

This interview mentions domestic abuse so please take care when listening.

Welcome to Partner Conversations; a series of interviews from the Edinburgh Trust where we learn more about the work of our partners across the city and the challenges faced by the people they support. My name is Ems Harrington and I'm the Edinburgh Trust Senior Partnership Development Officer. Today I'm speaking with Imelda Utuk from Shakti Women's Aid, a charity that helps BAME women, children, and young people experiencing, or who have experienced, domestic abuse. Please note that this interview was recorded over zoom, so the sound quality is slightly different from other interviews. There are also some notification sounds towards the end of the interview. Thanks for understanding!

My name is Imelda Utuk and I work for Shakti Women's Aid.

Thanks Imelda. And can you tell me what type of work your organisation does?

Shakti Women's Aid supports BME women and children and their families fleeing domestic abuse. You know from their parents, their spouses, or and we also support em victims of honour-based violence, forced marriages eh and FGM.

We also support... Shakti also supports BME women you know and children that are LGBT and having risk of honour violence and forced marriages you know because of their sexuality.

Thanks Imelda. Can you let me know what your role is within the organisation?

I'm the team leader for visiting support and housing service. So my team is mainly responsible for supporting women in the city of Edinburgh Council that have left their abusive relationship, you know, so I run a team of seven staff and then I am also responsible for the refuge. You know looking after the Shakti Women's Aid refuge.

How long has Shakti been around for Imelda?

Shakti has been in existence since 1986.

Wow, I didn't realise it was that long.

Yeh, so we are almost going to be 40 years.

Just a little bit younger than myself! Em, so in your experience, how have things changed for the people you support since the 2020 covid pandemic and the current cost of living crisis? And how has that also impacted your work and the work of your organisation?

Oh a lot has changed since the pandemic. One of the first things that we noticed is that em, one of the things that we noticed was the increase in mental health. You know mental health of our clients has really been impacted because a lot of them were really isolated during the pandemic and they had nobody. They couldn't talk to anybody because they don't have families here. And it was quite isolating for them. And a lot of the groups that they used to attend did not run in person and most of them are not quite ok with computers and technology and they also have language barriers so there was quite a lot of mental health. And another problem was most women stayed longer in an abusive environment because during the pandemic they couldn't leave and so it means the impact it had on them was more severe and their children. And em after the pandemic you know there has been a severe increase in prices of goods and we have seen a lot of our clients not being able to afford basic

things you know for themselves and their family. So it has been a lot of poverty, increased poverty for most of the women that we support. And another problem is because majority of women are migrants so a lot of them have no recourse to public funds. So they are just being supported by maybe em, SMV and the amount they get is very, very little and that money is not even enough to get basic things. For example, a woman, a single woman, will get just £60 per week to live on. And that is all they live on, that includes their transport, everything. So we have seen a lot of increase in poverty and a lot of stress you know. And another thing we have noticed is that even though we pay for, reimburse them for activities, some of them don't even have the money to take the bus because they need to take the bus and we reimburse them you know so we've seen a decline in the number of women that come for activities. The em, the cost of living has totally impacted negatively you know on most of our clients. A lot of clients are struggling.

Thanks Imelda. What are the main challenges in your work? I know you've talked a bit there about the extra difficulties that are facing people but what are the main challenges you are seeing for your own role and your own team? How has that impacted you?

The biggest thing is the funding, which has been cut and which has affected you know the way we give our support. Because even though the funding is cut, they want us to do a lot more. It then means that you can't support, you know to do everything that the council, you know the number that the council want us to support, it does not allow us to support the way we want to support the women. So they just want us, the number to be high, but then just to do basic crisis work and the kind of women that we are supporting you know, a lot of them do not have basic like skills, they are all migrants, a lot of them have no recourse to public funds and they don't know how the system works here. So it's like probably just taking a baby you know, and you have to do a lot because they don't know, they don't have a clue and English is not their first language and sometimes when they go to services there is no interpreter. So we have to interpret, we have to do everything so technically the time it takes us to support one BME woman, that is a migrant, you could have supported three. So [its] making it very, very difficult and sometimes the workers are feeling that what the funders are looking for, what the clients are looking for, like the real support there is no time. Because the numbers are high that they want us to support and then the em, the workforce you know we can't employ more staff because we don't have money to employ more staff and so it's really a struggle because it's really, really stressful you know for the workers.

