



**WOMEN
FOR
REFUGEE
WOMEN**

COERCION AND CONTROL

**THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN SEEKING ASYLUM
IN HOTEL ACCOMMODATION**

About Women for Refugee Women

Women for Refugee Women (WRW) supports women who are seeking asylum in the UK to rebuild their lives, on their terms. Alongside refugee and asylum-seeking women, WRW challenges the injustices experienced by women who seek asylum in the UK.

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, we would like to thank all the women who generously gave up their time to participate in this research. We hope that this report does justice to your experiences, and that it results in the change that is so desperately needed.

We would also like to thank the Lloyds Bank Foundation for funding this research, and Birkbeck, University of London, for providing us with a 'room of our own' to meet, talk, and develop our research. In particular, we would like to thank Isabelle Habib and Anna Hetheron at Birkbeck's Access and Engagement team for their unwavering support. Additionally, we are very grateful to Trauma Treatment International, and in particular Dr Lotta Raby, for the invaluable support they have provided to the research team.

Finally, we would like to thank Professor Victoria Canning at Lancaster University, whose work on coercive control in the lives of women seeking asylum has helped us to fully understand our research findings.



A note on photography and names

Most of the names given to refugee and asylum-seeking women throughout this report have been changed for the women's privacy and safety. This includes the names of some of our researchers.

Some of the photography and creative works within this report are by women from WRW's network, except where otherwise stated.

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Charity number: 1165320
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Executive Summary

The use of hotels as a form of asylum accommodation has increased significantly in recent years. Yet little attention has been paid to the specific experiences of women in hotels. This research, which has been designed and carried out by a team of women with personal experience of the UK's asylum and immigration system, is the first to focus on the treatment of asylum-seeking women in hotel accommodation.

The majority of women seeking asylum are survivors of gender-based violence, including rape, domestic violence, forced marriage and sexual exploitation. Yet rather than supporting women to recover from these previous abusive relationships and situations, and rebuild their lives, hotel accommodation perpetuates the patterns of control and domination they have experienced by subjecting them to a multiplicity of coercive and controlling practices.

As this research shows, women in hotels are:

- **Routinely monitored and surveilled**
through requirements to sign in and out every time they leave and return to the hotel, and intrusive questioning from staff.
- **Required to be in the hotel at specific times each day**
with some women having to adhere to evening curfews as early as 6pm, and many women also subject to morning 'roll calls'.
- **Not allowed to stay away from the hotel overnight**
or permitted to leave only on condition

that they give details of where they are going and with whom they are staying.

- **Isolated from social networks and sources of support**
through visitor bans, as well as the limited financial support they receive, which makes it all but impossible to leave the hotel.
- **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' or be non-compliant with the restrictions placed on them**
including through eviction from the hotel.

Living in hotel accommodation has a devastating impact on women's mental health. **Ninety-one per cent of women we surveyed said living in a hotel made them anxious or depressed**, and almost half of women, **46%**, said it made them suicidal.

But there is now a clear opportunity for change.

Since coming to power in July 2024, the Labour Government has promised to prioritise survivors of gender-based violence and make sure they receive the support they need. The new Government can ensure that asylum-seeking survivors are included in this promise by ending the use of hotels and providing safe and supportive accommodation for women seeking asylum, which allows them to begin reclaiming control of their lives.

Introduction:

The coercion and control of women seeking asylum in hotel accommodation

In recent years the hostility of the UK asylum system has intensified, through policies including the Rwanda scheme, large-scale accommodation sites, and the normalised use of 'contingency' accommodation such as hotels. While hotel accommodation for people seeking asylum has routinely been portrayed by politicians and the media as indulgent and luxurious, the reality, predictably, is very different. As previous research has highlighted, in hotels people are housed in cramped, unhygienic conditions, where there is little if any personal space. They have no choice but to eat unhealthy food that exacerbates and even causes physical health problems, and the long periods people spend in hotels also has a profound impact on their mental health^[1].

Alongside the poor living conditions in hotels, a key feature of this type of accommodation is its **restrictiveness**. The daily lives of people accommodated in hotels are controlled and regulated in a multiplicity of ways, through practices such as: having to sign in and out whenever they leave and return; evening curfews; not being allowed to stay anywhere other than the hotel, even if this is just overnight; and very low levels of financial support, currently just £8.86 per week, which makes leaving the hotel premises all but impossible^[2]. Such controls and restrictions have a negative effect on everyone subjected to them – both men and women. But for women, they can have a particular impact and resonance.

Over more than a decade, Women for Refugee Women's (WRW) research has found that the majority of women seeking asylum, between

65%-85%, are survivors of gender-based violence, including rape, domestic violence, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation^[3]. As the academic Victoria Canning has highlighted, the control and restrictions women are subject to while going through the asylum system can be seen to **replicate and extend the patterns of coercion and domination they have experienced in previous abusive relationships and situations**^[4].



This research uncovers how women are subjected to coercion and control in hotel accommodation, akin to patterns they have experienced in previous abusive relationships and situations.

