

Women Asylum Seeker Housing Project (WASH) Roundtable Report

Housing



NRPF

Shelter



Disability

Work

**Social
Security**

**Public
Services**

Children



Asylum



Schools

**Welfare
Reform**



Monday 10th December, 2018

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Introduction

The Women Asylum Seeker Housing Project (WASH) is a community organisation situated in Glasgow and dedicated to championing for the rights of women asylum seekers. As part of the Scottish Women's Convention's ongoing work into homelessness and housing, roundtable discussions were held with the organisation and women they work with on the 10th December 2018.

Women asylum seekers face unique barriers which are different to those experienced by UK residential women. Seeking asylum in the United Kingdom is an extremely difficult experience for women and their families. Often after having to flee severe conflicts in their home country's where they have experienced harrowing events they are then forced into detention or destitution. Refusing women asylum seekers crucial support completely repudiates many of the international treaties that our country is signatories to including the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women as well as the International Declaration on Human Rights.

Asylum seeking women often do not present themselves and are thus hidden from accessing even the limited options that are available. This is seen to be for a number of reasons such as lack of information, lack of interpreters, fear of persecution and repatriation.

POLICY ISSUES

No Recourse to Public Funds

No recourse to public funds is often understood within a social security context in terms of welfare benefits. However, it also encompasses the likes of public housing and welfare pertaining to this, such as discretionary housing payments by local authorities that are not available to asylum seekers.

It also means that many organisations do not have the resources to help individuals undergoing these events. Women seeking asylum do not qualify for the same support in terms of homelessness services from Local Authorities. Instead, if given accommodation there is no choice in where they are placed and cash support is extremely limited.

The media and the wider public do not fully understand the "hoops" which asylum seekers and refugees have to go through in order to access basic human rights. Many do not realise that no recourse to public funds means no right to money or help with housing costs.

"We hear about housing and homelessness but not about women with no recourse to public funds."

Decisions Regarding Asylum

The detaining of asylum seekers within the UK does not have a definite legal time limit, unlike many other European countries. Many women are refused release from detention centres despite mental health issues. When they are finally discharged, there is no support available to them.

If a refusal is given in terms of application for asylum, the right to lodge an appeal within a given time frame is available. However, this can take months leading to further strain. Many voluntary organisations who can help are under enormous workloads with little funding meaning their resources are stretched to the limit.

In terms of housing issues, women can be placed in temporary—and often mixed—accommodation for long periods of time. Whilst the target time for an asylum decision is six months, already a huge strain on women, in practice, it is often much longer. This opens up already vulnerable individuals to chaotic lifestyles, exploitation and severe poverty.

“Seeking asylum is a lottery. You could tell them everything and still not get it. There is a lack of clear consistency. If you left your country by boat the last thing you will have is the likes of a passport or documented evidence. If no evidence, then your case isn’t credible.”

“The way you can be spoken to by the likes of the Home Office can be awful. The processes are designed to trip you up.”

The Appeal Process

The appeal process an individual may have to go through if refused leave to remain within the U.K. is often marred by lengthy delays, causing trauma and confusion for many. Furthermore, it adds additional chaos to female asylum seekers and their families lives when not being told what decision is taking place. Trying to find further evidence to prove their case when there is none was cited as a main reason without taking into account the experiences these women have gone through. If you are unable to provide proof in the first place, it is unlikely it will be available at appeal.

“Being told you have no leave to remain is basically telling you live or die. It is saying this is nothing to do with us. Whilst living here it is not like previous circumstances in your home country have likely changed.”

“There are women whose cases have been refused because they have been asked a question about their city they do not have the answer to. They may live in a different part and have had no access to internet – how are they supposed to know? Then they have to prove where they stayed, often with no documentation.”

ACCESS TO ACCOMODATION

Accommodation is seen as extremely limited in terms of asylum seeking women's access. There is no flexibility with only one option given. Women are often so scarred by this process, they can even be terrified to leave immigration detention centres as they have no where to go and are scared about what might happen to them.

Night Shelters

Female specific night shelters and immediate accommodation are described as *"difficult to find."* Many shelters for destitution have a limited number of vacancies meaning that if they are full for the night then there is no other option. Additionally, women may not feel comfortable in temporary accommodation due to being mixed in terms of gender, especially if these women have faced human rights issues and gender abuse previously. This problem may lead women into stressful and exploitative situations.

Bed and Breakfast Accommodation

Bed and breakfast accommodation is common in terms of temporary forms of shelter for asylum seeking women. It does not however take account of basic issues such as being able to heat food or do laundry. These facilities are basic and are not a "home" for women and their children. Furthermore, with the limited options for funds, many asylum seekers are forced to rely on foodbanks. Parcels are, however, often made up of goods that require cooking equipment and facilities.

Again, this form of "mixed" accommodation discredits the experience of women who have undergone gender based violence. This means staying in these temporary places with no real structure. It adds stress to already chaotic lives and negatively impacts on the mental health of women and their families.

"Local Authorities put you in a B and B. If you compare the costs to authorities for doing this than just providing accommodation it is much more."

"What is your mental health if stuck in B and B? Can't even wash clothes. You literally have a kettle and that's it."

Contracted Housing Providers

Many women are housed by Government-contracted providers of housing in places that are not suitable and would *"absolutely"* never be lived in if there was a choice.

"It is completely inhumane that private contractors can just evict people. There should be a human rights based approach. It should not be "you need to go"."

