

Aderonke

My name is Aderonke Apata and I'm from Nigeria. I am an activist campaigning for the rights of LGBT asylum seekers, and was recently recognised for my work by being awarded the National Diversity Award 2014. I have a MA in public health and primary healthcare, and I mention this because this gives me the me an understanding of what proper healthcare should look like, which is relevant to the evidence I present below.

1) Experiences of living in immigration detention, including the context and duration of your stay

I was detained in prison from Oct- Dec 2011 and then taken to Yarl's Wood in Dec 2011. I was taken back to prison in Oct 2012 before finally being released in Feb 2013 (so I was in the Detention Centre itself for nearly a year). I claimed asylum in 2004 and have been waiting till now for the Home Office to give me protection.

It was life threatening. Horrific... Everything bad in this world. It was such an isolating thing, where I had to wake up every day doing the same thing for nearly one year, despite asking for bail. The applications were all turned down. I was not even given a ticket to go home for nearly a year but was still kept in detention. I only got a deportation order in Jan 2013.

It broke my family. It exacerbated my mental health problems.

My experience of that place was like being kept in a concentration camp, not a detention centre. I saw people being maltreated and their human rights being taken away from them... People treated without dignity at all, just for the purpose of deportation. And I remember that the staff, who had a duty of care, were actually bullying and abusing detainees.

Another big experience that I had was a complete corporate cover-up. I was subject to homophobic attacks at the hands of fellow detainees. They [Serco] knew that if they reported it to the police as a hate crime, then they would be accused of not doing the job of protecting me properly, and that I might be released, so they didn't want to do that. They investigated the attack and found out what I was saying was true (they wrote me a letter to verify this), and yet they didn't go beyond that.

2) The conditions in immigration detention, including your ability to access services such as legal advice, healthcare, pastoral support;

Its prison conditions. There are guards who have keys that make lots of noise. We got locked up at night and at intervals that they deem right (sometimes the whole detention centre goes on lock-down). There are high gates, high walls. The place is in the middle of nowhere. When you look out the window you see no human soul – just trees and bushes. The windows only opened a little. Two people lived in one room and there was virtually no ventilation.

Legal advice

They have three legal aid solicitors that they gave us the contacts of, so you're restricted to just those three. From our experiences there, I believe that they all work for the UKBA. They turn themselves into judges and they judge you based on what's in your decision letter and then they say they can't take you on. If they do take you on, they drop you really fast. I believe this is directly linked into funding for legal aid.

At the initial stage of their interview and early in the asylum process, people have no knowledge about what to say or how to present their evidence. In detention it's very hard to get hold of evidence. People outside the detention centre abandon you because they are scared, so they can't help you get evidence.

This all means the solicitor is likely to say your case doesn't have merit. So you find that they cannot help you and they reject your case.

If you need to send anything to your solicitor the guards read it. There's no privacy. If you receive a letter from your solicitor they read it before they give it to you.

If their phone is taken off them people don't have money to buy credit. The vouchers they sell start at £10, so people often can't afford to call their solicitor. The tariff is too expensive (o2), not like Lycamobile. There were some people who didn't have anybody to buy a simple phone on a cheaper network for them. I even asked my friends to buy phones for two people in detention. What would happen if you didn't know someone who could help you?

If your phone has been taken away and your SIM still has credit on it you can't take it out and put it in the phone they give you. It stops you calling your lawyer. So much is being done to deny access to justice.

Healthcare

When people go to complain of any illness, they don't take them seriously. They say to people "you're just making it up so you can be released." If you become persistent, they just prescribe you paracetamol. If it becomes critical then you get to see a doctor, but they hardly ever refer you to secondary care.

When it came to my mental health, even though it was written by the centre's doctor that I was unfit to fly on several occasions, they still kept me there. Afterwards I requested my medical notes and I realised that the reason they kept referring me to the doctor was because they wanted him to say I was fit to fly, but he kept saying I wasn't.

They eventually got a psychiatrist to do an assessment with me but it was flawed. He diagnosed mild depression but the nurses had witnessed me having a psychotic episode. I had an honest conversation with one of the nurses and he told me that if it came down to a question of people's health, then there would be nobody left in detention. I think this shows that they deliberately ignore people's illnesses....At the end of the day, Serco need people in detention to keep the money coming in. And UKBA needs to keep deporting people to keep up with their targets, so why would they listen to advice from medical professionals?

There was an occasion when I was in serious pain and doctors were supposed to be coming to see me regularly. Eventually when one came he said 'I just came to say hi' but that wasn't what I need. He needed to diagnose why I was in serious pain and give me medication.

I witnessed pregnant women who were quite advanced. They came to complain of cramps and symptoms of labour. My view was that these pains were brought on by being distressed. In one case, they didn't take what one woman said seriously and it was not until her waters broke that they took her to hospital. To me, it seems that the life of the unborn baby was not important: all that was important was deporting people – not the care for the mother and the unborn baby.

When you see a doctor in detention there's no confidentiality. There's always a nurse with them (possibly for safeguarding reasons). In my case a guard even discussed my mental health problems with other detainees. I went to the doctor to complain and he said I should get evidence from the detainees that the guard spoke to, but they were too afraid to give it to me so I couldn't take it any further. Officers are in breach of the Caldecott principle of care (not divulging medical issues to third parties).

