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# I AM HUMAN

**REFUGEE WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF DETENTION IN THE UK**

*women for* **refugee women**

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Women for Refugee Women challenges the injustices experienced by women who seek asylum in the UK.

**Our vision** is a society in which women's human rights are respected and in which they are safe from persecution.

**Our mission** is to ensure that women seeking asylum in the UK are treated with justice and dignity.

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*Cover illustration by Priya Sundram*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**his report looks at the experiences of 38 women who came to the UK to seek asylum and were detained in Yarl's Wood detention centre between June 2012 and October 2014. It focuses particularly on what these women told us about how they were treated during their arrests, detention and attempted removals.

We undertook this research in order to gain more insight into the way that the Home Office and their contractors treat women who come to this country seeking protection. 6396 women came to this country to claim asylum in their own right in 2013, out of 23,584 asylum applicants overall.<sup>1</sup> During 2013, the Home Office detained **2038 women** who had come to the UK to seek asylum. 43% were held for more than a month.<sup>2</sup> (Many of those held in immigration detention are not asylum seekers, but we are only looking in our research at the experiences of those who come to the UK seeking asylum.)

In January 2014 Women for Refugee Women published a longer report which explored the experiences of women who had been detained in the UK after seeking asylum. This report, *Detained: women asylum seekers locked up in the UK*, discovered compelling evidence that women who are **survivors of rape, sexual violence and other torture** are often being held in immigration detention for long periods when they come to this country to seek asylum, and that this detention has a very negative impact on their mental health.

The research we undertook for this new report adds more weight to our original findings. For instance, the women we spoke to for this report also told us about **grave experiences of persecution** in their home countries. Of the 34 women who disclosed their experiences of persecution to us, 19 women said they had been raped; 21 women had experienced other sexual violence; 28 women said that they had experienced gender-related persecution under the headings we asked about – rape, sexual violence, forced marriage, forced prostitution, or female genital mutilation. We also found that 21 women said that they had been tortured in their home countries. We cannot know how representative these findings are compared to the whole population of asylum seeking women, but this suggests that the UK government is still routinely detaining large numbers of women who are survivors of rape, sexual violence and other torture. We should state that all our research relies on women's own accounts of their experiences of seeking asylum and being detained. We did not seek corroborating evidence but simply allowed women to tell their own stories in their own way.

Again, we found that detention had an extremely **negative impact on the mental health** of those who have already experienced persecution. Among the women we spoke to, half of those who answered said that they had been on suicide watch in Yarl's Wood, and 40% said they had self-harmed. This is comparable to findings in our previous report, where one in five of the women we spoke to said she tried to kill herself in detention.

There have been recent reports of **sexual assaults** within Yarl's Wood. In June 2014 the management of Yarl's Wood said that 31 allegations of sexual contact had been investigated and 10 staff had been dismissed. Six women in our sample said that staff at Yarl's Wood had made sexual suggestions to them, and 3 said that they were touched sexually.

However, our research suggests that the intimidation of women in Yarl's Wood does not start and end with sexual assault. Almost every woman told us about other ways in which they felt their **privacy** was invaded, especially by the male staff at Yarl's Wood.

Almost all of them said that **men watched them in intimate situations** such as while naked, partly dressed, in the shower or on the toilet. Of the 38 women, 33 stated that they experienced men seeing them in these situations. Three did not answer, one was on the family wing with her husband, and only one stated this never happened to her. Of these 33, 13 said that men saw them naked, 29 said men saw them partially dressed, 29 said that men saw them in bed, 16 said men saw them in the shower and 14 said men saw them using the toilet. Nineteen of the women we spoke to were on suicide watch for some or all of their time in Yarl's Wood. For them, the invasions of privacy felt particularly extreme, as they were watched continuously night and day, and even told not to cover their faces while they slept. Seven of the women in our sample had also been put into solitary confinement in Yarl's Wood, for reasons ranging from punishment after they protested, to having suspected

**Women who are survivors of rape, sexual violence and other torture are often being held in immigration detention**

## Almost all said that men watched them in intimate situations

communicable diseases, and the majority of these were also watched by men while they were in solitary confinement.

The women also talked to us about how they felt their privacy was invaded by being **searched by men**. Thirteen of them told us that they were searched by a male member of staff. Twenty-two of them said that they were watched by men while being searched by a female member of staff.

These experiences of being watched by men were **distressing**. Thirty-one of the 33 women who were watched by men said that this made them uncomfortable, 27 said they felt ashamed, and 27 said they felt scared. It is also something that the **Home Office has denied**. In January 2014, when we published our previous report, the Home Office made this statement: 'Male staff would not supervise women showering, dressing or undressing, even if on constant supervision through risk of self-harm.' Our evidence shows that this is not the case, and that either the Home Office does not know what roles are given to male staff and how they have been behaving in Yarl's Wood, or it is deliberately misleading the public.

Women also spoke to us of other ways in which they felt **victimised** by staff members, male and female. For instance, while only 6 women said that they resisted being taken into detention, 15 of them said that they were handcuffed. They also spoke to us about how they felt abused or bullied in Yarl's Wood. Six women said that a member of staff made a sexual suggestion to them, and 3 said that they were touched sexually. Seven said that they were assaulted by a member of staff. Twenty-nine said that they were bullied by a member of staff. Twenty-five said that they experienced a member of staff being racist to them. Twenty-four women witnessed another woman in detention being subjected to some kind of abusive behaviour.

This report builds up a more detailed picture of what happens to women when they are detained in the UK. We believe that **detention is unnecessary in the asylum process and that women who seek asylum should not be detained**.

In 2013 only 633, or 31%, of women who were detained

after seeking asylum left detention to be removed from the UK, the rest re-entered British society to continue their asylum claims.<sup>3</sup> Their detention had served no purpose.

**All asylum claims can be considered while the asylum seeker lives in the community.** This need not compromise immigration controls, as the government learned after it announced it would end the detention of children for immigration purposes in 2010. An evaluation of the new family returns process in 2013 found that '5% of families within the new process [with minimal use of detention] had absconded. This is exactly the same as in the previous process.'<sup>4</sup>

Detention is also **very expensive**. In 2013, the UK government reported in Parliament that the cost of detaining an individual in an immigration removal centre for a year is £37,230.<sup>5</sup> Maintaining an asylum seeker in the community has consistently been found to be significantly cheaper.<sup>6</sup>

Women for Refugee Women is not the only organisation that is recommending a change or end to the process of detention for those seeking asylum. The recent Parliamentary Inquiry into Detention heard from many organisations including Liberty, Amnesty International and UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), all of whom are challenging current detention practice.

**We recommend an end to the detention of those seeking asylum.** In the immediate future, we recommend that those who have experienced rape or other gender-based violence should never be detained, that pregnant women should never be detained, and that there should be an upper time limit of 28 days on all immigration detention. We also recommend that immediate changes should be made to the conditions under which women are detained and to the training and recruitment of staff at Yarl's Wood detention centre. For more detailed recommendations please see page 25. ●

## Half of the women said that they had been on suicide watch

# KEY FINDINGS

**W**e spoke to 38 women who were currently or recently detained in Yarl's Wood. Twenty-five had been released between June 2012 and June 2014, and 13 were in detention at the time of the interview (between June and October 2014). All of these women were detained in Yarl's Wood, though 3 had also been detained in other places - 2 in Colnbrook detention centre and one in prison.

## **34 women disclosed the experiences in their home countries which led them to seek asylum in the UK:**

19 women said that they had been raped, 21 women had experienced other sexual violence, and 24 altogether - over 70% of the 34 who answered - had experienced either rape or sexual violence. 8 had been raped by soldiers, police or prison guards.

28 women said that they had experienced gender-related persecution under the headings we asked about - rape, sexual violence, forced marriage, forced prostitution, or female genital mutilation.

21 women said that they had been tortured, and 26 altogether said they had experienced either rape or torture.

## **36 women told us why they thought they had been persecuted:**

19 women, just over half, said they were persecuted because they were women.

10 because they were politically active.

9 because of their ethnicity.

7 because of their religion.

3 because they were lesbians.

## **We asked these women if they were clear about why they were detained:**

They answered in regard to 44 instances of detention (as some women had been detained more than once).

In regard to 20 instances of detention, women said that they were not clear about why they were detained.

## **We asked them about their experiences of being taken into detention:**

Out of the 38 women, 6 said that they resisted detention 15, or 39%, said that they were handcuffed on detention.

13 said that between 5 and 10 staff detained them, and one woman told us that more than 10 staff were involved in detaining her.

20 said that more men than women were involved in

taking them into detention, 10 said it involved equal numbers of men and women.

## **We asked them about their experiences in Yarl's Wood:**

Of 36 women who answered, 19, or more than half, were on suicide watch in Yarl's Wood.

Of 35 women who answered, 14, or 40%, said that they self-harmed in detention.

7 out of the 38 women we spoke to were placed in Kingfisher Wing, or solitary confinement.

## **We asked them about how they were treated in Yarl's Wood:**

Out of the 33 women who spoke about men seeing them in intimate situations, 13 said that men saw them naked, 29 said men saw them partially dressed, 29 said that men saw them in bed, 16 said men saw them in the shower and 14 said men saw them using the toilet.

Out of the 19 women who were on suicide watch, 13 said that they were watched by men, 10 while they were in bed and 8 while on the toilet.

Of 33 women who were watched by men, 31 said they felt uncomfortable, 29 said they felt upset, 29 felt angry, 27 felt scared, and 27 were ashamed.

Out of 35 women who answered questions about being searched, 13, or a third, said that they were searched by a male member of staff. 2 women said that a man searched them and asked them to take off their clothes; one of these instances was in Yarl's Wood and one in Colnbrook. 22, or two thirds, said that they experienced a man watching them while they were being searched by a female staff member.

## **Women also spoke about bullying, racism, and sexual suggestions and assault by staff in Yarl's Wood:**

6 out of 35 said that a member of staff made a sexual suggestion to them, 5 of these were men.

3 of them said they were touched sexually, 2 by men.

7 said they were physically assaulted, all of these by men.

25 said that a member of staff was racist to them, 21 of these by men.

29 of 34 said they were bullied, 24 of these by men.

## **Women in this sample were detained for long periods:**

In our sample the shortest length of detention was 2 days, the longest was one year and 3 months, and the average length of detention was 93 days. ◆

# PERSECUTED

One of the main findings from all the research that Women for Refugee Women has carried out is that most women who come to the UK to claim asylum tell us that they have already suffered serious harm in their home countries or that they have been threatened with harm.

