

Risk has no country: The importance of identifying and supporting survivors of trafficking exploited outside of the UK

April 2026

Introduction

Globally, all countries are affected by human trafficking, whether as source, transit or destination countries. Many European states, including the UK, are simultaneously source, transit and destination countries for human trafficking and modern slavery.

In the UK, many survivors¹ of human trafficking and modern slavery who are non-British nationals have endured extensive exploitation not *within* the UK, but also/instead in their countries of origin, such as China, Vietnam and Albania, and during their journey *to* the UK. On these journeys, frequently involving multiple transit countries such as Libya and Turkey, they can experience repeated abuse, coercion, and severe violations of their human rights. Understanding these experiences is critical to designing effective support systems and protection policies within the UK.

The government has been reviewing the National Referral Mechanism ('NRM' - the system for both identifying and supporting potential victims of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK) and has stated that the NRM needs to change because it is being misused, with "vexatious, last minute challenges"² made by individuals trying to prevent their removal from the UK. It has been argued that trafficking and modern slavery protections were not "designed for" survivors who were exploited "years and years ago in their home country".³ A recent consultation on the identification of victims of modern

¹ The terms 'victim' and 'survivor' are both used in relation to modern slavery and human trafficking. 'Survivor' is often preferred in certain contexts and by individuals themselves as it better reflects the dignity and agency and of each individual, rather than 'victim' which can perpetuate negative stereotypes and a sense of powerlessness. Within this report, the term 'survivor' is generally used to reflect this but where law or policy refers to 'victim' we use the same language for clarity.

² The Guardian, "[Mahmood vows to change modern slavery laws after bid to deport Eritrean man thwarted](#)". 23 September 2025. This was in response to the High Court ruling on the case of an Eritrean national whose claims of trafficking abroad required further exploration, preventing his removal under the 'One in, one out' scheme "[UK deportation of Eritrean man to France under 'one-in, one-out' halted by judge](#)" *The Guardian* 16 September 2025

³ "[How migrants stall deportation by claiming they were slaves abroad](#)" *The Sunday Times* 02 November 2025

slavery proposed separate systems of identification and support for those exploited abroad to those exploited within the UK.⁴

This briefing looks at the problems faced by survivors of trafficking who have been exploited outside the UK; the benefits to them of accessing identification and support through the NRM; and the potentially harmful impact that separating their treatment from that of other survivors could have. The horror of Libya as an unregulated and unpoliced market for trafficking and modern slavery has been well documented, as have the drivers of trafficking and slavery such as state corruption and organised crime in countries such as Albania, Vietnam and the Philippines. However, understanding of the experiences of survivors before they reach the UK is limited. Alongside HBF client's stories, survivors supported by HBF (Hana, Kaleb and Rea)⁵ have shared their perspectives and their words are included throughout this briefing.

All survivors of trafficking and modern slavery, no matter their country of origin, should have access to the same NRM. Establishing different systems for survivors risks establishing different quality of support and care. There are also many crossovers in the needs of survivors exploited overseas and within the UK. In HBF's experience, if vulnerabilities stemming from exploitation, regardless of where it occurred, are not properly addressed they can even lead to re-exploitation or re-trafficking. Where mental health has been harmed, if left untreated survivors are also particularly susceptible to other forms of human rights abuses, such as domestic violence. Division between these groups is arbitrary and unhelpful and risks undermining the central aims of the NRM to properly recognise, protect and support survivors.

About the Helen Bamber Foundation

The Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) is a specialist clinical and human rights charity that works with survivors of trafficking, torture and other forms of extreme human cruelty and believes that all survivors should have safety, freedom and power. Our multidisciplinary and clinical team provides a bespoke Model of Integrated Care for survivors which includes medico-legal documentation of physical and psychological injuries; specialist programmes of therapeutic care; a medical advisory service; a counter-trafficking programme; housing and welfare advice; legal protection advice; and community integration activities and services.

⁴ [Call for Evidence – Identification of Victims of Modern Slavery, Statement 16 July 2025](#), question 13e

⁵ The names of each of these survivors have been changed to preserve anonymity.

What is human trafficking?

The essence of human trafficking is that the victim is coerced or deceived into a situation where they are exploited. Human trafficking is defined in the UN Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime Protocol on Trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means such as threat, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, or deception, for the purpose of exploitation.⁶ Exploitation is not defined but includes sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, and organ removal. Exploitation or coercion may occur at any point and need not be present at all points. For example, an individual may travel voluntarily for employment, only to find themselves later subject to coercion or exploitation.

Human trafficking consists of three basic components:

1. Act – What is done (e.g. the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons).
2. Means – How it is done (e.g. by threat, use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power).
3. Purpose – Why it is done (e.g. for exploitation for labour, sex, or organs).

