



# UK BME ANTI-SLAVERY NETWORK

## Submission from the UK BME Anti-Slavery Network (BASNET) to Inform House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee Inquiry on Human Trafficking

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### About BASNET – The UK Black and Minority Ethnic Anti-Slavery Network

BASNET - The UK BME Anti-Slavery Network is a project of AFRUCA Safeguarding Children, established in 2019. BASNET is the first network in the UK and Europe dedicated to promoting Race Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the modern slavery and human trafficking space. BASNET has a membership of 40 UK Black and Diaspora grass-root charities and community interest companies, as well as over 80 associated members.

In 2021, BASNET produced a unique Race Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan for the UK Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Sector to help address gaps in race equality in the sector. A progress report of the Action Plan to track sectoral changes will be released in May 2023.

Below is our response to the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee Inquiry into Human Trafficking

**1. What is the scale and nature of human trafficking in the UK? Considering in particular:**

**a) Different types of exploitation (including sexual, labour, or criminal exploitation),**

**b) The profile of victims and perpetrators,**

**c) The gendered aspects of human trafficking,**

**d) The role of technology in facilitating human trafficking.**

1.1 Human Trafficking and modern slavery are endemic problems which directly affect and impact very significantly on people from Black and ethnic minority groups in the UK. Human Trafficking in the UK is therefore a race problem with significant repercussions for many individuals and communities. This is the case whether we are referring to external trafficking involving victims from outside the UK or internal trafficking involving UK citizens.

1.2 The work of our members at BASNET shows that sexual, financial, labour and criminal exploitation are on the rise. In particular, we note reports that labour exploitation which involves people on long haul recruitment work visa has grown exponentially in the care, agriculture and health sectors. In February 2022, in partnership with the former UK Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, BASNET held a round table meeting to explore the risks associated with long haul recruitment in these sectors. In particular, we note the activities of bogus and unscrupulous recruitment agents who capitalise on systemic gaps, including faults in the visa schemes, to recruit and exploit individuals from various countries and hold them in debt bondage and financial exploitation. These forms of exploitation include: inflated visa fees, bogus recruitment fees, online scams and misleading advertisements on social media and the internet to trap potential victims. Our members have shown us different advertisements circulating in their countries of origin where recruiters place misleading adverts to scam those keen to come to the UK to work. Without appropriate due diligence, vetting, monitoring and checks of recruitment agents, our concern is these activities will continue unabated.

1.3 We note that many individuals on international student visas are prone to labour and financial exploitation based on the need to work to earn an income for subsistence and pay their school fees. We are aware of cases including students being forced to work longer hours than legally allowed, not being paid for work done or being told they owe exorbitant amounts for various reasons. Our members have reported being approached by international students caught up in exploitation for financial support and other assistance. Sometimes victims do not report to the police out of fear they will be prosecuted for breaking the law. Our parent charity AFRUCA Safeguarding Children has sought to address the plights of international students involved in the Child Protection system including cases of child neglect and leaving children alone at home to work long hours. We know of one case where a young girl was trafficked as the wife of an international student and put to long hours of work in domiciliary care without being paid for her work. Government agencies including the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority have sought to explore the scale of student visa exploitation through projects like Operation Narial. We are also aware of an ongoing research project funded by the UK Modern Slavery Policy and Evidence Centre to explore UK agriculture and care visas and vulnerability to exploitation. We feel this important issue requires further exploration to assess the scale and impact.

1.4 Our members House of Rainbow and African Rainbow Family have raised concerns about the perceived growing sexual exploitation of LGBTQIA individuals claiming asylum in the UK on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. We note that homophobic government policy and legislative action in countries like Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Burundi, to criminalise LGBTQIA is pushing individuals to seek asylum in the UK as a place of safety and refuge. At an event held by BASNET in partnership with both charities in November 2021, we heard the experiences of individuals victimised and exploited, allegedly by those claiming to support them in processing their immigration documents.

1.5 We note the ongoing court case of human trafficking for organ harvesting involving Nigerian nationals. While it is not certain that this is the first case in the UK, the possibility of human trafficking for organ harvesting occurring again cannot be ruled out.

