

**WOMEN
FOR
REFUGEE
WOMEN**



SAFETY AND SURVIVAL

HOW THE WORK BAN FUELS VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN SEEKING ASYLUM

About Women for Refugee Women

Women for Refugee Women (WRW) supports women who are seeking asylum in the UK to rebuild their lives on their own terms. Alongside refugee and asylum-seeking women, WRW challenges the injustices experienced by women who seek asylum in the UK.

Authors

This report has been researched and written by: Anne Marie Munene, Christine Harris, Deborah Rest, Etracy Rukwava, Gemma Lousley, Goldie Joseph, Hadnet Tesfom Habtemariam, Kaffy Kazep and Andrea Vukovic.

Acknowledgments

Firstly, we would like to thank all the women who generously gave up their time to participate in this research. We hope that this report does justice to your experiences, and that it results in the change that is so desperately needed.

We would also like to thank the Lloyds Bank Foundation for funding this research, and Birkbeck, University of London, for providing us with a 'room of our own' to meet, talk and develop our research. In particular, we would like to thank Isabelle Habib and Anna Hetheron at Birkbeck's Access and Engagement team for their unwavering support.

Additionally, we are very grateful to Trauma Treatment International, and in particular Dr Lotta Raby, for the invaluable support they have provided to the research team.



A note on names, personal details and photography

Most of the names given to refugee and asylum-seeking women throughout this report have been changed for the women's privacy and safety. This includes the names of some of our researchers.

Photo Credits: Sonny Malhotra (cover, p. 2, 7, 15, 18, 20, 23, 24 and 25); Carenza Arnold (p. 1)

Report designed by Carenza Arnold.

Women for Refugee Women
Tindlemanor, 52-54 Featherstone Street
London, EC1Y 8RT

@4refugeewomen
www.refugeewomen.co.uk
020 7250 1239 / admin@refugeewomen.co.uk

Charity number: 1165320
© Women for Refugee Women, September 2024

Contents

<u>Executive Summary</u>	4
<u>Background</u>	6
<u>Research Methodology</u>	8
<u>The Price Paid by Women Banned From Working</u> <i>Women in the asylum system would like to work</i> <i>Women are unable to meet their basic needs</i> <i>Women are forced to turn to other forms of financial support</i>	9
<u>Charlotte's story</u>	12
<u>The Price Paid by Women Banned From Working</u> <i>Women in the asylum system stayed or were pushed into unwanted and abusive relationships because of the work ban</i> <i>Women in the asylum system are prevented from integration into society</i>	14
<u>Farah's story</u>	16
<u>Trapped and Traumatized: The Impact of the Work Ban on Women's Mental Health</u>	17
<u>Trapped and Traumatized: The Impact of the Work Ban on Women's Sense of Self</u>	19
<u>No Way Out: The Impact of the Work Ban on Women's Asylum Claims</u>	21
<u>Why does the Home Office Implement This Policy?</u>	22
<u>Time to Act: Our Recommendations for Change</u>	24
<u>References</u>	28

Executive Summary

One of the most pernicious policies that is actively harming women in the asylum system is the ban on working.

Over the past decade, Women for Refugee Women's (WRW) ground-breaking research on women seeking asylum has shown that the **majority of women seeking asylum in the UK are survivors of rape and other forms of gender-based violence**, including domestic violence, forced marriage, female genital cutting and sexual exploitation^[1]. Women make up a minority of those in the asylum system, which often means their **specific experiences and needs as survivors of gender-based violence are overlooked**.

Moreover, some Home Office policies and practices not only fail to offer proper support to women seeking asylum who have survived gender-based violence – rather, they **retraumatise** them, exacerbating their previous experiences and hindering their recovery.

One of the most pernicious policies that is actively harming women in the asylum system is the ban on working. Our research, conducted by seven members of WRW's network, all of whom have personal experience of the asylum and immigration system and of the work ban, is the first of its kind to look at women's experiences of being banned from working. Our main finding is that women who are banned from working, and forced onto meagre levels of asylum support, are unable to meet their basic needs and so are **forced into exploitative and harmful situations, where they are vulnerable to violence and abuse**.

Key findings from our research include:

Women are being forced to enter or stay in unwanted or abusive relationships as a result of the work ban.

Women are turning to sex work as a result of being banned from working.

Women are being forced into exploitative and dangerous situations, becoming more vulnerable to sexual violence, as a result of being banned from working.

- Women are being forced to enter or stay in unwanted or abusive relationships as a result of the work ban. **38%** of survey respondents reported that they had been **pushed into or stayed in an unwanted or abusive situation** - either with a partner or someone other than a partner. One of the women we interviewed told us, *"It forced me in the situation of living with a man because of no choice. I suffered abuse in that relationship, because I didn't have anything with me."*
- Women are turning to sex work as a result of being banned from working. **8%** of the women who took part in our survey (8 out of 103 respondents) said they **turned to sex work as they were unable to meet their basic needs**. During her asylum journey, Hassana was made homeless, exploited and forced into sex work. She explained, *"I became like a commercial sex worker, to have money. One time I was forced to have unwanted sex so that I would have a place to sleep."*

- Women are being **forced into exploitative and dangerous situations**, becoming more vulnerable to sexual violence, as a result of being banned from working. One of the women we spoke told us about the desperation she felt at being unable to provide for her baby and found herself in a situation where she was raped, *"I was pushed into going to a dating site to look for men so that they can give me money. I remember going on a date with one man, thinking it was just to know him first, but I was raped at that time."* Others we spoke to felt compelled to take on illicit work in which they were forced into unsafe or degrading conditions for fear of being reported to the authorities.

Our findings should be of concern to all those interested in ending violence against women and girls. As troubling as these revelations are, it should come as no surprise to policymakers that vulnerable women, when forced into poverty and barred from working to support themselves, are pushed into exploitative and unsafe situations that expose them to further violence and abuse.

