

The Way Ahead

An asylum system without detention

By Marchu Girma and Gemma Lousley

WOMEN FOR REFUGEE WOMEN



About Women for Refugee Women

Women for Refugee Women challenges the injustices experienced by women who seek asylum in the UK. Our vision is a society in which women's human rights are respected and in which they are safe from persecution. Our mission is to ensure that women seeking asylum in the UK are treated with justice and dignity.

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Women for Refugee Women

Tindlemanor

52 Featherstone Street

London EC1Y 8RT

020 7250 1239

admin@refugeewomen.co.uk

www.refugeewomen.co.uk

Charity number: 1165320

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About this report

Every year, around 2,000 women who have come to the UK to seek asylum are locked up in immigration detention.

Many of these women are survivors of rape or other gender-based violence. Detention is traumatic for them, and levels of mental distress and self-harm among them are high. Their detention is also often pointless, as the majority of these women are not removed from the UK, but released back into the community to continue with their cases.

This can't, and doesn't have to, continue. This report sets out a vision of a different type of asylum system: one that focuses on providing support to and engaging constructively with people seeking asylum, and which works to resolve their cases in the community, without the use of detention.

Immigration and asylum systems that are based on support and engagement are much more humane than those that rely on enforcement and detention. Research also shows they are cheaper, and more effective.

The report draws on specific, practical examples of the use of support and engagement in the asylum process, to show what a different type of asylum system might look like. It is also rooted in the views and opinions of women who have been or are going through the UK asylum system. The voices of asylum-seeking and refugee women have always been at the heart of Women for Refugee Women's work, and we believe it is crucial that their experiences of the asylum system, and opinions on how it should be reformed, are heard.

We urge the government and the Home Office to listen to these voices, in order to build a system that is dignified and humane, and gives each individual the chance of a fair hearing.



Introduction and overview



Moving away from detention: The case for change

Over the past three years, Women for Refugee Women has carried out research on the experiences of asylum-seeking women in immigration detention. Our previous research reports, *Detained* (2014) and *I Am Human* (2015), found that **the majority of women we spoke to had experienced sexual or other gender-based violence in their countries of origin, which led them to seek protection in the UK.**¹

And yet, when they came to this country, they found themselves locked up in a prison, with no idea of when they were likely to be released.

Our research has highlighted the **poor conditions in Yarl's Wood detention centre**, where the majority of asylum-seeking women are held. We have revealed how women are denied privacy and dignity in detention as they are routinely watched in intimate situations – while they are in bed, on the toilet, in the shower, or getting dressed – by male guards.² This happens when guards burst into their rooms without knocking, or when women who are on 'constant supervision' or suicide watch are watched by male guards. Our findings in this area have been corroborated by HM Inspectorate of Prisons, which in 2015 called Yarl's Wood "a place of national concern".³

Our research has also testified to **the harm, in itself, of detaining these women**. Many of the women we have spoken to have told us how being locked up in detention triggered memories of their previous experiences in their countries of origin, and re-traumatised them. One in five of the 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. The harm of being locked up is exacerbated by the lack of time limit on immigration detention in the UK; women simply do not know when they will be released.

The government says that detention centres such as Yarl's Wood are essential in order to remove people from the UK. However, in 2015, 84% of the asylum-seeking women detained were subsequently released back into the community to continue with their cases,⁴ **so their detention served no purpose at all.** Detention is not only harmful, then; it is pointless.

It is also well established that **detention is very expensive**. It costs just over £35,000 a year to hold one person in detention,⁵ and in 2015-16 the cost of running detention centres in the UK totalled £125 million.⁶

There is a growing consensus that the current reliance on immigration detention isn't working, and that it is time for change.



Recent steps towards reform

Women for Refugee Women launched our campaign against the detention of women seeking asylum in January 2014. **Our key recommendation since the beginning of this campaign has been to end the detention of women who seek asylum.** Our interim recommendations include: an end to the detention of survivors of sexual and other gender-based violence; an end to the detention of pregnant women; an end to indefinite detention; and immediate improvements to conditions in detention for women. In response to our work and that of other organisations, some steps towards reform have been taken.

In July 2014, a cross-party group of MPs and peers launched the **first ever Parliamentary inquiry into the use of immigration detention in the UK.** The report of the inquiry, published in March 2015, recognised that “the nature of detention is often particularly distressing for women” and recommended that survivors of rape and sexual violence, and pregnant women, should not be detained. It also recommended that a 28-day time limit on detention should be introduced, and set out the need for a “wholesale change” in the Home Office’s approach, away from the use of enforcement and detention and towards “community models of engagement” (this is discussed in more detail below).⁷

Early 2015 also saw Theresa May, then Home Secretary, commission **a review of the welfare of vulnerable people in detention,** which was conducted by former Prisons Ombudsperson Stephen Shaw. The Shaw review was published in January 2016 and, among its wide-ranging recommendations, it reflected our concerns in stating that pregnant

women should never be detained; that survivors of sexual and other gender-based violence should not be detained; and that, overall, the use of immigration detention “ought to be reduced”.⁸

Following the publication of the Shaw review, the government responded by introducing **a new ‘adults at risk’ policy, which came into force in September 2016.** With its introduction, the government set out its expectation that the number of vulnerable people detained would fall,⁹ and the number of people detained overall would be reduced.¹⁰

In line with one of Women for Refugee Women’s key recommendations, **the policy specifically refers to survivors of sexual and other gender-based violence as ‘at risk’, and so unsuitable for detention.**¹¹ This is the first time that government policy has explicitly stated that survivors of sexual and gender-based violence should not be detained.

As part of the adults at risk approach, **the government has also introduced a new policy on the detention of pregnant women.** As already noted, the Shaw review recommended that pregnant women should never be detained; during the passage of the Immigration Bill 2015-16, however, the government resisted attempts to introduce this absolute exclusion, even though the House of Lords voted resoundingly in its favour. Nevertheless, the government has promised to “end the routine detention of pregnant women”¹² and, to effect this, a time limit on their detention was introduced in July 2016. **Pregnant women can now be detained for a maximum of 72 hours.**¹³

As highlighted above, **a time limit on all detention** was one of the key recommendations of the Parliamentary inquiry into detention; this reform has long been called for by many organisations,¹⁴ including Women for Refugee Women. More recently, monitoring bodies

such as HM Inspectorate of Prisons and the National Preventive Mechanism have also set out their support for this.¹⁵ During the Immigration Bill 2015-16, the government rejected attempts to introduce this, and the UK remains the only country in Europe that doesn't have such a limit. However, it did introduce a level of **automatic judicial oversight of detention**, so that an automatic bail hearing will be required if someone has been in detention for four months and has not already made an application for immigration bail.¹⁶ At the time of writing this report, this provision of the Immigration Act 2016 has not yet been implemented.

Over the last three years, Women for Refugee Women has uncovered the treatment of women in detention, and their loss of privacy and dignity. For instance, our previous reports *Detained* and *I Am Human* laid out that, despite denials from the Home Office, male guards were watching women on suicide watch or 'constant supervision'. Taking up our recommendation that there should be gender-specific standards for women in detention, in June 2016 the Home Office published a **new detention service order on the treatment of women**. This guidance sets out that women who are placed on constant supervision should never be watched by male guards.¹⁷

We hope that through the effective implementation of these policies the government will reduce the number of asylum-seeking women in detention, and will achieve its aim of reducing the use of detention overall. However, alongside these steps, we also believe there should be a bigger, more ambitious vision. **The UK should now start moving away from a system in which detention retains a central place, towards a different type of asylum system altogether.**



An asylum system without detention

This report sets out a vision of what a different type of asylum system, that doesn't rely on enforcement and detention, might look like.

There is a wealth of evidence, and examples from other countries, which show that things can be done differently. This evidence shows that **providing ongoing, structured support to people as they go through the asylum process, and focusing on engagement with people seeking asylum as a way of resolving cases, can drastically reduce the use of detention**, and ensure that it is only ever used as a last resort. Moreover, an emphasis on support and engagement throughout the asylum process can mean a better system overall.

The international evidence on engagement-based immigration and asylum systems has been brought together comprehensively in a number of recent reports: by the cross-party Parliamentary inquiry into the use of detention in the UK, by the International Detention Coalition in *There are alternatives* (2015),¹⁸ and by Detention Action in *Without detention* (2016).¹⁹ We don't repeat this evidence here, but instead focus on specific examples such as the asylum process in Sweden, as well as pilot programmes run previously in the UK, **to explain what an asylum system that is based on support and engagement can look like in practice.**

The vision for reform we set out in this report is rooted, too, in the views and opinions of women who have experienced the UK asylum system. Across summer and autumn 2016, we ran a series of workshops with women seeking asylum, as well as those who now have refugee status, to find out their views on how the UK asylum system should be reformed. In the first set of workshops we ran, we asked women to tell us about what is positive in the current system, and what needs to change. Strikingly, **the need for proactive support**

as people move through the process, which is a core feature of engagement-based systems, was consistently pointed to in the conversations we had with women.

We subsequently ran a second set of workshops, where we explained how asylum systems based on support and engagement work, and asked women what they thought of this sort of approach. In line with the findings from the previous set of workshops, **the women we spoke to were unanimously positive about the idea of structured support in the asylum process**, and suggested that this would help to address many of the issues and problems asylum seekers face at present. We also explained what happens in this type of system when, even after all possible appeals have been made, asylum claims are finally refused. This can be a very difficult issue for those going through the asylum system to talk about and, understandably, some women didn't want to discuss it. Some did, however, and during these discussions **some of the women we spoke to identified elements that they felt were preferable to the current UK approach to people who have been refused.**

The voices of asylum-seeking and refugee women have always been at the heart of Women for Refugee Women's work, and **we believe that it is crucial that their experiences of the UK asylum system, and opinions on how it should be reformed, are heard.** In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on the experiences of 'service users' in areas such as mental health support, drug and alcohol treatment and the criminal justice system, and government departments and agencies have increasingly sought to ensure that the views and opinions of 'experts by experience' are reflected in the design and delivery of these services.²⁰ We urge the government and the Home Office to take the same approach to the asylum process and **listen to the voices of those who have been and are going through it**, in order to build a system that is dignified and humane, and gives each individual the chance of a fair hearing.