1.6 We would like to highlight the growing problem of child criminal exploitation in the UK, especially County Lines Drugs Trafficking. There are no national figures collated to demonstrate the scale of what we believe is a massive problem. However, our parent charity AFRUCA Safeguarding Children works across Manchester to support children and families affected by this form of child trafficking and exploitation. We note the disproportionate involvement of children from Black and other ethnic minorities, in particular children with different forms of neuro-divergence, as victims of county lines trafficking and this is also reflected in AFRUCA's work in Manchester.

1.7 We would like to bring to the attention of the Committee the hidden problem of child sexual exploitation which disproportionately affects young women and girls, especially from ethnic backgrounds. Our parent charity AFRUCA Safeguarding Children launched the Phoenix Project to tackle the sexual exploitation of girls across Manchester. We note that "adultification" pushes young women and girls from Black and ethnic communities into risks of exploitation as cultural and systemic factors combine to deny them their childhood and treat them like adults, especially in comparison to White girls of the same age.

1.8 We are concerned about how much technology has been a factor in the growing trafficking and exploitation of people – both external and internal to the UK. We note that technology is used to lure people on social media into fake jobs in the UK, or to scam them into parting with money. We note the role of technology like Whatsapp, Facetime and Snapchat in fuelling county lines trafficking in which children are forced to move drugs across the country. We also note that children are exposed to online sexual exploitation due to the ease of using various social media like Tiktok, Spotify and Instagram to lure children and exploit them, with little efforts by technology companies to address these issues. We note that in many ethnic communities, parents with limited command of English or limited education might not have the capacity to protect their children from online abuse as they might not be aware of the various risks of harm posed to children online. Hence, there is a gap here in relation to protection of children from risks of trafficking online.

## **2. How effective is the UK's approach to discouraging the demand that leads to trafficking?**

2.1 Our view is that there has been very limited efforts on the part of the UK government to tackle various forms of trafficking and the demand that leads to people being trafficking into and within the UK.

2.2 We note the reduced numbers of prosecutions of perpetrators and efforts to track down and disrupt the activities of international organised criminal gangs who traffic and  
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exploit people in the UK. In our opinion, the UK's ability to disrupt human trafficking operations has reduced considerably, in the aftermath of BREXIT. This is apparent in the reduced co-operation between the UK and our closest neighbour – France, resulting in more boat crossings across the Channel to the UK.

2.3 Demand for foreign labour to meet UK shortages in jobs in which British citizens are not keen to do (for example care work, agriculture, horticulture) creates an avenue for exploitation and human trafficking to thrive as we noted in our response to Question One above. Additionally, the seemingly lack of will to address the systemic gaps in the various seasonal visa schemes and the activities of employers that create avenues for foreign workers to be exploited in different ways shows a degree of complicity on the part of government in fuelling financial exploitation, labour exploitation and debt bondage of foreign workers in the UK.

2.4 We note the exponential growth in the number of missing children in the UK and the disproportionate cases of Black children going missing for longer periods than children from other races, according to a report by the charity Missing People. Based on work by charities like AFRUCA Safeguarding Children, we know that these cases disproportionately involve children of Black origin trafficked for criminal exploitation. We are very concerned about the reduced efforts to tackle this growing problem, working in tandem with Black communities where child trafficking for drugs and county lines appears to be a serious problem.

2.5 It is critical to highlight that government rhetoric around human trafficking as “illegal migration” appears to create avenues for modern slavery and human trafficking to thrive. This is especially the case in relation to child trafficking. It is our firm opinion that the new Illegal Migration Bill which aims to deny support for victims from abroad is a racist action against victims of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. This piece of legislation will further embolden human traffickers (who are currently not being prosecuted) because where there is no crime, then traffickers will be free to ply their evil trade in people.

### **3. To what extent do support services meet the needs of victims who have been trafficked in or to the UK?**

3.1 BASNET Race Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan 2021 has outlined instances where support services have failed to meet the needs of victims trafficked within or into the UK. We have made recommendations to help address these gaps. It is our view that many in the sector, especially Government, have not adopted or have failed to see the need to adopt our recommendations to help improve support for survivors from different ethnic backgrounds.

3.2 Based on the experiences of our members, some of whom also provide culturally appropriate support for victims and survivors of human trafficking, we are of the opinion that support services for victims of human trafficking in the UK are inadequate. While services provide basic needs – financial support and housing, there are variations in the quality of services provided by different NRM subcontractors. Of note is the lack of trauma informed care afforded victims. We note that in one “safe-house” a victim attempted suicide four times in less than six months without urgency to explore additional care and

support to meet their needs. This patchwork quilt of service provision compounds the experiences of victims and hinders, rather than facilitate their recovery.