When the guards escort people to hospitals they stand by you whilst we are being seen by doctors. They don't move out of the room, they just stand there. In my experience, there's no privacy, even for physical

examinations. It also stops you from being able to disclose what's wrong with you. In my View, Serco just wants to put it on record that they've taken you to hospital. But the doctor knows you're likely to be deported, so they're unlikely to give you a proper diagnoses and treatment plan.

I have a condition that makes me have low blood count. My nurse told me I needed a special dietary plan to replace the blood I lost. In detention they refused to give me that plan and I think the reason was that they thought I could use it as documentary proof that I shouldn't be detained and they didn't want to give that to me.

Pastoral support

This is great. You have access to a faith leader and all the time that the detention centre is open you can go to the church or Muslim place of worship. The pastor is an approachable person. He was always available to pray with you or listen to you. When Muslims were fasting the staff did make provision for their meal times to change and also made sure they had halal food.

They have counselling facilities there. I accessed this service, and I think it was alright. They listen to you but they cannot make any recommendations. They know the stress of being detained does affect you, but what use is that when they can't say you shouldn't be there?

Interpreters

There aren't any interpreters for healthcare appointments. You have to rely on other detainees and again this is a breach of confidentiality and they might not even translate for you properly as they haven't been trained.

3) Were there appropriate mechanisms to deal with any mental, physical or emotional issues you may have experienced prior to or during your time in detention?

They have all the structures in place (e.g. medical team/ suicide watch) but that doesn't mean they protect people. Do they work? No. For example, people who are put on suicide watch are watched by male guards, which only makes it worse.

I had an assessment of my mental health done by Medical Justice, but the Home Office ignored it. They presented evidence that I'd been tortured and that I had poor mental health, but it wasn't accepted.

4) Any longer-term impacts of detention on you, your family and/or your wider community;

It's a life-long impact. I don't think it can go away.... I've been in and out of a mental health hospital ever since I was released. This has impacted negatively on my family. They have to keep a watch over me.

When I was released in February I was not aware of my environment. I could just walk out into the road. I could have been knocked down. I had to have people to accompany me.

Now, when I go to report I always feel so afraid. I've had two bad episodes. I have panic attacks, high blood-pressure, fear, everything. I had to throw up last time I went. I now have claustrophobia. I can't stand to be in a place that's locked up, with windows or doors that don't open. Now when I hear the sound of keys it sets me off.

I know that for everybody, the detention centre has caused relationship break-down. It's caused them to lose personal belongings. It's caused them to lose the community support network they've built up over years.

It has an effect on the wider community too... people are constantly thinking of their mothers, aunties, friends in detention. It also affects their day to day life because they need to take time out of work to visit. When they get there they're treated as if they're criminals. Visits only last for a short time, and people might have travelled six hours to come and see you. It costs them money. They're constantly having to send you money to be able to top up your phone and buy toiletries. And items are so expensive in the detention centre.

5) **Any other information** about detention that you would like to share;

When people are being deported they are injected with tranquilizers to subdue them.

There's no freedom to meet as a group – they think you're planning to start a demonstration. If more than three people stand together they send an officer to listen to what you're planning.

The internet is restricted and this stops people from getting evidence. For example, you can't access the Poppy Project website (information for victims of trafficking). Each time I walked into the computer room they would watch me on the CCTV and would call the officer in there and tell him to watch me. They were afraid I would send information to Movement For Justice. They always said they were trying to stop people sending hate messages or terrorist information, but nobody was doing that. They have a central system where they watch what emails you're receiving and what you're doing.

Somebody sent me a package from Nigeria containing paper evidence for my case. I was given the tracking code to go on the internet, but I couldn't access the Nigerian Postal Services website. The manager said they would try and sort it out but they didn't. It made me really anxious waiting and not knowing. This censorship stops people from helping themselves to build their case.

6) How far does the current detention system support the needs of vulnerable detainees, including pregnant women, detainees with a disability and young adults?

I saw people who were as old as 70 years in detention and who are so physically ill they're in a wheelchair. It takes ages for them to see a physiotherapist or occupational therapist. Sometimes this never gets done before a person is deported.

I saw many pregnant women.

The needs of people with mental health problems were definitely not met. It doesn't help you at all to be put on 'suicide watch.'

7) There is currently no time limit on immigration detention – in your view what are the impacts (if any) of this?

In the criminal justice system if you're sent to jail you know when you'll be released, but in immigration detention there's no limit. Even when you request and request for them to release you on bail... even when you ask to be put on a tag, they won't let you. We were told detention was a last resort, but people were there for years and years without being deported.

8) Are the current arrangements for authorizing detention appropriate?

The way people are detained is just arbitrary. When people still have their cases going on and they haven't had a reply sent to them or their solicitors, they are still detained at Dallas Court. They give you the

decision letter when you go to sign, but how are you supposed to appeal? This surely isn't due process. You don't know what grounds you've been refused on and you haven't prepared your evidence to bring with you to detention.

9) What are the wider consequences of the current immigration detention system, including any financial and/or social implications?

There are huge financial costs to the government. It's such a waste of taxpayers' money. When it comes to human rights, detention doesn't make the government look good. More than that, there's the lasting scars emotionally and psychologically for detainees.

10) How effective are the current UK alternatives to detention (e.g. bail, reporting requirements)?

These are effective. When people are on bail they don't deliberately jump it. People comply, so these alternatives are working.

Myself, I've been on bail since Feb 2013 and I haven't gone underground. Because of my episodes I've been asked not to go to report but I've not run away and I'm still in touch with the authorities.

It's only fear of detention that might make people want to run. It's only detention itself that's making people want to break the rules.