Structure of the report

In the **first section** of this report, we present findings from the first set of research workshops we ran, where we asked women with experience of the UK asylum process to tell us what is positive about the current system, and what needs to change. A number of issues, many of which have been documented in previous research reports, came up repeatedly, and we present these here. As has already been highlighted, the need for ongoing support as people move through the asylum process, a key feature of engagement-based asylum systems, was also consistently pointed to by the women we spoke to.



One of the collages produced during the first set of research workshops we ran. Other collages made by the women who participated in these workshops can be found throughout the report.

In the **second section**, we explain what asylum systems that are based on support and engagement can look like. Drawing on examples such as the asylum system in Sweden, as well as the 'key worker' pilots run previously in the UK, we set out how these types of system work and what their benefits are, including how they can reduce the use of detention.

We then present findings from the second set of workshops we ran, where we discussed this type of approach with asylum-seeking and refugee women. The women we spoke to were overwhelmingly positive about the idea of structured support in the asylum process. Alongside this, some women identified elements in the engagement-based approach to people who have been refused asylum that they felt were preferable to the current UK system.

In the **final section** of the report, we set out seven recommendations for change to the government and the Home Office, across two key areas. Our first three recommendations are key steps the government and the Home Office can take to move away from detention as a routine part of asylum policy, and create an asylum system based on support and engagement, which resolves cases without the use of detention.

We also set out four further recommendations, which are additional steps the government and the Home Office should take within their current programme of detention reform, to help ensure these reforms are implemented effectively and transparently.

We recognise that the overall vision of reform we present in this report is ambitious - but we also believe it is achievable.

1. 'You are covered in darkness'

How women see the UK asylum system



How we listened to women

The first stage of this project focused on **talking to women about their experiences of the asylum system in the UK, and finding out what they think is positive, and what needs to change.** Through this, we wanted to understand what a better asylum system looks like to these women, including whether the ongoing, structured support that is a core feature of engagement-based systems is something that feels important to them.

To do this, we ran four workshops, involving 33 women with experience of the asylum system. We ran the workshops in London, Birmingham and Manchester.²¹ The women who participated were at very different stages of the asylum process: ten – so, about a third – had refugee status; twenty-three, or two-thirds, were still involved with the asylum system in one way or another. Some of these women had made their asylum claim very recently, while others had been waiting for a decision for some time; some were appealing the decision that had been made on their claim; and others had been through the whole asylum process, including all possible stages of appeal, and were preparing or had submitted a fresh claim.

In these workshops, **we asked women to make collages about their experiences of going through the asylum system, focusing on both the positive and negative aspects of this.** To help them understand what making a collage involved, one of the researchers, who has been through the UK asylum system herself, showed the women who were participating a collage she had made about her own experiences and explained why she had chosen particular pictures. She emphasised, however, that this was just an example, and that it was up to individual women what they included in their collage. We provided materials for the collages, including a diverse selection of magazines and newspapers for women to use.



As women made their collages, we spoke to them individually about these and asked them to tell us about the pictures they had chosen. Although we developed some prompt questions and sometimes used these, overall the conversations we had were led by the women who participated.

We chose this approach for a number of reasons. Collage making can be a good way of helping people to communicate experiences that have been upsetting or traumatic, because it relies on images rather than words – so it can support people to express things that are difficult to articulate or talk about.²² It can also be useful when working with people who do not speak English as a first language, because images can help them to express things that they may not know the specific words for. Alongside this, in the conversations we had with women about their collages, we made relatively little use of the prompt questions we had developed because we wanted to ensure that they were able to raise the issues and experiences that were important to them.²³



Disbelief, delays and detention: Key themes for women

Although, as we have highlighted, we asked those participating in the workshops to make collages that reflected both the positive and negative aspects of their experience of the UK asylum system, **the majority of women we spoke to characterised their experiences as overwhelmingly negative, including those who now have refugee status.** This is not to say that women didn't identify positive aspects, and we come to these later on; however, across all the workshops we ran, a number of negative experiences or issues were identified repeatedly, and are therefore clearly core areas for reform.

Many of the issues we set out below have been identified by previous research. It is, nevertheless, important for us to highlight them again. **Reform in these areas is at the heart of what a better asylum system looks like for the women we spoke to**, who have experience of the process. The fact that their views echo the findings of previous research demonstrates the need for and the urgency of change.

“the Home Office looks for loopholes to call you a liar.”

One of the key issues raised by the women we spoke to, including those who now have refugee status, **was being made to feel as if the Home Office didn't believe them when they claimed asylum.** In this way, they pointed to what has been identified as the Home Office 'culture of disbelief'.²⁴ So, for instance, women talked about being questioned aggressively during their main asylum interview; about being asked the same question repeatedly, as if the interviewer was trying to catch them out; and about being asked to produce evidence that they couldn't possibly have or ever get hold of.

Women also described Home Office decision-makers as actively looking for ways to reject their claims. One woman, who was initially refused asylum but had this decision overturned by the courts on appeal, said that she felt the Home Office “looks for loopholes to call you a liar”.

A number of women also talked about **delays in the asylum process, and waiting** – waiting to be given a date for their main interview, or for a decision on their claim, without any clear timescales or idea of when the waiting would come to an end.²⁵ Many women said that, because of this, they felt their lives were on hold, or slipping away from them.

One woman, who had been waiting for a decision on her claim for almost a year, explained: "I can't plan, I can't say to anyone what I've been doing in this period apart from saying I've been waiting for an asylum claim. I won't have this time again." Another echoed her as she said: "It's too much time of your life which is just being wasted, because we're growing older."

Many women spoke about **problems with the housing and financial support** they received as they went through the asylum process. Some said the housing they were placed in was in very poor condition and was often overcrowded. One woman also highlighted intrusions on women's privacy and dignity as she explained that in her accommodation, which is run by Serco, "there is no privacy at all, there are male housing officers who go into your room whether you have locked it or not. I suffer from depression and anxiety, this made me feel worse."

Others described the difficulty of surviving on the low level of financial support the Home Office provides - just £36.95 per week, which is about half of what those on Jobseeker's Allowance receive. They explained that, with this small amount of money, they are expected to cover their basic living needs, as well as ensure they have enough money to pay for public transport to attend appointments, and to put credit on their phone so they can call their solicitor or the Home Office.

“*There is no privacy at all, there are male housing officers who go into your room whether you have locked it or not.*”



“*I really want to work, but without papers there is nothing I can do. I have to just sit. It's really hard.*”

The **prohibition on asylum seekers working while they are waiting for a decision on their claim** was raised repeatedly by the women we spoke to. Many explained that if they were allowed to work, they would have the opportunity to support themselves and earn enough money to live on; they also pointed to the contribution they would be able to make to UK society.

Women talked too about the impact of not being allowed to work on their mental health and self-esteem. One woman said: “I really want to work, but without papers there is nothing I can do. I have to just sit. It's really hard. I grew up working. I came here and I'm just sitting.” Another woman talked about the longer-term effects of forced unemployment: “A person can be energetic, but if they didn't work for a long time, by the time they get their papers they can't work, because they have been destroyed by depression.”

Racism in the asylum system was talked about by a number of women. Some women spoke about racist treatment they had experienced from individual members of Home Office staff. Others described the asylum system as a whole as racist and discriminatory. One woman said: “I came to the UK hoping I am at the right place, but I am at the wrong place. As a black woman I respect the British people, and I thought they were always good to people who ask for help - but when you ask for help, they put you in a horrible situation.”



“*I think the whole system is designed to push you to the edge. All we did was flee our own countries because of problems, but they don't treat us like human beings at all.*”

“*I’m really scared of detention, that anything could happen and then I will be arrested again.*”

Another woman said she felt that the Home Office doesn’t believe asylum seekers and treats them poorly because they come from particular countries. She went onto say that in the UK, “until you are British, you are not yet somebody.”

Several women also talked about how going through the asylum system had made them feel like they were worthless, or less than human. One said: “I think the whole system is designed to push you to the edge. All we did was flee our own countries because of problems, but they don’t treat us like human beings at all.”

Building on our previous research, **the harms of detention** came up repeatedly in the workshops we ran, and the importance to women of an asylum system that doesn’t rely on enforcement and detention was clear. It was particularly noticeable that, even for those who hadn’t been detained, the possibility that they might be locked up at some point caused them real anxiety and distress. One woman who now has refugee status explained that, compared with what some women have been through, her experience of the asylum process had been “not bad at all”. But she also said that the possibility of detention had been a constant source of worry to her:

“They used to give me documents all the time, or the letters they used to send me said ‘you are liable to be detained’, so I was scared. In my country I was detained before, so it really used to come up in my head, that I’m going to be detained. I used to fear to go to the Home Office, because I feared to be detained. Even when I was having my interview, the only thing I was worried about was detention.”

Women who had been detained also talked about **the trauma of being locked up, and the ongoing impact of this experience on them even when they had been released**. One woman said: “When the Home Office detains people, they are killing them slowly, slowly. I don’t think if they were in our shoes they could stand that kind of thing.” Another woman explained: “I was arrested at home, and they took me to detention, Yarl’s Wood. I stayed there for two months. Now, I’m really scared of detention, that anything could happen and then I will get arrested again. Asylum seekers need freedom.”

