

We want to be strong, but we don't have the chance

Women's experiences of seeking asylum in the UK



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The power
of kindness

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Foreword

Women seeking asylum are living through a system designed by people who have no experience of what it is like to be a woman seeking asylum. The most recent reforms of the asylum system, proposed through the New Plan for Immigration, are no exception.

When the New Plan for Immigration was announced in March 2021, the government committed to protecting vulnerable women and children. However, women with first-hand experience of the asylum system feel their views and experiences were not considered when this plan was developed.

By contrast, this report aims to bring the experiences of women seeking asylum to the forefront of asylum reform. If women with lived experience had been consulted when devising previous asylum policies or the New Plan for Immigration, research papers like this would not need to exist.

I cannot recount the number of emotionally overwhelming moments I have experienced while trying to gather my thoughts to write this foreword. It is because this report consolidates the harrowing experiences of many high-calibre women who have had their wings broken and hopes crushed while going through an asylum process that seems endless. I can resonate with this. However, as one of the long-standing members of the VOICES Network, I know that speaking about our lived experiences has only made us feel stronger. When the situation you face is outside of your control, the only control you have is how you use your voice.

When I arrived as a person seeking refuge in the UK, I did not know what I was committing myself to – the next seven years of uncertainties, rejections, redundancy, stagnation and destitution. My life completely flipped in a matter of days, from living a comfortable life to having

to flee and becoming a person who felt invisible in the UK, not even part of the society.

This report is a collection of the unheard cries and unwritten pains of many women who are stripped of their rights to be themselves – instead they have their stories disbelieved and are reduced only to a label: 'asylum seeker'.

The research was co-designed with women who have first-hand experience of seeking asylum in the UK, who organically curated and shaped the research questions, and conducted workshops and in-depth interviews with fellow women. We adopted a co-production approach where the British Red Cross worked collaboratively with Ambassadors of the VOICES Network by sharing equal power, and worked towards achieving the same goal – to amplify women's voices in the reform of asylum policy.

The main recommendation from this research is that the government must co-produce asylum policy with the people these policies affect, with women seeking asylum. This report has been led by women with first-hand experience of seeking asylum. Women who have developed detailed recommendations for change – on the asylum interview process, access to healthcare, education, housing and more.

Read this report and you will find insights and recommendations that can be acted on now to make the asylum system safer, fairer, and more sensitive towards women.

Swami Vivekananda, an Indian spiritual leader and reformer once said, "*The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women*". Failing to take into consideration the expert voices of women, when designing policies that would impact their lives, means failing as a nation.

Sharlu Rajen, Ambassador for the VOICES Network

About the VOICES Network

The VOICES Network brings together people with experience of the issues that affect refugees and people seeking asylum. Launched in 2018, it brings together ambassadors in Birmingham, Derby, Glasgow, Leeds, Leicester, London, Sheffield, the South-East of England and across Wales. The VOICES Network is supported by the British Red Cross.

With training and support, VOICES ambassadors work together to speak out about issues that affect refugees and people seeking asylum. Sharing their own experiences, they advocate to change policy, use the media to change points of view and support the British Red Cross and others to improve services through expert feedback.



Listen to the 'We are VOICES' podcast [here](#)

Glossary

- **Asylum support:** is a form of support provided by the Home Office to people seeking asylum who are facing destitution and homelessness. Asylum support includes accommodation and/or weekly financial support of £39.63 per person.
- **ASPEN card:** is a chip and pin payment card used by the Home Office to provide weekly payments of asylum support.
- **Asylum Registration Card (ARC):** is a card issued by the Home Office to people who claim asylum. It contains information about the holder's identity, including their age and nationality and their immigration status as an asylum applicant.
- **ESOL:** stands for English language learning for speakers of other languages.
- **Gender-based violence:** is violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately. It can include sexual violence and exploitation, forced and child marriage, FGM, so called 'honour' based violence and intimate partner violence. It can be physical, psychological, sexual, emotional and material.
- **Istanbul Convention:** is commonly used to refer to the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. The UK government signed the Istanbul Convention in 2012.
- **Participants:** women seeking asylum who participated in interviews and workshops.
- **Person seeking asylum:** is a person who has left their country of origin to seek protection in another country, often described as an 'asylum seeker'. A person seeking asylum has not yet been legally recognised as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:** is caused by very stressful, frightening or distressing events. Someone with PTSD often relives the traumatic event through nightmares and flashbacks, and may experience feelings of isolation, irritability and guilt. They may also have problems sleeping, such as insomnia.
- **Research advisors:** women from the VOICES Network, who were involved in developing research questions, leading interviews, facilitating workshops and developing recommendations.
- **Refugee:** is a person who has proven that they would be at risk if returned to their home country, has had their claim for asylum accepted by the UK government and can now stay in the UK either long term or indefinitely.
- **VCS:** organisations from the voluntary and community sector.
- **Screening interview:** is the first interview in an asylum application. It is usually short, lasting 30 minutes to two hours, and includes questions about a person's background, family, journey to the UK and briefly why the person is claiming asylum.
- **Substantive interview:** is the main interview in the asylum application process. It can last several hours and is when a Home Office interviewer will ask detailed questions about someone's reasons for claiming asylum.
- **Survivor of trafficking:** is used in this report to describe people who have experienced human trafficking, modern slavery or other exploitative situations, including forced and compulsory labour, sexual exploitation and forced criminality.
- **Trauma-informed practice:** is a model that is grounded in and directed by a complete understanding of how trauma exposure affects a person's neurological, biological, psychological and social development.
- **Unaccompanied minor:** is a term used to refer to children who have arrived in the UK alone, without a parent or guardian.

Executive summary

Women seeking asylum have fled from war, persecution and violence and can face specific risks of physical and sexual violence because of their gender, not only in their home country but also in the place where they seek refuge. Women and girls make up around 40 per cent of people seeking asylum worldwide¹ and in 2020, three in 10 people who applied for asylum in the UK were women and girls.ⁱ Across the world one in three women are subjected to physical or sexual violence – these risks increase during times of emergency and displacement.²

Women seeking asylum need specialist and sensitive support in response to the harrowing experiences they have been through. The British Red Cross provides support to women seeking asylum across the UK. This is the first report, in partnership with the VOICES Network, that the organisation has produced specifically looking at the experiences of those women.

As a signatory to the Istanbul Convention, the UK government has committed to providing an asylum system that is gender-sensitive in terms of application and decision-making processes, and support services, such as accommodation or healthcare. **This research explores the first-hand experiences of women going through the asylum process in the UK. It concludes that, for many women, the UK's asylum process is not sensitive to gender or trauma and does not provide the support they need.**

The research was led by women who have first-hand experience of seeking asylum in the UK. It involved 47 women in different towns and cities across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, including young women who had arrived when they were children. Women leading this research chose to focus on the asylum interview and application process and experiences of navigating and accessing support such as accommodation, healthcare or legal advice. Women taking part also reflected on broader themes about identity, family and their aspirations for building a new life in the UK.

Women taking part in the research described having to re-live traumatic experiences repeatedly, being required to recount experiences of rape and sexual abuse to a male interviewer and feeling interrogated and disbelieved by government officials. One woman said she felt she was treated like a criminal when applying for asylum, and that she was assumed to be lying until she could prove otherwise.

At the same time, many women are living in precarious situations where they don't feel safe. The lack of health and needs assessments when women enter the asylum process, and the additional barriers they face in accessing legal advice or healthcare, mean in many cases women's needs simply aren't recognised, recorded or met. Women described the lack of dignity they felt in being reliant on charities and community groups to access basic needs such as finding a place to sleep, registering with a GP and accessing food, sanitary items or nappies for their babies.

Women who wait months, and even years, for a decision on their asylum application, are not allowed to work, struggle to access education and live on just over £5 a day. Many not only feel they start to lose their identities as professionals, friends and women but also experience loneliness and depression. Instead, women wanted an opportunity to thrive, contribute and be recognised as members of their new community in the UK.

The UK government has recently set out its plans for what it describes as the 'most significant overhaul' of the asylum system in decades. The New Plan for Immigration describes the proposed reforms as aiming towards an asylum system that is 'fair to everyone' and that 'helps the most vulnerable', including women and children.ⁱⁱ Yet there are no proposals in the plan for how the government will ensure the needs of women and girls are met by a future asylum system, nor any mention of an asylum system that is sensitive to gender or trauma-related needs.

In the media, on social channels and in parliamentary debate, people are often talking about the asylum system, but rarely listening to those who are living through it themselves. This is particularly the case for women, who are often described as 'vulnerable' or 'voiceless'. Women who are seeking asylum in the UK right now are experts by experience – in some cases navigating the asylum process and supporting others to do the same has been a central part of their lives for many years. All the women involved in this research had ideas for reform of the asylum system, but most felt that their ideas would not be valued, or even sought, by policymakers.

Led by women going through the asylum process themselves, this research presents women's first-hand experiences and their proposals for reforms that really would make the UK's asylum system safer and fairer for women and girls.

ⁱ Many more women and girls will also have been waiting for a decision on their asylum claim, but the Home Office does not release gender disaggregated data beyond that on applications and the outcome of decisions. The full datasets can be found in the immigration statistics quarterly release, available at: gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-statistics-quarterly-release

ⁱⁱ The New Plan for Immigration was published in March 2021, with a consultation period running for six weeks. The UK government's response to the consultation was published in July 2021 and set out its intentions to proceed with plans to overhaul the asylum system. The New Plan for Immigration and the UK government's consultation response are available at: gov.uk/government/consultations/new-plan-for-immigration

Key findings

Women who are seeking safety and going through the UK's asylum process come from diverse backgrounds, with individual experiences that are specific to them alone. However, throughout the interviews and focus groups that took place during this research project strong themes and shared experiences emerged among women applying for asylum in the UK. Many of these experiences had a deeply negative impact on the women's lives, their families and their mental health.

Women seeking asylum do not feel they are treated with basic human dignity.

Women who took part in this research said that being in the asylum system in the UK makes them feel side-lined, dismissed, silenced or 'dehumanised'. This became evident in the consistent need for independent advocates to support them to access appropriate housing, legal advice, education and health services, as well as to subsidise asylum support that many women found insufficient to meet their basic needs. Instead, women wanted an opportunity to thrive, contribute and to be recognised as members of their new community in the UK. All the women taking part in this research had ideas, and recommendations that they wanted to be heard and acted on to ensure other women did not go through what they have.

Asylum application processes fail to make women feel safe or to respond to trauma.

Women described how interviewers and asylum officials often seem to lack the training or sensitivity to respond to trauma and create an environment where people feel safe to disclose violence. Despite policy guidance on gender-sensitive interview processes, women described having to disclose rape and sexual assault in interviews conducted by men, and experiences where they were interrogated and disbelieved by interviewers.

These experiences were compounded by the struggle many women faced in accessing good quality legal advice, including finding solicitors who could support them in the early stages of their asylum application. Participants felt that this lack of sufficient, good quality legal advice could contribute towards delays in their overall application and affected their confidence and ability to navigate the asylum process.

Women seeking asylum face significant challenges accessing safe and appropriate accommodation, financial support and healthcare.

Common themes throughout interviews and focus groups were experiences of inappropriate and, in some cases, unsafe accommodation, the lack of adequate financial support and challenges accessing and navigating health services. Often these issues were connected – for example, having a temporary

address and moving frequently affected women's ability to register with a GP and maintain any continuity of care. Many women spoke about the damaging impact that these negative experiences can have on their mental health, their safety and their ability to engage with the asylum application process. This was particularly stark where women were left facing street homelessness, with one woman describing being forced to sleep in a bus shelter with her young children.

Decision-making delays leave individuals, and families, in limbo for many years.

A sense of being 'in limbo' was one of the primary issues identified by women who took part in this research. Many had experienced long delays waiting for their substantive asylum interview and subsequent decision. Long waiting times leave women's lives on hold, making it difficult to maintain their skills and independence, as well as facing the ongoing anxiety of waiting for any communication from the Home Office. This all combines to negatively impact their mental and physical health. Many felt they had been left to sit and wait for life to resume, sometimes for several years.

Young women seeking asylum need independent advisors they can trust.

Women of all ages described struggling to understand the asylum system and processes they were going through, but young women emphasised this and their dependence on social workers and other professionals in their lives. Many spoke about not knowing their rights in the UK, including when having their age questioned and, in some cases, disbelieved. Young women said that they don't know how they would have coped without charities, community groups and others they could turn to, and stressed the importance of independent support beyond the immediate social care they received.

Women seeking asylum aspire to study and to work.

Women taking part in this research made it clear that in order to better establish themselves in a new society and to build their confidence they need to have opportunities to access education and become part of the working population. For many women, work and education were also important parts of their identity.