This is borne out by our findings among this sample of 38 women. We asked them about their experiences in their home country that led them to seek asylum here. Of the 34 who answered, 19 women said that they had been raped and 21 women had experienced other sexual violence. Twenty-eight women, more than 80% of those who answered, said that they had experienced gender-related persecution under the headings we asked about – rape, sexual violence, forced marriage, forced prostitution, or female genital mutilation. We also found that 21 women said that they had been tortured in their home countries. Eight women of the 34 who disclosed their experiences of persecution said that they had been raped by soldiers, police or prison guards in their home countries. This rape by state actors had taken place in various countries including Uganda, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Zimbabwe and Sierra Leone.

Home Office policy states that people who have evidence of torture should not be detained, except in exceptional circumstances.<sup>7</sup> There is however no explicit mention of victims of rape and sexual violence in the guidelines for Home Office staff on who should or should not be detained. This is contrary to the UNHCR guidelines on the use of immigration detention, which state, 'Victims of torture and other serious physical, psychological or sexual violence also need special attention and should generally not be detained.'<sup>8</sup>

Over recent years, there has been growing awareness of the violence that women suffer throughout the world. The UK government has led and joined many initiatives to protect survivors of gender-based violence in the UK and elsewhere in the world. However, so far these have not extended to creating a dignified asylum process for women who are fleeing persecution.

For instance, the government's initiative to end female genital mutilation is being carried through by the Home Office, the Department for International Development and the Department of Health.<sup>9</sup> Yet one of the women we talked to for this report had fled the Gambia because she had been trained to be a cutter like her mother and grandmother before her, and the elders of her village were trying to force her to carry out the practice despite her abhorrence of it. When she claimed asylum she was placed in the Detained Fast Track and held for six months, and was not given an interpreter or a lawyer for her

**I was asking for protection. But I ended up in prison**

interview. She recently stated: 'When I got into the van [to go to Yarl's Wood] I was thinking I lost everything... Did I commit any crime? I don't think seeking asylum is a crime. So I was scared... I was very scared. The only thing I was asking for was protection. But I ended up in prison. People call Yarl's Wood detention, it's not detention, it's prison.'

The government has also moved forward on policies to combat forced marriage, which has resulted in a Forced Marriage Unit run by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Home Office, and new legislation in 2014 making it a specific criminal offence to force someone to marry.<sup>10</sup> Yet one of the women who spoke to us in Yarl's Wood had come to the UK after being threatened with a forced marriage by her family. 'My parents have threatened me. They said that they will kidnap me from the airport and kill me, skin me and show it to other girls as an example.' After she was detained on the fast track she said: 'I was receiving threatening messages in Pakistan. Straightaway I went to my room alone, with a glass and tried to cut myself. I don't remember what happened after, a female officer found me.' She was put on suicide watch. 'They are very rude on suicide watch. They say, "Why did you do that? You cut yourself, you did wrong, now you have to deal with the consequences."' The guards make sure you can see them, you can't cover your face in bed. They wake you up to check you are asleep.'

This government is also attempting to combat trafficking and modern slavery, with new legislation currently passing through Parliament aimed at preventing trafficking to the UK.<sup>11</sup> Yet one of the women we spoke to for this report had been brought to this country to be forced into prostitution. She has been detained twice, once when her asylum claim was still ongoing, because she was staying with a friend when the police came to pick up someone else staying in the house. Even though she had legal and medical evidence that she had an ongoing asylum claim and that she suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, she was detained and was on suicide watch throughout her detention. She said that men watched her in the shower, on the toilet and in bed.

The government has also created a new global initiative

to end sexual violence in conflict, with a high profile summit led by William Hague and Angelina Jolie in 2014 where a new international protocol to prosecute sexual violence in conflict was launched. But one woman we know came here to seek asylum from eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. There she had been imprisoned and repeatedly raped by many different men. When she got to London she was detained without warning when she went to report. In detention, she experienced flashbacks to her previous imprisonment and became extremely depressed.

She tells her story below.

It is time that the UK government joined the dots and recognised that it cannot effectively tackle abuses such as female genital mutilation, sexual violence in conflict, forced marriage, and trafficking for forced prostitution, if it continues to lock up women who come to the UK fleeing such persecution. These women could be protected and enabled to live full lives in the community; instead, we are compounding their trauma. ◆

## MARGARET'S STORY

**U**ntil two years ago I had a normal life in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I'm a mother of three kids. I was lucky because of my business. I ran a restaurant. I had a small car, I would drop my kids at school and bring them back home. I wanted to give my kids a good education. I wanted to give them everything. One day I had just got home and somebody knocked on the door.

He said, 'Can you come with us? We need to ask you some questions about your brothers, the rebels.'

I had no choice but to go with the men. I was scared, I had heard people were being kidnapped but I am not political so I didn't think it would happen to me. I got in the car. They were talking, and said, 'If we take her in the prison, maybe the Red Cross will come. Let's take her to another place. She needs to talk.'

They stopped at what looked like an abandoned house. I started to scream and tried to resist. They dragged me into a room. There were five women already there, and all were naked. There was a pile of old doors in the room, stacked up to make a bed. One man pushed me on to it. Two men held my legs while a third held my arms. The fourth man raped me. Then they all raped me.

After that every morning men came into the room and raped us. About two weeks after I arrived a large group of men came and raped all of us. Two women struggled. I saw men stabbing their legs with knives to keep them apart. One of the women died just after they finished and the second died in the night. The dead women were left in the room. After this they tied us. I was tied with

a thick rope around each ankle, and each rope then tied to a window handle.

They brought me food and water, but they would not take me to the toilet. Every morning I was untied and a cleaner would pour cold water and disinfectant on me. One day this man spoke to me. He said, 'Every day I expect you to be dead, but you are still alive.'

He talked to me. He found he knew my pastor. I said, ask him to pray for me. A few days later he said the pastor had paid the man to set me free. I was in so much pain I could hardly walk. A car was waiting on the road and my pastor was in it. We drove and drove to Uganda. I was left with a Christian family near Kampala. In Uganda I was scared to go outside in case the soldiers found me. I paid an agent to bring me here.

I didn't even know I was coming to the UK. When we arrived in London he took me to Croydon, to Lunar House. I went into this place and said, 'I have come from the Congo.' I asked for protection. I had to report to the Home Office centre every month. The second time I went in they said, they were taking me into detention.

We arrived at midnight. And I saw it was a prison. I came here only just to ask asylum, I'm not a criminal.

I am so depressed that they think I am going to kill myself here and I am watched by men and women night and day. When the men watch me it makes me have so many bad feelings about myself and my body. I feel full of shame about what happened to me and what is happening to me. Being in prison here is a torture in my head. ◆ *Margaret now has refugee status in the UK.*



# ARRESTED

**W**omen can be detained at any point in the asylum process. They may be detained as soon as they claim asylum if they have cases that Home Office staff believe may 'be decided quickly', and placed in the Detained Fast Track. They can be detained at any point while their claim is being considered, if they are seen as 'likely to abscond'. And they can be detained if they are refused asylum, and their 'removal from the UK is imminent.' These are the ostensible reasons given for detention, but in practice women whose cases are extremely complicated are often placed in the Detained Fast Track, women who pose no apparent threat of absconding are often detained while their claims are considered, and women who have been refused but for various reasons cannot be removed are often detained for long periods.

Written reasons for detention should be given in all cases at the time of detention by Home Office staff, using the form IS91R. The six possible reasons given on this form for detention are:

- 'You are likely to abscond if given temporary admission or release.
- There is insufficient reliable information to decide on whether to grant you temporary admission or release.
- Your removal from the UK is imminent.
- You need to be detained whilst alternative arrangements are made for your care. Your release is not considered conducive to the public good.
- I am satisfied that your application may be decided quickly using the fast track asylum procedures.<sup>12</sup>

However, in practice, asylum seekers themselves, and their lawyers and supporters, are often unaware of the reasons for their detention. The Home Office will not disclose how many people are detained under each of these reasons.<sup>13</sup> Eleven of the women in our sample told us that they were detained because they were put into the fast track, and 16 said they were detained because they had been refused asylum. But in 20 instances they said that they were not clear why they were being detained at the moment of detention. This lack of clarity added to women's feelings of loss of control.

**I was not clear why I was taken into detention. I was frightened**

**'They didn't tell me why I was being detained. They put me in a van. I was so scared.'**

**'I cried. I didn't know what was happening to me. I didn't speak English. I was confused and scared.'**

**'I was not clear why I was taken into detention, I was frightened.'**

**'I was just about to put my fresh claim in. When I asked why they were detaining me, they said they want me to go home. I was crying.'**

**'I had a refusal but they didn't plan to remove me. I had no flight tickets yet I was detained for eight months.'**

The moment of being detained can be extremely shocking for women who have no prior warning that this will be the result of going to sign at a reporting centre or of an unexpected knock on a door. However, only 6 women in our sample said that they resisted being taken into detention. A much higher number, 15, said that they were handcuffed and a further 4 were threatened with handcuffs. Home Office policy on the use of 'restraint', including handcuffs, on detainees under escort, sets out that 'the use of any restraint should be necessary, reasonable and proportionate, and have regard to all relevant circumstances; restraints should only be used for the minimum amount of time ... any use should be following an individual risk assessment.'<sup>14</sup> Given that 19 women in our sample, or half, were either handcuffed or threatened with handcuffs, and yet only 6 said that they resisted detention, we would question how effectively this policy is being implemented. The routine use of handcuffs on vulnerable women does not appear to reflect use of restraint that is 'necessary, reasonable and proportionate'.

**'They told me they were taking me to a hotel. But then they put me in handcuffs. I was wondering why they put me in handcuffs so then I resisted.'**

**'They wanted to put me in handcuffs. I cried and begged them not to.'**

**'They said they had to handcuff me, but I have a disability from when I was a child so I have a calliper and I asked if they would not handcuff me because I would not be able to move.'**

**'I said I've never been put in handcuffs before. They said, "We are just putting you in handcuffs for our own security."'**

The fear that many women felt when being detained was exacerbated by the sheer numbers of people who were arresting them. Fourteen of the women in our sample said that there were more than 5 members of staff involved in arresting them, and one said that there were more than 10. The majority of these were men. The experience of being handcuffed and escorted by a number of staff, including male staff, was very traumatic for many women.

