

Amplifying Unheard Voices

**A Report on the Experiences
of Migrant Women
in Emergency
Accommodation Centres.**

www.akidwa.ie



Amplifying Unheard Voices - A Report on the Experiences of
Migrant Women in Emergency Accommodation Centres
© AkiDwA January 2025

Copyright Declaration

You are free to copy, distribute, or display this publication
under the following conditions:

- You must attribute the work to AkiDwA.
- You must not use this report for commercial purposes.
- You may not alter, transform, or build upon this report.

For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the licensing terms
of this publication.

Any of these conditions can be waived with permission from AkiDwA.

Whilst every effort has been made to ensure that the information in this report
is accurate, AkiDwA does not accept legal responsibility for any errors,
howsoever caused.

Any person relying on this publication or using it in connection with any legal
matter shall be deemed to have accepted the terms of use and shall not hold
AkiDwA responsible for the use or misuse of this publication or any of the
information contained herein.

AkiDwA would like to acknowledge the financial support provided by
The All-Ireland Funds and Lucy Gaffney.

Published by AkiDwA,
Unit 2, Killarney Court, Upper Buckingham Street, Dublin 1, Ireland
Tel: 018349851 Email: info@akidwa.ie Website: www.akidwa.ie.
Company Registration Number: 370089
Charity Registration Number: CHY 17227 (Ireland)

Compiled by
Sharon Etokhana



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Foreword By Dr Salome Mbugua, CEO AkiDwA	4
2. Introduction	6
3. Project Objectives	9
4. Project Summary	10
5. The Challenges of Migrant Women in Emergency Accommodation	12
6. Recommendations	18
7. Conclusion	22

1. FOREWORD

Women and girls are estimated to make up about half of the world's 281 million international migrants.[1] Both women and men migrate in search of better living conditions, but, in recent years, women from diverse social and educational backgrounds have increasingly migrated independently. This trend includes educated women who face employment discrimination in their home countries and migrate in search of opportunities that better utilise their skills and provide higher wages.[2]

Female migration is also driven by non-economic factors, including societal pressures, patriarchal traditions that restrict freedom and opportunity, the need to escape abusive marriages, female genital mutilation or domestic violence, and the pursuit of equality and autonomy.[3] Discrimination against specific groups of women—such as single mothers, unmarried women, widows, divorcees, and LGBTQ+ individuals—also compels many to seek refuge elsewhere.[4] However, a significant number of women still migrate as spouses, with their migration status tied to that of their partners.[5]

In the year 2022, there was a growing dependence on emergency accommodation centres, a trend that coincided with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, which resulted in a significant influx of displaced people.[6] These centres often consisted of repurposed spaces such as disused offices, large conference rooms, schools, and sports halls to accommodate international protection applicants.[7]

According to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), the International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) weekly overview for the first week of May 2024 reported a total of 291 centres accommodating international protection applicants. These centres housed a total of 30,027 individuals, including 7,314 children.[8] Of these, 236 were emergency accommodation centres.[9]



IPAS provides residents with full-board accommodation and a weekly personal allowance of €38.80 for adults and €29.80 for children.[10]

[1] UN Women, 'Facts and figures: Economic empowerment' 2023. Available at :

<https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-economic-empowerment#:~:text=It%20is%20estimated%20that%20women,networks%20in%20a%20foreign%20country> Accessed 20 December 2024.

[2] ibid, International Labour Organisation, ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers: Results and Methodology (3rd edn), 2021.

[3] International Organisation for Migration, 'Action against Violence and Discrimination Affecting Migrant Women and Girls' (2013).

[4] ibid.

[5] (n 2) ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers (2021).

[6] Asylum Information Database, 'Types of Accommodation : Republic of Ireland' (2024).

[7] ibid.

[8] Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'IPAS Weekly accommodation and Arrivals Statistics' (2024).

[9] ibid.

[10] Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'International Protection Accommodation Services IPAS' (2023).

As a migrant-led women's organisation, in the last three years, AkiDwA has faced growing demand for services from women living in these emergency accommodation centres seeking support. The organisation continues to advocate for the urgent need for comprehensive vulnerability assessments, improved quality of accommodation, and mandatory vetting for all staff, including security personnel, working in emergency accommodation centres. Major concerns persist regarding safety and protection, lack of privacy, and numerous other challenges faced by residents.

It is important to recognize that women seeking international protection are not a homogenous group. Many of these women possess significant expertise and experience across various fields. Their migration journeys and experiences should be acknowledged, and they should be encouraged to participate in activities that empower them and help shape their lives and those of their families. Recognising their agency and the positive contributions of their integration is essential. These women are drivers of change and should not be confined to situations of disempowerment. By creating empowerment structures and opportunities, we can all learn from and benefit from their resilience, skills, and potential to contribute to society.

Receiving countries must consider the intersectionality between migration, gender, gender-based violence and all other disempowering forms that affect women and girls seeking international protection. Many migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking women and girls have already endured various forms of gender-based violence in their countries of origin, during their journeys to Europe, or upon arrival in destination countries.^[11] Upon arrival, women seeking international protection, as well as refugees and migrants, are often subjected to discrimination, exploitative employment conditions, trafficking, and even prostitution.^[12]

In countries such as Ireland, migrant women experiencing domestic violence face additional challenges. They risk losing their residency rights if they leave abusive spouses, lack resources and coping mechanisms, and encounter barriers to accessing essential services.^[13] This further exposes them to protection risks, including gender-based violence.