Since coming to power in July 2024 the Government has made welcome commitments to halve the rate of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the next decade and make sure that survivors of gender-based violence receive the support they need. If there was ever any room for doubt, our research makes clear that the work ban policy directly undermines these efforts.

It is also at odds with other areas of Government policy – including efforts to move people away from welfare support and into work, address shortages in the labour market, and support refugee integration and community cohesion. On the other hand, there would be countless benefits as a result of reforming this policy. It would save taxpayers' money through reduced costs for asylum support and increased tax revenues and would enable newly-recognised

refugees to enter work promptly rather than relying on state support^[2]. Crucially, it would enable people in the asylum system to **live in dignity, put their skills and experiences to good use and meaningfully contribute to society while rebuilding their lives in the UK.**

Giving people seeking asylum the right to work is common sense. That's why we're calling on decision-makers to give people seeking asylum and their adult dependents the right to work after they have waited for six months for an initial decision on their asylum claim or fresh submission, unconstrained by the Immigration Salary List.

In addition, in order to realise its commitment to tackle violence against women and girls, the Government must reform the asylum system for women. **Failing to address the harms that survivors of gender-based violence experience in the asylum system will result in a two-tier approach to tackling violence against women, with asylum-seeking survivors treated as less deserving than others and so left behind.**

"If we are allowed to work, we will contribute to the country. So banning us from work is just nonsense."



Background

People seeking safety in the UK are effectively banned from working while they wait for a decision on their asylum claim.

Currently, they can apply to work if they have been waiting for more than 12 months. If they are granted the right to work, this is limited to roles on the 'Immigration Salary List'- a very narrow set of occupations like Chemical Scientists and Orchestral Musicians, though this has recently been expanded to include Care Workers. This effectively amounts to a ban on working and forces people in the asylum system to rely on state support if they are to avoid destitution[3].

It hasn't always been this way. Until mid-2002, people seeking asylum could apply for permission to work if they had been waiting six months for an initial decision on their asylum claim. This right to work was removed by the then Labour Government, for the stated reason that the Government would focus on making swift decisions on asylum claims within six months. The Government argued that moving people through the asylum system within this timeframe would make the right to work policy redundant[4].

Yet, the **asylum decision-making backlog has continued to grow, and people are regularly spending years in limbo unable to work**. There are currently 73,866 people waiting for an initial decision on their asylum claim for more than six months[5]. The new Government elected in July 2024 brought hope to advocates of progressive reform that there could be an opportunity to

review this harmful policy and to grant people seeking asylum the right to work.

However, the Immigration Minister, Dame Angela Eagle, responded to a question about giving people the right to work by saying, *"the answer is to speed up the asylum system so that we can get proper results much faster."*[6] Whilst quicker decision-making is important, there will always be cases that require more than six months for resolution, meaning the right to work should remain available to people in the asylum system.

Another common argument against reform of this policy has been made by successive governments which have maintained that easing work restrictions could draw people seeking asylum to the UK because they believe that conditions are more favourable. The Immigration Minister put forward this argument in a recent debate noting, *"we cannot ignore that the perception of access to the UK labour market is among the reasons why people take dangerous journeys to the UK."*[7]

However, **people seeking safety who are escaping conflict and persecution often do not have much choice in where and how they travel to safety.**

Research has suggested that most people are unaware of reception conditions in destination countries and to the extent that they are able to exercise any choice, they are more likely to be motivated by factors such as colonial links to a country, the presence of family members and friends, knowledge of the language, and the belief that a country respects human rights and upholds the rule of law[8]. Even the Home Office's research into why people seeking asylum come to the UK found that *"economic rights do not act as a pull factor for asylum seekers."*[9]

The work ban is depriving women seeking safety of a chance to live dignified and respectful lives.

This is the first report to focus specifically on women's experiences of the work ban. Since women are a minority in the asylum system, their unique experiences are often overlooked.

It is clear from our research that the work ban is depriving women of a chance to live dignified and respectful lives, particularly after the trauma they have been through as part of their journey to seeking safety. Our research into this policy has uncovered that **the work ban has a profoundly negative impact** on many different aspects of women's lives, **forcing them into exploitative and abusive situations, ravaging their mental health and well-being, undermining their integration** into their communities, and **harming their ability to progress their asylum claims.**

We believe that there should be **the right to work for people seeking asylum and their adult dependents after 6 months of waiting for a decision, unconstrained by the Immigration Salary List.**

In 2024, women made up 22% of people claiming asylum, so although the Home Office's statistics are not broken down by gender, one could deduce that there are around 15,000 women waiting more than six months for a decision on their claim^[10]. That means that there are thousands of women who would directly benefit from this policy change right now, and many more in the future.

"It's like being in a prison, you know, because I have the skills, I have the knowledge for me to be able to work, but I could not work."



Lift the Ban campaigners at Parliament Square, February 2025

Research methodology

This research has been designed and carried out by a team of seven members of WRW's network, all of whom have **personal experience of the asylum and immigration system. All research team members have experience of being banned from work.**

We used two main methods of data collection:

- An online survey on women's experiences of the work ban, which was open from April-July 2024 and was completed by 106 women currently or previously banned from working; and
- 15 semi-structured interviews with women currently or previously banned from working, carried out across July-November 2024. Four of the women we interviewed were also survey participants; eleven were not.

In total, we gathered data from **117 women** with experience of the work ban for this research.

The women who participated in our research came from the following countries: Afghanistan, Albania, Botswana, Cameroon, China, Congo Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, India, Iran, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Malaysia, Namibia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Sudan, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Türkiye, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

The online survey and semi-structured interviews focused on women's experiences of being banned from work. We didn't ask women about the previous experiences which led to

them seeking asylum in the UK. WRW's research spanning over more than a decade has already gathered significant and consistent evidence showing that around 65-85% of women seeking asylum have experienced gender-based violence, including rape, domestic violence, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation, in their countries of origin and on their journeys to the UK^[11].