“*When the Home Office detains people, they are killing them slowly.*”



The need for support

As we have explained, although we developed some prompt questions and used these to some extent in the workshops, overall the conversations we had were led by the women who participated, because we wanted to ensure that they told us about the issues and experiences that were important to them. It was striking, then, that across all the workshops we ran, the conversations we had with women pointed consistently to the **lack of ongoing, structured support in the current asylum system, and the need for this to be addressed.**

Lack of support in the asylum system and the impact of this

Although we asked women to focus on their experiences of the UK asylum system in their collages, some talked to us about what had happened to them in their countries of origin and why they had to leave. In line with our previous research reports, where the majority of asylum-seeking women we spoke to had experienced gender-related persecution,²⁶ their experiences included rape, forced marriage, domestic violence and being trafficked for prostitution.

“You feel stranded, and you feel stuck. You are covered in darkness, there is no one to direct you. When you are in the system you feel like everything is scary.”

Some women also explained how, alongside this trauma, and although they had to leave their countries to ensure their safety, they went through the emotional wrench of leaving behind everything they knew, and people they loved. One woman told us that when she had to flee her country, “my heart was broken”. Pointing to one of the pictures she had chosen, another woman explained: “This picture is about my family. I miss my family back home, that’s why I put this picture here. I wish I have my family, like this family.” Some women also talked about when they first arrived in the UK, and explained that because they didn’t know anyone, they felt alone and depressed.

In this vulnerable state, women are then expected to navigate the complexities of the asylum system on their own. **Many women said that they didn’t understand the system, and often didn’t know what was going on with their case.** One woman told us: “No one is there to explain anything. You are all by yourself.” Another pointed out that “we come from a different country, so obviously we don’t know anything about the laws here. Everything is different, so it’s difficult.” One woman, who has now been given refugee status, described her experience of going through the asylum system in the following way:

“Here, I don’t know anything. It’s like you don’t know your way, and you don’t know the system. You don’t know where the signpost is. You feel stranded, and you feel stuck. You are covered in darkness, there is no one to direct you. When you are in the system you feel like everything is scary.”

Several women described trying to get more information about the progress of their case from the Home Office, but had found this difficult. One woman said: “Whenever I call, it’s just like a 30 second call, ‘we haven’t made a decision’, and they put the phone down. No chance of getting an explanation or me asking a question.”

“Whenever I call, it’s just like a 30 second call...and they put the phone down. No chance of getting an explanation or me asking a question.”

Additionally, although some women were very positive about their legal representation, others said they had found it difficult to get information or updates from their solicitor. One woman explained: “I have a solicitor but they’re not really doing anything at the moment. I called her, I went there; they say they will give her my number, she will call me, but she hasn’t.”

Some women also talked about the uncertainty and anxiety they felt as they went through the asylum system, not knowing what was going to happen next or what to expect. While a few women we spoke to had been given useful information about the process by people they had met, which had alleviated their anxiety, in other instances the information women had been given by others had made them feel more concerned. A couple of women, for instance, were told that as soon as they claimed asylum, they would be detained.

A number of women talked about feeling particularly anxious about the main asylum interview. One woman said that when she went to her interview with the Home Office, “my body was shaking”. Another woman explicitly identified the need for support and reassurance as she said: “There was no one there to explain things, so I was in all that confusion on my own. If there was someone to prepare me, to explain, at least I would go in there feeling calm.”



Women also talked about the uncertainty and anxiety they felt as they waited for a decision on their claim, even in instances where they waited for comparatively short periods of time. One woman, who received a positive decision within two months, explained that while she was waiting for the decision, “I used to cry every day, not eat; I used to feel like maybe I will kill myself, get out of this world. I don’t drink, but I started drinking alcohol, and I never used to sleep in the night because I was thinking, what is going to happen?” She went on to say: “I wouldn’t say the UK has a bad asylum system, but they don’t support people, emotionally.”

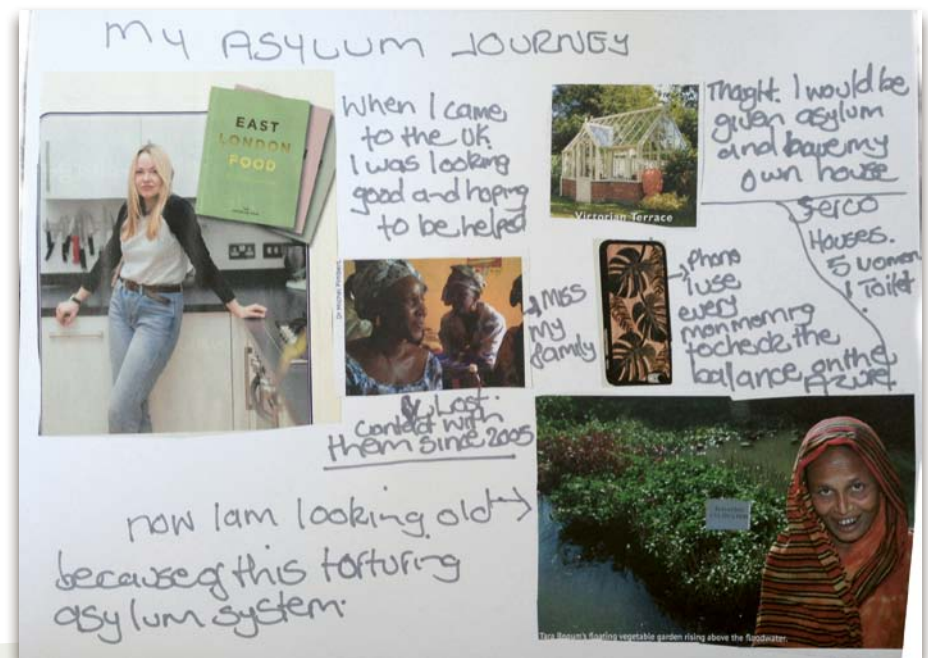
“When the refusal came, my solicitor just said she is no longer helping me, leaving me in absolute shock. How am I going to do it on my own? How am I going to represent myself?”

Many women talked about practical difficulties they had faced as they went through the system, and said that when these problems arose, they didn't know what to do or who to turn to. For instance, one woman said that when she was called to her main asylum interview, she had to get the train from Bolton to Liverpool. As she explained, however, “it was expensive and I didn't have money at that time – but if I missed my interview it would be a very big thing. I needed someone to help me with that.”

Several women also described how, after their initial application was refused, their solicitor had told them they could no longer represent them for their appeal hearing. They said that in this situation, they didn't know what to do. One woman explained: “My lawyer told me when there were only three days before the hearing that she could no longer represent me. I didn't know the language, I wasn't educated, so I didn't know what was happening.” Another said: “When the refusal came, my solicitor just said she is no longer helping me, leaving me in absolute shock. How am I going to do it on my own? How am I going to represent myself? All the time I was thinking, as long as she'll be there for me.”

As we talked to the women in the workshops, **the effect of having to go through the asylum system with very little practical or emotional support was made very clear.** One woman, who had recently discovered that she had won her appeal against the Home Office's refusal of her claim, said that although she felt relieved, “I still have wounds inside. I've been going through this for years.” Several women talked about the impact of going through the system in terms of premature ageing. Pointing to a picture of a young, smartly presented woman she had chosen for her collage, one woman explained:

“This one represents me, nicely dressed, young looking, when I first came to this country, hoping to be helped. But now, with all this depression and what I've been through, I look like an old woman. That's how I feel.”



The importance of support

As explained earlier, although most of the women we spoke to characterised their experiences of the asylum system as negative, some women did point to more positive aspects of their experience. One woman, for instance, said that her Home Office interviewer had been kind to her during her interview, and another said that she felt her interviewer had listened to her. A few women also said that they had good interpreters for their asylum interview.

On the whole, however, where women identified more positive aspects of their experience of the asylum process, **this was almost always related to instances of support they had received** – support which was not provided by the Home Office. Rather, this support came from friends or people they had met in the UK; from their solicitor; or from charities and peer support groups.

So, several women talked about the **practical and emotional support they received from individual people they knew or had met in the UK**. One woman explained that a woman she met when she first arrived in the UK had helped her to understand how to make a claim for asylum, and another talked about how a friend who spoke English had helped her find a new solicitor when she moved to a new city.

Another woman, who now has refugee status, said that when she first arrived in the UK she didn't know anyone, and was homeless, so she used to sleep in a derelict building. However, eventually she met someone from the same country she came from, who helped her to find accommodation in a hostel. She also talked about the emotional support she received from friends when she went to her asylum interview: "On the interview day, the interviewer was really scary. His questions were really scary, and he frightened me. But I went with my friends to Liverpool [where the interview was taking place], and they supported me."



“*I waited for two years for a decision from the Home Office, and it was such a shock when the refusal letter came through. After that, I started receiving support from charities; they have been amazing.*”

Some women spoke about the **support they received from their solicitor, and explained how important it had been to have someone who explained the asylum process, and what was happening in their case, to them.** One woman described how, whenever there was a new development in her case, her solicitor would take the time to explain what it meant and to set out what the next step was, which she found reassuring and helpful. Another woman said that a charity she was receiving support from had recently invited a local solicitor to give a talk about the asylum process, which she and others attending had found very useful: “You could see how people don’t know a thing about their cases, but he sat down and explained things to everyone, answering their questions.”

Several women also described the **support they had received from charities as they went through the asylum process, and in particular the practical help they were given when they found themselves in crisis situations.** So, for instance, some women talked about support they received from charities when they first arrived in the UK, or when they had just put in their asylum claim and were waiting for support from the Home Office to come through; this included the provision of food, money and clothes.

Some women also talked about support they received from charities when their asylum claims were refused and their accommodation and financial support were terminated by the Home Office; this included temporary shelter, food, and travel expenses. One woman explained:

“I am originally from Eritrea, I am a Pentecostal Christian and I was persecuted for my religious beliefs. I waited for two years for a decision from the Home Office, and it was such a shock when the refusal letter came through. After that, I started receiving support from charities; they have been amazing. The support I get to cover my travel expenses and to get something to eat is a very big thing for me.”