Key recommendations

Ensure each stage of the asylum process is trauma-informed and gender-sensitive

and that there are clear safeguards and accountability for this. The way to achieve this is by ensuring women seeking asylum are involved in reform of the asylum process on a policy and operational level and in monitoring and accountability procedures.

- The UK government should **develop, publish and implement a strategy to ensure women seeking asylum are engaged throughout the current reforms of the asylum process and as a matter of course at all other times.** This strategy should be developed in partnership with women with experience of seeking asylum in the UK. It should consider, as a minimum:
 - how to make engagement opportunities accessible, including through financial recompense.
 - how to ensure feedback is provided to women who engage with the Home Office.
 - the role women seeking asylum have themselves to set the agenda for the issues they want to discuss.
- The Home Office should **invest in peer-to-peer asylum guides** to ensure people going through the asylum system have support and guidance to navigate the asylum system.
- The Home Office should **ensure that guidance on responding to gender in asylum applications is implemented and monitored effectively.** To achieve this, it should:
 - Ensure all asylum casework staff are appropriately trained to respond to trauma.
 - Ensure all women can be interviewed by a woman if they want to be.
 - Create an independent monitoring group to receive feedback from women who have recently made an application for asylum, this could include their experience of screening and substantive interviews and communication from the Home Office. This monitoring group should include women with lived experience.

For a full set of recommendations, please see page 46



Experiences shared by Foura*

Foura is seeking asylum in the UK and is a survivor of child abuse and human trafficking. The sexual violence she experienced in her home country left her with long-term harm including being HIV positive and she has been recently diagnosed with vaginal cancer while living in the UK. She had hoped seeking safety in the UK would mean her life would become better, however she does not believe this was the case. She describes the impact of how people seeking asylum are treated, such as through years of waiting for a decision on her asylum application, being arrested and detained and facing a culture of disbelief and distrust, including by healthcare services, due to her status as an asylum seeker.

“I don't really know how to express it in a way that is going to be clear enough, but ... I thought, 'I'm done with the pain back there, where I was really facing the demon itself.' And I thought that [being an] asylum seeker is going to make things a little bit calmer for me. So I felt the very same fire that tortured me back then ... Asylum seeking is just beyond recognition ... there was a time where I was blaming myself, that maybe I'm the one who is the problem here, you understand? Because if you are seeking help, and you get such kind [of negative] response, you start doubting everything. That's why [poor] mental health also comes, and plays a role, so it's just not a good experience at all.”

Despite everything she has been through, Foura is positive and glad to support others by taking part in this research.

“I know that for a fact, because after being abused and molested and survived that ... I'm coming from a hell of agony. I'm glad today I'm sitting there testifying about it. It wasn't easy ... There's a saying ... “You strike a woman; you strike a rock.”

*Not her real name



Introduction

Women seeking asylum have specific protections in international law, as set out most recently in the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (often referred to as the Istanbul Convention).³ The Istanbul Convention sets out requirements for gender-based violence to be recognised as a form of persecution under the Refugee Convention as well as requirements for governments to adopt gender-sensitive asylum procedures and support services for people seeking asylum.

The UK signed the Istanbul Convention in 2012 and has recently published the fifth progress report on its assessment of the UK's progress towards ratification. The first progress report set out that the UK government had implemented an 'asylum gender action plan' to ensure the asylum system was 'gender-sensitive'.⁴ Subsequent progress reports have marked the UK as 'compliant' with requirements for *"the necessary legislative or other measures to develop gender-sensitive reception procedures and support services for asylum seekers as well as gender guidelines and gender-sensitive asylum procedures, including refugee status determination and application for international protection"*.⁵

Prior to and since the UK signed the Istanbul Convention, there have been several detailed reports that have raised serious concerns about women's experiences of the UK's asylum system, which have set out recommendations on asylum determination processes⁶; reception conditions and support services⁷; preventing destitution and homelessness⁸; the impact of Covid-19 restrictions⁹; and more. Some of this work builds on the Women's Asylum Charter, which was established by a group of civil society organisations in 2008 and led to wider recognition of women's specific experiences in the asylum determination process. There have been important policy developments since then, such as commitments to specific training for asylum decision-makers, published guidance on responding to gender in asylum claims

and, in 2019, the introduction of guidance on responding to domestic abuse in the asylum support system.

The most recent changes proposed to the UK's asylum system, set out in the New Plan for Immigration¹⁰ and implemented in part through the Nationality and Borders Bill, make no references to gender-sensitive asylum procedures. The changes focus on introducing powers for the government to treat people differently based on how they arrive in the UK, including introducing criminal penalties of up to four years imprisonment; setting up 'off-shore' asylum processing; housing people in accommodation centres; and introducing 'temporary protection' for refugees, which includes reduced rights to welfare support and to reunite with family.

Many individuals, groups and organisations submitted responses to the UK government's consultation on the New Plan for Immigration, including the British Red Cross and the VOICES Network. In July 2021 the government published a response to the consultation which states that *"Several stakeholders flagged that whilst the reforms may have an impact on all protected groups, women, children and LGBT individuals are most likely to be affected, as well as those who have experienced trauma, including where there are mental health issues. Respondents felt that this will make it harder for them to access safe and legal routes into the UK, potentially displacing them into more dangerous routes. Similar concerns were highlighted in relation to the overall differentiated approach to asylum and admissibility. These are vital considerations in policy changes going forward"*.¹¹

It is not clear what, if any, changes have been made in light of responses to the New Plan for Immigration, nor what 'policy changes' the government intends to make in response to concerns raised about the impact on women and other protected groups. It is also unclear whether the government remains committed to having a 'gender-sensitive' asylum system at all.

Research methodology

This research came about as a result of suggestions from women who are members of the VOICES Network to conduct research that looks at women's specific experiences of seeking asylum and ensures their voices are heard. At a time when the government is proposing a 'complete overhaul' of the asylum system, women wanted to explore with other women what reforms they felt would make a difference and make the asylum process safe and better for them.

In July 2021 the British Red Cross and VOICES commissioned Savanta ComRes to undertake this research on our behalf. The research was a collaborative process, and every stage was led or informed by a group of 10 'research advisors' from the VOICES Network, who were involved in developing research questions, leading interviews, facilitating workshops and developing recommendations.

Participation and recruitment

37 women seeking asylum participated in interviews and workshops to discuss their experiences. They had arrived from a range of countries and continents over the past 10 years and were living in different parts of the UK, from Plymouth to Belfast. While only women over the age of 18 took part, participants included those who had arrived as children without a parent or guardian and been placed in the care of social services, as well as those who were older, both with and without children.

The women who took part in this research as advisors and participants were recruited through VOICES and the British Red Cross's networks and included bringing together existing women's groups who meet regularly for group sessions, activities and to provide peer advice and support for each other. This allowed us to reach a large number of women across the country and to gain a broader range of perspectives on the issues being explored.

However, by the nature of how we recruited we know that the participants in this research have better connections and access to support networks than many women who are seeking asylum in the UK, and that these networks were central to their ability to overcome the many challenges they faced. While women who are less connected to these types of networks are likely to face many of the same challenges as those who participated in this project, without access to the same level of support they are likely to find it even harder to navigate the asylum system and life in the UK.

Insofar as this report highlights the common needs of women seeking asylum in the UK, it also highlights the value in ensuring that supportive networks are available to, and reach, those that are more cut off, as well as the value in conducting further research that considers the experiences of women who do not have voluntary and community sector (VCS) networks supporting them.

Voices of women seeking asylum

This research project brings together the experiences and advice of 47 women with lived experience of seeking asylum in the UK.

10 women from the VOICES Network, who are currently or have recently been through the asylum system in the UK, took part as **research advisors**. They co-produced and led this research from design, through to carrying out fieldwork and shaping policy recommendations.

11 women with lived experience of the UK asylum system took part in **interviews** to discuss their experiences.

26 women with lived experience of the UK asylum system took part across **three workshops** to discuss their experiences.



Fieldwork

In order to gain in-depth insight into women's experiences, a qualitative approach was adopted, incorporating the use of two research methods: peer-led focus groups (termed as workshops during fieldwork) and peer-led interviews. A semi-structured approach enabled participants' responses to be compared, while also allowing space for them to lead the discussion and raise issues or concerns that were particularly important to them. There were three key stages to the research:

STAGE 1: RESEARCH DESIGN WORKSHOPS (August 2021)

- Two exploratory online workshops with research advisors from the VOICES Network. Through these workshops, research advisors shaped the design of the interview and focus group guides, advising on themes to be included based on their experiences and the experiences of other women seeking asylum they know. The sessions were facilitated by Savanta ComRes.

STAGE 2: FIELDWORK (September 2021)

- **11 in-depth online interviews** led by advisors from the VOICES Network, with researchers from Savanta ComRes acting as support-moderators.
- **Three online workshops** facilitated by advisors from the VOICES Network, supported by researchers from Savanta ComRes.

STAGE 3: CO-PRODUCTION WORKSHOP (October 2021)

- Following completion of the fieldwork, research advisors participated in an online **co-production workshop** to discuss and reflect on the research findings, and feed into recommendations. The workshop was jointly facilitated by Savanta ComRes and British Red Cross.

The research was conducted remotely, with interviews and workshops taking place online, via Zoom, with the option to conduct the interview by telephone if preferred. In order to overcome barriers posed by limited digital access, the workshops took place during sessions run by already-established women's groups, so participants could join the online workshops collectively.

Adopting a co-production approach to the research helped to ensure that participants' voices were heard. The fact that interviews and workshops were led by research advisors who themselves had lived experience of the asylum system put participants at ease; advisors could relate personally to many of the issues being discussed, which encouraged participants to speak openly and honestly. This approach was beneficial not only to the research process, but also to the advisors themselves, many of whom reported learning new skills and building confidence. The advisors also helped with interpretation where needed, facilitating conversations that otherwise would have been difficult. Conducting fieldwork online also helped overcome language barriers, by allowing participants to write directly into text boxes to ensure clarity.

Savanta ComRes acted as a support researcher, providing training and preparation sessions, and participating as a co-facilitator during fieldwork, asking follow-up questions and addressing any concerns among either the participants or the advisors.



Section 1

Experiences of asylum procedures



1.1. Applying for asylum in the UK

Background: Claiming asylum in the UK

To claim asylum in the UK, a person needs to be physically present in the country. Some people claim asylum immediately at the place where they arrive in the UK, and others register their asylum claim at an Asylum Screening Unit after entering the UK.

People claiming asylum will have an initial 'screening interview'. This interview is usually quite short, lasting 30 minutes to two hours, and includes questions about their background, family, journey to the UK and briefly why they are claiming asylum. It can involve taking biometric data (e.g. photographs, fingerprints) and can take place the same day that someone arrives in the UK.

After the screening interview, the next major stage in the asylum determination process is usually the 'substantive interview', often described as the 'big' interview. This interview can last several hours and is when a Home Office interviewer will ask detailed questions about someone's reasons for claiming asylum. There is no set timeframe for when this interview will take place, and some people wait months and, in some cases, one or two years before they have their substantive interview.¹²

The asylum application process can determine the overall experience of being in the UK for most people seeking asylum, and this was also the case for the women who took part in this research. The asylum screening interview was usually their first interaction with the Home Office, and how positive and accessible this process felt to them had a big impact on how they felt about their initial months in the country.

1.1.1. Screening and substantive interviews

The women who took part in this research had mixed experiences of the asylum application and interview process, and while some said it had been positive, this was not true for most.

The minority who reported positive experiences of the asylum interview process attributed this to being able to engage well with the person taking down the details of their initial application and interviewing them, and had felt a sense of agency around the overall interview process, for example in relation to their choice of interpreters.



“I would say it depends on who is interviewing you. Because I will say, with confidence, the lady [who] was interviewing me, she was brilliant.”

Interview participant, London

“For the small [screening] interview, for me it was good. Even if you want to choose the translator, they give you a choice, like, for example ... if I need a man or a woman.”

Interview participant, Leeds

However, the application and interview process had been a negative experience for the majority of women who participated in this research. Many had felt apprehension about having to recount difficult experiences during their application and interview. They talked about the challenge of having to repeat their story multiple times to different officials, including those from the Home Office and, in some cases, the police. This often made them feel that their story was being questioned and that they were not believed and, as a result, they felt a constant need to prove themselves. On top of the need to keep repeating the details of their experiences, the formality of the interview process also made them feel that they were not being properly listened to. These factors led to high levels of stress for a number of women during the interview process.

“When you go to the Home Office, they expect you to start from zero again, and it's something that's really hard to go through because if you have to go through the pain you want to forget ... in my case it was really, really hard to go through that.”

Workshop participant, Women of the World Group

“It was really hard and painful ... The pressure, your heart will race ... it's a really horrible feeling.”