All three components must be present in an adult trafficking case; for child trafficking the ‘means’ component is not required. Trafficking can be historical and may have happened outside the UK. Common forms of human trafficking include trafficking for: sexual exploitation; forced labour; removal of organs; domestic servitude; and forced criminality.⁷

Modern slavery encompasses human trafficking and slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour.⁸ Some people may not be victims of human trafficking⁹ but will be victims of modern slavery if they have been subject to slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour. The term “modern slavery” has been widely viewed as unclear, unhelpful, or misleading, particularly when compared to more specific, legally grounded terms such as human trafficking or defined forms of exploitation.¹⁰

Factors that can leave individuals more vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking include economic hardship (such as poverty, unemployment, or debt); unstable or abusive

⁶ [UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime | OHCHR](#), November 2000

⁷ This is by no means an exhaustive list. For a global analysis of trafficking trends see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, [2024: Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#), December 2024.

⁸ In England and Wales, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 (MSA 2015) introduced the now-prevalent term “modern slavery”, terminology not adopted in statute in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

⁹ Because, for example, the “act” part of the definition above is not present (there has not been transferring, harbouring, receipt etc.)

¹⁰ [More than words: how definitions impact on the UK’s response to child trafficking and exploitation](#)

home environments; homelessness; lack of education and lack of employment opportunities. Children and teenagers - especially those in care or experiencing family rejection - are at higher risk, as are migrants, refugees, and others who face language barriers, discrimination, or limited legal protections. Trauma, low self-esteem, mental health challenges, and substance dependency can also increase susceptibility, particularly when traffickers exploit emotional needs through false job offers, romantic relationships, or promises of safety and belonging. Additionally, natural disasters, conflict, and/or human rights abuses can heighten vulnerability by driving displacement and forcing people to leave their countries.

Human trafficking is often confused with people smuggling, defined by the UN as *“the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident”*.¹¹ People who need to cross international borders but are unable to secure the paperwork to do so legally may resort to moving irregularly, by crossing borders at unofficial locations, using false documents or entering with a different type of visa. In some cases, this may mean using the services of people smugglers.

Smuggling can be solely an illegal transport option used voluntarily by migrants to get to their destination across an international border, and where, once arrived, the relationship between both parties usually ends. However, in some cases trafficking victims may believe that they are being smuggled but then end up in a potentially exploitative situation - for example, in cases where someone who has been smuggled is then forced to work to pay off their ‘debts’. Travel through smuggling is often chosen out of desperation and a feeling of urgency, including by those fleeing poverty, persecution or severe human rights abuse. Under the UN Refugee Convention, people seeking asylum should not be penalised for how they have fled and how they have reached their destination country¹² though it does not prevent the State from punishing the person smuggling an individual.

¹¹ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OCHR), [Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime | OHCHR](#), 2000

¹² Provided they've presented themselves without delay to the authorities and shown good cause for their method of entry, Article 31, UN [Refugee Convention](#) 1951

Amanuel's story¹³

Amanuel is an Eritrean national and fled to Ethiopia when he was 20 years old to avoid forced conscription. Amanuel remained in Ethiopia for many years until an incident which involved several members of his family being killed and kidnapped.

Amanuel made arrangements, through an agent, to leave Ethiopia and travel to Sudan. When he arrived in Sudan, a second agent locked him in a house and he was unable to leave. He was made to cook for all the agents that were staying in the house for around six months.

Amanuel was then taken to Libya where he was forced to do manual labour for over a year. He was not paid for this work and had to stay in an abandoned building with around 50 other men. They were only given stale bread twice a day and had to sleep on the floor. Amanuel was told that he had to do this work to pay for his onward travel.

Amanuel was eventually taken to Turkey by an agent where he stayed for a further six months. He was forced to work in a factory and was only paid enough to buy a small amount of food each week. Amanuel felt unsafe working in the factory and was not given safety equipment.

Amanuel then travelled through various countries before arriving in the UK. During his journey, he was sexually assaulted and raped by men associated with the agent. He arrived in the UK by small boat and was referred into the NRM. As a result of his experiences, Amanuel has a diagnosis of complex post-traumatic stress disorder and suffers from flashbacks and nightmares.

Amanuel has now received a positive conclusive grounds decision from the National Referral Mechanism confirming him to be a victim of trafficking, and has been granted refugee status.

¹³ This name and all names included in case studies have been amended to preserve anonymity. Certain identifying details have also been amended to preserve anonymity.