“*If it wasn’t for organisations like [charities and support groups], you wouldn’t be talking to me right now.*”

Alongside this, a number of women talked about the **emotional support they receive from charities, including from peer support groups** run by Women for Refugee Women in London, Hope Projects in Birmingham and Women Asylum Seekers Together in Manchester. Talking about the peer support group she attends, one woman explained: “We have a chat, we smile together. It helps in various ways, because you’ll be thinking about something else, not your situation.” Another woman described the group she attends as “the most positive thing during this process, coming together to meet people who are going through what we are going through, who understand how you are feeling.” One woman described the importance of the emotional support she receives in stark terms: “If it wasn’t for organisations like them, you wouldn’t be talking to me right now.”



“This is like a wall I cannot reach, that is me stuck in the middle... I don’t have any hope. I feel like the Home Office is angry, like they don’t want to help us.”

The need for solutions

During the first set of workshops we ran, **it was noticeable how many women described the asylum system as adversarial, angry, or punitive.** Explaining one of the pictures she had chosen, one woman explained: “This is like a wall I cannot reach, that is me stuck in the middle. I used to be a healthy, happy person, but it seems like here I have lost everything. I don’t have any hope. I feel like the Home Office is angry, like they don’t want to help us.” Another said that in the asylum system, “you literally have to pull up your sleeves and fight, you just don’t get a break, it’s just one thing after another. You feel like, why do I even bother? I’m just better off dead really.”

The women we spoke to highlighted serious problems with the very fabric of the UK asylum system, including a culture of disbelief in the Home Office, lengthy delays and waiting, poor housing and financial support, and the prohibition on asylum seekers working. It is clear that these problems need to be addressed to ensure an asylum system that is not dehumanising and discriminatory – as so many of the women described it – but fair and humane.

Alongside this, the conversations we had with women consistently pointed to the lack of support as people go through the asylum system, and the negative impact of this. When women did speak positively about going through the asylum process, this was almost always related to instances of practical and emotional support they had received.

In the next section of the report, we explain how **systems that provide ongoing, structured support to people as they go through the asylum process ensure a better asylum system overall, and help to ensure that enforcement and detention are used only as a last resort.** We also present the findings of our discussions with asylum-seeking and refugee women on asylum systems that are based on support and engagement.

Figuring out the system in the dark: Helen's story

I was born in Eritrea. My mother died when I was young. There were religious divisions in my family, and my father was persecuted. In the end he fled and I ended up having to flee too.

At the age of 13, I went to Sudan in search of my father. An elderly Ethiopian woman took me in. I worked for her for 12 years without pay but last year she told me I had to leave. She knew some traffickers who said they would take me to Italy, through Libya, and she made the first payment for me.

We crossed the Sahara desert in a lorry, travelling day and night for 15 days. It was so sandy and hot. Sometimes the men were forced to get off and lie on their backs in the desert. A bright light was shone into their eyes so they couldn't see, and then we women were taken to the back and raped. All of us. They didn't use any protection, nothing.

We had brought food and water and we thought we had what we needed. Then the lorry we were in broke down. There was no shade. We were burnt by the sun, and the constant heat made us more and more thirsty. One man lost his brother, and a woman I had known in Sudan also died. Those friends of ours were buried in a shallow grave. The men dug and we women wept. It wasn't really a burial. The sand will not cover them long. You can't forget.

When another lorry came for us in the desert, we thought we were being saved, but these men were traffickers and they locked us up, to torture us further for money. Some people were shot dead in front of our eyes to threaten us, to say that if we don't bring money this would be us tomorrow. They gave food so we wouldn't die, but not enough; we were always in the balance between life and death. The men who held us would burst into the room at any time, and pick out a woman. They would do whatever they wanted with you, and then return you to the room.



I thought I would never make it out of that prison, because I had no family I could call on to send money for me. I said to the guards, please shoot me: do not let me suffer another day like this. But my fellow prisoners saved me. When they were asking their families to save them from the prison, they also asked for money to get me out of there. One of the prison guards, who felt sorry for me, then made sure that I was on one of the boats.

We were lucky. The boat behind us, which had over 400 people in, sank.

That journey took us perhaps 12 hours. There were 750 people on our boat. The Italian sea guards met us halfway, and took us to Italy. We were lucky. The boat behind us, which had over 400 people in, sank. I knew some of the people on there. A couple of the people said that they were travelling on to France to try to get to the UK, and asked me if I wanted to join them. I didn't know which country was best, but I listened to other people who said that the UK was good.

I went to Isbergues, a camp near to Calais, and lived there for two months. By now, I realised I was pregnant, and I was desperate to reach a safe place for me and my baby. In Isbergues life was hard. There were no toilets, no showers. There were a lot of us and space was tight, five of us on one mattress. But there was only one thing on my mind – that if I got to the UK I would reach a safe place where I and my baby could have a good chance at life. I was determined to get here. I tried every night without fail.

So I came to this country hiding in a lorry. Thirty people broke into the same one. At the border the lorry was searched and the other 29 people were

found and had to get off. I was under the flooring so they couldn't find me.

There was only one thing on my mind – that if I got to the UK I would reach a safe place

When the lorry stopped I knew there was something wrong. I was in pain, and when I got off, I saw I was covered in blood. The lorry driver shouted at me when he saw me, and said he couldn't do anything to help. I begged him to show me to the nearest police station. At the police station I told them I had come from Calais, and that I was pregnant. They took me to the hospital, but I had lost my baby. Then the Home Office did a short interview with me and I was brought to Leeds, where I am living now.

At first, I lived in a hostel. I was given meals, but I didn't have any money. I couldn't even go out and buy sanitary towels. In the Calais jungle people used to give out clothes and shoes and shampoo, but here I had nothing. I couldn't find any charities to help me. I rang my friends in Calais and they sent me a parcel with clothes and toiletries because I had nothing in the UK.

Now, I live in a house with other women. I am not complaining because I have been in situations that were much worse, but life is hard, and there is a lot of stress here. I do not have the right to work and I get £35 a week.

One of the most difficult things has been not being able to speak the language. I receive many letters, but there is no one to translate them for me, or to help me understand what they are saying. When I got the letter telling me to come to the Home Office

interview I didn't understand it. They told me to pick up my travel tickets, but I needed a bank card to do that and I don't have one.


It's a miracle I got to the interview. The person interviewing me was not sympathetic, but I told my story as carefully as I could. I didn't know what evidence they needed. I feel I am trying to figure out the system in the dark, I don't know how they make decisions and who determines what will happen to me. Before I came to the UK I had no idea that refugees could be detained here. It is very frightening to think that could happen to me.

I feel I am trying to figure out the system in the dark. I do not know what will happen to me next. The waiting is so difficult.

What happens to a man on this journey? The most is that he is whipped and tortured. I would have rather had the same fate. But no women pass through the Sahara to Libya without being raped. I would have rather that they whipped me than made me be a plaything for them. What they forced me to do ... I know it will be an everlasting fire inside me, burning for the rest of my life. It is like the fire of hell burning inside you.

I am safe now, but I do not know what will happen to me next. The waiting is so difficult. Living is hard, but I have no choice. The only thing that's keeping me going is the fact that I've seen worse in Calais, and in Libya. And one day I hope I will be safe here and I can be educated. I want to be a nurse.

Names have been changed.



‘It’s as if you never really get out of Yarl’s Wood’: Grace’s story

I was released from Yarl’s Wood over a year ago. But I still think about it every day. It has such a big effect on your life; it’s as if you never really get out. When I hear footsteps in the corridors in my hostel, it is as if I am back there again.

My troubles started 11 years ago when I was at university in Kampala. I have known I am lesbian since I was a teenager, but it is not allowed in Uganda, so I had always struggled with my sexuality. But at university I met my partner Rachel. I was so happy with her. It was the first time I felt comfortable in a relationship. With her I could be myself, we were very close. We knew other LGB people at the university and one gay man we knew wanted to stand for president of the student union. He was being bullied very badly by other students, and one day a group of us decided we wanted to stand up for him. We decided to take a banner together to a big gathering of students.

We went there just to say, yes, we are here, we are gay. We wanted to be peaceful, but immediately trouble broke out.

The students set on us, they were beating us, stamping on us. The police came and dragged us away. I was pulled into a police van, I was bleeding, I had lost a shoe, I still have the scar on my leg where they stamped on me, my face was swollen, my lip was split. I was taken to the police station, but Rachel was not with me.

The police saw us as the criminals. They took me to Luzira prison and I was there for some months. I was so ill in prison. There is no proper toilet, you are never given the chance to shower, you sleep on the floor. And the worst of it was that the guards abused me. They would take me to a room to punish me. Other times they questioned me, how do you have sex with a woman, why do you go against African culture like this?

I claimed asylum here because I knew I could not go back, that my life would always be in danger in Uganda.

Finally a friend bailed me out of prison, she paid for my release. I owe her so much. But I still did not know where my girlfriend was. I never found her. I was heartbroken. I moved to another part of Uganda for a while, and tried to work and build up a normal life. Then a woman I was working with told me she knew who I was – she didn't want to expose me, she was lesbian in secret too, but I realised I could not keep my secret. I began to get death threats from others. I felt in despair, what had I done wrong? This woman helped me to get to England, on a student visa, with a place at a university here.

I claimed asylum here because I knew I could not go back, that my life would always be in danger in Uganda. But I didn't know anything about how to claim asylum, and I had a very bad lawyer. He asked for money but he never told me what evidence I needed. He never told me that I had to show proof of the imprisonment. He never explained that I needed a medical report on the torture I had suffered in prison and to show that I was a rape victim. I didn't know any of that so I was refused asylum.

