

Women for Refugee Women submission to the Home Affairs Committee inquiry into Home Office preparedness for Covid-19

16 April 2020

About Women for Refugee Women

Women for Refugee Women (WRW) is a charity that supports women seeking asylum in the UK and challenges the injustices that they experience. This submission focuses on two key areas of our expertise: first, women in immigration detention and second, women who have been refused asylum and have been forced into destitution.

A: Women in immigration detention

WRW is in touch with women currently locked up in Yarl's Wood detention centre. We have worked for years to highlight the pointless and inhumane nature of immigration detention, particularly for women who have already survived violence, torture and trafficking.

We are very concerned by the way the Home Office has prepared for and responded to the coronavirus pandemic in relation to people in detention. We recognise, first of all, that a significant number of people have been released from detention centres since the pandemic began. However, we understand that around 20 women are still locked up in Yarl's Wood. In keeping these women in detention, the Home Office is putting their lives at risk. There are also real questions about the legality of their detention, since – as countries around the world have closed their borders – it is simply not possible to remove them.

We set out our key concerns in relation to the detention of women in Yarl's Wood during the coronavirus pandemic below.

1. Lack of preparedness for coronavirus in Yarl's Wood and inadequate response once a case was confirmed

On Saturday 21st March women in Yarl's Wood contacted WRW to tell us that there was a suspected case of coronavirus in the centre. On Sunday 22nd March, the Home Office confirmed this case.

Women in the centre told us that there had been a lax attitude to hygiene up to the point of the announcement of the suspected case, with women having to ask staff to remind others to wash their hands, and no extra soap or hand sanitisers provided at mealtimes. On 21st March, women were given face masks and gloves and told they could move around the centre if they used these and washed their hands every half hour – but they were only given one pair of gloves and one mask each and no information about how to use them effectively. It also

became apparent that women with underlying physical health conditions that would make them more vulnerable if they became infected with Covid-19 were not being given any extra protection or information following the announcement of the suspected case.

One woman who was in the centre for more than a fortnight prior to 21st March told us: 'Now they are taking precautions, but they were taking no precautions until yesterday. So right now everyone is panicking. We know there is a pandemic going on and here we are not being given the means to protect ourselves.' Another woman, who has serious underlying health conditions, said: 'I am so scared that I will die. I am not a young woman and my health problems mean that I am at high risk. I feel so afraid.' Another woman told us: 'I don't feel safe. I've locked myself away and am not talking to anyone because I have asthma and am afraid for my health. I just want to get out. This whole thing is just terrifying.'

Following the initial response during the 21st-22nd March, women subsequently told us that the implementation of protection measures in Yarl's Wood had become increasingly lax. For instance, later on that week women explained that there was now only hand sanitiser in the area where women go to pick up their food – all the hand sanitiser that had been put out in other parts of the centre had been removed. Women also said that staff had started doing regular cleaning of the centre initially following the confirmed case, but by the end of the week this seemed to have stopped. They explained, too, that fresh face masks or gloves were not being actively handed out to women as a matter of course. Rather, if women needed to move anywhere around the centre they had to ask officers for a new mask and set of gloves. Some women, however, told us that they had only recently become aware that they were supposed to do this, and had been using the same mask and gloves that they had been given over the weekend when the case was confirmed.

Many of the women we have spoken to since the announcement of the case of Covid-19 have told us, in fact, that although they are still allowed to move around Yarl's Wood they are staying in their rooms most of the time, because they simply do not feel safe and do not think enough is being done to keep them protected. Women we have spoken to have also told us they were very anxious because – although there was an initial meeting on Saturday 21st March, explaining to the women there that there was a suspected case of coronavirus in Yarl's Wood – there were no further updates or provision of information regarding the case and how it was being dealt with.

2. Arrival of newly detained people into Yarl's Wood

The apparently lax nature of the protective measures that have been implemented are even more concerning when it is considered that – as well as the risk posed by officers and other staff still working there, who come in and out of the centre everyday – newly detained people are still being brought into Yarl's Wood. In the week following the confirmed case on 22nd

March, for instance, we were aware of six new women who were brought into Yarl's Wood. More recently, on 13th April around 40 men were detained in the short-term holding facility there. Our understanding is that these men may have recently arrived in the UK by boat.

The health implications of bringing new people into the detention estate are extremely worrying. We understand that the process for those detained in the short-term holding facility at Yarl's Wood, for example, is that if they are showing any symptoms of Covid-19, they are kept in quarantine for 14 days. Otherwise, however, we assume that (in line with the time limit for being detained in short-term holding facilities) they may be moved to another part of the detention estate within seven days – despite the fact that, as the government has increasingly emphasised, asymptomatic transmission of the virus is possible. As we explain below, moreover, it is very difficult to understand why the Home Office is continuing with any new detentions at the moment, since it is simply not possible to remove anyone from the UK.