**'I did not resist because I was scared - I thought that it would be the same type of prison as in Africa. I did not want to be touched again so I said yes.'**

**'I had shouted. I refused to be detained. I was pregnant at the time and was not in a position to be detained.'**

**'The woman I was living with resisted arrest and would not open the front door. The men kicked the door down and arrested both of us with handcuffs. This was at 5 in the morning. I had only been three weeks in the UK so I panicked and had an asthma attack.'**

Many women spoke to us about how confused they were about being taken into detention when they had not

committed any crime. They found the process chaotic and confusing, and often talked of feeling angry, ashamed and helpless.

**'It was very intimidating. It was shocking, confusing and so chaotic. You get lost for hours. It takes time to digest. I will never forget the knock on my door in the morning, that knock by UKBA. It terrorises you for the rest of your life.'**

**'I was very scared. I didn't know where I was going. It was the middle of the night. The van was running for more than four hours. I was thinking maybe I'm going to die because why did they hold me in Croydon since 9 in the morning. Maybe they want to do something bad to me. I was too scared to ask questions.'**

**'They don't explain anything to you, they just lock you in the van. Anything can happen to you, you don't know which hands you are in. I was very scared, it was too much.'**

**'I felt bad. I was sick. I couldn't believe I was put in the hands of police again in another country.'** ◆

## EMMA'S STORY

**E**mma, who is a lesbian from Kenya where she was beaten by family members and forced to undergo FGM as an adult as punishment for her sexuality, told us this story about her experience of being taken to Yarl's Wood:

I was at the reporting centre when they said they would detain me. They proceeded to drag me across the room and put me in another room which was really cold. They were pulling on my legs. They locked me in the room by myself. I was banging on the window to the other room, saying I wanted to get my jumper, I wanted to go home. But they were taunting me. I think they must have turned on the air conditioning because the room got colder. I don't know how long I was there, it felt like ages. I went to the toilet which was in another room, while going to the toilet a security guard banged on the door insisting I need to come out.

The warmest place was the bathroom, so I remained there. The people who were transporting me to Yarl's Wood came and said I need to walk out on my own to the van. Because I was refusing to move there were four

men in the bathroom. One of them made a comment, "Maybe you are enjoying seeing her standing here," and all of them laughed. It was a very small bathroom. Big men were standing there laughing at me and saying, "If you don't move, it is going to get silly." They were saying it's getting late and they had to take me now. One of them put me in a head lock. They bound my wrists and my feet, like a goat.

Everything was tight and someone was putting pressure on my neck, they were pulling me, lifting me and putting me in the van. They transported me in the same position - my hands and legs bound. There was a security guard who was standing behind me, who had me in a neck choke. He stood the whole way to Bedford - all three hours. Just standing behind me. I said that my wrists were hurting me and can they take off the cuffs - but one of the security guards said they don't trust me. They were also holding my seatbelt tight across my body - it was digging into my shoulders. There was only one lady in the van, who kept checking my pulse. ◆

# SEARCHED

**W**e acknowledge that people who are entering detention centres may be searched for security reasons, but we were surprised to hear from the women whom we interviewed that they were frequently searched during their detention and that this searching was often carried out by male staff or in the presence of male staff. Out of 35 women who spoke to us about being searched, 11 said that they were searched by a man while dressed, and 2 said that they were searched by a man while they were undressed (one of these instances was at Colnbrook). Twenty-two said that they were searched by a woman with a man present. Overall, 24, or 69%, said that they were either searched by a man or with a man present.

This is in breach of Home Office policy on searching in detention centres. The relevant policy states that where a full, or strip, search is undertaken, 'The search must be conducted by two officers of the same sex as the individual,' and that where a rub down search is undertaken on a female detainee, 'staff members conducting the search must be female (and where possible only female members of staff should be present).'<sup>15</sup>

Home Office policy is also clear that staff should consider religious as well as gender sensitivities. However, one woman told us about being asked to remove her hijab, or headscarf, in front of men.

In an answer to a Parliamentary question in July 2014, the Home Office spokesperson in the Lords said: 'The service provider for Yarl's Wood immigration removal centre (IRC), Serco, is required under their contract to employ sufficient female officers to enable appropriate searching and security arrangements for female detainees.' He admitted that 'Yarl's Wood IRC has 52% male detainee custody officers (DCOs) and 48% female DCOs,' and said that they currently had a recruitment drive going to attract more female staff, but did not say why it had become routine for men to search woman or be present at their searches.<sup>16</sup>

**'One time I was told to remove my scarf. I told them they could feel my head. They said I had to remove my scarf. It was in front of many men and women. I explained I wear the scarf for my beliefs. They did not care.'**

**'I was strip searched at Colnbrook. There were six men. I felt I was being handled.'**

**'Most of the time it was male guards searching you.'**

**'I was always searched by men.'**

**'Male officer escorts you to legal, then woman searches you, in front of men.'**

What's more, searches of women's rooms were often undertaken by men and we heard more than one account of men coming into women's rooms without warning to carry out searches of the beds and clothes. Home Office policy on room searches states: 'A search of a detainee's room will be carried out by a minimum of two detainee custody officers (DCO) and the detainee should be invited to be present during the search. In the case of female detainees, establishments should aim to ensure that both staff members conducting the search, and where possible any others present, are female.'<sup>17</sup>

In this research, we heard from survivors of sexual abuse who felt distressed that men were able to touch their belongings without warning, and there seemed to be a strangely specific action on the part of the men who searched the rooms, to look through and touch women's underwear. The recent HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) report into Yarl's Wood noted that detainees were 'embarrassed by male officers carrying out searches of their rooms and personal property.'<sup>18</sup>

**'Because of sexual abuse I used to feel very uncomfortable with male officers in my room when I was in bed. I had to quickly sit up, even if I was sleeping. I felt very vulnerable. They don't warn you when they are going to search your room. They shout room search. We complained. They said they don't have to give you warning. They all enter and search. Men touch your knickers. This upset me. A man touches your knickers and leaves them on the bed. It made me cry.'**

**'Male officers search your room. They check the wardrobe, looked through underwear. I requested a female officer, the men said, "We can't do anything."'**

**'It was on a Sunday morning around 9 o'clock in the morning. I was in bed suffering from a bad toothache,**

**Because of sexual abuse I used to feel very uncomfortable with male officers in my room**

when officers (three male and one female) opened the door and let themselves in my room. I was ordered to get up and get dressed as they were doing room search. I asked if they could do it at some other time in the day, as I was too tired and in pain. They showed no compassion, called the managers and said I was being difficult. Two male managers came to talk to me, and concluded I was faking the toothache and went ahead with the room search. I was in bed in pain, half naked, with five male officers and one female in my room. They went through my all my clothes with male officers touching my underwear and talking about me as though I wasn't in the room. At the end of the room search they found nothing. What makes me angry about the whole thing is the fact that everything in my room was provided by Serco including the clothes as all my personal belongings were confiscated the day I arrived. What they were looking for I don't know. That day I did not leave the room, and didn't even go for meals, I just stayed in bed crying and feeling violated.'

We are also concerned by the frequency of body searches and room searches. Women told us that they were routinely searched both as they entered and as they left social and legal visits, but also that they experienced what they felt were random searches. The recent HMIP report

## Most of the time it was male guards searching you

into Yarl's Wood stated that the practice of random room searching was 'over-restrictive.'<sup>19</sup> There seems to be no rationale behind the frequency of searches. Unlike in the prison estate, where detailed Prison Service Instructions (PSIs) govern the use of searching, the relevant policy for detention centres simply says: 'All areas of an establishment and all detainees are liable for ad hoc searching in accordance with the searching procedures of each service provider.'<sup>20</sup>

'They always come in without knocking on the door. Even if you are in the shower or toilet. There was one incident where they were doing roll call and maybe they had someone missing but that day they searched everyone's room - regardless of whether you were in the shower or not.'

'When we were queuing for lunch they would just touch us and search us for no reason.' ♦



# WATCHED

**F**rom our evidence we can state that it is clearly routine for men to enter women's bedrooms and bathrooms without any warning at Yarl's Wood detention centre, both when women are on suicide watch and when they are not.

Almost all of the women we spoke to said that men entered their rooms without knocking. The recent HMIP report into Yarl's Wood also said: 'Women detainees complained that male staff entered their rooms without waiting for a reply after knocking.'<sup>21</sup> Most women in our sample said that men saw them in intimate situations such as while naked, or partly dressed, or in the shower or the on the toilet. Of the 38 women in our sample, 33 stated that they experienced men seeing them in these situations. Three did not answer, one was on the family wing with her husband, and only one stated this never happened to her. Of these 33, 13 said that men saw them naked, 29 said men saw them partially dressed, 29 said that men saw them in bed, 16 said men saw them in the shower and 14 said men saw them using the toilet.

Nineteen of the women we spoke to were on suicide watch; of these, 13 said that they were watched by men during the suicide watch. Five said that they were watched on suicide watch by a man while they were naked, and 10 while they were in bed, 8 while on the toilet, 7 while in the shower. Suicide watch is officially called 'constant supervision' and takes place as part of the so-called Assessment Care in Detention and Teamwork (ACDT) self-harm reduction strategy. It is described in this way: 'Constant supervision of a detainee will be carried out by a designated member of staff on a one-to-one basis, remaining within eyesight at all times.'<sup>22</sup> There is no mention in the Home Office policy that this staff member should be female for a female detainee, or that she should have received any training regarding the need to respect the detainee's privacy and dignity. This is in contrast to recently published HMIP *Expectations* on the treatment of and conditions for women in prison, which set out that 'the gender of staff conducting constant supervision' should be 'determined following documented consultation with the prisoner and assessment of need.'<sup>23</sup>

In a Parliamentary answer in July 2014 in response to a question about the supervision of female detainees by male staff, the Home Office spokesperson in the House of Lords said: 'ACDT requires centre managers to appoint trained assessors and named case managers to provide individualised care to detainees based on their particular needs.' He did not, however, say why women were being routinely watched by men.<sup>24</sup>

'I got a bladder problem because I did not want to go to the toilet in front of a man.'

'They even took the blanket off me to see if I was in the bed.'

'You have to ask a staff members for sanitary towels when you are on your period. It is embarrassing asking a man for sanitary towels, and then he comes into the bathroom afterwards when you are changing it. Why? All women in Yarl's Wood are harassed by men coming into their rooms.'

'Roll call is meant to be at 10am. At 9.45 a man came into the bathroom and looked me up and down. I was naked.'