This research report, which is the first to focus on women's experiences of hotel accommodation, uncovers how women in hotels are:

- routinely monitored and surveilled;
- required to be in the hotel at specific times, and only permitted to leave for limited periods;

- isolated from social networks and sources of support;
- subjected to humiliating, degrading and dehumanising behaviour by hotel staff; and
- punished if they are deemed to 'step out of line' or be non-compliant with the restrictions placed on them.

Such practices are strikingly reminiscent of the coercion and control inflicted by individual perpetrators of abuse.

Such practices by the Home Office and the private companies it contracts are **strikingly reminiscent of the coercion and control inflicted by individual perpetrators of abuse**^[5].

As such, rather than supporting women to recover from their previous experiences and take ownership of their lives, hotel accommodation deprives them of autonomy and agency and traps them in dependence.

But there is a clear opportunity for change. Since winning the General Election in July 2024, the Labour Government has committed to prioritising survivors of gender-based violence and ensuring they receive the support they need^[6]. Firm steps can be taken towards this, now, by ending the use of hotel accommodation – as the new Government has promised^[7] – and **ensuring that women seeking asylum are**

housed in safe and supportive accommodation, which allows them to begin reclaiming control of their lives.

The Government's ambition to tackle what it has termed the 'national emergency' of violence against women and halve this violence within a decade^[8] must include a focus on the Home Office and its behaviour towards women in the asylum system. Failing to do so will result in a two-tier approach, with asylum-seeking survivors of gender-based violence, most of whom are from racialised groups, treated as less deserving and so left behind.



Hopes for asylum accommodation created by women in WRW's Campaigns Forum

Women and the use of hotel accommodation

The use of hotels as a form of asylum accommodation has increased significantly over the past few years. This has happened primarily because of the growing backlog in asylum claims; as a result, people seeking asylum haven't been moving through the process and so more 'contingency' accommodation has been needed to house the growing number of people stuck in the asylum system. At the end of 2023 there were almost 46,000 people in hotel accommodation, though more recently numbers have noticeably dropped; at the end of June 2024, there were 29,585 people in hotels^[9]. Since coming to power the Labour Government has committed to ending the use of hotels, mainly through processing the backlog of asylum claims^[10].

Women make up a minority of those in the asylum system: in the year ending June 2024, 23% of adult main applicants were women^[11]. This is reflected in the number of women accommodated in hotels. As with many of the statistics the Home Office publishes, asylum support figures are not broken down by gender, meaning women are rendered invisible.

However, a Freedom of Information request we submitted shows that as of the beginning of June 2024, there were **8,029 women in hotels** - so they make up just over a quarter (27%) of those in hotel accommodation. The table below shows the top ten nationalities of women seeking asylum accommodated in hotels.

Because they are a minority in the asylum system, women's particular experiences are often overlooked. Since the use of hotels has increased, important research has been carried out into the experiences of people accommodated in hotels – but much of this has focused predominantly on the experiences of men. This is the first report to focus specifically on women's experiences of this type of accommodation.

Top ten nationalities of women seeking asylum accommodated in hotels, as of 6th June 2024:

Nationality	Number of women
Iran	1236
Eritrea	618
Afghanistan	586
Iraq	516
Pakistan	438
Albania	403
Colombia	269
Namibia	189
Syria	177
India	164

How we carried out our research

This research has been designed and carried out by a team of seven members of WRW's network, all of whom have personal experience of the asylum and immigration system. Three research team members have experience of being accommodated in a hotel. WRW's Policy and Research Manager provided support to the research team, including facilitating regular team meetings.

We used two main methods of data collection:

- An online survey on women's experiences of hotel accommodation, which was open from April-July 2024 and was completed by 62 women currently or recently accommodated in hotels; and
- Ten in-depth interviews with women currently or recently accommodated in hotels, carried out across July 2024. Nine of the women we interviewed were also survey participants; one was not.

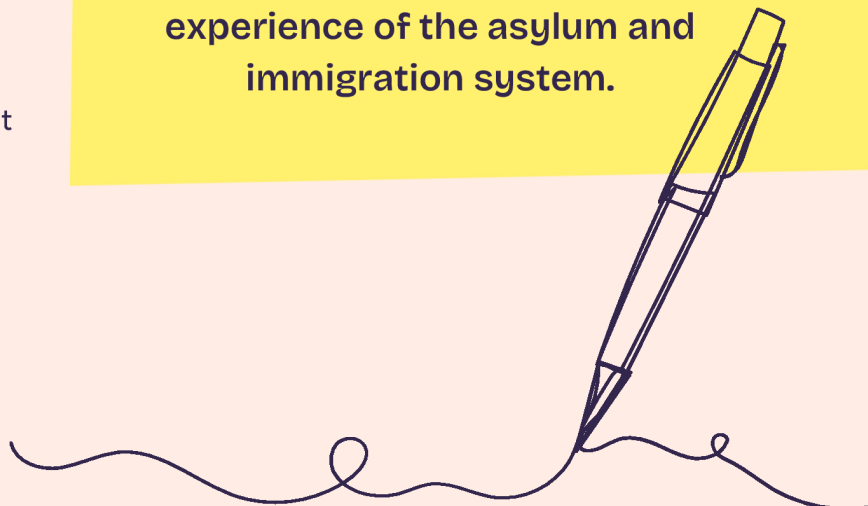
Alongside this, this report includes insights and reflections from our research team members with personal experience of hotel accommodation.