In Yarl's Wood you do not have your freedom, you are powerless, you do not know what will happen next.

Even though I was refused I couldn't go back. By then I had heard that my partner Rachel was dead. I had nothing to go back to but more suffering. So I stayed illegally and one day I was found by the Home Office and I was taken to Yarl's Wood detention centre. The first night I passed in the police station I went mad. It triggered flashbacks of Luzira prison and I was shouting and crying, saying there were men in the room, that they would rape me. The police brought a psychiatrist and he recognised I was a victim of rape and torture, but even so I was locked up in Yarl's Wood detention centre for five months.

I cannot tell you how hard I found that. It was not because of the conditions, it is not so bad in Yarl's Wood, it is not like a prison. You have a bed, you have a shower room, you can use your mobile phone. But you do not have your freedom, you are powerless, you do not know what will happen next. So my terror kept coming back and I became suicidal. When I was on suicide watch they would put male officers to watch me, they would watch all night,

right by my bed. This made me even worse. When I went to the doctor at Bedford Hospital they handcuffed me and the officers would stay in the room even during the consultation, so I could not speak freely to the doctor.

It would be very good if the asylum system was clearer and there was more support from the start, then a lot of suffering could be avoided.

But in Yarl's Wood I met Medical Justice and other organisations who explained what I needed to make a proper asylum application. I realised I needed real evidence, so I contacted lawyers in Uganda who found my police records, and I got a medical report here on the torture I had suffered. Now I have refugee status. It would be very good if the system was clearer and there was more support from the start, as then a lot of suffering could be avoided.

Detention really destroys people mentally. You lose your dignity, you lose your self-esteem.

Detention really destroys people mentally. Even if you do not have mental health problems when you go in you will have them when you go out. You lose your dignity, you lose your self-esteem. Since I was in detention I have lost all my confidence. I keep asking myself, what was it all for, all this suffering? All I wanted was a life in peace, to love and live like others.

Names have been changed.

2. Support and engagement in the asylum system



Photo: Shyamantha Asokan

What does an asylum system based on support and engagement look like?

There is, as we highlighted earlier, a wealth of research and evidence on the use of support and engagement in immigration and asylum systems. Where support and engagement has been used most successfully, it generally takes a 'case management' approach.

Case management involves the provision of **structured, holistic support to people as they move through immigration and asylum systems**. The case manager is a type of support worker, who assesses the needs of migrants and asylum seekers and provides one-to-one support to them.²⁷

Case managers help those they are working with to **understand the process** they are going through, and to **actively engage** with it.²⁸ They can also act as an important link between them and the immigration authorities, as well as their legal representative.²⁹ They can help those they are working with to **access other support they may need**, such as counselling, or medical care.³⁰ Alongside this, they work with them to **prepare for all possible outcomes** on their case.³¹ Key to this type of approach is **building a relationship of trust** between the case manager and the person going through the process.³²

Case management is used in many different countries,³³ including Sweden, where people going through the asylum system have access to a case worker who is responsible for explaining the process and how this works to them, and ensuring they are able to engage with their case. They also help them to access additional support they may need, and to prepare for all possible outcomes, including the possibility that their case may be refused.³⁴

Case management in the asylum system has also been trialled on a small scale in the UK. Between 2010 and 2012, the key worker pilots for single people and families going through the asylum process were run by Refugee Action, and were funded in part by the UK Border Agency (UKBA).³⁵ Single people and families taking part in the pilot were assigned a key worker who provided practical and emotional support to them as they went through the asylum process.

They supported them to understand the process and what was happening in their case, and to participate actively in it; they acted as a link between asylum seekers and other agencies, including immigration; they supported them with issues or problems they faced as they went through the process, including to do with health, accommodation and financial support; and, from the very outset, they prepared them for all possible outcomes on their case, including refusal.³⁶

Benefits of this type of approach

Providing structured support to people as they go through the asylum process can mean a much better asylum system, for a number of reasons.

Case management is a **person-centred approach**. It recognises that people going through the asylum system have often been through very traumatic experiences and have complex needs, and responds to this by supporting them to navigate the asylum system – so, by helping them to understand the process and resolve particular difficulties and problems that may arise, and also to deal with the anxiety and uncertainty of making an asylum claim and waiting for a decision on this. By providing this ongoing, structured support, and by linking asylum seekers in with other specialist services, case management works to **promote their health and wellbeing**,³⁷ and to **prevent crisis situations from developing**.³⁸

Case management can also help to ensure **good quality and timely decision-making** on asylum claims. Acting as a link between the person going through the process and the immigration authorities, the case manager can ensure that decision-makers **have all the relevant information about a case**, so that they can make a well-informed decision.³⁹ Moreover, by supporting people seeking asylum to understand the process they are going through, case managers can help them to become more involved in their case, and **to participate in ensuring that all relevant information and available evidence is submitted**.⁴⁰

The relationship of trust that develops between the case manager and the person going through the system can also mean they **disclose information that may be crucial to their asylum claim**, but which, in a less supportive system, they might have kept to themselves.⁴¹ Importantly, in the key worker pilot for families in the UK, this was found to have **gendered dimensions**.

The pilot's evaluation noted instances in which women participating **only felt able to disclose their previous experiences of violence and abuse, which were critical to their asylum claims, to their female key workers**, with whom they had established relationships and built rapport and trust. The evaluation explained that these women had felt unable to reveal this information to the Home Office case owners, or their solicitors, but that "having a female key worker who visited them in their home and was interested in asking questions about them helped them gain enough confidence to 'take the plunge'".⁴²

Providing support during the asylum process can mean better outcomes once people receive decisions on their claims, too. So, people who receive this support and subsequently receive a positive decision are often in a much better position to get on with their lives in the country where they have been granted asylum. In this way, **case management can improve social inclusion outcomes for refugees**.⁴³ For those who are refused asylum, the provision of structured support can mean they are more able to think through and make an informed decision about their possible options. We explore this in more detail in the following section.

How does support and engagement reduce the use of detention?

Asylum systems based on support and engagement aim to resolve cases, including those where claims have been refused, while people remain in the community, without the use of enforcement and detention.

As highlighted earlier, an important element of case management is preparing those going through the asylum system for all possible outcomes, including a refusal of their case. This can help people to have more realistic expectations. If they are ultimately refused, their case manager can then **help them to understand why this is, and explain what further options are available to them**. The relationship with the case manager is key here: it is crucial that those going through the asylum process have someone to speak to whom they see as separate to the system, and feel they can trust.⁴⁴

By helping them to have realistic expectations, and understand why their claim has not been accepted, case managers can prepare and support those who are refused to think through all options available to them, including the possibility of return to their country of origin through voluntary programmes. Discussing these issues is inevitably difficult, but support provided during the process can mean people who are refused **feel more able to have these discussions, and consider their possible options.**⁴⁵

Research has also highlighted that keeping people informed about their cases, and supporting them to participate in immigration and asylum processes, **helps them to feel they have been through a legitimate system and had a fair hearing.** Building this trust and transparency means that, if someone's claim is refused, they are more likely to understand this decision.⁴⁶

In Sweden, the use of support and engagement in the asylum process means that, where people are refused asylum and are required to leave the country, **case resolution very often happens in the community, without the use of enforcement or detention.** Between two-thirds to three-quarters of those required to leave the country do so through voluntary programmes.⁴⁷

Overall, Sweden has capacity to detain just 255 people at a time.⁴⁸ This is in striking contrast to the UK, where around 3,000 people are in detention at any one time.⁴⁹ Indeed, across 2015, Sweden detained about 3,500 people;⁵⁰ in the same year, approximately 32,400 people – almost ten times this amount – were held in detention in the UK.⁵¹ It is important to highlight, too, that these lower numbers are not related to Sweden having fewer asylum applications compared with the UK; in fact, it has been dealing with much higher numbers of asylum applications.⁵²

Key issues for engagement-based asylum systems

Compliance and cost

Research evidence from many different countries shows high levels of compliance and very low levels of absconding for community-based programmes. This includes programmes working with people whose cases have been refused and who are required to leave the country, who remain in the community until they depart.⁵³ Key to high levels of compliance is trust in the system people are going through, which is promoted by the emphasis on support and engagement that is at the heart of the case management approach.

Research evidence also demonstrates that community-based programmes have much lower operational costs than detention centres. Engagement-based approaches also cost less because they have significantly higher rates of voluntary return, which is less expensive than forced deportations; and because reducing the use of detention can also mean fewer cases of unlawful detention, and so reductions in the amount of compensation paid as a result of this.⁵⁴ Between 2011 and 2014, for instance, the UK government paid almost £15 million in compensation following claims for unlawful detention.⁵⁵

Implementing engagement-based systems effectively

- **This type of approach is most effective when support is provided all the way through.** In the key worker pilots run by Refugee Action, some single people and families were only referred to receive support after their main asylum interview had taken place. The evaluations of the pilots pointed to the negative impact of this, highlighting that in some instances it had worked against the development of a relationship of trust between the key worker and those going through the process.⁵⁶ The evaluations of the Millbank and Glasgow pilots, which were run in the late 2000s for families refused asylum, also highlighted the problems that can occur when support and engagement only happens at the tail end of the process.⁵⁷
- **It is also most effective when, if someone's case is refused, all options available to them including other avenues for remaining in the country legally are considered.**⁵⁸ This helps to ensure that people feel they are going through a fair and legitimate process, in which their case to remain in the country has been fully heard and considered.
- **Ensuring the basic needs of those going through the system is crucial.** We highlighted earlier that the women we spoke to about their experiences of the UK asylum process pointed to the poor accommodation and inadequate level of financial support provided, as well as the restriction on the right to work. Research evidence actually shows that making sure people have decent housing and adequate financial support helps to ensure compliance with immigration and asylum processes. Ensuring that the basic needs of migrants and asylum seekers are met is also associated with higher rates of voluntary departure.⁵⁹ There is no evidence to show, conversely, that making people homeless and cutting off their financial support – as currently happens in the UK to many of those who have been refused asylum – ‘incentivises’ people to leave the UK.
- **Ensuring access to good quality legal advice and representation is also essential.** We highlighted in the first section of the report that some women had experienced problems with their solicitors, including finding it difficult to get hold of them and get updates on their case. Such problems need to be seen in the context of significant cuts to legal aid, which have left legal practitioners stretched and unable to dedicate the time and resources needed for asylum cases.⁶⁰ Ensuring that those going through the asylum system have access to good quality legal advice and representation is an important part of helping them to understand the process they are going through, and fostering trust in it.⁶¹ It also helps to promote good decision-making (see below) and timely and efficient case resolution.⁶²
- **Ensuring good decision-making is critical.** It is vital that those who are in need of protection are recognised as refugees and given refugee status. We highlighted earlier the concerns of the women we spoke to about the Home Office culture of disbelief; indeed, around a third of appeals by asylum-seeking women against Home Office refusals of their cases are successful.⁶³ As explained earlier, asylum systems based on support and engagement can help to ensure good quality decision-making, and that decision-makers get it right first time.

