

familial domestic servitude

a professional's guide

This guide has been produced by Unseen (UK) as part of a National Lottery funded project to engage hard to reach communities at risk of exploitation. The purpose of this guide is to support professionals and community organisations to identify familial domestic servitude.



This guide is for those in frontline services, safeguarding roles, community organisations, or support work who may come across people at risk of exploitation.

Familial domestic servitude is a form of modern slavery that is easily missed. It can often look like a difficult relationship or domestic abuse situation, but people in domestic servitude experience exploitation and loss of freedom as perpetrators extract work or services from them via a high degree of control.

what do we mean by familial domestic servitude?

Familial domestic servitude is when someone is made to carry out excessive domestic work by a partner, their in-laws, or their own family, not by choice, but because they are under threat or coercion to do so.

This can include:

- Cooking, cleaning, childcare, and gardening.
- Looking after extended, elderly, or disabled family members.
- Working long hours in the home without rest.
- Having no control over money or daily life.

At first glance, it may appear to be a typical household arrangement, but the crucial difference is that victims are forced or pressured into carrying out these duties rather than choosing to do them freely, and they are threatened with consequences if they refuse or attempt to leave.

domestic servitude v. domestic abuse

There is notable overlap in presentation between domestic servitude and domestic abuse. Both can involve coercion, monitoring and control, and physical and/or emotional abuse. However, in domestic servitude situations there is a distinct intent to use a person for domestic labour – this labour becomes a main part of their “purpose” to the exploiter rather than being one aspect of an abusive relationship.

It is important to remember that although there are differences between domestic servitude and domestic abuse, both can be happening at the same time.

<i>Domestic servitude</i>	<i>Overlapping indicators</i>	<i>Domestic abuse</i>
• Intent to extract domestic work or service from someone by using threats and restricting their freedoms.	• Coercion and threats. • Physical, sexual, emotional abuse. • Control of finances • Control of access to, or monitoring of, technology. • Social isolation. • Using children as a control method. • Many more...	A pattern of behaviour in a relationship used to gain or maintain power or control over someone and keep them in the relationship.

why it's so hard to spot

This kind of exploitation is often hidden in plain sight because:

- It happens inside private homes.
- It is often mistaken for domestic abuse only.
- Cultural or family expectations can make it seem “normal.”
- Victims may not see themselves as exploited.

These factors also hide cases of domestic abuse. It is important to critically evaluate a situation for concerning indicators and determine if a person would best benefit from modern slavery support, domestic abuse support, or both.

common ways people end up in these situations

There isn't one single pathway. People may find themselves in familial domestic servitude through:

- Arranged or forced marriages.
- Coming to the UK on a different visa and then being pressured into marriage.
- Sham marriages linked to immigration status.
- Relationships formed to avoid homelessness.
- Relationships connected to substance dependency.
- Situations that started as labour or sexual exploitation and developed a domestic servitude aspect.

What matters is not how the relationship started, but what it becomes.

what control can look like

Control is often layered and persistent. It might include:

- Threats of being reported to immigration or social services.
 - Threats of deportation or losing their children
- Physical or emotional abuse.
- Being constantly monitored or not allowed out alone.
- Being cut off from friends, family, or support.
- Having no access to money.
- Cultural pressure, shame, or “honour”-based control.
- Threats of homelessness.
- In some cases, control through addiction.

Over time, this creates a situation where the person may technically be able to leave but not in any real or safe way.

signs that something isn't right

No one sign confirms exploitation, and not all of the below will be present in every situation of modern slavery, but patterns matter.