Support and protection for survivors of trafficking

The UK has a legal obligation, under the Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights (the human right not to be held in slavery or servitude) to identify and protect victims of human trafficking.¹⁴ This includes a duty to assist them in their physical, psychological and social recovery. The duties are sometimes categorised as 'the systems duty', a general duty to implement measures to combat trafficking; 'the protection duty', to take steps to protect individual victims of trafficking; and 'the investigation duty', a duty to investigate situations of potential trafficking. Article 12 of the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings¹⁵ also outlines that states must adopt measures to assist victims in their physical, psychological, and social recovery and in the accompanying explanatory report, notes, "*Victims who break free of their traffickers' control generally find themselves in a position of great insecurity and vulnerability.[...] It must be pointed out that Article 12 applies to all victims, whether victims of national or transnational trafficking.*"¹⁶

Non-British national survivors of trafficking can access support and/or permission to remain in the UK in various ways, including by:

- Being referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM - the framework designed to identify and protect victims of human trafficking and of modern slavery)
- Making a protection claim through the asylum system.
- Obtaining leave to remain as an overseas domestic worker who has been trafficked.¹⁷
- Another route that they may be eligible for, for example, if they have a British child or spouse or it is accepted that their removal would be a breach of their rights under Article 3 or 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Below, we look at the asylum system and the NRM. It is through either of these systems that most of the survivors supported by HBF will be able to access forms of accommodation, assistance and protection. However, the support they receive from each varies hugely on an individual basis.

Once referred into the NRM, a survivor should receive a decision from a 'Competent Authority' on whether there are 'reasonable grounds' to believe they are a victim of trafficking. If positive, they are entitled to a 'recovery and reflection' period of at least 30 days, during which they can access appropriate support through relevant contracted

¹⁴ [European Convention on Human Rights](#)

¹⁵ [Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings](#).

Ratified on 17 December 2008 by the UK but not incorporated into UK statute.

¹⁶ Emphasis added. See para 196 Explanatory report to [Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings](#)

¹⁷ Under Appendix Domestic Worker who is a Victim of Modern Slavery, pursuant to s.53 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015

providers. Following this, a 'conclusive grounds' decision will be made¹⁸ as to whether the person is a victim of trafficking. Once conclusively recognised as a victim of trafficking, a person without leave must be automatically considered for permission to stay in the UK on limited grounds.¹⁹

A survivor can also claim asylum and will need to show that they would have a 'well-founded fear' of persecution if they were returned to their home country, due to race; religion; nationality; political opinion; or membership of a particular social group. An asylum claim that is entirely or partly made on the grounds that a person has been a victim of trafficking would usually be made on the basis that they would be at risk of being re-trafficked, by specific individuals or more generally, if returned to their country of origin or that they would be at risk of serious harm because they had been trafficked (for example because of the stigma around their sexual exploitation).²⁰ It would then be determined whether being a victim of trafficking made them a member of a particular social group. If an individual's protection claim is successful, they will be granted refugee status with leave to remain in the UK.

No borders for exploitation

“Trafficking is trafficking, and every survivor’s life has been put at risk. Changing the NRM to create different standards for those exploited outside the UK would be terrible and could ruin people’s lives.” Hana

Many survivors of human trafficking in the UK have endured exploitation in their home country and/or at multiple stages of their journey to the UK. They may be subjected to forced labour, sexual exploitation, extortion, and physical violence, often suffering a combination, rather than just one type, of abuse.²¹

Women and girls are particularly vulnerable: they are often trafficked into sexual exploitation in transit countries before being brought to the UK. In September 2025, the UK's Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC)²² highlighted that NRM referral numbers for women had reached the highest number since records began and made up the majority of those exploited “through modern slavery in the contexts of sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and forced marriage.”²³

¹⁸ On the “balance of probabilities”

¹⁹ Helen Bamber Foundation, ATLEU, ECPAT, '[Road to Nowhere](#)', July 2025

²⁰ [SB \(PSG – Protection Regulations – Reg 6\) Moldova CG](#) [2008] UKAIT 00002

²¹ [Modern slavery and human trafficking - National Crime Agency](#)

²² This is an independent official created through the Modern Slavery Act 2015, with role of encouraging good practice in “the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of slavery and human trafficking offences [and] the identification of victims of those offences., see [Modern Slavery Act 2015](#), section 41.

²³ Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, "[Integrating Modern Slavery into the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2025-2035](#)" September 2025

Alana's story

Alana is an Albanian survivor of sexual exploitation. When she was only 20 years old, her parents arranged for her to marry a much older man. This man was physically and psychologically abusive during their marriage. Alana did not feel safe in her marriage and ran away to Macedonia where she found work as a waitress. Alana's family disowned her for this and told her she would be punished if she returned to Albania.

At her job, one of the regular customers was friendly towards her and they started a relationship. He told her he would take her to live with his parents who lived in Germany where they could start a life together. When they arrived in Germany, Alana was beaten and raped and her ex-boyfriend arranged for other men to rape her for money. He repeatedly threatened her life if she tried to leave.

Alana's ex-boyfriend then forced Alana to travel to the UK where she was able to escape through the assistance of one of her customers. Alana is now supported by the Helen Bamber Foundation and has received therapeutic support for her complex post-traumatic stress disorder. Alana remains very fearful of being around men. Alana fears returning to Albania because her family will not be able to support her and she is aware that her ex-husband has connections with the police.

