

Women trafficked into crime in UK are imprisoned without support or protection

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Research reveals extent of shortcomings in UK justice and immigration to adequately define and intervene in such cases.

Most foreign national [women](#) trafficked into the UK and forced to commit offences are given custodial sentences without help or support if arrested – despite being victims of often horrifying crime and abuse themselves, says a Cambridge-led report.

The research shows that violence, [intimidation](#) and rape are common experiences among the women, but evidence of their suffering is often overlooked and they do not receive the protection supposedly guaranteed to them as victims of [human trafficking](#) under international law.

The report's findings and policy implications were presented to MPs and Peers in the House of Lords last week, at a seminar convened by the University's Institute of Criminology and the Prison Reform Trust.

The research, conducted last year, involved interviewing 103 of the over 600 foreign national women incarcerated in the UK at that time. Foreign nationals account for roughly one in seven of the total female [prison population](#).

The offences of 58 [interviewees](#) were linked directly to their victim status. Researchers identified 43 women as victims of human trafficking. Five more who entered the country freely had since worked in slave-like conditions.

Only one quarter of the women identified by researchers as having been trafficked were processed through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) – the framework set up in 2009 to ensure that victims of human trafficking receive help.

Some women were not processed by the NRM until their sentences were complete, and even referrals to the NRM that resulted in positive decisions still left victims spending an average of four months in custody.

For the rest, no formal recognition of victim status – and consequent support and protection – was given. In only one case of human trafficking of all those identified by researchers did victim disclosure result in police investigating the crimes perpetrated against them.

Nearly half the women had been forced into prostitution. Other coerced crimes included drug smuggling, cannabis production and street robberies. Several cases of domestic servitude were also identified.

Five women had been trafficked as children, one of whom had been re-trafficked to the UK following deportation back to Africa from another country.

All the women interviewed had suffered physical and/or emotional abuse. Over half those identified as trafficking victims had experienced multiple rapes, with some turning to prison doctors for help with severe pain and bleeding following extensive physical and sexual abuse.

For some women, abuse was the key reason for migration and harrowing stories of persecution in their homeland were relayed to the researchers – from extreme torture to the execution of their own children. For many, the threats made by those who moved and controlled them continued, even after the women had been arrested and detained.

Those interviewed spoke of confusion and powerlessness when confronted by UK authorities. A common problem was the failure by justice and immigration agencies to provide interpreter support and access to documents in a language the women could understand.

One victim of sex trafficking – arrested for false documents – told how she was never asked if she needed an interpreter: "I did not understand what was going on. I was crying... I just wanted to be able to tell them everything – I wanted them to listen and understand. If I had been able to talk then maybe I would not be here."

Another stated that her sense of powerlessness during court proceedings felt like "being in the hands of the people who brought me here".

"The message is clear: the powerlessness of these women in the hands of their traffickers is terrifyingly replicated within the criminal justice system," said Professor Loraine Gelsthorpe from Cambridge's Institute of Criminology, who conducted the research with Dr Liz Hales.

"The legitimacy of our criminal justice system stands or falls on the way in which we treat victims as well as offenders. There should be renewed efforts to recognise that 'offenders' can also be 'victims', and to ensure that appropriate credence is given to women's accounts of their own experiences.

"We hope this research will encourage government agencies to implement better training and procedures in relation to this."

The report *The Criminalisation of Migrant Women* can be viewed [here](#).

Provided by University of Cambridge

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