



WOMEN FOR REFUGEE WOMEN

# SUMMARY:

## Will I ever be safe?

Asylum-seeking women made destitute in the UK

by Priscilla Dudhia

# Executive summary

Women for Refugee Women (WRW), together with our partners, **spoke with 106 asylum-seeking and refugee women from across England and Wales to hear how they have survived after being forced into destitution.** Destitution is defined here as having no right to work, and no housing or financial support.

**Women were made destitute at different points during their asylum journey.** But the vast majority who participated in this research became destitute after their asylum claims had been refused. This report explores the effects that enforced destitution has on women who have sought asylum, particularly those women whose claims were rejected, and highlights the urgent need to end this inhumane and ineffective policy. To the best of our knowledge, this report represents the most detailed contemporary account of asylum-seeking women's experiences of destitution in the UK.

The women who shared their stories with us came to our shores for safety. **When asked why they left their country, around half of the women said they experienced violence at the hands of state authorities.** Forty-two percent had been tortured and almost a third had been raped by soldiers, prison guards or police. Other women experienced violence by private individuals, such as partners, family or community members, in a situation where they believed their government could not protect them. (It is important to note here that where states fail to protect, violence in the private sphere can be grounds for asylum.) Over a third of women had been raped in the private sphere, with others fleeing forced marriage, forced prostitution, and other forms of gender-based abuse. Overall, **more than three quarters of women had experienced gender-based violence perpetrated either by the state or by private individuals.** These findings are similar to the findings in WRW's previous research, where two thirds of the women we spoke with had experienced gender-based persecution. We also asked women about their journeys to the UK; almost half of the women in this research had traumatic experiences in the categories we asked about: rape, sexual violence, physical violence and imprisonment.

Yet despite all the trauma that they experience, when they come to this country women struggle to find safety. Women and men who seek asylum

face a culture of disbelief at the Home Office, whose unfair and irrational decision-making is well documented. But women are disadvantaged further because of the inadequate understanding among Home Office staff of the impact of gender-based violence and how this falls within the UN Refugee Convention. Other barriers to fair and accurate decision-making include the decimation of legal aid and the difficulties women experience in disclosing details of sexual violence.

When they are refused asylum and forced into destitution, women often find that their experiences of violence and abuse are compounded. **Over a third of destitute women were forced into unwanted relationships, in many cases leading to sexual and physical violence.** Around 60% of the women who stayed in an unwanted relationship disclosed that they were raped or subjected to another form of sexual violence by their partner. As a result of being homeless, **a quarter of women we spoke with were raped or sexually abused when sleeping outside or in other people's homes.** Fears of deportation and detention, fuelled by information-sharing between public bodies and the Home Office, stopped the majority of those affected from reporting abuse to the police.

**Almost a third of the women who had been raped or sexually abused in their home country were then raped again or subjected to further sexual violence while destitute in the UK.** Ten women were raped or sexually abused at all three stages: in their countries of origin, when travelling to the UK, and again here after being made destitute. In other words, women who have already survived serious violence are being made vulnerable to further abuse through the policy of enforced destitution.

The cruelty of enforced destitution is also seen in the fact that **almost all of the women in our research felt depressed while living destitute, while around a third had tried to kill themselves.** Destitution is also humiliating, with the vast majority of women saying they struggled to keep clean and access period products. Forcing women into extreme poverty harms their families too; 15% had children they were looking after while they were destitute, and of these more than half said their children went hungry.

Not only is the policy of enforced destitution cruel,



it is also ineffective and even counter-productive. If the policy has any rationale, it is to make life so hard for those seeking asylum in the UK they take steps to leave the country. However, almost all of the 106 women we spoke to said they could not consider returning to their countries of origin because they still felt they would not be safe there. Furthermore, **93% of women said that being destitute negatively affected their ability to think about their asylum claim and plan for a resolution.**

By the time the research was completed 15% of the women who participated already had some form of leave to remain. We would expect that if these women were tracked further we would see rising numbers becoming successful in making their cases and getting refugee status or another form of leave to remain in the UK. If provided with

the ability to support themselves and with quality legal representation, we might see much higher numbers.