You might notice:

physical and health signs

- Poor hygiene.
- Weight loss or signs of malnutrition.
- Untreated injuries or illness.
- Constant tiredness.

behaviour

- Very anxious, withdrawn, or quiet.
- Avoids eye contact.
- Looks to their partner or family member before speaking.
- Fearful of engaging with authorities.

control and restriction

- Doesn't have access to their passport or ID.
- Rarely leaves the house, or never alone.
- Limited or no contact with others.
- Limited access to bathrooms or other parts of the home.

day-to-day reality

- Doing excessive domestic work with no rest.
- No personal time or independence.
- A partner or family member who is overly controlling or speaks for them.

barriers to getting help

People in these situations often face multiple barriers:

- They may still care about or feel loyal to their partner.
- Cultural or religious beliefs may make leaving feel impossible.
- Shame and stigma can be overwhelming.
- They may fear being rejected by their family or community.
- They may not know their rights.
- They may be afraid of immigration consequences.
- There may be language barriers, including in the deaf community.

Professionals can also face barriers:

- They may see the situation as domestic abuse only.
- They may not recognise the signs of modern slavery.
- There is limited training across services.

what we see in real cases

Across different cases, similar patterns come up repeatedly:

- Someone is expected to serve an entire household, often including in-laws.
- Are prevented from working outside the home, or if they do work any money they earn is taken or controlled.
- Abuse (including sexual violence) may happen alongside exploitation.
- Communication is often monitored or restricted.
- Attempts to seek help may lead to increased control or punishment.
- Immigration status, children, or divorce are often used as leverage.

These are not isolated incidents; they are patterns of exploitation.

the case of chandni

Chandni* belonged to a middle-class family in Gujarat, and met her husband, Manoj, through a familial workplace connection. Chandni and Manoj were married for two years before she joined him to live in the UK on a spousal visa. During those two years he was distant and unfriendly over the phone.

Chandni's father-in-law arranged work for her, and all her salary went to him. She was not allowed to speak with her family back in India without supervision. Generally, Manoj would stay away from her but there was an instance where she was drugged and subjected to sexual violence by him.

Chandni managed to tell her family about the situation after Manoj was arrested for a drug offence, but her father-in-law found out about this and got her fired from her job. After that, she was confined to the home and forced to do all the housework without being fed and fearing for her safety.

Concerned friends managed to get a mobile to her, and she was able to arrange for her uncle, who lived in the UK, to come take her away. Luckily, she was able to keep her passport and went back home to India, but her in-laws are withholding the wages they took from her, and Manoj has refused to return to India to go through divorce proceedings, putting Chandni's life on hold.

Case study found in [Disposable Women](#).

**Identifying information has been changed.*

legal context (UK)

Familial domestic servitude can fall under both:

modern slavery (domestic servitude)

A form of forced labour within a residential setting, where the victim does not have meaningful freedom of movement (even if they appear to from the outside) due to perpetrator control and monitoring.

domestic abuse (Domestic Abuse Act 2021)

An incident or pattern of abusive behaviour between people aged 16 and over who are "personally connected," including partners, ex-partners, and family members.

Note: Abuse of those under 16 is considered child abuse, not domestic abuse

This includes:

- Physical and sexual abuse.
- Controlling or coercive behaviour.
- Economic abuse.
- Psychological or emotional abuse.

In many cases, both apply at the same time.

How to respond

If something doesn't feel right, it's important to act even if you're unsure.

- Try to speak to the person alone and in a safe space.
- Don't use partners or family members as interpreters.
- Use professional interpreters where needed.
- Be calm, non-judgmental, and patient.
- Avoid framing it as "just a relationship issue."
- Explain support available to someone experiencing domestic abuse.
- Explain support available to someone recognised as a victim of modern slavery.
- Follow your organisation's safeguarding procedures.
- Keep in mind that, should the exploiter become aware that you are speaking with the potential victim, they may become physically violent with the potential victim, further restrict their movements, move them away for an area, or impose other repercussions. If you do not think you can speak with the potential victim in a safe way, consult your safeguarding lead and Unseen's [FAQs for Professionals](#) page.