We designed the online survey together as a research team, drawing on our own experiences as well as previous research reports in this area to help us to decide what to ask. We used primarily 'closed' questions for the survey with a series of options for respondents to choose from in their answers, which made it easier for them to complete the survey and helped to ensure we were able to gather a significant number of responses: 106 in total. The semi-structured interview questions were designed to complement the online survey by providing detailed narratives of women's experiences. For the semi-structured interviews, we chose open questions to allow participants to share their experiences in their own words, offering richer, qualitative data.

This research has been designed and carried out by a team of seven women - all of whom have personal experience of the asylum and immigration system, and the work ban.

The Price Paid by Women Banned from Working

A core question in the research we carried out was how does the work ban restrict the freedom and liberty of women in the asylum process, and are women affected in ways that are specific to them because of their gender? Our findings reveal that **women experience particular harms of the work ban**, whereby they are unable to afford essential items to meet their basic needs and are forced into harmful and exploitative situations, including sex work and illicit work, as well as being forced to enter or stay in unwanted or abusive relationships.

Women in the asylum system would like to work

Women who seek safety in the UK after fleeing conflict and persecution are keen to start rebuilding their lives, and returning to work is, for many, an integral part of this. Our research has found that **women seeking asylum would overwhelmingly like to work if given the opportunity to do so**. Of 51 respondents, 50 replied (98%) that they would like to be able to work.

Many of the women we interviewed did not know about the work ban before claiming asylum in the UK and were surprised that they were expected to rely on asylum support rather than provide for themselves and their families.

One of the women we interviewed, Catherine, shared, *"When I found I was banned from working, it really shocked me. We were told the government will be providing everything for you. And I was like, providing everything for me? For how long will this go on? Like, for how long will I be provided for? I am getting £45 a week, but if*

I was doing even a cleaning job, even just 5 hours a day maybe 20 hours a week, it will be more than £45. There is just so much people could do to provide for themselves instead of just relying on the government."

Fawzia, who was seeking asylum from Afghanistan, likened the ban on working to being in prison. She expressed that *"It was like a modern prison: everything was banned for me. When I was in Afghanistan, I had my income and I could support my family, but when I was in the UK, I didn't have any activity and I didn't have any income and couldn't do anything for myself. You can imagine how hard it was for me, thinking about my children and about my family in Afghanistan."*

**"It was like a modern prison:
everything was banned for me."**

Women are unable to meet their basic needs

Our research showed that women seeking safety in the UK are **unable to meet their basic needs due to the work ban and the low levels of asylum support that they are forced to subsist on**. As of April 2025, asylum support levels are currently set at £49.18 per week – that's about £7 a day to cover all items such as food, clothing, toiletries, sanitary products, public transport and non-prescription medication. For those in catered accommodation where meals are provided, they instead receive just £8.86 per week for all essential items apart from food^[12]. It simply isn't enough for women to be able to afford these basic items.

Of the 101 respondents who responded to this question in our survey, we found that:

- 85% of women (86 of 101 respondents) said they were unable to afford clothes
- 80% (81 of 101 respondents) said they were unable to afford public transport
- 79% (80 of 101 respondents) said they were unable to afford phone credit for data and internet
- 66% (67 of 101 respondents) said they were unable to afford food
- 59% (60 of 101 respondents) said they were unable to afford toiletries
- 47% (47 of 101 respondents) said they were unable to afford sanitary products
- 30% (30 of 101 respondents) said they were unable to afford medication, including non-prescription medication

These responses reveal how the work ban and low asylum support levels push women into poverty and prevent them from meeting even their most basic needs and living a dignified existence. Some of the women we spoke to told us about the impossible choices they were forced to make as a result. Aaliyah, who is Muslim, told us she could not afford halal food and often relied on food banks which would sometimes give her foods containing pork. She explained, *"If I wanted to survive, I have to eat the pork"*, even though it is not culturally appropriate.

Many of the women told us they felt their freedom was restricted as a result of the work ban. Abiola, who was banned for four years before being granted refugee status explained, *"It restricts your freedom in a lot of ways. I mean freedom of movement as you can't spend all your money on travelling. I was living in a very isolated town so for everything I have to go to the city. And then for the city you need a bus and the bus needs money. Then the internet - I could do so many courses online, but I can't afford internet, and there is no Wi-Fi in the house, so you have to buy the data. And then, of course, there is the bigger picture, like your freedom of choice, where you live, where you work and what you do with your time."*

We found that there were particular ways that women were disadvantaged by the work ban and the resulting unaffordability of certain items. For example, **47% of women interviewed said they were unable to afford sanitary products**. For women like Abiola, with additional health needs, it is particularly harmful: *"I have fibroids in my uterus which means I get more periods and more heavy. So a lot of money goes to my pads."*

Many of the women we interviewed were mothers and spoke about the challenges they faced in meeting the needs of their children, particularly with babies and young children. Charlotte's story, featured later in the report, reveals the difficulties of not being able to purchase basic items for her baby such as nappies, clothing and milk, and having to forfeit her own needs, wellbeing and health as a result.

Other essential items for school, such as uniforms and appropriate shoes, or for recreation, learning and development, are also out of reach for women living in poverty in the asylum system. As Elizabeth shared with us:

"It affects me a lot. Not being able to provide for my children... I had £30 to buy school uniforms for both my kids, but the shoes were very expensive, and I need to save up to buy a new jumper too. And one day my son asked, 'mum, when are we going to go somewhere to have some fun?' I said 'when mummy starts working...' I just want them to be happy and feel okay and have fun as well."



Gayle told us about the impact of the work ban and the enforced poverty she experienced together with her two teenaged daughters:

"We felt so lost. We felt we didn't have any future. At one point, my eldest daughter was in a really bad situation. She even went to hospital three times because she had very high anxiety. She lost a lot of weight because of stress. It affected us all, mentally, physically, emotionally."