The online survey and in-depth interviews focused on women's experiences of and treatment in hotels. We didn't ask women about

the previous experiences which led to them seeking asylum in the UK. This is because WRW has already gathered significant and consistent evidence on this over the past decade. This shows that around 65%-85% of women seeking asylum have experienced gender-based violence, including rape, domestic violence, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation, in their countries of origin and on their journeys to the UK.

The women who participated in our research came from the following countries: Afghanistan, Botswana, Cameroon, Congo Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, India, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Namibia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Tunisia, Türkiye and Uganda.

This research has been designed and carried out by a team of seven women - all of whom have personal experience of the asylum and immigration system.



Coercive control

Women's treatment in hotel accommodation: A form of coercive control

Victoria Canning's research highlights the 'stark correlation' between the coercion and domination experienced by asylum-seeking women in abusive relationships and situations – abuse that is often the reason for them fleeing their country of origin – and the 'control, regulation and threat'^[12] they are then subject to while going through the UK asylum system.

In particular, Canning highlights how controlling and restrictive practices in the UK asylum system mirror the tactics and techniques of 'coercive control', a non-physical form of domestic violence which has received increasing attention over the past decade. Coercive control within the context of an intimate or family relationship was criminalised in the UK in 2015^[13].

The national charity Women's Aid, which works to end domestic violence, defines coercive control in the following way:

'Controlling behaviour which is designed to make a person dependent by isolating them from support, exploiting them, depriving them of independence and regulating their everyday behaviour. It creates invisible chains and a sense of fear that pervades all elements of a victim's life. It works to limit their human rights by depriving them of their liberty and reducing their ability for action.'

As Women's Aid explains, some common examples of coercive behaviour are:

- Isolating the victim from friends and family;

- Depriving her of basic needs, such as food;
- Monitoring her time;
- Taking control over aspects of her everyday life, such as where she can go, who she can see, what she can wear and when she can sleep;
- Depriving her of access to support services, such as medical services;
- Repeatedly putting her down, such as saying she is worthless;
- Humiliating, degrading or dehumanising her;
- Controlling her finances; and
- Making threats or intimidating her^[14].

While coercive control has normally been identified as a form of abuse inflicted by an individual perpetrator, within a personal or intimate relationship, there are striking parallels between some of the common examples of coercive behaviour listed above and the practices that asylum-seeking women are subject to in hotel accommodation. The women who participated in our research described the myriad ways they are **monitored, controlled, degraded and threatened while living in hotels, through formal policies implemented by the Home Office and the private companies it contracts, as well as more insidious practices that appear to be initiated by hotel staff.**

This research report shines a light on these policies and practices, revealing the intense level of coercion and control women experience in hotel accommodation, which permeates and infiltrates their daily routines – from when they wake up in the morning to when they go to bed at night. As one woman explained to us:

"We are living in fear."



1) Women are routinely monitored and surveilled

A central element of coercive behaviour is regulating and taking control of the victim's everyday life, including where she can go and who she can see. Such behaviour is apparent in the treatment of asylum-seeking women in hotel accommodation, as the women who participated in our research explained how their daily movements are monitored and surveilled, and they are asked to account for where they are going or have been, and with whom they are associating.

A common policy in hotel accommodation is requiring those who are living there to sign in and out when they leave and return to the hotel.

In our survey:

- **Nearly two thirds of women, 63% (35 of 56 respondents^[15]), said they had to sign in and out every time they left and returned to their hotel**
- 7% of women (4 of 56 respondents) said they had to sign in and out, but not every time they left and returned to their hotel
- Under a third of women, just 30% (17 of 56 respondents), said they were not required to sign in and out.

One woman we interviewed described how she has to sign out every time she leaves her hotel, even if she is just going out briefly to the nearby shop. As she explained,

"You have to sign out, you have to notify them that you have gone out. For every single movement."

Another interviewee explained how the routine monitoring of women manifested not just through the requirement to sign in and out, but through the deployment of significant numbers of security staff in the hotel. She said: *"When you want to go out you have to sign out, when you come in you have to sign in. You have to leave your key. And there are so many security in the hotel – it's scary. They are moving up and down, up and down your corridors ... When I arrived, I felt that this was not my place. You can't go out just like that; there are so many restrictions."*

In some hotels, formal policies such as the requirement to sign in and out spill over into more insidious behaviour by hotel staff, as women are asked intrusive questions about where they are going or where they have been. One interviewee told us: *"When you go outside, in the reception they are warning you 'Where are you going out?', asking you many questions. Maybe like finally you go to church and stay there for hours – but then when you reach that hotel reception, they start asking you questions."*

As explained in more detail below, visitors are often not permitted in hotels – although policies across hotels appear to vary and in some they are. But even where visitors are allowed, this apparently less restrictive approach can be accompanied by monitoring and surveillance. One of our research team, who has personal experience of living in a hotel, recounted how if someone came to visit her she would be asked by hotel staff who the visitor was and why they were visiting her. She refused to give this information, but worried about the potential consequences of this and whether her refusal to comply might result in negative repercussions.

