

Citizenship or Silence? The Moral Impact of the UK's New Citizenship Law on Refugee Survivors of Modern Slavery

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Abstract

This dissertation critically analyses the moral and legal implications of recent reforms to UK migration laws, especially the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and the Illegal Migration Act 2023, for the treatment of refugee survivors of modern slavery. It suggests that those laws have reshaped the British asylum and citizenship complex, displacing a jurisprudence of rights with one primary concerned with deterrence, control and conditionality. Traumatized and focused on crossing irregular channels, survivors are asked to produce an overabundance of evidence. Drawing on trauma theory, moral philosophy and comparative legal analysis, this dissertation examines how the UK asylum system demands an ordered and dispassionate testimony that overlooks the fractured and non-linear nature of trauma. It has survivors' fear of death because they are punished for being a late or inconsistent discloser, and their silence is equated with dishonesty. The research shows how deservingness turns citizenship into a bribe for being compliant rather than an admission of mutual humanity. Through qualitative research analysis and survivor accounts, the study demonstrates how institutional mechanisms, including the National Referral Mechanism, often re-traumatizes victims without offering lasting protection. A comparison with the model provided for in Article 18 of Italian law reveals the potential of more trauma-sensitive and rights-based approaches that place recovery at the centre of the process, rather than requiring cooperation with law enforcement as a condition for support. Ultimately, the dissertation concludes that the UK's migration governance is failing as it contravenes international obligations under the Palermo Protocol and Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The redress of this means an extensive reform to asylum and citizenship policy which centres unconditional protection, elevates life-led models of worth, and conceives citizenship not as a conditional entitlement but as a right integrated within dignity, care, and justice.

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Introduction

In recent years, the United Kingdom has undergone a significant shift in how it treats migration, asylum, and citizenship. Despite the enactment of the NBA and IMA laws, the UK is undergoing drastic changes in its immigration system. These changes alter the system through which victims of modern slavery receive support, introducing a stricter system of control and conditions that must be met before they can receive protection in the UK. The government supports these measures to protect citizens' rights and keep the country safe and under control. Given that, this was the initial reason for Brexit: "Regain control of its borders." However, the government still fails to mitigate the effect these laws are causing on the victims, which often re-traumatise them (Balch & Hesketh, 2024).

This research examines the morality of these laws, concentrating on what impact they have on people who have otherwise survived modern slavery. Many of these people are irregular migrants struggling with their cases, facing legal challenges. Yet, instead of receiving absolute security, they face proof demands, credibility tests, and official procedures which tend to silence them and diminish their respectability. The United Kingdom (UK) asylum system increasingly requires survivors to provide organised and emotionally controlled accounts, ignoring the fragmented nature of trauma and the anxiety that often accompanies telling their stories (Ward & Fouladvand, 2018)

The Palermo Protocol (2000) is a central element of this investigation. As a fundamental international instrument, it obliges signatory countries to protect trafficking victims, ensure they are not punished for acts committed under duress, and prioritise their rehabilitation rather than focusing on migration control. Despite being a signatory, the UK's recent legislative advances raise serious questions about its commitment to these principles. The IMA, for instance, deems people arriving in the country irregularly inadmissible, even when there is clear evidence of trafficking. Similarly, the NBA division of asylum seekers into "Group 1" and "Group 2" creates a hierarchy of protection that penalises those who fail to meet strict procedural requirements (Gov.UK, 2022). Besides contradicting the spirit of the Palermo Protocol, these measures reveal a broader ideological commitment to national sovereignty, to the detriment of solidarity with the most vulnerable.

The MSA, once looked upon as an advance in safeguarding the interests of the victims, has increasingly been utilised as a way to control migratory patterns. Created to locate and support victims of modern slavery, however, the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in practice

appears to have become an arena of delays, distrust and re-traumatisation. But survivors face increasingly long waits, few opportunities to gain either housing or psychological help, and always-feared deportation. The NBA changes implemented can be noted by the implementation of Section 63 of the NBA, where support through the NRM can be refused if the victim delays their disclosure (Heys, 2023)

The UK continues to emphasise the victim's credibility and manners for people who are profoundly traumatised to be required to speak out clearly, logically and in good spirit, which can be sometimes impossible. However, psychological studies on survivor testimonies found that the impact of trauma weakens an individual's memory, leading to incoherent disclosure of the facts (Galappathie, 2024). Notwithstanding, the system continues to penalise those who present fragmented stories, interpreting silence or emotional distress as a sign of dishonesty. This performative expectation not only silences survivors but also fuels a form of institutional violence, in which mechanisms designed to protect end up generating more pain (Poole & Rafanell, 2018).

The concept of "deservingness" plays a central role in the UK migration discourse. Citizenship is increasingly seen as a reward for good behaviour, economic productivity, and cooperation with law enforcement. Refugees and survivors of human trafficking are often required to demonstrate gratitude, docility, and resilience, often under impossible conditions (Mojtahedi et al., 2026). The Victim Temporary Stay (VTS) visa, granted to survivors, offers only temporary protection and seldom leads to permanent residency. This conditional model sharply contrasts with the rights-based approach advocated by the Palermo Protocol, which is applied more inclusively in countries like Italy, where victims can obtain residence permits without the need for mandatory cooperation with authorities (Palumbo, 2024).

Italian legislation has shown itself to be more empathetic towards the victims with the implementation of Article 18 of Decree No. 286/1998, which allows victims of modern slavery to remain and receive a residence permit in Italy due to the need for social protection focusing on the victim's safety, and not on an exchange of favours where the victim only receives support if they collaborate with the authorities. Italy recognises the complexity of the trauma each victim has faced. Therefore, it does not require these individuals to retell their stories or beg for help to demonstrate their need for protection. On the contrary, Italy focuses on mental health and integration, which has proven to be positive and has strengthened trust between victims and organisations that support them.

The UK's migration policies also reflect a broader ideological commitment to sovereignty and control, often to the detriment of international legal standards. Parliamentary sovereignty is frequently used as justification for resisting external human rights frameworks, such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the Council of Europe Convention on Trafficking in Human Beings. This stance allows the government to prioritise domestic interests above humanitarian responsibilities, portraying survivors as potential profiteers off the system rather than people in need of protection (Young, 2023). As a result, many ultimately become trapped in a legal limbo, between recognition and exclusion, unable to rebuild their lives or access justice.

To guide this research, the dissertation establishes three interconnected objectives:

1. *Assess the extent to which UK policies marginalise and criminalise survivors of human trafficking and modern slavery.*
2. *Examine how securitisation and externalisation influence how the country governs asylum and combats human trafficking.*
3. *Investigate the possibilities of trauma-sensitive strategies to transform policies and practices into survivor-centred models of care.*

These aims are examined through three key conceptual lenses:

- Using securitisation, migration and exploitation are portrayed as threats to national security that must be punished with more oppressive measures (Benson & Sigona, 2024). It can be understood from this point how political rhetoric can influence decisions in legislation, frequently pushing the concern for human rights into a secondary position.
- Polymorphous Borders can illustrate how exclusion takes place across multiple and often mundane sites of everyday institutions, sidelining particular bodies (Griffiths & Yeo 2021). It validates that borders are geographical, not simply in the sense of there being unchangeable physical limits, but it is established through bureaucratic procedures, legal definitions and institutional culture as well.
- The Trauma-Informed Care model prioritises the safety, empowerment, and recovery of survivors whilst taking into account the psychological impacts of exploitation and institutional neglect (Williamson et al., 2024). The idea is to have policies that support victims rather than punishing them.

In addition, the following analysis is based on a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology for the investigation of these hypotheses. Documentary analysis of British legislation; The international legal frameworks; academic research and survivors' testimonies. Grounded in the theory of trauma, critical and legal studies and moral economy, which is written in more detail to support the understanding of how policy and law intertwine with the present. The approaches of the UK and Italy are both compared using Article 18 of Italian law as a reference. Survivor narratives, drawn from NGO's reports and qualitative studies, are used to highlight the human impact of policy decisions and challenge prevailing institutional narratives. This study was approved by the University of Coventry Ethics department ref(P186108).

The methodology adopted deeply values ethical sensitivity, ensuring that survivors' voices are treated with respect and authenticity. While the study does not conduct direct interviews, it draws on public testimonies and academic research that highlight the experiences and perspectives of these individuals. The methodological choice allows for a careful and empathetic analysis of the impacts of UK immigration laws on some of society's most vulnerable individuals. Furthermore, the incorporation of comparative public models, especially Italy's inclusive and decentralised approach, provides an essential perspective for assessing the restrictive nature of the British system.

Through this conceptual and methodological lens, the research demonstrates how UK migration laws are used not only as legal norms but also as moral and symbolic tools informing public opinion, defining institutional practices, and ultimately shaping survivors' experiences. The dissertation further foregrounds the ethical complexities of combining national interest with humanitarianism, rebuffing the dichotomous response that control and compassion are mutually exclusive. Using moral philosophy, particularly theories of justice and care ethics, the work considers the values that inform British policies and assesses whether current practices reflect core principles such as dignity, autonomy, and solidarity.

This dissertation ultimately argues that the UK is morally failing in its current immigration policy. That, in turn, undermines the values it professes to champion, turning citizenship into a provisional benefit and asylum into a test of faith. The increased focus on deterrence, confinement, and surveillance contravenes international standards and further erodes the confidence of refugees fleeing disaster who are trying to speak out. Authentic reforms are transformative: trauma-informed, survivor-centric and human rights-led; in which protection

is unconditional, testimonies are believed, and citizenship is regained as an emanation of membership and respect.

To address these inquiries, this dissertation synthesises survivor testimony, legal doctrine, and comparative public strategies to expose the quotidian experiences of those who suffer most tremendously. It emphasises the survivor narratives, whilst attributing agency, resilience and demonstrating nuance to these affected adults. In this context, silence is not a duplicitous manoeuvre; it tends to be an adaptation rooted in trauma and policy violence. The study thus takes issue with dominant narratives by arguing for a more humane and rights-based form of migration governance, focusing on dignity, empathy, and justice.

Chapter 1: Silence and Survival: Dignity in UK Asylum Law

The way that current UK laws and policies matter such as citizenship, asylum claims, and identifying human trafficking survivors, is thoroughly examined in this chapter. It focuses mainly on the NBA modifications and how they have impacted the treatment of refugees and victims of modern slavery. The research aims to analyse how these regulations directly impact these individuals' experiences and life choices, posing significant moral dilemmas on how to strike a balance between border control, legal rights recognition, and human dignity.

1.1. Balancing Borders and Rights: The Complex Legacy of the NBA

The NBA marked a significant shift in the UK immigration policy. Its main aim was to discourage irregular migration and make the asylum application process more efficient. Proposed by the Home Secretary and supported by influential figures in Parliament, the Act was presented as a response to growing concerns about border security and the misuse of asylum routes. Among the main points of the new legislation are the division of asylum seekers into two groups: "Group 1" and "Group 2", the introduction of so-called Priority Removal Notices, and the expansion of the government's power to revoke citizenship. While the government claims the law has helped reduce irregular crossings across the English Channel, Home Office data shows that this drop was only temporary in 2023, followed by a further increase in 2024 and 2025 (fig.1). Therefore, it raises questions about the real effectiveness of the measures adopted and whether the objectives of the legislation are being achieved.