Women are forced to turn to other sources of financial support

Our research found that women who were banned from working often turned to other sources of financial support in order to prevent destitution. This includes receiving money from family, friends and charities, as well as, for some, entering exploitative situations including taking on unregulated cash-in-hand jobs and sex work.

Of 103 women who responded to this survey question we found that:

- 61% (63 of 103 respondents) said they received money from charity or another organisation
- 48% (49 of 103 respondents) said they received money from family or friends
- 8% (8 of 103 respondents) said they did sex work
- 7% (7 of 103 respondents) said they worked without permission

The fact that 8% of respondents to our survey engaged in sex work is undeniably one of the most damaging and dangerous consequences of the work ban on women. It reveals the level of desperation and deprivation that women are

experiencing in the asylum system and should be of great concern to all those interested in ending violence against women and girls.

Hassana's story

Hassana was banned from working for several years before she received her refugee status and the right to work. During this time, Hassana was made homeless, exploited and forced into sex work, causing huge and lasting harm to her mental health.

"I was lifeless, hopeless. I became homeless, sleeping at bus stops, on the buses through the night, sometimes at Kings Cross train station... I was sleeping there. One time I was forced... somebody wanted to have sex with me, unwanted sex. If I did not, I wouldn't have a place to sleep. So in one way or another, I became like a commercial sex worker, to have money. If I remember now, it makes me feel suicidal. But the situation... I had to. I felt so bad, I'm still on medication for depression and anxiety today."

For some of the women we spoke to, the work ban led them to take part in exploitative or illicit work. Engaging in cash-in-hand and unregulated jobs makes them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, as women may feel pressured to work in unsafe or degrading conditions or to accept low wages, for fear of being reported to the authorities. We spoke to Charlotte whose experience of poverty and the work ban pushed her into a dangerous situation where she was raped. You can read her story overleaf.

"One time I was forced to have unwanted sex, so that I can get a place..."

CHARLOTTE'S STORY

Charlotte, a young mother with a small baby, struggled to survive on the little amount of asylum support she received each week, particularly to meet the needs of her child.

Banned from work and driven by her desire to care for her baby, Charlotte found herself in exploitative and unsafe situations to try to make ends meet. Here, she tells her story.

I was not allowed to work for years. It's like being in a prison, you know, because I have the skills, I have the knowledge for me to be able to work, but I could not work. I studied accounting and finance back in my country, I was an accountant, I have the skills, but I could not use them. So it's like my hands have been tied, like being in a shell. I could not do anything for myself.

I could not afford everything I needed for my child, for me. I became belittled. I had to beg for things. I couldn't afford to buy clothes for my own child. I have to think between eating or buying clothes for her. I often had to line up at a soup kitchen just to get some warm food for my daughter. She was only small then, less than two years old. She had dietary requirements, she is lactose intolerant so could not drink dairy milk, so I had to buy other milk which is very expensive. I even had to go to charities to ask for nappies, because nappies are expensive. I had to make difficult choices. To eat, to survive, to buy clothes. I needed to provide for my daughter.

I became so depressed because I wasn't able to work.

"I remember then I was introduced to some cash in hand jobs. I became a slave to other people..."



I remember I was introduced to some cash in hand jobs. But I became a slave to other people. If people knew I was not allowed to work, they knew I could not do anything. I remember going to clean a woman's house, I did six hours and she paid me just £10. People exploit you if they know your status.

After that, I was pushed into joining a dating site to look for men so that they could give me money. I remember going on a date with one man, thinking it was just to get to know him first. I didn't have any intention of doing anything, you know. Just a chat. But I was raped at that time. The guy raped me.

"I remember going on a date, thinking it was just to know him first. But I was raped.

The guy raped me."

I thought, if I am able to work, all these things would not be happening.

I became very, very depressed, at the point of trying to end my life. I attempted to. I had to, I had to go. It was useless, I wasn't hearing anything from the Home Office. I was useless. So I became very, very depressed. Not being able to work really affected my mental health so much, I felt worthless, like nothing good will ever come out of me. I lost my self-esteem, became a beggar.

"I became very, very, very depressed at the point of trying to end my life."

But somebody told me I could seek help, because back then I didn't even know what depression is. Back in my country, we don't know what depression is. So I started opening up, saying this is how I'm feeling... and I started getting help. Then, I got my refugee status.

I can work now. I feel so free. You know, I don't have to go to charities anymore, I can contribute... I pay my tax and I'm able to support the community. Freedom is dear, self-esteem is dear. When you do something, you think, you work, you feel so proud that you have earned this thing. Now when I buy myself things, there's that pride, I bought it with my money. That joy is there. I have room to grow. I feel pride, I feel self-esteem, I feel myself.

Charlotte was banned from working for over four years in total. She now has her refugee status and is working.

Women in the asylum system stayed or were pushed into unwanted and abusive relationships because of the work ban

Our research found that **women in the asylum system stayed or were pushed into unwanted or abusive relationships because of the work ban.**

Of the 93 women who answered this question:

- 38% (35 of 93 respondents) of the women were pushed into or stayed in an unwanted or abusive relationship or situation
- 20% of the women (19 of 93 respondents) said they were pushed into or stayed in a relationship with partners they did not want to be with
- 19% (18 of 93 respondents) said they are pushed into or stayed in an unwanted and abusive relationship with someone other than a partner
- 16% of the women (15 of 93 respondents) said they are pushed into or stayed in a relationship with partners where they are being abused

These findings point to the particular vulnerability of women who, because of their lack of financial means, are either pushed into or trapped in abusive relationships when they are economically dependent on another person.

For some of the women we spoke to, the relationship involved a romantic partner on whom they were reliant to meet their basic needs. For others, it was acquaintances or relatives who provided things like shelter and food but in turn would exploit them to support with things like child-minding and house-keeping.