To address these challenges, policies must be developed to support migrant women. Policies that protect them, ensure their needs are met, and that they are not pushed into further vulnerability. Creating a framework of protection, empowerment, and opportunity is essential to safeguarding their rights and dignity.



Dr Salome Mbugua

CEO AkiDwA

[11] UN Women, 'From Evidence to Action: Tackling Gender-Based Violence Against Migrant Women and Girls' Policy Brief (2022).

[12] The Institute of Political Studies – Strasbourg, 'Migrant, Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Women and Girls in Europe' Gender Equality Division of the Council of Europe (2019).

[13] AkiDwA, 'AkiDwA Submission to the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality' (2023); Immigrant Council of Ireland, 'Migrant Experiences of Domestic Abuse in Ireland : Recommendations for Immigration Law and Policy Reform' (2023).

2. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Ireland has seen a significant increase in the number of migrants, especially women, into the country, driven by various factors such as conflict, persecution, economic hardship, and the pursuit of better opportunities. As these women arrive, they often face complex challenges in adapting to their new environment. Integration can be difficult, with many migrant women encountering discrimination, social isolation, and inequality in areas such as employment, healthcare, and education. The barriers they face are further compounded by language difficulties, cultural differences, and the trauma many have experienced before their arrival.

The growing number of migrant women in Ireland has highlighted the urgent need for dedicated support and advocacy. These women require assistance not only to navigate the legal and social systems but also to ensure their voices are heard and their rights protected. The challenges of integration, coupled with the vulnerabilities that arise from discrimination and inequality, create a pressing need for an organization that could specifically address the needs of migrant women and champion their cause.

In response to these challenges, Akina Dada wa Africa (AkiDwA), meaning "sisterhood" in Swahili, was founded in 2001 as a national network to support migrant women living in Ireland. From its inception, AkiDwA has been dedicated to promoting equality, justice, and social integration for migrant women across the country, with a vision that every woman should have equal access to opportunities and resources, regardless of her background.

Over the last two decades, AkiDwA has become a prominent non-governmental organization (NGO) in Ireland, focusing on the unique challenges faced by migrant women. The organization has developed a variety of programmes and services, particularly in addressing issues such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and in the areas of reproductive health and social integration. Through these efforts, AkiDwA has empowered thousands of migrant women, helping them to adapt and thrive in their new environment. The organization has also raised awareness about the particular risks faced by migrant women, especially those seeking international protection and living in emergency accommodations.

Since 2023, AkiDwA has noticed a significant increase in the need for support services among women arriving in Ireland, many of whom are escaping conflict, persecution, or severe hardship. These women often find themselves in vulnerable situations upon arrival.

Through our work with women in emergency accommodation centres, we have gained a deeper understanding of the numerous challenges which they face in these often overcrowded and under-resourced environments. These centres are not adequately equipped to meet the needs of women who have experienced trauma or who are caring for children, leaving them at increased risk of exploitation, including sexual violence.

To address these critical issues, AkiDwA launched the "Unheard Voices" project, aimed at supporting women seeking international protection. This initiative provides essential information on rights, services, and opportunities for personal and social development, as well as peer-to-peer and psychosocial support, helping women navigate the complex challenges of their daily lives.

MIGRANTS PROTECTION
WOMEN VIOLENCE
OPPORTUNITIES
TRAUMA CHALLENGES
CONFLICT
VULNERABLE EXPLOITATION
SEXUAL VIOLENCE RIGHTS
PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT



3. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the project, which were established before its initiation, are:

3.1

To provide women living in emergency accommodation centres with the opportunity to learn about their rights, services, and opportunities available to them, and to receive peer-to-peer and psychosocial support.

3.2

To provide training in areas of AkiDwA's expertise, including sessions on reproductive health, sexual and gender-based violence, parenting, navigating Irish systems, referrals for individual needs, information provision, and linking women to support and services.

3.3

To include, engage with, and listen to migrant women seeking international protection residing in emergency accommodation centres, and to document their experiences.

3.4

To produce a testimonial booklet with documentation of stories of resilience shared by the women at the end of the project.

3.5

To facilitate informational and social empowerment through the Unheard Voices project. This is to support the effective realisation of rights for migrant women living in emergency accommodation and to address additional vulnerabilities, as well as opportunities for integration, as identified in the Government White Paper on Ending Direct Provision.

4. PROJECT SUMMARY

The delivery of project objectives comprised of the following activities:

4.1

Capacity-Building Sessions

From December 2023 to June 2024, AkiDwA organised and facilitated nine capacity-building sessions with women seeking international protection who were resident in six emergency accommodation centres across three regions in Ireland. In total, we provided training to 89 women in the course of delivering this project. Capacity-Building sessions focused on intercultural parenting, sexual and gender based violence, including the risk of exploitation and trafficking, mental health, and welfare.