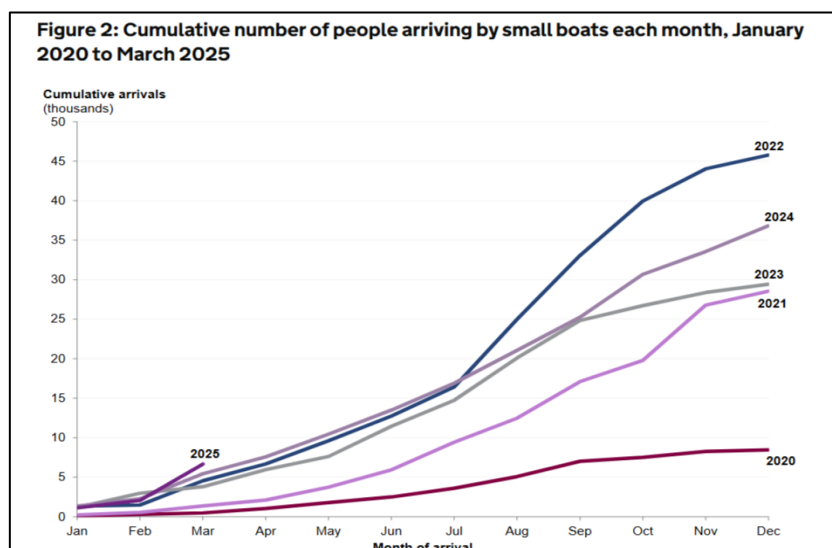


Figure 1 - Irregular boat arrivals in the UK (Gov.UK, 2025a).

The government supports this logic to divide asylum requests into “Group 1” and “Group 2”, stating that it is a more focused and equitable system for the NBA. The performance is given to the first group of applicants at a higher risk of life and persecution. By contrast, the background checks for those in Group 2 are harsher because they come from countries perceived to pose a greater security risk. The government argue that this curbs unsafe passage, disrupts human trafficking rings and assures support for those who follow legal channels. From a public policy standpoint, however, these measures serve to boost the public trust in the asylum process and limit misuse. However, it raises a question about whether this approach violates the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, which prohibits punishment based on how refugees enter the country.

Furthermore, many academics criticise this new system that categorises asylum seekers, arguing that making this categorisation is a violation of the United Nations Convention of 1951 (UN), which prohibits refugees from being penalised regardless of how they entered the country. Moreover, academics such as Kuzniar (2022, p.256) and O’Nions (2023, p.28) emphasise that, in practice, irregular entry often constitutes the only viable route for individuals seeking to escape persecution in their countries. Also supported by Hughes (2022, p.548), highlighting a structural limitation of the system: the requirement for cohesive, linearly organised narratives from asylum seekers. These impositions made by the government disregard the psychological impacts, creating even greater trauma, compromising the individual in reporting their experiences in a clear, chronological and consistent manner, causing a violation of international protection protocols.

Moreover, the Act also introduced a priority removal notice plan, a rapid mechanism that will process asylum applications faster and can be made outside the UK. Likewise, the UK had a plan to transfer asylum seekers to Rwanda until their asylum claim was granted; however, this plan was later dropped. As Balch (2022, p.331) argues, the UK's most recent migration policies have been widely criticised for running counter to available evidence, raising serious questions about their effectiveness, ethical foundations, and impact on human rights. Another clause criticised in this Act is the revocation of British citizenship without prior notice. This measure has been widely criticised for its potentially disproportionate impact on dual nationals, its profound implications for civil liberties and the principle of legal certainty.

Nevertheless, although the reduction in irregular arrivals in 2024 and 2025 may, at first glance, suggest that deterrence measures have a positive effect. It should be noted that the significant increase in vulnerable individuals, including victims of human trafficking, is creating challenges for the government to treat each case with respect and justice (Boduszek et al., 2017), avoiding the re-traumatisation of these people.

Griffiths & Trebilcock (2022, p.416) argue that legislation contributes to creating a “hostile environment,” the effects of which fall not only on migrants but also on those who act in their defence. Balch & Hesketh (2024, p.335) also support Griffiths and Trebilcock's view that implementation without support will backfire and undermine the UK asylum system by eroding trust and credibility. The creation of the NBA was fast-tracked to highlight imperfections in asylum and deter irregular migration. According to the government, new legislation would make the asylum process less complicated, prevent abuses of the system and restore public confidence (Gov.UK, 2022). The classifications of “Group 1” and “Group 2” were meant to ensure that actual beneficiaries would not only prioritise but also receive much-needed protection. Critics say that they contribute to an unequal system, while the government argues that it provides a more efficient way for resources to be distributed and prevents dangerous crossings.

1.2.Between Reform and Reality: The MSA's Unfulfilled Potential

When it was created, the MSA was seen as a significant step forward. It brought together in one piece of legislation only crimes related to slavery, forced labour, and human trafficking. The goal was to empower authorities to act, increase punishments for those affected, and offer greater protection to victims, especially with the creation of the NRM, which helps identify and support these individuals. The law also introduced an essential rule on transparency in

supply chains. Large companies must publicly explain what they are doing to prevent modern slavery in their operations. The idea is to encourage greater accountability and ethics in the private sector.

The MSA, by contrast, was a significant leap forward. The creation of the Anti-Slavery Commissioner and greater collaboration between agencies signalled quite rightly the hope for systemic change. These measures are essential to addressing the sophisticated networks of exploitation, according to industry experts and non-governmental organisations.

Though initially lauded for centre-staging victims in the process of prosecution, it has been recently criticised as a measure with the focus on immigration control. The actual structure gives priority to everything other than the victims, which can undermine the current legislation and its humanitarian purposes Balch & Hesketh, (2024, p.330). However, the government maintain that it is essentially a way to protect the system and prevent it from being abused. The government says that to maintain public confidence and allocate resources responsibly, each claim needs in-depth scrutiny to separate the real from the fraudulent. The way this conflict crystallises the security and empathy dichotomy is a practical example of just how difficult it is to balance policy security and empathy in public policy-making.

The NRM, introduced by the MSA, was developed to identify and support victims of modern slavery through a two-step process: a reasonable grounds and conclusive grounds decision. The UK's approach to human trafficking as a migration issue with the MSA conflicts with the Palermo Protocol. This international instrument confirms that protection and rehabilitation of victims is at the forefront, safeguarded from their immigration status. The system was put in place to allow for a full, unbiased review, but critics said it has led to delays and has been moved too late. However, reports from the British Red Cross and UNHCR reveal that delays in decision-making increase their vulnerability; furthermore, a lack of appropriate housing and psychological support severely impacts them (British Redcross, 2022). Heys (2022, p.69) bolsters these claims: the government's betrayal is an "institutional" one. In addition, if the resulting problems were due to outrageous evil, then they would be much harder to fix than political reorganisation that makes a conscious effort to grasp the psychological devastation left over after extreme trauma.

Likewise, it is tough to employ trauma-sensitive practices using the NRM model, as victims further suffer emotional distress as it takes longer for help to be provided. However, the government has defended this process of checks, insisting that without them, criminals could

fraudulently abuse benefits. This balance between procedural rigour and empathy is reflective of the conflation in public of national interest with humanitarian imperative.

Cultural norms make it even more challenging to recognise victims. As Machura et al. (2018, p.213) argue, there is a common stereotype of the “ideal victim”, someone passive, grateful, and visibly shaken. People who do not fit this profile, such as those exploited in domestic or informal work, often go unnoticed. It reinforces exclusions and undermines the law’s purpose, which is to protect all victims, without exception.

Moreover, the enactment of the NBA made the MSA approach more binding, particularly through Section 63. It permits authorities to refuse the NRM support to a victim who delays reporting their experience or provides evidence of security concerns. The government argue this measure is necessary to prevent people from taking advantage of the system, while critics may see this approach as a hurdle that could deter genuine victims. Balch & Hesketh (2024, p.331) characterise these measures as a tactic to lower demands, whilst Heys (2022, p.61) argues that it serves to undermine institutional trust and deters survivors from seeking assistance. Similarly, Machura et al. (2018, p.213) assert these measures reinvent cultural stereotypes of characteristics that define protection while neglecting other profiles. This movement is in line with a broader push to make UK policies about control and credibility rather than empathy and inclusion, which risks undermining the protections that the system is meant to provide.

Malloch & Stanley (2020, p.64) further suggests that harm is systematically embedded in the logic of the political economy; UNHCR identifies inconsistencies with the legal compliance; Heys (2022, p.58) points to institutional fragmentation and Machura et al., (2018, p.213) echoes Malloch & Stanley point arguing on the failure to recognise less visible victims socially. These critiques indicate that the MSA’s limitations are not only operational but also discursive, based on social and political assumptions.

The implementation of the MSA, however, has resulted in ethical and practical challenges despite the critical reforms it introduced. The problem arises when the issue of protection becomes control, which is not what it was built for. As such, if the approach and practices towards addressing crime are victim-blaming, this system may perpetuate trauma rather than provide the necessary support to victims. From a government perspective, the need to regulate abuse of the MSA must mean making immigration status integral. Authorities claim the NRM could be abused by those who want to stall deportation or secure leave to remain with little

valid cause unless concrete tests are performed (Home Office, 2024). That is one reason behind this view. It lacks the confidence to be sustainable in terms of the UK victim support.

1.3.Citizenship as Privilege: The Shifting Landscape of Belonging in the UK

The government has adopted strict citizenship measures, restricting how it approaches migration, identity, and belonging within the UK. Benson & Sigona (2024, p.2045) criticise this government approach, reporting that this new system resembles a negative hierarchy in which the country grants citizenship only to those who deserve it, abandoning it as a fundamental right and making it a right based on contributions for services rendered to the government. The restrictions become more evident since this new law gives the Home Secretary the power to revoke citizenship, sometimes even without prior notice.

Moreover, with the idea of strengthening national security, the government advocates for a conditional citizenship model only for those who meet the requirements, demonstrating that the government maintains control over its immigration system. The government defends that revoking citizenship is necessary mainly for people who demonstrate a threat to the country and those with dual citizenship, as they would not be left stateless if revocation were required. However, critics oppose this law, warning that these measures ultimately affect racialised groups, further increasing exclusion. Lomba (2010, p.431) argues that by taking extreme policy measures, this can become a common discriminatory practice, further affecting those in the most vulnerable situations seeking asylum or protection because they are victims of human trafficking in the country.

In addition, survivors of human trafficking or modern slavery are among the most vulnerable victims in the country. Although there are legal ways to obtain citizenship, such as through long-term residency or a work visa, there is no citizenship pathway for victims of human trafficking in modern slavery. The immigration system only allows these individuals a temporary residence visa, known as VTS, which enables them to stay until they receive the necessary treatment and are then invited to leave the UK. According to UNHCR (2022), excessive delays and inconsistent policy implementation ultimately put these people at risk of reliving trauma. As a result, a country whose citizenship system was a symbol of respect and security has now become known as a reward system in which only those useful to the government are considered eligible.