'Men enter your room without knocking and see you in bed every day. I have been seen partly naked more than once.'

'They always come in without knocking the door. Even if you are in the shower or toilet.'

'They enter your room without knocking a lot. They always come in whether you are in the shower or toilet.'

'I was asleep and when I woke I saw a guard in our room... One day I was in the bathroom taking a shower, they asked me to come out. I was naked.'

For some women, particularly those from traditional communities, or those who are survivors of sexual violence, the constant lack of privacy and the unpredictable nature of male intrusion into their bedrooms and bathrooms can trigger mental health problems. Of 33 women who were watched by men, 31 said they felt uncomfortable, 29 said they felt upset, 29 felt angry, 27 felt scared, and 27 were ashamed.

**Women told us about how they felt about being watched by men**

'It bothered me so much. I have a history of sexual abuse. This man can do anything to me. It's not right at

**There was nothing I could do. Four men watched me while I was naked**

all. It makes you so vulnerable.'

'I was a victim of rape, so it brought on all those memories when they came to my room.'

'I couldn't sleep or rest. It made me feel very stressed. It made me much more nervous, and it gave me bad headaches and increased all pain in my body.'

'When I was seen on the toilet I felt so scared. The anger I had when this happened, it made me feel so frustrated.'

'We are in their hands, they can do anything at any time, we don't have a right to question them. They have all the control. This makes you feel like you are useless, like you have no say.'

'I felt like nothing. I lost hope and courage, that I was degraded to such a condition. All these people watching me.'

'There was nothing I could do. Four men watched me while I was naked. They wouldn't cover me. I was so vulnerable.'

'I never felt safe. Because I was raped before in my country. I was scared the same thing will happen to me. I was so scared I hardly left my room.'

'Uncomfortable, yes, definitely. I know that male guards can come at any time, so I could not feel free.'

'Helpless. We feel all the time we are not human. We are nothing. They can open your door whenever they want.'

'I felt ashamed. A total stranger just saw you naked and you have to see them all day. It breaks your confidence.'

'Anybody who is on suicide watch has sexual harassment in Yarl's Wood because those male guards they sit there watching you at night, when you are sleeping and being naked. People who are on suicide watch need doctors, not officers sitting at their door.'

The Home Office has already denied our finding that men watch women in their bedrooms and bathrooms in Yarl's Wood. When we mentioned this aspect of women's experiences in our previous report the Home Office issued

**I was a victim of rape, so it brought on all those memories when they came to my room**

this statement: 'Male staff would not supervise women showering, dressing or undressing, even if on constant supervision through risk of self harm.'<sup>25</sup>

The fact that the Home Office has denied that such practice takes place in Yarl's Wood shows that they realise that it should not happen. The fact that so many women state that it does happen is cause for serious concern.

We are particularly concerned by the high numbers of women who feel intruded on by staff while on suicide watch. These are already women who have been considered to be mentally vulnerable.

#### Women on suicide watch told us their experiences

'There are always male staff. You have to have the shower door open - when you go to the toilet too. It is another way of torturing you. They do anything they can to break you down.'

'It made me feel much more depressed. I got bad constipation and piles. I have severe pain because of this and I need an operation. Because I was unhappy about someone coming in while I was on the toilet.'

'When you are on suicide watch you ask for a woman when you want to take a shower, they said we don't have enough staff. I was on suicide watch and so was my room-mate. A man and a woman were watching us. We asked if the men could leave while we went to the toilet and he refused. They didn't respect us.'

'You don't have any privacy of your body.'

'All the time I was watched by men. They kept coming all the time.'

'This was the most difficult situation in my life while I was in Yarl's Wood. They kept the door wide open and the man sits there watching you when the door is wide open. They put me on suicide watch because they

showed me the ticket to send me home. Every two hours they change another guard and they don't care even if you're putting on your pants, they don't care. I was so angry with how they treated me, I always turned away and covered my head. They said I had to lie on my back or face the front while sleeping. I refused to eat when I was on suicide watch. I just wanted to die because of the stress I had in me. So you are on the toilet, he is sitting there, I shouted at him, "You are a man, how can

you sit there?" He said, "We don't have enough staff, we do what we are told." I asked the staff, "Why not have women watch us? This is not good for us."

"They are very rude on suicide watch. They say, "Why did you do that? You cut yourself, you did wrong, now you have to deal with the consequences." The guards make sure you can see them, you can't cover your face in bed. I cannot go to the toilet with a man guarding.' ◆

## RECHEL'S STORY

**R**echel was in Yarl's Wood for eight months. She is from St Vincent and is now living in Leeds. She claimed asylum in March 2014 and is waiting for a decision:

I'm not proud of how things have gone in my life and what I have had to do to survive. I have been coming to this country since I was 9 years old. At the age of 15 I was raped by a gang to teach my father a lesson over drugs money that my father supposedly owed the gang. A lesson I had to take. I was raped by three men at gunpoint. I lost my virginity and fell pregnant. My whole world was turned upside down. For my safety I was sent to England to my grandfather. I came to England scarred for life. My grandfather paid almost £4000 to a solicitor to have my stay here regularised but in the end he did nothing.

After that my grandfather disowned me. I was forced out on the street and I worked here like a slave while trying to heal on my own from my rape. One thing I know about people here is when they know fully well that someone hasn't got their papers they will exploit you to slavery. I worked very hard at my young tender age cleaning buildings for £3.50 an hour. I was feeling used and washed up. Hiding in shame, I became nothing. I watched as kids my age went to school and did the things little girls are supposed to do without a care in the world. I wish I could be like them. I want just to be a kid at heart again. But instead I had to grow up and become a carer. I would work from 6 am to 9 pm. Then I had to leave my care job due to immigration cracking down on illegal immigrants.

So I moved to Coventry to start again. I found a job and later that year I was arrested and sentenced to 12 months in prison. I served my sentence and then I was transferred to Yarl's Wood IRC. I thought to myself

who did I kill? Am I a murderer? My time in prison wasn't easy, but the one thing I can say is in prison you know what's your release date and you have that to look forward to. But in Yarl's Wood you don't know that.

I became majorly depressed. I was then diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and rape trauma syndrome. I remained in Yarl's Wood for another eight months. Pure shame and disgrace. I thought prison was bad but Yarl's Wood pushed me to the point of wanting to commit suicide. I went on to become a major self-harmer. I was harming myself to cope with things. I suffered with people invading my space. Officers would enter your room behind your back, go through your bed, your underwear and these are male officers. I felt raped all over again. And while there I told the doctor I was raped at 15 and she told me it was a private matter. I felt like ending my life. Yarl's Wood made me feel like life itself wasn't worth living anymore. It is faith that kept me going and the fact that I shared a room, or today I would not be here to tell my story, I would have been a dead woman.

I had a doctor come in and examine me and assess my situation and the doctor sent a report to my caseworker letting him know that I was I was being watched while at Yarl's Wood and the effect it had on me. He ignored it. I was advised to give a copy to the healthcare at Yarl's Wood and they themselves ignored it while my health deteriorated. I have to thank the judge that released me because I had already written my suicide note in preparation to killing myself. I would never wish for any human being or even a dog to be in a place like that. It is not humane, it is not right and it leaves you scarred for life. I don't know how to recover from this torture. ◆

# ABUSED

**Y**arl's Wood has recently been in the spotlight due to allegations of sexual abuse at the centre. In June 2014 Serco admitted that it had dismissed 10 staff in relation to 8 separate cases out of 31 which had been investigated over the last 7 years. Members of Parliament stated that they were not satisfied by the investigations, and that, 'The allegations are so serious, we can't leave it at that.'<sup>26</sup>

Our evidence underlines this growing recognition that there has been a culture of inappropriate sexual conduct at Yarl's Wood. Out of our sample of 38, 6 women said that a member of staff made a sexual suggestion to them, and 3 said that they were touched sexually.

**'I met an officer in a corridor, and he said to me, "Oh, you are so gorgeous, I wish I can grab you and kiss you, kiss you."'**

**'They say you are a beautiful lady, if I can have you I can help you get out of this situation. This happened a lot. I refused to sleep with them. People did accept this. Many people know about it. But when someone says something, they just deport them. There is nobody who can protect you there. They come and tell you that maybe you can have a room of your own. They say they can help you get out. They just want to use us. They just want to come into the room.'**

**'Officers try to touch you. They look like they are going to hug you. They come very close without saying anything.'**

**'Lots of women had open relationships with the guards. This meant there was favouritism and the guards gave attention to women they were having relationships with.'**

**'Officers were asking some women for sex. I knew one woman in particular who was having sex with a guard.'**

In addition to this exploitative sexual conduct, women spoke about other instances in which they felt staff were abusive towards them. Twenty-nine said that they were bullied by a member of staff. Twenty-five said that they experienced a member of staff being racist to them. Twenty-four women witnessed another woman in detention being subjected to some kind of abusive behaviour.

**'I was unable to speak English, so I received constant bullying. There was constant sniggering behind my back. The guards made me out to be a laughing stock.'**

**'Someone said to me: "All these Africans are coming here, you should go back to Africa. The British government is too lenient with you."'**

**'One day I asked for cold drinking water. They said, "Why are you asking? In Africa you drink dirty water." They did not give me any that night.'**

**'They insulted and bullied everyone, even the old women.'**

**'I heard a guard saying, "Why are you in our country? You should go back."'**

Seven of the women we spoke to said that they had experienced some kind of physical assault from a member of staff in Yarl's Wood. For instance, one woman spoke about being physically forced into solitary confinement. A further 4 women spoke about the use of physical force in the context of forced removals (please see page 23). In the recent HM Inspectorate of Prisons report on Yarl's Wood, it was noted that use of force had decreased but that there were still 48 incidents of use of force in the previous six months.<sup>27</sup>

**'While being served milk and biscuits by one of the guards - I saw that the milk had run out so I reached for the box of milk to open it. The guard slapped my hand and said, "If you want to steal go back to your country."'**

**'When there was an alarm they would just push us.'**

**'When I attempted suicide they kept on pushing me.'**

It is obviously unacceptable that any staff member should behave in a bullying or abusive way to any detainee. But it is important to note that many women pointed out to us that it was not the individuals who were at fault so much as an entire system that they felt dehumanised those who were detained.

**They insulted and bullied everyone, even the old women**



'I feel that many of the staff were out of place there - they were not always comfortable with what goes on there. There are some officers who are happy to work there and be aggressive and there are others who are uncomfortable with the way people are treated. They say "It is my job." I feel, is it your job to destroy my life? But that is how they would defend themselves.'

