

Women In Immigration Detention

This Briefing Paper focuses on women's experience in immigration detention. It has been created by women who are either experts by experience or who work to support women who have been detained.

Refugee women are survivors of gendered violence and political repression and have suffered for resisting persecution and social inequality in their countries of origin. Despite this, their claims for international protection are often disbelieved. Detention re-traumatizes women and the threat of deportation leaves them in fear for themselves and their families. Concern for their children makes them especially vulnerable to pressure and threats. As women, they are more likely to have suffered abuse throughout their lives and are more likely to be shamed and shunned after release from detention.

We call for an end to the detention of women and present here the testimony of women and make recommendations to ease the suffering of detained women.

Immigration detention is typified by physical containment, social isolation, silencing, and separation from loved ones, services and support. Immigration detention centres are managed along the same lines as prisons and feature "... visible security measures, shared living quarters, reduced levels of privacy, and isolation from the wider community..." [APPG on Immigration Detention 2021](#)

Men make up the vast majority of people detained around the world and the structures and systems of confinement have been designed for male inmates. Few women are held in UK detention centres, when compared to men, but research shows that detained women suffer disproportionately high levels of mental illness in and after detention.



Image Credit: Images of Empowerment

Women may be particularly vulnerable to the trauma of immigration detention but should not be treated as helpless victims. Many have been politically active in their countries of origin and have been powerful and productive members of their communities. Women are highly motivated to work, build careers and look after their families and communities – they have many skills to offer.

We reflect on the experience of women detained in the UK's immigration removal centres (IRCs) - Yarl's Wood and Derwentside - and in various Short-Term Holding Facilities (STHF).

We also reflect on the accommodation that women are released to as, until a final right to remain is granted, the women in this study felt that:

"Home Office funded accommodation is a continuation of detention."

Key data

- 20,354 people entered immigration detention in the year to June 2023
- Of the 8,077 people who entered immigration detention during the first two quarters of 2023, 524 were women (about 6.5%)
- Almost 84% of these women were released within 28 days
- 75% of women leaving detention between January and June 2023 were granted bail – i.e. were released from detention without resolution of their claim to remain in the UK. Only 22% of women leaving detention during the same period were removed from the UK
- The average cost of detaining an individual is around £107 per day
- In the financial year 2021-22, the Home Office paid compensation payments for unlawful detention totaling around £13 million
- All the detention centres - Immigration Removal Centres (IRC) and Short-Term Holding Facilities (STHF) - are run for profit by the multinational companies Mitie and Serco.

All data drawn from the [Home Office](#) and the [Oxford Migration Observatory](#)

On Being a Woman In Detention

The prior experiences of women seeking asylum, which often include torture and sexual violence, can make women vulnerable and fearful in detention. The prison-like environment and confinement brings back past experiences. Women who have spent most of their lives in domestic settings may struggle in detention to get the support they need.

"We have never had to talk to men outside our families."

"Some women are frightened to speak to the police or to people in charge."

"I can't speak out."

Fear for the well-being of their children makes women vulnerable to threats. We heard cases of the Home Office using women's concern for their children to coerce them into agreeing to return. Home Office Enforcement has threatened to put children on planes without their mothers and women speak of their pain at being separated from their children.

"You don't know where your children are, who is looking after them."

Children have witnessed their mothers being coerced and forced into vans. Mothers hear children crying without being able to comfort them.

"Even now the children are so scared I might not come back."

The lack of interpreting services in detention disempowers many women. It undermines their access to healthcare and to information, support and representation.

Some women are detained after

"It was very difficult and painful for me. I really felt like I was suffocating. It seemed time had stopped. Time was no longer passing for me. Imagine... It was a horrible time, full of stress and fear ... and time isn't passing. Time is frozen. This feeling was suffocating me." [Walking Inquiry 2022:17](#)

reporting to Immigration Centres, others are picked up from their homes.

One woman witnessed others in her house being taken at 3:00am.

"4 hefty people entered my house - am I next? Am I going to be deported?"