Workshop participant, Women of the World Group

Many participants recalled being unable to understand entirely what was going on when an appropriate interpreter was not available. Some participants said they had been provided with interpreters that didn't speak their regional dialects, which led to certain expressions or meanings being misinterpreted. For others, the entire process of speaking through an interpreter made them worry that the nuance and accuracy of what they were saying was being lost.

“There are words used in this country that have a different meaning when you use it in the other country. And I found this is what makes interpretation sometimes really really difficult because, sometimes if you interpret this word to English it doesn't have the same meaning.”

Interview participant, London

In such cases, women felt they had to continue with their interview, knowing that they may not be understanding the nuance of everything being asked of them, and that the things they were saying may not be being correctly interpreted. Most women we spoke to were well aware of the impact this could have on the decision on their asylum claim but felt there was little they could do to change that, which again heightened their levels of anxiety around the interview process.

Many women described their interactions with interviewers as being stressful and confrontational, while others described them as frightening. Some participants described feeling daunted by the asylum application process and said the lack of information surrounding the interview process made it hard for them to feel heard.

“As a young person, especially if you're a young girl and you don't know what to do, it's a really huge problem, very stressful, you don't know what to do.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

Some women had found that the stress of the application and interview process affected their ability to recount their experiences. The attitude of the interviewer and the tone of the interview had a significant impact on their experiences of the interviews and how they viewed their situation. Participants noted that some interviewers were critical, harsh and impatient, and gave the impression of being frustrated. The long lists of questions asked during interviews led to concerns among some women that this was done to confuse them or to catch out any inconsistencies in their story.

“They are harsh on us as well. Because sometimes we are not good in English or we are panicking because of what we went through. It really damaged our emotions and stuff, so sometimes they're being harsh or ask you a lot of questions when they know the story as well, you know. They just want to confuse you or it's like they don't believe you.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

Experiences shared by Dana*

Those who seek asylum in the UK are expected to provide ample evidence to the Home Office of their reasons for doing so. However, Dana felt that when providing such evidence, she was often not taken seriously and not believed. She said that officials indicated that her evidence could be fake.

Dana described how the interrogatory approach in her interview made her feel like a criminal rather than someone who was seeking safety. Her experiences were similar to many other women taking part in this research, who described the effects of being forced to prove everything they spoke of and then only being assessed according to any evidence the Home Office regarded as correct.

“I think the first thing, I think the culture of the Home Office this needs to be scrubbed first ... They make it hard for you, even for the criminal law they say you are innocent until they find evidence you are already a criminal, but with immigration, that is the opposite, it's ‘you are lying until you prove otherwise’. It makes it more difficult, so you have to search for proof and even after you bring proof, they say this proof is fake, it's not right, so it's a really complicated matter.”

***Not her real name**



1.1.2. Disclosing gender-based violence

Background: Gender-based violence in asylum claims

The Home Office has published guidance for asylum casework staff on responding to 'gender issues' in asylum claims. Published in 2018, the latest version of this guidance includes specific sections on gender-based violence and on 'taking gender into account' in asylum interviews and decisions.¹³ In relation to interview conduct, the guidance sets out that:

- Applicants should be asked at screening interviews whether they would prefer a man or woman to interview them and can also request this at later stages.
- Applicants should not be asked to recount persecution in front of their children, and the Home Office can make provision for childcare

available or re-arrange appointments where the person is unable to find childcare.

- Interviewers should create a 'reassuring environment' and should not ask 'intimate or insensitive questions' and 'must be responsive to trauma and emotion'.
- In relation to 'credibility': there may be a number of reasons why someone does not immediately disclose gender-based violence, including the effects of trauma and associated memory loss, feelings of guilt, shame and concerns about family 'honour', or fear of family members or traffickers, or having been conditioned or threatened by them.

During their substantive interview many women described feeling extremely apprehensive about disclosing and describing experiences of gender-based violence, in particular experiences of sexual violence and rape. Some women also stressed that women seeking asylum are more likely to have had experiences that are harder to disclose and to evidence.

“Because a man is normally fleeing maybe from the government ... war and this kind of stuff, women can flee from this too, but they have some other things like domestic violence, maybe rape, maybe sexual assault, and this is hard to prove and hard to say.”

Interview participant, Glasgow

Even under the best possible circumstances, such as working with an interviewer who is trained in trauma-informed approaches, participants said that it remains very difficult to discuss gender-based violence and traumatic experiences. The difficulty was exacerbated for women who had had to disclose these experiences to men.

“My interviewer was a man, and I had to go through a lot of stuff that I didn't want to explain in front of a man.”

Workshop participant, Women of the World Group

The few women taking part in this research who described positive experiences of their screening and substantive interviews had been interviewed by women, who they described as 'sensitive' and 'attentive'.

However, it was clear that being interviewed by a woman does not necessarily mean that the interview will be conducted sensitively and in a way that creates an environment where

someone feels safe to disclose experiences of gender-based violence. Regardless of the gender of the interviewer, their approach and demeanour gave women a sense of whether the person was someone they could trust with their experiences, and whether they would record these accurately.

“So, you can have a woman, but sometimes, which is really not great, you have a woman interviewing you and she's not really sympathising with you. I feel, sometimes the person interviewing you already ... doesn't believe you, and he interprets that in the answers, because he writes the answers, so he writes the answers like he doesn't believe you.”

Interview participant, London

Participants gave specific examples of reports of sexual assault being met with disbelief by officials, including Bola who shares her experiences in more detail below. Another participant described the impact on a woman she knew who was told that she was not telling the truth during her asylum interview:

“The person who was interviewing said to her, ‘No, you were not sexually violated ... You were not exposed to the things that you're telling me, it's not true.’ She said to me, you know, you feel so low and you feel so degraded and you've been violated and you were [telling] your story, you were expecting to be heard and to have someone who shows you some form of sympathy.”

Interview participant, Glasgow

Experiences shared by Bola*

Bola is a survivor of torture and rape, which she experienced in the Democratic Republic of Congo, her country of origin.

The asylum interview process required Bola to detail her experience of rape, sexual assault and torture, this was made all the harder by having to share her experiences with a male stranger. Bola describes how these challenges were made worse by the sense of suspicion and disbelief that surrounds asylum applications generally, as well as the need to communicate this in a language that was not native to her.

Under these circumstances, there were certain details that Bola did not feel comfortable disclosing to male officers, and there were times during the process when her account was disbelieved and dismissed. This put

Bola in an extremely difficult position, feeling uncomfortable - and unable - to share the level of detail being asked of her, but knowing that if she said more, they still might not believe her.

“The interview process is difficult for a woman. Because I had two interviews, the two interviews I had with the Home Office were with men. I’m a victim of torture, of rape, but I have to explain it to a Home Office male officer, so it’s difficult for a woman to explain all these things to a strange person ... and then they say, ‘Your answer was not clear, we don’t believe you.’ But, sometimes, I would love to say more about what happened, but, because it’s a man in front of me, it’s like I’m scared to say all these things in front of a strange person, so it’s difficult.”

*Not her real name

These experiences highlight the distrust and disbelief women can face when discussing traumatic experiences of violence, and demonstrate that, in some cases at least, interviewers fail to provide the interview conditions that are responsive to trauma, ‘reassuring’ or gender sensitive.

In addition to the above, women said that their confidence in relaying these experiences was further inhibited by a reliance on interpreters; long delays and poor communication in the lead-up to interviews; challenges with accessing legal advice; and the power imbalance they experience when confronted with the dispassionate question-answer format of asylum interviews.



Recommendations

Women seeking asylum should have access to asylum procedures that are trauma-informed and gender-sensitive:

- The Home Office should ensure that guidance on responding to gender in asylum applications is implemented and monitored effectively. To achieve this, it should:
 - Ensure all asylum casework staff are appropriately trained to respond to trauma.
 - Ensure all women can be interviewed by a woman if they want to be.
 - Create an independent monitoring group to receive feedback from women who have recently made an application for asylum, this could include their experience of screening and substantive interviews and communication from the Home Office. This monitoring group should include women with lived experience themselves.

“I would start with the issue of being sensitive. For the interviews they really need to look into it and provide professional women who can then interview women, because most women sometimes they would’ve been exposed to things that aren’t even imaginable.”

Interview participant, Glasgow

1.2. Decision-making timeframes

Background: Asylum decision-making delays

There are no set timeframes for making decisions on asylum claims, and no set timeframe between the initial asylum application and the substantive interview. Following the initial screening interview and then the substantive asylum interview, applicants should receive an initial decision on their asylum application.

In 2014, the Home Office set a target that 98 per cent of initial decisions on 'straightforward asylum claims' should be made within six months. This target was subsequently abandoned in 2019. While there has been no published service standard for decision-

making timeframes since then, the Home Office has recently indicated it will re-introduce one.¹⁴

Quarterly statistics released by the Home Office show that there were 67,547 asylum applications waiting for an initial decision at the end of September 2021, and over 60 per cent had been outstanding for longer than six months.¹⁵ There is an increase of over 70 per cent in the number of people waiting six months or more for an initial decision, compared to December 2019. The Home Office does not include a gender breakdown in the data published about the numbers of people waiting for a decision on their asylum claim.

Nearly all women in this research said that they had been kept waiting a long time for interviews and decisions on their asylum claim after first applying for protection in the UK, in some instances for years.

“The whole process can take many, many years and that's the most frustrating thing, for a lot of asylum seekers.”

Workshop participant, Women's Group, Newport

This period of being 'in limbo' had had a negative impact on our participants' mental health. This was particularly true in cases where women were waiting for their substantive interview and knew they would have to share sensitive and difficult experiences, as their apprehension grew the longer they waited. The majority of women who took part in the research said that the extended periods of waiting and the drawn-out application process - which involves the same questions being asked repeatedly from the screening interview onwards - had had an increasingly detrimental impact on their lives.

“Yes, all over again ... you will say your story maybe five times a week ... to just talk about your experience or about your journey was just too much, too much pressure, and it's like, 'Oh, I don't want to talk,' but you have to in order for you to, to see how they can help [you] through your situation.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

Some participants acknowledged that the complexity of their case may have impacted the length of time their application took. Some felt that delays are also caused by issues such as difficulties in accessing legal advice, or challenges providing evidence requested by the Home Office that is not readily available. This process of back and forth can again take longer due to difficulties in communicating with Home Office officials, commonly as a result of language barriers or the absence of sufficient legal representation.

Whatever the cause of delays, women said that the Home Office could do more to communicate with them about timings and with updates on the progress of their case, to ensure they feel less in limbo during the time they spend waiting for a decision on their claim.

“I would also make people know how long this process is going to take because as a human being, we need to start living our life, you don't have a future, you cannot plan, it's really depressing. So, by letting somebody know, okay, you have applied for asylum, so this is how long it's going to take. Just like tell you what to expect.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

The majority of women who participated in this research described feeling let down by the system, caught up in a seemingly never-ending cycle of waiting for the Home Office to progress their asylum application.

“The problem is staying without papers for [many] years ... If you get status, you can [grow] your life step by step. But we are eating, we are sleeping, we are living. But without papers we can't thrive.”

Workshop participant, Women's Group, Newport

“There are people who just stay home Monday to Sunday, they don't have any place to go, they don't study, they don't [do] anything, and then just stay without nothing, and then just wait until the Home Office will give the answer. And when the Home Office gives the answer they give you a negative answer, and most of these people experience depression, stress, and then some of them, they are lost.”

Interview participant, London

This constant waiting negatively impacted the mental health of many women that we spoke to, causing them to feel apprehensive, depressed

and unable to move forward in their lives. Delays have an impact not only on the person's life in the UK but also on their ability to reunite with family they may have been forced to separate from when they fled to seek safety elsewhere.

“We have women who left their kids back home, sometimes they took 10 years, 12 years before the process finished. When they grant them [asylum], their children are already over 18, they cannot bring their children here ... I know some women, they took 15 years before they finished, this asylum process is difficult, they came here young, by the time they passed them, they're already over 40.”

Interview participant, London

Many women taking part in this research emphasised that the asylum process and decision-making within it need to be both swifter and simpler to navigate.

Recommendations

Women seeking asylum should expect fair and timely decisions on their asylum claim, and clear, accessible decision-making processes:

- The Home Office should put improving asylum decision-making at the heart of its plans for reform of the asylum system. Decisions should be made as quickly as possible and should be right first time.
- The Home Office should introduce regular, accessible communication with applicants as they go through the asylum process, such as text message updates on the progress of their application.

“If [women seeking asylum] were in charge, they'd make it swifter, that's my word, swifter, easier and quicker, so that people don't have to sit at home and suffer anxiety and have health issues of worrying about whether or not they'll get status.”

Workshop participant, Women's Group, Newport

1.3. Legal advice

Background: Access to legal advice and legal aid

Professionals providing legal advice on immigration matters need to be qualified and registered with the Office of Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC). It is a criminal offence to provide immigration advice without qualifications.