2) Women are required to be in the hotel at specific times, and are only permitted to leave for limited periods

Taking control of women's everyday lives and regulating their daily movements is also apparent in other policies and practices routinely deployed in hotels. A key example is **evening curfews**. In our survey, **just over half of women, 51% (29 of 57 respondents), said they were subject to an evening curfew and had to return to the hotel each evening by a fixed time.**

The times of the curfews imposed varied:

- Most survey respondents who gave the time of their curfew said they had to be back in their hotel by **10pm each evening**
- A few respondents had curfews earlier than this, with some explaining they had to back by **8pm or 9pm**
- Two survey respondents had the **very early curfew of 6pm**
- The latest curfew given by any survey respondent was midnight.

One woman we interviewed succinctly highlighted the effect of such curfews: *"You have a specific time to be in the hotel. You can't just go anywhere, anytime."*

Non-compliance with controlling behaviour is met with humiliation and punishment.

Another interviewee drew attention to how evening curfews and policies similar to this infantilise women, as she explained: *"There were rules, like school dormitory rules, like you cannot enter after 8 o'clock or you cannot go to sleep anywhere else... That's why, of course, sometimes you are not feeling like freedom."*

All the members of our research team who have personal experience of hotel accommodation have been subject to evening curfews. One research team member recalled the panic she felt about getting back in time for the curfew, and the anxiety that, for example, delays on public transport would cause her: she worried that hotel staff wouldn't accept this as a legitimate reason for returning 'late'. She described the curfew as a constant threat hanging over her.

The experience of another research team member demonstrates that such feelings of panic and threat are justified. On one occasion, she returned to the hotel just ten minutes after the curfew, and found she had been locked out. She had to knock on a window to request that staff let her in, which she found highly embarrassing. She remembered wondering to herself: *"How did I get into this situation?"*

As Canning notes, 'a culture of threat and compliance [and] the potential for repercussions ... all are reflective of definitions of domestic violence'^[16]. The treatment of our research team member, then, as she was locked out by the hotel for being 'late', and forced to ask to be let in, can be seen as mirroring the dynamics of a coercive and abusive relationship, where non-

compliance with controlling behaviour is met with humiliation and punishment.

In addition to evening curfews, some hotels also require those living there **to confirm their presence in the hotel every morning – effectively a form of morning ‘roll call’**. In our survey, **52% of women (30 of 58 respondents) said they were required to do this.**

Most respondents who gave the time by which they had to confirm their presence each morning said it was by ‘breakfast time’. Some respondents gave specific times, typically 8am or 9am.

As one of our research team members who was required to do this explained, having to confirm your presence each morning can have a very disruptive effect. Women who have previous experience of trauma and violence can suffer from sleep problems and are often not able to stick to ‘normal’ sleep patterns; this can mean they are not able to fall asleep until very late. Having to make sure they are awake by 8am or 9am to confirm their presence, therefore, interrupts and curtails the sleep they are able to get.

Requiring women to be awake and confirm their presence in the hotel by a certain time each morning also has a disturbing resonance with a specific example of coercive behaviour given by Women’s Aid, where the perpetrator’s level of control extends into regulating when the victim can sleep.

“I feel like we are being kept in a place that is restricted... more like a prison.”

The women who participated in our research told us that their everyday movements were controlled in one further way, as they were not allowed to spend the night away from their hotel – or, if they were permitted to do this, they were required to provide the hotel with details of where they were going.

In our survey:

- **Over a third of women, 37% (21 of 57 respondents), said they were not allowed to spend the night away from their hotel**
- **Just over half of women, 51% (29 of 57 respondents), said they were allowed to spend the night away from their hotel, but only if they gave details of where they were going**
- **Only 12% of women (7 of 57 respondents) said they were allowed to spend the night away from their hotel without having to give details of where they were going.**

The interviews we carried out revealed that, where women were allowed to leave overnight, there appeared to be different rules across hotels as to how long exactly they could spend away. One interviewee, for example, explained that she was permitted to be away for a maximum of 24 hours, whereas another said she was required to return within four days. There was a common consequence for not returning within the period of time specified by the hotel, however: eviction.

As one woman explained:

“They give you a piece of paper. You have to sign, that if I go out for more than 24 hours, I'm going to be thrown out ... They give you some rules that you have to read and you have no option. If you don't sign, you can't get inside. So you have to adhere with the rules no matter what. It doesn't matter.”

Similarly, another interviewee noted:

“When you are going out for more than four days, you have to give the address where you are going, the name of the person where you are going, and that's the only time you can go. If you don't come back after four days they might kick you out of the hotel, or give you certain warnings ... I feel like we are being kept in a place that is restricted for doing something bad or wrong, more like a prison. It's not good and I don't really feel ok with it.”

Similar to locking women out for arriving back after the evening curfew, threatening them with eviction if they do not return to the hotel within a specified period of time replicates the dynamics of an abusive relationship, as fear and intimidation are deployed to coerce and control women's behaviour.

On one occasion when one of our research team members was asked to provide the name and

telephone number of the person she was going to stay with, and explain her relationship with them, she asked why she was required to give this information. The hotel staff member justified it in humanitarian terms, responding that if something happened and she did not return to the hotel within the specified time period, then the hotel would be able to follow up. When our research team member refused to give the information, however, she was told by the hotel staff member that such a refusal was a breach of the occupancy contract she had signed when she first came to the hotel. Very quickly, therefore, the altruistic reasoning initially used to justify this policy disappeared, and its purpose as a mechanism of coercion and control clearly surfaced.