The dependence on others often left women feeling trapped in unhealthy or dangerous situations, like Farah, whose story is overleaf.

"It forced me into the situation of living with a man, because I had no choice. But I suffered abuse in that relationship."

Women in the asylum system are prevented from integrating into society

Our research revealed that the **work ban is a significant barrier to women's integration in the UK.**

Of 98 respondents to this question in our survey:

- 72% (71 of 98 respondents) said it had a negative impact on their sense of belonging to the UK
- 68% (67 of 98 respondents) said it made it difficult for them to meet new people and make friends
- 33% (32 of 98 respondents) said it made it difficult for them to learn English or improve their level of English

Unsurprisingly, without the ability to work, people seeking asylum often find themselves isolated and disengaged from the wider community. Work is not only a source of income but also an important way for individuals to build social networks, integrate into society, improve their language skills and gain a sense of purpose. The work ban coupled with the low levels of asylum support mean that people in the asylum system are forced into poverty and isolated from wider society which is ultimately harmful to integration and community cohesion.

As Anaya told us, "It has negatively impacted my integration into UK society, in the sense that I have always been indoors, having nowhere to go to, having nothing to do, therefore causing me to remain as a new visitor to the UK that does not know anywhere around the country after years of arriving in the UK."

Many of the women we spoke to expressed their frustration at having the skills and willingness to work but being banned from doing so, particularly at a time when there are existing labour shortages in the UK. One of our research team members is a healthcare professional who notes, *"I am a professional in healthcare services and yet they are recruiting healthcare workers from abroad, putting my career on hold due to this work ban policy."*

Being forced into economic inactivity, often for years at a time, inevitably erodes women's professional skills and knocks their confidence. This makes it harder for them to find employment when they are eventually granted their refugee status and then permitted to work. As a member of the research team shared:

"I finally have my status and the right to work. But I've been forced out of work for so long, everything feels so difficult now. It feels like I have to start all over again from scratch. I don't have the confidence anymore."

In addition, as a research team we have often discussed the impact of the work ban on women's retirement plans and access to a pension. As one of our research members noted, *"How would I be able to push through my retirement period or old age without having a pension plan as I am already over 50 years?"* Long periods of exclusion from the labour market will make it difficult for women to rebuild their careers and for those who are approaching older age, makes it impossible for them to provide for their own retirement and enforces an ongoing dependency on the state.

The current Government has committed to policies aimed at supporting integration in order to improve community cohesion. It has taken a renewed interest in the barriers to community

cohesion since the racist riots during the summer of 2024, when people seeking asylum, as well as others from racialised backgrounds, were targeted by the far-right. It shouldn't take much imagination to be able to identify the work ban as a significant barrier to integration for an entire group of people, who are already demonised by certain segments of the media and politicians. **Lifting the ban and allowing people the right to work would support their integration and help build cohesive and resilient communities.**



FARAH'S STORY

Farah had been navigating the asylum system for years when she became street homeless. She was suffering with depression when she met a man who she thought was a loving partner. Due to the work ban and being unable to support herself, Farah became dependent on him and was forced to stay in an abusive and unwanted relationship. Here, she tells her story.

Living homeless was not easy, because you don't have any income, surviving on charity organisations, food parcels, night shelters – it's a very traumatic experience.

I ended up sleeping in night shelters. I would go into a shop and just watch the food on the shelves, toiletries on the shelves, but I didn't have a single penny. No means of access, of getting those things that I need, as a human being, as a woman, to maintain my dignity, which traumatised me so much.

It forced me into the situation of living with a man, because I had no choice. But I suffered abuse in that relationship. At first, it was like it was out of love... but I didn't know that I would suffer mentally and be abused. There were times when I didn't even have any food. I was mentally, psychologically abused, my body... I became a victim of abuse. I ended up in a big mess, which triggered my mental health

conditions, I became so scared of everything in society. I suffered abuse by someone who I thought was my partner.

Now, to be in a position where I am to this day, fearful of men, fearful of relationships. I don't even know myself. I'm a victim. The trauma, the fear and the challenges have made me lose my confidence, stripped my dignity for years.

"I feel like I'm rejected in the society I'm just a number. It's like my dignity has been stripped away from me."

I became a failure because I didn't have permission to work. The ban made me lose confidence in myself. It has taken a toll on my life, like I'm useless. I cannot do anything for myself in terms of living like anyone else in the community, in society... as a human being. I feel like I'm rejected by society. I'm just a number. It's like my dignity has been stripped away from me, my independence, even my rights as a woman. I'm traumatised.

Farah continues to be supported by Women for Refugee Women whilst she waits for a decision on her asylum claim.

Trapped and traumatised: The impact of the work ban on women's mental health

Our research revealed the **devastating impact of the work ban on women's mental health**, with the vast majority of women who took part in our survey revealing that it made them **anxious, depressed and hopeless**, and **nearly half** of them feeling **suicidal** as a result.

Of 104 respondents to this question in our survey:

- 85% (88 out of 104) said it made them anxious or depressed
- 79% (82 out of 104) said it made them feel hopeless
- 67% (70 out of 104) said it affected their ability to sleep
- 43% (45 out of 104) said it made them feel suicidal
- Only 4% (5 out of 104) said it didn't have a negative impact on their mental health

85% felt anxious or depressed
79% felt hopeless
43% felt suicidal

For many people, work is not only a source of financial stability, but it also provides structure, a sense of purpose and identity. Without the right to work, the women we spoke to revealed they lacked motivation and direction and experienced significant isolation and loneliness. This, coupled with the constant worry of how to meet their basic needs and uncertainty about their future as they waited for a decision on their asylum

claim led many women to experience anxiety and depression.

"I already had PTSD, I was traumatised and stressed from the war. Now, I found this hostile environment where I'm not allowed to work. The depression is like a monster that eats you every day. Every day, I wish that I don't wake up, because there's no point of just being stuck in this limbo forever."