Nora's story

Nora was born and raised in one of the most impoverished areas of the Philippines. She left school at a young age to help raise and look after her many young siblings at home. Her parent's wages were not enough to support the whole family and as a young woman she left her home for a domestic worker role in Saudi Arabia looking to send money home to support her family. There, she was expected to work every day from early in the morning to midnight. The work was exhausting and after many years, she made the difficult decision to return home.

Back in the Philippines, she was unable to find work and faced the threat of forced marriage. At this point she encountered a firm recruiting women to work abroad in Egypt as domestic workers. She decided with her family that this was her best opportunity to escape and contacted the recruiters. Shortly after she left for Egypt, her uncle was murdered as reprisal for helping her to escape her marriage.

In Egypt Nora was subjected to excessive working hours and had her salary withheld for a number of months. She was expected to work constantly, with no holiday and her movements were controlled in the home she worked in. She could only leave the home to send money to her family and to do shopping. The family she worked for held her passport and she was severely underfed during her time there.

She was eventually brought to the UK by the Egyptian family who had a second home here. She was again employed as a domestic worker under horrendous conditions with no time off. Her employers continued to hold her passport and she was given even less food than in Egypt. Her movements were heavily controlled and she was accompanied almost everywhere. She was eventually able to escape by one day taking out the dustbins and taking the opportunity to run to a local train station. She was supported by friends she made in the Filipino community and over the next year, began to build up local relationships. She has lodged an asylum claim and has received a positive 'conclusive grounds' decision via the NRM recognising her as a victim of trafficking.

Exploitation is dynamic and opportunistic, and disempowered individuals are at risk before, during and after their journey. Many survivors will be lured into exploitation through deceptive recruitment practices, being promised legitimate work or education in other countries, including the UK, only to arrive and then have their movement, documents and labour controlled by traffickers. The initial deception is then reinforced through coercion: traffickers often impose debt-bondage, claiming that the victim must repay the cost of their journey or visa, and then withholding wages or forcing them into work to pay off the debt. According to research on UK trafficking routes, high recruitment, transit and smuggling fees that leave individuals indebted are a common tool of control.²⁴

Countries such as Libya, Turkey and parts of Eastern Europe are high-risk zones where migrants can be detained, abused, or sold between criminal groups. These regions can become hubs for trafficking networks, where victims are vulnerable to recruitment, exploitation, or further movement. Migrants transiting through Libya are frequently held in detention centres and informal camps run by state authorities, militias, or smugglers, experiencing overcrowding; lack of adequate sanitation, food or medical care; beatings; extortion; forced labour; and sexual violence.²⁵ Research has highlighted a "hidden economy of ransom-based human trafficking" in Libya: victims kidnapped, detained, tortured, forced to call family for ransom, exploited as forced labour or sex workers in transit camps.²⁶ A recent UN report describes the systematic and widespread human rights violations as "business as usual" in Libya, entrenched in "an exploitative model that preys on migrants... in situations of heightened vulnerability". Trafficking networks prey on these vulnerabilities through the sale of people, belonging and identification documents.²⁷

²⁴ University of Nottingham Rights Lab, [The top 20 source countries for modern slavery in the UK – comparative report](#), April 2021

²⁵ Independent Commissioner for Aid Impact, [The UK's approach to tackling modern slavery through the aid programme](#)

²⁶ Tilberg University, [Hidden economy of ransom-based human trafficking in Libya affects hundreds of thousands of migrants](#)

²⁷ United Nations Support Mission in Libya and United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, [Business as usual: Human Rights Violations and Abuses Against Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Libya](#) February 2026.

“People who are trafficked outside the UK face many serious challenges. In many countries, even if they try to tell the police or government bodies, they cannot get help. Sometimes they are even harmed by police officers. From my own experience and people I know, when I was in Libya, we were not only afraid of smugglers. Even when you escape from smugglers, you are still afraid of the police. Police officers kidnap people and ask for a lot of money. There is no safe place to ask for help.” Kaleb

Ella's story

Ella is a young woman from Eritrea. She was forcibly conscripted into military service in Eritrea and only managed to escape because she was receiving medical treatment and was helped by a family member to leave the hospital and flee to Sudan.

When she arrived in Sudan, an agent arranged a job for her as a housekeeper cleaning and taking care of children. She was not allowed out of the house on her own and was not paid for the work. She was then moved to another house where a number of other people were being held. She was sexually assaulted on multiple occasions by the agent and his men. After several months, Ella managed to escape with the assistance of a man she had befriended.

Ella then travelled to Libya. On the border of Libya she was captured by police and taken to prison where she was detained for around seven months. Whilst in prison, she was physically and sexually assaulted by the guards. She managed to escape from prison but had to spend two months working for the agent to cover the costs of her onward travel. She was forced to do long hours housekeeping and was not paid for this work.

