

Inquiry into the use of immigration detention

1. Background information – I am the refugee and asylum seeker development worker for DPIA (Displaced People in Action) based in Newport, South Wales, working on Oxfam's Sanctuary in Wales project. I have been in post for 2 years and the project has one more year to run. The project aims to support refugee and asylum seeking women to establish themselves within the local communities and to prepare for life in the UK.
2. Client group – I currently support a group of approximately 50 women 33 of whom are seeking asylum. In the course of the 2 years one woman has been forcibly detained and ultimately removed from the UK. Others live in constant fear of being 'taken'.
3. Detention process – I have only experienced the detention process from a distance and only once. Just before Christmas 2013 my client was awoken early in the morning by 3 men who took her from her home to Newport Police Station. She was detained there for almost a week with limited access to the outside world. I can only imagine that this was not a pleasant experience, particularly for a young and vulnerable woman. She was eventually taken from Newport to Colnbrook where she was held for 1 night before being moved to Yarls Wood. From what she has told me the conditions at Colnbrook were better than Newport Police Station but far better than Yarls Wood. My client remained at Yarls Wood, where she was subject to a range of abuses – from verbal insults to being pushed off a chair – for about a month before being removed and returned to face detention in her own country.
4. Impact of detention – the impact of this detention was felt by a wide range of people. For myself I experienced feelings of helplessness – I did not know what I could do to help and support my client. She had a mobile phone with her but apart from that I was unable to contact her or to find out how she was. For the refugee/asylum community there was a feeling of shock and fear. People wanted to offer support but were afraid that this might impact badly on their own cases, the situation made them feel more vulnerable and afraid, it might happen to them too. For the wider community – the case was well publicised and there was a degree of support in the media and the locality for my client. However the detention period fell across the Christmas period and it was difficult to co-ordinate and maintain this, further isolating my client who felt as though she had been abandoned. For my client – her mental and physical health and well being were impacted by this experience. She was hospitalised a number of times, once from Newport on the first day of her detention and again when at Yarls Wood. From what I understand the conditions relating to food and exercise were not conducive to healthy living. Mentally, her spirits fluctuated and we (her friends and supporters) experienced her ups and downs whilst trying to keep her buoyant. She lost a lot of weight and found it difficult to sleep whilst in detention. The publicity connected to this particular case has made my client notorious in her own country, where she was imprisoned following a televised return. She is now free but is subject to stares, whispers and curiosity wherever she goes.

5. Length of detention – it is wrong that people are held in detention and criminalised for seeking asylum. The detention centres are like prisons and people need greater access to the outside world. It is good that they are allowed mobile telephones, but there is an onus on individuals to make sure they have an appropriate phone (without a camera) and sufficient credit. Access to email and Skype would be helpful both for the detainee and their friends. Opportunities for bail should be offered earlier in the process or as an alternative to detention. The system of detention dehumanises people, criminalises them and isolates them from family and friends. People often become depressed and lose the will to fight. There should be a clear time limit on detention with viable alternatives to allow asylum seekers to maintain social networks and maintain contact with their friends and families. Particular thought should be given to detentions at sensitive times of the year. In my client's case she was detained over Christmas, increasing the difficulty of accessing legal and other advice and making it hard to mobilise support. Insult was added to injury by the Christmas gifts provided at Yarls Wood of chocolate and *travel sized* toiletries!

Liz Thomas

Project Officer, DPIA: Sanctuary in Wales

c/o Share Centre, 88 Stow Hill, Newport, South Wales NP20 4DW