However, this change is making it even harder for human trafficking survivors. They are forced to consistently demonstrate gratitude, good behaviour, and economic productivity in order to be recognised as “deserving” of citizenship. Despite this, large numbers remain traumatised and homeless or psychologically anguished; the demands are both unjust and impossible. Stewart & Mulvey (2014, p.1026) similarly criticise the merit-based citizenship model on a moral basis for being too demanding of refugees and is hence in conflict with their rational skill set theories. Traditional forms of protection and the need to “prove” a right to citizenship decelerate integration, creating fear-based naturalisation instead of voluntary membership.

The UK already does not apply exclusionary citizenship models consistently. Mulvey et al. (2023, p.962) found that the refugee and returnee policies executed in Scotland were more accommodating and sympathetic compared with those confronted by Westminster. The Scottish authorities, for their part, use language that gives priority to dignity and broader access to services, a sign of how devolved governments can twist or resist national guidelines. This regional diversity indicates the possibility of more humane and rights-based responses within the British migration system.

Although refugee status is recognised by law, many displaced people are still treated as “citizens under observation” in the UK, meaning their right to remain in the country is constantly being reassessed. Perez (2023, p.317) states that this system places refugees in legal, moral, and bureaucratic uncertainty. Thus, the issue goes far beyond a simple technical problem; it is a profound ethical dilemma. When state power overrides the principle of justice, citizenship ceases to be a universal right based on our common humanity and becomes a privilege that can be taken away.

Nonetheless, there are possible paths forward. Mulvey et al. (2023, p.961) argue that rights-based models of inclusion are not only viable, but also fundamental. Instead of distrust and rigid demands, these models prioritise dignity, empathy, and stability. As debates about citizenship continue to evolve, the real challenge is to reclaim its original meaning, not as a reward for good behaviour, but as a guarantee of belonging and protection, especially for the most vulnerable. The government defend the power to revoke citizenship as a necessary tool to protect national security, especially in cases related to terrorism or serious crime. According to the Home Office (2025a), this measure is applied very restrictively and only when the person poses a clear threat. Furthermore, the process is conducted in a way that prevents anyone from becoming stateless, particularly affecting individuals with dual nationality.

1.4. When Truth Is Measured by Performance: The Burden of Credibility on Survivors

In the UK's asylum and victim protection system, sharing personal stories has shifted from a legal requirement to a moral expectation. Likewise, to ensure a positive response from the government, victims are pressured to share their experiences in a robotic way that implies clarity and controlled emotion, ignoring all the trauma these individuals have faced. According to Heys (2022, p.69), these expectations ignore the devastating effects of psychological trauma, which can affect memory, scramble the order of events, and make it challenging to construct a coherent narrative. However, the system still penalises these victims for providing inaccurate or late reports, putting their credibility at risk, instead of offering support and empathy.

Additionally, the government alleges that if the victim shares their story immediately upon entering the service, it will prevent fraud and lies, protecting the victim and also keeping the system's integrity. The government defends that such a new rule will help decisions come faster and require less time to do so. However, critics argue that the visa sanctions are seldom supported by evidence. Here, the criticism of Goodey (2008, p.433) raises concerns that the system puts suspension above compassion, arguing that there are few firm grounds for believing systems abuse claims; instead, much is mere hearsay. Nevertheless, they are continuing to frame public opinion and set the vectors for legislation, supported as well by (Balch & Hesketh, 2024, p.2).

Moreover, these pressures have only intensified with the introduction of the NBA. The law places less value on later disclosures and strongly emphasises “structured” testimony, reflecting a legal culture that often equates emotional control with credibility. While the Home Office argues that this approach is necessary to deter false claims and ensure fairness, Ward & Fouladvand (2018, p.148) highlight the heavy burden it places on survivors. They explain that victims are often forced to relive their trauma under intense legal scrutiny, a process that can be deeply retraumatising and ultimately counterproductive.

Furthermore, Karvelis (2013, p.277) asserts that a critical but often overlooked issue is the fear of retaliation. Many survivors remain silent, not because they are being dishonest, but because they are afraid. That fear may come from traffickers or even people within their communities. Oram et al. (2011, p.11) build on this point, arguing that the legal system's tendency to revictimize survivors is not an unfortunate side effect; it is a predictable outcome of institutional processes that fail to consider deep psychological scars left by exploitation.

Country of origin information (COI) was created to provide context for the protection of the applications. However, in practice, it is often used selectively to discredit survivors. Pettitt et al. (2008) criticise this approach, noting that COI can fuel a distrust culture where incomplete or emotionally fragmented accounts are viewed with suspicion. Rather than supporting victims, COI often weakens their stories, reinforcing a system that values procedural over emotional truth.

The situation also proves that the system is struggling, as it takes precedence over victims and due process. The immigration law provisions offered victims only minimal protection, and Goodey (2008, p.433) notes that the system is built upon extremely fragile assumptions about false allegations. Goodey (2008, p.433), with whom Ward & Fouladvand (2013, p.141) are essentially in agreement, is adamant that there should not be a right or wrong for the victims to retell their story. The tension between compassion and control, uncompromisingly depicted in their analyses, is a struggle that often deprives those whom the system should have safeguarded.

1.5.Performing Credibility: How the System Silences Survivors

In order to access support in the UK through the asylum and modern slavery system, survivors are often asked to report their experiences within a controlled and emotionally muted framework. Instead, what Hughes (2021, p.4) writes is that this expectation without a doubt splinters their identities and makes them live according to a “drama” model, in which performance takes precedence over authenticity. Although the government maintains this method to legitimise credibility and not fraud, this can punish actual survivors who experience their trauma incoherently. The system may inadvertently proffer the protection of emotional and bureaucratic walls in place of genuine empathy, which would otherwise inform its ethics, thus betraying itself.

Nevertheless, from the policy standpoint, these expectations are often framed as efforts to ensure fairness and prevent false claims. Officials argue that emotional control and clarity are essential for assessing credibility. However, this approach usually overlooks the psychological complexity of trauma. Poole & Rafanell (2018, p.13) describe the result as a “false faith” system that continues harmful practices even when their consequences are known. Aware of the risks, survivors often shape their stories to match what they believe will be accepted, leaving out important details to avoid disbelief, detention, or deportation.

This pressure produces the effect of institutional self-censorship, undermining its credibility and fairness. Complicating matters, emotional pain is also often written as manipulation, and silence is the only way of dealing with it. Wells et al. (2024, p.6) also claim that the compulsion to conform to a scripted narrative robs survivors' autonomy and increases mental health issues. When their experiences do not meet the system's expectations, they are discounted in a way that is, in truth, a form of moral violence. Over time, many survivors internalise this logic, ceasing to see themselves as people needing support and beginning to see themselves as problems that must be managed.

Hughes (2021, p.12) questions that silence always represents submission, suggesting it can be a subtle form of resistance. While this view offers a more complex understanding of survivors' autonomy, Poole & Rafanell (2018, p.6) warn that it can ignore the lasting psychological damage caused by institutional pressure. Survivors are often placed into rigid categories, which may facilitate access to services but also risks erasing their individual experiences. Therefore, to protect the system, relying on standardised assessments can end up deepening trauma and perpetuating exclusion.

The UK is thus grounded in a perplexing paradox, as Wells et al. (2024, p.6) state, constant uncertainty, prolonged waiting and relocation pressure combine to encourage survivors either to acclimate or modify their behaviour in order to demonstrate credibility. Peaceful is the silence in such a realm where the worry lurks.

1.6. Institutionalising Exclusion: How UK Asylum Policy Undermines Human Rights

The IMA has achieved a marked change in the UK policy; this was a government re-commitment to a securitised response. It argues, like the NBA, that anyone arriving trigger-haphazardly ought to be naturally ousted, including survivors of human trafficking and asylum seekers. The government insists that the measures are needed to secure its borders from illegal immigration, restore public confidence and protect national security. However, critics argue it smashes humanitarian values and disregards the country's international obligations by putting asylum seekers in jeopardy, rather than safeguarding them.

Home Secretary defends tougher and stricter border control, arguing that it is needed to defend national security and the asylum system in the UK. The law, according to Benson & Sigona (2024, p.15), establishes a racialised hierarchy of citizenship which reduces the right to

protection into a form of conditional privilege for those living in other states, should they meet specific behavioural standards as well as procedural requirements. This has, in practice, meant that automatic detention, denial of legal remedies, and the announcement of plans to deport these individuals to third countries are entirely permissible (This concern was dealt with some time ago when it was discussed in the Rwanda Bill). Many international organisations, such as the UN and ECHR, have condemned this policy.

Furthermore, Savatic et al. (2024, p.6) see the Act as part of a broader strategy of exclusion under control. Presenting migration as a crisis justifies increasingly harsh measures, transforming human vulnerability into a perceived threat to the national order. The shift from an approach based on humanitarian protection to the logic of deterrence is not accidental, is intentional and systematic. Using the legal apparatus to enforce exclusion reflects what Wells et al. (2024, p.5) call “institutionalised precarity,” in which uncertainty and instability become part of the daily lives of those seeking refuge. Instead of offering security, the system generates fear and insecurity in the lives of people who already face enormous challenges.

This policy is profoundly affecting people’s psyches. As Wells et al. (2024, p.6) point out, what hurts most is not always the visible restrictions, but rather those that take hold internally: the loss of self-esteem, the trauma of living in constant uncertainty, and the emotional toll of confronting a system that repeatedly denies one’s very humanity. Benson and Sigona Show how the exclusion of migrants is often linked to race. Savatic et al. (2024, p.5) however, draw attention to an important point: focusing solely on the race can lead us to ignore other, larger structures that also marginalise people in precarious situations, regardless of their origins. Together, these insights reveal how specific policies, under the guise of maintaining order, can silently undermine people’s dignity.

The law has sparked controversy both in the UK and internationally. Some scholars, such as Schuster (2018, p.2), suggest that the system is so flawed that what might ordinarily be protective mechanisms become exclusionary tools, at least for those most in need of protection and shelter. He questions whether UK policy could breach key legal obligations, such as the ECHR and the 1951 Refugee Convention. The government defends that reform is indispensable to take back into its own hands the asylum system and control of its borders.

The UK's citizenship and asylum laws, especially those introduced by the NBA and the MSA, demonstrate a worrying shift: instead of protecting, they end up excluding the victims. People who have survived modern slavery face barriers that undermine their dignity and silence their

stories. True justice requires a rights-based approach guided by empathy, stability, and inclusion, where citizenship is treated as a right for all, not a privilege reserved for the few. The next chapter gives voice to survivors and reveals the human effects of legal uncertainty.