In the UK legal aid is available to fund legal advice and representation for people seeking asylum, and for people seeking protection on humanitarian grounds. Legal aid for asylum cases is subject to a standard fee structure, which has been described as *“inadequate for high quality work”* meaning legal aid providers

are unable to *“reconcile quality, financial viability and client access”*.¹⁶

People seeking asylum who receive accommodation support from the Home Office are sent to live in different towns and cities across the UK. In many areas in the UK there are no immigration and asylum legal aid advisers at all, and in others there is just one for the entire county.¹⁷ A recent study by the Law Society found that across England and Wales, 63 per cent of the population do not have access to an immigration and asylum legal aid provider.¹⁸

Applying for refugee status is a complex process, and for many who arrive here it is their first experience of dealing with a legal system in this way.¹⁹ Accessing good legal advice and services is extremely important and was a priority for research advisors when considering areas of focus for this research. This included exploring women's awareness of and access to legal advice, as well as their experience of advice and representation provided by legal advisors such as solicitors and charitable organisations.

Some said they had been provided with inaccurate legal advice from other people seeking asylum (usually people from their home country or people who could speak their language).

“Sometimes the friend advice is not really reliable, just messes them around, or maybe they just give them the best advice from his knowledge, or her knowledge, so sometimes it's not reliable at all.”

Interview participant, London

1.3.1. Finding a solicitor

“It's not easy to find the information, it's not easy to find solicitors ... they don't have space to take the case, they're fully occupied, so you have to search for another solicitor and sometimes the time is not with you.”

Interview participant, London

Everyone taking part in this research stressed how important good quality legal advice is during the asylum process. Around half of the women discussed difficulties in accessing a solicitor. Some did not know where to go to get legal advice and related information when they arrived in the UK and relied on word-of-mouth and voluntary and community-based organisations to help them to understand their rights and how to find a solicitor.

“I don't know what's happening, to be honest. I don't have any solicitor ... And they said they got me a volunteer lawyer but he's doing nothing. I don't know really what's happening.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

There was agreement among participants that, while informal support networks can be a great source of support in some ways, word-of-mouth advice is not a reliable source of information on legal rights. Those without English language skills were particularly reliant on their informal support networks and on third parties such as charities to access information.

Some women seeking asylum noted the difference in the availability of legal aid providers depending on where they were living, including that people living in cities like London or Birmingham might have better access to legal advice. Women living in areas with limited or no legal aid providers reflected on the serious challenges they faced.

“When I came here, there were no lawyers ... I don't even know what's happening with my case, and it's so stressful, the process is so slow and you are just left empty. You don't know what's happening, it's just like you live - you wake up, you eat, you sleep.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

1.3.2. Quality of legal advice and support

Around half of participants who did have solicitors felt they had been able to access good legal advice, and that their solicitors were able to provide them with advice and support throughout their asylum claim. Participants felt that having clear and accessible early legal advice largely depended on the individual solicitor.

“I had a really good solicitor. She was so supportive and very attentive. And explained, even though English wasn't my first language, there was an interpreter as well, even the day we went for the interview, she prepared me.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

“Some legal advisors come to you with full interest. They want to help. Some are not interested, to be honest. Some just read your case anyhow. Some reject you from number one, from day one. They will say they will not take up your case. Some take your case and just let it lie. It's affected me personally.”

Interview participant, London

Some women felt their solicitors did not support them adequately with the asylum interview, with their overall application or with the immediate process of claiming asylum. This was particularly difficult in the early stages of the asylum process and in preparing for interviews.

“I was stuck with my solicitor five years, and that time, I wasn't doing anything at all, I was just informed by him, ‘Wait, just wait, just wait’, and wait, nothing else ... He didn't even inform me anything about my case, nothing. He didn't even prepare me for interview, he just sent me there directly without preparation, and just said, ‘Say whatever you know’, that's it. And from my friends, I just find out, actually your solicitor should prepare you.”

Interview participant, London

During the asylum process, participants spoke about poor or limited communication from their solicitors which caused confusion, leading to feelings of being ignored or not taken seriously. Negative experiences with solicitors such as this impacted upon some women's confidence and their understanding of decisions they were being asked to make at different stages of the asylum process. One participant felt this meant that people seeking asylum had to rely on advocates such as charities for greater credibility and support when engaging with solicitors.

“If they see you don't have a responsible person ... who can look after you, like maybe Red Cross or a social worker, they will leave you. They're not going to care about your case at all, because they think, ‘she's asylum’, or ‘he's asylum’, and they will just take advantage of you, taking their monthly payment for doing nothing, and leaving it until the end.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

Recommendations

Women seeking asylum should have access to good quality legal advice from an appropriately qualified and funded legal advisor:

- The Ministry of Justice and the Legal Aid Agency should improve legal aid provision for the early stages of an asylum application, to ensure people can access specialist advice and have support to gather evidence and prepare for interviews.

“I think if I was in charge I would provide more lawyers, solicitors, and I will give more attention to the cases, like, to listen, to have time to listen to everyone's opinion as well and how they are feeling about it.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

Section 2

Experiences of support, services and life in the UK



2.1. Young women living in care

Background: Unaccompanied children seeking asylum

Home Office statistics show that in the year ending September 2021 there were 3,103 people under the age of 18 without a parent or guardian who claimed asylum in the UK. 216 were young women.²⁰

Children under the age of 18 years old arriving in the UK as 'unaccompanied minors' without a parent or guardian are placed under the care of social services and may live in foster care or in a residential children's home. The Local Authority acts as their corporate parent.

Many young people who arrive alone go through an age assessment process carried out by social workers from a Local Authority and/or officials from the Home Office. Guidance by the Association of Directors of Children's Services sets out that "Age assessments should only be carried out where there is significant reason to doubt that the individual is the age they claim. Age assessments should not be a routine part of a Local Authority's assessment of unaccompanied or trafficked children".²¹

In the year ending September 2021 there were 1,865 age disputes raised about the age of a young person seeking asylum, a 135 per cent increase compared to the previous year.

Under the New Plan for Immigration, the Home Office is proposing to introduce new methods for assessing age, including giving immigration officers powers to treat someone as an adult where their 'physical appearance and demeanour' suggest they are over 18 years old, rather than the current threshold of 25 years old.

As part of this research, we conducted one workshop and three one-to-one interviews with young women who had arrived in the UK when they were under the age of 18. For these young women, who arrived in the UK without a parent or guardian, their relationships with professionals in their lives – including their social worker, foster carer and those providing independent support through charities and other organisations – were central to their wellbeing.

"You're leaving your country because you can't stay there anymore, and you're coming to a different place, where you've never been, and you don't know what is actually going to happen with you ... As a young woman, I would say there can be issues that you can't be confident of yourself, since you've been always with your family, especially in Muslim countries [where] women don't have a lot of responsibilities, as in European countries. So, mostly your brother, your father, your mum look after you, but once you arrive here, without your parents especially ... it's very hard to then settle down in the UK."

Interview participant, Birmingham



2.1.1. Age assessments

A few young women we spoke to reflected on the difficulty of having their age disbelieved by the Home Office and other government bodies they interacted with, such as social services, and spoke of disputes about their age affecting their sense of identity and their trust and confidence in the asylum system.

One young woman described the impact of being considered to be over 18 by the Home Office. Although she was under 18 years old, she was treated as an adult, including being placed in a hostel by the Home Office with adult men and women, and sharing a bedroom with an adult woman. For this young woman, her age and her related needs and life as a young woman were effectively erased until the authorities accepted that she needed to live with a foster family and go to school.

“In the old hostel [it was a mix of] men and women ... At that time I was not feeling good because I was [sharing a room] with a woman who was older than me ... I had nightmares and I felt not good at that time ... In the hostel I got support [from other residents] because I talked with them about it and about my age also, and they helped me.”

Interview participant, Leeds

Another young woman described the impact of arriving in the UK when she had just turned 18, which meant she had to navigate the asylum system as an adult without any additional support:

“I was 18. I didn't have a social service worker. No one was looking after me ... I was doing everything. Well, it was really hard ... The problem in this system is, like, they're treating young people, who are under 18, differently, and who are over 18 so differently. So if you arrive as an 18-year old girl, or young woman, without parents, by yourself, they will treat you as an adult. Especially if you don't have any friends or relatives in the UK, it's very problematic.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

2.1.2. Support and independence

Participants in this research who had arrived before they were 18 discussed the challenges of being reliant on others for support and, in some cases, drew attention to examples demonstrating their restricted ability to make their own choices. Participants discussed their reliance on professionals around them to make decisions on their behalf. They reflected on feelings of

dependence, lack of confidence and of not knowing who they could trust or where to turn to for the right advice.

“[Even] today sometimes if I want to speak to a professional I'm not comfortable enough, I will have to ask my foster carer, I'm like, 'Please can you talk to them? Help me.' like that. So, it's just because sometimes they just don't listen or they don't understand what you are trying to say.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

Participants described varied experiences of social services and foster care. Where they lived and their home environment had a fundamental effect on their experience of the asylum system and their life in the UK. Some young women lived in semi-independent accommodation provided by social services, and a few women had experience of living with foster carers. For those who had a positive relationship with their foster carers, they reflected on the wide-ranging supportive role that foster carers played. As one young woman described:

“My foster carer used to stand by me ... because you're going into the asylum process, I didn't know anything about it. Like, I'm going there with nothing.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

By contrast, one participant had an extremely negative experience with her foster carer, and this had an impact on everything in her life, including her asylum interview and her ability to make contact with family she had been separated from.

“Some foster carers shouldn't be carers ... She didn't want me to even call my family ... It was so stressful, I wanted to call them, she said no. One day she left a phone with my foster carer friend, and I was asking for one minute, 'Please, I want to call my family to tell them I am fine and not to worry'.”

Workshop participant, Women of the World Group

Several participants articulated the importance of independent support beyond their immediate social services care, with one participant describing this as being beneficial in building trust, safeguarding against any potential abuse of power and providing opportunities to counter any misinformation provided.

“People helped me ... church people. If they didn't help me maybe today I [would be] dead, but they've helped me and I'm thankful for them. But the government never helped me ... I didn't get any help from the social worker even though I called for her ... There is no help. A lot of people in these times they are crying, they want people but they are not getting people.”

Workshop participant, Women of the World Group

The importance of additional support was raised by young women in relation to the specific services they received while in the care of social services. Women felt that, while in care, they could be pushed in the direction of certain services, including housing and legal advice, without having the support they needed to feed into the decision-making process, for example having a say in who their solicitor would be, or whether they were comfortable in their home environment.

“I remember when I came here I was a minor, I was 16 and they put me in emergency foster care first for three days. They put me there while I think they were finding me a proper placement. And then my emergency social worker came in and took me and brought me to my current placement and to my new foster carer, and then we got introduced, and until now it's where I live ... I just do what I'm told, really.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

While child guardianship schemes exist in Scotland and Northern Ireland, young people going through the asylum process on their own in England and Wales do not currently have independent 'guardians' to support them as they navigate the asylum process. A legal guardian is someone that works with local authorities, legal services and other organisations to support separated children and young people through the asylum process, and they can make decisions in their best interests.

In the workshop, young women described the difficulties they faced in communicating their needs and what was happening to them throughout the asylum process, and their struggle to understand the system and processes they were going through. Ultimately, they reflected on the challenges of not knowing their rights and entitlements in the UK, and of developing the confidence to speak for themselves.

“I didn't know that ... you have the right to say whatever you want to say ... I was intimidated.”

Workshop participant, Women of the World Group

Recommendations

Young women seeking asylum should have support focussed on their best interests:

- The UK government should introduce independent legal guardians for all young people going through the asylum process in England and Wales.
- Social workers from local authorities are best placed to undertake age assessments while considering the best interests of the child. When an age assessment is deemed necessary, it should be holistic, multi-disciplinary and completed with other child-centred professionals such as teachers, foster carers, youth workers and others.

“But the issue is when you come straight from wherever you're coming from, which is not the UK, like, your home country, when you come here, if you don't have someone or, for example, charities or something like that to help you ... you're going to struggle.”

Workshop participant, Women of the World Group

Women of the World (WOW) - Surviving to Thriving Project

The Women of the World (WOW) group are an online community formed of young women aged 15 to 25 years old from asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds. The group is connected to Surviving to Thriving, a partnership project between the British Red Cross and the Refugee Council that supports refugees and people seeking asylum aged 11 to 25 in Birmingham, Leeds and Peterborough who don't have parents or guardians in the UK. The project provides life skills, advice, mental health support and leadership opportunities to help young people rebuild their lives and thrive in the UK.

