

'They took me away'
Women's experiences of immigration detention in the UK

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REPORT SUMMARY

This report of research by Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) and the Refugee Women's Resource Project at Asylum Aid (RWRP) highlights shocking testimony from thirteen women asylum seekers, who were detained by the UK Immigration Service for periods ranging from one week to 86 weeks.

KEY FINDINGS

- Thirteen women seeking asylum in the UK agreed to be interviewed to share their experiences of detention.
- The great majority came from an African country and the majority were aged between 20 and 29 years.
- Some fled gender-related persecution (such as female genital mutilation, forced marriage, rape and trafficking) whilst others had fled gender-based abuse in the context of imputed political opinion or a country embroiled in civil war.
- Almost all had voluntarily made contact with immigration authorities for the purpose of seeking asylum: being detained in response was a profoundly shocking and disruptive experience.
- The women were detained for periods ranging from just a few days in two cases only to over 83 weeks in two cases. Eight out of 13 spent several months or longer in detention. The Home Office commonly cite the need for detention in order to affect removal and to prevent absconding. Yet despite lengthy periods of detention in the majority of cases, removal from the UK was not the outcome of their detention, even if several women did experience a number of attempts to forcibly remove them. Only one was successfully removed but the others remained to tell us that they experienced a disproportionate use of force and violence in the process. Their accounts do not suggest that serious attempts were made to employ alternatives to detention or to keep detention to the shortest period necessary.
- The women we interviewed were clearly upset and traumatised by their experiences of immigration detention in the UK. They suffered fear, uncertainty and a profound sense of injustice and bewilderment.
- They were often unable to exercise their legal rights or secure legal representation to challenge their detention. They were not able to find out what was happening in their case and did not feel that their rights and entitlements had been explained in a language they could understand.

- Some were unable to address their physical and mental health needs whilst in detention, and in some cases, detention exacerbated existing physical and mental health problems.
- In addition, their daily lives during often prolonged periods in detention were characterised by frequent moves between centres and an overriding sense of frustration and depression.
- Activities that were provided were not taken up and women felt like criminals because of the institutionalised regime. Women, including those who were pregnant or with young children, lacked control over meeting their basic needs.
- The women who got out of detention and went back to live in the community continued to experience a fear of being re-detained and lived under the shadow of the ultimate fear of being removed from the UK.

KEY CONCLUSION

Both the account of the experiences of detention narrated in this report and other research suggest that guidelines for immigration detention contained in the Home Office instructions, the Operational Enforcement Manual, and the statutory Detention Centre Rules are not followed in many cases.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We therefore strongly urge the government to make fundamental changes to the legal framework for detention in order to comply with domestic and international human rights norms.

We also strongly urge the government to adhere to existing guidance and rules in order to fully meet women's needs in their predicament both as women asylum seekers and women held in detention.

Lastly, we recommend that the use of immigration detention be considered in the wider context of the need for changes in the asylum system which address the quality of Home Office decision-making and improved country information; without this people who should be given protection in the UK will continue to be detained and experience further trauma and bewilderment, similar to what the women in our research have so vividly and painfully described.

Copies of the full report are available to download at:

www.biduk.org/pdf/women/women_in_detention_in_word_02Sep04.doc
or http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/New%20RWRP/RWRP_RRP_Publicationslist.htm

For hard copies, please contact Bethany Collier on 020 7377 5123 or bethanyc@asylumaid.org.uk

WHAT WOMEN TOLD US - EXTRACTS

Being taken to a detention centre

"they told me they will take me to another place but I didn't realise it was a detention centre with gates and security officers. It's hard, you feel like a criminal, it's not nice... At the beginning it was a bit easier because I thought they would accept my asylum claim. I thought this is okay, I will pay the price [by being kept in detention]... But after, when I realised they had decided to refuse my asylum claim, it was horrible..." [Q1]

"Why did they put me in detention? ... I spent six years here, if they didn't want me to stay here, they should have told me immediately. I have a family here, my children speak English. They tortured me, my baby is innocent." [Q3]

About the reasons for being detained

"...The best way to describe it is that it's a waste of money and a lack of understanding. The money they are using to take care of me is too much... It's a waste of money. They have to pay for food, electricity, water... I just keep thinking, why?... Everyday, why? why? why? And there is no answer. I wish they sent someone, an immigration officer, to talk to us." [Q7]

"In order to 'run down' people mentally, in this case you tell yourself, "no, I am going back to my country". It's to weaken people's morale. In my opinion, it's not good. ...I saw news on the TV, a British guy was crying after only three days in prison. But what about us who spend six months, or a year, what can we say? ...It's not a good system. The criminals should be put in jail, be locked up. We are not overstayers, we are asylum seekers." [Q9]

"I don't know. I was told they wanted to remove me to my country, that my country is safe. But my country is not safe, a lot of people are being killed there. ...Don't they see on television, the people at the Home Office, what is happening in my country? My brother, I don't know if he is still alive." [Q3]

About their legal rights

"The information on bail is in the small print. Also, by the time you get the letter in detention, your state of mind is such that you don't always take it in. They don't explain it to you." [Q13]

About their legal representatives

"The immigration officer asked me if I had a solicitor, I told him my solicitor never contacted me, I didn't have a solicitor. These solicitors, if they don't want to work for asylum seekers, why don't they say so? They take money and do nothing. My solicitor had my file for a year, she never told me anything, never visited me, never wrote to me." [Q9]

About their mental and physical health

"On the X of December, I received another removal letter. After all this suffering. Why? I was crying... I took a headscarf and I tried to hurt me, I just wanted to die that day. They took the headscarf from me and took me to the security area using force. They locked me during the night and drugged me with three tablets to get me to sleep." [Q9]

"I saw people with babies weeks old - some as young as four weeks old. I also saw pregnant women, some during the first three months of pregnancy which is the worst stage. I think it's very bad to detain pregnant women and women with small children. They are psychologically torturing people and tearing families apart." [Q12]

"I have problems with my knees- I couldn't walk properly. When they look at you, they look like they're caring, but then when you walk away, they say you are lying. Because they think you do everything you do, because you don't want to go home." [Q11]

"They only give you paracetamol. If you are ill, they always tell you that you are pretending to be ill to get out." [Q9]

About violence during removal attempts

"But the worst thing is the times when they take women to the airport. They are really scared and when they come back they tell the stories of what happens. I couldn't believe it as I didn't think men could do that to a woman [bends her arm back]." [Q5]

About their daily routine

"Before everyday I used to work on computer, read. But since in detention, I have been depressed, hopeless, you can't concentrate on anything, I have got lots of books but I can't read. I just listen to TV sometimes and then go to sleep. Sometimes I do things with other detainees, sometimes I don't." [Q2]

Getting out of detention

"I am comfortable [now], I am free. I can do whatever I want. I can check on my health, I am now like anyone else. Nobody can beat me anymore the way I have been beaten. But I would like to get respect, human rights in England. This is my big problem. ...I haven't received any letters yet; I don't know what is happening, they can arrest me at anytime. If they take me away now, I will die. I cannot bear this anymore. ...I don't know about my future. Every week I have to go and sign, it's not convenient, I have to go to London Bridge; I am in pain everyday, I am sick, they know that I am sick. It's as if I was still in detention." [Q9]

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