Charlotte - whose story you can read on page 12 - was an accountant in her country of origin and banned from working for four years before getting her refugee status: *"I became very, very depressed at the point of trying to end my life. I wasn't hearing anything back from the Home Office. I was useless. So I became very, very depressed. But somebody told me I could seek help, because back then I didn't even know what depression is. Back in my country, we don't know what depression is. So I started opening up, saying this is how I'm feeling... and I started getting help. I also started volunteering in some charities that support asylum seekers. So not being able to work really affected my mental health so much."*

The **sense of hopelessness was pervasive** among the women we spoke to. Work often gives people a sense of control over their lives and being banned from working can make them feel helpless and powerless. Nearly half of the women we surveyed had suicidal thoughts as a result of the work ban.

Catherine, who, in addition to being banned from working, was unable to access any support from the Home Office during the first six months of her asylum claim explained:

"I really understand those that die by suicide, because I was in that place where I was about to. I was tired of suffering. I was asking, like, what's the purpose? What is happening in my life? You know, everything is just going south. And there were times when I thought maybe I really deserve to die. Maybe I wasn't supposed to be living. That's why things are going like this. And maybe this is the way for me. Maybe this is how life is telling me that I should end my life. It was like being in that black hole where, you know, there's no coming out."

For some of the women we spoke to who already suffered from poor mental health, often as a result of the war, violence or persecution they had experienced in their countries of origin or on their journeys to the UK, **the work ban exacerbated existing conditions.**

Noor shared:

"Not being able to work, of course affected me mentally, because I already had PTSD, so I was traumatised and stressed from the war. Now I came here, I found this hostile environment where I'm not allowed to work. The depression is like a monster that eats you every day. Every day, I wish that I don't wake up, because there's no point of just being stuck in this limbo forever."

Work is not a luxury, it's a need. Like I need to work, I need to have an income. It added to my stress, because, as I said, sitting and waiting for a very long period of time is not helping, because you are not busy, you're not doing anything, you're not earning your income, you're sitting or waiting like a table or a chair."

Lifting the ban on work would have a positive impact on the mental health of women in the asylum system by giving them a **sense of purpose, structure and accomplishment**, while **fostering social interaction** and providing **financial stability**.

"There are times when I was asking, like, what's the purpose? What is happening in my life? You know, everything is just going south. And then, yeah, there are times when I was like, maybe I really deserve to die. Maybe I wasn't supposed to be living."



Lift the Ban campaigner at Parliament Square, February 2025

Trapped and traumatised: The impact of the work ban on women's sense of self

78% felt helpless and like a burden
78% felt unvalued by UK society
71% felt less than human

We asked survey respondents and interviewees about the effect of the work ban on their sense of self, which we defined as 'how you feel about or view yourself'. The question was phrased in this way to capture how the work ban can have psychological effects that are broader than causing mental ill health.

Our research revealed that **the work ban has had a damaging effect on women's sense of self**. Many women who are navigating the asylum system will have built their careers in their respective fields in their countries of origins, but on arriving in the UK and being banned from working, will lose this integral part of their identity which impacts on their self-esteem and sense of self.

The women we spoke to regularly cited the anxiety they suffered from, with panic attacks because of the fear of the unknown, and more serious mental ill health including depression.

According to the survey we carried out in the research, we found out that of 104 respondents:

- 78% (81 of 104 respondents) said the work ban made them feel helpless and a burden
- 78% (81 of 104 respondents) said it made them feel that they were not valued by the UK society
- 71% (74 of 104 respondents) said it made them feel less human

- 69% (72 of 104 respondents) said it negatively affected their self esteem

Having to rely on the goodwill of other people like family and friends or being dependent on asylum support before they could afford basic needs such as food, clothing, public transport and personal hygiene products has made it difficult for women to maintain a sense of pride and dignity. Our findings suggest that **most women who are banned from working begin to see themselves as helpless and a burden to their friends, families and society more widely**. The psychological impact of being entirely reliant on others to meet your basic needs cannot be overstated.

Charlotte, whose story is told earlier in this report, explained this feeling in more depth. She said, *"I feel you are so useless. You feel you are worthless and there is nothing good coming out of you because you're just sitting down there. You lost your self-esteem. You become a beggar. So it affects you so much."*

It is clear from our interviews that the women we spoke to have the **ability, capacity and willingness to work and provide for themselves and their families but the work ban makes them feel unvalued and judged by society**. This in turn will undermine community cohesion as people seeking asylum are effectively outcast to the margins of society where they are forced into isolation.

Abiola explained how she felt being banned from working, *"I felt helpless, then with time I started to feel hopeless and like unworthy of anything because I was such a long time in the process. You feel hopeless because I had a degree, I had skills but my biggest problem is that I am not able to use my skills or my education to improve my life."*

As revealed in this report, the work ban has **pushed or trapped some women in unwanted and abusive relationships or situations**, with some even engaging in sex work to be able to meet their basic needs. These **abusive and harmful situations inevitably undermine women's sense of pride and dignity and chip away at their self-esteem and sense of self**. In our survey, 71% of the women said the work ban has affected their self-esteem.

Mary, who was banned from working for five years before being granted refugee status, told us that, *"It makes you feel so useless. Sometimes it makes you feel hate. Sometimes you hate your decision to come. Sometimes you*

hate the country itself, because it's a country that doesn't like you, that prevents you from having essential right to work. You don't want to sit. You just want to work."

Lifting the ban on work would play a significant role in boosting the self-esteem of women in the asylum system, supporting them to rebuild their sense of self while they begin to rebuild their lives in the UK.

Lift the Ban campaigner at Parliament Square, February 2025



"You feel you are worthless and there is nothing good coming out of you. You lose your self-esteem. You become a beggar. It affects you so much."