Areas of success to build on in the UK: The Family Returns Process

While case management is not currently used in the UK asylum process, a more engagement-focused approach is being used in some sections of the asylum system, with real success.

The Family Returns Process, which was introduced in 2011 following the Coalition government's pledge to end the use of detention for children, uses engagement to help resolve the cases of families who have been refused asylum. It operates in the following way.

First, a 'family return conference' is held with the family, to discuss the option of voluntary return and any barriers to return, such as medical or family welfare issues. Two weeks later, there is a 'family departure meeting', to discuss the family's views about their options. If the family do not then decide to take voluntary return, they are given two weeks' notice of a 'required return'. This means their return is arranged by the Home Office but they make their own way to the airport, and their return takes place without the use of enforcement.

It is only if these attempts to resolve the family's case are unsuccessful that enforcement can then be used. If the family

does not comply with the required return, the Home Office draws up a plan for their 'ensured return'; this plan is referred to the Independent Family Returns Panel, whose membership includes health and child welfare experts, and who can recommend that changes to the plan are made. As a last resort, detention may be used, but only with the approval of the Panel. Detention can be for up to 72 hours, or up to a week with ministerial approval.⁶⁴

Under the Family Returns Process, the number of children detained in the UK has fallen dramatically. In 2009, for instance, 1,119 children were held in detention;⁶⁵ in the year ending September 2016, by contrast, 93 children were detained.⁶⁶ The most recent report of the Family Returns Panel also highlights that, between 2014-16, 97% of families routed into the process who subsequently returned to their countries of origin did so without the use of enforcement or detention.⁶⁷

The Family Returns Process does not, as Detention Action has highlighted, "correspond to international good practice in alternatives to detention." But as they also point out, this approach to families who have been refused asylum nevertheless "demonstrates that engaging in a structured way with migrants in the returns process can reduce the need for detention".⁶⁸ This is a vital lesson that could be the basis for further reform in the UK.

Women's views on support and engagement in the asylum system

Following the first set of workshops we ran with women, to find out what a better asylum system looks like to them, we ran three further workshops, involving 52 women. We ran these in London and Birmingham.⁶⁹ In these workshops, **we talked to the women participating about engagement-based systems and the case management approach, and asked what they thought of this.**

This included talking about what happens in engagement-based systems when people are refused asylum. So, we set out that in this type of system, people are supported to discuss and think through their options, including the possibility of voluntary return, and that the aim is to resolve people's cases in the community. We explained that in Sweden, where they use this type of approach, the majority of people refused asylum who subsequently leave the country do so through voluntary programmes, and this is why detention is used on a much more sparing basis than in the UK.

Before running these workshops, we considered at length whether it was necessary to broach this subject with the women we were speaking to, many of whom did not have refugee status and so were still going through the uncertainty and anxiety of the asylum process. In the end, we felt that in order to find out about women's opinions on this different type of approach, it was important to be upfront and honest about the system as a whole.

Before each workshop, we made it clear that we were going to be talking about what happens when people are refused asylum. We also said that we understood some women may not want to discuss this, and emphasised that they didn't have to participate in this part of the workshop and could leave at any point. Understandably, some women didn't want to discuss these issues; however, some did, and we include our findings from these discussions here.

'Support is a good idea': What women think of possible reforms

In line with the first set of workshops we ran, where the need for support came through strongly, the women we spoke to about engagement-based systems and the case management approach were **unanimously positive about the idea of structured support during the asylum process.**

Some women were particularly interested in the role of case managers in **helping people to understand the process they are going through, and supporting them to participate in their case.** One woman explained: "That would be very, very important for asylum seekers. When she comes to a land she doesn't know, she needs that support in the asylum system from the very beginning." Another said: "Someone who explains things from the start will make things easier – you will understand more."

Women also felt that the **emotional support** offered by case managers, to help people cope with the uncertainty and anxiety of going through the asylum process, is important. One woman said that, if she had received support through the asylum process, "I think I would not be having this depression, because I would have someone to help me on this journey." Another said that women going through the asylum system "can have depression, stress, madness. They don't know where to go, or who do I speak to? Who will help me? Support is a good idea."



"When she comes to a land she doesn't know, she needs that support in the asylum system from the very beginning."



“Support sounds amazing, because that’s what we lack. I’m struggling with so many things.”

Some women thought that the **practical support** provided by case managers would be particularly useful. One woman explained: “Support sounds amazing, because that’s what we lack. I’m struggling with so many things at the moment, so I think it sounds like a good thing.”

Several women also felt that having someone to act as a **liaison between them and immigration**, and to ensure that decision-makers have all the information they need to make a good decision, would be very helpful. One woman remarked: “They can help the immigration authorities to understand who they are dealing with, the background of a person and the problems they are facing.”

In one of the workshops, although we had not specifically asked women whether they thought they would feel more comfortable talking about previous experiences of violence and abuse with someone they had built a relationship with, one woman said that she thought **this type of approach would help disclosure, and pointed to the gendered dimensions of this:**

“The Home Office should know that me, as a woman, I will not say ‘I was raped’ if you talk to me; I will not say ‘I was raped’. No, no, no. Because I will want to first get your trust. If I get your trust then I will open up a bit, but not all at once, just a bit, a little bit. And certain people who are patient, they will know how to treat those people, they will know how to treat those cases.”

‘At least they will be preparing you’: Hard choices in the asylum process

During the discussions we had about what happens in engagement-based systems when people are refused asylum, the women who participated identified several elements that they felt were preferable to the UK approach to people who are refused.

“If you have someone who is walking with you, even if you are refused, at least they will be preparing you”.

Several women responded positively to the idea of **supporting people to prepare for all possible outcomes, including a refusal**, and suggested that this would be helpful. One woman said: “Sometimes when I go out, I come back, I check my letters, and if it is a brown envelope, I think it is from the Home Office; my mind starts pounding, because you don’t know what is in there. So at least with some support, it won’t be a surprise for you, it won’t be a shock.” Another woman explained:

“I think support is a good thing, because you have someone who is working along with you, trying to explain to you what is happening. I think it will help women, especially those who are going through a tough type of waiting, and are in depression – so many asylum seekers are depressed. And if you have someone who is walking with you, even if you are refused, at least they will be preparing you that they can refuse you. I think it’s a good idea.”

“Every time you’re going to report, you don’t know if you’re coming back or not”.

Some women contrasted this type of approach, and supporting people to think through their options if their claim is refused, with the **apparently arbitrary way the UK asylum system operates**. They highlighted that following a refusal, you can be reporting regularly to the Home Office as required and attending all your appointments, but then you are suddenly detained.

One woman emphasised the inscrutability of the UK system as she explained “every time you’re going to report, you don’t know if you’re coming back or not”. Another woman added that the uncertainty of this “makes you crazy, it makes you depressed”. Several women suggested that this type of approach can actually reduce compliance with the asylum system, because if people are worried they are going to be locked up, they may feel it is better to stop reporting altogether.

Some women said that when supporting people to think about the options available to them if they have been refused, **barriers to voluntary return need to be addressed**. In particular, several women explained that being given permission to work, and so being able to save some money, would make it easier for those who are refused to return to the country they have come from.⁷⁰ One woman said: “If somebody came because of war, but maybe now things have changed, if they can work then maybe they have some little savings, and they feel secure to go home and start something.” Another said: “If you have some money, rather than staying here, wasting time and age, you can go home, start on a new life.”

It is important to highlight that some women did not view the approach of engagement-based systems as more positive, because they still require some people to return to their countries of origin. A number of women we spoke to were also very clear that using detention on a much more sparing basis, as happens in Sweden, is not good enough – they emphasised that detention should not be used at all.

Some women, however, said that they felt a significant reduction in the use of detention in the UK would be an important step forward. Alongside this, some also said that although engagement-based systems still refuse asylum claims and require people to leave the country, **working to resolve cases in the community is a better approach, overall, than the UK asylum system**. One woman put it simply: “It’s better to be out than to be in detention. This system is good.” Another said:

“I know you can seek asylum and then you will be refused, but if you have someone to help you or hear what you are saying, even if you are refused, I think the process you are talking about will help us and the minds of people will be more relaxed. It’s a good idea, I like it.”



Photo: Shyamantika Asokan

3 Recommendations ■ for change



In this final section of the report, we set out **seven recommendations for change to the government and the Home Office**, across two key areas.

Our first three recommendations are steps the government and the Home Office should take to work towards an asylum system which resolves cases without the use of detention. We then set out a further four recommendations, which the government and the Home Office should adopt to ensure their current programme of detention reform is implemented effectively.