Chapter 2: Legal Limbo - The Fragile Status of Trafficking Survivors

The legislative changes do not just shape policies; they transform lives. For people who have survived human trafficking, the consequences are fierce. Instead of finding shelter, many end up trapped in an uncertain legal status, suspended between promises of protection and the constant threat of punishment. They live agonisingly, waiting with no clear path, seeking safety but unable to return. The Palermo Protocol (2000) is the foundation of international law against human trafficking. It requires countries to protect victims, punish traffickers, and ensure that no one is penalised for acts committed under coercion. Although the UK is a signatory, recent laws such as the IMA and the NBA call this commitment into question. Therefore, by prioritising deterrence over protection, these policies undermine the Protocol's core principles and leave survivors in an uncertain and vulnerable legal situation. This chapter delves into the realities of this imposed instability, where fear, silence, and the reactivation of trauma become part of the routine of those who have faced the unimaginable.

The legal landscape for survivors of human trafficking has been profoundly impacted by the UK's increasing focus on immigration control, as evidenced by the IMA. While this Act aims to "to prevent and deter unlawful migration, particularly migration by unsafe and illegal routes" and claims to "protect the integrity of the UK's immigration system and the safety of those who might otherwise be exploited by people smugglers" (Legislation.gov.uk, 2023), the way the law was implemented has raised concerns about the possible unintended consequences, especially for people in vulnerable situation.

The government argues that these measures are crucial to prevent abuses of the asylum system and preserve public trust. However, critics raise questions about the impact of these policies on how trafficking victims are perceived, changing them from being seen as those in precarious conditions in need of protection to being treated as potential exploiters of the system. It ultimately weakens the safeguards created to support them. Therefore, current debates, both in the political and academic areas, revolve around this tension between deterrence measures and the need to guarantee protection. Moreover, Arnell (2025, p.2) argues that although official

discourse emphasises border control and protection, in practice, law enforcement has been criticised for playing a role in a situation of legal ambiguity, where they are deprived of protection precisely because of the circumstances in which they arrived in the country.

The government's justification is based on the principles of parliamentary sovereignty and domestic authority. Young (2023, p.4), from a constitutionalist perspective, argues that international courts or external legal interpretations should not limit the British Parliament. This view helps to understand why the UK has demonstrated increasing resistance to international human rights commitments, especially in the context of its migration policy. In addition, by asserting its sovereign legal authority, the state can minimise, or even ignore, international standards for combating human trafficking, such as those established by the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, and the ECHR (2022). This ideological stance allows the government to justify the exclusion of trafficking survivors under the guise of protecting the national interest and preserving its legal autonomy.

However, this assertion of sovereignty has a direct and profound impact on the legal and emotional lives of survivors. Arnell (2025, p.2) notes that the IMA considers anyone arriving through irregular channels inadmissible, even when there is clear evidence of trafficking. Therefore, this policy weakens the MSA, once seen as a landmark in victim protection, and leaves many vulnerable people without any real protection.

Furthermore, when attempting to seek justice under section 45 of the MSA, many survivors face unexpected barriers. Heys (2023, p.13) shows that even in these cases, relief is often denied due to overly rigid requirements regarding how the victim must behave and tell their story. As a result, these individuals are prevented from seeking asylum and lose access to legal defences created precisely to protect them.

According to Helen Bamber Foundation (2023, p.28), survivors who entered the NRM face long periods of waiting and uncertainty, during which they are prevented from working, studying, or fully recovering. These administrative delays are not mere one-off errors; they are an adversarial policy framework that discourages reporting and penalises vulnerability. Gadd & Broad (2023, p.16) argue that these practices are leading to the “collapse” of the anti-modern slavery agenda, as survivors are increasingly criminalised and discredited.

Nonetheless, this criminalisation also violates a fundamental principle of the international fight against trafficking: the principle of non-punishment of victims. According to the Council of Europe report (2022), the UK has not implemented sufficient safeguards to ensure that

survivors are not prosecuted for acts committed under coercion. Bales & Mayblin (2018, p.2) illustrate this contradiction by showing that detained migrants, including trafficking victims, are forced to work in precarious conditions, in a system they describe as “unfree labour.” The same state that denies protection to these individuals benefits from their vulnerability while in custody.

Ultimately, when analysed together, these sources reveal a deeper pattern. The deterrence model adopted by the UK goes beyond simple migratory control; it expresses an ideological commitment to the supremacy of internal legislation on the theatricalisation of borders, as highlighted by Young (2023, p.4) and Gadd & Broad (2023, p.3). This vision transforms the legal limbo into a strategic tool: to deny a state legal status, the government discourages new requests, frames what is in progress and reaffirms its national authority. Therefore, this context, or limbo, is not a policy error, but a planned outcome, a form of governance based on sovereignty, not humanitarian protection.

2.1.Deterrence Over Dignity: The Human Cost of the UK’s Asylum

The British government presents the IMA as an essential measure to restore order, reduce irregular migration, and preserve public confidence in the asylum system. Inspired by international models such as Australia’s deterrence strategy (Riva et al., 2025, p.2), policymakers advocate for robust action to prevent abuses and secure borders. However, this approach raises ethical and humanitarian concerns. While deterrence may serve administrative objectives, Mayblin et al. (2024, p.16) argue that it disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, especially survivors of human trafficking. Their research highlights that detention and uncertainty exacerbate trauma and mental health issues, hindering recovery and access to justice. The real challenge lies in balancing the state’s legitimate interests with its commitment to protecting human rights and providing trauma-sensitive care, especially for the most vulnerable.

Mayblin et al. (2024, p.16) highlight the severe impact of immigration detention on mental health, such as increased anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal thoughts (McDermott, 2018). These effects are even more profound in human trafficking victims, whose prior trauma intensifies the suffering caused by confinement. Mulcaire et al. (2024, p.8) further argue that health inequalities at the border are not accidental; political decisions maintain them. Her research also shows that deterrence policies are not merely bureaucratic but structurally violent. Although the government claims that immigration detention is administrative and

temporary, in practice, its effects resemble those of a punitive system. Therefore, this leads to the traumatisation and isolation of people already in vulnerable situations.

Furthermore, Griffiths (2024, p.9) shows how immigration is managed in the UK, which is deeply influenced by emotions, primarily suspicion and emotional distancing. These attitudes directly influence the decisions made by those on the front lines (Dlamini et al., 2017). Migrants are often portrayed as “undeserving” or “manipulative,” which ultimately shapes institutional responses that intensify isolation and cast doubt on survivors’ accounts, devaluing their experiences. Moreno-Lax & Vavoula (2024, p.7) point out that the concept of vulnerability is political, not neutral, and influences who has access to protection. When trauma affects memory or the clarity of the account, survivors can be unfairly excluded, transforming vulnerability into a legal obstacle.

Moreover, not everyone is affected equally by these structural exclusions. Radziwinowiczówna (2024, p.115) states that the likelihood of being deported varies according to nationality and social class. People from Eastern Europe, for example, face more severe removal practices, even when they experience similar vulnerability to other groups. In addition, Banerjee & Awan (2025, p.367) assert that racialised and marginalised survivors face systematic barriers to accessing trauma-sensitive care. These difficulties stem from both institutional racism and a lack of cultural preparedness in the service offered. Tammone (2024, p.112) reinforced this analysis by arguing that structural competence, a deeper understanding of inequalities, is needed to simultaneously address the different types of marginalisation that many asylum seekers face.

The suffering caused by migration policies does not affect everyone equally; it intensifies when different vulnerabilities intersect. Rees (2025, p.148) explores how gender, class, and race combine to deepen legal and social exclusion. When protection systems ignore these intersections, policy responses become generic and ineffective. Banerjee & Awan (2025, p.364) further criticise the UK border control as a more symbolic than practical policy. They argue that the fanciful idea of absolute control and national purity ultimately overrides international obligations. Thus, a political narrative treats human suffering as mere collateral damage.

Ultimately, by trying to discourage new arrivals, the UK's asylum system risks punishing those most in need of protection. Instead of recognising the vulnerability of survivors, the regime ends up treating these people with suspicion, as if they were suspects and not worthy of care and acceptance. Supporters of deterrence-based policies argue that they are essential to

discouraging irregular migration and weakening human trafficking networks. Policymakers in the UK believe that stricter measures, inspired by models like Australia's offshore processing, help reduce the pull factors that lead people to make dangerous crossings (Rivas et al., 2025). These policies are presented as essential to preserving the integrity of the asylum system and ensuring that protection is offered to those who pursue legal pathways.

2.2.Silenced by fear: Mistrust and the Risk of Disclosure

Survivors of human trafficking face significant obstacles to dealing with legal institutions in the UK, marked by average mistrust and stigma. The government recognises the IMA as essential to protect the immigration system and combat exploitation networks, and the impact on immigrants due to irregular and profound breaches. According to IMA, its objective is to “deter Illegal entries” and prevent the abusive use of protections against modern slavery when the individual is not a genuine victim. However, there are concerns raised based on this strategy that undermine fundamental principles of protection, intensifying mistrust and silence precisely among those it claims to want to protect.

Many survivors take a long time to tell what they lived through because they suffer from deep traumas, fearing reprisals or feeling shame for cultural problems, factors that have never been raised in the accelerated process of detention or deportation. As outlined by Davis (2024, pp.79-89, chapter 4), trauma can profoundly affect how a human expresses and lives with emotions. For this reason, it is common for the stories to emerge in a fragmented way or take a while. Nevertheless, while the Home Office claims these measures help reduce fraudulent claims, Galappathie (2024, p.416) argues that the legal system often ignores the psychological factors that influence the stories of asylum seekers. It creates a dangerous distortion: the silence, which can be a way of dealing with trauma, ends up being interpreted as a lie.

The legal system should acknowledge that trauma can have a lasting impact on memory, communication and trust. Practices providing flexible deposition times and psycho-social support, which take these impacts into account, are needed to make sure that survivors do not get penalised due to trauma-induced reactions. Alternatively, as Galappathie (2024, p.416) observes quite chillingly, the failure to take into account these emotional or social subtleties often ends up in genuine suffering being taken for a fake.

Nonetheless, Hefner & Hill (2023, p.9) show that silence, far from being a manipulative strategy, is a defensive reaction motivated by fear, specifically, fear of arrest, deportation, or

discredit. Khazbak et al. (2024, p.12) expand on this view by highlighting that survivors from marginalised ethnic groups and migrants face even greater vulnerabilities in the face of institutional neglect, which makes disclosing their experiences even more difficult. Nonetheless, the demand for immediate and coherent reporting ignores the fact that trauma narratives are often fragmented and delayed. Shame, cultural stigma, and psychological distress make it difficult for survivors to share their experiences. Therefore, the pressure for quick disclosures not only undermines the credibility of genuine victims but also creates a hostile legal environment that alienates and re-traumatises those most in need of protection.

In addition, the IMA gives the Secretary of State broad power to detain or deport people even before their trafficking allegations are properly reviewed, a change that, while administratively efficient, carries serious risks. Williamson et al. (2024, p.5) show how these practices cause emotional distress, especially when survivors feel punished for seeking help. Similarly, Fino (2024, p.4928) asserts that shame and fear of judgement silence many victims before they reach the formal system. Therefore, it creates a chilling effect: for fear of being misunderstood, treated as criminals, or deported, many are prevented from seeking help (Williams et al., 2023).

