

Why the definition of refuge matters

Women's Aid analysis of the ONS report "Women survivors of domestic abuse and their lived experiences of temporary safe accommodation in England: January to June 2023"

Women's Aid, January 2024: Sarika Seshadri

This analysis looks at the report "[*Women survivors of domestic abuse and their lived experiences of temporary safe accommodation in England: January to June 2023*](#)" published by the ONS on 10th January 2024. The report is part of an initiative to highlight the experiences of those who are 'invisible' in statistics, those who are too often under-represented or missing in our understanding of what our society looks like. The report, with quotes and insights from 40 women with experiences of different forms of temporary accommodation, sheds important light on what it is really like to flee domestic abuse.

We know from our [*Nowhere to Turn report series*](#), which explores the experiences of women facing barriers in accessing a refuge space or safe accommodation, that the alternatives to refuge are often dangerous and difficult and that it is often the most marginalized women who are left to fall through the gaps. Whilst searching for a refuge space, our research has shown that many women and their children experienced further abuse, financial hardship or homelessness and some returned to the perpetrator. The *Nowhere to Turn* reports highlight the unsuitability, in some cases dangers, of alternative accommodation including sofa surfing, hotels and emergency accommodation and in particular the unsuitability of mixed-sex hostel accommodation for survivors recovering from abuse by male perpetrators.

This report from the ONS looks specifically at the experiences of women staying in different types of temporary safe accommodation. What becomes starkly clear, is the difference between refuge services (including specialist 'by and for' refuge services) and other types of temporary accommodation, which may not necessarily be safe. This includes hotels and bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation, hostels and local authority-provided self-contained and shared temporary accommodation. Whilst self-contained flats were more suitable for some women from an accommodation point of view, for example if they were in new builds, they lacked the required wraparound support and in some cases they also lacked furniture. Meanwhile hotels lacked both facilities and support, whilst mixed sex hostels were again found to be particularly unsuitable for women escaping domestic abuse. Whilst experiences of refuge services were generally better, Women's Aid's own research, notably our [*Annual Audit*](#) series, shows that challenges around funding and capacity mean that the required support was not always available and the strains on the sector in terms of funding and capacity were reflected in women's experiences.

Women's Aid defines a refuge as a service that *"offers accommodation and support only for women experiencing domestic abuse which is tied to that accommodation. The address will not be publicly available. It will have a set number of places. Residents will receive a*

planned programme of therapeutic and practical support from staff and access peer support from other residents. This will include:

- *Access to information and advocacy*
- *Emotional support*
- *Access to specialist support workers (e.g. drugs/alcohol use, mental health, sexual abuse)*
- *Access to recovery work*
- *Access to support for children (where needed)*
- *Practical help*
- *Key work and support planning (work around support needs including parenting, finances and wellbeing)*
- *Safety planning*
- *Counselling*¹

In this report, the importance of each element of this definition are clearly highlighted in the experiences of the women, through every stage of their journey. Following Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), traumatized women and children escaping abuse first need to have their immediate needs met. However, in many of the non-refuge forms of accommodation, women reported struggles with securing essentials such as food and water, clothing, bedding or space to sleep.

"I had two pyjamas, one jacket, one pants, one top. And there was no washing machine in the hotel. So, I had to wash my clothes in the bathroom, and then wait two days for them to dry on the heaters, and then I could go out". (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Multiple types of TSA, Asian or Asian British)

"For those three weeks, I didn't eat anything. I was breastfeeding. And it was COVID, and the hotel didn't give too much, just gave a cereal, a juice, and a cake. That was all my food for three weeks, while I was breastfeeding. And I didn't have money to buy anything". (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Multiple types of TSA, Other ethnic group)

¹ Definition from Routes to Support. Routes to Support is the UK violence against women and girls directory of services and refuge vacancies, run in partnership by Women's Aid Federation of England, Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland, Scottish Women's Aid and Welsh Women's Aid.

"We're just living in one small room, with ... one double bed. So, we have to share a bed. He sometimes didn't like me to sleep with him... I told the council, 'This is the situation. It's very narrow, and I don't know what to do'... They were like, 'You have to make him sleep on the floor, and you sleep on the bed.'...How can I do that? He's a disabled child. He's autistic. How can I make him sleep on the floor, while I'm on the bed?" (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Multiple types of TSA, Other ethnic group)

As noted in the report:

"While hotels could lack basic facilities for more than short-term stays, survivors also described experiences of local authority-provided accommodation that lacked basic amenities and offered poor living conditions. These included having no furniture, no access to hot water, infestations of mice and bedbugs, broken fire alarms, and no external lock on the door. Survivors identified these conditions as having a detrimental impact on the sense of safety and recovery from the domestic abuse they had experienced."

Women emphasised the importance of safety, including broad emotional and psychological safety, as well as the practical security measures put in place in refuges, including the undisclosed location, locks, gates and cameras, which were often lacking in other forms of accommodation.

