

Home Affairs Select Committee Inquiry into Asylum Accommodation

Submission from Hibiscus Initiatives. 3 February 2025

About Hibiscus Initiatives

1. [Hibiscus Initiatives](#) ('Hibiscus') is a national voluntary sector organisation which has been delivering services to Black, minoritised and migrant women in contact with the criminal justice system and immigration system for over thirty years.¹ Hibiscus supports Black and minoritised migrant women in prison, in immigration detention and in the community. Many of the women Hibiscus supports are victim/survivors of serious harm including trafficking and violence against women and girls (VAWG).
2. Hibiscus has recently published an evidence report, [Unsafe, Insecure: barriers to safe housing for Black and minoritised migrant women and their children](#) and an accompanying [policy briefing](#) making recommendations for reform. This is based on insights from our frontline workers and the women we support, identifying barriers faced by migrant women seeking safe housing for themselves and their children.

Barriers to safe housing for migrant women and recommended reforms

3. Our research identifies five key barriers which make Black and minoritised migrant women and their children particularly vulnerable to unsafe and insecure housing and the significant harms associated with this, and recommends reforms:
 - (1) The 'hostile environment' policy and associated structural, legal and procedural barriers (including failures by state agencies to use interpreting services and limited access to legal aid) block mainstream housing routes for migrant women and their children, and increase stigma and discrimination. **We recommend that the government should end the 'hostile environment' policy and instead support migrant women into education, training and work.**
 - (2) The reliance on poor quality, shared accommodation for migrants, instead of decent, self-contained, family-friendly social housing in communities, causes harm to health and re-traumatisation to migrant women and their children. **We recommend that central and local government should invest in decent, self-contained social housing in communities which is accessible to migrant women and their children.**
 - (3) The failure to adopt a gender-informed, trauma-responsive and intersectional approach to migrant women's accommodation provision and the housing application process causes harm to migrant women and their children. **We recommend that all agencies should take a gender-informed, trauma-responsive and intersectional approach to accommodation provision and the application process.**
 - (4) The failure to address links between imprisonment or immigration detention and housing problems can increase both the risk of imprisonment and the risk of homelessness for migrant women and lead to separation of families. **We recommend that the government, criminal justice agencies and local authorities should work together to ensure migrant women are never**

¹ We use the term 'migrant women' to indicate women without British citizenship.

incarcerated in prison or immigration detention due to a lack of accommodation in the community.

- (5) The failure to collect and publish data about housing outcomes for migrant women and their children hampers progress. **We recommend that the government should improve collection and publication of disaggregated data to measure progress in improving outcomes.**

Problems with asylum accommodation

There are ongoing concerns about the quality and suitability of asylum accommodation and support, many of which are documented in our evidence report. Some examples are included below.

Shared accommodation

Women taking part in our research felt strongly that no one should be forced to share accommodation with strangers. This was particularly important for women recovering from trauma and those with dependent children. In particular, women and children should not be required to share accommodation with men. One practitioner commented:

“Waiting on a waiting list for mental health support and then going through counselling etc, when you go home you need your own space. They can’t expect you to recover from trauma when you’re sharing a space with someone else who may also have experienced trauma.”

Where women do have to share accommodation, it is important for this to be women-only and to have agreed ground rules, such as on visitors and cleaning. One woman described Home Office accommodation in which she had to share with a woman who was bringing men back to the house, which made her feel unsafe. Some women were distressed by strangers using their personal items (food, pots/pans, toiletries etc.).

Ruby

Ruby was an asylum seeker living in Home Office accommodation. She was a victim of torture, domestic abuse and trafficking. She was placed in a shared room with another family, which included a man. After a few days her Hibiscus caseworker was able to have her moved to a single room, but it smelled like a dead body.

Located in their community

It was important for the women that their accommodation should be located within reach of their community and support networks, including essential services such as school and health services, appointments with Probation and Immigration, women’s specialist services, and their personal support network such as friends or church. One woman spoke of her distress at the prospect of being moved a long way away while she waited for a place in a safe house:

“They tried to move me to Manchester, my mental issues were made worse. They wanted to move me away from everything and everyone that I knew. And I had to fight and got ill and I couldn’t even stand on my feet and all that. So, it’s been affecting my

mental health... They made me an offer to stay in a hotel in Ilford before I was moved to a safe house. You can't forget those experiences; it's staying in my head. You can't do anything, you feel like you're trapped, you don't know what's next... And are you going to get an accommodation in a safe house here or are you going to go outside? And now I'm staying in the safe house and I'm rebuilding myself."

Disrepair, overcrowding and unsafe conditions

Hibiscus has supported numerous women whose asylum accommodation was in poor condition, including where there were missing or faulty facilities, major leakages, rat infestations or broken windows. Housing managers in these cases took a long time to arrange repairs and, in some cases, did not take action at all. In one case reported to Hibiscus, a woman was housed in accommodation infested by cockroaches and both she and her baby got skin rashes as a result. One practitioner noted how challenging this can be:

"For service users in NASS accommodation, when it is in a really bad condition, what can we do about that?"

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