To deliver sessions most relevant to the select migrant women, AkiDwA engaged with local women's support groups or key influential persons within the local migrant women community before each visit. To this end, we relied on existing AkiDwA networks in Dublin as well as the support of the Women's Collective Ireland in Clare and the Aremoja Women's Group in Sligo. We delivered training sessions in two accommodation centres in Dublin, covering Leinster. In Munster, we supported groups of women from two emergency accommodation centres through training in county Clare. In Connaught, we held capacity-building sessions with migrant women in emergency accommodation centres in counties Sligo and Mayo.

4.2

Advisory Board Discussions

In July and September 2024, AkiDwA convened Advisory Group meetings for the Unheard Voices project, bringing together representatives from various not-for-profit organizations that provide support services to women seeking international protection in emergency accommodation. These meetings focused on critical themes including the ongoing housing crisis, safety and minimum standards in emergency accommodations, challenges surrounding sexual and gender-based violence, navigating Irish systems, and the difficulties women face in accessing support services. Additionally, the discussions addressed the growing anti-immigrant sentiments in Ireland and their impact on this vulnerable group. The collective expertise of the Advisory Group is essential to shaping effective solutions and informing the project's ongoing efforts.

AkiDwA would like to thank the following organisations for their contributions to this project, particularly from their representative members in the Advisory Board:

- Women's Collective Ireland – Clare
- Jesuit Refugee Service Ireland
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Ireland
- Dublin City Community Co-Op
- Young People at Risk
- Aremoja Women's Group.

4.3

Peer-to-peer Mentorship Scheme

As part of this project, AkiDwA organised a Peer Mentorship programme which is a targeted initiative designed to support women seeking international protection in Ireland who are residing in emergency accommodation. Through this programme, participants are paired with mentors who have themselves navigated the asylum process and who are at a more advanced stage of their application process, or have received their refugee status. This programme featured 24 participants when it commenced in August 2024 and is scheduled to run over the course of 10 weeks. The mentorship provides emotional support, guidance, and practical assistance, fostering empowerment, cultural integration, and personal growth for both mentors and mentees. The initiative is rooted in peer-to-peer learning, enhancing community support, and helping mentees build confidence as they adapt to their new environment. AkiDwA has paired 12 new arrivals in emergency accommodation centres with 12 migrant women with experience of the international protection system. AkiDwA delivered initial training to mentors and continues to check in with participants to ensure the programme runs smoothly and effectively. The mentorship fosters a sense of community, resilience, and mutual empowerment, benefiting both mentors and mentees through shared experiences and learning.

4.4

Documentation of Testimonies

To leave a lasting impact with this project, AkiDwA has produced “Echoes of Resilience: A Booklet of Experiences” which is a powerful collection of personal stories from 10 migrant women residing in emergency accommodation centres across Ireland. These women, hailing from diverse backgrounds including Nigeria, El Salvador, Algeria, and Uganda, have courageously documented their unique journeys and the challenges they face under the conditions of the centres. This booklet serves as an effective advocacy tool by amplifying the often unheard voices of migrant women, bringing their lived realities to light. Through their stories, policymakers and the public can gain deeper insights into the systemic issues and human impact of the asylum process, making the case for more compassionate and informed policies.

4.5

Final Report

This report marks the conclusion of AkiDwA’s “Unheard Voices” project, encapsulating comprehensive documentation of the project's activities, the challenges faced by migrant women, and actionable recommendations. “Amplifying Unheard Voices - A Report on the Experiences of Migrant Women in Emergency Accommodation Centres” serves as a pivotal resource, summarizing the outcomes of our initiatives and offering critical insights into the lived experiences of women residing in emergency accommodation centres. By highlighting the specific needs and experiences of international protection applicants, particularly migrant women, the report seeks to inform and guide efforts towards improving accommodation support and ensuring sustained, equitable solutions. It aims to be an influential tool in shaping future policies by advocating for necessary amendments in existing policies, regulations, and practices on the reception conditions for persons seeking international protection in Ireland.

5. THE CHALLENGES OF MIGRANT WOMEN IN EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION



5.1 RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Migrant women in emergency accommodation centres frequently encounter racial discrimination, not only from residents but also from staff members who are tasked with managing these centres. This discrimination often comes in the form of exclusion, verbal abuse, or unequal treatment in accessing services or amenities.

For instance, migrant women from African backgrounds report that their concerns or complaints to centre management are dismissed more quickly than those of residents from other ethnicities or that they are stereotyped and subjected to prejudice because of their race or cultural background. This environment fosters feelings of alienation, dehumanization, and isolation. The compounding stress of racial discrimination exacerbates their already vulnerable situation, making it difficult for them to access equal opportunities for integration, education, and mental health support.



5.2 MISMANAGEMENT OF ACCOMMODATION CENTRES

Mismanagement within emergency accommodation centres is a significant issue affecting the lives of migrant women. Housing international protection applicants within emergency accommodation

centres managed by private entities such as former Airbnbs and hotels has resulted in disparate standards of living. In the course of this project, issues of unsanitary living conditions, overcrowding, and insufficient access to basic necessities such as toiletries and proper food were recurring challenges faced by migrant women in the centres we visited.