3) Women are isolated from social networks and sources of support

Another core aspect of coercive behaviour is isolating the victim from social networks and sources of support, such as friends and family. For women in hotel accommodation, such isolation is effected through a combination of restrictive policies, which make it very difficult for them to maintain existing personal relationships and also prevent them from forging new ones.

In the first instance, as mentioned earlier, **visitors are often not permitted in hotels.**

In our survey:

- **Nearly three-fifths of women, 57% (33 of 58 respondents), said they were not allowed visitors in their hotel at all**
- Just over a third of women, 36%, (21 of 58 respondents) said they were only allowed visitors during the day.

Only three women said they were allowed visitors overnight, and one woman said she was allowed visitors both during the day and overnight.

"I remember when I was really sick, I needed someone to sleep next to me. But it wasn't allowed. I had had an operation... I was in much pain... I even felt like I was dying."

One interviewee explained the effect of not being allowed to have visitors in her hotel: *"Sometimes you need a friend to talk to. Not because they are going to help you with anything, but just someone to talk to in privacy ... But you can't bring them in the hotel. So you have to sit somewhere public, but you can't express your emotions."*

The same interviewee also described how, following surgery, she wanted to ask a friend to stay overnight with her, to look after her and make sure she was alright – but she was not permitted to. As she said: *"I remember when I was really sick, I needed someone to sleep next to me. But it wasn't allowed. I had had an operation; I really needed someone to sleep next to me ... I was in much pain, I had fever in the night, at some point I even felt like I was dying. But they wouldn't let you sleep with anyone next to you, because they weren't allowing any friends."*

Even in hotels where visitors are, in theory, permitted, the setup of these hotels can often mean that in practice it is very difficult for this to happen. One of our research team members explained that in the hotel she was in, visitors were allowed during the day. However, as she shared a room with another woman, and as there was a lack of private space elsewhere in the hotel, she rarely invited people to visit her. The lack of privacy in hotels, and the effect of this on personal relationships, emerged clearly from our survey:

- **More than half of women, 56% (32 of 57 respondents), said they had to share a room, with 86% of women (25 of 29 respondents) who shared a room saying this made it difficult for them to have private conversations or phone calls.**

Not only are women in hotel accommodation banned or prevented in other ways from having visitors to come and see them – the very low level of financial support they receive makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for them to leave the hotel and engage in social activities. Until recently people in hotel accommodation received just £9.58 per week – but in January 2024 this was cut even further, to £8.86. The isolating effects of this are clearly demonstrated by responses to our survey:

- **Over three quarters of women, 78% (45 of 58 respondents), said they were unable to afford public transport as a result of the limited financial support they receive**
- **Around two-fifths of women, 41% (24 of 58 respondents), said they were unable to leave the hotel because they didn't have enough money to do so.**

One woman we interviewed told us how, following the refusal of her initial asylum claim, she was required to report to the Home Office, at a police station, every fortnight. Travelling to her reporting appointment used up a significant proportion of her financial support, meaning she had little money left over to spend on anything else: *"I was going every two weeks to sign. It was so difficult for me, because they just gave me the £8 per week. I used two buses to go to the police station, £4 to go and £4 to return."*

Another interviewee explained that the remote location of her hotel exacerbated the barriers imposed by the low level of financial support, resulting in her being unable to leave: *"The hotel was so far away from the town there was no way you could go anywhere. And it's not like there was bus access anyway. It was the kind of place that you would have to drive out to. And so you couldn't leave, unless you were being moved out of there."*

The limited financial support women receive also makes it difficult to maintain relationships via phone and online. In our survey, **nearly three quarters of women, 72% (42 of 58 respondents), said the low level of financial**



support meant they had been unable to afford phone credit or data for internet access. While Wi-Fi is supposed to be available in hotels, access to this can be patchy and unreliable.

The amount of money provided to people in hotels is justified primarily on the basis that they are in catered accommodation, so do not have to buy food – but from the £8.86 they receive weekly, women are nonetheless expected to afford public transport, clothing and footwear, and non-prescription medication^[17]. Yet, as we have highlighted, in our survey **78% of women said they couldn't afford public transport – and an even higher proportion, 83% (48 of 58 respondents), said they were unable to afford clothing.**

Moreover, although hotels are supposed to provide toiletries and sanitary products, some interviewees said this did not happen in their hotel – and in our survey **more than a quarter of women, 28% (16 of 58 respondents), said they were unable to afford sanitary products because of the low financial support.** Additionally, **nearly a fifth of women, 17% (10 of 58 respondents), said they had been unable to afford items for their children^[18].**

Arguably, then, there is a strong resemblance between the limited financial support provided to women in hotels and the impact of this, and what is often termed 'economic abuse': a form of coercive behaviour where the victim's income and access to daily essentials such as food and clothing are tightly controlled^[19]. In a similar way, women in hotel accommodation are allotted a very small amount of money each week, restricting their ability to afford essential items such as clothing, sanitary products and items for their children – if not depriving them completely.