"We've, obviously, got cameras here, and we've got panic alarms in every doorway, so that, obviously, makes you feel safe. Having someone checking in on you every day, bar the weekends, makes you safe. Being around people, I suppose, makes you feel safe... Although it's a bit backward in the way that I've had to be moved and be taken away from the situation, being taken away has, obviously, made me feel a lot safer." (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Refuge, White British)

The access to information, support and advocacy around often complex processes for benefits, employment, healthcare and immigration was also seen as essential.

"[the TSA employee] helped me to do the Universal Credit, to do the food bank, to register for an appointment at the GP, things like that. Because English is not my first language, so I find it difficult to do these things." (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Multiple types of TSA, Asian or Asian British)

Overall, the report noted, *"The optimum standard of TSA was nearly always described as accommodation which most closely resembled a traditional home, with the addition of "wrap-around" support including access to emotional and practical support."*

For those survivors with children, support for the children was critical, with many mothers being extremely concerned about the impact of changes on their children. Support that was valued ranged from support with accessing nurseries and schools, toys and play spaces to direct support for the children in recovering from the trauma, as well as support for the mother, including childcare and emotional support. With the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 bringing about a legal definition of domestic abuse that now recognises children as victims in their own right, it is essential that this be seen as a core part of refuge provision.

"I feel like a lot needs to be put in place for women who've just had babies, especially without their partner's support, or without any support, just them and the baby. Basically, a lot needs to be done to ensure that we don't get depressed." (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Hotel, Black African)

Following Maslow's triangle, survivors also shared the importance of their emotional needs being met, sometimes by staff and at other times by other residents, and the importance of needing to feel confident and resilient in order to move on, recognizing that a large part of this comes from the work that survivors do themselves and not just the support:

"I'd probably say 30% of it was the support I had, but I'd probably say the other 70% was me, myself, it came from me. I felt strong, I felt ready, I felt confident." (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Refuge, White British)

"You don't realise, actually, how much support you actually get when you're in refuge. You do get a lot of support. I mean, I feel so much better. This is probably the best I've felt in 30 years." (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Refuge, White British)

This contrasted with the lack of support in other forms of accommodation, for example hostels with limited understanding of the needs of domestic abuse survivors.

"You couldn't really go and see them, they'd lock themselves in [the office] drinking coffee or whatever. They didn't want to be bothered by people. And I think it was because of the type of people that were in there. I think we were the only ones in there that have fled domestic [abuse]. So, they weren't really understanding of it, really." (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Hostel, White British)

There was therefore also a crucial difference in the role that refuges played in supporting survivors to move on, and the report outlines many of the challenges that survivors face in accessing accommodation, support, services and essentials in moving on, and the difference that support at this time could make.

"So honestly, I know so many people who have had such bad experiences, but I've had such an amazing experience. I got given food vouchers, so that I can stock up my fridge when I move out. Honestly, I was in tears for about three days, just because I couldn't believe how generous- and how lucky I was. There are nice people out there, and, basically, the council and my key worker, just for getting me back on my feet. I move in, hopefully, by the end of the week... The council gave me £1,000 worth of vouchers for white goods." (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Refuge, White British)

Refuges, being part of a wider network of services, could also play a role in supporting survivors to escape in the first place, including through their awareness raising and schemes such as the [Rail to Refuge and Road to Refuge schemes](#) run jointly by Women's Aid and the Rail Delivery Group and National Express respectively.

"I hadn't got any access to money. The refuge said they would be able to help with cost of my train ticket but, between trying to sort out the red tape, by the time they could sort out the money for my train fare I then couldn't leave because he was already home... I actually borrowed money to get here. I assume the person I borrowed it off is very annoyed now because I've not been back but, you know, it was that or risk not getting here again." (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Refuge, White British)

The report also sadly highlights the impact of the stresses faced by refuge services, including under-funding and staff shortages. Whilst survivors were well supported in some areas, there were other areas where more support could have made a critical difference:

"They're supposed to meet up with us and do things like sort out the council tax, or sort out anything we qualify for, help us find property, do forms for us. I think they're supposed to check on our mental health, but there's no time for that. (Laughter) So, there has been a lot of sickness, where they have time off, because I think they're like teachers, like most essential workers. They're understaffed, underpaid, overworked." (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Refuge, Mixed or Multiple ethnic group)

"As much as women have help, particularly speaking for myself, you have the support, you have your key worker that comes to see you every week, but one side that I thought was not looked ... into is people's mental health ... accessing even mental help was very difficult ... Because I felt suicidal a lot. But my key worker was very good, she was really brilliant. She made loads and loads of referrals." (Survivor quoted by the ONS, Refuge, Black African)

This lack of support is extremely concerning and demonstrates the need for high quality, well-funded specialist refuges, including specialist by and for services. A recent report by Imkaan and the Centre for Women's Justice on the homicides and suicides of Black and minoritized women in the context of domestic abuse found that by and for services could be critical in preventing these deaths. The difference between 'temporary safe accommodation' and specialist, high quality refuge provision is therefore not simply semantics, but potentially the difference between life and death.