If the potential victim is unwilling or unable to have a conversation in that moment, and it is safe to do so, provide them with:

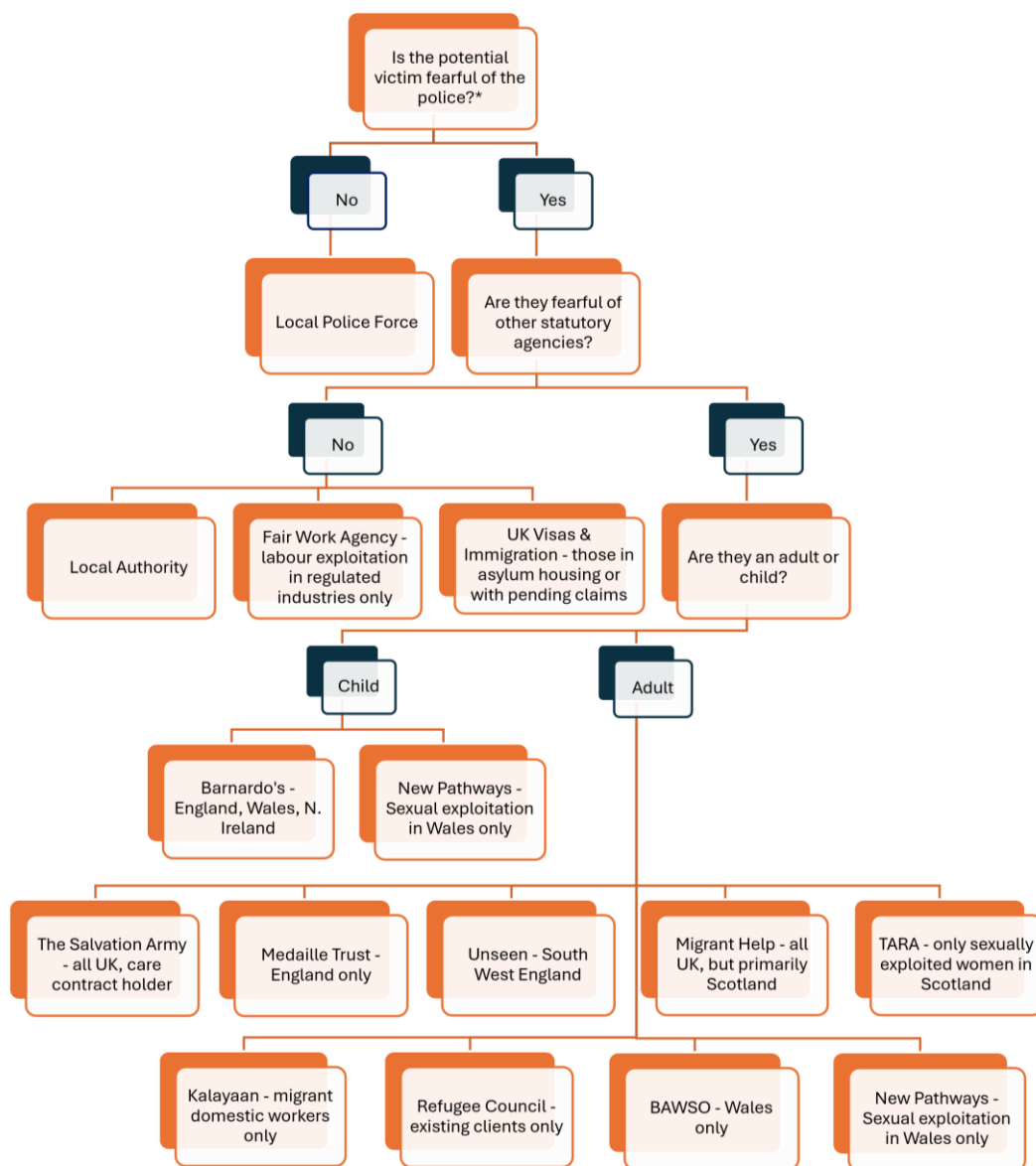
- The [Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline](#) -number if they have presented with indicators of modern slavery.
- The [National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#) if they have presented with indicators of domestic abuse.