Ella then travelled to Italy before travelling on to the UK. As a result of her multiple trafficking experiences, Ella suffers from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation and has significant difficulties knowing who she can trust. Ella has engaged in therapy at the Helen Bamber Foundation and has done extensive work with the counter-trafficking team to reduce her risk of being re-trafficked or re-exploited further.

Ella's relationship with her NRM support worker was essential for her continued safety and well-being at the point she was receiving it. The support included maintaining effective communication with HBF on her needs. Ella received a positive conclusive grounds decision and was granted two and a half years' discretionary leave to remain as a victim of trafficking to receive trauma-focussed therapy from HBF. At this point her asylum claim was still being processed and the grant of leave allowed her to “finally move forward”. She was granted refugee status a year later.

In HBF's experience, travel through certain countries can be indicative of risk even if an individual has not been previously identified as a survivor of human trafficking. Whilst HBF staff are not country experts, we explore indicators of modern slavery and human trafficking so that we can adequately risk assess, safeguard and prepare care plans for our clients and within this we note repeated patterns of experience. For instance, it is our professional experience that if a person has travelled through Libya, particularly if they have travelled on the transit route through or from Sudan, there is a high likelihood that they will have experienced exploitation there. We have worked with many survivors (including those within our Medico-Legal Report service)²⁸ who have been repeatedly passed on or 'sold' to traffickers/gangmasters in Libya and have then been forced to into sexual exploitation or labour exploitation including in agriculture, truck loading, manufacturing, garage work, catering in restaurants or to work in manufacturing/garages etc. Of those we have worked with, we have found a prevalence of rape and sexual violence suffered by women, men and children in Libya as well as other forms of violence and abuse.

In 2025, 17,696 non-British nationals were referred into the NRM. Of those, 68% were exploited overseas and 12% were exploited both overseas and in the UK. In 2024, 59% were exploited overseas and 18% were exploited both overseas and in the UK.

In 2025, of the non-British national survivors issued with a positive 'conclusive grounds' decision confirming them to be a victim of trafficking (11,009 people), 59% were exploited overseas and 22% were exploited both overseas and in the UK. The most common form of exploitation for men was labour exploitation and for women it was sexual exploitation.

The countries in which exploitation was most commonly said to have occurred were Libya, Sudan, Albania and Vietnam.²⁹

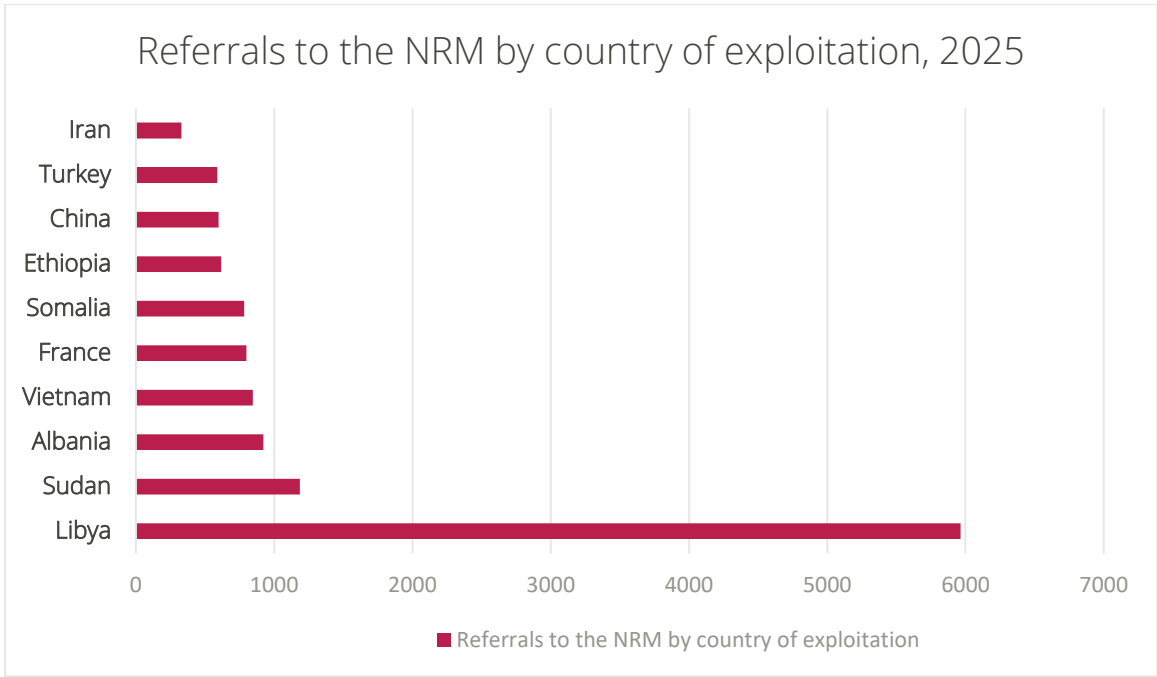
The survivors with whom HBF works are non-British nationals who have been exploited abroad and/or in the UK. 81% of all survivor referrals accepted to HBF³⁰ in 2025 and 83% of survivor referrals accepted so far in 2026 were exploited and/or trafficked abroad (this total includes those trafficked solely outside the UK and both within and outside the UK).³¹

