

Women for Refugee Women

Supplementary evidence to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Detention

1. Women for Refugee Women (WRW) is a charity which works with women who have sought asylum in the UK. We support two grassroots groups in London: Women Asylum Seekers Together London and the London Refugee Women's Forum, and we also work with similar groups throughout the UK. We work with the mainstream media, with arts organisations, and with women's organisations including the Women's Institute, to try to ensure that refugee women's voices are heard by wide audiences and to challenge the injustices experienced by refugee women.
2. WRW has already sent written evidence to the Inquiry and has brought two women to give oral evidence at the first session. This original evidence particularly shone a light on the detention of survivors of rape and torture, and the mental health impact of detention. Our evidence is based particularly on our 2014 publication, *Detained: women asylum seekers locked up in the UK*.
3. We are writing now with supplementary testimonies from women who wanted to tell the Inquiry more about the mental and physical health impacts of detention. This evidence is sent in partnership with Hope Projects in Birmingham, which supports a number of women who have sought asylum, some of them ex-detainees.
4. We hope that the Inquiry will look further into these issues, as all of these women who have told their stories here would be glad to come and give oral evidence to the future sessions.

Privacy in detention

5. Women for Refugee Women's report *Detained: women asylum seekers locked up in the UK* found that one of the key issues for women who were detained in Yarl's Wood IRC was the lack of privacy. Women spoke to us about staff, both male and female, entering their rooms without warning and watching them while they were in bed and in the bathroom. They told us how this made them feel unsafe, especially if they had previously experienced sexual violence as part of the persecution that they had experienced. We will be publishing further research into this issue in January 2015

Rechel's Story

Rechel 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 fifteen 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 3 men at gun point. 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 8 months. Pure shame and disgrace. I thought prison was bad but Yarl's Wood pushed me to 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 health care 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.

Pregnancy in detention

6. WRW and other organisations, especially Medical Justice, have drawn attention to the scandal of detaining pregnant women. Despite Home Office policy that “pregnant women should not normally be detained”, pregnant women are still being held in Yarl's Wood IRC. (Please see WRW: *Detained: women asylum seekers locked up in the UK* and Medical Justice: *Expecting Change: the case for ending the immigration detention of pregnant women.*) Being detained while pregnant can cause enormous emotional and psychological distress and serious physical discomfort.

Lara's Story

Lara is from Pakistan. She claimed asylum on 27 February 2014 and was taken into the Detained Fast Track with her husband in March even though she was in the early stages of pregnancy. She was held for just over 5 months. She has been released and is now living in Stockton.

Detention is a very painful experience and I would never wish this environment for anyone. Living in detention had no liberty, there were timings for everything and one does not have any kind of freedom. In short your sovereignty is taken away which gives you a feeling of depression and low self-esteem.

My experience in detention was as painful as it could be, the treatment given by some of the Serco staff members was very hurtful and because we were at their mercy therefore we felt complaining would not help.

Pregnancy is a beautiful experience and I wanted to enjoy this time but because I was held in this place it was very agonizing, upsetting and I worried most of the time. Every time negative thoughts came sinking into my head I would get scared and had no hope that I would ever be able to come out of detention.

Serco Healthcare neglected my health, when my first removal directions were set by Home Office and I fell ill the first question they asked was “Oh you have a ticket – is that the reason you are feeling sick?” I told them that my ticket is cancelled and feeling ill had nothing to do with removal directions, however not getting treatment on time is the issue here as I was made to wait in a queue of 12 females standing in front of me in order to see the nursing staff.

The second time when my removal directions were set I was extremely worried and depressed but my God who is very Merciful and Loving cancelled my ticket. I was then called to Healthcare and told that a doctor would be seeing me over the weekend, I asked why and to that the Healthcare Manager told me it was to discuss the anti-malaria medication, which I didn't understand at that time. So I waited for the weekend, it was a Saturday when the doctor called me and told me that I have to take a course of anti-malaria medicine before I fly back home. I was very angry and disturbed but kept my cool and explained to the doctor that my removal directions have been stopped and that I was expected to be released soon from detention, then why are you telling me about this anti-malaria course now? I told her that I am not going to take any course as I believe that I will be released soon. I later informed Medical Justice about the entire incident and they explained to me that such medication related to anti-malaria needs proper monitoring and supervision by the Healthcare staff, but they did not explain such important guidelines to me. After this incident I stopped going to Healthcare for anything as I lost all faith in them.

It is a well known fact that food during pregnancy is very essential. I never enjoyed the food served to me in detention however I survived mainly on fruits and milk. There were times when I would feel very sick and did not want to eat but had to force myself to collect fruits and milk. I had great cravings for watermelon and the day it was served I would feel happy. Once an officer refused to give me my extra share of watermelon which I was entitled to and told me that if I took two watermelons it would not be enough for others. He was a nasty officer, sometimes they would take out their frustration on us. Not all officers in detention are bad, however, a few were very caring and helped me during my tough days.

I would like to conclude by saying that detention is not a place for pregnant women, I hope and pray that this concept of detaining pregnant women is abolished forever.

Healthcare in detention

7. In WRW's recent research (*Detained: women asylum seekers locked up in the UK*) 38 of the 46 women we spoke to who had been recently or currently detained said that they had health issues while in detention. The most frequently mentioned problem was mental health, but there was a range of physical problems from high blood pressure to diabetes, tuberculosis, cancer and HIV. Many women spoke about disruptions to their existing medication or potentially serious delays in diagnosis and treatment.

Regina's story

Regina was detained for 3 weeks in September 2013. After release, Regina was diagnosed with a serious health condition which she would rather not disclose publicly. She was told by doctors after release 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.

Some names have been changed to protect women's privacy. All these women would be glad to come to give oral evidence to the Inquiry.

Please see WRW's original written evidence for fuller context to these testimonies and recommendations for reform.

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