In some centres, dissatisfactory management practices involved rationing personal food, for instance, food was rationed to one bread roll per family, and a general disregard for providing child-appropriate meal alternatives, allergy-sensitive or culturally appropriate meals. It is important to note that recent reports find that due to the cost of living crisis, parents are struggling to provide food for their children and a significant portion of children are going to school without breakfast.[14] In this context, the additional vulnerabilities and deprivations within these centres put children in emergency accommodation at risk of overrepresentation among children arriving at school hungry and also among those suffering from food insecurity.

[14] Barnados, 'Food Insecurity in Ireland: Impact on Children and their Parents' (2024);

BreakingNews.ie, "Growing number of children arriving at school hungry, study reveals" (2024) Available at:

<https://www.breakingnews.ie/ireland/growing-number-of-children-arriving-at-school-hungry-study-reveals-1705724.html> Accessed 20 December 2024.

In addition, the restrictive rationing of personal hygiene products proved a challenge, especially for families. In one centre, residents were given four laundry detergent pods per week. In addition, inadequately addressing infrastructural issues like heating, ventilation, or cleanliness, made the daily lives of residents extremely difficult.

Furthermore, the lack of transparency around the actual system of oversight for centre management through IPAS causes unease within residents. There is a significant lack of information on the available channel through which migrant residents can raise concerns about their living conditions and this exacerbates the feeling of hopelessness during their time in the state. Several women have written letters of complaints to IPAS but their letters have been met without response. Requests to change centres due to stressful living conditions are often met with rejection or sometimes silence. Indeed, it is noted in the IPAS House Rules & Procedures that:

“Transfer is possible, but only when the Minister decides that the reason is a priority. This only happens in rare and exceptional circumstances.” [15]

Nonetheless, there is presently no accountable system for addressing complaints arising within the centres by IPAS and this is proving to be necessary.

According to the IPAS Code of Practice for Persons Working in Accommodation Centres, staff are obligated not to “abuse, neglect or harm Service Users or colleagues.” [16] However, in some extreme cases, there have been reports of coercion and abuse by centre staff, who have a duty of care toward residents and wield power over vulnerable residents. Instances of exchange of verbal abuse between staff (a centre manager in Connacht and a security officer in Leinster) and residences have been noted from focus group discussions. In addition, random searches of residents’ belongings and seizing of their properties have also been found. Such mismanagement erodes the dignity of these women and deepens their sense of helplessness.



5.3 LIMITED ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Migrant women in emergency accommodation centres face several barriers to accessing education, which is critical for their personal development and long-term integration. For many, language barriers, combined with a lack of information about available educational opportunities, prevent them from enrolling in language classes, vocational training, or higher education. Additionally, restrictive policies on asylum seekers' access to formal education make it difficult for women to pursue meaningful qualifications. The centres' remote locations also hinder access to schools or training institutions, and limited financial resources mean that many cannot afford the necessary materials or transportation to attend classes.

[15] Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'IPAS House Rules and Procedures for Reception and Accommodation Centres' Rebranded January 2023, 11.

[16] Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'IPAS Code of Practice for Persons Working in Accommodation Centres', May 2023.

In one instance, children were reported to be missing the first and last classes of the school day which were spent commuting to and from school to the remote emergency accommodation centres by bus service. Without these educational opportunities, adult migrant persons are deprived of the skills and knowledge needed to become self-reliant, which in turn limits their ability to secure employment and build a future for themselves in Ireland. For migrant children, the inadequacies result in indiscriminate access to educational services which is crucial to their development.



5.4 LACK OF EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Employment is a critical step towards autonomy and integration for migrant women, but many face significant barriers to accessing meaningful work. The remote locations of emergency accommodation centres, coupled with the challenges of navigating Ireland's work permit system, restrict their ability to find jobs. Even when work permits are granted, limited public transportation makes it difficult to commute to potential job opportunities. Employers may also be reluctant to hire individuals living in temporary or precarious housing situations, further compounding the issue. Without access to employment, migrant women remain financially dependent on inadequate state allowances, which hinder their ability to support their families, access essential services, and improve their living conditions. The lack of employment opportunities also contributes to a loss of self-esteem and feelings of uselessness, which are detrimental to their mental health and long-term prospects.



5.5 IMMOBILITY DUE TO TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS

The immobility caused by inadequate transportation systems is a major challenge for migrant women living in emergency accommodation centres, particularly those in rural or remote areas. Public transportation in these regions is often infrequent, unreliable, or completely absent on weekends, making it difficult for women to access essential services such as healthcare, education, and employment. Women who need to attend medical appointments, language classes, or job interviews may be forced to rely on costly private transportation options or miss opportunities altogether. This lack of mobility also increases isolation, as it prevents women from engaging with the broader community or participating in social and cultural activities. The inability to travel freely compounds their feelings of entrapment and makes it harder for them to integrate into Irish society.



