

# **Everyday Bordering and Gendered Exclusion: What Grassroots Women's Centres Can Teach Migration Policy in the UK**

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King's Policy Journal

KCL Policy Research Centre

Centre for Refugee Studies (with STAR)

Word Count: 2500

January 2026

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## **Introduction**

Migration debates in the United Kingdom are increasingly dominated by narratives of fear, threat and crisis. Within this political landscape, migration policies prioritise border security over human security, neglecting belonging, empowerment and gender-sensitive approaches. This is especially damaging for migrant women, whose agency and vulnerabilities are marginalised through UK governmental policy considering them as security risks rather than rights-bearing individuals.

Grassroots women's centres across the UK, such as Crossroads Women's Centre in London, play a crucial role in addressing these gaps by providing safety, education and practical assistance. The work of these centres reveals how migration policies are experienced in everyday life, insights largely absent from mainstream policy design.

Key policies such as the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) Condition and the Illegal Migration Act 2023 (IMA) illustrate the state construction of migrants as threats or undeserving burdens. These policies disproportionately harm women, who are more likely to be financially or legally dependent, have care responsibilities or be survivors of gender-based violence and trafficking.

This article argues that insights from grassroots women's centres can inform more humane, gender sensitive migration policies in the United Kingdom. Drawing on theories of belonging, intersectionality and everyday bordering, it demonstrates how local, care-based approaches offer a transferable framework for policy design, treating migrant women as agents of change, rather than subjects of crisis.

## **Background and context**

Migration policies in the UK consistently frame migrants as dangerous threats rather than individuals seeking protection. Home Office communications surrounding the IMA repeatedly describe entrants as "a threat to public safety" and claim the system must deter "dangerous and unnecessary journeys" (Illegal Migration Act, 2023). Similarly, discourse surrounding the NRPF condition states the

need to “protect finite public resources for British citizens”, reinforcing the otherness of migrants (Cuibus & Fernández-Reino, 2023). These notions increase public fear, whilst overlooking the reasons why people are forced to migrate.

Gender-awareness is essential when discussing these policies in practice. Women’s migration causes, journeys and outcomes differ systematically from men, and yet UK policy is largely built upon vague, gender-neutral assumptions.

In a 2012 study, 66% of women reported cases of gender-related persecution (Dorling et al., 2012), from husbands, family members and other men in misogynistic cultures. UK asylum rules only recognise this violence as a right to enter the UK if it can be framed narrowly as “non-state actor” harm (Home Office, 2018), building significant boundaries. Once here, these women are left financially independent, without basic employability or language skills due to their domestic role abroad.

Secondly, upon their journey to the UK, women are highly susceptible to sexual exploitation and trafficking, to then enter a country where they are shamed and dehumanised. In 2021, 23% of identified victims of trafficking were female (UNHRC & British Red Cross, 2022).

Women are far more likely to have caring responsibilities, directly intersecting with restricted access to welfare, housing and employment. The current policy assumes a one-size-fits-all model, overlooking the practical realities that women face, with the NRPF condition trapping women in unsafe living and working conditions due to financial dependency.

### **Women’s Centres and Grassroots Organisations**

Grassroots women's centres seek to counteract these policy failures. Through open-door, non conditional support and peer-led practices, they offer safety, resources and community to any women who are otherwise disconnected from state institutions.

With five decades of experience supporting migrant and marginalised women, centres such as Crossroads Women's Centre embody a non-hierarchical feminist ethos that responds directly to the everyday consequences of immigration policy. Trauma-informed support, collective governance and

practical assistance reveal both how policy fails women at the ground level and how alternative, care-based approaches can mitigate these harms.

Asylum-seeking women rely most on these spaces, due to restricted access to state funding and aid, fear of deportation and trauma from asylum processes, leaving these women state-wary. These avenues of support prompt critical questioning about migration policies; however, understanding women's centres requires a theoretical informal governance lens.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Yuval-Davis et al.'s (2018) research on belonging and exclusion in the United Kingdom offers a useful framework for analysing gendered migration issues. Their analysis of the Hostile Environment Agenda, introduced by Theresa May in 2012, demonstrates how migration governance extends beyond the physical border to shape migrants' everyday experiences of exclusion. This framework illuminates the ways that state policies marginalise migrant women.

Everyday Bordering, a technology of public control to manage pluralist societies through constructing social borders (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018), is central to this analysis. Changes following the 2014 Immigration Act and subsequent 2015-2016 Immigration Bills shifted the UK border into everyday life, requiring landlords, employers and banks to act as immigration enforcement agents. These practices map directly onto policy failures, particularly through the exclusionary design of NRPF and surveillance logics in the IMA.