4) Women are subjected to humiliating, degrading and dehumanising behaviour by hotel staff

A further key element of coercive behaviour is humiliating, degrading or dehumanising the victim. The women we interviewed told us about a range of incidents they were subjected to by hotel staff, where they were treated in a demeaning and debasing way. The behaviour women described often appeared to be initiated by staff members themselves, rather than being sanctioned by official policies. Yet such conduct by staff nonetheless directly stems from the formal policies and practices implemented by the Home Office and the private companies it contracts, which we have documented throughout this report, as these create an environment in which controlling, surveilling and threatening women is deemed acceptable and legitimate.

A common theme among interviewees was hotel staff entering their rooms without being given permission to do so. Some women said staff entered their rooms after knocking, but before waiting for a response to say they could come in – replicating the practice of ‘knock and walks’ which WRW has documented in our research on immigration detention^[20] – while one woman told us staff would enter without knocking at all:

“Whenever they want to come into our rooms, they will just come in ... They don’t even knock. I experienced it every day.”

As interviewees explained, such intrusive practices can result in hotel staff – including male staff members – seeing women in vulnerable situations, and engaging in behaviour that verges on voyeurism. One woman recounted how, *“sometimes you are in bed sleeping, and one staff knocks on the door, and 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 in.”*

Another interviewee described very similar behaviour by staff in the hotel she was in:

“They come and check your room all the time. Sometimes you are sleeping, and somebody comes and knocks at your door. Maybe it’s hot in the room, and before you wake up to open, they already have the keys. So you are there in the room, you are not dressed, and when you are walking up to put on your robe so that you can go and open up, you meet with a man. And you are naked, you know, and then the man is just like ‘Oh sorry, sorry, sorry.’”

One woman we interviewed described how she had experienced an incident where two men who were also accommodated in the hotel she was living in were trying to enter her room, by repeatedly turning the doorknob. She reported this to the hotel staff and Migrant Help, but they dismissed her report, suggesting that she was imagining it and attributing her concerns to mental health problems. Following this incident, she explained how *“one of the hotel staff tried to come into my room without knocking, using their key. And that was where I lost it. Because if you’re coming from an abusive background, you’re already angry.”* Instead of

trying to understand why she was so distressed, however, the hotel staff responded by threatening to call the police to arrest her.

Sometimes staff behaviour goes beyond intrusions and voyeurism: one woman, Mercy, whose story is told in more detail later on, explained how she was subjected to daily sexual harassment by the manager of the hotel she was accommodated in.

The hotel manager would knock on her door every day, asking her to go out with him and saying things like *"You're looking for men outside, but we're here."* She later found out he was sexually harassing other women in the hotel too. She explained that she felt there was no point reporting his behaviour to Migrant Help or the Home Office, as she did not think they would believe her, or do anything about it.

Women who participated in our research described other types of behaviour they experienced from hotel staff that were demeaning and degrading. One interviewee recalled how a staff member became verbally aggressive towards her over a supposedly lost towel: *"He started asking: 'Where is this towel? Where is this towel?' I just said, 'What towel?' Maybe we forgot that we put another towel over there. And he just started shouting, shouting, shouting, to find the one towel."*

The same interviewee also explained that following the refusal of her asylum claim, she spoke with her immigration solicitor about lodging an appeal. Some time later, she was informed by hotel staff that a letter had arrived for her, from the Home Office, that stated she was soon going to be moved from the hotel to accommodation in London. However, hotel staff did not give her the letter to read and keep for herself; instead, it was kept at the hotel reception. A few days later, she asked to see the letter herself; hotel staff allowed her to take a picture of it, but they would not give it to her to keep. She sent the letter to a charity that was assisting to her, who explained that the letter

One woman was subjected to daily sexual harassment by the manager of the hotel she was accommodated in.

was actually indicating that no appeal had been lodged in her case and she was facing removal from the UK. Fortunately, the charity was able to assist her with ensuring that her appeal was submitted.

Another woman, who has a significant visual impairment and spent nearly a year and a half in hotel accommodation, explained how despite being aware of her disability, staff did not provide any assistance to help her navigate life in the hotel. Sometimes she was able to rely on her daughter, who was also living in the hotel – but when her daughter was not present, she had to stay in her room, which at times resulted in her being unable to eat. She described how worthless this treatment made her feel:

"If my daughter was not around, if she was at college, I couldn't go downstairs to collect food. The hotel didn't make arrangements to help me, so I was just in my room, because if I go down I have to use the lift and you have to press the numbers, which I can't ... You feel less human. At times I felt like I was just disappearing from the universe. I wanted to do plenty of things, but because of my sight, no one is there to help."

One woman we interviewed, Madiha, was in hotel accommodation for over a year with her husband and young son. She described how she had to plead with hotel staff to provide nappies for her son, since she could not afford these from the weekly financial support she received; she also asked staff for clean bedsheets while her son was being potty trained – but they refused to provide these. Her story is overleaf.

MADIHA'S STORY

When we came to the hotel I was using nappies for my son. I asked the hotel staff to buy nappies because I know from other hotels, from my friends, everyone said to me they are supposed to provide the nappies for the kids. When I asked them to provide for me, they said firstly, they don't know how to do it, they don't know where to buy it, or something like this. They even said they were not sure that they're supposed to do it, you know?