Some scholars argue that the government's strategy reflects broader patterns of migration control. However, by mapping geographic impacts, Cockbain et. al. (2024, p.165) show that deterrence-based policies disproportionately affect communities already marked by excessive surveillance. In contrast, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024) and Robinson et. al. (2025, p.104) defends victim-centred, trauma-sensitive approaches that recognise silence as a form of protection, not a sign of deception.

The UK ultimately tries to manage immigration while maintaining that it is a matter of protection and dignity. However, the IMA is a policy that could affect precisely those who can be silenced. The system assumes that trauma-sensitive traps, if the victim does not open their mouth and tell, they are automatically a liar, keeping traumatised victims re-exposed to new pain.

2.3.Silencing Survivors: UK Policy and Trauma

The UK presents such migration and anti-trafficking policies as protective frameworks; however, survivors' testimonies, supported by the statements of their NGOs, suggest a more contradictory reality which sees survivors frequently re-traumatised, silenced or even

criminalised. This is not just an anecdote, it is vital evidence against the legitimacy of the state's professed victim-led strategy.

Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in the UK, who, according to Warren & Nigbur (2024, p.13), have similarly fundamentally fractured identities. However, instead of discovering a permanent country, they often forsake them. This lengthy period of self-doubt and social segregation led to what is only an enhanced sense of who they indeed are. Likewise, Gerayeli & Kyriakopoulos (2024, p.2) explore how the therapists working with refugees talk of loneliness in isolation, not as part of these people's pre-migration experience, but as a direct result of the asylum process in the UK itself. These accounts counter the official state narratives, which typically represent this type of suffering in accidental or externally acquired ways.

The government often justifies its policies based on deterrence, public safety, and resource control. However, Dang et al. (2023, p.13) assert the real impact of these measures: many survivors end up homeless, facing hunger, and dealing with untreated trauma, trapped in a seemingly endless legal limbo. Although the government stated that the UK's NRM is a path to safety, the survivor report presented by Eglen et al. (2024, p.22) reveals a different reality. Eglen et al. (2024, p.31) argue further that prolonged delays, institutional distrust, and inconsistent support ultimately transform this mechanism, which should protect, into yet another source of suffering for those who have already been through so much, a form of revictimization.

Furthermore, case studies additionally explain the vagaries of the system. Over the past few years, austerity policies have sharply reduced resources for legal aid and support services available to survivors of trafficking (Ramachandran, 2024, p.140). It creates structural barriers that hinder access to justice. These individuals, who often rely on public services to navigate complex legal processes, are particularly affected by these cuts. In addition, Ramachandran (2024, p.140) explains that the austerity measures imposed by the state effectively restrict survivors' access to life-saving provisions, a structural outcome of a governance that opts for deterrence over care, but it is not an accidental act.

The government supports the strict measures to prevent false reports, ensuring that protection is granted only to genuine victims. This view reflects a broader concern for the integrity of the asylum system and its potential misuse. De Angelis (2017, p.49) criticises this rigid division, pointing out that it is based on stereotypical ideas and social constructs of victimhood, which ultimately exclude those who do not fit institutional expectations. Likewise, those who face

barriers to share their experiences, whether due to psychological distress, cultural issues, or fear, risk being unfairly excluded from protection. Gabb & Broad (2024, p.313) illustrate this problem with cases of victims prosecuted for acts committed under coercion, showing how the legal system can interpret survival strategies as criminal behaviour. A more sensitive approach is needed, recognising the diversity of experience and avoiding rigid classifications.

Finally, these accounts show that UK policy not only marginalises survivors but also relies on that silence to sustain itself. These practices violate one of the central principles of the Palermo Protocol: not punishing trafficking victims for illegal acts committed as a direct result of the exploitation they suffered. Rather than recognising the context of vulnerability, these measures end up blaming those who have already been deeply harmed.

While the government advocates a pragmatic approach, voices on the margins reveal a system focused on control, not justice. Real reform requires listening to and validating these experiences. To truly understand the human impact of these policies, it is essential to go beyond the laws and consider the lived experiences of those directly affected.

Chapter 3: Belief and Barriers in the UK Asylum

The life story of human trafficking survivors and asylum seekers vividly and sensitively illustrates how UK policies affect actual individuals, manifesting in ways that go way beyond the reach of laws and official rhetoric. In tracing the failure of such protection and, consequently, the emergence of fresh figures of pain, abandonment and social disappearance, this chapter examines how government paternalism falls through. The evidence is primarily based on testimonies of survivors and reports by non-governmental groups, as well as academic studies.

3.1.A System of Control Disguised as Care

The NRM was established to offer protection for victims of human trafficking. Nonetheless, when applied in reality to these people, it usually entangles them in a web of legal and bureaucratic battles that, instead of relieving, render their fragile status more difficult. They enter the NRM seeking help, security and answers. However, often, they are met with the predictable holding patterns of no news, or bad news, re-prioritising and re-traumatising. Such legal ambiguity is by design; it mirrors a structural imperative that rewards border protection

and eligibility over the care, assistance, and security that these same persons also surprisingly more often than ever require.

Furthermore, Reports such as “Surviving Trafficking” by Murphy (2020) and “Road to Nowhere” by Mullan-Feroze and Dorling (2025) demonstrate how trafficking survivors can wait months, sometimes even years, for an official decision. During this time, many of these individuals live in extremely precarious conditions, with little or no access to consistent support for mental health, employment, or education. When a decision is finally made, whether positive or negative, access to housing and financial assistance can be abruptly cut off, leaving survivors once again vulnerable which is further criticised by Tribe & Farsimadan (2022, p.4), who highlights that these delays and interruptions have direct consequences: worsening mental health in an increased risk of being exploited again.

The Home Office state its asylum procedures are necessary to prevent fraud and protect the integrity of the system. However, this argument is symptomatic of the deeper challenges in responding appropriately to migration and governing resources equitably. Stemming from rising global displacement and system pressures, the government has made a deliberate effort to focus on credibility assessment, with the aim of standardising processes in order to ensure fairness and consistency. This reasoning typifies the larger dilemma of protection versus control, a tension that strongly informs our experiences as survivors. However, a recent qualitative study by Haggard & Kienzler (2024, p.4) questions whether the government’s objectives can be accomplished without affecting the victims’ mental health. The research shows the presence of a “political burnout” in the UK asylum system, characterised by long routes, adverse procedures and a lack of support for those waiting, directly impacting mental health and dampening the ability to participate.

Nevertheless, the research by Haggard & Kienzler (2024, p.4) questions this government’s defensive stance, showing that the asylum process, far from offering protection, often leads to re-victimisation. Wilkin & Constantinos Melachrinou (2024, p.3) reinforce this criticism, warning that applying rigid evidentiary criteria without trauma-sensitive adaptations ultimately punishes applicants for psychological effects beyond their control. While the system nominally aims to safeguard credibility and prevent misuse, it frequently individualises responsibility, thereby glossing over structural and clinical dimensions of trauma. As part of a larger critique of policies like the MSA designed to both protect the victims and meet principles of accountability, Gilmore (2024, p.311) introduces what she calls “attenuated solidarity.” It is a

symbolic recognition of survivors' rights. However, it still means that there are delays, institutional distrust and bureaucratic roadblocks that prevent people from getting the recognition and protection they were supposed to receive under these laws.

Tomaselli (2023, p.8) deepens this critique by showing that protection systems often operate through control, victim recognition becomes dependent on expected behaviours and compliance with bureaucratic demands. Therefore, survivors' accounts in the *Real People, Real Lives*, and *In the Dock* (2019) report confirm these analyses, repeatedly expressing feelings of abandonment, disbelief, and exhaustion from having to relive their traumas repeatedly.

Meanwhile, the promise of long-term security rarely materialises. As noted in the *Lessons not Learned* (2019) report, most survivors who obtain a conclusive grounds decision do not automatically receive the discretionary right to remain in the UK. Instead, they face continued immigration uncertainty, are forced to make new asylum applications, or are left without legal status. It undermines the primary purpose of NRM: providing an authentic path to recovery and autonomy. Forringer-Beal (2024, p.101) expands further and states the term "chronic liminality" to describe a condition experienced by many survivors: a state of suspension, in which these people are not fully protected, but also not completely excluded. It is like living in a legal and existential void; there is a lack of clear answers or stability. Skleparis et al. (2025, p.4) complement this analysis by showing that the protection system operates under a logic of security, which, instead of caring, seeks to control migrant bodies, regulating their presence and movements.

While it sounds rather protective, in the end, NRM means upholding bureaucratic procedures over the dignity of survivors. It will continue to be harmful under the pretence of being helpful. The Home Office states NRM procedures are needed to maintain fairness, consistency and prevent fraud. As global displacement increases and resources become ever scarcer, authorities continue to demand credibility assessments in order to prioritise bona fide claimants while preserving the integrity of a system under significant stress.

3.2.The Emotional Impact of the NRM: A Balanced Analysis

The NRM and asylum system serve to protect victims of human trafficking and modern slavery by granting them access to services, as well as legal recognition. Nevertheless, that implementation tends to disregard the trauma-inspired emotional debilitation manifesting as

severe episodic irrationality. For this purpose, the NRM has an important role in providing official recognition and therefore assistance to trafficked persons through temporary protection, safe housing and legal support. The government defends the need for specific testimony disclosures to ensure fair justice and not allow fraudsters access to a scheme that must last. However, this balance between compassion and bureaucracy does not always take into account the emotional toll on victims of such trauma.

Nevertheless, it might have been an inadvertent outcome of the flawed system, given that many survivors and coverage of mental health studies suggest it usually has the effect of compounding trauma. Retelling complex stories over and over is more likely to make anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress worse. Reports such as *Will I Ever Be Safe?* and *Forced Labour and Forced Marriage* reveal how women are forced to relive violent episodes in interviews without adequate intervention, facing disbelief and distrust, which undermines trust and reproduces the coercive dynamics of exploitation itself.

Moreover, mental health professionals have expressed ongoing concerns about the psychological impacts of the asylum system. According to the Mental Health Foundation report (2025), survivors face intense distress caused by prolonged uncertainty, frequent changes, and unstable support. Bishop (2022) highlights a serious flaw in Home Office procedures: survivors are assessed by professionals with adult trauma training, who interpret signs such as lack of eye contact or confusing narratives as lacking credibility, ignoring clinical evidence and distorting these individuals' real experiences.

Furthermore, O'Connell Davidson (2024, p.2) points out that it reproduces symbolic violence by treating people seeking protection as "invaders" who need to be controlled, not welcomed. Forringer- Beal (2024, p.101) reinforces this view, arguing that the system ultimately causes more suffering than support, deepening the trauma experienced by victims. This analysis questions whether the emotional pain imposed by bureaucracy can truly be justified. It is critical to remember the human implications of policy changes, despite the very real challenges the government might be facing, such as resource constraints and the necessity to prevent fraud while maintaining public trust. James and Forrester-Jones (2025, p.8) found that for the individuals, even if justified as necessary, controls, mandatory interviews, and strict evidence requirements can be experienced as traumatic actions masked as a control mechanism. The system's rigidity, when more than protection against fraud, will lead to dehumanisation and personal suffering, and solid integration barriers that contribute to a lack of well-being.