Furthermore, Yuval-Davis et al. identify autochthonic policies, the 'I was here first' mindset, as the foundation of the hostile environment. This mindset legitimises the othering of migrants, positioning them as less deserving of welfare, employment, safety or dignity. It provides an ideological foundation to policies that particularly treat women as subjects to be deterred, monitored or removed, not rights-bearing citizens deserving of support.

A key framework that the authors implement is situated intersectional analysis. Rather than viewing social categories, such as gender, race or class, as additional to policy, these dimensions overlap so individuals experience the same policies in vastly different ways. Women do not merely experience sexism on top of their migrant status; their gendered identity produces co-specific vulnerabilities. Women subject to NRPF face compounded risks of economic dependency, exposure to gender-based violence and fears of deportation, which need simultaneous consideration.

These theoretical insights underline the limits of top-down policy approaches. In contrast, women's centres operate within local realities, recognising the practical manifestation of vulnerability. Feminist theories of aid highlight the effectiveness of localised interventions not as supplementary to policymaking, but as integral tools of design.

## **Gendered Failures in UK Migration Policy**

Using the lenses of gendered vulnerability, belonging and everyday bordering, this section evaluates three key UK migration policies, demonstrating how each produces distinct yet overlapping gaps in recognition, protection and resources for migrant women.

### ***1. Exclusion at the border: The Illegal Migration Act (IMA) 2023***

The first point of contact to the United Kingdom begins at the nation's physical border. The Illegal Migration Act of 2023 prevents individuals from entering the UK "illegally" or remaining if found to have entered without authorisation (*Illegal Migration Act*, 2023). The policy's language criminalises irregular entry, repeatedly using terms like "illegal, dangerous, unnecessary", framing refuge-seekers as security threats rather than individuals fleeing persecution. This aligns with Yuval-Davis et al's (2018) argument that bordering technologies rely on constructing migrants as risks.

A significant proportion of those entering the UK via irregular routes are fleeing, or on the journey have encountered, abuse, honour-based violence, trafficking and coercion (Dorling et al., 2012). Under the IMA, these women are denied the opportunity to have their claims heard. Lacking the "correct" entry route or linguistic resources, many are forced back towards traffickers. Furthermore, they lose any future opportunity to re-enter the UK legally. Limiting their agency and installing a fear of the state intensifies their existing vulnerabilities.

The IMA produces a recognition gap, where gender-based violence and dependency are not recognised as legitimate grounds for protection, unless confined within rigid evidentiary criteria (Sella, 2024). In practice, "incorrect" routes and delayed disclosure of abuse due to cultural barriers contribute to this policy oversight. This gap reveals a border regime prioritising deterrence over protection, leaving community organisations to intervene where state recognition fails.

### ***2. Gendered Protection Gaps: Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy***

Once inside the UK, policy continues to fail women with legal migration status. The 2021 Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy aimed to recognise cohesive control, yet explicitly excluded women with insecure immigration status or those subject to NRPF condition. The absence of firewalls between social services and immigration enforcement leaves migrant women susceptible to harm, with fear of removal leading to significant under-reporting.

The government acknowledged this gap through the Support for Migrant Victims (SMV) pilot scheme, funding community and women's centres to support those unable to access state resources. The scheme was able to provide valuable service to 302 victims in its first year, a true testament to the ability of women's centres to complete life-changing work with victims. However, the pilot had constraints: insufficient funding, restrictive twelve-week case limits (exceeded in 31% of cases), and the reliance of partner organisations on donations (Home Office, 2023). Furthermore, the project's funding has not been continued, leaving structural barriers intact.

The VAWG Strategy produces a protection gap, positioning migrant women as beyond national protection. Through the lens of belonging and exclusion, this gap reflects the reproduction of everyday bordering, with the absence of firewalling between police, social services and immigration enforcement fostering fear, under-reporting and institutional distrust. Protection isn't denied merely through ineligibility, but through the active fostering of disadvantageous governance structures making protection inaccessible.

### ***3. Everyday Precarity: No Recourse to Public Funds***

The No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition is fundamental to economic vulnerability. Individuals on temporary visas, including workers, spouses and asylum seekers, are unable to claim state benefits, tax credits or housing assistance. This particularly leaves women trapped in financially dependent abusive relationships, with no alternative source of income, or in desolate poverty.

Women's centres play an essential role in these cases, offering emergency food support, legal aid, care networks to bridge the gaps where the state has failed. Adopting a mindset of these women's centres, of state-governed support, is critical to fostering a productive society. NRPF produces a resource gap, where essential material support is withdrawn precisely where it is needed. Poverty risk, lack of housing and benefit exclusions create economic dependency traps that women's centres attempt to mitigate but cannot solve at scale.

