In three decades a social welfare advisor has not seen the levels of poverty that are routine today. **Rebecca-Omonira-Oyekanmi** listens to the stories of Londoners who struggle to survive.

Mahder Redie has not slept since finishing an eight-hour cleaning shift at 7am. It is noon on Thursday 3rd April 2014. Since 8am he has been waiting for the repairman, as arranged with his landlord. Mahder, 35, prepares lunch for his pregnant wife and daughter in the closet-sized kitchen. His wife Hiriti tries to relax on the sofa. One-year-old Merken wants to play, squealing happily.

Hiriti is subdued. ‘I want a fresh start’, she says. Speaking a mixture of Bilen, her native Eritrean tongue, and English, Hiriti says the thought of raising another child in the mouldy flat is depressing. Above the dining table is a framed photograph of 30-year-old Hiriti wearing traditional Eritrean clothes; her dark hair pulled into thick braids that fan out into luxuriant mahogany cloud; her face is decorated and her expression carefree.

The Redie’s one-bedroom flat is infected with mould; they can’t afford to move. Spooning sweet white rice and salad into a bowl for Merken, Mahder says that since the start of the year his housing association landlord has sent seven inspectors to the flat and, each time, ‘They do nothing’.

Mahder Redie earns £8.61 an hour as a cleaner at the Westfield shopping centre in East London, across the road from the multimillion-pound Olympic Park. Like many low paid workers, his job is temporary and barely covers living costs in a city where the average monthly rent is £1,233.

The family is desperate to move, but for those on low incomes there is little choice. The provision of council homes and social housing continues to fall. Nine London councils recently lost a legal challenge against Mayor Boris Johnson’s plan to increase the upper limit of rents deemed ‘affordable’ in the capital.

These circumstances have deepened an inequality of arms between London’s poorest renters and their landlords. Pamela Fitzpatrick sees the consequences every day.

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Mahder Redie’s problems began in 2008, a few months after he moved into the one-bedroom flat in Brixton, South London. He scrubbed the dark smudges on the bedroom walls, but they always came back: furry, blackish green blotches, spreading upwards and outwards from the wall’s corners. Each year the mould got worse, seeping into the bed frame, the wardrobe, onto the frame of his daughter’s cot. Merken has been rushed to hospital three times after struggling to breathe while asleep.

‘That has not happened,’ Pamela says. ‘All we really have are people who are in very poor accommodation paying really high levels of rent and living in squalor. One five-year-old child brought in her lunchbox to show me that rats had eaten it. We are talking about pretty grim situations.’

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‘Every year since 2008 I took a picture of the room,’ Mahder says. The landlord ‘just sent people to come and check it, but they did nothing.’ Mahder’s landlord is Metropolitan, a national housing association providing homes to social tenants across England.

Hiriti became ill while pregnant with Merken back in 2012. A desperate Mahder went to Metropolitan to complain, saying he was sure the damp was affecting her health. Hiriti developed asthma, coughed up blood. After Merken’s birth in January last year, Metropolitan sent a handyman to repaint...
the bedroom walls, and install a small ventilator in the bedroom. The mould soon came back.

Mahder began to fall behind on rent; he had to spend money replacing things ruined by damp—mattress, bedframe, clothes. ‘I took my family to the housing office to discuss in person the problems,’ he said. ‘When the receptionist informed the housing officer that we had come to see her, she refused to see us and told the receptionist to tell us that nothing can be done until I pay the arrears.’

Up until the summer of 2011 when he lost regular work on a construction site, Mahder paid the rent on time. He put in a claim for housing benefit. The money arrived in November, too little, too late.

When Mahder found work again the following March, housing benefit payments stopped. The job paid £72 a week, not enough to cover the rent or clear the arrears.

‘It’s a common situation’, says Pete Elliott, a caseworker at Brixton Advice Centre. Pete also volunteers at a local food bank at St Paul’s church in Brixton. He sometimes bumps into former clients he has advised on welfare benefits or housing.

‘A lot of rent arrears are through welfare benefits not being paid properly,’ he said. ‘For the majority of our clients, it is because they start working 10 hours a week and immediately their Jobseeker’s Allowance gets stopped and recalculated.’

By 2013 Mahder’s arrears exceeded £2,000. When Merken got sick, Mahder spent what little he earned trying to clear the mould. The family moved Merken’s cot into the living room, the adults took turns sleeping on the two-seat sofa.

Then in April 2013, Metropolitan served Mahder with an eviction notice: ‘You have failed to make satisfactory payments to clear your arrears, so we are in the process of applying to the County Court for possession of your home.’

Did this mean that Mahder and his family would be evicted and re-housed?

No. People evicted due to rent arrears are considered ‘intentionally homeless’; the council is under no obligation to re-house them. Mahder and Hiriti were miserable in their squalid flat, but now they faced something worse.

Across the river Thames in Stamford Hill, one private landlord has decided to evict tenants two months earlier than planned. One Thursday in March 2014, the residents of a three-storey terrace house are given 15 minutes to pack and leave.

Two police vans, blue lights flashing, pull up in the large drive. Around half a dozen police officers and High Court sheriffs pile out. They break into the house, run up and down the stairs, shouting over and over: ‘You have to leave, you have got 10 minutes!’

The house is sectioned into 22 rooms, each one a home for families, couples, and individuals. Some of the residents try to show the sheriffs an order with the original eviction date: 22nd May. They are ignored. Other residents gather what they can, piling clothes into plastic bags.

Libia Montaya, a 57-year-old cleaner from Colombia, lives alone in a small room on the top floor. She’s had a difficult few years. She separated from her husband and is estranged from her daughter. She is on medication for depression. Her hours at work have been cut.

When the sheriffs bang at her door, she crumbles. ‘Why is this happening? Someone help me please.’