3.3 On 21 July 2022, based on complaints received from survivors of modern slavery in different “safe houses” run by NRM subcontractors/providers, BASNET held a face to face confidential meeting with 10 survivors of modern slavery at AFRUCA office in Manchester. We learnt about their experiences of racism and discrimination in different safe houses. This form of racism involved complaints by Black victims that non-white workers were giving Asian and Eastern European victims preferential treatment and that Black victims were treated less favourably than victims from other races. Victims complained about being housed in inappropriate accommodation, with broken doors and sometimes in premises also housing ex-criminals, compounding their traumatic experiences and putting them at further risks of harm. LGBTQIA victims told us how they were subjected to racist and homophobic behaviour in safe houses, called demeaning names and this was worse when workers were from the same country or ethnic background as themselves. Reports of both racist and homophobic abuses have not been addressed by safe house management. Victims we spoke to discussed how these behaviours have compounded their mental health and affected their physical well-being, with some on medication to help them cope with these experiences. Others felt they had no option but to leave the safe houses and move to other locations – especially the few specialist LGBTQIA safe houses for victims. Many regret the decision to be referred into the NRM. We feel that racism and homophobia in government funded safe-houses require urgent action to help improve protection and safety of survivors/victims.

#### **4. What evidence is there, if any, that the National Referral Mechanism process is being exploited by individuals seeking asylum in the UK?**

4.1 We do not have any evidence that the NRM process is being exploited by individuals seeking asylum in the UK. While no BASNET members are first responders, we are of the opinion that in some instances, many survivors/victims do not actually want to be referred into the NRM, preferring instead to go down the asylum route. For example, LGBTQIA individuals who took part in our event in partnership with members House of Rainbow and African Rainbow Family discussed how the fear of stigmatisation, abuse and homophobia has prevented many victims of sexual exploitation from wanting to be referred into the National Referral Mechanism. Additionally, many victims of human trafficking are deterred by the very long period it takes (years, in many cases) before hearing the final outcome of their NRM application. Our parent charity AFRUCA Safeguarding Children has worked with first responders to refer victims for NRM support. Our view is that the NRM process itself was designed to detect false claims of trafficking as victims go through different layers of assessment – from reasonable grounds to conclusive grounds. Hence, it is not clear how the NRM process could be exploited by individuals claiming asylum in the UK.

## **5. How can legislation, including the Modern Slavery Act 2015, policy and criminal justice system practice be improved to prevent and address human trafficking?**

5.1 To respond to this question, we refer to the recommendations in our Race Equality Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan for the UK Modern Slavery Sector. For emphasis:

5.2 We call on the Government to adopt a ‘Victim/Survivor First’ Policy in relation to modern slavery and human trafficking irrespective of race, ethnicity and country of origin of victims. The government should stop what in our view is a racist policy of stigmatising and criminalising victims of human trafficking and strengthen its obligations under current legislation and international conventions to meet their needs.

5.3 Government and service providers should improve provision of free, specialist, culturally appropriate, trauma informed services for all survivors of modern slavery. The current patchwork quilt of support services does not meet the overall needs of victims, and in some cases, compounds their recovering and healing.

5.4 Related to this, the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) Victim Care Contractor should develop and implement a robust and comprehensive Action Plan on addressing race Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in service provision. This should include the recruitment of a specialist Focal Point on EDI and Survivor Engagement to help address claims of racism and homophobia in government funded safe houses.

5.5 Government should use ethnicity data to ensure equitable treatment and decision-making for all victims/survivors at all stages of the National Referral Mechanism process. Currently the lack of data makes it difficult to understand the scale of human trafficking across the country. This helps to promote and strengthen the negative portrayal of victims as “milking the system”.

5.6 We call on the government to demonstrate better and more robust commitment to the principles of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in modern slavery and human trafficking policy and service provision. We ask the government to build closer relationship with communities affected by human trafficking and modern slavery and create better opportunities for dialogue to address this intractable problem with “one voice”.

5.7 Racism and homophobia in government funded safe-houses requires urgent inquiry to help improve protection and safety of survivors/victims.

5.8 Lastly, we call on the government to declare a national emergency in addressing the issue of children missing from home, being trafficked for criminal exploitation, working in tandem with affected Black and ethnic communities to make this happen.

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