People have always moved and will continue to do so, especially when their safety is threatened. But instead of welcoming these courageous women and giving them a fair hearing, our system punishes them for fleeing danger and for wanting to survive. It is time to reshape the political and public discourse, and to replace narratives of hostility and fear with those of empathy and tolerance. It is time to build a fair asylum system in which individuals are supported throughout the process and are able to access quality legal advice. On behalf of the brave women who took part in this research, **it is time to end the policy of enforced destitution.**

Held back, by Antho

*"These two people are at a drop-in for destitute refugees, where we can get food and clothes.*

*You feel so held back, when you don't have papers. I feel I am in a prison. I can't work, I am not allowed to do anything. You just feel so depressed, you go over and over your situation, you want to die. You just have to wait in line to be given things. You can't make your life. You can't move forward.*

*I want to learn English and set up my own charity, to help widows and orphans. I will not give up. I will go forward."*





# Key findings

Our findings are drawn from the experiences of women who became destitute in England or Wales after claiming asylum. We have listed below the key areas that our research on destitution explored, and how the women responded. 106 women completed the questionnaires in total, but since not all questions were answered by all women, we have indicated the relevant sample size for each statistic.

## Persecution in countries of origin

*Of the 103 women who responded:*

- ▶ 32% had been arrested or imprisoned.
- ▶ 71% had been tortured.
- ▶ 78% had experienced gender-based violence
- ▶ 59% had been raped.
- ▶ 30% were raped by state authorities.
- ▶ 17% were fleeing forced marriage.
- ▶ 13% were fleeing forced prostitution.
- ▶ 10% were fleeing female genital mutilation (FGM) or the threat of FGM on their daughters.
- ▶ 27% were trafficked within their country of origin or to the UK or another country.

78% of the women had experienced gender-based violence in their country of origin

## Reasons for persecution

*Of the 103 women who responded:*

- ▶ 33% were persecuted because "I am a woman."
- ▶ 23% were persecuted because they were politically active.
- ▶ 16% were persecuted because they are or were suspected of being lesbian or bisexual.

## The journey to the UK

*Of the 106 women who responded:*

- ▶ 45% had experienced rape, sexual violence, torture, physical violence and/or imprisonment.

## Experiences while destitute

### When women were made destitute

*Of the 106 women who responded:*

- ▶ 75% were made destitute after their asylum claims were rejected, following an unsuccessful appeal.
- ▶ 29% after filing their initial asylum application and while waiting for Section 95 asylum support to begin.
- ▶ 8% after receiving a form of leave to remain.

### How many times women were made destitute

*Of the 104 women who responded:*

- ▶ 46% experienced destitution more than once, typically before Section 95 support began and following the refusal of an asylum claim.

## Food

- ▶ 95% of 105 women who responded were hungry; 27% of women "all the time".
- ▶ 87% of 106 women who responded relied on charities for food.
- ▶ 25% of 106 women who responded begged on the streets/outside for food.

95% of the women were hungry while destitute

## Shelter

- ▶ 44% of 106 women who responded slept outside at some point while they were destitute.

*Of the 100 women who disclosed information about a place they stayed at:*

- ▶ 58% had stayed with other community members, family or friends.
- ▶ 42% were hosted by a charity.
- ▶ 15% were hosted by a church, mosque, synagogue or other faith-based organisation.

*Of the 103 women who disclosed information about support:*

- ▶ 82% were given small hardship payments by charities to meet their basic needs.

- ▶ 18% begged on the streets/outside for money.
- ▶ 24% were exploited for work.

## Sexual violence

*Of the 106 women who responded:*

- ▶ 25% were raped or experienced another form of sexual violence when sleeping outside or at a place they were temporarily staying.
- ▶ 22% experienced physical violence while street homeless or at a place they were staying.
- ▶ 35% said that destitution forced them to stay in a relationship they would not have otherwise stayed in: 38% of those who stayed in an unwanted relationship were raped by their partner, 41% experienced another form of sexual violence, and 35% were physically abused.
- ▶ Only eight women who experienced rape, sexual or physical violence while destitute in the UK approached the police for support.

## Mental health

*Of the 106 women who responded:*

- ▶ 78% said their mental health had become "much worse" after destitution.
- ▶ 95% felt depressed, 24% self-harmed, 32% tried to kill themselves.
- ▶ 80% felt lonely.

## Children and pregnancies

*Of the 106 women who responded:*

- ▶ 14% became pregnant.
- ▶ 15% were looking after children.

*Of those women who were caring for children while destitute:*

32 women were raped or sexually abused in their country of origin and again when destitute in the UK

- ▶ 75% said their children were unable to sleep well.
- ▶ 56% said their children were hungry.
- ▶ 38% said their children missed school and suffered from poor health.

## Cycles of violence and abuse

*Of the 103 women who responded:*

- ▶ 32 women were raped or sexually abused in their country of origin and again when destitute in the UK.
- ▶ 10 women were raped or sexually abused on three occasions: first, in their country of origin; second, while travelling to seek refuge in the UK; and third, when made destitute.

