

Approaches to Domestic Abuse Victims

In considering settlement claims from victims of domestic abuse, the Home Office (HO) refers to Appendix Victim of Domestic Abuse of the Immigration Rules, namely the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC – formerly the Destitute Domestic Violence Concession or DDVC).

There have been changes in the MVDAC, but the Home Office's attitude regarding the gender binary approach has not changed. What do I mean by the gender binary approach? We have clients with various gender identities and sexualities who face domestic violence and abuse. The HO does not question the credibility of applications from women (if this gender is given on the identity documents and application form) in the same way they question men's applications. Without exception, if the application form states male, further questions are asked. The HO even sometimes emails the experts who provided support letters for the applicants to ask follow-up questions regarding their expert opinions. And while this might seem to be part of the process as written in official guidelines, the problem is that the Home Office does not send these follow-up emails for all gender identities.

This gender binary approach holds that only women can be victims of abuse, while men cannot be victims, only perpetrators. We know from experience that it can be a struggle to convince the police when the victim is a man, because of this kind of thinking around gender roles. As long as these stereotypes prevail – that men have to be strong and cannot be abused, though men can abuse women, and only women (being weak and vulnerable) can be abused - how can we expect the police and HO to believe that anyone using the pronoun *he* or *they* could be a victim of domestic abuse and need support as a victim? Moreover, this perspective overlooks all other gender identities who are victims of domestic abuse, excluding them from the potential support systems.

Questioning the credibility of applications from particular gender identities is itself a gender binary approach as it comes from stereotyping gender roles. There is a need for those of ALL gender identities who are victims of domestic abuse to be protected from perpetrators.

AUD

On Sunday 13th October I was lucky enough to attend an evening of musical entertainment at **patch**, the vegetarian restaurant in the middle of Colchester town centre. **Patch** has been a long time supporter of RAMA and has raised a considerable amount of money for us with various fundraising events over the years. The evening was a fabulous cocktail of musical delights from classics such as Fleetwood Mac and Barbara Streisand to original songs performed by owners Jenna and Adam and guests including Brooke Parratt and Al Morris and Laura Wyatt. Regular MCs Ben and Tom (maybe better known to some as Shar Cooterie) were on hand to keep the music flowing and the audience chuckling. There was just the right mix of comedy and poignancy and some of the ballads had me on the verge of tears, they were so beautiful. To say they were all as good as any singers in the charts today is not an understatement. Refreshments were reasonably priced and there was a raffle with some amazing prizes and I was lucky enough to win 2 tickets to an upcoming Drag & Desserts event at Patch which I can't wait for.

I would really recommend a visit to **patch** - they have various events to suit a wide range of tastes going on all week round and it really has a friendly inclusive vibe. Not to mention that the food is also amazing even for non-vegetarians. Their next fundraising event for RAMA is a Christmas concert on Sunday 22nd December: bag your tickets quickly as it's always a sell-out.

P.S. We have just heard that the amount raised at the concert was £567 - a huge amount which will go a long way to support some of our most desperate clients. Our sincere thanks to **patch**.

SD

Proceeds from The Concert at Christmas will come to RAMA.

Come along for a festive programme of live music and readings including barbershop, classic carols and Christmas hits, with merriment, mince pies and mulled wine. Book tickets: <https://bit.ly/concertatchristmas8>



Project with Colchester Makerspace

A new initiative is launching to support victims of modern slavery and human trafficking by combining counselling with creative expression. The program, which targets 14 to 16 individuals, aims to provide a safe space where survivors can process their trauma through both talking therapy and art.

Recognising that many of these individuals may struggle to articulate their experiences verbally, especially if English is not their first language, the project offers a unique blend of professional counselling and access to an art studio. Here, participants can express their journeys and emotions through creative mediums, helping them to narrate their stories in ways that words alone might not allow.



The course will take place in Colchester Makerspace at **Trinity Works** (just behind patch café). Over a three-month period, the participants will attend six fortnightly workshops where they will create individualised maps of their journeys from their countries of origin to the UK. These workshops will be accompanied by a shared meal or snack provided by the cafe, with psychologist and interpreters on hand to provide support. The project will conclude with four additional group counselling sessions, followed by individual assessments to measure the impact of the intervention. By comparing pre- and post-intervention results, the team will evaluate the program's effectiveness in improving participants' mental health and helping them articulate their experiences.