The way in which these companies handle issues without taking into account individual experiences is seen as having a huge impact on many vulnerable women, including potential homelessness and severe mental health issues.

“Cases should be handled with the utmost sensitivity”

“If the government could take over instead of private housings providers it might mean some people wouldn’t have to be made homeless.”

Accommodation priorities:

- *Be joined up from the point of application with due regard for individuals circumstances.*
- *Be up to an expected standard with uninhabitable conditions being held to account.*
- *Release of detainees should involve a joined up approach through which appropriate accommodation and support is provided.*
- *Allowing greater provision of rights for staying in accommodation when appealing decisions.*
- *More gender-specific recommendations in policy making for women threatened with or experiencing homelessness and housing issues.*
- *Resources for women only facilities and accommodation to ensure safety and security including joined up services.*
- *More robust data on asylum applications for housing broken down by gender.*
- *Stricter guidelines and oversight as to how resources are used.*

FURTHER ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

Language Barriers

Another major obstacle for women seeking asylum revolves around the issue of language and communication barriers. Can interpreters really put into words the harrowing circumstances faced? Those interviewing should have some knowledge of language and cultural issues. Women are often put in accommodation that is uninhabitable and cannot say anything because of this problem with language barriers.

“If someone comes in for advice you can tell they are distressed. But if you can’t communicate how can you help them?”

“There is a language barrier first and foremost before you even get to all the other problems”

Priorities:

- *Provision of language classes for all abilities available to asylum seeking women.*
- *Quality interpreters that stay the same from day one in the process in order to make women comfortable when telling their experiences.*
- *Specific female aids in order to ensure women feel secure if needed.*

Resources

There is a tremendous strain on organisations that do amazing work to assist vulnerable women. Not only does this impact on those working on the front line, but leaves those seeking help having to wait weeks or in some cases months in order to gain access and support, putting many at severe risk.

Third sector organisations who provide support, commented that there is often “*limited signposting*” in terms of helping asylum seekers to seek help and advice.

“Allocations are not going to those who really need it. It is the workers on the ground that make the difference but resources are scarce.”

In order to access advice, some women have to travel from one side of the city to the other. This often translates to high transport costs, leaving little money for essentials such as food.

“A bus ticket in Glasgow is £4.60 and you are only given a fiver a day. This means you are left with 40p for food.”

Priorities:

- *Support services for women with No Recourse to Public Funds*
- *Signposting when asylum application has been rejected to organisations that can help.*
- *Use people with real experiences that know.*
- *Flexible access to childcare in order to attend appointments and appeals*

Exploitation and Stigmatisation

In keeping with prescriptive and cultural gender inequality, it is of little surprise that this is further perpetuated when women are faced with the vulnerability of the loss of a home. Many women are abused and mistreated sexually, physically and mentally as they are so desperate for a roof over their heads. Women face a vulnerability at the thought of losing their home. Being abused by someone they know may be better than sleeping on the street and fearing for their life in the unknown.

“They should try living like this for 24 hours, carrying your whole life on your back and not knowing if you will have a warm safe place to sleep at night.”

“If you come from a country in which women are oppressed, then you see abuse as normal and what women just go through. It’s so degrading.”

“There is so much anger towards asylum seekers. All they are doing is trying to survive. This creates a certain frame of mind and fuels the idea that you are oppressed. This does not come from nowhere.”

Withdrawal from the European Union is seen as worrying due to protection afforded to asylum seekers through certain laws. At present, the EU Asylum Qualification Directive supports those in need of protection. Added to this, Brexit is seen as fuelling anti-immigrant agendas, leading to further attacks and discrimination on asylum seekers.

Priorities:

- *More education around refugees including cultural differences and the rights of women.*
- *Support for asylum seeking women to understand their human rights.*
- *Encouraging and fostering positive attitudes amongst the general public about the integration of refugees and asylum seekers into society.*

Health

Healthcare is seen as a major problem for asylum seeking women facing limited accommodation options. Whilst GPs must register homeless people, this is often unknown. Many remain with their GP even after being made homeless. They simply use their previous address. This may mean being in a location some distance away from health services.

Furthermore, the strenuous toll on women asylum seeker's mental health is seen as a huge problem. The trauma that these women continue to go through including PTSD and severe depression is perpetuated by inconsistencies in the housing process.

"It is making people so crazy because they are so helpless."

"There is desperation. Many think.... 'what is there for me?'"

Priorities:

- *Support in accessing healthcare, including being able to register through local authorities.*
- *Support services in place to take preventative rather than reactive actions – many women are already homeless when approaching services.*
- *Focus on issues such as addiction and mental health with provision of holistic services.*

Conclusion

It is clear that a number of matters arise in terms of asylum seeking women. Aside from the legislative and policy agenda, underneath this there are a host of myriad factors all combining in a way that causes women to suffer harrowing experiences to the point of desperation. Aside from the policy of No Recourse to Public Funds and the Home Office decision making process, a number of other problems await these women. Taken together, they represent pernicious problems in the system as a whole that urgently need to be addressed in the area of women and housing.

The undertaking of this thematic body of work dealing with homelessness and housing issues for women is in order to showcase to policy makers how acutely different women and their families experiences are in terms of sustainable housing and how it touches on every facet of their everyday life. It can play extreme havoc with mental health, lead to break down in family relationships and force women into dangerous and exploitative situations in order to simply have a roof over their heads.

The SWC would like to thank all the women who participated in this event.