An asylum system based on support and engagement

Alongside the detention reforms the government has promised to implement (see recommendations on this below), it needs a bigger, more ambitious vision. It needs to develop a strategy that moves away from detention as a routine part of asylum policy.

We recognise that the wider vision of reform we set out in this report, of an asylum system that provides structured support to people as they go through the asylum process and which focuses on engagement as a way of resolving cases, is ambitious. However, it is achievable. The government and the Home Office could start moving towards this type of asylum system in three key ways:

■ **Listen to those who have experience of the asylum system**

As highlighted earlier, in recent years areas such as mental health support, drug and alcohol treatment and the criminal justice system have focused increasingly on the experiences of ‘service users’, and government departments and agencies have sought to ensure that their views and opinions are reflected in the design and delivery of these services.

The Home Office should learn from this, and seek out and listen to the views and opinions of those who have experience of the asylum process, in order to build a system that is dignified and humane, and gives each individual the chance of a fair hearing.

■ **Work with the voluntary sector to implement pilots that move away from detention and are based on support and engagement**

These pilots would not function as ‘proof of concept’ – as we have highlighted, there is a wealth of international evidence demonstrating that immigration and asylum systems based on support and engagement work. Rather, they would help the government and the Home Office to understand how this type of approach can function most effectively in the context of the UK.

The key worker pilots, run by Refugee Action and part-funded by the Home Office, demonstrated the strength of the voluntary sector in providing case management support, and its ability to build trust with those seeking asylum, which is crucial for this type of approach.

In the context of the wider immigration system, Detention Action's ongoing Community Support Project with young men who have been through the criminal justice system also highlights the importance of the voluntary sector in implementing a successful case management approach.⁷¹ The Home Office therefore needs to work closely with the voluntary sector, and draw on its strengths and expertise, in developing and implementing these pilots.

The vulnerability of women seeking asylum, and the particular harms they experience in detention, make them a suitable group for a pilot. As we have highlighted, as well as reducing the use of enforcement and detention, evidence also suggests that an approach based on support and engagement may help to address the significant barriers survivors of sexual or other gender-based violence face in disclosing their experiences of persecution.

■ **Implement an overall strategy to move away from immigration detention**

While the government has set out its expectation that reforms such as the adults at risk policy will reduce the number of people in detention overall, it hasn't yet developed a clear and coherent strategy to ensure that this is achieved.

In consultation with key stakeholders, including voluntary sector organisations and those who have experienced detention, the Home Office should develop, publish and implement a strategy for significantly reducing the use of immigration detention in the UK. A core element of this strategy should be the implementation of support and engagement-based approaches for those going through the asylum system.

Implementing detention reform

At the beginning of this report, we explained the reforms that the government has recently introduced, through which it expects to reduce the number of people in immigration detention.

We welcome this commitment to reduce detention through incremental reform. However, more needs to be done to ensure that these reforms are transparent and effective, and result in genuine change. Within its current programme of reform, the government and the Home Office need to take the following steps:

■ **Implement the time limit on detaining pregnant women transparently**

Since the introduction of the 72-hour time limit on the detention of pregnant women in July 2016, the Home Office has resisted repeated calls to actively publish statistics on the detention of pregnant women,⁷² and has also made it very difficult to access this information through Freedom of Information requests.⁷³

We welcome the government's commitment to end the routine detention of pregnant women. However, in order for the effectiveness of the new time limit in achieving this to be scrutinised, it is essential that statistics on its operation are made publicly available. These statistics should include the numbers of pregnant women detained, and outcomes for these women – whether they are removed from the UK, or released back into the community.

Since the Coalition government's pledge in 2010 to end the detention of children, figures published as part of the Home Office's quarterly immigration statistics have been crucial for monitoring the effectiveness of the Family Returns Process in achieving this. There is no sound reason why the Home Office cannot, similarly, regularly publish statistics on the detention of pregnant women, to ensure that the new policy is operating as it should.

■ **Implement the new adults at risk policy to end the detention of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence**

The new adults at risk policy, introduced from September 2016, sets out a clear presumption against the use of detention for vulnerable adults, including survivors of sexual and other-gender based violence. The Home Office has said that through this new policy, it expects to see a reduction in the number of vulnerable people detained.

However, it has not yet explained how it plans to monitor the implementation of this policy, and how it will know that the policy is achieving its aim.

The Home Office needs to develop a clear mechanism for monitoring the adults at risk policy. It should also make statistics collected through this publicly available, including how many survivors of sexual and other gender-based violence are being detained under the new policy.

■ **Implement the automatic judicial oversight of detention**

During the passage of the Immigration Bill 2015-16, the government introduced a provision to ensure that an automatic bail hearing is required if someone has been in detention for four months, and has not already made an application for immigration bail.

This provision now forms part of the Immigration Act 2016. However, the government has not given a specific date for its implementation. Given that the Act became law in May 2016, the automatic judicial oversight provision needs to be implemented immediately.

■ **Introduce a 28-day time limit on immigration detention**

The indefinite nature of immigration detention in the UK exacerbates the harms of being locked up, as people simply have no idea of when they will be released. The introduction of a time limit has cross-party Parliamentary support, and has also been called for by monitoring bodies including HM Inspectorate of Prisons and the National Preventive Mechanism. The UK remains the only country in Europe without a time limit on immigration detention. A 28-day limit, as recommended by the Parliamentary inquiry into detention, should be introduced.



Our partners

Photo: Camilla Greenwell



Women Asylum Seekers Together Manchester

is a charity led by women seeking asylum which was founded 12 years ago. WAST aims to empower its members and together they build one another's capacity, both practically and emotionally, for recovery from the gender-based violence they experienced in their country of origin, and for survival in the UK asylum system. The women-only, secure, non-judgemental, secular and accessible space that WAST women have created is central to their safety and wellbeing.

At WAST Manchester women share experiences, support one another, have a voice and are valued. WAST group activities – such as the choir, dance, English classes, information workshops and food bank, as well as support groups and drop-ins – aim to improve women's physical and mental health, and help them to learn about their rights and build their confidence. Specialist advocacy and advice volunteers and agencies who visit WAST also help to break down barriers women face in accessing services, especially women's safety and immigration services. At WAST women are given the support and resources to have their voice heard and gain the confidence to speak out both within the group, and to the wider public. They campaign and raise awareness about the injustices they face as they experience the realities of the asylum system.

Hope Projects, Birmingham

is a Birmingham-based charity offering housing for 27 destitute asylum seekers in one of their nine houses; money for food and basic essentials for over 60 people per week with no other means of support; and legal advice and representation to Hope residents made destitute through flawed refusals of asylum, who are unable to access legal aid. In addition, Hope runs two volunteer-led peer support groups, the Hope Women's Group and the Migrants Union, which aim to empower and build wellbeing.

London Refugee Women's Forum

is a group of refugee women who campaign and advocate for the rights of refugee and asylum-seeking women. Members of the group come from diverse backgrounds, including Afghanistan, Iran, Sudan, Eritrea and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and many of them campaigned on women's issues in their home countries before they became refugees in the UK. Their campaigning work in the UK includes public speaking as well as telling their stories of migration through performances, using poetry and songs. Recently they performed their 'Set Her Free' poem at Refugee Week events in 2016 and the Women's March on London in January 2017. Currently the Forum has a weekly drama session, hosted by the Southbank Centre, where they meet to develop their writing and performing skills and to support one another.

Women Asylum Seekers Together London

is an open and inclusive group of women who have come to the UK seeking sanctuary from persecution. It is a self-help group that runs projects and programmes based on the needs of WAST members. Currently there are English classes, a group for mothers and toddlers, and yoga classes. Women at WAST also participate in other shorter courses, including employability, IT and campaigning, designed to increase their skills and confidence. They contribute hugely to the campaigning and research work that Women for Refugee Women does. Above all, WAST provides a warm, friendly space to meet, chat, learn and share for refugee and asylum-seeking women in London.

References

1. In *Detained*, 33 of the 43 women (77%) who spoke to us about their experiences of persecution told us that they had been raped. Forty of the 43 women (93%) said they had been either raped or tortured. In *I Am Human*, 24 out of the 34 women (71%) who disclosed their experiences of persecution said they had experienced rape or sexual violence. Twenty-six out of the 34 women (76%) said they had experienced either rape or torture. See <http://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/2016/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/WRWDetained.pdf> and http://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/2016/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/WRW_IamHuman_report-for-web.pdf
2. In *I Am Human*, 33 out of the 38 women who spoke to us overall said that male guards had seen them in intimate situations when they were detained in Yarl's Wood.
3. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2015) *Report on an unannounced inspection of Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre*; <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2015/08/Yarls-Wood-web-20151.pdf>
4. According to statistics supplied to Women for Refugee Women by the Home Office, in 2015, of 1,827 women leaving detention who had claimed asylum, just 285 were removed from the UK; 1,526 were granted leave to enter or remain, temporary admission or release, or bail. A further 16 had another unspecified outcome.
5. <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2014-11-10/213948/>
6. Home Office (2016) *Annual report and accounts 2015-16*; https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/539638/HO_AR_16_gov.pdf
7. All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees and All Party Parliamentary Group on Migration (2015) *The report of the inquiry into the use of immigration detention in the UK*; <https://detentioninquiry.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/immigration-detention-inquiry-report.pdf>
8. Shaw, S. (2016) *Review into the welfare in detention of vulnerable persons: A report to the Home Office by Stephen Shaw*; https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/490782/52532_Shaw_Review_Accessible.pdf
9. Home Office (2016) *Immigration Act 2016: Guidance on adults at risk in immigration detention*; https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/547519/Adults_at_Risk_August_2016.pdf
10. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2016-01-14/debates/16011448000010/ImmigrationDetentionVulnerablePersons>
11. Home Office (2016) *Immigration Act 2016: Guidance on adults at risk in immigration detention*.
12. <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-04-18/HCWS679/>
13. With ministerial approval, this can be extended to up to seven days. See Home Office (2016) *Chapter 55a: Detention of pregnant women*; https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/537066/Chapter_55a_Detention_of_pregnant_women_v1.pdf
14. The Detention Forum, a network of organisations working together to challenge the UK's use of detention, has been at the heart of calls for a time limit on detention. Women for Refugee Women is a member of the Detention Forum. See <http://detentionforum.org.uk/>
15. See HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2015) *Report on an unannounced inspection of Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre*; National Preventive Mechanism (2017) *Monitoring places of detention: Seventh annual report of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism*; <http://www.nationalpreventivemechanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/NPM-annual-report-corrected.pdf>
16. This provision will not apply, however, to those who are facing deportation because of a conviction for a criminal offence.
17. Home Office (2016) *Detention Services Order 06/2016: Women in the detention estate*; https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/531270/DSO_06-2016_women_in_the_detention_estate.pdf
18. International Detention Coalition (2015) *There are alternatives: A handbook for preventing unnecessary immigration detention*; <http://idcoalition.org/publication/view/there-are-alternatives-revised-edition/>
19. Detention Action (2016) *Without detention: Opportunities for alternatives*; <http://detentionaction.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Without-Detention.pdf>
20. See, for instance, <https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2015/09/07/involving-recovering-alcohol-and-drug-users-in-the-delivery-and-design-of-treatment-and-recovery/>
21. Two of these workshops were in London, one was in Birmingham, and one in Manchester.