Support and reporting

First Responder organisations are those given authority by the Home Office to refer potential victims into the National Referral Mechanism, the government framework for support and protection for modern slavery victims. They have a duty to identify and report modern slavery, which includes securing informed consent from the potential victim to refer into the NRM or, if no consent is given, to complete a Duty to Notify submission.

The Home Office has released [Modern Slavery Statutory Guidance](#) fully detailing the duties and roles of First Responders.

- More information about First Responders can be found in the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline's [FAQs for Professionals](#) or get further training from our [Tackling Modern Slavery for First Responders](#) course.
- If you are not part of a Modern Slavery First Responder organisation, you should refer the case to an appropriate First Responder. The First Responder organisation you refer someone to will depend on several factors.



*If someone is in immediate danger or needs extraction, police should always be called.

UK Immigration Enforcement, Border Force, and the National Crime Agency are also First Responders, but most potential victims will encounter these agencies either through immigration operations, at border control, or as part of an escalated investigation that is national or international in scale.

If you are unsure which First Responder organisation to refer to, consult your safeguarding lead.

Emergency

999 if someone is in immediate danger.

SUPPORT NUMBERS

Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline (Unseen)
08000 121 700

If you suspect someone is in a modern slavery situation but it is unsafe or they are unwilling to discuss it with you, you can share the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline number with them so they can access support and guidance when they are ready and safe to do so.

- The Helpline is confidential has interpreters available and provides free advice. If professionals have questions, please see our Professional FAQ page linked below.

Domestic abuse support

If a case crosses over with domestic abuse, or if the indicators more strongly lean towards abuse than domestic servitude, provide potential victims with ways they can access domestic abuse support. Depending on the case, they may be more likely to get support under domestic abuse provision, or they may be entitled to support under both.

[National Domestic Abuse Helpline](#) 0808 2000 247

[Respect Men's Advice Line](#) 0808 8010327

- For men affected by domestic abuse.

[Karma Nirvana](#) 0800 5999 247

- For those affected by honour-based abuse.

[Galop](#) 0800 999 5428

- National Helpline for LGBT+ Victims and Survivors of Abuse and Violence

[Ashiana](#) 0808 2000 247

- For black and minority women

[Muslim Women's Network](#) 0800 999 5786

[Halo Project](#) 01642 683 045

- For black and minority women who have experienced forced marriage, honour-based abuse, or female genital mutilation.

Useful resources

[Modern Slavery Statutory Guidance](#)

[NRM Toolkit for First Responders in England and Wales](#)

[Unseen - Frequently Asked Questions for Professionals](#)

[NRM explanatory booklets](#)

[LEAP Survivor Identification Tool](#)

[West Yorkshire domestic servitude animation](#)

[Women's Aid](#)

[Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women's Organisation](#)

[Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation](#)

[SignHealth - The Deaf Health Charity](#)

[Respond - Domestic abuse support for those with learning disabilities and autism](#)

Conclusion

Familial domestic servitude is a complex, hidden form of modern slavery, often embedded within relationships and reinforced by cultural, economic, and immigration-related factors.

Professionals must be equipped to recognise subtle indicators, challenge assumptions, and respond appropriately, ensuring victims are identified not just as experiencing domestic abuse, but as individuals subjected to exploitation and loss of freedom.

**If you think someone may be a victim of
modern slavery call the Modern Slavery &
Exploitation Helpline on:**

08000 121 700

www.modernslaveryhelpline.org

**Working towards a
world without slavery**



The Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline is a free service open 365 days a year. It is available to anyone who has concerns about modern slavery.

- Professionals can call confidentially to discuss a concerning situation and receive expert advice on next steps.
- Members of the public can call to report potential situations of modern slavery they have observed.
- Victims and survivors can call to learn about support options, or to request assistance.

The Helpline is confidential, or anonymous if the caller prefers not to provide identifying information.

We have translators available in over 250 languages.

You can also report online via the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline website or through the app.

Website



Unseen app

