA migrant women. There must also be communication and cooperation between home and destination countries, as well as between the government and civil society on policy information and rights entitlements. Raising awareness on trafficking and migrant labour issues in destination countries is key, especially among the general public in the UK, given the emphasis that has been heavily placed on the migrant communities to seek assistance and fight for their rights. We also find that English language skills, rights entitlements, and other skills training for women, as well as awareness-raising must be made accessible socially, culturally (e.g., language) and financially (e.g., travel costs and childcare support). It would be ideal to have more cross-cultural interactions and solidarity building among migrant and trafficked women.

Resulting Policy and Community Advocacy

In order to utilise the findings of the research and contribute to the changes the women wanted to see, SEEAC implemented some advocacy actions at both the policy and the community levels.

Policy advocacy



SEEAC Executive Director Mariko Hayashi (second from left) joined representatives from GAATW and The Voice of Domestic Workers during the Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland (September 2022).

Benefiting from the support of GAATW and other partner organisations, SEEAC conducted some lobbying activities to influence the process of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), ahead of the review of the UK for its fourth cycle in November 2022. Led by GAATW and together with The Voice of Domestic Workers, FDWA, and Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX), SEEAC co-produced a factsheet containing key recommendations to be submitted to the permanent missions of UN Member States that are accredited to the UN Office in Geneva (see Appendix B). SEEAC Executive Director Mariko Hayashi travelled to Geneva in September 2022, together with colleagues from the Voice of Domestic Workers and GAATW, and held face-to-face meetings with diplomats of the permanent missions, as well as several experts of the Special Procedures of UNHRC to share current situations in the UK that are impacting human rights of migrants, including the current visa rules for

migrant workers, potential victims of trafficking who are in the NRM and the asylum process.

Our suggested recommendations to the UK were as follows:

1. Amend the visa policy for domestic workers and all other migrant workers so that they are able to change employers and apply to renew their visas independently of their employer and without risking their immigration status.
2. Establish legal routes to settlement for all migrant workers, including undocumented migrants, without discrimination on the basis of job category or gender.
3. Ratify and implement International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No.189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers (Domestic Workers Convention, 2011).
4. Improve the system of identifying victims of modern slavery and trafficking in person for better protection of potential victims.
5. Ensure that all potential victims of trafficking and persons seeking asylum are given sufficient financial assistance to live with dignity and free from poverty, and that all can realise their right to decent work while awaiting a final determination in their case.

SEEAC also called on the UK government to ensure all migrant workers, irrespective of their individual immigration status, can realise their rights and protections under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* and the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children*, supplementing the *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*.

During the UK's UPR in November 2022, migrant rights were one of the most prominent issues raised by states, both the rights of migrant workers and the rights of asylum seekers. Setting aside the recommendations about asylum seekers and refugees, 27 states in total made recommendations for the UK to strengthen the

protections for migrant workers, and, specifically, 18 states recommended that the UK ratify the Migrant Workers Convention. 13 states made recommendations about combating trafficking in persons. Of the states that we briefed directly in Geneva, Bangladesh, Nigeria and the US raised the rights of migrant workers. Although Germany did not make a specific recommendation on this topic, they did state at the start of their comments that they “remain concerned” about the rights of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

In the midst of the UK’s continuing hostile political environment towards migrants and refugees, including the Nationality and Borders Act and the Illegal Migration Act, SEEAC hopes to engage in more policy and campaigns to improve the human rights situations of all migrant and trafficking women. This includes advocating for an end to NRPF, as well as calling for regularisation of undocumented people through engagement with national level campaign coalitions such as Status Now Network. SEEAC also supports organisations led by migrant women workers like FDWA and The Voice of Domestic Workers in their campaign for the domestic workers’ visa concession.