Women talked about the shock of being imprisoned and of not knowing why they are being held in what feels and looks like a prison.

"Since I was a child I have never visited a police station."

The Experience of Detention

Women contributors struggled to remember or talk about what detention was like, but many spoke of sleeplessness.

"Banging doors day and night."

"Four weeks I was in detention - and I never slept."

And of fear:

"When the officer comes we know it's not for peace."

"The lady was crying and wailing - It is gruesome - those of us not being taken were locked in a room."

"They come at night - always a mad rush - we run to hide."

The impact of detention on mental

health is huge. Women reported *"Feeling disorganised", "I need time to sort myself out."*

"I'm just trying to bring my sanity back."

"I can't sleep, I jump at any noise, I'm scared if I hear a car outside."

Women feel isolated, alienated and lose their sense of self and self-worth.

"People are afraid to speak out, I am heartbroken, I never expected this and I never tell anyone - they will mock me."

Living Under Immigration Controls

Release from detention does not mean the resolution of claims to remain in the UK and once released, women enter a protracted state that can feel like detention.

"NASS accommodation is a continuation of detention."

"A 'free' prison."

"I'm stuck living with people I don't know and who I might not be able to talk to, I'm sharing a kitchen with strangers and there is racism."

Women spoke of the *"torture of not being able to work."*

And that nearly as bad was *"not being able to set up a home."*

One woman outside the system said



Image Credit: No to Hassocksfield

"I have no solicitor, no house, no food and I am very, very scared to go to a doctor or the hospital."

Women living under immigration controls feel they are different and less worthy, than others. This was especially the case when sharing accommodation with people at different stages of the asylum process who might have access to cash, as opposed a cash-less voucher payment.

Living under the restrictions of the hostile environment means not enjoying normal social relationships.

Women lose a great deal, spiritually and materially, during the process of detention. They are rarely able to return to where they lived before detention:

"I had respect and a business."

"I lost my home, my friends and my stuff."

"I lost my cooking pots, my equipment, the things I need for my business."

"My blender!"

Even after release, women have no stability and can be moved from place to place.

"Someone I know lost her partner because in her tradition she couldn't live with him without getting married, there are restrictions stopping her getting married so she lost her man. She lost her chance to have kids, in her culture she must be married – so now she has no kids – she is very bitter – it is a life sentence."



Image Credit: Images of Empowerment

Recommendations – how can policy be improved?

The overwhelming feeling of those involved in this work is that immigration detention, and especially the indefinite detention of people without clear judicial process, is indefensible and an affront to human dignity.

Our goal is the abolition of all immigration detention but, to move forward, we propose the following practical changes to ameliorate the harms caused to women held in immigration detention.

- Detention must be limited to no more than 28 days (as recommended by the [Brook House Public Inquiry](#)).
 - Night-time transfers to and between immigration detention and holding centres must end.
 - Prompt and fair decisions must be made on immigration cases recognising the forms of violence faced by women seeking international protection.
 - The special vulnerabilities of women in detention must be acknowledged; no victim of trafficking should ever be detained.
 - Formerly detained women should be released to their previous homes and communities ensuring that their possessions are protected and returned.
 - The family rights of detained women must be protected recognising that the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child definition of the Best Interests of the Child](#) guarantees the rights of children to live safely with their parents or other carers.
 - The Home Office must be held accountable for the psychological, social and material damage caused by immigration detention and migration control including when these harms have been caused by private contractors.
 - Crucially, a clear and robust complaints system is needed. This system should simplify the current process which has been found inadequate (see [Recommendation 28 of the Brook House Inquiry report](#)).
- In short, the dignity of women held in immigration detention must be paramount ([Gerlach 2023](#)).

Acknowledgments

During this project women have reflected on a period of great suffering which, in many cases, is still unresolved. We recognise this brave and remarkable act and the emotional and practical risk women have accepted while facing the possibility of destitution, re-detention and deportation; for this reason all quotations are unattributed.

Grateful thanks also go to the agencies who have supported this work and whose logos are shown below.

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"I am struggling but I don't let it get me down – I will never let them see me cry."



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