'There was a woman who worked there who said that she had nightmares about it [Yarl's Wood] and so she resigned. Some people don't like what happens in Yarl's Wood but they are forced to act in a certain way.'

'I did not have a problem with the staff at Yarl's Wood - they were doing their job. My point is that when you go into detention you do not just come out, it stays with you. It changes you. When you go out you do not

**It's not just about the people who work there, it's the place itself, locking up vulnerable women**

know if you'll ever come back to your house again.'

'It's not just about the people who work there, it's the place itself, locking up vulnerable women.' ◆



# UNWELL

**W**e did not include specific questions about healthcare in this research. However, many women took the opportunity in open questions to tell us about the problems that they had accessing appropriate and timely healthcare while they were detained and about poor attitudes they encountered from medical staff either for themselves or for other women. Out of the 38 interviewees, 17 raised issues around healthcare without being prompted. Some of the women in this sample had health conditions which made them clearly vulnerable in detention; 3 were pregnant, one was HIV positive (which was undiagnosed while she was in detention), one had tuberculosis (TB). Others talked about dismissive attitudes from healthcare staff and a lack of confidentiality and appropriate treatment.

In our previous report, *Detained*, we found that a majority of women had health issues while they were in detention, and most of them rated the healthcare in detention as bad or very bad. The organisation Medical Justice, which sends independent doctors into detention centres and campaigns for the rights of detainees, found in recent research that a majority of detainees who were HIV positive suffered disruptions in their medication and a majority were subjected to poor practice including being denied access to hospital for appointments with specialists.<sup>28</sup> We are very concerned that the qualitative evidence from this research shows that women are still finding that healthcare in detention falls below proper standards.

**'I was so sick that I begged them to take me to the hospital, but they refused. I said I was not a prisoner but they said that is not their problem.'**

**'I was pregnant and I used to throw up all the time. Male guards used to say to me that I should not come into the office. To get out.'**

**'They speak to you in a way that makes you feel like a child. Some are good people, but some, particularly in healthcare, make you feel like dirt.'**

**'The staff in healthcare have been very rude to me and as I am four and a half months pregnant I feel I need to have a scan and it is difficult for me to eat. That makes me worried about my baby.'**

**'In the room next door, there is a lady who is severely sick, who couldn't even walk. One guard came to our room and asked us to carry the woman downstairs to the healthcare clinic. I am a nurse by profession and**

**found this alarming. I said to him that we don't have insurance to carry the woman downstairs. He became quite intimidating after this.'**

**'Once I went to the nurse to say I couldn't sleep and can I get some help. I was given two pills without explanation. This is something that we as nurses would not do in hospital. I asked repeatedly what the two pills were but was told if you don't want to take them then suffer.'**

**'The healthcare in here is terrible. Everyday they make appointments for women to come at 10 and then there are so many women waiting that they only take the first four. I have very swollen legs and bad pains in my stomach and vaginal bleeding. They won't deal with either of these things and just try and give you paracetamol. The women that come in here get very depressed and ill because of their situation and they need healthcare. It seems like a very unsafe situation because there are so many mentally and physically ill women in Yarl's Wood and so little and such poor healthcare.'**

**'I think the healthcare in here is a serious issue. I have become immobile since coming in Yarl's Wood and fear I have had a stroke. There is such a lack of care for us in here. The women around me are so worried about me that they have threatened hunger strike unless I was taken to hospital to be thoroughly checked. The staff have told me that they don't believe me and feel that I am faking it to stay in this country.'**

**'I saw a woman in her late 50s or 60s who was very sick. They used to give her painkillers but that didn't help. She ended up having to walk with a frame. Her room was upstairs and the kitchen was downstairs – and they never let anyone take food upstairs to her rooms so she only had one meal a day. We asked the guards to take her in the lift, but they said that had**

**It seems like a very unsafe situation because there are so many ill women in Yarl's Wood**

to get approval. So I saw one month later she couldn't walk at all. And then she couldn't even sit in the wheelchair but had to stay in bed. We used to sneak food to her, hid it in our bras, however we could. If the officers had found it, they would have put the food in the bin and put me in Kingfisher.'

'I am disabled and use a wheelchair but the guards want me to use a frame to walk to the food hall. They say that they do not have the staff to wheel me to the food hall or to bring me some food. I cannot do this and so I have not eaten for many days and am getting very ill and weak.'

'When I was taken to hospital because of my pregnancy

## When I was in detention, I was seriously sick

I slept there for three days. I had three men guarding me. Even when the gynaecologist was doing an examination on me there were male guards in the room watching me. When I went to the toilet they were the ones who took me. When I sat down on the toilet the male guards were there. It made me feel ashamed. In the hospital I was treated like a criminal. No doctor wanted to come and see me.' ◆

## GINA'S STORY

**G**ina was detained for three weeks in September 2013. After release, Gina was diagnosed with HIV/Aids and was told by doctors that she could have died if she had not been treated at that point. She has claimed asylum and is awaiting an appeal:

I am from Nigeria. When I came to England I was destitute, I was homeless. I went to Croydon to the Home Office to explain my situation. Before I could say anything, the lady said to me, you are lying. I said, God knows if I am lying. They said to me I had to come back for an interview. I went there the second time and nobody attended to me until 5pm.

Then they took me to a room. Nobody told me they were taking me to detention. A lady said to me, they are taking you to another immigration office. They put me in handcuffs. I did not know what was going on. Since I was born I had never left my country before. They put me in the van and took me to Yarl's Wood. They searched me. I wasn't able to ask what was going on, because I was too scared of them. Nobody told me what

was going on. They said, you are in fast track, but I didn't know what that was.

While I was in detention, I was seriously sick, I was dying. My body collapsed. There were times when I could not walk. They took me to healthcare, they said you must eat, but I couldn't eat the food. I was skinny, I was dying.

One day they said, you have a legal visit, and I went, and I had my interview that day. I told the solicitor everything I could and she said, I can't promise you anything, but I will try to get you released. And she wrote to the Home Office and got me released. Being in detention was a very very shocking thing for me because I went to the Home Office and told them I needed help and they took me into detention when I was dying. They didn't check me or find out what was wrong with me, they just handcuffed me. Each day I think about that, and I wonder if that is what it is like in the UK. Because I went to the authorities willingly and their way to help me was to take me into detention and I cannot express how bad that was. ◆

# DEPRESSED

**A**mong the 38 women we spoke to, half said that they had been on suicide watch in Yarl's Wood, and 40% of the 35 who answered said that they had self-harmed. This is similar to the sample we talked to for our previous report, where 30% said that they had been on suicide watch and 22% said that they had tried to kill themselves in detention. It is very clear that the experience of detention is extremely distressing to women who have sought asylum. We do not believe that any amelioration of the conditions under which women are detained will end the trauma of being locked up. Women who seek asylum should not be detained.

Dr Katy Robjant of the Helen Bamber Foundation is co-author of a study comparing the mental health of detainees with a similar group of asylum seekers who were living in the community. As Dr Robjant stated in her recent evidence to the Parliamentary Detention Inquiry: 'There were significantly higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety in those who were detained compared to the asylum seekers who were living in the community, despite comparable levels of pre-migration trauma.'

Many women who are detained after seeking asylum will have existing mental health problems due to the trauma that they have suffered in their home countries and the experience of crossing borders to seek safety. These can be exacerbated by detention. As Dr Robjant said, 'There are obviously for people who have been tortured significant reminders in the detention centre... and this means that people are more likely to experience flashbacks and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as a result... the neurobiological processes mean that when reminders are occurring people will re-experience the event as if it is happening to them again right now.' She also stated, 'A lot of our clients, despite experiencing very significant pre-migration trauma, will cite being detained as one of the most harmful things that has happened to them, and experience nightmares about detention, flashbacks about being detained in itself.' And the experience in itself of being locked up indefinitely without warning can clearly cause mental health problems. Dr Robjant also stated: 'Being in captivity is

**I suffered in Yarl's Wood a lot. I had to stay with strange men. I felt unsafe**

a traumatic event. So no matter how nice you make it if you're held against your will in a captive environment then that will be traumatic for anybody.'<sup>29</sup>

Other authorities and organisations have also noted their concerns about the mental health of those in detention. For instance, the mental health charity Mind states that the UK is 'regularly failing refugees and asylum seekers.'<sup>30</sup> There have been six recent cases in the High Court where it was ruled that the care of people with mental health problems who were held in immigration detention breached Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), amounting to inhuman and degrading treatment.<sup>31</sup>

## In our research, women spoke to us about their fear, anxiety and depression in detention

**'I saw women being dragged out of their rooms and being taken to the airport. I was never sure of the power that the Home Office had and so I felt scared all the time. I hardly ever slept.'**

**'I suffered in Yarl's Wood a lot. I had to stay with strange men. I felt unsafe.'**

**'It is as if you are inside a grave - it is like you are not there.'**

**'I felt suicidal, psychotic, fearful.'**

**'I am worried about completing what I am thinking about [suicide].'**

**'I overdosed on anti-depressants and sleeping pills. I did this twice. I was taken to hospital and then I was brought back to Yarl's Wood.'**

**'I thought a lot about hurting myself. They made me hate myself and my life. I thought many times of killing myself.'**

**'I stopped eating. I was really sad and upset, I was looking for something to kill myself with but I remembered my children.'**

**'I wrote a letter to my lawyer saying I really needed help, I needed a psychiatrist because no one was helping me in Yarl's Wood. They seized the letter and started to watch me 24/7. There was no privacy.'**

**'I was depressed. If I had anything I would have killed**

myself. If anyone tries to take me to detention now I would kill myself.’

‘I was receiving threatening messages from my family in Pakistan. Straightaway I went to my room alone, with a glass and tried to cut myself. I don’t remember what happened after, a female officer found me.’

‘After I was nearly deported I have started self-harming.’

‘I took an overdose of antidepressants and paracetamol. They took me to the hospital but didn’t do anything. My stomach still burns. I have cut myself.’

‘I tried to kill myself. I wanted to jump out of the window. I tried to give myself an electric shock with a charger.’

**Many women spoke to us about how their existing trauma was re-awakened in detention**

‘I was too much depressed and scared. I was depressed before I was in detention. Every day it got worse in detention.’

‘Being locked up reminds me of the sexual abuse I suffered. I feel completely powerless in the same way. I feel like I am invisible and being overlooked.’