And another problem is with no recourse to public funds. When the women come you know, sometimes even though we have a project called the SMP Project that will pay for the women, we still have challenges you know with the accommodation. A lot more during the pandemic for the accommodation actually it was better because the federal government they say that any victim of domestic abuse should be accommodated. And that finished last year so we now have women with no recourse to public funds that they have been forced to leave their accommodation because they have no recourse to public funds. So that is a huge challenge you know for us because em, eh they can't work you know, and they have no way of getting money or funding so that's another big challenge you know for us. And I think another challenge is a lot of women now are needing money for the electricity, for the gas, they are needing money for shopping and things like that and we are not able to give them because we are a charity and we don't have and that is where we are actually quite grateful for Edinburgh Trust because it then means we can; some of those women that are really destitute can get some money when they come. But apart from that it's a real struggle because women come, there is nowhere to send them.

Another thing we have noticed is that organisations that used to give funding, they have too many people now wanting the same funding you know for food vouchers or things like that, so the numbers decrease the amount of money they give us. Like STV fund, they used to give us a lot more you know

a lot of the funding is a lot less so it's a real struggle because women need things, and we cannot provide for them.

That must be so difficult Imelda, for the people you support and for yourself and for your team. Em, I mean you kind of touched on it there quite a bit but what would help you? I mean, would it be more money, more staff, what are the main things that would really help you in your role right now?

I think for us you know if our funding, if we have a bit more money to employ more staff then it means then that at least we feel a bit more not rushed because you have to make sure you rush. And so I remember when I started this job, I used to have more time you know for clients. And I used to feel that satisfaction you know but now sometimes the workers are feeling that there's a lot of things to do but they don't have the time because we can't afford to employ more staff and we still have to meet the targets you know. And I think em, also the government you know should also give some funding for small charity organisations like us to be able to give when people are destitute. So not just... because that would make our work a lot more complete because sometimes, we are feeling, when they come there is nothing we can do you know, because funding now is very, very tight. So if they could just allocate some little money for organisations you know to give for workers, for staff, for clients. Because the problem is for Shakti because we have branches in Fife, in Dundee, in Falkirk, Stirling and all these places, so because of that you look as if the money is a lot in total, but this money is just for little, different projects. It then means that some of the little funding that can help us with our clients, but we don't qualify because they say "you have more money" but that money that we have has nothing, we can't give to support the clients with those things you know. So that is one of the biggest problems.

And that's it because with funding, it's quite specific isn't it and it can be quite specific for certain people so you could have funding for one thing but what you actually need is money for the people that you support. It's so challenging Imelda.

It's very challenging.

What's rewarding about the work that you do? And I totally acknowledge what you've just said about in the beginning and that's something I can identify with in my work. You know since the pandemic and the cost of living crisis everything has gotten so stretched. We've been feeling that as well in our organisation and I think for me, it was easier to more hopeful you know a few years ago. What do you feel is rewarding about the work that you're doing now?

I think the most rewarding thing is the fact that we can, despite all these things, we still manage to make a change, a significant change in women's lives. And it's rewarding that you can find a woman coming and [who is] quite down and because you know Shakti we've been around a long time, and we network a lot with different organisations so we've been able to still help even where it's very difficult. And it's very rewarding for us because especially for no recourse to public funds, that they can go to any other organisation and nobody is willing to take their case and help them but then they come to Shakti and we are willing to listen to them and look for where we can break down barriers and still be able you know... well we might not be able totally, totally to do what they want because it's not within our hands but make those little, little changes in their lives you know. So for me I find it's quite rewarding even if you can save one woman's life.

Even if you can you know... I think the most important thing is a woman coming and thinking that nothing is possible, there is no way out, they don't even feel that there is a way out that they can come out of that situation. But for us to be able to find ways that they can still come out and ways that yes they don't have the work [that] they need to have but we can still you know be able to look for

accommodation for them, look for a little funding for living expenses and everything. So for me that is the most rewarding thing is the empowerment of these women. Seeing a woman coming in not speaking a word of English and at the end of the day is able. I have a woman that was able to go and become a pharmacist, so you know without being, never being to school went through college and for me that's the thing that makes me happy. And seeing some of the children that we have supported come back and work, even some of the clients, come back and work with Shakti. So to us that is the most important, you know thing. That is the rewarding thing, making that change in their lives.