During an International Women's Day event in March 2019, three young women from the British Red Cross's Surviving to Thriving project suggested the idea of setting up a regular women's group alongside the already existing mixed gender groups for unaccompanied minors. They spoke from their experiences about the specific problems that young women can face after arriving in the UK and described a need for female-only spaces.

In April 2020, during the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, the British Red Cross created a national online group for young women from across all its young refugee projects. Young women were consulted about what they wanted the group to look like, when it should take place and what kind of topics and activities they would like to cover. The group was self-named WOW.

Since then, over 30 online sessions have been delivered to women from 13 different geographical areas across the UK. They represent 28 different nationalities. The WOW programme is planned around targets of improving understanding of rights and entitlements, developing new life skills, reducing isolation, and improving confidence and self-belief for young women. Recent sessions have included women's health and period empowerment workshops with the charity IRise, digital safety and social media, and 'girl power' introductions to advocacy. Some of the young women also met in person for the first time in October 2021 during a face-to-face cooking session, and there are residential planned for 2022.



"I love to be part of this group because I learn a lot of things from everyone in the group. I feel strong when we speak about women's rights. I feel proud to be a part of this group."

"I want to say that all young women must take part in this group because it's very helpful to them. Being a part of WOW improves our skills and we learn about women's rights. And I thank all of the members of this group. They help me a lot in every situation and I thank you for your time and help <3."



2.2. Housing and homelessness

Background: Asylum support accommodation

People seeking asylum are not allowed to access public funds, this includes any housing and homelessness support from a Local Authority. They also do not have an automatic right to rent properties and, in cases where they have the funds to do so, have to apply for permission to rent from the Home Office.

Under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the Home Office has a duty to provide accommodation and/or financial support to anyone applying for asylum who would otherwise be destitute. If someone seeking asylum is facing destitution and homelessness, they can apply to the Home Office for 'asylum support'.

Accommodation is provided on a 'no-choice' basis, which means people cannot choose where in the UK they will be accommodated. If someone is facing immediate homelessness, the Home Office should provide emergency accommodation, usually in a full-board hostel. After staying in this accommodation, people are moved to 'dispersal accommodation' around the UK, which is usually provided in shared housing, including shared bedrooms, with other people seeking asylum.

Under the New Plan for Immigration, the government is proposing to change the current model of community-based housing, and to house some people seeking asylum in large 'accommodation centres'. The government also proposes to enact changes to remove accommodation and support from families with children who are refused asylum.

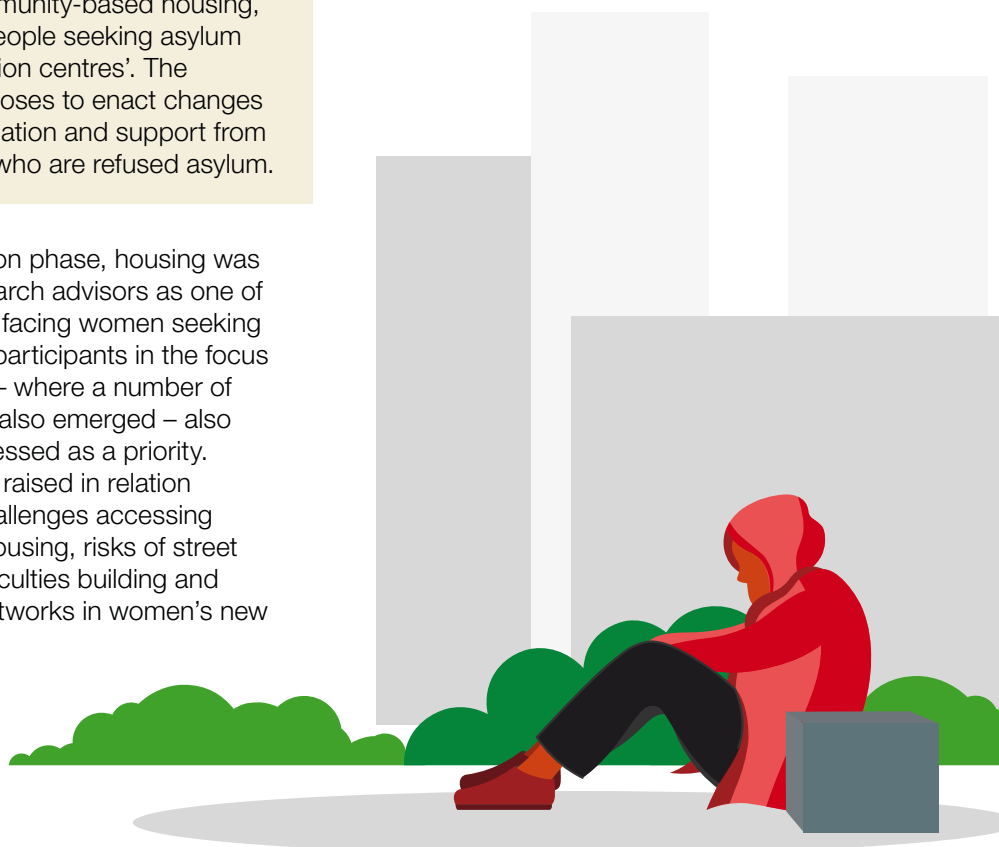
At this project's inception phase, housing was highlighted by our research advisors as one of the most urgent issues facing women seeking asylum in the UK, and participants in the focus groups and interviews – where a number of housing-related issues also emerged – also wanted this to be addressed as a priority. In particular, the issues raised in relation to housing included challenges accessing safe and appropriate housing, risks of street homelessness and difficulties building and maintaining support networks in women's new communities.

2.2.1. Finding a home and risks of homelessness

Stories shared by women in the research show that it can be easy for women seeking asylum to slip through the cracks, missing out on accommodation they should be eligible for. The work of VCS organisations that directly support people seeking asylum was seen by the participants as important for helping people to gain housing, and without it some felt they would not have been able to access a place to sleep. One woman and her family, who had nowhere to stay, had been offered a place temporarily by someone in her church congregation. However, she felt that if it hadn't been for the VCS being persistent with the Home Office on their behalf, she and her children would have ended up with nowhere else to go when her temporary stay with the congregant came to an end.

“It was really like British Red Cross had to push for me and then I managed to get accommodation. You know, just the thought of thinking that maybe if British Red Cross had not pushed for me, what would have happened?”

Interview participant, Glasgow



Women who took part in this research spoke about the very real threat of street homelessness that hangs over women seeking asylum, and some also had direct experience of this. Homelessness was considered to be a particular risk for women who were refused asylum and left with no support, but it was clear this could happen at any stage of the asylum process, including in the initial stages, when first trying to access asylum support.

While rough sleeping is a dangerous experience for anyone, women sleeping on the streets are particularly vulnerable to crimes such as sexual assault.²² Research by Women for Refugee Women that involved 106 women seeking asylum found that a quarter of the participants had been raped or sexually abused when sleeping outside or in other people's homes.²³

Research advisors observed from their own experiences that women with no dependent children faced a greater risk of street homelessness, as authorities like the Home Office seemed to deem them to be lower priority for housing than those with children. However, homelessness is certainly not limited to 'single' women, with one participant describing a situation where she was forced to sleep in a bus station with her children:

“So, I don't know where the problem is coming from but all I know is it's not easy to access [accommodation] ... me and my children, we had to sleep in-, what's it called? Bus station. Victoria Station. On the street, in the bus, ... underage children with me. So, I wouldn't say that to access the accommodation is easy. It's not easy.”

Interview participant, London

One young woman we spoke to highlighted challenges related to menstruation and access to toilets, as well as the fear she felt and the risks to her personal safety when facing street homelessness.

“You don't know what's going to happen to you and you're scared for your life. It is a bit difficult for women, especially when we've got monthly periods so we can't sleep outside.”

Workshop participant, Women of the World Group

2.2.2. Accessing appropriate and safe accommodation

Most women had experience of living in asylum support accommodation, where they were initially placed in hostel accommodation (in some cases mixed-gender), before being moved to dispersal accommodation in another part of the UK where they shared bedrooms and facilities with other women. Some women reflected on the challenges of sharing a bedroom with another woman. One woman described her experiences of trauma, including nightmares and flashbacks, making it extremely difficult to share a bedroom with another person.

“I had to share a home with [another] lady ... it was a bad experience. And then I wrote to my case[worker] ... they tried to explain to the Home Office, ‘She a victim of torture, rape, and then she needed privacy’, and then they tried to give me a single room.”

Interview participant, London

The challenges of sharing accommodation were also related to different ways of living, and the different needs of people living together. Some women reflected on their experience of living with people who did not seem to have access to the specialist mental health support they needed, and the effect this had on other residents, including their own children. One woman who was a care leaver described the relationship with the woman she had been placed in accommodation with breaking down over disagreements around the house, which resulted in her being physically assaulted by the housemate and fearing for her life.

“She beat me that day, she threw me out and I had to go the next morning to the A&E because I busted my hand and I had to call my social worker and everything ... she was bigger than me, she was stronger than me ... I had to run out. If I didn't run something could've happened to me, and this time maybe I could've been dead.”

Workshop participant, Women of the World Group

Participants described the challenges they faced in accessing accommodation that was suitable for their needs and said that evidence they had provided of their need - for example, for accessible accommodation - was not taken into account when they were allocated accommodation. One woman said it had taken over a year and the intervention of multiple different support agencies for her to be moved to ground floor accommodation where she could safely move around with her new-born child, as existing leg injuries left her unable to climb stairs.

“It was difficult for me to move. I had to put a few-day [old] baby on my shoulder and sit with my bum to be able to climb the steps. So, I couldn't go downstairs to cook or give the baby food ... at times I had to sit there and cry ... Even after getting letters from the Red Cross, from MPs, from the doctor, from everywhere, even from the children's centre, telling them how critical my condition is and the baby might fall, but nobody did anything about it. ... So, I was imagining within that time, if that baby had fallen or I had fallen with the baby, maybe I would have lost my life or the baby.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

Another participant explained that she had been locked out of her accommodation because she had not been given the correct keys by her accommodation provider, meaning that she was unable to get into her home after returning from hospital with her young child in the evening. She and her child were supported by the Red Cross to access emergency accommodation for the night, but without this they would have had nowhere to stay.

“Then they moved me in the new house, they don't give me the key in the front door ... I'm asking him [the housing manager] for the door key but he said I'm not allowed to have the key [for] the front door. And ... in the back door it's locked so I can't go home in the night time. So, then in the dark day, the Red Cross support me staying in the hotel one night until the housing manager comes to open the door for me and let me in.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

Many participants spoke about the quality and hygiene of the accommodation they were living in through asylum support. Women described being placed in accommodation that was 'old', 'dirty' and had infestations of pests such as bed bugs. Some women felt that the quality of the housing they were provided reflected how little they were valued, and felt humiliated and angry that they were being asked to live in accommodation that they didn't think would be deemed fit for the rest of the population in the UK.

“We go to the same school, we're in the same environment where we meet a lot of people but then the housing levels are very different, so, that's humiliating.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

Decent and safe accommodation is a vital part of people's lives and is closely connected to their health and wellbeing. Women seeking asylum are not allowed to work and have limited access to education and financial support, so many spend most of their time confined to the place they are living. When that accommodation is unsafe or inappropriate, they have no escape, and this has a serious impact on their health and their wellbeing.

2.2.3. Making connections and building support networks

Women taking part in this research reflected on how important it is to make connections and have support networks to rely on. Many spoke about support they received from VCS organisations, but also women they lived with and women who were part of local peer support groups they attended. The support networks that women seeking asylum come to rely upon for help and information can be disrupted by being rehoused and dispersed multiple times to different parts of the country.

“Accessing housing from the beginning is not easy, but when you get through to it in this area in the system, it's still not easy to navigate. It's like changing from accommodation to accommodation to accommodation.”

Interview participant, London

Some women reflected on the importance of maintaining the location and connections made through their asylum support accommodation, particularly for women who are single mothers. Moving frequently undermines the level of support that women seeking asylum have access to and can result in them becoming isolated.

“I lived in Plymouth and I know people. All the people you see in this group, they are like my family. These are people that I could call any time and say, ‘Hey, I need this’, and somebody’s always ready to help me. If I move to Wales where I have no idea where the market is, where I cannot move because of my knee, I’ve got a new baby, how do I locate where to get things, buy stuff, or even know anything about it? I don’t know anybody to call.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women’s Group, Plymouth

“It’s difficult. You know, I was in London, they sent me to Glasgow, they don’t care that I have a family here, I have friends here, I already started to build the relationship in London, so they just sent me, like that, to Glasgow, they don’t know how I will stay there.”

Interview participant, Glasgow

Ultimately, women spoke about the importance of having a home and a place where you can make connections and start to build a life.

