

About IARS

Independent Academic Research Studies ([IARS](#)) is a leading, user-led, international think-tank with a charitable mission to give everyone a chance to forge a safer, fairer and more inclusive society. IARS achieves its charitable aims by producing evidence-based solutions to current social problems, sharing best practice and by supporting young people and the community to shape decision making. IARS is an international expert in user-led research, evaluations, human rights and inclusion, citizenship, criminal justice and restorative justice. We are currently running a user-led skills development and research project [Abused No More](#) which aims to generate institutional change and increased gender sensitivity in the treatment of refugee and asylum-seeking women, both by harnessing existing research and by allowing the women themselves to identify the problems they currently face through community-led action research. The submission draws on the experience of one of the asylum-seeking women involved in our project, Ms Mariam Mansare who is of Congolese background. Ms Mansare was interviewed by IARS Projects Coordinator (Equalities), Dr Natalia Paszkiewicz who is leading on the Abused No More project.

Mariam Mansare's evidence, recorded on 26 September 2014

1. Context and duration of detention

I was detained twice, first time in Dungavel in 2005 for 10 days, and second time in 2007 in Yarl's Wood, for two years. In the first case, I was arrested at 3am and I was told that was because my case 'ran out of merit'. My younger sister was with me at that time and managed to escape. She was so afraid of detention that she left the UK and is now living in another European country. I was released on bail by Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID). In 2007 I was arrested and detained for driving without a valid driving licence. I signed voluntary return form twice, but my nationality was disputed so they could not remove me. When in Yarl's Wood, I applied for bail eleven times. I was refused bail because I was classified as being at risk of absconding.

2. Ability to access services

2.1. It is extremely difficult to access any services in detention. There was a list of lawyers in the library but none of them was a good lawyer. I could not even call them because I didn't have money for phone calls. We were only getting 71pence per day. My boyfriend paid for my solicitor twice, once £1000 and again £700. However, none of the solicitors came to see me in detention. Not even once! When I came out and my partner tried to get his money back, those legal firms no longer existed.

2.2. Healthcare was equally disappointing. We were all given Paracetamol for everything that we complained about. I knew women who had miscarriages in detention. There were no doctors on site when we needed them. When I was in detention, I had an operation. I was taken back to detention only two hours after the surgery, and they gave me wrong medications. I was crying all night but no one came to help me. I even had to change my bandage myself. There was no compassion whatsoever, and no clear complaints procedure either. We were all afraid of complaining anyway because there were stories of people who

were put on a plane after they made a complaint. Also, my solicitor explicitly advised me not to complain whilst in detention. But then when I was released I was too busy with following up my asylum case and I did not have time to sue detention staff.

- 2.3. When I was in Yarl's Wood, I was not happy with the support from Bail for Immigration Detainees. I did not trust the lady who was representing me in the court. She used to chat with people from the Home Office, and pushed for multiple bail applications as if she was getting paid by legal aid for each representation made.

3. Mechanisms to deal with mental, physical and emotional issues

- 3.1. Everytime I was refused bail, I would have a nervous breakdown but there was no psychological support available. When your bail application gets rejected, some of the ladies would laugh at you. It used to drive me crazy and I would get into fights. As a punishment, I was in solitary confinement three times, for a week, 14 days and for a whole month. At that time I had no contact with other people. Only imam came to see me but I could not have an honest conversation with him because he was a man. Also, I don't cover my hair so he did not see me as a pious Muslim woman.
- 3.2. There were no appropriate interpreting services in detention. I was lucky I could express myself in English. During night shifts, officers would often ask me to interpret for newly arrived Francophone detainees. It was against the rules and they were always asking me not to tell anyone.
- 3.3. I felt very lonely and isolated in detention. My brother lived in Glasgow and could not come to visit me in Yarl's Wood because it is so difficult to access when you don't have a car. There was a long waiting list for a local befrienders' organization, and those who had a befriender visiting them, did not want to share them with other detainees. Luckily, my partner would come to see during weekends but for first two months he couldn't visit me. A visit could not last for more than 1 hour within each slot before and after lunch, and in practice it was down to 30 minutes given how long it was taking to search visitors and detainees. There was no privacy during visits because we were all cramped into one room. I had a mobile phone, and we could use a computer room but there was no access to internet so it was pointless really.
- 3.4. No one knew when they would be released, so in that sense detention was even worse than prison. Families were broken. And after release there was this social stigma attached to my experience in Yarl's Wood, because many people don't understand the difference between detention and prison. My family members would say that I was in prison and I have to tell them repeatedly that it was not a prison, but immigration removal centre.
- 3.5. I still have flashbacks today, five years after my release, and I get panic attacks in locked rooms and when I hear the sound of keys or locking the door. I remember hearing people cry in the middle of the night. I remember my roommate who was taken to the airport in the middle of the night, naked and screaming. They would deport people in the middle of the night, so that they would not resist, and obviously others would not witness it. I recall a Cameroonian lady that they tried to deport four times. She had bruises everywhere, that's how heavily they were restraining her. Another woman was actually beaten to death by Serco at Heathrow, and others were killed on arrival in their country of origin. People had their arms broken routinely. There were also bureaucratic and administrative mistakes made. One day I was taken to reception late at night because I was mistaken for another

person who was to be sent back to Sri Lanka. I waited there from 5am until 10am when they told me that it was not me that they were looking for... I even know one lady from Burkina Faso who was sent to... Pakistan! They had to put her back on a plane to the UK.

- 3.6. There was no privacy, both female and male officers would enter your room without knocking. We did not trust the staff there. I would say that 75% of officers were engaged in some form of inappropriate relationship with female detainees. They would pay for sexual advances of the detained women. I remember two officers who were in relationships with detainees and used to tell them that they would marry them. One of the women got pregnant as a result, and the officer was fired. Lesbian officers would sexually abuse detainees in showers. It was just like in a prison.

4. Material conditions

- 4.1. When it comes to material conditions, Yarl's Wood was a decent place. Cleaners would come and clean it once a week. The food was decent but it did not cater for our cultural needs. It was all European food. We were told it was halal but who knows if it really was?
- 4.2. The routine in Yarl's Wood was mainly eat-and-sleep, eat-and-sleep... The garden was open from 9am and after 5pm we could not go out at all. So, normally I would have one hour of fresh hour in the morning, and another hour after lunch, that's all. I would wake up in the morning, have breakfast, go to library and praying room, and that was all, it was my day. In Yarl's Wood there was also a gym, TV room and lounge. We also had a small TV in our rooms. Some ladies worked in a hair salon for 1£ per day.
- 4.3. I did not get all my stuff back when I was released, my mobile phone was stolen.