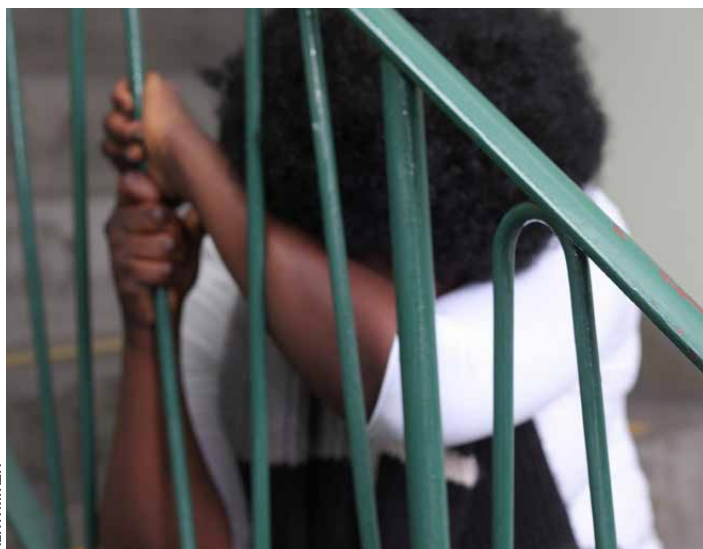
‘I felt so upset and frightened because I was arrested and locked up and tortured back home. I have scars

**I feel so frightened because it feels like being locked up in prison back home**

on my feet and arms where I was beaten by police and guards and so the situation and male guards in Yarl’s Wood made me feel extremely frightened. I feel so frightened because it feels like being locked up in prison back home.’

‘The way the keys sound, you can’t forget it, you have nightmares. I am now scared of lifts or small places. I still have nightmares. I was tortured back home. I shouldn’t have been detained.’

‘Detention is aimed at intimidating people, isolating them and making them feel they are at the bottom of society and they don’t deserve anything. They put that in your mind. It stays with you when you leave detention. It tortures people mentally, it is psychological torture. The scars of psychological torture last your life. The scars of physical torture, from my country, you can see. The psychological scars from detention here, you can’t see but they will last forever.’



ALIYA MIRZA

# CRIMINALISED & DEHUMANISED

**F**or this report we asked a number of open questions about women's feelings about detention, so that we could allow women to shape this report with their own views. Two themes that arose time and again were that being detained made women who had sought protection here feel like 'criminals', and that they felt they had lost their humanity. Sixteen of the women we spoke to spontaneously talked about how they had been made to feel as if they were 'criminals'. We believe policy should reflect the fact that these women are fleeing persecution and that it is not a crime to seek asylum.

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## 'Criminal'

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'It is better to be in prison than Yarl's Wood.'

'I still feel scared. I feel like a criminal, like I've killed someone. Everyone who's been in Yarl's Wood feels like a criminal. When released, it took me a whole month to go back to my house. The fear doesn't go away.'

'I felt really bad, I didn't expect it. I am not a criminal. It brought back everything that happened to me back home.'

'When they took me, I didn't know where I was going. I didn't know where I was. After a month I realised where I was - it was prison.'

'I haven't killed anyone or committed any crime, why are they treating me this way?'

'I was seeking asylum, all I got was disillusion, all I got was prison. It was like the world was going to come to an end. I had never been in prison before.'

'They put me in the van like I was a criminal. We were far back, enclosed by glass like we would infect them or were dangerous to them. You feel as though they don't want to touch you. It took me time to realise what was

going on. I was unwell. I had an appointment at the hospital, they said you cannot go.'

'It was very intimidating. It was shocking, confusing and so chaotic. You get lost for hours. It's like a movie. It takes time to digest. I will never forget the knock on my door in the morning, that knock by UKBA. It terrorises you for the rest of your life. You worry the neighbours will think you committed a crime. My neighbours never saw me again. They think I am a criminal. I lost everything in the house, all my property.'

'I think it is unlawful. This is a violation of human rights. We are not criminals. Everything is being violated. ... They think we are like insects. They don't think we are people. They don't care about our values, they first want to get rid of us.'

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## Inhuman

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'You feel that you are not human.'

'Once you get to Croydon you are no longer a human. The treatment I went through was not humane.'

'Yarl's Wood is against the law and human rights. It is an offence for human beings.'

'Asylum seekers are treated as if they are lesser human beings.'

'They spoke to me as if I was an animal, not a human being.'

'There shouldn't be Yarl's Wood at all, it is not a place for humans at all.'

'We feel all the time we are not human. We are nothing. All the noises made me scared at night - they can open your door whenever they want.' ◆

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**I haven't killed anyone  
or committed any crime,  
why are they treating  
me this way?**

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# ISOLATED

It is little known that within Yarl's Wood there is a solitary confinement facility, known as Kingfisher.

Among the women we spoke to, 7 had been held in solitary confinement. A recent report by HMIP described the facility in this way: 'The separation unit was located at the end of a secure corridor near the residential units. Accommodation consisted of eight cells on a single landing. Two cells were used to house detainees under Rule 42 (temporary confinement) and six held detainees under Rule 40 (removal from association). Communal corridors were clean and brightly painted. Cells were clean and adequately furnished. However, sharp edges from some shelving were a safety hazard. The daily regime was basic, and included showers, exercise and access to telephones. Following a risk assessment, detainees on Rule 40 could attend activities such as the library and gym. Detainees were not allowed to retain their mobile telephones while locked in their cells.'<sup>32</sup>

In our research women obviously felt very distressed about being placed in Kingfisher, and there seemed to be little rationale about why women were taken to solitary confinement. Although the HMIP report into Yarl's Wood clearly states that 'separation should not be used as punishment',<sup>33</sup> many women who spoke to us clearly felt that it was used as a punishment or as a threat.

Of the 7 women who had been held in solitary confinement, 5 said that they were watched by a male member of staff, and 3 of these said that he watched them while they were using the toilet.

**'I don't know why I was there. They take you to Kingfisher when you have done something bad. All I did was not feel well.'**

**'They threatened to put me in Kingfisher because I kissed my roommate.'**

**'They put me in there because I had a bad cough, they thought I had TB. I waited for four days for my results. I was going mad.'**

**'They said if I organised women to campaign then it was to make an example of me.'**

**'People are afraid of Kingfisher, the staff use it as a threat.'**

**'They used it as a threat to keep us calm – they use it when you respond to something.'**

**We asked these women about what it was like to be held in Kingfisher**

**'It was dirty, I had no food.'**

**'It is a prison cell. It has prison door. There is a little hatch where they can look through. The doors are made of iron. The toilet is in the room. It was very cold, the heating was not working.'**

**'It is like you are being tortured again. It is like a prison, toilet is there, bed is there. You can't see anyone.'**

**'It is not nice. It makes you want to kill yourself because you are on your own.'**

**'It was as if I was very small or I was nothing.'**

**'I was isolated. I felt punished.'** ◆

## ISA'S STORY

**M**y family came on Friday to deliver my property because I was being deported. The guards said I wasn't allowed to receive it because it was over the weight limit. I asked if I could write some of it off so I could have my phone. They said no. I was very upset and was running towards my room. A male officer grabbed my arm on the stairs and pushed me to stop. I kept saying, 'Don't touch me', but he kept on touching me. He said, you need to go to Kingfisher, and he pushed me on the floor and bent my hand and kept pushing

me towards Kingfisher.

Kingfisher is a dirty room, dirty toilet. No shampoo and soap, just a mattress and pillow. It was so cold. It was a male officer guarding me there. I was so nervous I wet myself and they forced me to take a shower. I refused. They said, 'It is for your dignity.' Now they are thinking about my dignity.

It is mental torture. I don't remember everything. I was laughing and crying. Kingfisher has changed my life. I lost all my hope. I feel insecure now. I feel I have lost all my energy to fight my case. ◆

# SILENCED

**W**e are very concerned about the high levels of anxiety and suffering that women disclosed to us, often as a result of staff behaviour at Yarl's Wood, and we wanted to find out why they were not being heard through complaints or legal action. There is a complaints procedure at Yarl's Wood, and we asked women if they had used this or if they had talked to lawyers about instances of assault or abuse. Of the 37 women who answered this question about the complaints procedure, 19 said they were aware of the complaints procedure and 18 said they were not. Fourteen said they had made a complaint.

The low rate of complaints at Yarl's Wood is often perceived positively. For instance, in the recent HMIP report it is noted that 'in the previous six months, 22 complaints had been submitted, compared with 52 in a similar period before the previous inspection.'<sup>34</sup> However, for women in our sample who said they were aware of the complaints procedure and did not make a complaint, it was clear that fear and fatalism played a part in their silence. They were afraid that complaining might lead to some kind of retribution, or that complaining would not make a difference.

**'People said if you complain you are removed. You had to put your name and room number on the complaint.'**

**'There was a feeling that things would get much worse if you complained – like they would speed up the removal.'**

**'You are sometimes scared to give feedback because you'll be seen as rebelling.'**

Of those who did make a complaint, 3 women in our sample mentioned that they had a positive outcome to the complaint. One said, 'I received an apology,' and another

said, 'It did make a difference.' The remaining 11 women made comments that their complaint was ignored or brushed off.

A recent report from Medical Justice, on complaints made by detainees with their support, highlights that problems identified by the last independent audit of complaints procedures in IRCs, conducted in 2008, persist. The report notes, for instance, that 'time scales for replies to complainants were not met', and that 'investigations were frequently inadequate and partial, biased towards the Home Office's contractor, even when there was evidence to the contrary.' It sets out that, of the 31 complaints they supported between 2011 and 2013, 'nearly half were found to be unsubstantiated by the Home Office, about a quarter of complaints were found to be partially substantiated, and no complaints were fully substantiated. The remaining were left unanswered.'<sup>35</sup>

**'They said they received my complaint and they will investigate and get back to me. The letter was not signed – it seemed like a letter that they sent to everyone.'**

**'I sent a complaint to UKBA – but I was getting a response from Serco. I was making a complaint about Serco to an outside body but then my complaint was passed to Serco. There was no investigation.'**

**'Nothing. They told me the complaints take 4-5 months to process – who would bother?'**

**'When you make complaints about someone, they cover their backs – they say "we're investigating it" and that's it. Basically we get the brush off. They write in our books about our behaviour, this gets seen by the Home Office – we never get heard.'** ♦

**There was a feeling that things would get much worse if you complained**





# REMOVED

**A**t least 3 of the women we interviewed while they were in Yarl's Wood have since been deported. Of the women we interviewed, 12 also went through an attempted removal, when they were taken to the airport but did not fly. Of these 12, 11 said that they were verbally threatened and 4 said that they were physically assaulted.