3. Continued detention of women during the pandemic, including women with underlying physical health conditions who are particularly at risk

Following the Detention Action legal challenge that was heard on 25th March the Home Office committed to urgently reviewing the cases of everyone held in detention, and it was also stated that new detentions of people from 49 countries had been halted because it was not possible to remove them from the UK. However, we know that there are still women in Yarl's Wood from countries for which the Home Office has now halted new detentions because removal is not possible.

The Home Office has attempted to justify its continued detention of people from these countries by insisting that they are 'high harm foreign national offenders'. It is important to recognise, however, that any concerns around potential harm to the community or public protection will have been reflected in the criminal sentence – which has been served by the time someone has entered immigration detention. The purpose of immigration detention is not public protection, but removal from the UK. Since countries around the world have closed their borders in response to the pandemic, therefore, there are serious questions about the legality of any use of immigration detention at the present time, since removal from the UK is simply not possible.

We are also aware of women with serious underlying physical health conditions which would put them at particular risk if they were to be infected with coronavirus, who were kept in Yarl's Wood following the confirmed case and are still there. Additionally, we are in touch with women who are survivors of rape, trafficking and torture, and are very concerned about the impact on them of being detained during this extremely stressful time. At the best of times, immigration detention has a traumatising effect. A wealth of evidence – including a literature review conducted for Stephen Shaw's 2016 review of vulnerable people in

detention, commissioned by the Home Office – has demonstrated the injurious impact of detention on people’s mental health. From the conversations that we have been having with women in Yarl’s Wood, it seems the current context of the coronavirus pandemic, and women’s uncertainty and anxiety about this, is exacerbating detention’s very negative effects.

4. Access to legal advice and other support in Yarl’s Wood

Detention centres are now closed to most outside visitors, including legal representatives, and as a consequence it appears that the legal advice surgery in Yarl’s Wood is no longer operating. This raises serious concerns about women’s access to justice, particularly for those who do not already have a legal representative or who are unhappy with their current solicitor and want to change representation. Some women we have spoken to have told us that, in place of the legal advice surgery, they have simply been given a list of solicitors and have been told to try calling them. For some women, particularly those who speak little or no English, this means that accessing legal representation will be impossible.

Other services in Yarl’s Wood have been stripped back considerably. For instance, we understand that most of those working for the Wellbeing service, which provides mental health support, are now working remotely, and that the Welfare department is now completely shut. The effect of this, of course, is that already vulnerable women, who are being re-traumatised by detention, are now unable to access the limited support that was in place for them previously.

5. Release

Many of the women we have been in touch with in Yarl’s Wood who have subsequently been released have, fortunately, had accommodation to which they have been able to return. However, we know from solicitors and other advocacy groups working in this field that some people have been released from detention to destitution. We are also aware of cases where women released from Yarl’s Wood, who speak little English, have had to make long journeys back to their accommodation but have been given little explanation of the travel arrangements that have been made for them – despite the fact that this is the first time they have had to travel from Bedford (where Yarl’s Wood is) to where they live. We are also aware of cases where women have had the phone issued to them by Yarl’s Wood taken away from them, despite the fact that they do not have another phone on them. As a result, they have had to make long journeys back to their accommodation without any way of contacting someone for help if they run into difficulties. In failing to ensure that women – many of whom are vulnerable because of their previous experiences – are able to travel safely back to their accommodation, the Home Office and Serco are clearly ignoring their duty of care.

Key recommendation:

All detention centres should be closed and those women who are currently detained should be provided with support and safe accommodation where they would have the means to self-isolate.

B: Asylum-seeking women living destitute

Many of the women we work with at WRW are living destitute, banned from working and with no access to statutory financial or housing support. We are very concerned by the way the Home Office has prepared for and responded to the pandemic in relation to these incredibly vulnerable women.

1. Situation before the pandemic

In February 2020, WRW and its grassroots partners in Manchester, Coventry and Birmingham, published a [report](#) on the particular vulnerabilities of asylum-seeking women who are made destitute. Based on accounts provided by 106 women, the research constitutes the most comprehensive study so far on the experiences of destitute asylum-seeking women in the UK. Our findings show that even in normal circumstances destitute asylum-seeking women face a day-to-day struggle for survival.

