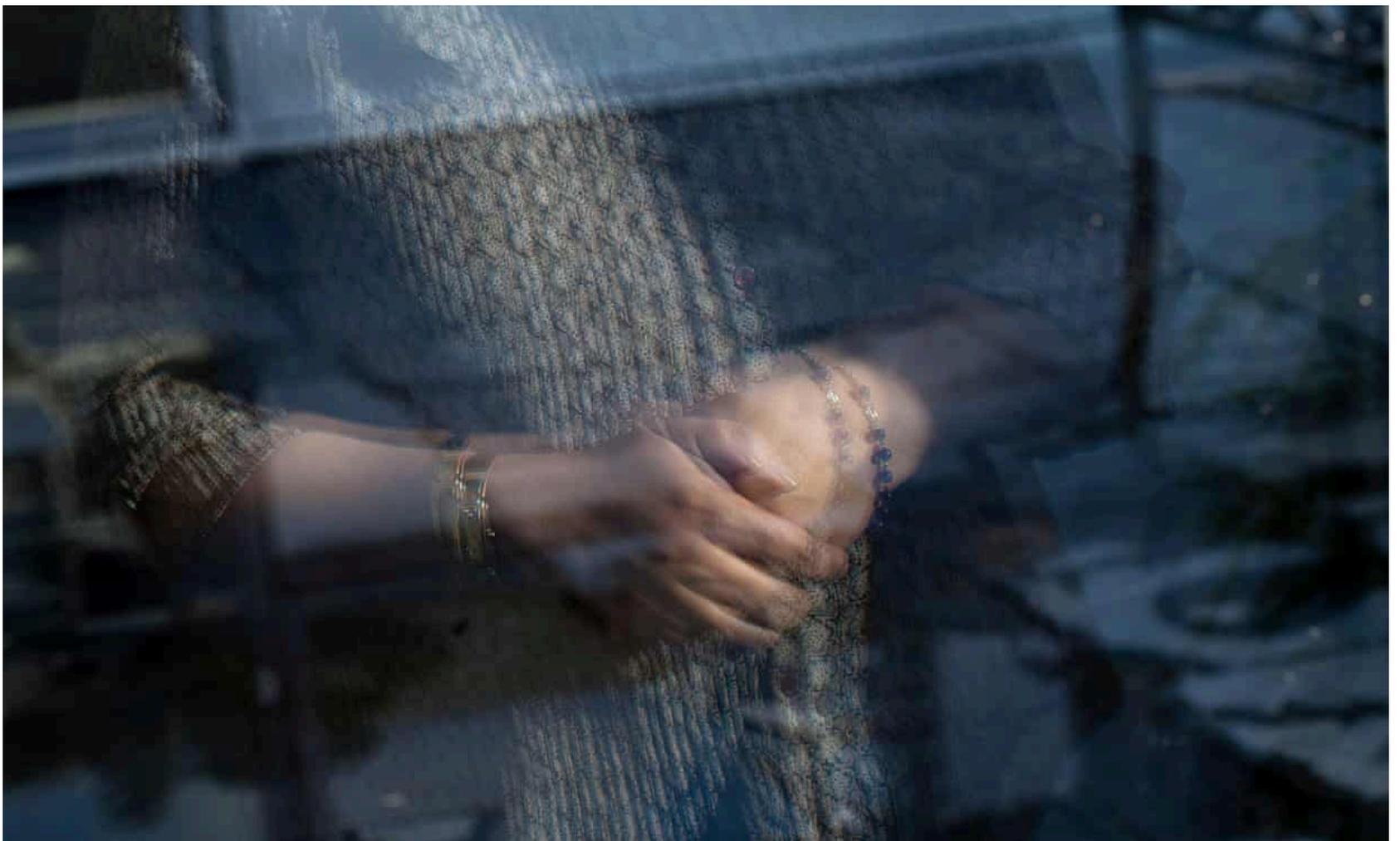


Female trafficking survivors in UK forced into unsafe housing, report finds

Large proportion of victims not placed in specialist safe housing, leaving them vulnerable to further exploitation, says charity