Finally, however well-intentioned and protective its mechanisms may be, it does not embody trauma-informed principles, which ultimately leads to unnecessary harm. Without a trauma-informed redesign, the UK will move only hesitantly from containment to authentic care at best, or at worst.

3.3.Conditions of Deservingness and Performativity: A Balanced Analysis

Conditionality directly affects access to protection in the British anti trafficking system. Survivors not only have to prove they were victims, but they are also pressured to fit a limited image of the ideal victim, passive, traumatised, and submissive. This performative expectation, present in the NRM and asylum processes, establishes a logic of deservingness that filters support based on moral, legal, and bureaucratic criteria. The government justifies this approach as an oversight to ensure justice, prevent abuse, and manage finite resources from its position. However, the government say that tight standards and extensive evidence are necessary to safeguard the system. These are understandable goals; however, they largely ignore the unspeakable complexity of trauma and power imbalance between surviving individuals and the state.

According to the Real People, Real Lives report (2019), survivors are often discredited if they fail to express their trauma clearly and directly. Women who do not fit stereotypes of vulnerability, such as passivity or emotional withholding, face greater scrutiny, and their emotional complexity is often penalised. Several studies highlight how women fleeing sexual abuse are retraumatised by a system that demands a controlled and emotionally restrained narrative from them (Booth et al., 2017; Curley et al., 2026; Fray et al., 2023). The government argues that these demands are necessary to preserve the integrity and efficiency of the system, avoiding fraud. While O'Connell Davidson (2024, p.5) argues these justifications often rely on simplified narratives that portray asylum seekers as culturally incompatible, reinforcing exclusion rather than protection. Therefore, he critiques that this view ignores the realities of forced migration and legitimises policies that punish survivors for not fitting expected narratives of victimhood.

Testimonies of survivors in NGOs support these conclusions. In Grace's testimony (Hestia, 2025), she described feeling the need to prove to authorities that her trauma was real as a result of dissociation and memory suppression. Likewise, too many shape their stories to conform with recognised patterns and expect few will believe the stories in Sosa's testimony (Causeway,

2024). Statements from Black Country Women's Aid (2025) and Their Voice (2024) suggest that many survivors are made to fill in slots, rather than be reclaimed, and many have lost their voices in the bargain. These examples illustrate how the system can replicate power imbalances and even reproduce relationships of domination symptomatic of exploitation.

On the other hand, it must be addressed that the problems the government is going through include a lack of funding, the obligation to protect against abuse and the pressure to ensure fairness in the proceedings. Nevertheless, as James & Forrester-Jones (2025, p.12) argue, requirements like mandatory interviews and evidentiary standards are out of touch with the emotional consequences of trauma.

Finally, despite the UK's alleged victim-centred approach to protecting survivors of human trafficking, its reliance on performative credibility effectively debases those intentions. Most importantly, it must rely on a trauma-informed lens which begins with believed credibility and understands that trauma presents across many expressions and pathways. Absent this move, formal support will remain contingent, insufficient and ultimately unjust. However, from the government's point of view, the idea is to protect public policy against potential abuse by allowing only structured and consistent testimony. The government warned that without clear criteria for what counts as evidence, the system would be swamped and amount to a failure to support genuine victims. It aims to help those who need limited support services (James & Forrester-Jones, 2025).

3.4. Visual Summary: Trends in Survivor Testimony

This graph offers a thematic interpretation of recurring experiences, drawing on sources such as Surviving Trafficking, Real People, Real Lives, Lessons Not Learned, Will I Ever Be Safe? Road to Nowhere, as well as testimonies from organisations such as Hestia, Causeway, Black Country Women's Aid and Their Voice. While not statistical in the formal sense, it reflects consistent narrative patterns that emerged throughout the analysis (fig.2).

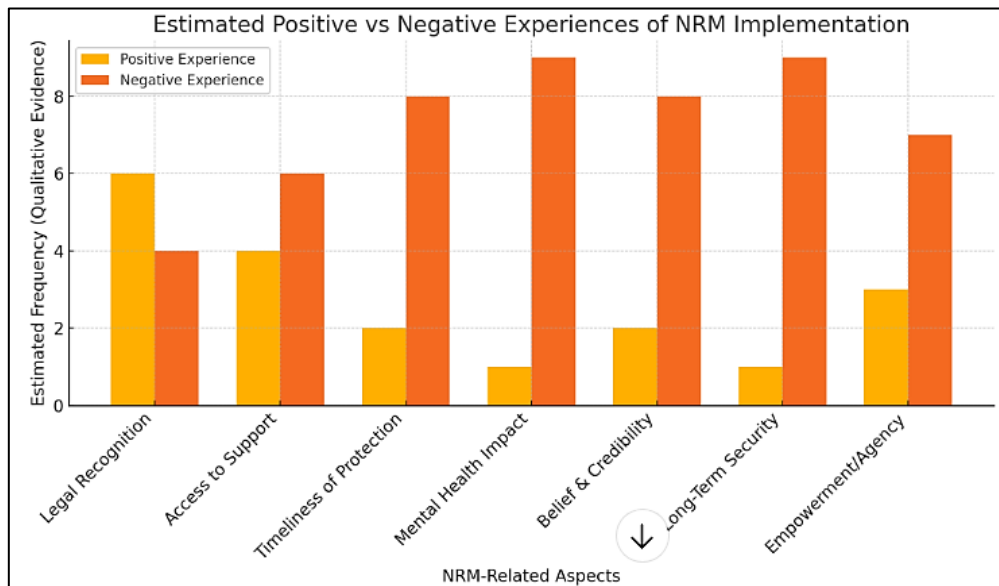


Figure 2 - Statistic of Survivors' Account (Author's work).

The most criticised aspects, Timeliness of Protection, Mental Health impact, Belief and Credibility and Long-Term Security, reveal flaws in the provision of stability. Many survivors leave for long periods in uncertainty, facing psychological distress and being discredited, even with clear evidence.

Access to Support and Empowering/ Agency were more mixed, showing a short-term success when the victims received trauma-informed care by the NGOs. Even Legal Recognition, which received the highest rating, weakens because it rarely guarantees lasting protection or migratory security. This graph does not provide conclusive data, but it meaningfully illustrates the voices and experiences of survivors. It visually highlights how structures that should protect can, in practice, reinforce cycles of exclusion, disbelief, and lack of freedom.

3.5. Identity, Belonging, and Freedom

When exploring how identity, belonging, and freedom intertwine, it is essential to recognise that laws, even when created with good intentions, can end up limiting those they are supposed to protect.

The MSA is undoubtedly a positive development; still, people are viewed to some extent as non-autonomous and whole human beings, which sometimes causes more pain. The MSA, instead of providing universal coverage, sets criteria and state categories, based on which the victim, based on that category, deserves support. Therefore, it can impact the survivors' mental

health drastically, the way they see themselves and feel they belong, as this approach from the government limits this inclusion.

The UK legislation brought significant changes: it grouped different types of crimes under a single framework, created the NRM, and began requiring greater transparency from companies. These measures have earned the UK recognition as a world leader in combating human trafficking. However, as Jannesari et al. (2023, p.2378) argue, the law still fails to incorporate outcomes defined by survivors themselves, something also reflected in the accounts of victims supported by non-governmental organisations. Therefore, even though these NGOs offer models based on the real experiences of those who have experienced human trafficking, they are still neglected by the government, which has failed to approach the issue with a more empathetic aspect, such as safety, stability, and long-term support.

Furthermore, Hynes (2022, p.249) argues that responses to human trafficking in the UK are deeply linked to the so-called “hostile environment,” which threatens migrants with suspicion and limits access to services. For many survivors, especially foreigners, identity ceases to be a protection and becomes an object of analysis. Belonging becomes conditional, negotiated through compliance with immigration rules, rather than recognised as part of a history marked by trauma and resilience.

The government often justified these restrictions with arguments of protection and deterrence. As Perez (2023, p.308) explains, the security measures adopted after Brexit, such as the NBA, are intended to prevent abuses in asylum routes and preserve the integrity of the system. Based on this logic, rigorous eligibility checks are seen as essential to avoid the misuse of available resources. However, this logic creates new forms of restrictions. Treadaway (2025, p.137) highlights that rigid family reunion policies prolong separation and intensify emotional suffering, further supported by Williamson et al. (2024, p.5), who argue that survivors face moral wounds as they deal with disbelief, prolonged uncertainty, and abandonment by the state, situations that weaken identity and erode trust.

The MSA, however, finally represented structural gains; its implementation solidifies our belonging conditionally. If survivors’ autonomy and relational justice are not fixed at the centre, they will be further violated by the system. The notion of absolute freedom depends on more than mere rescue; it needs an understanding of policy-making that treats them as independent beings, helping in the fostering of a general identity.

While the British system claims to offer protection, it often forces survivors to navigate complex bureaucracy, disbelief, and emotional distress. The disconnect between policies and lived reality reveals a deeper problem: when protection is based on control, it can end up causing harm that it is intended to prevent. Overcoming this disconnect requires more than reforms: it requires rethinking how support is understood and delivered.

Chapter 4: Control Over Care - The UK's NRM and the Politics of Protection

The British government presents the NRM as a protective measure for victims of human trafficking. In practice, it has functioned more as a tool for migration control than as a means of support. Instead of providing shelter, the system imposes bureaucratic barriers and evidentiary requirements that hinder access to protection. This chapter will analyse the NRM and its role within broader anti-trafficking policies. It will also compare differences between the UK and Italy on identification, residency rights, and reintegration strategies.

In order to be recognised as legitimate victims, survivors must tell their stories coherently and present rigorous evidence, requirements that often ignore the profound effects trauma can have on memory and speech. However, Phillimore et al. (2025, p.4) challenge this rationale, emphasising how trauma does affect memory and disrupts coherence. Nevertheless, the Home Office data reinforces Phillimore's argument, revealing that in 2024, 5,598 adults identified as potential victims voluntarily denied entering the NRM system (fig.3). Instead, they were referred through the Duty to Notify (DtN), which allows professionals to refer the victims to the NRM without their consent.