## Health and hygiene

- ▶ 81% of 106 women who responded struggled to keep themselves clean.
- ▶ 65% of 105 women who responded struggled to access period products.

*Of the 104 women who disclosed the state of their health:*

- ▶ 70% said it became "much worse" once they were made destitute.

*Of the 101 women who disclosed information about access to healthcare:*

- ▶ 27% said they were unable to access NHS health services.

## Current situations

*Of the 106 women who responded:*

- ▶ 65% were still destitute.
- ▶ 42% were still refused with no pending application.
- ▶ 21% were awaiting an outcome on a fresh claim submission/Judicial Review application.
- ▶ 15% had been granted some form of leave to remain.

## Views on the future

- ▶ 93% of 105 women who responded said that being destitute negatively affected their ability to think about their asylum claim and plan for a resolution.
- ▶ 96% of 101 women said they could not return home.
- ▶ 98% of 103 women said they wished to remain in the UK.
- ▶ 98% of 105 women said they wished to work.

# Mariam's story: Ten years in limbo

I'm from Fumayu in Somalia and came to the UK in November 2008 after fleeing the war. I'm from a minority clan called Bajuni. My people live in Kismayo and in the islands between Somalia and Kenya, and we speak Kibajuni. We've been persecuted for a long time by the bigger clans. We're very poor - we fish for a living - but the majority clans have better jobs. They've treated us like slaves.

By the time I was 17, my father had arranged for me to marry a much older Bajuni man called Ahmed. I saw Ahmed for the first time on our wedding day. As a woman, I had no choice. I couldn't leave the house freely, laugh openly, talk to men who weren't my close relatives or even look other men in the eye.

I escaped the war in Somalia twice. The first time, militiamen broke into our family home and raped me and my daughter Amina. She was just 15. The men shot her dead after, and they killed my son too.

I escaped the war in Somalia twice. The first time was in the early 1990s. Militiamen broke into our family home and raped me. They raped my daughter Amina as well. She was just 15. The men shot her dead after, and they killed my son too.

Like many others, we fled to a refugee camp in Kenya where we stayed for a few years before returning to Somalia. We planned to go back to Kismayo together but Ahmed got very sick while travelling and we were forced to separate for the sake of our children.

War broke out in Kismayo and I lost two more sons. Militiamen took them away, which was common in Somalia. They were stealing boys to train them as soldiers. The men also killed my brother and raped me.

I fled to Kenya again with my children. Soon after, I came to the UK. Bajuni elders said that it would be too risky for my children to go with me, and that I should go first. I wasn't used to making decisions; in my culture it's always the men deciding. So I did as they said and my children stayed with my mum.

I applied for asylum the day after I arrived. Because I had no money, the Home Office put me in a hostel where I got two meals a day. Soon after, my support started and I moved to Middlesbrough into accommodation for people seeking asylum.

I was scared during my asylum interview. It felt as if I was in court. I'd never been made to answer so many questions in my life. I come from a place where I wasn't allowed to talk freely. And now, all of a sudden, I was in a foreign country doing an interview. I didn't understand how to tell my story.

The interpreter spoke in Swahili, not Kibajuni, and so I wasn't understood. I was made to speak to a language analyst. I was told he was Bajuni. He wasn't speaking Kibajuni like me and he told the interviewer that I wasn't Bajuni. The interviewer started questioning me in a very stern way. I was shaking so badly I wet myself.

I was refused asylum because the Home Office didn't believe I was Somali. To make things worse, my legal aid solicitor didn't tell me about the refusal until three days before the appeal deadline. I called a different solicitor who said he'd help me if I came to London but I didn't have money to travel. The asylum support money was hardly enough to eat properly. The solicitor was kind and paid for my ticket. He appealed in time but again my claim was rejected.

Around that time I learnt through someone in the Bajuni community that Ahmed was in the UK. I couldn't believe it. When Ahmed called I had so many emotions running through me. I was shocked and really pleased, knowing he was alive and here.

Apparently he'd come to the UK before me and had got refugee status soon after. He sent me money so that I could move to him in Birmingham. I felt so relieved; I only had three days left in the accommodation for people seeking asylum.

It turned out Ahmed didn't want to be with me. I told him what happened to me after he left. Instead of showing love he made me feel like being raped was my fault: "I don't feel comfortable with such a wife. This is a bad omen. You were raped so many times by so many men. I don't want that." I felt heartbroken. Sadly, Ahmed's reaction is common; there is so much shame in our culture about rape.