[Nicola Kelly](#)



The report says the legal requirement to safely house women who need specialist support is not being enforced as it should be. Photograph: Martin Argles/The Guardian

Wed 2 Dec 2020 16.28 GMT

Last modified on Wed 2 Dec 2020 16.30 GMT

Female trafficking survivors in the UK who have the legal right to be placed in safe housing are being forced to live in “inappropriate and insecure” accommodation where they risk being re-trafficked and exploited, according to [a new report](#).

Anti-trafficking charity Hibiscus Initiatives says that 98% of modern slavery victims referred to it in the past two years were not given specialist safe housing as is their right under UK law, but were instead housed in unsafe asylum accommodation.

Angelia*, an asylum seeker from Jamaica, was recognised as a potential victim of trafficking through the national referral mechanism, the system used to identify and provide support for trafficking survivors, in May 2019. This should have triggered her right to safe accommodation where she could receive specialist support. Instead she was placed in a multi-occupancy house with no locks, CCTV or front-desk security.

"I've shared with six, seven women in a year, from all different types of nation," she said. "I even had a baby born in the room with me. You wonder who is running this business? Do they really care about you? Do they know the people they put me with? They don't do the checks, none of them."

Angelia, who was sexually exploited in both Jamaica and in the UK, is now sharing a room with a woman who has acute mental health needs.

"She meets men in the park ... she tries to bring them back here," she said. "It's up to me to say, 'Don't bring them here, I'll call the police.' One day, a man was trying to come in the house and wouldn't go away. I stood on my bed at the window and I beat the glass, but he was knocking, knocking, he just keeps knocking, knocking ... I feel like I have to be vigilant, to take care of myself in here."

Justė Marcinkevičiūtė, Angelia's case worker, says it is very common for unknown men to show up at asylum accommodation.

"The key problem of being housed in asylum accommodation is it's not a safe house," she said. "In a safe house, whoever is arriving and leaving is being monitored and there's an extra level of support, but asylum housing is very, very overcrowded. When you have people who have been exploited and they are claiming asylum because their exploiters are

looking for them, then that is risky. Subjecting survivors of trafficking to such unnecessary stress ... it's just not right."

She says many women she supports don't know what a safe house is, and it is not typically explained to them by the authorities.

"So many women have never heard of a safe house – and the fact they're not being offered that accommodation is really troubling," she said.

"There are two ways forward: either asylum accommodation is made more secure, or more safe houses are established for survivors of trafficking.

The way things are at the moment, it's just not working."

A response to a freedom of information request submitted by Hibiscus Initiatives to the [Home Office](#) revealed that, of 581 safe house bed spaces available to accommodate referrals, only 25% of those who are recognised victims were allocated those spaces.

The chief executive of Hibiscus Initiatives, Marchu Girma, said: "Safe house provision is important for the recovery and wellbeing of women who are survivors of trafficking. Too many people go missing after being recognised as potential victims of trafficking by the national referral Mechanism. There needs to be more investigation into why these people disengage from the process and do not take up the support they are entitled to. The government needs to address failings and gaps by increasing investment."

The Home Office says that where a potential victim is eligible or already in asylum housing or local authority housing, and there is no risk to them in remaining in their current location, they will usually continue to stay in that accommodation unless it is assessed that they require a place in a safe house.

"The safety and security of potential victims of modern slavery remains a key priority for the government," a spokesperson said. "We are proud to provide world-leading support for victims to help them rebuild their lives. Financial support, a specialist support worker and, where needed,

accommodation, is provided to potential and confirmed victims of modern slavery who have received a positive reasonable grounds decision and have consented to support from the Victim Care Contract.”

* Name has been changed

© 2020 Guardian News & Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved. (modern)