No Way Out: The Impact of the Work Ban on Women's Asylum Claims

Another aspect of the work ban that has received little attention in existing research has been the impact it has on people's ability to progress their asylum claims. From our survey, 72% (73 out of 102) of the respondents stated that **the work ban has had a negative impact on their asylum claims.**

The main way that the work ban impacts on women's asylum claims is their ability to get legal advice and representation. Although people seeking asylum are eligible for legal aid, the demand for legal aid lawyers far outstrips the supply. Many of the women supported by WRW are simply unable to find lawyers to take forward their cases given the growing deficit. This is compounded by concerns around the quality of legal advice provided. WRW has previously documented issues around poor quality legal advice, which particularly impacted women with more complex cases, for example on the basis of their gender or sexual orientation^[13].

To that end, many of the women who participated in our research stated that if they were not banned from working, they would be able to pay lawyers to assist with their cases. As Joy explained, *"It took me almost ten years fighting for my asylum case through legal aid. If I was working I will be able to pay for my own lawyers, my case wouldn't take all these years waiting for legal aid."*

Some women were reliant on others to help with costs for their legal support, with Gladys saying, *"I could not even afford to pay the lawyer for my appeal. I had to resort to begging money from people."* Similarly, Sara explained, *"I was not able to afford any lawyer or support for myself. I was dependent on the people showing*

me mercy. It is a feeling of dependency and vulnerability."

"It is a feeling of dependency and vulnerability."

Other aspects of preparing for an asylum case also require funds, such as mobile data needed to connect with solicitors or others supporting an asylum claim, printing and postage for collating documents, and travel to relevant appointments with solicitors, caseworkers or others supporting a claim. There is insufficient or no provision made for these needs in asylum support levels and with the ban on working, many women feel unable to progress their asylum claims due to associated costs.

Gayle told us about how she struggled to afford mobile data, *"If you want to send emails, you need data, if you want to translate something you need data. And sometimes when you are depressed you don't want to ask for help."*

Travel to appointments related to asylum cases was also frequently identified as a barrier, with our survey showing that 80% of respondents were unable to afford travel. Abiola explained, *"My lawyer was really far from me. So if I have to visit their office, I need them to tell me in advance so I can save up some money for the travel ticket."*

Lifting the ban would better allow women to effectively pursue their asylum claims, ensure they have a fair chance at getting their protection needs recognised, and ultimately would result in fewer people left languishing in the asylum system for lengthy periods.

Why does the Home Office implement this policy?

During the course of conducting this research project, it became clear that **the case for lifting the ban was so compelling and common-sense, that it was difficult to understand the Home Office's rationale** for the policy. To that end, we asked those with experience of the work ban why they felt the Home Office implemented this policy and heard a range of responses from our interviewees.

One interviewee suggested the Government used the work ban as a deterrent measure: *"they want to stop people crossing the Channel to come here."* It has been suggested by decision-makers over many years that a more hostile approach to asylum policy could serve to dissuade people seeking safety from making the journey to the UK. As noted in our introduction, **there is no evidence to suggest that there is a link between the choices people make in their asylum journeys and the economic rights they would be entitled to in their countries of destination.**

Instead, **people come to the UK thinking it is a safe country that respects human rights and upholds democracy.** A number of women we spoke to explained their shock at the cruel policies they encountered on arrival. For Charlotte, *"not allowing people to work is barbaric."* Layla shared, *"I didn't see the UK as a cruel type of country. The idea is that UK is a Great Britain: we will save you, especially women's rights, human rights. We initiate all the law, international law, you name it. The UK is a very outstanding country. But when I came here, I feel like it's a fake, because why do you need to show that you are so good in the eyes of the world, but you are treating asylum seekers like this? It's hypocrisy."*

A number of the women we spoke to felt the work ban was a **punitive measure or a form of control** designed to enslave people and punish them. Catherine shared, *"It's one way of control, of keeping people in control, maybe to curb them from being free."* Similarly, another interviewee explained it was about keeping people seeking asylum purposefully segregated from others in society, using their status to prevent them from living freely. Mary explained, *"they ban people seeking asylum from working so they feel like they didn't give them permission to live like others. So they don't think they are like the others."*

One interviewee, Noor, wisely highlighted the **risks associated with creating a separate class of people in society who are regularly demonised by certain politicians and elements of the media**, banned from work and forced onto welfare. She felt it encouraged hatred and bitterness towards people seeking asylum and said:

"When you put us here living on benefits and taxpayers, this will encourage things like the far right to protest against people seeking asylum and refugees in the country. They will hate us. They think we are here to take their money. Well, on the other hand, if we are allowed to work, we will contribute to the country. So banning us from work is just nonsense."

Almost all of the women we spoke to couldn't understand why people who can work and contribute positively to society are forced into stagnation and inactivity, becoming de-skilled and de-motivated in the process. They highlighted the benefits of allowing people seeking asylum to work and made the economic case for allowing people to contribute through tax revenues. One woman, Abiola, noted, "if you give me permission to work, I can go out from my place. My mind will be shifted. I will be productive. I will be learning. I will be contributing to the country, and I will be paying taxes also. So, it's not just for me, it's for the country as well."

Mary pointed out that the ban can create a dependency mentality where people rely on benefits, making it more challenging to find work later on. "If you don't work for a long time, after you have refugee status, people are used to staying at home and they may carry on receiving benefits. But if they work before they have refugee status, I think a lot of them will carry on working. They won't stay on benefits."

Lift the Ban campaigner at Parliament Square,
February 2025





Time to Act: Our Recommendations for Change

Allowing people seeking safety the right to work and giving them the chance to rebuild their lives, integrate into their communities and contribute to society is **common sense**.

Our research, which complements the existing body of evidence on the topic of the work ban, makes clear that it is an **irrational, costly and harmful policy that serves no one**. Allowing people seeking safety the right to work and giving them the chance to rebuild their lives, integrate into their communities and contribute to society is common sense. For women seeking safety, it is a **matter of urgency**.