Ahmed made me sleep in the living room. He gave me food but no money. And I wasn't able to keep clean all the time. A Somali woman living nearby let me use her washing machine sometimes. But it was degrading; cleaning my clothes is something I should have been able to do myself. My mental health got so bad during these years. I had thoughts about ending my life.

Then Ahmed stopped giving me food. Sometimes if I left the house to try and find food he would lock me out. On those nights I'd sleep in the coach station. Ahmed became aggressive as well, and it started to frighten me. He kept asking me to leave, would swear at me, slamming doors and hitting things. But where could I go?

One day, when I went to report at the Home Office, I saw a leaflet for the charity Restore. I felt scared about sharing my experience with strangers but I also felt really scared about my situation. I called Restore and explained what was happening, and a woman came to collect me the next day. She gave me food and got me a room with The Hope Projects. She also found a legal aid solicitor to start up my asylum case. I stayed with Hope for around two years. They gave me £20 a week for food and travel to charities.

Restore got me a psychologist who helps survivors of sexual violence and registered me with the NHS. Until then, I had no idea I could see a doctor; I had heard that you couldn't get healthcare if your case was refused. I finally got treatment for my mental health, after suffering for so long.

My solicitor filed my fresh claim and I eventually got support. Restore and Hope wrote letters for me, and my solicitor got a report from a mental health specialist that said I was suffering from severe trauma. My solicitor reminded the Home Office

that my husband had refugee status. We're both Bajuni, from the same family and fled the same war. How is it that he was believed and I wasn't? It didn't make sense. I had given the Home Office my husband's details on my asylum application, so I don't understand why they didn't make the connection then. My solicitor also sent a report from a language specialist who speaks Kibajuni. I went to court twice and in the end, in December 2018, I got refugee status. I cried and cried and cried. In a way, it had lost its meaning because I'd wasted 10 years waiting to be believed.

Being raped changed me forever and I sank into severe depression because of it. And then I was made destitute and things got even worse.

My solicitor told me to apply for benefits. I made an application as soon as I got status, but it took a really long time to process. I did my best to follow the procedure, but it's confusing when you're new to the system, and it wasn't clear what I had to do. The asylum support stopped in January but my benefits didn't start for nine months. The Home Office put me in a dirty hotel and I had no money. I was lucky to have my solicitor, who gave me some cash before I got benefits. I also relied on charities for food. Being destitute after getting asylum isn't something I had expected.

Even now, I'm scared to be around men. It all comes back to me. Being raped changed me forever and I sank into severe depression because of it. And then I was made destitute and things got even worse. I'm still on anti-depressants and have a psychologist. I also have hospital appointments for my mental health.

I feel really lonely sometimes. So most days I keep myself busy in the community. I still attend support groups for asylum-seeking women. I also pray a lot. But it's hard to find peace, having lost so many people, so many children, and being separated from my remaining family. My youngest daughter, Caliyah, was eight years old when I came here. She's 19 now - a young woman - and I wasn't there for any of it. Will we live together again? I think about this every day.

# Recommendations

This report shows that forcing women who have sought asylum into destitution is inhumane and humiliating, and also pointless.

**The destitution of asylum-seeking women in the UK should end.**

**Immediate steps to end destitution in the asylum process include:**

- 1 Improving access to asylum support so that all those who make an asylum claim can live with dignity;
- 2 Granting people seeking asylum the right to work if their case has not been resolved within six months;
- 3 Extending the period in which those who are granted leave to remain continue to receive asylum support, so that those whose asylum claim is recognised are not suddenly forced into destitution;
- 4 Ensuring support continues for those refused asylum until the point at which the individual has regularised their immigration status in the UK or has returned to their country of origin.

**Immediate steps should be taken to ensure the safety of women experiencing - or at risk of - violence. These include:**

- 1 Ending data sharing between NHS and others and the Home Office so that women can seek help with confidence;
- 2 Separating immigration enforcement from police responses to victims of crime, so that women can report violence and seek justice without fear;
- 3 Enabling women with insecure immigration status to access refuges and support when they experience sexual and domestic violence, so that they can find safety.

**Overall, the UK needs a just and transparent asylum system in which each individual gets a fair hearing. This must include:**

- 1 Ensuring that Home Office decision-making is fair and recognises the impact of gender-based violence on women who seek asylum;
- 2 Revising the legal aid system so that all those claiming asylum can access quality legal representation.

[www.refugeewomen.co.uk](http://www.refugeewomen.co.uk)

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