



# Refused: the experiences of women denied asylum in the UK

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with Baroness Helena Kennedy QC and Esther Freud

## Report Summary

Along with other countries, the UK has made a commitment to give asylum to those fleeing persecution if their own state cannot protect them. Only a third of the 18,000 people who claimed asylum in 2010 were women, yet 74% of these women were turned down. *Refused* explores the experiences of 72 women who have sought asylum in the UK.

### Persecution

These women were asked about the experiences they had fled in their home country. 49% had experienced arrest or imprisonment; 52% had experienced violence from soldiers, police or prison guards; 32% had been raped by soldiers, police or prison guards; and 21% had been raped by their husband, family member or someone else. Others were fleeing forced marriage, forced prostitution and female genital mutilation. Altogether, 66% had experienced some kind of gender-related persecution and 48% had experienced rape.

*'I was held in captivity. The actions I went through were degrading and inhuman.'*

### Refusal

Despite these experiences, of the 70 women who disclosed the initial outcome of their application, 67 women were refused asylum. Of those who had been refused, three quarters said that they had not been believed, suggesting that the culture of disbelief which has previously been observed in the Home Office is still a major cause for concern.

*'I can't understand why they don't believe us, why they think that a woman is as powerful and independent in other countries as in their country.'*

The women who had been refused asylum were asked about the effects of refusal: 67% had been made destitute (left without any means of support or accommodation) and 25% had been detained. Not a single woman felt able to contemplate returning to their country of origin.

*'I would rather die here than go back.'*

### Destitution

Of those who had been made destitute, 96% had relied on charities for food and 56% had been forced to sleep outside. 16% had experienced sexual violence while destitute and a similar number had worked unpaid for food or shelter.

*'I was forced to sleep with men for me to have accommodation and food. I was forced to go and be a prostitute for me to survive.'*

### Depression

The women were asked what they felt about being refused asylum: 97% said they were depressed; 93% were scared; 63% said they had thought about killing themselves.

*'They kill me already. I feel like the walking dead.'*

*'This report paints a shameful picture about asylum practices and the treatment of women seeking refuge in the UK from serious human rights abuses and persecution. It should be read and re-read and then used to press for immediate and far-reaching changes to restore this country's role in promoting the rule of law and protecting those who are vulnerable and threatened.'*

Philippe Sands QC, Professor of Law at University College London

## **Report recommendations**

Despite positive rhetoric from this government regarding the need to improve women's experiences in the asylum process, the findings of this report highlight that there is still much to be done to ensure that women fleeing persecution get a fair hearing and can find protection when they need it. It is now time for the government to turn the rhetoric into reality, and to this end we make these recommendations:

- Improve the quality of asylum decision-making
  - Ministers should show leadership on the importance of breaking down the culture of disbelief in the Home Office
  - Training and guidance should be put in place for judges on immigration tribunals on the nature and impact of gender-related persecution
- Ensure access to free quality legal advice and representation for all asylum seekers
- End the destitution of those refused asylum
  - Grant asylum seekers permission to work if their case has not been resolved within six months or they have been refused, but temporarily cannot be returned through no fault of their own
  - Provide welfare support for all asylum seekers who need it, up until the point of return or integration

The numbers of people entering the UK to claim asylum are not large. Many of the women who come here to seek refuge have fled persecution that we would struggle to imagine, and are desperate to find safety. It is time that we built a just and humane asylum process, in order to give every woman who comes to this country fleeing persecution a fair hearing and a chance to rebuild her life.

## **Women for Refugee Women**

WRW challenges the injustices experienced by women seeking asylum in the UK. We enable women refugees themselves to speak out through arts events and exhibitions, media work and lobbying opportunities which bring the voices of refugee women to wide audiences.

This research was carried out by Women for Refugee Women in partnership with Women Asylum Seekers Together (WAST) London, WAST Manchester, Women Seeking Sanctuary Advocacy Group Cardiff, Embrace in Stoke on Trent, Bradford Refugee & Asylum Seeker Stories, the Women's Group at the Young Asylum Seeker Support Service in Newport and the Refugee Women's Strategy Group in Scotland.

*'The treatment of asylum seekers is one of the powerful measures of who we are as a nation and of our values. If we cannot provide comfort and safety to those who arrive on our shores having suffered torture, the horrors of war and cruelty of the most extreme kind, we have lost a sense of our own humanity,'* Baroness Helena Kennedy QC

## **Women for Refugee Women**

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