²⁸ A Medico-Legal Report documents the psychological and/or physical result of torture and other forms of ill-treatment to which an individual has been subjected. See Helen Bamber Foundation, [Medico-Legal Reports | Helen Bamber](#)

²⁹ NRM data for UK data service, Q4 2025

³⁰ In our [Model of Integrated Care](#)

³¹ This figure is taken from the complete number of referrals from people who have survived human trafficking rather than the full list of all referrals (as we work with people with experience of interpersonal violence in a range of forms – see Helen Bamber Foundation, [Referrals](#))



Country of exploitation for NRM referrals, 2025



Bahram's story

Bahram is a refugee who fled Iran after being tortured as a result of his public opposition to the Iranian Regime. Within Iran, he had been kidnapped and locked up for many months. As a result of his prolonged torture, he has had multiple scars all over his body as well as chronic pain which he suffers from to this day. He was made to sign a document under duress and released by his torturers to his home – being told that he would be under constant watch. He knew he needed to make the difficult decision to leave Iran as there was no future for him there. Out of fear for his life, Bahram paid a large amount of money to smugglers to help him travel safely from Iran. He suffered a grueling journey, being passed from smuggler to smuggler, and witnessed the horrendous treatment of fellow asylum seekers as he travelled.

When he reached Turkey, he was forced to work in a local shop for hours without pay. The work was cruel and long. Bahram needed to carry heavy weights which exacerbated his physical injuries. He felt isolated and alone in Turkey and, having travelled there without documentation, he felt completely helpless in this position. This was extremely damaging to his psyche. After many months, he travelled to the UK.

He claimed asylum and was referred to the NRM by the Home Office. He received a positive conclusive grounds decision months after his referral. His asylum claim however was pending for a long period. He was only invited to his first substantive asylum interview around two years after he had claimed asylum and was granted refugee status months after that interview.

Bahram struggled to talk in depth about what he had endured both in Iran and in Turkey for a long time. His physical injuries from his abuse in Iran and the physical work he endured in Turkey have continued to impact him. He has significant and pronounced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and hearing about Iran in the news has triggered these multiple times.

Every survivor counts – the impact of trafficking

The experiences and journeys endured by trafficking victims are marked by prolonged uncertainty, physical abuse, sexual violence, fear, and lack of control—leading to significant psychological and physical trauma. Many arrive in the UK with acute distress, deep distrust of authorities, and minimal knowledge of their rights or the support available to them.

In the course of HBF's long-term work with survivors of trafficking, we find that for years after 'escape', they can remain at risk of being re-trafficked or re-exploited again.

Phe's story

Phe is a Vietnamese survivor of sexual, criminal and labour exploitation. She had a difficult upbringing and was raised by a distant family relative. Phe was offered work in a factory in China where she would earn much more than she was able to earn in Vietnam.

On arrival in China, Phe was forced into sexual exploitation. After a few years, she was trafficked from China to France. Phe attempted to escape but was badly beaten and, as a result, she suffered long-term physical health issues. Phe was subsequently trafficked from France to the UK. During this time, she was badly beaten and raped multiple times.

In the UK, Phe was forced to cook and clean and take care of cannabis plants. She remained there until a police raid two years later. The police arrested and detained her for one night. When she explained what had happened to her, she was referred into the NRM and was released. Unfortunately, she was not offered any support in securing accommodation, and ended up approaching people on the street for help. A family she met while homeless told her that she could stay with them, but they then exploited her for domestic servitude. They forced her to do housework and was not allowed to leave the house except to attend appointments and take the children to school. Phe was eventually offered accommodation in a safe house and was able to leave the situation. As a result of her experiences, she suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and rarely leaves the safe house. She is afraid that she will be exploited again and does not know who she can trust.

Phe received a positive conclusive grounds decision through the NRM and was initially granted humanitarian protection³² before being recognised as a refugee in the UK and being granted refugee status. It was through her NRM support worker that she was referred to HBF who have provided her with specialist support for many years.