5.6 MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

The mental health challenges faced by migrant women in emergency accommodation centres are profound and multifaceted. Many of these women have already experienced trauma before arriving in Ireland, including violence, persecution, and loss. The conditions within emergency accommodation—such as overcrowding, lack of privacy, racial discrimination, and uncertainty about their legal status—intensify feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression. The absence of mental health services in many centres, or the lack of culturally sensitive mental health care, means that women are often left to cope with these challenges alone. Additionally, the stigma surrounding mental health in some communities may prevent women from seeking help even when it is available. This neglect can have long-term effects, making it more difficult for women to engage in social, educational, or economic activities, thus perpetuating their cycle of vulnerability and disempowerment.



5.7 SAFETY AND INSECURITY

Insecurity in emergency accommodation centres is a persistent concern for migrant women, many of whom report feeling unsafe due to poor security measures. Infrastructural issues persist which decrease security within accommodation centres. While some centres have no key for their bedroom doors, residents in other centres experience the challenge of having only one key shared between residents living in shared bedrooms. Also, there are increased risks in mixed accommodation centres with fights, and harassment (including sexual and gender-based violence and intimidation) from male residents. Instances of theft, physical violence, and verbal harassment are common, and management often fails to take adequate steps to address these issues or protect vulnerable residents. In some cases, migrant women have been subjected to exploitation by other residents or even staff members, further undermining their sense of security, particularly sexual exploitation of women. Reports of prostitution and sex trafficking of women have been noted, especially from discussions within the project Advisory Board. The lack of protection and a lack of sufficient training of staff results in a breach of safety through intimidation tactics and exploitation.

The environment within emergency accommodation centres ultimately creates and somewhat sustains a climate of fear and mistrust, where women are afraid to report incidents due to the potential impact on their asylum applications. There is also a fear of retaliation from centre management and security staff. Where there is no follow-up action on reports made to IPAS against centre mismanagement, a culture of impunity of centre management in the affairs of residence persists, resulting in a real fear that centre managers or security could make daily life difficult for residents who escalate concerns or complaints to IPAS. Cumulatively, from AkiDwA's observations, the fear of reporting stems from three issues:

- I. Misinformation spread by the community about the consequences of reporting.
- II. The impunity witnessed by residents, when situations or reports are not appropriately dealt with or addressed with adequate independent monitoring and a general absence of follow-up action. Indeed the general attitude towards complaints is a common “what difference will it make?” mentality.
- III. Previous mistrust of authority from their countries of origin, in transit countries and journeys.

The insecurity these women experience not only affects their physical safety but also corrupts their mental well-being and in turn, their ability to participate meaningfully in the community.



5.8 INTERCULTURAL CONFLICT IN PARENTING

Parenting within the context of emergency accommodation presents unique challenges for migrant women, particularly when cultural expectations around child-rearing clash with those migrant within the context of emergency accommodation presents unique challenges for migrant women, particularly when cultural expectations around child-rearing clash with those in Ireland. In communal living spaces, women often face scrutiny from other residents or staff for parenting practices that may be different from Western norms, leading to feelings of judgment and isolation. For example, discipline methods, expectations around children's behaviour, or communal child-rearing practices may be misunderstood or criticized. Challenges also present for women migrant parents who are often ignorant of the laws around parenting in Ireland. The lack of legal information in this regard is due to a combination of factors including the absence of structured culturally competent non-judgmental support for migrant parents particularly migrant mothers in their initial learning, upskilling, and adaptation to parenting in Ireland.

Additionally, children of migrant women may face confusion or conflict as they navigate the cultural values of their home country alongside those of their host country. This intercultural tension can strain relationships within families and contribute to a sense of disempowerment for the mothers, who may feel unable to parent according to their cultural values without facing criticism or interference. Challenges also arise when migrant parents are faced with the threat of having their children taken away by the Child and Family Agency in Ireland (Tulsa).



5.9 RISK OF GENDER AND SEXUAL-BASED VIOLENCE

Migrant women living in emergency accommodation centres are at heightened risk of gender and sexual-based violence (GSBV), exacerbated by overcrowding, lack of privacy, and poor security measures. Some women have reported cases of sexual harassment by fellow residents or staff, yet fear of retaliation or repercussions on their asylum cases often prevents them from reporting these incidents. In some cases, power dynamics within the centres create situations of exploitation, where women are coerced into trading sexual favours for resources or preferential treatment. Indeed some women, also women in direct provision centres, were being pushed into prostitution. The lack of dedicated support services for survivors of GSBV, combined with limited access to legal recourse, leaves many women feeling trapped and vulnerable. This exposure to violence further erodes their sense of safety and well-being, compounding the trauma they have already endured.



5.10 OVERCROWDING AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN LIMITED LIVING SPACES

Overcrowding in emergency accommodation centres is a phenomenon we noted across most centres we visited. In a centre in Munster, 6 unrelated women share small rooms in bunk beds and have to keep their personal articles in bin bags or personal boxes as no storage closets or units are provided.

Living in overcrowded living spaces significantly intensifies tensions and misunderstandings arising from cultural differences among residents. The lack of personal space in these overcrowded environments forces individuals and families from diverse cultural backgrounds to share limited facilities, creating frequent opportunities for conflict. Disputes over issues such as cooking practices, noise levels, personal hygiene, and the use of shared amenities are common. For instance, cooking practices involving strong spices or culturally specific ingredients may cause discomfort for others in the same shared spaces. Similarly, cultural differences in parenting styles or expectations about communal living etiquette can lead to disputes. In some cases, language barriers further complicate attempts to address and resolve these misunderstandings.

