



Women asylum seekers and immigration detention: Frequently Asked Questions

Key facts:

- About **2,000 women seeking asylum are locked up in detention every year** in the UK. Most of these women are held in Yarl's Wood detention centre, near Bedford.
- The majority of asylum-seeking women detained in Yarl's Wood are **survivors of rape or other forms of torture**.
- Being locked up in detention re-traumatises them: there are **high levels of mental distress and self-harm** among women in detention.
- Locking up vulnerable women in detention is also ineffective. In 2014, **three-quarters of asylum-seeking women were released back into the community** to continue with their cases, their detention having served no purpose at all.
- And immigration detention is expensive. It costs **just under £40,000 a year** to hold one person in detention. In 2013-14, the cost of running detention centres in the UK totalled more than £160 million.
- It is **more humane and effective, and much cheaper**, to resolve women's asylum claims while they are living in the community.

Q: Who are the 2,000 asylum-seeking women locked up in detention each year?

A: Women who seek asylum in the UK come from many different parts of the world, including countries where there is ongoing conflict and/or serious human rights abuses. The majority of asylum-seeking women in detention are survivors of rape, sexual violence or other torture.

Over three-quarters (77%) of the women who told us about their experiences of persecution for our 2014 report *Detained* said they had been raped in their countries of origin. Ninety three per cent said they had been either raped or tortured. For our 2015 report *I Am Human*, 71% of the women who told us about their experiences of persecution said they had experienced rape or sexual violence and 76% said they had experienced either rape or torture.

Q: Why are they there? Isn't detention only used for people who have no right to be in the UK, who are going to be deported?

A: There is often no clear reason why these women are locked up.

Home Office policy says that immigration detention should be used for the purpose of removing people from the UK. In practice, however, very few of the asylum-seeking women who are detained are actually deported from the UK. Home Office statistics show that in 2014, just a quarter of women seeking asylum were deported from detention; three-quarters were released back into community to continue with their cases. Their detention served no purpose whatsoever.



Q: So why are survivors of torture still being detained?

A: According to Home Office policy, survivors of torture should only be detained in very exceptional circumstances. However, our evidence and that of other NGOs and independent monitoring bodies shows that this policy is routinely ignored.

The Home Office recently published new guidance in this area, which emphasises that detention is inappropriate for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, and torture. We hope this will help to ensure vulnerable people are not locked up - but we also think the government should develop alternative approaches that focus on resolving people's cases in the community, without using detention. There is more information on these 'alternatives to detention' below.

Q: The government says that people held in detention are treated with dignity and respect. Isn't this reassuring at least?

A: Being locked up and deprived of your liberty is distressing and harmful in itself, even if conditions in a detention centre are reasonable. The impact of detention can be particularly acute for those who have already been through traumatic experiences. Women have told us how being detained forced them to relive the trauma they experienced in their countries of origin.

One woman told us: 'I felt so upset and frightened because I was arrested and locked up and tortured back home. I have scars on my feet and arms where I was beaten by police and guards, and so the situation and male guards in Yarl's Wood made me feel extremely frightened. I feel so frightened because it feels like being locked up in a prison back home.'

The damage caused by being locked up is clear from the high levels of mental distress and self-harm among asylum-seeking women in detention. One in five women we spoke to for *Detained* said they had tried to kill themselves in detention, and 40% of the women we interviewed for *I Am Human* said they had self-harmed while detained. The Prisons Inspectorate's 2015 report on Yarl's Wood noted that levels of self-harm had almost tripled since the last inspection in 2013.

Q: Why are there specific concerns about Yarl's Wood?

A: The trauma of being detained is exacerbated by conditions at Yarl's Wood. The 2015 Prisons Inspectorate report marked out Yarl's Wood as 'a place of national concern'. Their survey found that almost half of the women there said they feel unsafe.

Our research has documented violations of dignity and privacy experienced by women in Yarl's Wood, including: male staff barging into their rooms without knocking or waiting for a response; male staff observing women on 'constant supervision' or suicide watch; and male staff searching women's rooms and watching them being searched. More than 85% of the women we spoke to for *I Am Human* said male guards had seen them in intimate



situations, including while they were naked or partially dressed, in the shower, on the toilet, or in bed.