List of some of our recent policy advocacy activities

Month	Activities
August/September 2022	UPR advocacy in Geneva (factsheets and recommendations)
October 2022	SEA Junction webinar http://seajunction.org/event/vietnamese-women-migrating-for-work-to-europe/
December 2022	Blog post to FLEX on International Migrants’ Day https://labourexploitation.org/news/international-migrants-day-2022-a-call-for-stronger-protection-for-all-migrant-workers/
February 2023	Response to UN Special Rapporteur on human rights of migrants (Contribution to GAATW submission)
February 2023	Joint letter to the Home Affairs Committee led by FLEX on human trafficking
April 2023	Joint letter to shadow secretary of state for the home department (led by FLEX) IMB - Amendment 12 - Google Docs

Community advocacy



Left photo: Pilot women-only session: SEEAC conducted a zine-making workshop at the Museum of the Home in London, UK (April 2023). | Right photo: Mixed group session: SEEAC later organised a creative writing workshop with a larger group of individuals of different ESEA descent (May 2023).

To celebrate International Women’s Month in March 2023, SEEAC launched a series of three online English workshops dedicated to women. The lessons focused on topics such as women’s health, relationships, life in the UK, and many more. Attendees of the online classes included women from both England and Scotland via Zoom.

The series of online workshops culminated in one in-person women-only English and Zine-making workshop at the Museum of the Home in London, in partnership with Daikon Zine. It was a day for women to express themselves through arts, crafts, and even music. With the women’s consent, the zines they created may be used for future advocacy campaigns to tell the stories of ESEA migrant women in the UK.

The in-person workshop for women only served as a pilot for another series of English, Creative writing, and Zine-making workshops in May 2023, organised by SEEAC with the support of the ESEA Hub. With support of GAATW, SEEAC conducted two more workshops composed of a mixed-gender group of ESEA migrants¹⁴. Our pilot with women-only participants, therefore, informed SEEAC in developing the workshop with a wider migrant community.

Because of SEEAC’s service users’ desire to continue English lessons and complementary creative activities, SEEAC intends to continue conducting workshops of this kind, of course with continued consultation with the participants and their desired community activities.

¹⁴ <https://www.eseahub.co.uk/> (Accessed 14 September 2023)

Conclusion: Learnings and Ways Forward



SEEAC Executive Director Mariko Hayashi and Kimi Jolly of ESA Scotland presented initial findings of the research in GAATW'S seminar "From Southeast Asia to Europe: Strengthening migrant and trafficked women's rights to inclusive re/integration" in Bangkok, Thailand (May 2022).

Taking part in the consortium project "From Southeast Asia to Europe: Strengthening Migrant and Trafficked Women's Rights to Inclusive Re/Integration," led by GAATW, the research team at SEEAC conducted a FPAR together with 28 migrant and trafficked women from Southeast Asia living in the UK and several other stakeholders such as practitioners of community and charitable organisations working with Southeast Asian migrant women. The experiences of the FPAR provided SEEAC with a very important opportunity to reflect on our work as a relatively new "for-and-led-by" organisation of people with lived experiences of migration from Southeast and East Asia to the UK, which was formally set up in January 2020 and developed throughout the time of the pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 on this research project, as well as the work of SEEAC, has been significant as described in this report.

Carrying out the FPAR during the pandemic time, while responding to the increased needs of the communities, brought SEEAC specific challenges. The COVID-19 response measures, such as lockdowns and social distance measures, presented challenges in connecting with the community members and maintaining the connections. Many participants lived in precarity, and their situations and availability changed frequently and unexpectedly. This meant that the timeline and data gathering plans had to be amended. While this was a great challenge, it reminded us of the precarity of lives of many migrants experiencing the UK's immigration system and how essential it is to be aware of and accommodate the constant changes. At the same time, working with other grassroots organisations gave us opportunities to expand our outreach and connections while building solidarity in the challenging situations shared.

SEEAC is especially glad to have participated in a research process that was not exploitative towards the members of our community and staff as part of a migrant-led organisation. We commend FPAR as a model for future research and encourage all those who want to see change that meets the real concerns of migrants to prioritise this form of research for the future. Through researching with and for migrants, we truly hear their authentic voice—and remove the barriers—that will lead to their integration and contribution to British society.