Overcrowding not only amplifies these cultural clashes but also increases stress levels for residents, creating a hostile living environment that disproportionately impacts migrant women. Many women already face the psychological toll of displacement and systemic challenges, and the added strain of cultural conflict further exacerbates their sense of isolation and frustration. The lack of mediation services or culturally sensitive support mechanisms within emergency accommodation centres leaves these conflicts unresolved, contributing to an overall decline in the quality of life for residents.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1

TRAINING OF CENTRE MANAGEMENT

Staff Mandatory and ongoing training should be provided to all staff managing emergency accommodation centres to promote equality, cultural competency, and an understanding of anti-trafficking and anti-gender-based violence (GBV) principles. This training should focus on fostering an inclusive environment that respects the cultural diversity of residents and equips staff to recognize and respond appropriately to signs of exploitation or abuse. Staff should also be trained in trauma-informed care to better support women who have experienced violence or exploitation. Regular refresher courses should be required to ensure that management upholds high standards of care and accountability, creating a safer and more respectful environment for migrant women.

6.2

SECURITY IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

Security within emergency accommodation centres must be significantly enhanced to ensure the safety and well-being of migrant women. This should include installing proper surveillance systems and increasing the presence of appropriately trained security personnel. Clear appropriate training should include anti-domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence training and child safeguarding. Management should also work with residents to implement community-based security solutions, such as regular safety meetings and anonymous reporting mechanisms. Additionally, training programmes should be developed to educate both staff and residents on conflict de-escalation and the prevention of violence, fostering a safer and more cohesive living environment.

It is also important to establish clear protocols for reporting and addressing incidents of theft, harassment, or violence. Adequate mechanisms for appropriate follow-up, linked to anonymous reporting mechanisms, are crucial at the IPAS level. Maintaining a clear and independent email address for reporting is key, with follow-up processes designed to uphold the principle of confidentiality. Monitoring and reporting visits should ideally take place at external locations, such as the IPAS office, to encourage residents to come forward without fear. It is essential to ensure that whistleblowers' confidentiality is protected, avoiding situations where the monitoring team enters the centre and expects women to report incidents under the supervision of individuals who may be the perpetrators. Additionally, there must be a clear understanding of procedures for reporting incidents to the Gardaí.

6.3

STRINGENT AND CONTINUOUS MONITORING OF CENTRES TO LIVING AND RECEPTION CONSISTENCY

There should be stringent and continuous monitoring of emergency accommodation centres to ensure that living conditions including hygiene standards, living environs, food, and subsistence procedures are culturally appropriate and meet residents' basic nutritional needs. AkiDwA recommends the practice of independent monitoring especially through regular inspections by independent bodies such as The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) be extended to emergency accommodation centres and direct provision centres generally to assess the quality, variety, and adequacy of food provided, as well as the implementation of hygiene and health standards in communal kitchens.

Residents should also be given more autonomy and flexibility in food preparation, allowing them to cook meals that align with their cultural, religious, and age preferences, and allergy sensitivities. Introducing a system where residents can voice concerns or suggestions regarding food provision could help improve satisfaction and reduce food waste, ultimately creating a more dignified living environment. Particularly, we commend the formation of resident committees and the selection of community liaison persons to engage with management on behalf of residents within centres. Sharing of best practices between centre managements would facilitate easier learning and improvements.

6.4

STATE-LED ANTI-RACISM INITIATIVES

In line with existing government-led anti-racism initiatives in Ireland, particularly, the National Action Plan Against Racism, there is a need for state-led anti-racism initiatives aimed at fostering inclusion within emergency accommodation centres, as well as the broader community. These initiatives should include partnering with key stakeholders, service providers, and civil society organisations to deliver information sessions and educational campaigns to address unconscious bias and discrimination, both among the general public and those directly involved in the care and management of migrant women. There should be a focus on creating opportunities for intercultural dialogue and understanding within accommodation centres, with activities designed to bring different groups together. Furthermore, the government should ensure that there are clear, accessible channels for reporting and addressing incidents of racial discrimination and that these reports are handled with seriousness and transparency.

6.5

IMMEDIATE INCREASE OF ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Migrant women should have immediate and unrestricted access to education, including English language classes, vocational training, and higher education opportunities. The government should remove existing barriers that prevent asylum seekers from enrolling in formal education programmes, such as restrictive documentation requirements. Additionally, partnerships should be developed with educational institutions to offer flexible, low-cost, or subsidized courses tailored to the needs of migrant women. Ensuring access to digital learning platforms, along with the provision of necessary resources such as internet access and laptops, will further empower women to continue their education, improve their skill sets, and increase their chances of gaining employment.