Failure to do so will continue to place vulnerable women at further risk of violence, abuse and exploitation.

" You feel helpless.

I have a degree, I have skills... but I am not allowed to use them."

To that end, we are calling on the Government to:

- **Give people seeking asylum and their adult dependents the right to work after they have waited for six months for an initial decision on their asylum claim or fresh submission, unconstrained by the Immigration Salary List.**

Reform of this policy is long overdue. With a new Government in place that is focused on tackling violence against women and girls and moving people away from welfare and into work, the time to act is now. With just the stroke of a pen, the Home Secretary can bring about this change and lift the ban.

In addition, having touched on other aspects of women's experiences in the asylum system, we would recommend additional reforms to asylum policy. **These reforms are vital to ensure that survivors of sexual and gender-based violence who are seeking asylum in the UK are supported to heal and rebuild their lives**, in line with the Government's wider tackling VAWG strategy.

We are urging the Government to:

- **Increase asylum support levels so that people are able to meet their essential living needs**

meaning they should once again be set to at least 70% of the Universal Credit rate for people aged over 25.

- **Provide a comprehensive integration package to people with refugee status and people seeking asylum**

including free access to English language provision from day one after they arrive in the UK, clear pathways into education by recognising non-UK qualifications, access to further and higher education, and removing any barriers to accessing volunteer opportunities.

- **Ensure fair and timely decisions which recognise women's specific experiences of persecution**

by creating a dedicated caseworker unit specialised in gender-based protection claims, repealing harmful legislation which raises standards of proof and makes it more difficult for women to have their needs recognised and introducing group determinations for women from high grant-rate countries.

- **Improve mental health support for people with refugee status and people seeking asylum**

including through a joint needs assessment with NHS bodies and civil society actors to understand local needs of the asylum-seeking population and to inform a tailored care system, as well as committing to long-term funding for refugee mental health projects.

- **Include women seeking asylum in the Government's upcoming strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, by reforming the asylum system for women**

Failing to address the harms that survivors of gender-based violence experience in the asylum system will result in a two-tier approach to tackling violence against women, with survivors who are seeking asylum treated as less deserving than others and so left behind.

The right to
work.
Right now!

#LIFTTHEBAN

"If you give me permission to work, I can go out from my place. My mind will be shifted. I will be productive. I will be learning. I will be contributing to the country, and I will be paying taxes also. So, it's not just for me, it's for the country as well."

"You feel helpless.
I have a degree, I have skills... but I am not allowed to use them."

"It's like being in a prison, you know, because I have the skills, I have the knowledge for me to be able to work, but I could not work."

There are times when I was asking, like, what's the purpose? What is happening in my life? You know, everything is just going south. And then, yeah, there are times when I was like, maybe I really deserve to die. Maybe I wasn't supposed to be living."

"I remember then I was introduced to some cash in hand jobs. I became a slave to other people..."

"I feel like I'm rejected in the society. I'm just a number. It's like my dignity has been stripped away from me."

"One time I was forced to have unwanted sex, so that I can get a place..."

"I became very, very, very depressed at the point of trying to end my life."

"I remember going on a date, thinking it was just to know him first. But I was raped. The guy raped me."

"You feel you are worthless and there is nothing good coming out of you. You lose your self-esteem. You become a beggar. It affects you so much."

"I'm homeless, no house, no money, nothing."

Sometimes I sleep in the street. Sometimes I sleep on the bus..."

"If we are allowed to work, we will contribute to the country. So banning us from work is just nonsense."

The right to
work.
Right now!

References

[1] Women for Refugee Women (2012) *Refused: The Experiences of Women denied asylum in the UK*; (2014) *Detained: Women Asylum Seekers Locked Up in the UK*; (2015) *I Am Human: Refugee Women's Experiences of Detention in the UK*; (2017) *We are Still Here: The Continued Detention of Women Seeking Asylum in Yarl's Wood*; (2020) *Will I Ever be Safe? Asylum-seeking Women Made Destitute in the UK*; available [here](#).

[2] The National Institute for Economic and Social Research found that allowing people seeking asylum the right to work would increase tax revenue by £1.3 billion, reduce Government expenditure by £6.7 billion and increase GDP by £1.6 billion. See: [The National Institute for Economic and Social Research \(June 2023\) The Economic and Social Impacts of Lifting Work Restrictions on People Seeking Asylum](#).

[3] Home Office, [Permission to Work: Caseworker Guidance](#), Updated 22 October 2024.

[4] House of Commons (23 July 2002), vol. 389, Col. 1041W; available [here](#).

[5] Home Office, [Asylum applications awaiting a decision detailed datasets, year ending December 2024](#).

[6] House of Commons, Oral Questions: Asylum Claims Backlog debated on Monday 29 July 2024; available [here](#).

[7] House of Commons, Public Bill Committee Debate on the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill (Tenth Sitting) on 13 March 2025; available [here](#).

[8] Lucy Mayblin and Poppy James (2016) [Labour market access for asylum seekers](#), Policy Briefing: 03/16.2.

[9] Home Office (September 2020) [Sovereign Borders: International Asylum Comparisons Report](#).

[10] Home Office, [How many people claim asylum in the UK?](#), published 27 February 2025.

[11] Women for Refugee Women (2012) *Refused: The Experiences of Women denied asylum in the UK*; (2014) *Detained: Women Asylum Seekers Locked Up in the UK*; (2015) *I Am Human: Refugee Women's Experiences of Detention in the UK*; (2017) *We are Still Here: The Continued Detention of Women Seeking Asylum in Yarl's Wood*; (2020) *Will I Ever be Safe? Asylum-seeking Women Made Destitute in the UK*; available [here](#).

[12] Home Office, [Asylum Support](#).

[13] Women for Refugee Women (March 2023) [See Us, Believe Us, Stand With Us](#), pg 18.