After that I told them, you know, you are supposed to. Then after some time, they understand the issue. They went and were buying the nappies – but they were only giving me like three, four or five nappies each time. Not the whole box. Every time I was feeling bad, and shame, to go downstairs to the hotel reception and ask “Can I have more nappies, can I have 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 the 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 the extra bedsheets they never gave them to me. So I just washed all of them by hand. And then I made them dry, using the air conditioning, and after that I put them on the bed again.

I feel bad in the hotel, of course. It was really hard to refresh your hope each day. Every morning you wake up with hope: yes, today something might change. Today I might shift into another, nice place or something like this. 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. We were always thinking about, what can we do, more? But of course, while you are trying your level best, there's nothing you can really do from your side. I was just hoping that one day, it will pass.

Madiha and her family now have refugee status.

“EVERY MORNING YOU WAKE UP WITH HOPE... BUT BY THE END OF THE DAY, THERE'S NOTHING; THAT FEELING IS REALLY TERRIBLE.”



5) Women are punished if they are deemed to 'step out of line' or be non-compliant with the restrictions placed on them

As we have documented throughout this report, warnings about what will happen if they do not adhere to the restrictions placed on them are a constant, lurking presence in the daily lives of women in hotel accommodation: from threats about the consequences of returning after their curfew, to what will happen if they leave the hotel for more nights than they are allowed. As we have also highlighted, the use of such warnings and threats to induce women's compliance is disturbingly reminiscent of abusive personal relationships, where the perpetrator deploys fear and intimidation to coerce and control the victim.

Also mirroring the dynamics of abusive personal relationships, when women are deemed to 'step

out of line' with the rules of hotel accommodation, the warnings and threats they have previously received are often converted into harsh repercussions, as they are punished for their perceived non-compliance. The experience of one woman we interviewed, Mercy – who we mentioned briefly in the section above – illustrates this in a particularly stark fashion. After claiming asylum Mercy was accommodated in a hotel, where she was subjected to daily sexual harassment by the hotel manager. When she became unwell, she was given permission to leave the hotel for a period of time, to stay with a family member while she recovered from her illness. However, when she returned to the hotel she found that she had been evicted without any warning, and all her belongings had been disposed of. Her story is overleaf.



Realities of asylum accommodation created by women in WRW's Campaigns Forum

MERCY'S STORY

Very soon after I came to the hotel, the manager started with his harassment of me. His room was next to mine, and 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."*

Other 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. I didn't report what he was doing to Migrant Help or the Home Office, because to be honest, they wouldn't believe me or do anything. I just thought, what's the point? Later I found out he had been doing the same things to other women in the hotel.

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? I didn't want to stay in the hotel alone. 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. The manager who had been harassing me had been sacked, and there was a new manager in charge. All my belongings had been given to a charity shop; my letters and paperwork about my asylum case had been thrown away. No one from the hotel or the Home Office contacted me while I was ill, to tell me they were going to do this. They also stopped the small amount of money I was getting, so I had nothing: no money, no belongings, and nowhere to live.

"ALL MY BELONGINGS HAD BEEN GIVEN TO A CHARITY SHOP; MY LETTERS AND PAPERWORK ABOUT MY ASYLUM CASE HAD BEEN THROWN AWAY."

I called Migrant Help to find out why this had happened and to try to stop it. They told me I needed a solicitor to appeal the eviction. But at that time I didn't have a solicitor, or anyone who could help me with it. There was nothing I could do.

Since they threw me out of the hotel, I have been staying with friends – one night here, another night there. I have to move around a lot, which is tiring. I still don't get any money to help me survive, so I have to get what I can from charities and food banks. It's been over a year now, and my mental health has really suffered. Living like this is hard.

Mercy now has an immigration solicitor, and is being assisted by her solicitor and WRW to make a fresh asylum support application.



Living under coercion and control

The impact on women

Living in the controlling and restrictive environment of hotel accommodation has a profound impact on women's mental health. As one woman we interviewed explained: *"I was already having mental problems, so I just feel like I wasn't helped. Whenever you're going through something and you can't get any help, you get more damaged."*

Madiha, whose story was told earlier, described how the anxiety and stress of living in a hotel built to such an extent that one day, she physically collapsed:

"In the hotel I got depression, anxiety ... I was really feeling stressed. Once a day I took my son to the park; one day I felt really bad again. And then after that I don't remember; I fainted in front of the hotel. They called the ambulance, they check my heart or blood or something like this. And they just say that it happened because of stress."

In our survey we asked women about the effects of living in hotel accommodation on their mental health. The responses were striking:

- **75% of women (42 of 56 respondents), said it made them feel hopeless**
 - **Almost half of women, 46% (26 of 56 respondents), said it made them feel suicidal**
- We also asked women whether living in hotel accommodation affected how they perceived or viewed themselves – that is, about its impact on their sense of self. Worryingly:
- **Nearly three quarters of women, 73% (40 of 55 respondents) said living in a hotel negatively affected their self-esteem**
 - **Two thirds, 67% (37 of 55 respondents), said it made them feel like less of a human being.**
- **91% of women (51 of 56 respondents) said living in a hotel made them anxious or depressed**
 - **79% of women (44 of 56 respondents) said it affected their ability to sleep**

Women and hotel accommodation: Time for change

As it enmeshes women in layers of controlling, restrictive and threatening practices, hotel accommodation perpetuates the patterns of coercion and domination that women seeking asylum thought they had escaped.