A 2008 report from Medical Justice, the National Coalition of Anti-deportation Campaigns (now Right to Remain) and Birnberg Peirce and Partners documented nearly 300 cases of assault against detainees, highlighting that 'Most alleged assaults happened while detainees were being removed or deported'. The report explained that 'Most of the perpetrators of the alleged assaults are staff employed by either the Home Office or private companies contracted by the Home Office to run the detention centres or to escort detainees when they are being moved between centres or being deported.'<sup>36</sup> In October 2010, Jimmy Mubenga died after being restrained during the attempt to deport him. Three guards employed by the private security firm G4S were acquitted of manslaughter in December 2014, even though in July 2013 the jury at his inquest returned a verdict of unlawful killing.<sup>37</sup>

We are very concerned that a third of the women who experienced attempted removal in our sample said that they were physically assaulted. Other women also spoke to us about witnessing assaults against other women in Yarl's Wood; 24 out of the 38 women said that they saw women being abused or assaulted.

'They were trying to force me physically. They had me in handcuffs, I was on the floor screaming and shouting, they were forcing me.'

'They were trying to deport me on a chartered plane. There were women who were to be deported. Each person had a personal escort - but there were more staff than deportees. Four men held my body and one woman held my head. I was pinned down. I was scared they were going to inject me.'

'I met many women being abused and assaulted in Kingfisher. I saw one woman who was beaten by a male staff and her arms were swollen. Another being deported naked - with eight men. My roommate was handcuffed when they took her to deport her and she had bruises when she came back.'

'I was very upset and concerned about an Eritrean women who was returned from an attempted removal with very swollen and bruised arms and hands. She was in so much pain because she had been held down by guards and handcuffed. She was also very anxious and depressed. This was one day after Christine Case died and yet we felt that they did not care about the Eritrean women's suffering. We wanted to call an ambulance from outside to give her medical attention.' ◆

## ORA'S STORY

**I** was on suicide watch. They wanted to take me to the airport. I told them instead of bringing the car to take me to the airport they should bring the body bag. They told me I was dangerous. They took me to the induction unit which is not accessible to other female detainees. They told me not to touch anything. There was a male and female officer - they searched me and the room. I spent the night there. Then many officers, more than eight, all men, burst into my room. I was still sleeping - I got out of bed - I was naked. I shouted, 'Get out.' I didn't know what was happening to me. They handcuffed me, behind. They covered me with

a blanket and dragged me to Kingfisher. All those men were touching me.

When I reached Kingfisher, one of the male guards brought me a nightdress. I was screaming through the whole experience. They brought in one male and one female guard and they injected me. I didn't know what it was at the time - in the statement they gave to my solicitor it was valium. Once they injected me, it felt like my will had been taken away from me. I could not resist. I didn't know what I was saying, but I know I agreed to everything. They told me an escort was coming to take me to the airport and was I ready. I said yes. ◆

## ANNA'S STORY

**T**hey gave me removal directions more than once. One time I was praying by my bed and an officer interrupted me. I came to his office. He wanted me to pack my things for removal the next day.

I said I didn't want to go back to my country. He said if I refused I would not be allowed back in my room. He called someone. There was one woman and three men.

It was like a movie, you cannot imagine. One officer jumped on me and grabbed my arm and another the other arm, put me in handcuffs and threw me on the floor. I did not resist. I never resist. That was why it was so surprising that they jumped on me because I never resist them. They just received an order to do something, they were like robots, they just obey, they do not think like humans. They carried me to 'prison' [Kingfisher] under my arms, I screamed, it was a pain I have never felt, my arm is still not right. They just threw me on the dirty floor.

Another time they gave me the removal letter they

put me in isolation for a day and a half with no food. I was on my period at this time, with no other pad, I was bleeding, it was not nice. Another time they came to my bed, I was lying on it, the officer said I had to go but I refused because the first time they assaulted me. They dragged me off the bed, four of them, they handcuffed me, put me in isolation for a day and night before the airport. They took me to the airport in my nightdress.

They carried me in my nightdress, they put me on the floor, I was shaking, it was the night and I was so cold, and they were just laughing. They made me feel like I wasn't a human being like them. After the staff took me to the airport in my nightdress with no food and shoes, they brought me back to Yarl's Wood, they refused to let me in my room. They compelled me to change before I go inside. I hate hypocrisy; they said there is a doctor to look after me after sending me to the airport in my nightdress. You need to be strong inside or you will die there. ◆



# RECOMMENDATIONS

**W**e believe that detention has no place in the asylum process and that individuals who seek sanctuary in the UK should not be detained while their cases are being considered. Their cases can be heard while they are living in the community, causing less trauma to those seeking asylum, and with less cost to the state.

The further recommendations set out below would help to minimise the harms experienced by women in detention immediately, while also taking clear steps towards ending the use of detention for women seeking asylum.

## 1 Those who have experienced rape, sexual violence or other gender-based violence should not be detained.

Home Office guidance for immigration staff specifies groups who are considered suitable for detention 'in only very exceptional circumstances', including those who have survived torture or trafficking.

Those who have experienced rape, sexual violence or other gender-based violence are not, however, included in this guidance. *Given their particular vulnerability, this is a significant omission; they should be referenced explicitly.*

## 2 Pregnant women should not be detained.

The guidance cited above specifies women who are pregnant as a group suitable for detention 'in only very exceptional circumstances'. However, evidence indicates that a policy of exceptional use is not being adhered to. In the sample for this report, 3 of the women we spoke to were pregnant when detained. Medical Justice has documented the inadequacies of healthcare received by pregnant women in detention and the physical and psychological harms of detention on them.<sup>38</sup> *Home Office guidance should be altered to specify that pregnant women should not be detained under any circumstances whatsoever.*

## 3 Gender-specific standards should be introduced for the detention estate. These should include the requirement that no male staff should be employed in roles where they come into contact with women detainees.

Gender-specific standards<sup>39</sup> have been in place in the prison estate since 2008, following the publication of the landmark Corston Report,<sup>40</sup> which documented significant failings in the treatment of and conditions for women in prison.

*Equivalent standards should be introduced for immigration detention, and contractors should be audited on their compliance with these.* Given the particular vulnerability of women who seek asylum and the severe trauma these women have experienced, alongside ongoing reports of abuse and assault by male custodial staff, *these standards should include the requirement that no male staff should be employed in roles where they come into contact with women detainees.*

## 4 The Detained Fast Track should be abolished.

As highlighted in our previous report *Detained*, the Detained Fast Track (DFT), a rapid decision-making process for asylum claims deemed 'straightforward', is routinely being used for women whose cases are clearly complex, including those who have experienced rape or other gender-based violence and those who have been persecuted because of their sexuality.

Following a legal challenge brought by Detention Action, the High Court has ruled that the DFT is being operated unlawfully, and that it 'carries an unacceptably high risk of unfairness'.<sup>41</sup> *There are such serious flaws in the Detained Fast Track that it should be abolished.*

## 5 Engagement-focused alternatives to detention should be developed in the UK.

There is good international evidence on the effectiveness of engagement-focused alternatives to detention: while models used in different countries vary, these can broadly be understood as community-based programmes that support refugees and migrants to engage fully with their case, keeping them up-to-date with its progress and helping them to understand the process they are going through.

Evidence demonstrates high levels of compliance with immigration processes, high rates of voluntary return for those whose cases are ultimately refused and the lower cost of community programmes compared with detention.<sup>42</sup>

*The development of such alternatives should be accompanied by a clear commitment to reduce the number of people in immigration detention.*

## 6 There should be an upper time limit of 28 days on all immigration detention.

The UK's refusal to set a time limit for immigration detention puts it out of step with the rest of Europe. Detention without time limit is harmful, ineffective and expensive. *A time limit of 28 days should be introduced.* ●

# TOGETHER WE ARE STRONG: CAMPAIGNING TO END DETENTION ACROSS THE UK



## Women Asylum Seekers Together Manchester

WAST Manchester is passionately at the forefront of the campaign to Shut Down Yarl's Wood. This passion was born because we see the longlasting adverse effects of the psychological, physical, sexual and emotional torture and abuse experienced by some of our members who have been detained more than once over a very long period of time in Yarl's Wood.

Two of the WAST management group members are now leading the activism in Greater Manchester around the campaign to Shut Down Yarl's Wood, which is being carried out by WAST, Safety4Sisters and Migrant Solidarity.

Aderonke Apata began campaigning from inside detention to shut down Yarl's Wood in 2012. This led to her being sent to prison without charges. She is a leading figure at WAST inspiring other members who have suffered in Yarl's Wood to come forward and have the courage to talk about their experiences.

Noushin Barber suffered sexual abuse in detention and was brave enough to challenge the Home Office, the police and Serco about her treatment and continues campaigning as part of the group. Her bravery and

**We are all aware that the pressure has to be kept up**

campaigning work was recognised recently when she was awarded the 2014 Emma Humphreys Memorial Prize.

WAST uses visible demonstrations to achieve an ongoing high profile campaign. Aderonke spoke out at and directed the very successful Shut Down Yarl's Wood demonstration that WAST, Migrant Solidarity and Safety4Sisters coordinated in June 2014 in central Manchester. This was supported by many women asylum seekers from WAST - including the wonderful WAST choir - but also by other women and men asylum seekers, women's groups, trade unions, and many organisations and individuals across the North West.

Furthermore, we have been campaigning at different events and conferences to raise the profile of our passion to shut down Yarl's Wood. When we demonstrated at the Labour Party conference Parliamentarians came out of the conference to show support for the campaign and talk to members of WAST, after hearing the choir's powerful campaign song, 'We Want Yarl's Wood to Close', outside the hall. WAST is currently putting together a roadshow involving song, drama, poetry and dance to take out to the communities in the UK to raise awareness and understanding and to gain support for the campaign.

WAST is delighted that so many individuals, groups and organisations in the UK are campaigning and that at last real progress is being made. However, we are all aware that the pressure has to be kept up, that women are still suffering in Yarl's Wood and that so many women asylum seekers live with the perpetual fear that they could be detained and sent there without notice every day.