Libia struggles to breathe, her head is spinning. Terrified, she rushes into the toilet and in her distress grabs a bottle of bleach and tries to drink it. The officers tackle her, handcuff her, and then she blacks out.

Some of the residents spend the night in a nearby park. Others stay with friends or find hostels. One group takes a bus to the local town hall. They find the grand Art Deco building closed, and try to bed down on the stone steps. Security guards order them to move on.

In the morning they are first in line for the council’s housing officer. The families with children and an elderly woman who recently suffered a stroke are given temporary accommodation, but 16 adults are ineligible for help. Around 5pm they are sent to the local law centre.

Nathaniel Mathews, a senior solicitor for Hackney Community Law Centre, immediately gets to work on their case. He applies to the High Court for an interim injunction against the eviction. The warrant for possession was obtained unlawfully and the residents have the right to challenge it in court.

Nathaniel, a tall Englishman with a shoulder-length ponytail and bemused expression, converses with the residents in fluent Spanish (most are originally from South America). He will need immaculate financial information from each tenant otherwise the legal aid agency could refuse to fund the work. Hackney Law Centre, like legal aid providers across the country, has struggled to stay afloat.
after more than a decade of cuts. Legal aid ‘reform’ means only the very poorest are eligible for legal aid, and even those on income-related benefits do not automatically qualify. Drastic cuts have been made to advice and representation for housing disrepair and welfare benefits. There is nothing for employment and debt.

The injunction has been granted. One Mr Justice Collins rules that the landlord, named as Destrey Limited, must allow the 16 tenants to re-enter the property. They can return home, for now.

Back in South London, in January 2014, with the help of Brixton Advice Centre, Mahder kept his home, negotiating a repayment plan of £3.60 a week on top of his rent. Hiriti was pregnant and their case against the housing association was due in court within weeks. In court Mahder’s lawyers would argue that Metropolitan should waive the arrears and cover the cost of extensive work to improve the ventilation in the flat. Then Hiriti miscarried. Mahder blames stress caused by their housing situation. As well as the damp and debt, the couple had to contend with a broken kitchen sink. They placed a large bucket under the sink, emptying it three or four times a day. Mahder says this went on for ‘several months’ before the sink was replaced. In February 2014, Hiriti’s doctor wrote a letter which said: ‘I would be grateful if these repairs [to the sink] could be carried out as soon as possible as in her present condition she cannot manage to carry these heavy loads. She is also complaining of back pain and abdominal pain relating to this.’

Mahder went to court in February 2014. He had managed to reduce the arrears from £2,292.80 to £953.70, partly by borrowing money from friends. He told the court: ‘Since I’ve moved to the flat I have been miserable as the housing office neglects our needs. We are physically, emotionally, mentally drained from this situation and still saddened by the loss of our unborn child and nobody seems to understand.’

Metropolitan agreed to waive the arrears and carry out improvements to the flat. The court order decreed that work must begin within 28 days.

After leaving the Hackney Law Centre, the 16 tenants broke into their home. In the time they had been away the landlord had changed the locks and the house had been vandalised.

Mattresses slashed, toilets ripped from the floor surrounded by broken tiles, cisterns discarded in the yard, windows nailed shut. Chunks of plaster gauged from walls. Clothes left behind strewn across rooms. No heating or gas.

Diego was embarrassed. ‘We usually keep the house very clean, we don’t live like this,’ he says. ‘It’s trim, pepper-haired Colombian is 45. Before moving to London, he lived in Spain for 10 years – he was a social worker for a charity, providing support for new migrants and refugees. Now Diego earns slightly more than the minimum wage as a cleaning supervisor for an office cleaning company (see below).’

After a day of cleaning offices at Canary Wharf, the financial district across the city in East London. He paid £5.50 a month for his room with a double bed, a sink, a wardrobe, and a portable shower. But, he says, it will be difficult to find somewhere similar. ‘They want £1,200 or £1,300 and you see the flat and you want to cry.’

Libia paid £433 a month for her room, slightly smaller than Diego’s and without a shower. She earns about £200 a month from her cleaning job and receives £83 a week in housing benefit. ‘I am too exhausted and too tense,’ she says. ‘I can’t think about where to go or what to do. Committing suicide was the only way to leave behind all of these problems.’

Who owns the house? The tenants don’t know. They paid their money to managers who say the house was sold several months ago. Whoever owns it wants rid of them before the agreed notice period. ‘I imagined London to be a city that welcomed you, but it’s the opposite,’ says Diego, ‘I think London is becoming a city only for rich people.’

Nathaniel from the Hackney Law Centre says the exploitation of poorer tenants is routine. ‘We have got tenants in low paying jobs from abroad, all cleaners, in relatively cheap but completely unregulated accommodation. It is not uncommon for landlords one way or another to evict these people whether through the courts, or not through the courts, and often giving them no notice at all. You have got people who just don’t know their rights.’

In a statement about Mahder Redie’s flat, the Metropolitan housing association said: ‘We settled compensation in February and agreed to carry out improvement works. A maintenance survey report was undertaken before which identified a condensation issue and suggested an action plan to remedy the situation. The condensation was found to be as a result of a number of factors, including ventilation and heating, rather than attributable solely to the structure of the building.

We aim to carry out repairs quickly and efficiently … and we have regularly attended the property to carry out improvements to assist the resident with managing the condensation. Unfortunately, it recurred. Prior to the legal process, we have no record of the resident making a complaint through our complaints procedure.’

On 3rd April 2014, the Redie family waits for a repairman to arrive between 8am and 1pm. They finish lunch and Mahder looks at his phone. Around 1.15pm he calls the housing association to find out why the repairman has not shown up. The visit is rearranged. Mahder tries to sleep before his next shift at 11pm.