That's incredible Imelda and the work that your organisation does is absolutely essential. Like it's just... so I thank you so much for sharing that. Em, what are your hopes for the future? For em the people that you support and for your organisation.

I think first for the organisation is, our hope is we could... because we have calls from other parts of Scotland that we don't support, we don't have a team, that we could expand out to those other parts of Scotland. BME women that could get support. Because we have a lot of calls but finding we have is so restrictive that we cannot you know take people on over Scotland. My main aim is to see Shakti be able to support BME women all over Scotland so that when a woman calls within Scotland we can, we don't say "oh we can't support you" you know or expect you to move to Edinburgh or to one of the places that we have. And another thing I would like you know to see Shakti go stronger and stronger and continue the work that we are doing because for Shakti to be in Scotland we have been able to achieve so much. Number one, you know no recourse to public funds, without Shakti, women with no recourse to public funds would not have been supported. It's the campaign that Shakti has done nationwide, all over we have been able to make things like domestic abuse destitution visa concession, Shakti was one of the pioneers. We've been able to get the Home Office to support with the foreign support, migrant visa funding to support migrants that are not on spouse visa but no recourse to public funds. We've been able to raise awareness, I want us to continue to raise awareness about domestic abuse.

I want a situation where Shakti would be forefront you know to stop domestic abuse because although we are supporting, we want to stop domestic abuse. And we want to reach out to every way that is unreachable, and we want to be able to go into schools, go into communities and educate people you know on what domestic abuse is and how to stop domestic abuse. And also, you know for the young ones, to understand what domestic abuse is and to be able not to either be perpetrators or victims. It's just for Shakti to go forward and do more. And for us to be able to get a lot more funding you know so that we can do a lot more things that we would love to do for victims of domestic abuse. So technically to expand and keep on another how many years you know to be yeh.

Thanks Imelda. So we've come to our last question and em so can you tell me, what Edinburgh means to you?

Oh what Edinburgh means to me. Edinburgh is one city that means so much you know because Edinburgh itself is lovely and Edinburgh you know is a city that you can live a city life, you can live a country life. Everything is beautiful, is wonderful and like our clients when they come to Edinburgh you know they really fall in love with Edinburgh. And Edinburgh means a lot because Edinburgh Council has been the first council that have worked with us with no recourse to public funds. So it means a lot because the social services in Edinburgh you know support people with no recourse to public funds are able to win, whereas we go to other councils, it's not the same. And Edinburgh, because with us having offices in different councils we really see Edinburgh council stands out on itself.

So to us, Edinburgh means a lot because Edinburgh has helped Shakti to be what Shakti is today. You know working together with the City of Edinburgh Council and other statutory bodies in Edinburgh we've been able to make a lot of difference to BME. We've been able to make people understand and know what domestic abuse means you know for black, BME people. So Edinburgh means a lot. Without Edinburgh, Shakti would not be where Shakti is today. So that is why it means a lot. For Edinburgh to listen to Shakti, to hear Shakti, to work with Shakti, to make the difference that Edinburgh is making today you know, Shakti is making today in people's lives is just amazing. So I can't...I always use Edinburgh as an example you know, for working with the victims of domestic [abuse] so Edinburgh is just great. I can't say otherwise you know.

Thanks Imelda. So if somebody wants to learn more about your organisation, how can they do that?

If someone wants to learn more about the organisation, we do have a trainer that can come in and train you know any organisation, or they can come and visit you know maybe on the times we have staff meeting and we can talk a lot more. And also, we are still looking into having conferences where we could invite people and they could hear a lot more. But our training from Shakti will be the best way of learning more about Shakti.

And if somebody was experiencing domestic abuse, could they go to your website?

Yes. If somebody is experiencing domestic abuse they could go to the website, and it's safe you know to send a message to the website, can reach out through, we are on social media, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram so they can reach out to Shakti anytime. Or they can call the office, or they can pop into the office you know. You can drop in anytime.

Thank you so much Imelda for talking to me today and for sharing all that information. I'm really grateful to you.

This interview was carried out and produced by Ems Harrington, Senior Partnership Development Officer at the Edinburgh Trust. Sound production by Miles, Programme Assistant at the Edinburgh Trust.

The Edinburgh Trust is part of national poverty charity, Turn2us, and we have over a decade of experience in giving direct financial support to people experiencing poverty in Edinburgh. You can learn more about our work by going to www.turn2us.org.uk