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Joint submission to the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on people with protected characteristics

1st May 2020

About Women for Refugee Women and this submission

Women for Refugee Women (WRW) is a charity that supports women seeking asylum in the UK and challenges the injustices that they experience.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have continued to provide direct support to over 300 asylum-seeking women in our network in London, as well as supporting women who are currently in immigration detention. We have also been working closely with other groups who provide direct support to asylum-seeking women in other regions across the UK. This includes Women Asylum Seekers Together Manchester, Women with Hope in Birmingham and the Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group, who have contributed to this submission.

The vast majority of these women have fled sexual or other gender-based violence in their countries of origin, including rape, forced marriage, forced prostitution and female genital mutilation. Many women are targeted because of their actual or suspected political activities. Lilly, for example, had been a successful businesswoman in DR Congo, but had come to the notice of the authorities when she had started encouraging other women to register to vote. State officials imprisoned Lilly, and raped her during this time.

Other women have been targeted because of their sexuality in countries such as Uganda, Cameroon and Nigeria, where persecution of LGBT people, by both the state and the public, has been well-documented. Veronica, a gay woman from Uganda, was imprisoned, tortured and raped after her guardian informed state officials of her sexual orientation. Upon release, Veronica's guardian tried to forcibly marry her to an elderly man.

Many of the women we support experienced further trauma as they fled to our shores for safety, suffering rape, sexual abuse, torture, physical violence or some combination of these. Valbona, was trafficked from Albania to Italy where she was forced into prostitution. Unable to seek protection from the state, she escaped to the UK, suffering further sexual and physical violence on her journey.

It is perhaps unsurprising that most of the women we support at WRW suffer with mental health issues. Our research has found that a [third of asylum-seeking women living destitute](#), and [one in five women in immigration detention](#), have tried to kill themselves.



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In recent weeks we have seen various reports on the gendered impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Women are more likely to be living in poverty, and are bearing the brunt of the economic crisis. Domestic violence cases have increased as survivors are forced to lockdown with their abusers. Meanwhile, emerging data suggests that black and minority ethnic women are at increased risk, compared to white women, of suffering severe outcomes from COVID-19. The intersection of gender, race and immigration status, coupled with the trauma of their past experiences, means that asylum-seeking women are among those women most affected by the consequences of the outbreak.

This submission focuses on two key areas of our expertise. Firstly, we summarise the effects of the pandemic and the government's response to this on women held in immigration detention. Secondly, we look at the impact of the current situation on women who have been refused asylum but are unable to leave the UK, and who have therefore 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 government's response to women in immigration detention during the current situation. We recognise, first of all, that a significant number of people have been released from detention centres since the coronavirus pandemic began. However, we understand that around 20 women are still locked up in Yarl's Wood. In keeping these women in detention, the government is putting their lives at risk. There are also real questions about the legality of their detention, since immigration detention is meant to be used only prior to removal, but as countries around the world have closed their borders it is simply not possible to remove these women from the UK.

We set out our key concerns in relation to the government's continued 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.



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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.

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. 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 doing to keep them protected.

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 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 and survivors of torture, trafficking and gender-based violence



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Following a legal challenge brought by Detention Action 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. 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 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.

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 is that already vulnerable women, who are being re-



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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, some people have been released from detention to homelessness and 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 – even though this is the first time they have had to travel from Bedford (where Yarl's Wood is) to where they live. 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, which runs Yarl's Wood, are ignoring their duty of care.

Key recommendation:

All detention centres should be closed and those who are currently detained should be provided with support and safe accommodation in the community 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 impact of the pandemic and the government's insufficient response towards protecting these particularly 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, but many such women are unfairly denied refugee status and forced into destitution as a result. Thus, traumatised women who have already



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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 had been 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. Others were forced into transactional sex.

The vast majority of asylum-seeking women who experienced sexual violence after being made destitute did not approach the authorities for help. At the same time, not being eligible for welfare benefits means that they were unable to turn to refuges as a form of protection. As a result, women found themselves trapped in abusive relationships.

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, cleaning products and period products, such that 81% percent of women struggled to keep themselves clean while destitute.

2. Issues arising since the start of the pandemic

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, WRW has moved to supporting the asylum-seeking women in our network 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 or exploitative 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, small hardship 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.



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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 14th 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. Though a local authority eventually secured a hotel room, Sarah had already spent three nights sleeping outside, on night buses and in a park.

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. When we spoke with her on 5 April, she was sleeping on the floor in an overcrowded house. To avoid street homelessness, she was forced to cook and clean for everyone, and was sharing her room with a man she did not know. Maxine has serious mental health issues and has tried to kill herself since she was made destitute. Afraid she would become street homeless when the Home Office withdrew her asylum support, she was pushed into an abusive relationship, during which she was raped by her partner. Maxine managed to escape from that relationship but the severe practical challenges and mental strain of the current pandemic, along with her insecure immigration status, make her vulnerable to experiencing further abuse of this kind.

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 10th April, she had a broken hand and was sleeping in a church with no money and a few cans of tinned food. The fact that she can only speak Amharic makes it even more challenging for her to seek help from community members and access government guidance – only available in English - in order to remain safe.

Across the board, a lack of funds for phone credit and data are creating additional challenges to the safety of destitute asylum-seeking women. This has also jeopardised their access to up-to-date official guidance, as well as their ability to seek support with basic needs such as food, soap and medicine.

Everyone should be protected during a public health emergency. 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.



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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 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.

For further information please contact: Natasha Walter, Director, Women for Refugee Women, Natasha@refugeewomen.co.uk, 07710 348048.