6.6

LEGAL REFORM TO LIMIT VULNERABILITY – REMOVAL OF THE UNEMPLOYMENT PERIOD

Current legal restrictions that prevent asylum seekers from seeking employment for a designated period after arrival should be reformed to allow immediate access to the labour market. By removing the waiting period, the government can reduce the financial vulnerability of migrant women and enable them to gain economic independence sooner. Access to employment would not only provide a sense of purpose and dignity but also allow these women to contribute to the economy and support their families. This initiative would mitigate the risk of negative mental health outcomes associated with the current status quo of mandatory unemployment, even for those who are ready to engage immediately with the labour market. In addition, asylum seekers should be granted access to career counselling, job training programmes, and internships to help them build skills and navigate the Irish job market effectively.

6.7

BETTER SUPPORT FOR MIGRANT PARENTS

Parents in emergency accommodation centres, particularly mothers, require enhanced support to manage the challenges of raising children in such difficult environments. The government and accommodation management should ensure that family units are provided with appropriate living arrangements that are not only in the best interest of the child but also, respect the need for privacy and a safe, supportive environment for children. Additionally, childcare services should be expanded to allow parents time to attend language classes, educational programmes, or employment. This is of particular importance for single mothers living in emergency accommodation centres. Parenting

workshops that address the challenges of intercultural conflict, particularly around discipline and child-rearing practices, should be made available. These services should be sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of the families while also helping them navigate the expectations and norms of Irish society. AkiDwA found that the women responded very positively to this training which we offered as part of this project, affirming the need for same at a wider scale for recently arrived parents within the migrant community.

6.8

IMPROVEMENT OF THE TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

The government should prioritize improving public transportation options to and from emergency accommodation centres, particularly those located in rural or remote areas. A more frequent, reliable, and affordable transportation system is essential to ensure that migrant women can access critical services such as healthcare, education, and employment. Introducing shuttle services, particularly for isolated or remote centres with limited public transport connections, and subsidized transportation for residents of emergency accommodation centres would address mobility challenges, reduce isolation, and foster better integration. Additionally, transportation improvements should be designed with consideration for school schedules, medical appointments, and job opportunities, ensuring that residents can participate fully in daily life and build pathways toward self-reliance.

6.9

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

To address the significant mental health challenges faced by migrant women in emergency accommodation centres, the government should establish accessible and culturally sensitive mental health services tailored to their specific needs. These services should include regular on-site visits from trained mental health professionals, access to trauma-informed counselling, and mental health workshops that promote coping strategies and resilience. Given the high prevalence of trauma among asylum seekers, specialized support for survivors of violence, war, and displacement is essential. Moreover, there should be an effort to reduce stigma around mental health, particularly within different cultural contexts, to encourage women to seek the help they need.

7. CONCLUSIONS

As we conclude this project, we reflect on the immense strength and resilience demonstrated by the women who have shared their stories and participated in our capacity-building and mentorship programmes. Through these efforts, we have gained valuable insights into the challenges faced by migrant women in emergency accommodation centres. These challenges are summarised as follows:

I. Racial Discrimination: Encounters with bias and unequal treatment from both residents and staff, which exacerbates alienation and mental health struggles.

II. Mismanagement of Centres: Issues like unsanitary conditions, overcrowding, inadequate food and hygiene supplies, and ineffective complaints mechanisms.

III. Limited Access to Education: Barriers including language difficulties, remote locations, restrictive policies, and lack of financial resources.

IV. Lack of Employment Opportunities: Challenges navigating work permits, remote locations, and limited transport, which restricts financial independence.

V. Transportation Immobility: Poor public transportation, which isolates women from essential services and social activities.

VI. Mental Health Challenges: Stress and trauma, which are exacerbated by overcrowding, lack of privacy, and absence of culturally sensitive mental health care.

VII. Safety and Insecurity: Risks of theft, violence, and gender-based exploitation, with inadequate security measures and fear of retaliation.

VIII. Intercultural Parenting Conflicts: Tensions between cultural practices and Irish norms, with inadequate support for migrant parents.

IX. Risks of Gender-Based Violence: Increased vulnerability to harassment and exploitation due to overcrowding and weak protective systems.

In the course of this project, AkiDwA provided the migrant women in emergency accommodation with the following essential tools for growth and integration.

I. Capacity Building Sessions: Training in parenting, mental health, gender-based violence, and navigating Irish systems.

II. Peer Mentorship Programme: Pairing newcomers with mentors experienced in the asylum process for emotional support and guidance.

III. Documentation of Testimonies: Publishing 'Echoes of Resilience' to amplify women's voices and advocate for change.

IV. Advisory Board Engagements: Collaborating with stakeholders to address systemic issues and address housing, safety, and integration challenges, shaping solutions through collective expertise.

V. Psychosocial and Peer-to-Peer Support: Creating spaces for women to share experiences and build community, reducing isolation and fostering solidarity.

VI. Referrals and Linkages: Connecting women to critical services such as childcare, healthcare, education, and local support networks for holistic development.

The recommendations outlined in this report are intended to influence policy and advocacy efforts to improve living conditions, access to services, and the overall well-being of these women. AkiDwA recommends the following:

I. Staff Training: Mandatory cultural competency, anti-trafficking, and trauma-informed care training for management.

II. Independent Monitoring: Regular inspections by bodies like HIQA to ensure hygiene, food standards, and accountability.