## Embrace, Stoke-on-Trent

Embrace is a small grassroots project which supports women who are refugees and asylum seekers, who are experiencing extreme hardship and social isolation as a result of the asylum process. Located in North Staffordshire, Embrace provides a weekly drop-in service where asylum seeking women can meet others in a peaceful and safe space. Many of the women and children who attend the drop-in are among the most vulnerable, socially isolated and marginalised in North Staffordshire. Most of the women we meet are fleeing from extreme persecution, sexual violence and/or domestic abuse in their countries of origin and come to the UK to seek sanctuary and safety. But too frequently, the women's stories are not believed by the Home Office, and to make matters worse, some of these women are being detained at Yarl's Wood detention centre against their will, instead of being given a fair hearing.

Below Emma Rashidi from Embrace speaking at the Women of the World festival at the Royal Festival Hall, March 2014.

Embrace would like to see an end to detention for asylum seeking women because claiming asylum is a human right and not a criminal offence. Women who come to the UK for sanctuary and protection should be treated with dignity and respect and not imprisoned against their will and treated as criminals. Embrace believes that putting innocent asylum seeking women in detention is wrong and unjust.

Embrace aims to empower asylum seeking women and refugees to speak out about their experiences, including those at Yarl's Wood, and to have an active voice in the community. Together with Women for Refugee Women, the London Refugee Women's Forum, Why Refugee Women in Bradford, WAST Manchester and the Hope Project in Birmingham, Embrace hopes to create a stronger, more unified voice, that shouts out and stands up for equality, justice and a more dignified existence for female asylum seekers and refugee women in the UK.

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### Why Refugee Women, Bradford

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Why Refugee Women is an organisation that was set up to unite refugee women and asylum seekers and empower us to speak with one voice and fight for our rights. We are based in Bradford, we cover Yorkshire and the Humber and network with others throughout the UK.

We have always been active in speaking out against detention. Our founder, Beatrice Botomani, was herself detained with her family and was active in the campaign against the detention of children even before she founded Why Refugee Women. That campaign had a huge success when the government agreed to stop detaining children. Although children can still be held for very short periods, the government recognised that detaining children is harmful and unnecessary and they are no longer locked up for weeks and months.

However, Why Refugee Women is aware that many of its members are still at risk of detention and many of them have been detained. Detention is very harmful for women psychologically, and the effects of detention do

**Putting innocent asylum seeking women in detention is wrong and unjust**



ALIYA MIRZA

not leave women when they are released, the fear and the stigma stay with them. It is very hard for women to speak up about these effects, as it is like opening wounds.

Why Refugee Women organised a conference in Bradford in March 2014 to bring campaigners and supporters together to discuss how to end detention and find justice for refugee women. It is a huge task to create change in the Home Office. We want to see an end to detention in the asylum process, and right now we want to see a time limit on detention.

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### Hope Projects, Birmingham

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Hope began with subsistence grants to destitute asylum-seekers. We work with local refugee agencies who assist destitute people and then, as a housing need emerged, Hope Housing started to provide some temporary accommodation. Women living in Hope Housing began a knitting project offering emotional support to each other and selling goods at a local market to raise funds for the group's travel expenses.

Hope then gained funding for the 'Ujamaa' project with the Rape and Sexual Violence Project, doing practical therapeutic support for asylum-seeking and refugee women. Hope Housing's knitting group expanded and Ujamaa women started to join. Women visited Crossroads Women's Centre for their self-help book launch. We were inspired to take a more active role in challenging the

**Below Jade Amoli-Jackson of the London Refugee Women's Forum with Natasha Walter of Women**

**for Refugee Women speaking to Angelina Jolie at the End Sexual Violence in Conflict summit, May 2014.**

system, when we saw the All African Women's Group self-help meetings.

Our group now gives space for individual issues and collective discussions for refugee and migrant women. Immigration issues, treatment within the system, disbelief from the Home Office, exploitation as women, trafficking, abuse and violence, problems when granted status with housing, benefits and work were increasingly discussed. We invited speakers to help us know more and articulate what we want to say through research or film, we also networked with other groups, particularly Movement for Justice and the campaign to shut detention centres down. In September, our members spoke about detention at the Green Party conference, resulting in a policy commitment from the party to end detention of asylum seekers.

Our group was asked by Women for Refugee Women (WRW) to get involved with their first research into detention in 2013. Three women who had been detained engaged with this research. The report was good, women felt listened to and included in the possibility of making change. We were contacted again this year by WRW and around 12 women came to talk about issues they had experienced. This research is really important to give women a voice, and to treat them like human beings even when they have been hidden away and excluded. Locking people up like criminals when they come here for protection must stop.

### London Refugee Women's Forum

The London Refugee Women's Forum is a group of committed women's rights activists who have all sought asylum in the UK, and we campaign and speak out on the issues that concern us.

Many of us have experienced detention, and we all understand the harm that it can do to women to be locked up when we come to this country seeking protection. We want the government to listen when we say that detention is harmful to vulnerable women and must be stopped.

We all supported the launch of the Set Her Free campaign in Parliament in January 2014 when we heard from inspirational refugee women including Meltem Avcil and Lydia Besong. We stood alongside leading women from other fields, including Laura Bates of Everyday Sexism, Leyla Hussein of Daughters of Eve, Kat Banyard of UK Feminista, Helena Kennedy QC, the singer Skin, the actress Romola Garai, Lucy-Anne Holmes of No More Page 3, Caroline Criado-Perez, Stella Creasy MP and Shami Chakrabarti of Liberty to bring this campaign to Westminster.

We then worked hard to organise the Shine a Light protest in front of the Home Office in February 2014. Hundreds of people turned up and it was covered by journalists including Allison Pearson of the Daily Telegraph, Laurie Penny of the New Statesman and Ros Wynne-Jones of the Daily Mirror. We were glad that Zadie Smith spoke out for the campaign, but most important for us was when our secretary Ghada Rasheed enabled a woman to speak to the crowd over the phone from Yarl's Wood.

We spoke at many other events this year, including at the European Parliament and at East London University. Our chair, Rahela Sidiqi, spoke alongside Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper at One Billion Rising in February 2014 Trafalgar Square. We all brought our voices to the Foreign Office Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict in June 2014 where our secretary, Jade Amoli-Jackson, spoke to Angelina Jolie and also to CNN, ITN and the Evening Standard. Our members have also spoken to many universities and conferences and other protests this year.

Recently we brought the campaign to the Labour Party fringe conference when we opened an event organised by Movement for Change with Yvette Cooper and Rachel Reeves. One of our members spoke bravely to the Parliamentary Detention Inquiry in June 2014 about her experiences in Yarl's Wood. We are currently planning for more actions and events in 2015. We are delighted to work with other groups throughout the UK in order to carry through this campaign. Together we are strong.



Women Asylum Seekers Together London

WAST London is a large group of women who have sought asylum. We meet every week for English classes and lunch and we have been delighted to work on the campaign against detention. Many of us have been detained and spoken up for this report about what we went through in detention, and some of us have bravely spoken to journalists too.

In 2013 we made big Christmas cards for the women in Yarl’s Wood, sending them our best wishes and love and hope that they will soon be released.

Since 2014 we have attended many protests and events for the campaign to end detention. We have particularly worked on the Solidarity Quilt with our local Women’s Institute, the Shoreditch Sisters. This quilt has 400 squares for the 400 women in Yarl’s Wood and is made by Women’s Institute members and WAST members. The quilt was finished at the Women of the World festival in the Southbank Centre, where members of the public stitched on messages of support, and then the Women’s Institute took it to Yarl’s Wood. It was then taken to the Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, where Angelina Jolie admired it and wrote a message for it, which is now stitched into the centre of the quilt. We love the quilt as it is such a colourful symbol of solidarity and kindness.

We want to see an end to detention, and we hope you will join us. ◆

Below Protest to Set Her Free outside the Home Office, February 2014. Bottom Juliet Stevenson, Bryony

Hannah and Cush Jumbo performing a testimony play about women in detention at the Women of the

World festival at the Royal Festival Hall, March 2014.



**We want to see an end to detention, and we hope you will join us**



ALIYA MIRZA

# WHAT YOU CAN DO

## Sign Meltem's petition

Meltem Avcil was detained in Yarl's Wood detention centre when she was just 13 years old. She campaigned then to end the detention of children, a campaign that reached success in 2010 when the government announced it would end the detention of children for immigration purposes.

She is now campaigning to end the detention of women seeking asylum, and her petition gained over 50,000 signatures in the first year.

Please sign and share the petition at [change.org/refugeewomen](http://change.org/refugeewomen)

## Keep in touch

Sign up for our email newsletter at [www.refugeewomen.com](http://www.refugeewomen.com)

Follow us on Twitter at @4refugeewomen

Like us on Facebook  
Then we can tell you about events and actions as they happen and you can be part of the campaign.

You can also find our sister organisations on Twitter  
@WASTcampaigning  
@WhyRefugeeWomen  
@WomenEmbrace  
@HopeProjectsWM

Please stay in touch and be part of this growing campaign. ◆

Below Supporters gather outside Westminster for the launch of the Set Her Free campaign.



ABBIE TRAYLOR-SMITH



# RESEARCH METHODS AND ETHICS

**F**or this report, we interviewed 38 women who came to the UK to seek asylum and were detained in Yarl's Wood detention centre between June 2012 and October 2014. Thirteen of the women we spoke to were detained at the time of interview.

To design the research we worked with two refugee women's groups, Women Asylum Seekers Together London and the London Refugee Women's Forum, who developed the questionnaires with us. We did not ask the participants for any corroborating evidence, but simply allowed them to tell their stories in their own way. Interviews were carried out with the help of female volunteers and staff at Women for Refugee Women. All the quotations in this report are from the interviews carried out for the research, other than one quotation on page 12, beginning 'Anybody who is on suicide watch', which was spoken by Maimuna Jawo at the first session

of the Parliamentary Detention Inquiry.

We met the women who were in detention at the time of interview as visitors, without going through the Home Office or Serco for permission to talk to them. We were not prevented from meeting them, but at times our questionnaires were confiscated.

Ethical issues were of paramount importance when conducting this research. The research was completed in accordance with the Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines.

All participants were asked to give oral consent after the research aims and purposes were explained to them. Participants were informed that their names and details would be kept confidential. The research was carried out with care to the vulnerabilities of the individual woman. The names of women in this report have been changed for reasons of confidentiality. ◆

**Below** Refugee women with actress Romola Garai and

MP Stella Creasy at the launch of the Set Her Free campaign, January 2014.



# ENDNOTES

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