Over three quarters of the women we spoke with for this study had fled gender-based violence in their countries of origin, including rape, forced prostitution and female genital mutilation. But our dysfunctional asylum system, with its culture of disbelief, means that many such women are wrongly denied refuge and forced into destitution as a result. Thus, traumatised women who have already experienced extreme human rights abuses are made hungry and homeless, and placed at risk of further sexual violence in the UK.

With no access to financial support, 82% of the women we spoke with relied on small hardship payments by charities to meet their basic needs while destitute. Almost all of the women were hungry, turning to food banks, drop-in centres and churches for meals. Of those women who had children, 56% said their children went hungry too. Around half of the women in our sample had slept outside at some point, while others were forced to sofa surf with strangers, as a result of which a quarter were raped or sexually abused. Unable to meet their basic needs, a third of the women were pushed into abusive relationships, many of whom were raped or sexually abused by their partner.

Seventy per cent of the women we spoke with said their physical health became “much worse” after they were forced into destitution. Over a quarter were unable to access NHS services, with many citing well-founded fears of data sharing with the Home Office. Precarious living conditions affected access to washing facilities, soap and cleaning products, such that

81% percent of women struggled to keep themselves clean while destitute. A third of the women we spoke with had tried to kill themselves.

2. Issues arising since the start of the pandemic

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, WRW has moved to supporting around 300 asylum-seeking women via telephone. We are therefore aware of the pressing and growing needs of these women, as their usual sources of support cut down on activities or shut their doors. On a daily basis, we are hearing from women who are unable to buy food for themselves and their children, who are unable to self-isolate safely, and who are trapped in abusive situations. We are also hearing similar concerns from our grassroots partners in Birmingham, Manchester and Coventry.

The majority of destitute women in our network, who rely on donations from local groups, are facing severe difficulties in accessing food. Many food banks have shut down, while others are under unprecedented pressure to support a growing vulnerable population. Furthermore, hardship cash payments provided by charities, and usually collected in person, are extremely challenging, if not impossible, to obtain in the current context, since most of these women do not have bank accounts.

One destitute woman in our network, Sarah, has stayed in various places in London since her asylum claim was refused some months ago. When we spoke with her on 14 April, she had no money, no food, and nowhere to stay. The mosque where she had been sleeping had asked her to leave due to concerns about the virus. WRW exhausted all options to secure safe accommodation for Sarah, including by contacting homelessness services. We also contacted multiple hotels and hostels but were informed that they were not accepting anyone other than key workers. Sarah had walked past police officers whilst she was wandering the streets, but was too afraid to seek help for fear of being detained due to her insecure immigration status. Sarah has now spent two nights sleeping outside, on night buses and in a park in central London.

Another woman we spoke with, Maxine, a survivor of sexual violence, has also moved several times since being forced into destitution due to a refusal of her asylum claim over a year ago. She is currently sleeping on the floor in an overcrowded house. To avoid street homelessness, she is forced to cook and clean for everyone, and shares her room with a man she does not know.

Other destitute women who are struggling to isolate safely include those with serious underlying medical conditions, such as HIV, asthma and diabetes. Gergish, who was refused asylum over a year ago, is over 70 years old and has heart disease, as a result of which her immune system is highly compromised. According to government guidance, she is at

increased risk of developing a severe reaction to COVID-19. Yet when we spoke with Gergish, on 10 April, she had a broken hand and was sleeping in a church with no money and a few cans of tinned food. These are just a few examples of the first-hand accounts WRW have received in recent weeks.

A lack of funds to purchase phone credit and data constitute additional challenges to the safety of destitute women. This has jeopardised their access to up-to-date government guidance, as well as their ability to contact community members and others for support with basic needs such as food, soap and medicine.

Asylum-seeking women who are made destitute are, in ordinary times, at heightened risk of abuse and illness. In the current pandemic, they are more vulnerable than ever. We note some of the policy changes introduced by the Home Office in light of the COVID-19 outbreak. For instance, last month, the department announced that people whose asylum claims are rejected will not be required to leave their asylum accommodation for three months. It was subsequently announced that those in receipt of asylum support will continue to receive it in the event of a rejection. Yet no measures have been implemented to extend a basic safety net to individuals whose claims were refused prior to the outbreak. In a public health emergency, everyone should be protected.

Key recommendation:

Every destitute woman in the UK, even if she has had a refusal on her asylum claim, should be given immediate access to financial support and accommodation where she can self-isolate safely, whether through the existing system of asylum support or through the mainstream benefits system. This should be introduced with no caveats, no exemptions and no refusals.

All names in this submission have been changed.

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