Appendix A

A summary of the topics covered in the interviews and FGDs:

1. **Introduction and background information:** Questions aim to build rapport and gather personal and demographic details. These include queries about the participants' origins, current residence, and work status, as well as recent happy events and normal routines.
2. **Community life and social integration:** These questions explore the participants' experiences with social integration into the UK, including their perceptions of community life, relationships with friends or family, participation in community activities or places of worship, and the significance of their migrant community.
3. **Work experience and challenges:** These questions focus on the participants' work experiences, such as how they found their jobs, their level of job satisfaction, challenges they face, and resources needed to address these challenges. For those not currently working, their job aspirations and barriers to employment are explored.
4. **Migration journey and experience in the UK:** Questions aim to understand the participants' migration journeys, their sense of home and inclusion, their interpretation of "integration", their best experiences in the UK, and any participation in workshops, skills training or language courses.
5. **Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic:** These questions investigate the participants' experiences during the pandemic, such as access to health and safety resources, impacts on their job, and any financial or social support they received.
6. **Support and protection from the state and other stakeholders:** Participants are asked about their experiences with various forms of support, from their initial arrival in the UK to interactions with governmental authorities, embassies, and NGOs.
7. **Future aspirations and hopes:** These questions probe into the participants' future plans, what keeps them motivated despite challenges, any additional support they may need, and whether they plan to return to their country of origin.

8. **Questions for key informants from relevant organisations:** These questions seek to understand the key informants' roles and experiences working with migrant/trafficked women, their interactions with government stakeholders, the common issues faced by these women, systemic challenges, and recommended actions for improvement.

Appendix B

UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND

Mechanism: Universal Periodic Review
Session: 41st Session
Date of Review: 7 November 2022

MIGRANT WORKERS

Submitted by: *the Global Alliance against Traffic in Women, the Voice of Domestic Workers, the Filipino Domestic Workers Association (FDWA), Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) and the Southeast and East Asian Centre (SEEAC).*

The UK's immigration framework for migrant domestic workers exposes them to abuse and exploitation

Key Stats:

- i. 76.5% of migrant domestic workers have experienced physical, verbal or sexual abuse by their employer in the UK
- ii. 50.6% do not receive enough food from their employer
- iii. 60.9% are not given their own private room in employers' houses
- iv. The majority are paid below the national minimum wage and work 60-80 hours per week¹

In June 2022 UN Human Rights Experts sent a formal communication expressing their grave concerns over the treatment of migrant domestic workers in the UK.²

They expressed particular concern over a series of changes to the visa rules for domestic workers that have left them extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation:

- 2012: a new visa regime is introduced which prohibits domestic workers from changing employers even in cases of abuse
- 2016: domestic workers are allowed to change employer in cases of abuse but only for the remainder of her six-month visa and can only change employer to another single full-time job as a domestic worker in a private household

In practice, it's virtually impossible for domestic workers to escape abuse by finding a new employer because:

- Potential new employers looking for someone to provide full-time personal care rarely want a worker with just 2 or 3 months left on her visa.
- Many domestic workers have difficulty proving their identity to potential employers because their passports were taken by their former employers.

Without employment the worker is left destitute and homeless because:

- The majority of migrant domestic workers have "live in roles" where accommodation is provided by the employer
- Migrant workers have no entitlement to social security support from the UK Government

The UK's wider use of "tied visas" also exposes other categories of migrant workers to abuse and exploitation

Other categories of migrant workers (including agriculture workers and healthcare workers) are facing similar levels of abuse and exploitation due to tied visa regimes. These visas:

- Tie the workers' immigration status to their employer
- Prohibit workers from having any recourse to public funds (NRPF).

In May 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Experts explained how these visa regimes are contributing "directly and significantly" to the UK's failure to protect migrant workers from exploitation and abuse.³

The UK Government's own evaluation of the agricultural seasonal worker pilot scheme (SWP) found reports of mistreatment, including racism and discrimination, and a lack of provision of health and safety equipment.⁴ A study by FLEX in 2021 confirmed the nine ILO indicators of forced labour are being met by workers on the scheme.⁵ These include:

- A strong risk of being deceived about the terms and conditions of employment at the instance of recruitment
- Facing penalties and threats at work
- Being unable to leave the employer due to risk of destitution (workers have to incur significant debt to come to the UK)

Despite these findings the scheme was extended and expanded, becoming the Seasonal Worker visa.



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