Survivors commonly experience physical health problems including illnesses and injuries, and also mental health problems, with anxiety, depression and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) being the most prevalent. Mental health difficulties present a particular re-trafficking/re-exploitation risk as they may result, for example, in loss of autonomy and agency; lack of trust, low self-esteem; poor understanding of boundaries; social isolation; and concealment of psychological and physical injuries. Survivors may be at increased risk of entering into dangerous dependency or 'survival' relationships and they may have difficulty in recognising new threats to themselves or trafficking situations. Mental health difficulties are not confined merely to those considered to be at high risk of re-exploitation, or to those trafficked in the UK, but across the exploitation continuum. The

³² Another type of protection status available as well as refugee status in the UK.

consequences of failure to support these individuals can be extremely serious, including the risk of transmission of intergenerational trauma.

“People trafficked outside the UK often survive very close to death and arrive with serious mental health issues. The needs are similar for everyone: safety, support, understanding, and time to recover. I lost all my energy during my journey and I needed immediate support.” Kaleb

Whilst re-trafficking is a recognised phenomenon, it is not a term or a concept that has been clearly defined in domestic law, policy or guidance in a UK context. There is no international or national monitoring of either the occurrence of re-trafficking or individuals' risks and there is no clear strategy in place for how to address re-trafficking or prevent its occurrence.

In HBF's experience, a significant proportion of our clients who are trafficking survivors are at risk of being re-trafficked or re-exploited³³ and a range of other harms when they do not receive the support and protection they need in the UK. In 2021, research by the UK Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC) found that the circumstances after the original experience of trafficking or exploitation had a direct influence on their vulnerability to re-trafficking. Importantly, an individual's stability and access to adequate support reduced their risk.³⁴ The data did not distinguish those trafficked or exploited outside the UK as less likely to be re-trafficked and, in fact, it was noted in research findings that, *“Survivors were frequently re-trafficked within two years or less of having exited a trafficking situation and when re-trafficking occurs it was not uncommon for it to be to a different destination or for a different purpose of exploitation. The IOM database also showed that there was cross-over between international and internal trafficking.”*³⁵ HBF supports the IASC's recommendation that the UK government should seek ways to reduce re-trafficking through the support they offer survivors.³⁶

The provision of long-term, consistent, trauma-informed support, safe accommodation and secure immigration status is essential to enabling victims to recover from their experiences and to help prevent further exploitation or re-trafficking. Whilst survivors who have been exploited abroad may have geographical distance from their traffickers or other abusers, this does not mean that they are not still vulnerable or at risk.

³³ In using the terms “re-trafficking” or “re-exploitation” we are using an adapted version of the “re-trafficking” definition in IOM, [The Causes and Consequences of Re-trafficking: Evidence from the IOM Human Trafficking Database](#), 2010, namely a situation in which “a person has been trafficked [or exploited] on one occasion as set forth in the definition provided in the United Nations Palermo Protocol; has then exited that trafficking [or exploitation] situation by any means; and has then later re-entered another trafficking [and/or exploitation] situation, again as stated in the United Nations definition.”

³⁴ University of Nottingham: Rights Lab and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, [Re-trafficking: The current state of play](#) November 2021

³⁵ Emphasis added. Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

“Even when someone is trafficked outside the UK, it means they could also be trafficked again – even here. It can be a real danger. Depending on their situation, people’s exploiters sometimes come here. When I was here, even though I had been trafficked outside the UK, I continued to fear going through it again. I thought, “these people could be around me again.” When you are scared like that, you might be walking around outside, see someone’s face in the crowd and think, “is that the same person who hurt me before?” Rea

Equal harm, equal protection: The benefits of the NRM to those trafficked overseas

“The NRM is so important because it gives survivors a chance to feel at peace, knowing that there are people in the UK who understand their situation and believe them. We shouldn’t be making it harder for anyone to get the support and recognition they desperately need.” Hana

“If people have experienced the same thing and are living in the same place, they should be given the same rights.” Rea

At its most effective, a trauma-informed NRM is a lifeline for survivors, allowing them to properly access and remain engaged with the services they need to keep them safe. It provides the potential to bear witness to the traumatic accounts of survivors as well as providing professionals with the opportunity to properly collaborate and support those referred to it with accessing services. An effective NRM should recognise and support the needs of human trafficking survivors as a discrete category and there is recognition that this support needs to be wide-ranging and complex³⁷ requiring collaboration across sectors.³⁸ NRMs should, accordingly, be designed to be flexible designed to correspond with the profile of trafficking cases in a particular country.³⁹

³⁷ See OSCE ODIHR, [Guidance on Trauma-Informed National Referral Mechanisms and Responses to Human Trafficking](#), 2023.

³⁸ See IOM, [Guidance on Referral Mechanisms](#), 2019

³⁹ OSCE ODIHR, [National Referral Mechanisms: Joining efforts to protect the rights of trafficked persons](#), 2022

Afia's story

Afia has been recognised by HBF's Counter-Trafficking team as one of the most vulnerable people they support with varying and complex needs. She has experienced severe sexual exploitation and physical abuse from a very young age in Qatar for many years. When brought to the UK by her exploiters, she was repeatedly sexually assaulted including whilst street homeless. Because of her multiple traumas, her severe level of complex post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and some significant cognitive difficulties observed, it is anticipated that she will be in therapy for many years.