For asylum-seeking women in detention, the impact of being watched by male members of staff is significant. One woman who spoke to us for *I Am Human* said: ‘It bothered me so much. I have a history of sexual abuse. This man can do anything to me. It’s not right at all. It makes you so vulnerable.’ Another woman explained: ‘I felt ashamed. A total stranger just saw you naked and you have to see them all day. It breaks your confidence.’

There are also longstanding concerns about sexual abuse at Yarl’s Wood. Between 2007 and 2014 Serco dismissed 10 staff members following allegations of ‘sexual impropriety’ with women held there. The Prisons Inspectorate’s 2015 report did not find evidence of endemic abuse in Yarl’s Wood, but nevertheless emphasised that instances of sexual abuse and assault remain ‘an ever-present risk’.

Our research has documented how women are subjected to sexist and racist abuse by staff members. Following an undercover investigation into Yarl’s Wood by Channel 4 News in March 2015, which filmed guards calling women held there ‘animals’ and ‘beasties’, the Home Office Minister Lord Bates said in the House of Lords: ‘I watched that documentary on Channel 4, and quite frankly I was sickened.’ Nevertheless, vulnerable women continue to be held there.

Healthcare in Yarl’s Wood is also very poor. Women in *Detained* and *I Am Human* spoke about a culture of disbelief among medical staff. One woman explained: ‘Medical staff suspect you to act and pretend to be sick to strengthen your case. If you ask them for medication or tell them you are sick, they will say you are pretending.’ The 2015 Prisons Inspectorate report on Yarl’s Wood noted that there had been ‘a significant deterioration in healthcare provision since our previous inspection’.

Q: If asylum-seeking women aren’t locked up in detention, won’t they just abscond?

A: All the available evidence shows that a system which relies less on detention doesn’t result in people losing touch with the authorities and absconding.

From 2011, the Coalition government stopped detaining children at Yarl’s Wood and introduced a new ‘family returns process’ for families who have been refused asylum. This process focuses on engagement with families in the community in order to resolve their cases. An independent panel oversees this process and helps to ensure detention is only ever used as a last resort.

Since its introduction, the number of children held in detention has fallen dramatically, and the Home Office’s own evaluation found that there had been no rise in absconding among families.



Q: So if asylum-seeking women aren't locked up in detention, what are the alternatives?

A: We believe that the government should move away from locking people up and concentrate instead on developing alternatives to detention.

Alternative systems that rely on engagement with people in the community are used in many different countries. These programmes use a 'case management' approach, which means that asylum seekers and migrants are provided with independent support to ensure their practical and emotional needs are met, and that they understand and are involved with the process they are going through.

Q: Why is this a better solution?

A: International evidence demonstrates that engagement-focused alternatives have high levels of compliance and very low levels of absconding. Since they do not rely on detention, they are also much more humane and much cheaper.

Evidence demonstrates too that for people whose cases are refused, these types of programme result in much higher rates of voluntary return - that is, people leaving the country 'under their own steam'. Research indicates that this is because people who receive a negative decision are more likely to accept this if they believe they have been through a fair and legitimate process, and that their case has been fully explored and heard.

Q: Is there much political support for alternatives to detention?

A: There is growing support for a shift away from the use of detention towards an asylum system that focuses on engagement with asylum seekers in the community.

The recent Parliamentary inquiry into the use of immigration detention, which included MPs and peers from across the political parties on its panel, recommended that the Home Office should effect 'a wholesale change in culture... a radical move away from a focus on enforcement to one of engagement'. In September 2015, the House of Commons passed a motion endorsing the inquiry's recommendations.

In January 2016, the Home Office published a review of the welfare of vulnerable people in detention, authored by former Prisons and Probation Ombudsman Stephen Shaw. This also recommended that alternatives to detention should be developed. In his response, the Immigration Minister stated that he wanted to see 'a reduction in the number of those detained, and the duration of detention.'

Q: What can I do to help support the campaign?

A: Download our campaign actions sheet, research reports, and other resources from www.refugeewomen.co.uk/research