Recommendations

Women seeking asylum should have a safe place to live:

- The Home Office and Migrant Help should work with women seeking asylum to improve access to asylum support, and to reduce risks of women experiencing homelessness.
- The Home Office should carry out health and vulnerability screenings when a person first enters the asylum support system, to ensure their accommodation and support meet their needs.
- The Home Office should ensure people’s privacy is respected and that no-one is forced to share a bedroom with an unrelated adult.
- The Home Office should ensure women, whether single or with caring responsibilities for children, are accommodated in community-based dispersal accommodation where they can make connections and access support.

“[There are] three things I would make equal for everyone: getting education, getting a job, and housing - getting a place to live and stay and feel like you’re at home and you belong.”

Interview participant, Birmingham



2.3. Financial support

Background: Asylum support

People seeking asylum are generally not allowed to work while their claim is being considered. They are also not allowed to access welfare benefits such as Universal Credit, Income Support or Child Benefit. If someone seeking asylum is facing destitution, they can apply to the Home Office for 'asylum support', which is provided in the form of accommodation and/or financial support. Financial support comprises £39.63 per person per week. This money is loaded onto a debit card (ASPEN card) weekly.



The Home Office publishes the calculations involved in setting the amount of weekly financial support provided²⁴ - the most recent breakdown provides that this support is intended to cover:

- **£26.89 in food and drink**
- **£3.01 in clothing and footwear costs**
- **43p for laundry, toilet paper and household cleaning products**
- **69p for toiletries (including sanitary products, toothpaste, toothbrush and soap)**
- **35p for non-prescription medicines and healthcare products**
- **£4.70 for travel**
- **£3.56 for communications**

There is some additional support available for people who are pregnant (£3 per week), those with a baby under one year old (£5 per week), or those with children aged one to three (£3 per week). Applicants can also apply for a one-off maternity payment of £300.

Women taking part in this research explained that living off just over £5 a day on asylum support meant they regularly experienced financial hardship, and they spoke about the challenges of not being able to purchase anything online and facing administrative issues with their payment card leaving them reliant on others for support to meet their basic needs.

2.3.1. Financial hardship

Participants highlighted that the small amount of money they receive prohibits them from being able to cover their basic needs, allows very little flexibility in how they spend their money and can negatively impact their feelings of self-worth. Women described spending the majority of their asylum support money on food, meaning that they were not able to afford other essentials such as travel costs, toiletries, clothes and household items.

“I mean that financial support for women seeking asylum ... it is not enough for her to cover everything, all the daily things ... like food, like shampoo. I think it is not enough to buy everything, and even for food, and for clothes.”

Interview participant, Belfast

One participant described that women often have additional expenses compared to men, such as haircare and sanitary products. Those with dependent children also described the additional expenses that come with having children, such as food, clothes and travel money for school, which the additional allowances outlined above do little to cover. For some mothers, this created the feeling that they were not able to provide the same experiences for their children as other mothers can.

“It’s really hard for a woman, especially when you’re on your own. But the main thing ... was the support, the [money given] each week, it really isn’t very much, and people struggle to live on that.”

Workshop participant, Women’s Group, Newport

While those living in asylum support accommodation have their utilities such as water and electricity covered as part of their accommodation, there is no provision for telephone or internet costs and women are expected to cover this out of their weekly payments. Some women said that being unable to pay to access the internet had a knock-on impact on their access to information and support and prevented them from being able to contact the Home Office, their solicitors and their support networks.

“How could I pay with the £37 a week for this, how about the internet, how can I communicate with Home Office or with different people if I don't have internet? They don't even think.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

People receive weekly asylum support payments on an ASPEN card, which looks like a bank card and in most cases can be used to withdraw money or pay in-store using chip and pin. The card cannot be used online and is not contactless. Being unable to purchase products online limits the range of choice that women have when purchasing items. For example, one participant described struggling to find shops in her area where she could buy items for her baby and being unable to buy them online as a backup.

“Sometimes I want to buy baby [things] ... online, but I'm not allowed.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

Women in the research had experienced problems with their ASPEN cards, which in some cases led to them going weeks without any financial support and relying on charities and neighbours to get access to food and basic needs. Common issues included the incorrect amount of money being deposited onto the cards, cards not arriving on time and sometimes the cards not working at all. There was a recent changeover to a new provider of ASPEN cards, with reports of some women and their families being left with no support for weeks.

“I'm a mum with three children and recently, with the card issues ... there has been new cards that came in. I went two weeks without any money.”

Interview participant, Glasgow

2.3.2. Dependence on charity

Women spoke about being dependent on VCS organisations to meet their essential needs, with many reliant on food and clothes banks to supplement the limited support they received each week.

“Thankfully there are sanctuaries, like charities who offer free stuff for asylum seekers, otherwise you couldn't handle any more, like you couldn't afford anything. Some young people don't have phones because they don't got money enough, so through different organisations, charities, they are able to get anything ... It's very hard, very challenging, sometimes I was requesting the food banks because we couldn't afford the weekly money for food.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

Most of those we spoke to had access to good support networks, but recognised that, for other people seeking asylum who are not in contact with charities, or who may not have the language skills or confidence to approach others for help or to communicate their needs clearly, the challenges are likely to be particularly acute.

This reliance on charities and friends or community groups to meet their basic needs, such as having enough to eat each week, fed into negative feelings of self-worth. Participants described wanting to be able to provide for themselves, and to meet their own needs but having no choice but to rely on asylum support.

“That £38 is nothing, what can somebody do with £38 for a week? Now you can't have the food you normally eat, you just eat what they give you to eat. You cannot wear what you used to wear because that £38 cannot be enough for you to eat or to buy something to put on your skin. It's really, really difficult ... but what can we do? We still wait for the government and here, they don't allow us to work. As least if they can give us the chance to work, we can work and contribute to the nation and pay tax, and we can live by ourselves.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

Recommendations

Women seeking asylum should have sufficient financial support to meet their needs:

- The Home Office should involve women seeking asylum in the next review of asylum support rates and publish details of how they have involved people living on asylum support in setting rates for asylum support.

“If they increased the weekly financial support, it will be better, and even if they do, the process [should] be faster than that. It will be better for her, maybe, to get a job, and to work.”

Interview participant, Belfast

2.4. Work, education and training

Background:

The right to work and to access education

People seeking asylum in the UK are generally not allowed to work. They can only apply for permission to work if they have waited over 12 months for an initial decision on their asylum claim or for a response to a further submission for asylum and they are not considered responsible for the delay. Permission to work allows people seeking asylum to take up jobs on the UK's shortage occupation list only, these include scientists, engineers, classical ballet dancers and orchestral musicians.

People seeking asylum do not have equal access to higher education at UK universities. Most are classed as 'international students', meaning they must pay higher fees and cannot access student loans.²⁵ There is some limited funding for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes, which can be accessed after someone has waited over six months for a decision on their asylum claim.²⁶

Children aged five to 18 whose parents are seeking asylum have the same access to full-time education as other pupils across the UK, though someone's immigration status can mean they are not eligible to access free school meals. Childcare is considered a public fund and therefore access can be restricted based on a person's immigration status.²⁷ People who are receiving asylum support have access to 15 hours of free childcare for children aged two, and 15 hours of free childcare is also available for all three to four-year olds during term-time, regardless of their parents' immigration status.

Almost all of the women that took part in this research, regardless of their age, were eager to engage with education and work as part of integrating into life in the UK and establishing greater independence. Participants discussed their preference to be able to transfer their existing education and skill sets over to be in line with the UK job market, and to build on their English language skills, rather than to have to start again from scratch. They were also anxious that time spent waiting for their asylum application to be processed was leading to them losing existing skills or wasting time that could be spent gaining experience and developing expertise to help secure employment in the future.

2.4.1. Accessing education and training

All women in this study placed value on education and training, whether practical classes such as sewing, ESOL classes or university-level courses. Participants had varying levels of skills and education, but whatever their level they agreed that nurturing their existing skills and developing new ones through education and training was important both for their future job prospects and for integrating into life in the UK.

“Everyone needs education, especially when you're new to this country. Different language, different culture, you need to learn, you need to study, so you can fit into this society.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

However, there was almost unanimous agreement among those we spoke to that accessing anything more than a basic level of education could be challenging. This was particularly true for university-level education.

“Education is a bit hard to access ... because if you'd like some courses, it's easy, you can ask, you can access it, but if you would like to access like for example a Bachelor's degree or Master's degree it will be quite hard if you still have an asylum claim, or you don't have the decision.”

Interview participant, London

Barriers to higher education highlighted by participants included educational qualifications acquired elsewhere not being recognised by institutions in the UK; the requirement to restart education at basic levels; and a lack of funding for university scholarships. Some had previously attained higher education qualifications outside of the EU, which were not transferable to the UK, a problem that is exacerbated by some women also being less fluent in English.

“It's difficult to continue your studies. I already have my Master's, I asked to continue to finish higher education, but there's no chance. I know English, but still I went to college, I joined the ESOL classes from the beginning.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

Language barriers also prevented women we spoke to from accessing information about educational opportunities available to them, much of which is found online. Some said they found it very difficult to break free of a cycle, whereby having limited English can be a barrier to education and vice versa. Those who are digitally excluded face an additional barrier and are reliant on others for access to information about education. Women also spoke about a lack of access to, and awareness of, childcare services prohibiting women seeking asylum from accessing education.

The main way the women we spoke to had found it possible to access information, support and signposting towards education was through VCS organisations. For example, one participant in Newport explained that she was only able to start learning English when a VCS organisation provided a creche facility for her children. Another was unaware of her entitlement to free childcare until she received information from a VCS organisation.

“We do not know how to access education, because no one explains to us about our rights, or guidance. But, after the Red Cross said that ‘You can apply for college, you can apply for school and nursery’, it makes it easy.”

Interview participant, Belfast

For some women, college hours, travel costs and a lack of childcare meant they had to opt out of accessing educational opportunities. Some reflected that being unable to access education made them feel like passive members of society without opportunities or a sense of purpose. One participant saw her inability to access education as a missed opportunity to empower herself and her family.

“We are all housewives, we need to take care of the kids. So, we want to learn, we want to be strong, but we don't have the chance.”

Workshop participant, Women's Group, Newport

2.4.2. The right to work

Several women reflected on the importance of being able to work, and to provide for yourself and your family. Those who had existing experience and qualifications were left frustrated by not being able to put the skills they had to use in the UK, due to not having permission to work. Some women described being confined to the house, feeling cornered into staying at home rather than continuing with their career or education, or developing their identity outside of the home - something they felt they had lost when arriving in the UK.

“I'm holding a Master's degree. I have 20 years' experience of teaching in my home country, so, still, look at me just sitting around in four walls, just taking my children to school, and going to pick them up and taking them home, cooking, cleaning, and that is all.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

During one of the workshops, women spoke about the detrimental impact being unable to work was having on her mental health. One explained that, although she had trained as a healthcare assistant in her home country, in the UK she could not put her expertise to use to help others and was left feeling unproductive and without any way to provide for her family.

“You see doctors, nurses, you see intellectual people that are very good and very active when they came into this country that work very hard. [People seeking asylum] because of the attitudes, they can't do anything, they become useless.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

Many others, including the research advisors themselves, echoed this sentiment. The considerable lengths of time people seeking asylum are left waiting to gain refugee status – and without the ability to work – can leave them struggling to provide for their families and feeling as though their skills are wasting away. For many, this provoked a sense of unease and feelings of depression.

Experiences shared by Neneh*

When Neneh arrived in the UK with her mum she did not speak much English, but she managed to navigate this challenge through the use of Google Translate. She used Google Translate to explain to the college she was applying to that she wanted to study English.

Neneh encountered difficulties entering higher education in the UK while going through the asylum process. She struggled to find information on what was available and how she could access it and had to navigate her way through the system on her own.

She said that her level of English was a barrier in accessing education, even though there were supposedly provisions in place to deal explicitly with applications from people seeking asylum. She also experienced difficulties with the transferability of her previous qualifications, and found she needed to obtain additional qualifications to enter university.

“I did everything by myself. I applied for college. I just went there. I used Google Translate and explained to them, I want to study to learn English ... They only offer education to asylum seekers to the entry ESOL level, like ESOL entry three, no more. You can't study any specific subjects like business, law or something ... The college says, ‘Oh, we're accepting you, but you should level up. You need to get Level 2 GCSE, then you can apply for some subjects’.”

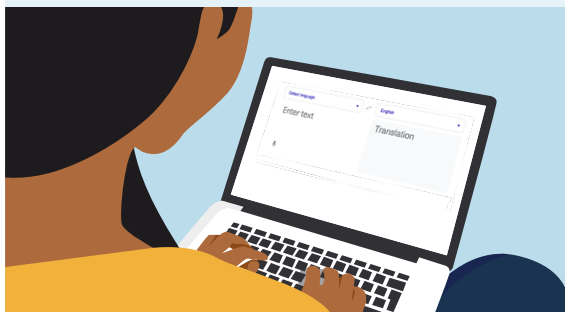
“I don't know why they're treating the asylum group of people very differently. I've tried applying to all of them. Some of them say, like, ‘We will accept you ... As you know, asylum seekers aren't allowed financial funding, so what you can do is apply for a scholarship. But scholarships are very competitive when you are in a city, and they accept only one asylum seeker from 500 applicants.’”