Afia has a pending asylum appeal. She has received a positive conclusive grounds decision and has been granted two years leave to remain through the NRM to aid her recovery and support through therapy.

The support she has received through her contracted NRM support worker has been transformative in many aspects of her case. Her support worker has accompanied her to countless solicitor appointments (a service which HBF could only provide on an exceptional basis to clients) allowing her to properly process and understand her asylum claim. She has helped with booking appointments and helping Afia travel to them. When Afia first attended HBF, it was with the help of her support worker accompanying her to help her make what was a new and difficult journey. Without this NRM support, it is doubtful that to what degree Afia could have accessed the services she has and progressed to the point she has now arrived at – particularly in engagement with her solicitors.

“From my experience, when I was recognised as a survivor and received a positive decision, I was given a caseworker. She met me every two weeks and followed up with me, asking about my needs and how I was coping. This gave me hope and helped me to start recovery. Being recognised made me feel that I had value as a human being, that someone believed me and could see me. For someone who lost hope, this recognition means a lot. It helped me feel less alone and more safe.” Kaleb

HBF have seen firsthand through our services some of the benefits an NRM referral can bring to our clients, be it through them feeling believed and identified for the first time; being given their first grant of leave to remain; or being able to access vital services with the practical support of a support worker. Rather than segmenting NRM support, we would encourage building upon and improving the work of the NRM to best support survivors as they exist now in the UK.

Conclusion

“I have passed through this system myself, and I have seen many people benefit and begin to recover. The NRM can change lives...

The system should protect people without causing more harm and should treat survivors with dignity and compassion.” Kaleb

The UK government has committed to identifying, protecting, caring and supporting survivors of trafficking, recognising that it is “a serious crime that violates human rights”.⁴⁰ The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a key part of this, its very purpose being to help identify trafficking victims and ensure their protection.

The effective and appropriate response to the increase in survivors of trafficking who have been exploited outside of the UK, either solely or in addition to exploitation within the UK, would be measures to best accommodate the needs of those survivors. Yet, in recent years the government has too often portrayed the NRM as a barrier to immigration enforcement rather than a vital system of identification and protection, introducing changes to law and policy that make accessing support under the NRM increasingly difficult. Thousands of victims of trafficking and modern slavery already chose not to be referred into the NRM due to their fear of being removed from the UK by immigration authorities⁴¹ and when they do the Home Office frequently refuses to provide them with a grant of permission to stay in the UK to recover and rebuild their lives.⁴²

We know first-hand that exploitation overseas often leaves survivors highly vulnerable and at significant risk of further harm and re-exploitation upon arrival in the UK, meaning that any genuine commitment to preventing re-trafficking must include protection for those exploited abroad. Ignoring post-migration drivers of exploitation fails to recognise the pervasive and long-lasting impact of trafficking and modern slavery. Any changes to the NRM that would undermine survivors' right to protection and increase their exposure to further harm also weakens the UK government's ability to work collaboratively with survivors to dismantle trafficking networks both domestically and internationally. Whilst there is certainly room for improvement, reform and change within the NRM, it cannot and should not come at the expense of recognising and responding to survivors' needs – including those trafficked outside the UK.

⁴⁰ [Modern Slavery: statutory guidance for England and Wales \(under s49 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015\) and non-statutory guidance for Scotland and Northern Ireland, 24 December 2025](#)

⁴¹ The Guardian, [“Trafficking victims rejecting UK government support because they fear being deported,”](#) 13 April 2025.

⁴² In 2024, only 4% of individuals (who had been confirmed as victims of trafficking in the NRM) were considered for and granted leave to remain. Helen Bamber Foundation, ATLEU, ECPAT, [“Road to Nowhere,”](#) July 2025

Recommendations

The government should:

- **Maintain the same standards of protection and support for all survivors of human trafficking survivors**, recognising that all survivors require appropriate identification, support and protection.⁴³
- **Actively look for ways to monitor and reduce the risk of re-exploitation or re-trafficking as part of its review of the NRM.** This should include improved data collection and publication
- **Introduce practical improvements to the support systems for all survivors** including through:
 - improving vulnerability screening at all stages of the asylum and detention systems.
 - strengthening recruitment, training and resourcing to ensure NRM and asylum decisions are timely and of high quality and that the process from start to finish is appropriately trauma-informed.
 - ensuring the availability of long-term support and safe accommodation in the community for all survivors of trafficking.
 - automatically granting leave to remain for five years with a route to settlement and recourse to public funds to all survivors of trafficking with a positive final ('conclusive grounds') decision.

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⁴³ In compliance with [Article 2, Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings](#)