

BREAKING: Women seeking safety in the UK subjected to coercion and control in hotel accommodation

A new report published 3 September by the charity Women for Refugee Women (WRW) (1) shows that women who have fled gender-based violence, including rape, domestic violence, forced marriage and sexual exploitation, are subjected to coercion and control in hotel asylum accommodation, akin to patterns they have experienced in previous abusive relationships and situations.

The report, *Coercion and control: The treatment of asylum-seeking women in hotel accommodation*, is the first of its kind to focus specifically on the treatment of asylum-seeking women in hotel accommodation (2). Further, the research has been designed and carried out by a team of seven women with personal experience of the UK's asylum and immigration system, including, for some, hotel accommodation.

Documenting the experiences of 63 women from 26 different countries – including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Türkiye and Uganda – the report shows that women in hotels are:

- **Routinely monitored and surveilled**, including through sign-in and out practices, intrusive questioning from staff, evening curfews and morning 'roll calls';
- **Subjected to humiliating, degrading and dehumanising behaviour by hotel staff**, including sexual harassment, room intrusions and voyeurism;
- **Punished if they are deemed to 'step out of line'**, including eviction from the hotel;
- **Isolated from social networks and sources of support**, through hotel visitor bans, and the limited financial support they receive, just £8.86 weekly, which makes it all but impossible to leave the hotel.

The impact on women's mental health is extremely damaging:

- **91% of women we surveyed said living in a hotel made them anxious or depressed;**
- **Almost half of women, 46%, said it made them suicidal.**

The intense levels of coercion and control women experience in hotel accommodation, most often enacted by private companies contracted by the Home Office, permeates and infiltrates women's daily routines. As one woman explained, *"We are living in fear."*

Such policies and practices control women's everyday lives, isolate them from sources of support, and replicate the dynamics of abusive relationships or situations (3).

Despite already fleeing gender-based violence, hotel accommodation further harms women by subjecting them to humiliating, degrading and dehumanising behaviour by hotel staff, including:

- **Staff entering rooms without being given permission to do so**, with some behaviour verging on voyeurism;
 - One woman told us, *“Whenever they want to come into our rooms, they will just come in... They don’t even knock. I experienced it every day.”*
 - Another shared, *“Sometimes you are in bed sleeping... the next thing you see the door is open. So if you’re naked or something, they don’t mind. That’s the kind of life you’re living.”*
- **Sexual harassment and unwanted behaviours** (see Mercy’s quote below for more information);
- **Verbal aggression and threats**, including of eviction;
- **Refusal to provide basic necessities**, including nappies for babies or sanitary products (see Madiha’s quote below for more information).

Consequently, women who come to the UK in search of safety are not being supported to heal and rebuild their lives; instead, they are being further harmed and traumatised.

But there is a clear opportunity for change. The Labour Government has promised to tackle violence against women and girls and to prioritise survivors of gender-based violence. Women who are seeking safety in the UK must be included in this promise. Otherwise, a two-tier approach will develop, with women seeking asylum – who are predominately from racialised groups – treated as less deserving and left behind.

To address the harms of hotel accommodation and ensure asylum-seeking survivors of gendered violence receive the support they need, we recommend the Government should:

- 1) **End the use of hotel accommodation as quickly as possible.** We welcome the Government’s commitment to do this by processing the asylum backlog and recommend presumptive grants of asylum for women from high grant rate countries (including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Sudan and Syria) to achieve this, as well as significantly increasing the number of Home Office caseworkers to ensure all asylum decisions are made within six months.
- 2) **Take immediate action to mitigate the harms of hotel accommodation** through increasing the levels of financial support provided to people in hotels; ensuring coercive practices are not implemented by privately contracted companies; and ending the practice of room sharing.
- 3) **Provide women seeking asylum with safe and supportive accommodation** where they can rebuild their lives.

Every woman deserves a safe place to call home.

Mercy from West Africa, who was in hotel accommodation for shares:

“Very soon after I came to the hotel, the manager started with his harassment of me. Every day he was knocking on my door, asking me to go out with him and saying things like ‘You’re looking for men outside, but we’re here.’ People in the

hotel used to ask me if I was having an affair with him, because he was at my door so many times.

While I was in the hotel I became quite ill. I asked the manager, can I go and stay with one of my family, to help me recover? The manager gave me permission and asked me to sign a piece of paper about this,

But once I was feeling better and came back to the hotel, I discovered I had been thrown out. All my belongings had been given to a charity shop; my letters and my paperwork about my asylum case had been thrown away. No one from the hotel or Home Office contacted me to tell me they were going to do this.