Neneh was highly aware of the importance of education and its value as a tool for integration, and much like many other women who participated in this research, she went to great lengths to ensure she could study and improve her skills while she was awaiting the outcome of her asylum claim.

“It was very hard. I was so tired but when I was studying on my access course, I got the refusal news from the Home Office. It was really hard for me. I was certainly broken. Even then I was thinking to leave the college because I was so stressed, I didn't know what to do. But because I had really good friends around me [and] my case worker was really helpful ... So that's why I was really keeping going. I was like, ‘I will just go to the end and see what will happen’.”

Neneh was eventually successful in applying for a scholarship, and is now studying at University.

*Not her real name



Recommendations

Women seeking asylum should be able to realise aspirations for education and work:

- The UK government should expand the plans to support integration that are contained in the New Plan for Immigration to include women seeking asylum, in particular steps to improve training and education opportunities.
- The Home Office should allow people in the asylum system to work after they have been waiting for six months for a decision on their claim, and this right to work should not be restricted by the shortage occupation list.

“Just give them opportunity [to work], even if it's not full time. Something to keep them active. At least let the person go out and do something.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

“I need one change about me in UK, about education. I need more.”

Workshop participant, Women's Group, Newport

Women's Group, Newport

British Red Cross - Newport Women's Group

The British Red Cross Newport Women's Group grew out of an orientation and integration project for refugees and people seeking asylum in Newport, provided by British Red Cross volunteers and staff. It soon became clear that there was a significant gap in support, especially around education, for women. Many women were facing isolation and loneliness – they spent much of their time at home and struggled to access education at local colleges as providers did not offer childcare. The group started as a safe place for women, and their children, to come and meet others and learn English.

English and Welsh language classes

The group aimed to provide informal conversation sessions, but women attending were clear that they wanted to attend structured classes. The group began with one English class, and by the beginning of 2020 there were five classes, with three being accredited Pre-Entry, Entry 1 and Entry 3 / Level 1. All were led by experienced ESOL tutors. Each class provided a creche and offered play and educational activities that helped to prepare young children for school.

English classes would include information about life in the UK, such as the education system, healthcare or the role of a Local Authority. This included opportunities to have role-play conversations, draft letters and take cultural trips, such as to the theatre as well as trips around the town, including visiting local supermarkets. Through local partnerships, the group was invited to watch a film once a month for free at the Riverfront Theatre in Newport, with a creche provided. The group often invited guest speakers – from the local health board, the police or from the women's refuge centre. Alongside gaining knowledge of and confidence in speaking English, these classes were about ensuring women had the

language skills they need to navigate support services and build a life in their new community.

As a result of requests from women for Welsh language learning, the group partnered with Learn Welsh Gwent / Dysgu Cymraeg Gwent in 2019 and ran a successful 10-week taster course on Welsh language and history attended by 25 women, with the National Centre for Learning Wales providing funding for childcare provision.

Prior to the pandemic, there were 70 women attending English and Welsh classes side by side, with a waiting list for more classes. During the pandemic, limited classes continued online.

'Perthyn' which means 'belonging' in Welsh

The group identified the need for a space to share experiences and support each other beyond the formal class settings. The aim of Perthyn, a partnership with the Mental Health Foundation, was to create a peer-led space where refugee and asylum-seeking women could talk about 'heartfelt' issues, create new friendships, improve their emotional literacy in English, and decrease experiences of isolation.

The project started by providing training for 11 women to become peer leaders. They went on to lead three groups, including recruiting women to take part. The groups met once a fortnight and would often take specific words as themes, such as 'ambition' or 'brave', which would create an opening into sharing people's experiences, what they had left behind and what their aspirations were. Over time women attending began to develop a deeper connection with other members of the group, and these support networks expanded into their communities.

Throughout the pandemic, Perthyn has continued meeting online, and has recently been shortlisted for an award.



2.5. Healthcare

Background: The right to access healthcare

Access to free healthcare in the UK can be restricted based on a person's immigration status. Primary healthcare - including GP and nurse consultations - are free of charge to all. Anyone can register with a GP surgery, and should not need proof of address or immigration status, identity documents or an NHS number to do so. However, people with insecure immigration status can be charged for secondary healthcare, including specialist treatment and maternity services. Different rules apply to charging for NHS healthcare in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

People with outstanding asylum claims and/or who are in receipt of asylum support are exempt from charging. Yet the Equality and Human Rights Commission has described the charging provisions as resulting in "*confusion and inconsistency*" among healthcare professionals, including clinicians wrongly denying people urgent care such as maternity services, as well as contributing to feelings of fear, lack of trust and stigma among people seeking asylum in accessing healthcare.²⁸

The Equality and Human Rights Commission also describes the fear and anxiety caused by provisions for sharing non-clinical data, such as someone's address, with the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes.²⁹ They found this can also affect people's decisions to seek healthcare, even when they were living in places such as Scotland that did not have the same policies of data-sharing.

2.5.1. Barriers to accessing healthcare

Many women described barriers to accessing healthcare, including struggling to register with a GP. Some women felt that the NHS was simply under-resourced, leading to overarching issues where patients on the whole have issues accessing healthcare. However, many participants linked the issues they have experienced with their status as a person seeking asylum.

"Yes, [doctors] are available, actually, but once they heard you are an asylum seeker ... You see some of them asking about your status. Like, 'Are you a refugee or something? Are you an asylum seeker?' I think it's not their business to ask who you are, what is your status. I am coming here checking my health, not my status."

Interview participant, Birmingham

Some women spoke about their lack of trust in the healthcare system, as they were aware that the NHS could share their personal data with the Home Office. This fed to feelings of a lack of privacy, lack of trust and in some cases, a fear that this would be used against them by the Home Office.

"There are some people who don't have awareness that they can access a GP, and they are scared to go to the GP ... The Home Office can access the healthcare, they can access the data for immigrants, which is really bad. As British people, nobody can access, especially the medical thing, without your permission, but with the Home Office ... they can access lots of things for immigrants, which is really bad."

Interview participant, London

Alongside systemic barriers, there were many other issues explored by participants that also prevent women seeking asylum from accessing healthcare. This included the challenge of language barriers, and identification issues such as needing to provide proof of address or photo identification, such as an Asylum Registration Card (ARC), to register with a GP.

"So, when I go to the GP they said, 'Oh, we can't get you at the moment because you don't have any papers and you don't have anything on you'. So, I had to wait until I was able to have [ARC] card ... Then to be able to go to the GP, to be able to have a dentist, so that's really hard ... Sometimes you may be ill and then if you don't [have] those admins, something can happen to you, something serious can happen to you."

Workshop participant, Women of the World Group

Most women we spoke to had temporary addresses and could not provide proof of address in the form of a bank statement or utility bill. This could be challenging to explain to staff at GP surgeries, and could lead to invasive discussions in public on the status of their asylum application, which was extremely uncomfortable for them. One woman, who is a survivor of human trafficking, described her experience of trying to register with a GP after she had been released from a detention centre:

“I remember when the first visit to the GP and the reception ... I said, ‘I don’t have a proof of address because I was detained, so I just moved into my friend’s place, so I don’t have anything to, you know, show that is my [address]’. She said, ‘I want the address of where you were detained’, and she’s loud ... and then I couldn’t. Then I went back to the person who sent me there ... luckily because I was still with my case worker from Salvation Army, and then we went there. That’s where I got to be registered because there was some citizen around on my behalf.”

Interview participant, London

Several women reflected on experiences of needing the intervention of an independent advocate to register with a GP. This creates the perception that the voice of the person seeking asylum is not enough – that women needed to rely on an advocate to access basic, primary healthcare services – and reinforces the feeling of not being heard, of being dismissed and considered to be someone with fewer rights.

After the difficulties in registering for healthcare services, some women felt that their status as a person seeking asylum had an ongoing impact on their access to appropriate healthcare and the perception of them held by doctors and other healthcare staff. Some women said that the level of pain or distress they experienced was overlooked or simply believed to be exaggerated, or that the care they received was affected by their status as a person seeking asylum.

“Once they know you are an asylum seeker, they are acting very differently. My mum, once she has a therapist, psychologist ... I explained to her she needed more support, she needed more care ... You know what she asked me? ‘Do you think once your mum gets a positive decision, she would get sooner better?’ ... I was shocked when I saw that from the psychologist ... They’re judging people.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

2.5.2. Trauma and mental health support

“If you can get the good mental health support it can improve a lot of women’s lives. Because when you face all this torture, and then you didn’t get the good support, you feel like you are not able to do anything, your life will just stay there. But if you get the good mental health support, I think you can help women just to stand up and then start again their journey.”

Interview participant, London

Many women reflected on the importance of appropriate mental health support, and the challenges of accessing it. Some women described relying on specialist mental health support services provided by charities, which they turned to as a result of not being able to access therapy through the NHS, where they found support was mainly limited to the prescription of medication.

“I didn’t use the NHS mental health services, I used ... a therapy for a different charity. Even [though] I was facing mental problems, my GP never referred me to the NHS mental services, just give me some pill for stress, for-, what are they called? It was for stress, it was for this kind of thing, I was not able to sleep.”

Interview participant, Glasgow

“They just give me the pill [anti-depressants], but he didn’t, yes, he didn’t refer me to the specialist. But with a different charity, I was able to get some time for the mental health ... just the charity, Freedom from Torture, Helen Bamber, these kinds of charities.”

Interview participant, London

Some women felt that that their medical histories are not explored, or their experiences are not taken seriously when accessing healthcare services in the UK and linked this to there being a lack of any specific health screening or assessment for women seeking asylum in the UK.

“We become depressed and we cannot get any support for that. I think it is important, when women seek asylum, it is important to ask for a full history and to ask for mood, and to ask for anything about medical conditions.”

Interview participant, Belfast

Participants in this research stressed, too, that the importance of doctors and healthcare staff being responsive to trauma, and being aware of the impact this has, extends beyond the role of specific mental health services. In this respect, some women reflected on positive experiences with their GP, consultants, and other healthcare staff – this came down to how the person responded to them, and to the sensitivity, time and support they were given by professionals.

“There are some GPs that you meet that will have patience with you, you can even overstay that 10 minutes, they will listen, they have listened, they answer you well.”

Interview participant, London

One woman felt that the way her doctor and nurses responded to her played an important part in her recovery, as much as the actual treatment she was given.

“I had some issues in my health that I was free or relieved of because of the attention given to me by the doctor, the nurses I saw ... But the doctor didn't know that she was part of the healing that I had, because when you respond with someone like you care for the person, you are happy to help the person, it's another relief from your mind.”

Interview participant, London

Recommendations

Women seeking asylum should be able to safely access healthcare and advice:

- The Department for Health and Social Care should cease sharing data with the Home Office for the purposes of immigration enforcement.
- The Home Office and its contracted asylum support providers should ensure everyone receiving asylum support is supported to register with a GP, and to access specialist healthcare where needed.

“What I would want to change is to make sure ... every person gets health advice and health assistance.”

Interview participant, London



Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

“I know that every woman is inspirational, hence that's why we came up with the name Inspirational Women's Group. I am very privileged to work with women from all walks of life, all these women are intelligent and have a lot to offer to society through lifelong learning.”

The Inspirational Women's Group in Plymouth provides tailored, one-to-one, and group-based support to women according to their individual needs. Set up in 2017, the group focuses on supporting women seeking asylum, women experiencing domestic abuse, and survivors of human trafficking and slavery. It aims to provide a safe meeting place for women and to reduce loneliness and isolation. But more than this, it is about celebrating women's achievements and drawing on the group's collective strengths to support each other.

The group spent a long time discussing potential names when they first formed, unanimously agreeing on Inspirational Women – as the group's founder describes *“these women are so inspiring, so inspirational, when you listen to them you cannot stop listening to them”*.

Group sessions are themed around education, health, employment, housing and awareness raising about things like personal space, domestic abuse and consent to sex in marriage. The group invites in speakers from other organisations including local community organisations, the diversity team from the local police force, or local healthcare teams that provide sessions on HIV and safe sex. Many of the sessions are led by members of the group themselves – one woman who previously worked as a dentist recently ran a session about taking care of your teeth. The group aims to share information and support that is relevant to all areas of women's lives, including history, culture and tradition, and to promote lifelong learning, education and future employment opportunities for women.

“All the people you see in this group, they are like my family. These are people that I could call any time and say, ‘Hey, I need this’, and somebody's always ready to help me.”