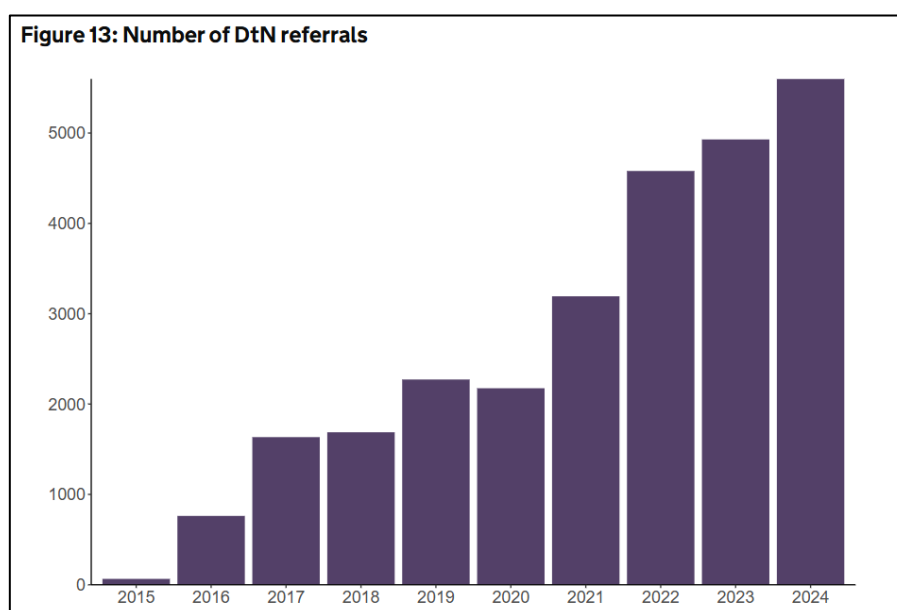


Figure 3 - Duty to Notify Graphic (Home Office, 2025b).

Therefore, this substantial increase in DtN referrals since 2015 raises questions about the NRM's credibility according to the Home Office (2025b). Rather than indicating increased reach, it may reveal a deep distrust, where fear of immigration enforcement and scepticism about state support discourage participation, weakening the proposed protective measures. Despite criticism, the UK's NRM has undergone improvements that have made the referral process more centralised and consistent. The DTN system allows professionals to refer potential victims even without their consent, which can help increase identification rates. Furthermore, digitalisation initiatives have sought to simplify procedures and reduce delays. While concerns remain about the human impact of these changes, they represent an attempt to make management more efficient and expand access to protection.

Furthermore, Lyons (2025, p.33) found in the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner (IASC) report that in 2024, the average wait time for conclusive grounds decisions was 831 days, with 68% of negative decisions overturned on appeal. These data reveal serious system reliability flaws, suggesting a process that fails to deliver fair and timely responses to the victims. Schmid-Scott (2024, p.7) critiques that such delays are not neutral: they deepen survivors' emotional distress, affecting their trust in the system. Although the Home Office defends these practices as necessary, the figures indicate a system that may be causing more harm than protection.

The government often advertises the increasing digitalisation of the NRM as a solution to streamline processes and standardise services. However, IASC data shows that this efficiency

can come at a high human cost, as evidenced by an increase in negative decisions. Morgan (2024, p.6) argues the digital silencing of survivors, forced into impersonal interactions contributes to the denial of the outcome of their case, which is further reinforced by Findlay (2024, p.4), who asserts that digital surveillance imposes a logic of distrust as technology. However, it simplifies the process, it can dehumanise the case outcome.

Canning (2017, p.3) places this debate within a broader political and economic context, where state protection is conditional, racialised, and guided by moral judgments. While conditionality is seen as necessary to ensure effectiveness, it can punish survivors who do not conform to expected behaviours. This logic reinforces colonial hierarchies and historical patterns of exclusion, threatening the ethical principles that should underpin any protection policy.

4.1.Moral Economy and Performed Victimhood

The British government presents its asylum and under trafficking policies as essential to preserving the system's integrity and maintaining public trust. The government argue that assessing credibility and applying deterrent measures are crucial to preventing abuse and ensuring limited resources reach those most in need. While this argument seems sound from an administrative perspective, it conceals a moral bias inherent in these policies.

Moreover, Morris (2016, p.5) argues that austerity has transformed welfare into a conditional privilege rather than a right, a logic that is intensified in the context of the asylum system. The Palermo Protocol advocates that victim identification should be carried out inclusively and without discrimination. This challenges the UK practice, which relies on a stereotypical notion of an “ideal victim” and requires complex tests, excluding those who do not fit this profile.

In this scenario, credibility is often tied to an idealised and limited image of the victim: someone passive, traumatised, and grateful. Selim et al. (2024, p.4) and Wimark (2025, p.5) expand on this discussion by showing how these expectations disproportionally affect LGBTQ+ people, whose identities do not always align with Western standards. Therefore, the government may claim that these criteria ensure consistency, but they generate distrust and marginalise those who do not fit in, undermining truly inclusive protection.

Wimark (2025, p.18) further criticises the evidentiary requirements imposed on asylum seekers, especially when information about their countries of origin is uncertain or complex. While the government defends these requirements as part of a careful analysis, they often create a hostile environment where structural biases hinder access to protection, which is further

supported by Sheldrick (2024, p.17) who asserts that local officials usually resort to subjective moral criteria to decide who “deserves” help, based on personal judgement rather than actual needs. This argument undermines the foundation and coherence that the system claims to guarantee.

The British government views agreements like the one in Rwanda as essential measures to disrupt dangerous trafficking routes and discourage irregular migration, signalling a commitment to public safety and international cooperation. However, Bonansinga & Forrest (2025, p.15) argue that these actions function more as political theatrics, populist strategies that seek to convey control, not offer ethical protection. The stop the boats campaign exemplifies this shift, where punishment and performative deterrence replace compassion and humanitarian duties.

Ultimately, Stielike et al. (2025, p.13) argue that these policies go beyond simple administrative tools- They reveal a profound logic that defines which lives are worthy of saving. Despite the government's claims of neutrality and fairness, the asylum system increasingly transforms into a moral triage system, where access to protection depends not only on vulnerability but also on the ability to demonstrate specific dignity in victimhood. These policies reinforce a hierarchy of deservingness that contradicts universal human rights principles.

4.2.Comparative Insight: Protection Gaps Beyond the UK

UK migration policies, such as the IMA and the Rwanda plan, are presented as control solutions. Nevertheless, they reflect a positive approach that ignores the structural causes of migration. Measures such as temporary protection and creditworthiness assessments mask exclusionary practices under the guise of efficiency and fairness, compromising fundamental rights.

Moreover, Griffiths & Yeo (2021, p.13) argue that public trust is eroded when welfare institutions become instruments of migration control. Donà (2021, p.10) takes this critique further by showing that this security logic has fatal consequences. While Griffiths & Yeo (2021, p.3) highlight the state’s structural transformation into an agent of exclusion, Donà (2021, p.10) argues that this exclusion translates into real fear and loss of life, as seen during the pandemic. Thus, the argument that such policies restore public trust falls apart: They fail to protect, deepen inequalities, and put lives at risk.

Likewise, Islam & Fay (2024, p.19) assert that women survivors of trafficking only received protection if they fit the stereotype of the “ideal victim,” passive and grateful. Schweitzer (2017, p.321), in turn, argues that, while deterrence exists in other European countries, they maintain legal pathways to integration. They both reveal in their analyses that exclusion in the UK is a political choice, not an inevitable consequence of security.

Furthermore, Guri & Rees (2024, p.23) argue that temporary protection in the UK does not offer absolute security but keeps survivors in a legal limbo that prevents healing and reconstruction. Landman et al. (2024, p.12) critically complement this analysis by showing that this uncertainty is intentional: a deterrence strategy disguised as humanitarianism. Even when European policies echo British rhetoric, many maintain stronger legal safeguards or more localised decisions. On the other hand, the UK adopts a centralised and punitive approach, revealing not only a migration management strategy but also a moral economy of borders where control trumps care and necessity.

4.3.Trust or Control? Unpacking UK and Italy’s Fight Against Human Trafficking

Although the UK and Italy claim to follow international standards in protecting survivors of human trafficking, their approaches reflect very different perspectives. The UK focuses on monitoring and verification through the NRM. On the other hand, based on Article 18 of Legislative Decree No.286/1998, Italy prioritises humanitarian reception, decentralised identification, and integration, shaping distinct ways of recognising victims and supporting their reintegration.

i. Identification and Residency Rights

In 2024, the UK recorded 19,125 referrals to the NRM, a 13% increase over the previous year. It demonstrates increased awareness of trafficking and a well-structured referral system. However, the identification process is primarily conducted by “First Responders”, who are often linked to inconsistencies in victims’ accounts and interpreted as lies rather than as a reflection of deep trauma, according to Gadd (2024, p.317). O’Brien et al. (2022, p.280) agree with a rigorous screening of the victims, raising concerns about potential fraud that could abuse the system. However, Heys et al. (2022, p.63) disagree, warning that this logic of control excludes the most vulnerable, especially those affected by trauma, making it challenging to meet evidentiary requirements. The GRETA report reinforces this criticism, highlighting delays

in decisions, limited long-term support, and overreliance on immigration agencies, which can alienate victims and weaken protection (COE, 2024).

According to GRETA's report, Italy identified 2,422 potential trafficking victims in 2022, but only 808 received assistance. While this number is lower than that of the UK, the Italian model allows certified NGOs, not just "appointed First Responders," to identify the victims. Greco & Illej (2025, p.60) support this decentralised approach, which promotes trauma-sensitive care and trust-building, aspects that Anderline (2024, p.5) consider essential for recovery. In addition, Palumbo (2024, p.237) argues that bureaucratic delays and regional inequalities often undermine the effectiveness of the Italian model. The GRETA report estimates that between 15,000 and 20,000 people are at risk of trafficking in Italy, revealing a large gap between detection and formal recognition. The report also criticises the fragmented Identification system and calls for the government to implement it consistently. These data reinforce Palumbo's view: despite being well-intentioned, the model faces serious challenges in practice. While Italy's decentralised approach favours more trauma-sensitive care, its implementation still varies significantly across regions. According to the GRETA report, many local authorities lack the resources or training necessary to apply Article 18 consistently. As a result, there remains a significant gap between victim identification and the provision of formal protection. It demonstrates that, despite the Italian legal framework being more inclusive, its practical effectiveness is limited by structural and regional inequalities.

The USA.gov (2024), Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP) reinforces significant concerns by highlighting that, although Italy has advanced legislation, especially Article 18, the number of residences permits granted is still surprisingly low. The document also highlights the need for greater collaboration with law enforcement in some regions, even when opting for the so-called "social path". It ultimately undermines the idea of truly unconditional protection.

In the UK, trafficking victims who receive protection are often granted a VTS 30-month visa. However, these benefits are usually conditional on cooperation with the police or a risk assessment, creating an instrumental relationship, where protection depends on the victim's perceived usefulness to the system.

Furthermore, Lumley-Sapanski et al. (2024, p.4) critique that although many victims receive favourable decisions through the NRM, they still fail to obtain definitive legal status. Therefore, it leaves them in legal limbo, vulnerable to insecurity and the possibility of reliving past traumas, which aligns with Mullan-Feroze & Dorling, (2025, p.4) report, who stated that

only 4,240 of the confirmed victims were considered for VTS, however, just 4% which is around 176 victims received a grant of VTS. Meanwhile, over 40% of these permissions were granted for less than 12 months, with some lasting as little as six months. The situation is even more critical for children: of the 699 confirmed child victims, fewer than 5 received VTS. This data validates the argument raised by Lumley-Sapanski et al. (2024, p.15) that while the UK officially recognises these victims, it fails to offer them absolute protection or stability.