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 retraumatised.

But there is now a clear opportunity for change.

The Labour Government has promised to prioritise survivors of gender-based violence and ensure they receive the support they need, which we very much welcome. It is essential that the Government includes asylum-seeking survivors within this promise – otherwise a two-tier approach will develop, with women seeking asylum, who are predominantly from racialised groups, treated as less deserving and left behind.

To address the harms of hotel accommodation and ensure that asylum-seeking women receive the support they need, we recommend the following changes:

1) End the use of hotels

2) Take immediate action to mitigate the harms of hotel accommodation

3) Provide safe and supportive accommodation for women seeking asylum, where they can recover and rebuild their lives

1) End the use of hotels

We welcome the Government's commitment to end the use of hotel accommodation through processing the asylum backlog, and urge them to do this as quickly as possible.

To achieve this, the Home Office should:

- Introduce presumptive grants of asylum for women from very high grant rate countries, including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Sudan and Syria, to immediately reduce reliance on hotel accommodation
- Significantly increase numbers of Home Office caseworkers and ensure that all asylum decisions are made within six months, to ensure the eventual elimination of hotel accommodation.

2) Take immediate action

to mitigate the harms of hotel accommodation.

While women remain in hotels, the Home Office must take urgent action to address and mitigate the serious harms of this type of accommodation, including by:

- Increasing the level of financial support provided to people in hotels
- Ensuring that coercive and restrictive practices such as signing in and out, evening curfews, morning 'roll calls', and visitor bans are not being implemented by the private companies it contracts
- Ending the practice of room sharing, to allow people in hotels some degree of personal space and privacy
- Tackling and preventing humiliating and dehumanising behaviour by hotel staff

3) Provide safe and supportive accommodation

for women seeking asylum, where they can recover and rebuild their lives.

While hotels are a particularly harmful form of accommodation, all too often other types of accommodation within the asylum system are damaging, degrading and unsafe.

Every woman deserves a safe place to call home, and women seeking asylum are no exception to this.

Wholesale change is needed, so that asylum-seeking women are provided with safe, supportive and healing accommodation, where they can start rebuilding their lives on their own terms.



References

- [1] See, for instance, Helen Bamber Foundation and Asylum Aid (2024) [Suffering and squalor: The impact on mental health of living in hotel asylum accommodation](#); Migrant Voice (2023) [No rest, no security: Report into the experiences of asylum seekers in hotels](#); Refugee Council (2021) [I sat watching life go by my window for so long: The experiences of people seeking asylum living in hotel accommodation](#)
- [2] Refugee Action (2023), [Hostile accommodation: How the asylum housing system is cruel by design](#).
- [3] Women for Refugee Women (2012) [Refused: The experiences of women denied asylum in the UK](#); (2014) [Detained: Women asylum seekers locked up in the UK](#); (2015) [I am human: Refugee women's experiences of detention in the UK](#); (2017) [We are still here: The continued detention of women seeking asylum in Yarl's Wood](#); (2020) [Will I ever be safe? Asylum-seeking women made destitute in the UK](#). All available [here](#)
- [4] Canning, V. (2020) [Corrosive control: State-corporate and gendered harm in bordered Britain](#). *Critical Criminology*, 28(2), pp.259-275
- [5] See Canning p.260
- [6] Violence against Women and Girls, [Volume 752: debated on Monday 29 July 2024](#) (Hansard)
- [7] Asylum: Hotels, [Question for Home Office](#), UIN 538, tabled on 17 July 2024
- [8] Violence against Women and Girls, [Volume 752: debated on Monday 29 July 2024](#) (Hansard)
- [9] Home Office (2024) [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending June 2024](#)
- [10] Asylum: Hotels, [Question for Home Office](#), UIN 538, tabled on 17 July 2024
- [11] In the year ending June 2024, 16,060 adult main applicants were women, of a total of 70,877 adult asylum applications - see Home Office (2024) [How many people do we grant protection to?](#) Women may also be in the asylum system as the dependant of a main applicant's claim.
- [12] Canning p.266
- [13] The Code for Crown Prosecutors, [Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship](#), updated: 24 April 2023
- [14] Women's Aid, [What is coercive control?](#)
- [15] All survey questions were optional, so the total number of respondents to the survey, 62, did not always answer every question
- [16] Canning p.272
- [17] Home Office, [Report on review of weekly allowances paid to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers: 2023](#), Updated 24 May 2024

[18] Women who are pregnant or have small children can access additional financial support, but the extra weekly payments available are very small: £5.25 for pregnant women; £9.50 for babies under 1; £5.25 for children aged 1 and 2; and £5.25 for children aged 3

[19] Surviving Economic Abuse, [What is Economic Abuse?](#)

[20] See Women for Refugee Women (2014) Detained and (2015) I am human.

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