Through the lens of everyday bordering, NRPF functions as a mechanism of exclusion that conditions access to basic resources on immigration status, reinforcing gendered vulnerability and neglect. Together, these gaps highlight the systemic nature of female migrant exclusion, providing the basis for the following policy recommendations.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The following policy recommendations address the prior gaps identified, by centering the agency of women's centres. These policies treat migrant women as rights-bearing individuals, whose lived realities should shape design.

#### ***Closing the Recognition Gap***

To close the recognition gap, gender-based violence must be established as an independent ground for asylum, removing restrictive evidentiary burdens. Many women struggle to articulate or prove abuse due to language barriers, trauma, lack of knowledge of their rights or coercion; therefore, late disclosure must be permitted without penalty. Furthermore, the state should adopt women-centre-informed interviewing methods. Utilising specialist workers rather than enforcement officers would recentre women and their trauma, ensuring that administrative processes do not invalidate legal claims.

#### ***Closing the Protection Gap***

Institutional safety requires closing the protection gap by institutionalising the lessons of the SMV pilot. Firstly, the adoption of a firewall between immigration enforcement and social services, is necessary to remove the idea of everyday bordering in situations where women need fundamental aid (UNHRC, 2022). To relieve pressure on under-resourced women's centres, a statutory Support for Migrant Victim schemes is required, offering unconditional refuge. Through embedding specialists in migration trauma and community integration within state authorities, the government can begin rebuilding lost trust through hostile governance.

#### ***Closing the Resource Gap***

Closing the resource gap, through material and legal support is a prerequisite for safety and belonging. Immediate reform of the NRPF condition is required to grant survivors of domestic or gender based violence access to state-issued support, enabling escape from financially abusive relationships. Furthermore, the state must ensure adequate housing conditions. Cramped, unsanitary asylum hotel rooms

without private facilities cannot sustain family life. Local partnerships between authorities and third-sector partnerships should be mandated to offer safe, dignified residences, where women are treated as worthy of protection.

Taken together, these recommendations offer a humane, gender-sensitive migration framework, aligning with Yuval-Davis' insights on belonging and reducing everyday bordering and strengthening locally grounded support. Through formally integrating the practices already found in women's centres nationally, UK migration policy can shift from a model of alienation to one centred on safety, agency and belonging.

## **Evaluation**

Whilst this article highlights the failures of UK migration policy, it is important to see areas of success in their policy design towards supporting migrant women's lived experiences. The SMV Pilot Scheme, although restricted in time, demonstrates an institutional understanding of the gaps in their policies and the need for specific, gendered, migrant protection within British administration. This measure has also shown success through targeted, community-based action. The inclusion of gender-based violence within the VAWG Strategy acknowledges the severity of this issue, although not yet reaching all populations of women.

However, these provisions remain limited in scope, condition and time restraints, resulting in many women never feeling their positive effects, instead living in daily precarity. Without structural reform and sustained integration of grassroots-led action, these existing policies are insufficient to protect vulnerable migrant women.

Furthermore, despite women's centres playing a critical role in mitigating harmful migration policies, their involvement is not without its limitations. Access barriers such as lack of awareness, child caring responsibilities and health crises mean that many women are unable to engage with these spaces. Moreover, the scale of national need cannot be met by these charitable organisations, raising the question of regional disparities. Private provisions, through their very nature, lack the universality that the government can offer, with their reach going only so far as the women who seek to utilise them.

However, these limitations do not undermine the relevance of women's centres to policy design. State provisions already fail to reach the women facing the greatest barriers, through structurally embedded exclusion.

This paper therefore does not argue for substitution of state responsibility with grassroots provisions, but for the institutionalisation of women's centre principles within formal governance. Third party involvement cannot replace state responsibility but could be used to complement their work in public private partnerships, with the correct funding and infrastructure in place. Without state integration, these organisations risk absorbing policy failures rather than addressing it.

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown that UK migration policy has significant gaps surrounding the female experience, constructing them as risks rather than rights-bearing individuals. The systematic gaps produced in protection and belonging are being filled through community centres, where the government ought to be taking agency. Across the IMA, VAWG frameworks and gender-blind design, we see a reinforcement of everyday bordering, with structural frameworks disallowing support to be offered. Through the theoretical framework of belonging and exclusion, we see that migrant exclusion is not accidental, but a deliberately manufactured policy logic. Reframing migrant women as rights-bearing individuals would require utilising the principles practiced by women's centres, of trust, community and belonging, at the centre of national policy. Doing so is essential for the UK to build a sustainable migration system that is humane, responsive to needs and sustainable. As long as migrant women are framed as points of crisis, policy will continue to fail them.

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