Lumley-Sapanski et al. (2024, p.15) further expand their criticism on how data is presented in this report, arguing that they reduce protection to numbers and ignore the structures that produce them. While the report highlights low grants on VTS, it fails to question the underlying system, based on conditionalities and evidence requirements that systematically exclude traumatised victims.

In contrast, Italy's Article 18 offers a more stable and inclusive legal framework. The victims receive a renewable six-month residence permit, with the possibility to convert to work or study, even without participating in legal proceedings, as argued by Palumbo (2024, p.237). However, according to GRETA report, only 52 permits were granted in 2022, despite thousands of identified victims, reflecting bureaucratic obstacles and restrictive interpretations. The TIP (2024) reinforces this criticism, noting that local authorities still require cooperation, making enforcement uneven and limited.

A critical analysis of this data reveals essential points as follows:

First: Although the UK and Italy have issued fewer visas compared to the amount of identified victims they had, The British system is much more restrictive in terms of number and duration of the VTS if granted, whilst Italy's model on the other hand, is more inclusive in its approach as it offers greater long-term potential, with permits that can be renewed and converted to work or study visa.

Second: The UK's protection model, often conditional on cooperation with authorities, creates a give-and-take relationship that contrasts sharply with the rights-based approach adopted in Italy. The temporary permits provided by the UK compromise victims' stability and increase the risk of re-trafficking. Despite its limitations, the Italian model offers the possibility of permanence and rebuilding a life.

Finally, the fact that the UK granted VTS to fewer than five children out of nearly 700 identified reveals a severe failure to protect the most vulnerable, something less evident in the Italian

model, which is decentralised and trauma-sensitive. The data reveal practical differences and opposing views on the state's role: the UK assesses victims, while Italy, at least legally, recognises their rights.

4.4.Reintegration Support

In Italy, reintegration support goes beyond temporary assistance; the goal is to help victims rebuild their lives. Greco & Illej (2025, p.59) describe a decentralised network of services that offers housing, psychological support, and job training. Therefore, the Italian model contributes to a true sense of belonging, with many survivors reporting successfully integrating into their communities. In contrast to the Italian model, reintegration support in the UK is often fragmented and short-lived, relying on charities. Heys (2024, p.58) further argues that services available after the NRM are limited and unclear about what is available to the victim.

The UK's reliance on charities to support victim reintegration reflects a broader strategy of outsourcing assistance. While this can lead to fragmented services, it also allows specialised NGOs to offer more personalised and trauma-sensitive care. Organisations like Black Country Women's Aid and Hestia have developed survivor-led models that provide psychological support and housing. However, a lack of sustained government funding and poor coordination hinder successful long-term reintegration.

Therefore, while both Italy and the UK seek to support survivors of human trafficking, their reintegration strategies reflect quite different visions. Italy is committed to a rights-based approach, which has the potential to offer long-term stability. However, it faces serious challenges, such as low implementation rates and difficulty identifying victims. On the other hand, the UK adopts a more restrictive and conditional model, which tends to exclude precisely those most in need of protection, revealing a more selective than inclusive approach.

In the UK, the DtN option, which allows victims to be referred without consent, demonstrates an effort to reach people who voluntarily refused to enter the NRM through a formal process. Pre-NRM assessment helps maintain the integrity of the system and prevent abuse. In Italy, however, immediate support, while well-intentioned, lacks rigorous screening, which can open the door to further exploitation and crime-related human smuggling. Despite the limitations of both models, the UK system appears to be more structured and reliable, especially considering the 2024 data: more than 19,000 victims identified in the UK, compared to less than 5,000 in Italy.

Conclusion

This dissertation critically examined the moral implications of changes to UK citizenship and asylum laws, with a particular focus on the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, for refugees who survived modern slavery. Through careful analysis of the legal framework, survivor accounts, and comparative policy models, it became clear that the UK's current approach not only undermines human rights but also contradicts fundamental ethical principles that should underpin a fair and humane migration system. The title “Citizenship or Silence?” “The Moral Impact of the New UK Citizenship Law on Refugee Survivors of Modern Slavery” is not just a rhetorical question. It represents a stark warning about the dilemma these survivors face: adapt to the demands of the system or disappear into silence.

The creation of the system that gives preference to deterrence, containment, and distrust over empathy, protection and the respect for human dignity being contributed by the NBA in collaboration with IMA and MSA. Modern slavery survivors, who are among the most vulnerable, encounter evidentiary requests that pay scant attention to the emotional and attitudinal nuances of psychological injury. The demand for organised and emotionally contained accounts not only silences survivors but also forces them to relive traumatic experiences. This dissertation has shown that an understanding of trauma does not guide the British asylum and protection systems; they are structured in ways that perpetuate it.

In the UK, the concept of “citizenship” has ceased to be a right based on shared humanity and has become treated as a conditional privilege, granted only to those deemed “worthy.” To be considered eligible, survivors must demonstrate gratitude, docility, and productivity. This expectation of exemplary behaviour is not only unrealistic, but also profoundly unfair. It transforms citizenship into a kind of transactional reward, where protection depends on obedience, cooperation, and credibility, criteria that many survivors, because of the trauma they carry, simply cannot meet.

The research is even stronger when considering the decentralised system in Italy. Implementation is still a struggle in practice, but Article 18 of this legal framework is practical and human rights-based. It allows victims to reside in the country without requiring them to assist with the investigation, recognising their trauma, and providing unconditional support. In contrast, the British system, with its VTS and its emphasis on utility and collaboration, sets up an instrumental, puppet-like relationship between the state and the survivor. It raises the

question of whether this system is protecting the people who need it or is participating in exploitation without knowing.

Equally, by collaborating with charities on reintegration, the UK not only demonstrates a greater range of care but also demonstrates a broader abdication of state responsibilities. While NGOs like Hestia and Black Country Women's Aid provide a lifeline, without consistent funding and sustainable coordination, they are only able to pick up the pieces. This system silos these services and sustains indefinite reintegration and vulnerability. Care should be a mandatory function of the state, not something it offloads.

This dissertation also explored theoretical frameworks such as moral economy, performativity, and institutional violence. It argues that UK migration policies are not merely neutral administrative instruments, but rather expressions of ideological commitments to sovereignty, exclusion, and control. The worrying shift in the ethical basis of these policies is revealed in the transformation of citizenship into a system of moral triage, where access to protection depends on the ability to demonstrate suffering. Survivors are no longer seen as individuals with rights but are treated as burdens to be managed.

This research prioritised the voices of survivors, recognising their agency, resilience, and complexity. Such silence is not a form of resistance within this context, but a means of survival, an expression that is born out of fear and shame and experiences accumulated over years. Nevertheless, the British system takes silence as an insincere cue, punishing the victims, already weakened by their suffering. Furthermore, it is not that the system is flawed in implementation; it operates as intended because it was designed not to include.

These findings, if confirmed, hold immense implications. Not only the UK's citizenship and asylum laws fall well below international standards, but they also actively flout them. Another long-standing principle of international law, non-punishment should be conducted as per the Palermo Protocol, however, is regularly forgotten. Given that, the survivors are criminalised, detained and deported frequently without access to justice or appropriate services. However, the system is not broken; it works perfectly to discourage, exclude, and silence.

Consequently, this dissertation argues that the UK's migration governance represents a moral failure. The UK's current strategy also conflicts with commitments made under the Palermo Protocol, which calls for a human rights-based approach that is sensitive to the trauma experienced by victims of trafficking.

It is a system that sacrifices human dignity in the name of border control. A system that demands silence from precisely those who most need to be heard. A system that transforms citizenship into a reward, not a right. This is ethically indefensible.

Moreover, for real progress to be made, the UK must reform its asylum and victim protection system based on a truly trauma-informed approach. It means, first and foremost, accepting the credibility of survivors' testimonies, recognising that silence or fragmented accounts are not signs of falsehood, but responses to suffering. Another key principle is to remove the notion of conditional access to protection and the continuous non-conditional support mechanism for long-term support. Decision-making must also be transparent and accountable, with public policies that include survivor-led models, centring the experiences of survivors as vital partners in building better and more human responses.

Furthermore, citizenship must be reclaimed as a legal and moral right, not treated as a privilege conditional on performance or obedience. It must be grounded in empathy, inclusion, and justice. The UK must recognise that survivors of modern slavery are not threats to be controlled, but people who deserve to be protected. Policymaking and implementation must foreground their experiences, their voices, and their rights.

In conclusion, this dissertation has illustrated how the UK's policy on citizenship and asylum is not only ineffective but also morally indefensible. The country is backsliding from the high-minded international human rights principles liberal democracies hypocritically invoke while repressing survivors, denying them paths to justice, and thereby undermining courtrooms' very moral foundations. The title, "Citizenship or Silence?" Which not just asks a question, but points to a reality, because under the law, it stands presently, the victims will be silent or will perish. In order to maintain its obligations with human rights, the UK must treat citizenship as an acknowledgement of our common humanity, not a reward for compliance. Anything less would be a betrayal of the founding concepts of justice and humanity that the UK purports to uphold.

Recommendations, Future Research, and Policy Reforms

This dissertation analyses the ethical and structural flaws present in the UK asylum and citizenship system, with a particular focus on the implications of the NBA, the MSA, and the IMA. To address these challenges, the work proposes a series of recommendations, points to

avenues for future research, and suggests policy reforms that could make the system fairer and more effective.

i. Recommendations:

The recommendations under consideration strive to encourage reforms that will demonstrate, more tangibly, greater support for the protection of refugees who have escaped modern slavery. It starts with being trauma-aware, which means that decision-makers must appreciate the psychological impact and provide less stringent deadlines for when information should be provided. There is also a need to abolish the practice of conditional protection, so that survivors may access ongoing and unconditional support independent of cooperation with the police. By considering it, it will protect the victim from being exposed or punished again due to a lack of cooperation or delayed disclosures. It is also essential to support survivor-led projects and ensure the voices of survivors are heard in public policy. It requires strengthening partnerships with civil society actors through a formalised relationship with the government for more effective joint action. Lastly, transparency and legal accountability in decision-making, along with external scrutiny of both the NTM and the asylum system, cannot be overlooked.

ii. Future Research:

Further research is needed into how survivor-developed models can be incorporated into asylum procedures and, more specifically, concerning trauma-light care. Looking to the experience of other European countries, such as Italy, can provide helpful input on how the effectiveness of decentralised, rights-based structures might vary. In addition, the psychological and social effects of this temporary protection as compared to its relatively permanent alternative must necessarily be examined further in more studies.

iii. Policy Reform:

Migration policy reform must move beyond the logic of deterrence and place human rights at the centre of decision-making. The British government must create laws that guarantee unconditional protection for survivors, establish clear pathways to permanent residence, and ensure that all professionals involved in asylum processes and NRM receive adequate training on the impact of trauma. To make the system more transparent, it is equally important to implement independent oversight mechanisms and include survivors' voices in decision-making. Only then will it be possible to build a system based on dignity, justice, and inclusion.

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