LL



Enjoying the local countryside.



RAMA Annual General Meeting 2024

As many of you will know, RAMA hosted a public meeting on moving to our new premises in May. This event for a large number of friends and partners introduced them to the new office and was a chance to highlight some recent work, as well as to host the Lord Lieutenant and High Sheriff of Essex and to receive the King's Award for Voluntary Service.

As a result, for our recent AGM in October we decided to take the easy route and to mark the occasion with a small gathering of staff, directors and volunteers at RAMA House. The formalities — reports about Operations, Finances and the ongoing Pamoja project — were followed by a chance for those in attendance to pose questions of directors and staff, and then simply to enjoy a drink and chat with those around them. We were also joined by patron Nick Butterworth who graciously signed books and appeared in selfies. This was a far more intimate occasion than we have previously had for an AGM, but was a warm and positive event providing satisfaction on all sides. We feel it reflected our desire to be transparent, supportive, and to maintain an open door policy... As ever, we encourage *anyone* to approach with questions, concerns, or suggestions, large or small, and we will do our best to resolve them.

RAMA was honoured in October to host the fabulous **New Adventures** dance company! The renowned group is touring its 'Doorstep Duets' all over the country to bring world-class dance and performance art to everyone, especially those who may not otherwise have access. They perform in schools, care homes, youth clubs, parks and even shopping malls. It was a totally joyous way to begin the day, with smiles, music, movement and colour from a versatile and talented cast. Feedback from RAMA staff, volunteers and clients was wholeheartedly positive!



Supporting clients to claim health related benefits

Many of RAMA's clients are disabled or have physical or mental health problems, often made worse by the experience of seeking asylum, and waiting months or years for their claims to be processed. Once they have been granted Refugee status, Indefinite Leave to Remain, Discretionary Leave or Humanitarian Protection they are eligible to apply for welfare benefits, but they are not aware that if they have long term health problems, or difficulty doing certain everyday tasks because of their condition, they can apply for enhanced benefits because they are unable to work or to help with extra living costs.

My role as RAMA's Wellbeing and Benefits Adviser is to support clients through the stressful process of applying for health-related benefits such as PIP (Personal Independence Payment) DLA (Disability Living Allowance for children) or completing a WCA (Work Capability Assessment) form. I get referrals from case workers, the Job Centre or sometimes a friend who has been through the process.

If clients have been supplying fit notes from their GP for several weeks, because of long term illness or disability, they will be asked to complete a WCA to prove they are unable to work, or are only capable of limited work. They arrive anxious thinking they will be sanctioned or will lose their benefits and find questions such as 'what size empty cardboard box can you lift' difficult to answer when their main health issue may be depression. An assessment interview follows and when their application is approved, they continue to receive Universal Credit, and at an enhanced rate, without continually and pointlessly being asked to look for work.

The PIP process is lengthier and more distressing for clients. There is a long initial phone call to DWP to apply for the application form, which frequently leads to another phone call and verification process to check their identity. Then there's a 2-3 week wait for the form to arrive and requests for medical reports and doctor's letters to provide evidence of their health problems, which of course many clients have lost in transit. With the help of an interpreter, the form takes about 2 hours to complete. It has to be handwritten, in capital letters, with all medications and dates of treatment listed and answers given to a series of graded questions about how their condition affects them. Clients can be reduced to tears as they recount the effect of injuries received in war or trauma caused by torture or abuse, others need gentle encouragement to disclose problems such as incontinence and bedwetting. New problems are frequently revealed so I also help clients request new medical appointments or to access additional support services.

Six to eight weeks after the form has been received by DWP the client has a phone- or face-to-face assessment. Most assessors are not medically trained and, in my experience, start the interview with the presumption that the client is either lying or exaggerating their illness. Even with an interpreter or advocate, questions can be misunderstood and clients who are nervous of giving the wrong answer may reply 'I'm fine' when asked how they are, which can undermine their claim. Those with mental health conditions find the process especially stressful.