Since they threw me out of the hotel, I have been staying with friends – one night here, another night there. It's been over a year now, and my mental health has really suffered. Living like this is hard."

Madiha from Asia, who was in hotel accommodation for over a year with her young son shares:

"When we came to the hotel, I was using nappies for my son. They were only giving me three, four or five nappies each time. Every time I was feeling bad... shame... to go downstairs to the hotel reception and ask "Can I have more nappies?" It wasn't good.

Later I was toilet training my child. It was quite late because he was already three and a half, but I couldn't give toilet training because we were in the hotel. Then I said okay, because he was asking for it. When we started, sometimes of course the sheets got dirty, but when I asked the hotel staff for extra bedsheets they never gave them to me. So I had to wash them all by hand.

I feel bad in the hotel, of course. You're hoping every day. But by the end of the day, there's nothing; that feeling is really terrible. Nothing happened today.

As a family we really wanted to set up our lives. I was just hoping that one day, it will pass."

The research team of seven women with experience of the UK's asylum and immigration system – Anne Marie Munene, Christine Harris, Deborah Rest, Etracy Rukwava, Goldie Joseph, Hadnet Tesfom Habtemariam and Kaffy Kazep – say:

"Every woman deserves a safe place to call home. But women seeking asylum, who have experienced abuse and trauma in their countries of origin, are being treated as less than human when they arrive in the UK, as they are placed in hotel accommodation where they are controlled, monitored, degraded, intruded upon, intimidated and threatened.

The treatment of women in hotels can be likened to putting a bird in a cage. The bird is deprived of flying wherever it wants and living the life that it chooses.

Hotel accommodation has a lasting impact on women's self-esteem and mental health. It tells women they are not worthy of dignity and respect and prevents them from recovering from their previous trauma.

This ill treatment of women seeking asylum must stop now. Women deserve safe, supportive and healing accommodation, where they can start rebuilding their lives on their own terms. We urge the new Government to take decisive action immediately."

Andrea Vukovic, Deputy Director of Women for Refugee Women, says:

"The new Government has inherited a crumbling asylum system which is actively putting women at risk. Nearly half of the women we spoke to said that hotel accommodation made them suicidal.

The Government needs to urgently get a grip on what's happening in asylum hotels to prevent further harm. We urge the Government to end policies which have put women in harm's way and ensure proper oversight of the private providers who are running hotels. Ultimately, the use of hotels for accommodating people seeking safety needs to end now.

Failing to do so will undermine the Government's ambition to tackle the national emergency of violence against women. It will create a two-tier approach to supporting survivors of gender-based violence, with those seeking safety in the UK left behind."

Christine Harris, a member of the research team who was accommodated in a hotel, says:

"This research should be an eye-opener as to why hotel accommodation should end.

Living in a hotel is similar to living in a prison. With all the restrictions, constant changes in rules, limitations put on us, no choice in what we eat...

Some hotel staff take advantage of our vulnerability and treat us like we are not human beings. Knowing that we have nowhere else to go. We are left to deal with emotional and mental bullying, our privacy isn't respected... men inspect or enter your room without permission.

It's mentally and emotionally tormenting. It makes you feel like you really don't belong. We all deserve freedom. Change is needed now.

/ENDS

Read the full report at www.refugeewomen.co.uk/research from 3 September, or request an early embargoed copy from Carenza Arnold, Communications Manager at Women for Refugee Women, on carenza@refugeewomen.co.uk

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Notes

- (1) Women for Refugee Women (www.refugeewomen.co.uk) is a charity which supports women who have sought asylum in the UK and challenges the injustices that they experience in the UK.
- (2) The use of hotels as a form of asylum accommodation has increased significantly over the past few years. As women make up the minority of those going through the asylum system, this is reflected in the number of women accommodated in hotels. As with many Home Office statistics, asylum support statistics are not broken down by gender, meaning women are rendered invisible. A Freedom of Information (FOI) request we submitted shows that as of the beginning of June 2024, there were 8,029 women in hotels.
- (3) Of women surveyed:
 - 4) Over half of women, 51%, were subjected to an evening curfew;
 - 5) Nearly two thirds of women, 63%, had to sign in and out every time they left and returned to their hotel;
 - 6) Over half of women, 52%, were required to confirm their presence in the hotel every morning;
 - 7) Over a third of women, 37%, were not allowed to spend the night away from their hotel;
 - 8) Nearly three fifths of women, 57%, were not allowed visitors in their hotel at all.