“Women are the real architects of society, there is no limit to what we as women can accomplish. But being an asylum seeker as a woman, [one] does not know what the future holds.”

“We are supposed to be powerful, but asylum takes away power.”



Section 3

Moving forward: valuing women's expertise and treating women with dignity



3.1. Being treated as more than 'an asylum seeker'

“I'm a human being here, not just asylum.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

Throughout this research we have seen that, once arriving in the UK, women seeking asylum can be left feeling disbelieved, frustrated and even frightened by the process of applying for asylum and accessing support services. The women we spoke to described themselves as feeling 'stressed' by a 'harmful' asylum system, with many highlighting the negative impact on their mental health.

At the same time, women spoke with warmth about the support they had received from local community groups, VCS organisations and each other. Despite facing incredible challenges while going through the asylum process, many women we spoke to had worked hard to build a life, and make connections, in their new communities. This will not have been possible for all women seeking asylum, and many participants expressed concern for women who don't have the same connections and support in their lives that they do.

“Navigating as a woman in the asylum system is really hard and it is an identity that you just wish you don't carry, you just wish it goes away overnight because it reduces you to nothing and it makes you feel worthless as a woman because you are restricted ... you don't see yourself doing the things that you love to do, and it's really hard putting yourself together to be that woman, that vibrant woman that you have always been. It reduces you.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

Women in this research shared many examples of how seeking asylum in the UK can lead to a lost sense of identity, and of being reduced to a new identity of being an 'asylum seeker'. Uprooted from their homes, often separated from family, and without access to people who speak their native language or are from similar cultures, some participants spoke of losing the person they were before. As we saw in earlier sections, women seeking asylum in the UK have extremely limited opportunities to integrate and give new meaning to their life through work, and there are many barriers to accessing education. Many are left with little to occupy them beyond domestic tasks and, for some, childcare. This compounded women's sense of lost identity, particularly for those who had worked or studied before coming to the UK.

As we saw in Section 1.1., many women felt disbelieved during asylum interviews and age disputes are also common (see Section 2.1.). This led some to describe the UK asylum system as erasing their past and identity.

Alongside the many parts of themselves and their lives that women may have lost through coming to the UK to seek asylum, they simultaneously assume a new identity in doing so – that of 'asylum seeker' or 'immigrant', which can carry many negative connotations for a woman's sense of self and can affect how they are treated by others, including those working outside of the immigration system, such as healthcare professionals.

“Sometimes, I think as an asylum seeker, maybe you're just being ignored because you're an asylum seeker. Sometimes, those things come to your brain. If I was a British citizen, maybe they would have responded to me. That makes you feel very sad.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

Throughout this report we have seen examples of the UK asylum system causing women to feel ignored and unheard. Some women we spoke to described feeling like a 'bat inside a cage' or 'dehumanised'. Many women seeking asylum spoke of being treated as though they were lying or that they were unimportant – particularly by government officials.

Many felt this impacted their ability to live their lives and was slowing the process of getting help where they needed it. For some, the sense of being side-lined and othered led to feelings of loneliness and depression. Many women spoke about the difference it would make if public authorities and others treated them with kindness and dignity.

“When your mind is free you can hardly get much worry from your sickness but when you've met somebody that treats you so low, treats you so disgusting like if you are not a human being, the feeling will increase the sickness. So, if they regard that asylum seeker as a human being as well and they show us the kindness that we deserve it can improve our health. What we need is not expensive and it's not impossible, it is something that can be given, and it would go a long way to support a human being.”

Interview participant, London

3.2. Knowing your rights

“It’s because of the language, the problem is language. If you don’t understand the system, the online things. Now it’s changing, everything is online. So, I can’t get help, there are a lot of problems.”

Workshop participant, Women of the World Group

“I wish everything can be, you know, in a good format and straightforward and then women know, just, some pamphlet and some information ... sometimes the information is only for the citizens, not for the asylum seekers ... we need to be made to feel welcome.”

Interview participant, London

Throughout this research, women spoke repeatedly about being unable to access information on asylum procedures and support services and found it difficult to understand the stages they needed to follow and how long processes would take. This included the asylum interview process itself (see Section 1.1.1.), as well as the process of accessing legal advice (see Section 1.3.1.), accommodation and financial support and education (see Section 2.4.1.).

These challenges were exacerbated by being separated from their culture, and from others who share that culture. This left many of the women we spoke to feeling isolated and incapable of seeking help due to language barriers and a lack of knowledge of where and who to seek help from. This caused feelings of stress, anxiety and helplessness among many of the women we spoke to and left some feeling out of control of their own lives.

While participants spoke of getting help from friends and others in their community, they also described feelings of being disbelieved and dismissed by those who were supposed to be helping them (such as when disclosing GBV – see Section 1.1.2. or attempting to access healthcare services – see Section 2.5.1.). This feeling was consistent for many of the participants regardless of their age, country of origin or the length of time they had been seeking asylum for.

The lack of information and support women received as they went through the asylum process meant that many women seeking asylum became reliant on friends, community groups and VCS organisations for information, advice and access to services.

“I was in London, in my community I find people who helped me, they send me to Red Cross, to Notre Dame Refugee Centre, Women for Refugee Centre, so I get a lot of support, but it’s not always the case.”

Interview participant, London

The women’s groups that participated in this study are another example of how peer support groups can help women to overcome barriers they face, develop their confidence and build support networks in their new communities. Many women spoke about how much they had learnt from each other, and the importance of that friendship and support.

“Women from all walks of life, they have tremendous skills. I’ve learnt a lot of things from women’s communities and I will cherish that for the rest of my life ... because of us making sure that we meet for one thing or the other, you know, supporting one another, you exchange skills as well. So, that is needed so much really because it can take your focus away from the disasters of the asylum route.”

Interview participant, London

“To make friends, to see, okay, there’s someone who has a similar experience, better or worse than me, you know, so it felt like, okay, I’m not on my own here.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

These networks and the support of friends were crucial for many of the women who participated in our research. However, we know that the women who took part in this project were particularly well connected into these types of informal networks, based on the channels we used to reach and recruit them. We also know there will be many more women seeking asylum in the UK who lack access to such networks and are therefore more isolated. These women are likely to face similar struggles yet lack the peer networks to fill these information and support gaps, leaving them at a significant disadvantage in navigating the system and accessing the support they need.

3.3. Experts by experience

“Yes, [the asylum system] can improve, it can improve if they can listen to us and know where we are lacking and know where we need help. And know where it needs to be improved.”

Interview participant, London

Throughout all of the interviews and workshops we conducted, women spoke about the changes they would recommend are made to the asylum process in the UK to make it safer and better for women, and for all people seeking asylum in the UK. These suggestions can be found throughout the report and relate to asylum processes and procedures themselves, such as asylum interviews and decision-making timeframes, as well as support and services, including healthcare, education and asylum support.

Despite having ideas and proposals for reforming the asylum system in the UK, no-one involved in this research felt that their ideas and advice for improving policy and practice were being listened to, or even sought by, the UK government. Some were surprised to be asked about their proposals for change, and referred to their ideas as ‘dreams’:

“For me, maybe in my dream, okay? Make every asylum seeker equal and they can be free, they can work,

they can work by themselves, and they can earn money by themselves ... Let us dream, but I don't know.”

Workshop participant, Women's Group, Newport

Some women from the VOICES Network had been involved in responding to the consultation on the New Plan for Immigration³⁰, including taking part in roundtable discussions with the Home Office and Britain Thinks, and some women had taken part in focus groups with the Home Office's asylum support providers, such as Migrant Help. Despite putting forward detailed proposals for asylum reform, those involved have not received any direct follow up on their suggestions or seen any changes in response to the concerns they raised.

Throughout the report there are detailed recommendations and proposals for reform of the asylum system to make it safer and fairer for women and girls seeking protection in the UK. Beyond these individual recommendations and proposals, this research is about experts by experience and listening and learning from people who are currently going through the asylum process themselves. All the women taking part in this research wanted to use their experiences to help improve asylum procedures and connected support services, and to make changes not only for themselves, but for all women and girls who seek safety in the UK.

Recommendations

Women's expertise should be recognised and experts by experience should be involved in reform of the asylum process:

- The UK government should develop, publish and implement a strategy to ensure women seeking asylum are engaged throughout the current reforms of the asylum process and as a matter of course at all other times. This strategy should be developed in partnership with women with experience of seeking asylum in the UK. It should consider, as a minimum:
 - how to make engagement opportunities accessible, including through financial recompense
 - how to ensure feedback is provided to women who engage with the Home Office
 - the role women seeking asylum have themselves to set the agenda for the issues they want to discuss

- The Home Office should invest in peer-to-peer asylum guides to ensure people going through the asylum system have support and guidance to navigate the asylum system.

“We are human beings like them. They should put themselves in our shoes.”

Workshop participant, Inspirational Women's Group, Plymouth

“Not everyone knows the access or the support, so, maybe they should have ... a woman to talk to us, if you had experience of the asylum process or if you're in the asylum process ... so you can know what is asylum, and what the process is, or what process you're going to go through and what to expect.”

Interview participant, Birmingham

Recommendations

Women seeking asylum should have access to asylum procedures that are trauma-informed and gender-sensitive:

- 1.** The Home Office should ensure that guidance on responding to gender in asylum applications is implemented and monitored effectively. To achieve this, it should:
 - Ensure all asylum casework staff are appropriately trained to respond to trauma.
 - Ensure all women can be interviewed by a woman if they want to be.
 - Create an independent monitoring group to receive feedback from women who have recently made an application for asylum, this could include their experience of screening and substantive interviews and communication from the Home Office. This monitoring group should include women with lived experience themselves.

Women seeking asylum should expect fair and timely decisions on their asylum claim, and clear, accessible decision-making processes:

- 2.** The Home Office should put improving asylum decision-making at the heart of its plans for reform of the asylum system. Decisions should be made as quickly as possible and should be right first time.
- 3.** The Home Office should introduce regular, accessible communication with applicants as they go through the asylum process, such as text message updates on the progress of their application.

Women seeking asylum should have access to good quality legal advice from an appropriately qualified and funded legal advisor:

- 4.** The Ministry of Justice and the Legal Aid Agency should improve legal aid provision for the early stages of an asylum application, to ensure people can access specialist advice and have support to gather evidence and prepare for interviews.

Young women seeking asylum should have support focussed on their best interests:

- 5.** The UK government should introduce independent legal guardians for all young people going through the asylum process in England and Wales.
- 6.** Social workers from local authorities are best placed to undertake age assessments while considering the best interests of the child. When an age assessment is deemed necessary, it should be holistic, multi-disciplinary and completed with other child-centred professionals such as teachers, foster carers, youth workers and others.

Women seeking asylum should have a safe place to live:

- 7.** The Home Office and Migrant Help should work with women seeking asylum to improve access to asylum support, and to reduce risks of women experiencing homelessness.
- 8.** The Home Office should carry out health and vulnerability screenings when a person first enters the asylum support system, to ensure their accommodation and support meet their needs.
- 9.** The Home Office should ensure people's privacy is respected and that no-one is forced to share a bedroom with an unrelated adult.
- 10.** The Home Office should ensure women, whether single or with caring responsibilities for children, are accommodated in community-based dispersal accommodation where they can make connections and access support.

Women seeking asylum should have sufficient financial support to meet their needs:

11. The Home Office should involve women seeking asylum in the next review of asylum support rates and publish details of how they have involved people living on asylum support in setting rates for asylum support.

Women seeking asylum should be able to safely access healthcare and advice:

12. The Department for Health and Social Care should cease sharing data with the Home Office for the purposes of immigration enforcement.

13. The Home Office and its contracted asylum support providers should ensure everyone receiving asylum support is supported to register with a GP, and to access specialist healthcare where needed.

Women seeking asylum should be able to realise aspirations for education and work:

14. The UK government should expand the plans to support integration that are contained in the New Plan for Immigration to include women seeking asylum, in particular steps to improve training and education opportunities.

15. The Home Office should allow people in the asylum system to work after they have been waiting for six months for a decision on their claim, and this right to work should not be restricted by the shortage occupation list.

Women's expertise should be recognised and experts by experience should be involved in reform of the asylum process:

16. The UK government should develop, publish and implement a strategy to ensure women seeking asylum are engaged throughout the current reforms of the asylum process and as a matter of course at all other times. This strategy should be developed in partnership with women with experience of seeking asylum in the UK. It should consider, as a minimum:

- how to make engagement opportunities accessible, including through financial recompense.
- how to ensure feedback is provided to women who engage with the Home Office.
- the role women seeking asylum have themselves to set the agenda for the issues they want to discuss.

17. The Home Office should invest in peer-to-peer asylum guides to ensure people going through the asylum system have support and guidance to navigate the asylum system.

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