22. See, for instance, Revolving Doors' report *A good life* (2015) – here, collage was used as a research method to find out about the hopes and aspirations for a 'good life' among people facing multiple and complex needs; <http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/file/1835/download?token=cN3o8ju0>
23. In each workshop, we recorded the conversations we had with individual women, or made detailed notes on them, depending on the preferences of the woman we were speaking to. We transcribed these recordings, or wrote up our notes, after each workshop, and subsequently analysed the transcripts/notes for key themes. We later checked the key themes we had identified by feeding these back to the women participating in the second set of workshops we ran, and asking for their views on the issues and themes we had identified. The majority of the conversations we had in the collage workshops were conducted in English, although one of the researchers conducted some conversations in Amharic; she then translated these into English when she transcribed these recordings.
24. Independent Asylum Commission (2008) *Fit for purpose yet? The Independent Asylum Commission's interim findings*; <http://www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk/files/Fit%20for%20Purpose%20Yet.pdf>
25. We recognise that, recently, the Home Office has made improvements in the area of delays on decisions – see <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2017-01-16/60192/>
26. We have already cited statistics on this from *Detained* and *I Am Human*. In our earlier report, *Refused* (2012), two-thirds (66%) of the 65 women who disclosed their experiences in their country of origin had experienced some kind of gender-related persecution, including rape, sexual violence, forced prostitution, forced marriage or female genital mutilation. See http://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/2016/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/WRW_Refused_report.pdf
27. International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, pp.47-53
28. *Ibid.*, pp.47-8; Detention Action, *Without detention*, p.32
29. International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, pp.32 & 48
30. *Ibid.*, p.49
31. *Ibid.*, p.49
32. *Ibid.*, p.50; Detention Action, *Without detention*, p.40
33. For a comprehensive overview of the use of case management in different countries and contexts, see International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*.
34. International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, p.62; APPG on Refugees and APPG on Migration (2015) *The report of the inquiry into the use of immigration detention in the UK*, pp.27-8; UNHCR (2015) *Options for governments on open reception and alternatives to detention*, p.5; <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/protection/detention/5538e53d9/unhcr-options-paper-2-options-governments-open-reception-alternatives-detention.html>. We understand that the significant rise in the number of asylum applications in Sweden in 2015 – from 81,301 in 2014 to 162,877 in 2015 – has had an effect on the level of support and information provided by case workers (who are employed by the Swedish Migration Agency). It is important to highlight, however, that this type of system has been running successfully in Sweden while they have been dealing with significantly higher numbers of asylum claims than the UK. In 2013, for instance, when a full support and information service was still in operation, there were 54,259 asylum applications in Sweden, compared with just 23,584 in the UK. See APPG on Refugees and APPG on Migration, *The report of the inquiry into the use of immigration detention in the UK*, p.28.
35. The UK Border Agency, an executive agency of the Home Office, was abolished in 2013, and replaced by UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) and Immigration Enforcement (IE).
36. Lukes, S., Hutton, C. and Behlic, Z. (2011) *Refugee Action key worker pilot: Project evaluation*; Hutton, C. (2012) *Evaluation of family key worker pilot: Outcomes and lessons learned*.
37. International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, p.49
38. Hutton, *Evaluation of family key worker pilot*, p.21
39. International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, p.15
40. Lukes, Hutton and Behlic, *Refugee Action key worker pilot*, p.25; Hutton, *Evaluation of family key worker pilot*, p.13
41. International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, p.49
42. Hutton, *Evaluation of family key worker pilot*, pp.7-8
43. International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, p.49
44. Hutton, *Evaluation of family key worker pilot*, p.21
45. *Ibid.*, pp.15-16
46. International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, p.14

47. In 2012 in Sweden, 68% of people required to leave the country departed through voluntary programmes (International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, p.62); in 2013, 76% of those refused asylum who subsequently left the country did so through voluntary programmes (APPG on Refugees and APPG on Migration, *The report of the inquiry into the use of immigration detention in the UK*, p.28).
48. APPG on Refugees and APPG on Migration, *The report of the inquiry into the use of immigration detention in the UK*, p.28; Caritas Sweden (2015) *Country report: Sweden – Asylum Information Database*, p.46; http://www.ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/aida_se_update.iii_.pdf
49. As at the end of September 2016, there were 2,998 people in detention in the UK. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-july-to-september-2016/detention>
50. Caritas Sweden, *Country report: Sweden – Asylum Information Database*, p.7.
51. <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/immigration-detention-in-the-uk/>
52. As highlighted in an earlier footnote, there were 81,301 applications for asylum in Sweden in 2014, and 162,877 in 2015; see <http://www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.39a9cd9514a346077211b0a/1422893141926/Inkomna+ans%C3%B6kningar+om+asyl+2014+-+Applications+for+asylum+received+2014.pdf> and <http://www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.7c00d8e6143101d166d1aab/1451894593595/Inkomna+ans%C3%B6kningar+om+asyl+2015+-+Applications+for+asylum+received+2015.pdf>. In the UK, there were 25,033 applications for asylum in 2014, and 32,414 in 2015. See <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migration-to-the-uk-asylum/>
53. International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, pp.10-11
54. *Ibid.*, pp.11-12
55. APPG on Refugees and APPG on Migration, *The report of the inquiry into the use of immigration detention in the UK*, p.21
56. Lukes, Hutton and Behlic, *Refugee Action key worker pilot*, pp.25-6; Hutton, *Evaluation of family key worker pilot*, pp.6 & 19
57. Detention Action, *Without detention*, p.23
58. International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, p.13
59. *Ibid.*, p.28
60. See, for instance, IARS' research on the impact of legal aid cuts on refugee and asylum-seeking women: <http://www.iars.org.uk/content/Legalaid>
61. International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, p.31
62. Detention Action, *Without detention*, pp.47-8
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66. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-july-to-september-2016/detention#children-in-detention>
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68. Detention Action, *Without detention*, p.25
69. We ran two of these workshops in London, and one in Birmingham. Some of the same women who participated in the collage workshops attended this second set of workshops, but a number of women also attended who hadn't participated in these.
70. See International Detention Coalition, *There are alternatives*, on how "securing short-term work rights can be integral to enabling independent return" (p.53).
71. Detention Action, *Without detention*, pp.51-2
72. See, for instance, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2016-10-27/debates/B506E3C6-6840-45E5-B60B-F7621BCE9EC6/ImmigrationDetentionOfPregnantWomen#contribution-20328359-D700-4C4C-B99F-0A51469BE5ED>
73. Women for Refugee Women has made three Freedom of Information requests for statistics on pregnant women in detention over the past year, none of which the Home Office has responded to within the 20 working day deadline specified by the Freedom of Information Act. In relation to two of these requests the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has issued formal breach notices against the Home Office because of its failure to respond within the required deadlines; see https://ico.org.uk/media/action-weve-taken/decision-notice/2016/1624503/fs_50624827.pdf and <https://ico.org.uk/media/action-weve-taken/decision-notice/2016/1625622/fs50649497.pdf>. We have recently submitted another complaint to the ICO about the third request, as yet again the Home Office has failed to respond by the due date.

I think the whole system is designed to push you to the edge. All we did was flee our own countries because of problems, but they don't treat us like human beings at all.

Every year, around 2,000 women who have come to the UK to seek asylum are locked up in immigration detention. Many of these women are survivors of rape or other gender-based violence, and detention is traumatic for them. Their detention is also often pointless, as the majority are not removed from the UK, but released to continue with their cases.

This can't, and doesn't have to, continue. This report sets out a vision of a different type of asylum system: one that focuses on providing support to and engaging constructively with people seeking asylum, and which works to resolve their cases in the community, without the use of detention.

The report draws on specific, practical examples of the use of support and engagement in the asylum process, to show what a different type of asylum system might look like. It is also rooted in the views and opinions of women who have experience of the UK asylum system. The voices of asylum-seeking and refugee women must now be heard, in order to build an asylum system that is dignified and humane, and gives each individual the chance of a fair hearing.

Women for Refugee Women
Tindlemanor
52 Featherstone Street
London

EC1Y 8RT

020 7250 1239

admin@refugeewomen.co.uk

www.refugeewomen.co.uk

WOMEN FOR REFUGEE WOMEN