III. Enhanced Security: Improved surveillance, resident collaboration on safety, and anonymous reporting mechanisms.

IV. Anti-Racism Initiatives: State-led efforts to combat discrimination and promote intercultural dialogue.

V. Education Access: Immediate provision of language classes, vocational training, and digital learning tools.

VI. Employment Access Reform: Removal of initial unemployment periods and better job training support for asylum seekers.

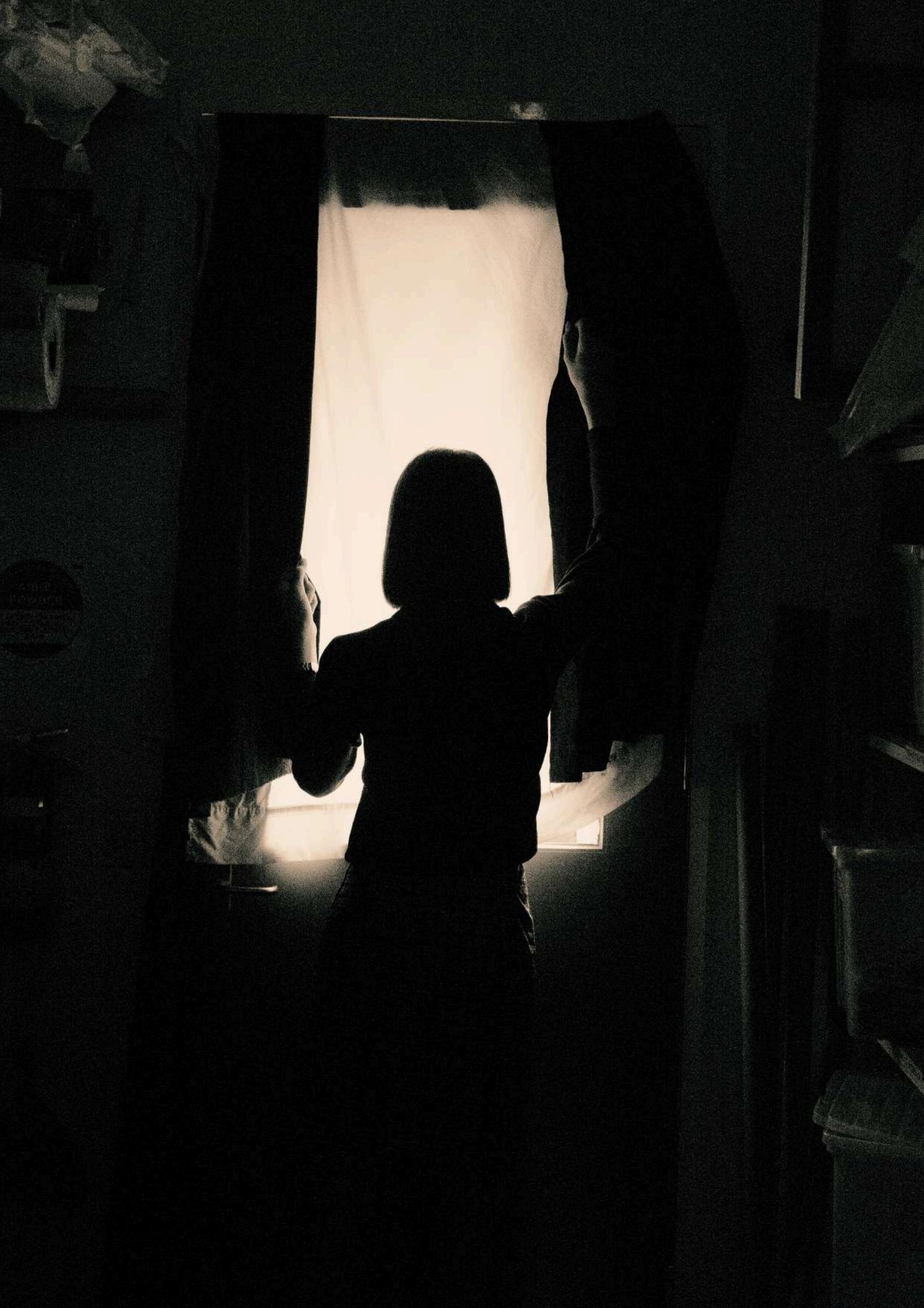
VII. Parental Support: Culturally sensitive parenting workshops and better family living arrangements.

VIII. Improved Transportation: Reliable, affordable public and private transport for remote accommodation centres.

IX. Mental Health Services: On-site, culturally sensitive mental health care and trauma-informed counselling.

Finally, this project would not have been possible without the active engagement of our participants, the tireless efforts of our team, and the guidance of our Advisory Group.

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to our funders, The All-Ireland Funds and Lucy Maguire, for their generous support, which enabled us to carry out this important work. We also extend our deepest gratitude to our partner organizations for their collaboration in the delivery of project activities as well as their contributions in the advisory board. Together, we have amplified the voices of those who are often unheard and laid the foundation for long-term, positive change in Ireland's treatment of women seeking international protection.





Phone: +353 (0)1 8349851

Email: info@akidwa.ie

Location: Unit 2 Killarney Court, Buckingham Street, Dublin 1, Ireland



Registered Charity Number: 20063641