



Hibiscus

HER STORY

Of the National
Referral Mechanism

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OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT

Trust for London generously supported a transformative project focused on empowering female survivors of trafficking. Through this initiative, we have created a powerful and compelling **podcast** that amplifies the voices of these remarkable women, allowing them to share their experiences within the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)¹.

Our podcast delves into the real-life stories of survivors, shedding light on their journey within the NRM system. By doing so, we aim to not only raise awareness but also bring about positive change by identifying and addressing the challenges these survivors encounter on their path to recovery.

At Hibiscus, working on anti-trafficking is a core part of our commitment and strategy. The podcast serves as a testament to the immense strength and resilience of these women as they navigate through the NRM process. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to these courageous women for their openness and willingness to share their stories.

Our goal is to make their voices heard far and wide, leading to meaningful systemic changes that can improve the NRM process for all survivors. Together, with Trust for London's support and our collaborative efforts, we strive to create a more compassionate and effective support system for those affected by trafficking.

KEY REFLECTIONS

- Authorities such as the Police, Home Office (HO), and National Health System (NHS) often treat victims of modern slavery like criminals, adding to their trauma and distress.
- The existing support systems for trafficking victims create significant stress and do not provide comprehensive, holistic assistance. There is a pressing need for more empathetic and comprehensive support throughout the entire process.
- The podcast shown the plight of women who were unable to escape trafficking, emphasising the urgency of improving the support and protection available to victims.
- Women going through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) system are left traumatised and made to feel like accomplices rather than victims. Despite presenting medical evidence and bruises aligning with their stories, they face unwarranted refusals for both NRM and asylum claims.

KEY THEMES

- Trafficking and Modern Slavery
- Mental Health
- Women experiencing Gender-based Violence (GBV), Domestic Violence (DV) and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)
- Destitution and homelessness due to No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)²
- Motherhood and parenthood
- Women in the criminal justice system

1. The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) - a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support.

2. A person will have no recourse to public funds when they are 'subject to immigration control', as defined at section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. No Recourse to Public Funds' is an immigration restriction applied to many thousands of people living in the UK, which prevents them from accessing welfare benefits and supports.

- Post Brexit, the European Court of Human Rights no longer holds binding authority over the UK government, leaving victims vulnerable and the UK government unaccountable for upholding human rights agreements.
- The lack of communication between the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and immigration systems hinders efficient and coordinated support for victims of trafficking.
- The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) does not consider victims of trafficking in its policies and initiatives, highlighting the need for their inclusion and protection.
- Many women are unaware of their rights or even the existence of the NRM, even when they have been referred to it.
- Some solicitors fail their clients by accepting money without providing the necessary legal assistance or maintaining proper communication.
- Language and cultural barriers are frequently overlooked and must be addressed and prioritised to ensure effective support for trafficking victims from diverse backgrounds.

KEY CHALLENGES

Key challenges experienced by potential female victims of trafficking and minoritised women in the CJS:

- The podcast brought attention to critical issues within the NRM process, revealing the lack of available information for survivors and their disorientation during the process. It emphasised the necessity of providing information in survivors' native languages to make the NRM more accessible. Empowering and providing survivors with knowledge about their rights and the process is crucial, as the current system feels like a confusing maze.
- Solicitors and government bodies need specialised and standardised training to better assist survivors. Inadequate advice from solicitors can further contribute to confusion and distress.
- Mental health support for those in the NRM is severely lacking, leading to survivors giving 'inconsistent' testimonies due to issues like memory loss, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression. Addressing mental health is crucial, and we can play a role in destigmatising it by encouraging group therapy and talking therapy.
- The NRM is often framed as a solution to the issue of modern slavery, but the process itself can be problematic and traumatising. Survivors should be given the opportunity to share their stories freely before engaging with the NRM and HO, allowing them to offload their experiences.
- The podcast highlighted a lack of empathy and curiosity in the NRM process, especially concerning women who have endured significant hardships.
- Understanding and acknowledging their stories fully is essential for providing appropriate support.
- Some MPs have shown tremendous support for survivors in the NRM process, but this support is not comprehensive. There is a need to hold MPs and local councillors accountable and ensuring their understanding of the process is vital for better outcomes.
- One major concern is the long waiting times for NRM entry and exit, which need urgent attention to minimise the time survivors spend in uncertainty.
- The need to actively share expertise on the NRM process and its challenges among professionals. Solicitors, and others involved should receive further education on reasons why people leave their home countries, the various forms of modern slavery, and effective ways to support survivors. It is also essential to be aware of country-specific guidance and be educated about clients' cultures.
- Specific cultural and religious stigmas faced by South Asian survivors, including the concepts of 'honor' and 'shame' that may hinder entry into the NRM and prevent women from seeking help. Similar issues were noted for Albanian survivors, with poverty and patriarchal norms playing a significant role in preventing women from speaking out against domestic violence. Recognising the similarities between different cultures can help us address VAWG effectively, transcending borders in our efforts to support survivors.
- Perpetrators exploit the hostile environment against survivors, instilling fear that going to the

police will lead to detention or deportation, deterring women from seeking help through the NRM. The emotional burden of shame, stigma, coercion, fear, and confusion further impedes survivors from entering the NRM process.

- Credibility remains an ongoing issue within the NRM. Survivors are unfairly penalised for not articulating their experiences convincingly or consistently enough.
- In the prison context, it's essential to recognise that women's involvement in criminal activities is statistically much lower than men. Often, their so-called "violent" offenses are rooted in acts of self-defence, highlighting their victimisation. It's crucial for MOJ and HO staff to acknowledge these circumstances rather than immediately resorting to criminalisation and imprisonment and understanding the prevalence of trauma among

women in prison can help reshape the approach towards their rehabilitation.

- The digitalisation of the NRM poses a significant barrier, creating new access issues for survivors. Not everyone is computer literate, has access to emails, or Wi-Fi, making it challenging for some to engage with the system effectively.
- Cuts to legal aid have made it nearly impossible for survivors to find legal representation, particularly from solicitors experienced in handling asylum and trafficking cases. Many survivors find themselves navigating both asylum and NRM processes simultaneously, which becomes even more challenging without a legal advocate to support them. Restoring access to legal aid is crucial to ensure these survivors can effectively navigate these complex procedures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The NRM must prioritise hiring experts and individuals with lived experience to enhance its effectiveness and support for survivors.
- First responders should be skilled professionals and not just volunteers. They need to be adequately compensated for their expertise in languages, culture, trauma-informed support, and other relevant areas.
- Multiple preparatory meetings should be conducted to provide extensive support before making a referral to the NRM. It is unrealistic to expect a survivor to feel confident and comfortable sharing their traumatic and distressing experiences with a stranger without sufficient preparation and support.
- Advocate for changes in CJS to include questions that explore the reasons behind women who are in contact with the CJS. It is crucial for law enforcement and authorities to identify instances of exploitation and abuse in female offenders from the earliest point of contact to prioritise their protection and prevention from further harm.

FURTHER AREAS OF WORK

- Increase the number of podcast episodes in the NRM series to provide a platform for more women with lived experiences to share their stories.
- Produce a full transcript of the episodes of the podcast to be included as part of Hibiscus Anti-Trafficking training program.
- Launch campaigns to address the criminalisation of potential female victims of trafficking.

Hibiscus

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