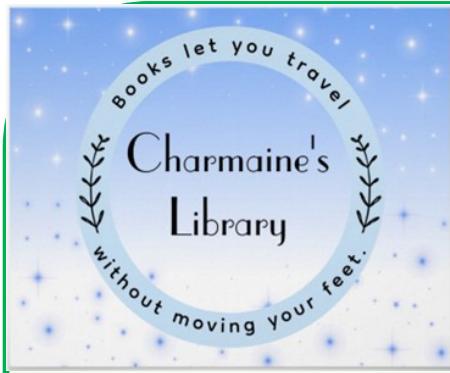
It takes another 2-3 months before clients receive a decision letter informing them what they have been awarded. Fortunately, almost all our PIP claims are successful and it's wonderful to see the difference it can make – clients able afford a healthy diet, buy a second-hand electric wheelchair, pay for dental treatment or incontinence pads or to stop worrying about putting the heating on.

JM



Joyce and the enthusiastic participants of the current food education classes.





First of all, I wouldn't have chosen the name 'Charmaine's Library', as I prefer to disappear behind the pages and shelves, despite this clearly being a legacy project in my head. Let me explain: when I heard that RAMA was finally moving into new premises that were a better fit for the volume and complexity of their work, I knew I wanted to find a special gift to mark this. And I had a sudden flash that the gift had to be a collection of carefully chosen books for refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and, of course, the people who support them now.

A library is so much more than a collection of books: I wanted it to be a beautiful, comfortable, welcoming, inspiring and calming space – a work in progress no doubt, especially as others will surely add to the collection and environment.

'Books let you travel without moving your feet' is the library's motto. Since childhood and as a child of refugees myself, real paper books have been for me a refuge, a consolation, an education and an inspiration that the Internet can't replace. I have collected many books and written and illustrated some myself – a few of these are included in Charmaine's Library. Some books in the collection have been extra special for me and I have noted 'Charmaine's Favourite' on the front cover.

The books are colour-coded and divided into categories: Cookery from around the world, Children, Novels, Refugee/Migrant experience, Reference, Wellbeing, Arts & Crafts, ESOL/Education. Maybe more categories or sub-categories will be added later – who knows how this library will evolve? At this point, I have not numbered each item as in a lending library, as I don't believe that this system would work in an ultra-busy, trusting environment. I just hope that the stickers that I have placed on the front of each book: 'Read it, Love it, Return it' will deter the books from going walkies and not returning home! There are some expensive volumes purchased because I thought they were just beautiful/essential, but in an imperfect and unpredictable world, so be it. I have also made some cushions and artworks to add to the feel of the space, including a large embroidered 'library' banner. There are some additional quirky toys and artworks that can be added in time. I hope the library will be much enjoyed. Kindness is the only thing I still believe in.



Charmaine McKissock
Volunteer Counselling-Supervisor for RAC/RAMA



The **Compassionate Communities Network** was launched in October, aiming to foster empathy and kindness throughout Colchester. The Mayor of Colchester, Cllr Lesley Scott-Boutell, said "These awards highlight the extraordinary efforts of people and organisations who go above and beyond to support others during difficult times. Together, we are building a community where empathy triumphs over fear, and no one is left behind."

We were delighted that our long-term associate **Major Udai Gurung** was chosen to receive one of the three Compassionate Community Champion Awards. The Major was commended for his exceptional dedication in tirelessly supporting the Gurkha community, as well as refugees and migrants in our city.

We join the mayor in extending warm congratulations to him.



Forthcoming events :

A Christmas Carol Read by Anthony Roberts / piano by Jamie Cunliffe

Monday 16 December 7:30pm RAMA House
Adults £10/children £5. All proceeds to RAMA

RAMA fundraising meal Delicious home cooking in good company

Date in December to be confirmed Cannock Mill
Contact pd@rama.org.uk

Contributors: Ayse Uzun Demir, Sue Duffy, Sarah Foley, Liubov Luishnenko, Julia Mason, Colm McDonald, Charmaine McKissock, Maria Wilby, Elizabeth Long

We hope you've found this informative. Please address any comments to the editor: el@rama.org.uk