

# Destitute and asylum-seeking women in the West Midlands:

Immigration issues and charity support  
related to housing and subsidy

Written by Sarah Taal

Edited by Geoff Wilkins and Lisa Goodman





## Foreword

The images of asylum seekers cast out to sea and prevented from reaching borders has meant that they have become a face of globalisation that we do not want to see and that everyone finds licence to reject. The continuous erosion of welfare support for asylum seekers in the UK and the tightening of immigration controls mean that men and women escaping from persecution across the world are amongst the most oppressed people amongst our society, as manifested in the daily vitriol we witness in the media and everyday life. Hunted down by immigration agencies and economically restricted by regulations surrounding 'no recourse to public funds', and in access to work, when the immigration appeals processes are exhausted asylum seekers may feel compelled to hide and avoid the public gaze for fear of attack and deportation. Under such conditions men and women may be forced to survive through illegal means and be at the behest of unscrupulous employers paying a pittance of a 'wage' for exhausting hours and work. Often, they end up in commercial sex work and are sexually exploited or manipulated. In this hand-to-mouth existence, women are much more likely to be preyed upon and be forced into sex work or to find that this is the only option open to them, even when they are abused and become victims of criminal behaviour. This can be seen to be a better option than facing the authorities and be returned to the country of origin to face additional persecution, humiliation, fear and insecurity.

This report offers an important window and an insight into the work done with women in Birmingham and the difficulties they experience in seeking legal representation, the impact of Home Office policy and practice on their physical and mental health. It shows that it is only the persistence of NGOs such as Hope to provide accommodation, financial, social, emotional support and advocacy that offers a glimmer of hope and dignity in their otherwise desperately torn, depressed and desolate lives.

**Surinder Guru**

**University of Birmingham and Hope Steering Committee Member**

## Executive Summary

This report draws on data collected during professional discussions with the West Midlands Migrant Destitution Group and the Hope Destitution and Housing Panel. Interview narratives came from a number of women supported by Hope Partnership and the Women with Hope campaign and support group. It investigates how the current social needs of destitute asylum-seeking women are constructed. It looks at the practical assistance provided to women when they have been refused asylum, suffer destitution and approach advocacy or support agencies in Birmingham. The report asks:

1. What immigration, housing and subsistence needs impact on asylum seekers' social positions?
2. In what ways are different needs addressed by charitable agencies, and how does this intervention impact on asylum seekers' social circumstances?
3. What is the link between immigration decision-making and support?
4. What are asylum seekers' perspectives and experiences of destitution and the system, including barriers facing asylum seekers in relation to accessing support?
5. Which gender-related issues affect women?
6. How can access to support be improved to reduce destitution?

The research adopted qualitative methods, underpinned by the principles of grounded theory and feminist constructionist theory. The research design was inductive and developed in accordance with the University of Birmingham's ethical guidelines.

Drawing on published literature, the background context briefly defines destitution and then outlines the issues that affect women. It then turns to consider key findings from previous destitution studies. The following section discusses subsistence and housing support provided by a range of organisations nationally and across the West Midlands. Women's issues are highlighted through campaigning groups and research findings. The immigration rights of asylum seekers will be set out, before considering benefits and entitlements.

### **Key findings to emerge from the research include:**

- The Home Office's 'disbelieving', unorganised and punitive systems lead to higher rates of destitution amongst migrant communities.
- Charities alleviate destitution by helping people re-access the UK Government system and engage in casework to address individual problems.
- There are strong links between immigration decisions and support, and as such clear routes out of destitution for asylum seekers.

- Women felt controlled and reliant on the advice of others. They found many ways to survive but often suffered health problems. Many found strength in solidarity groups and were highly dependent on charities, churches and others in their wider community.
- Women felt vulnerable to exploitation and forced relationships. They felt specific women's issues were ignored by the Home Office. Several women reported being subject to exploitative situations.
- Women felt powerless to challenge the system as they had no control of policy and lacked knowledge of the UK policy process.

Drawing on interview and focus-group data the report concludes that Home Office immigration policies are overly restrictive, punitive and institutionally racist. It demonstrates how local charity support in Birmingham alleviates destitution through partnership-working. This provides mainly short-term survival strategies which, it is argued, perpetuate a dependency culture initiated by the Home Office.

Women are disempowered by the system, and findings suggest that they need information and opportunities to live fulfilled lives, not just charity that enables them to survive. Advocates need to think of new strategies to empower women and challenge Government policy more effectively to end destitution.

A number of recommendations were developed collectively through focus groups with asylum seeking women and discussions with support organisations, including:

#### **Home Office:**

- Value humanity and scrap the judgemental refugee system to allow freedom of movement and equal opportunity across borders
- If the system exists, give timely, fair decisions, stop calling people liars
- Understand how history, international interventions, politics, religion, gender and culture create refugees and migrants coming to the UK

#### **Charities:**

- Disseminate findings recognising good practice and highlighting barriers people face
- Campaign individually and jointly for structural change
- Consider how to stop sustaining dependencies, think of new ways to facilitate opportunities and subsistence living solutions, empowering individuals

#### **Women:**

- Attend information and training sessions on the asylum system and women's rights to increase understanding
- Be involved in training charities and other alternatively paid work opportunities
- Promote good health, solidarity support and campaigning with other groups.

# Acknowledgements

**With thanks to:**

**West Midlands Asylum and Migrant Destitution Group:**

**Group Coordinators:** ASIRT (Asylum and Immigration Resource Team) and British Red Cross

**Members:** Restore, Children's Society, Hope Projects, Refugee Council, West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership, Narthex, Coventry Peace House, BIRCH, Regional Asylum Activism Project.

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Restore, Refugee Action

**Hope women who participated in interviews:**

AC, Agnes Tanoh, CMF, MM, TJ and YH

**Hope Projects Focus Group:**

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**Birmingham University Practitioner Research Program and MA Supervisor:**

Lisa Goodson

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# The Hope Projects

The Hope Projects work to help destitute asylum seekers and others with no recourse to public funds in Birmingham and the West Midlands.

There are currently six main Hope projects:

- The Hope Destitution Fund, making fortnightly cash grants to destitute asylum seekers.
- Hope Housing, providing emergency accommodation for homeless asylum seekers.
- The Hope Fund for Children, making one-off grants to mothers of small children who have no recourse to public funds.
- Ujamaa, providing specialist counselling, advice and casework support for asylum-seeker and refugee women.
- The Hope Special Fund, making one-off grants for purposes not covered by other Hope Funds.

There are two sub-projects of Hope Housing that provide emotional support, practical activities and intercultural integrative community events:

- The Women with Hope campaigning and support group
- The Hope Gardeners project (also known as Kushinga Community Garden).

Other projects developed by Hope Projects with others include:

- The Migrant Families Support Project, providing support and casework to people with no recourse to public funds and training community groups.
- The Advice Birmingham partnership.
- The Migrants' Union.

All these projects work in close partnership with other local agencies.

For more information about Hope Projects, and to download Hope's annual reports, visit [www.hope-projects.org.uk](http://www.hope-projects.org.uk)

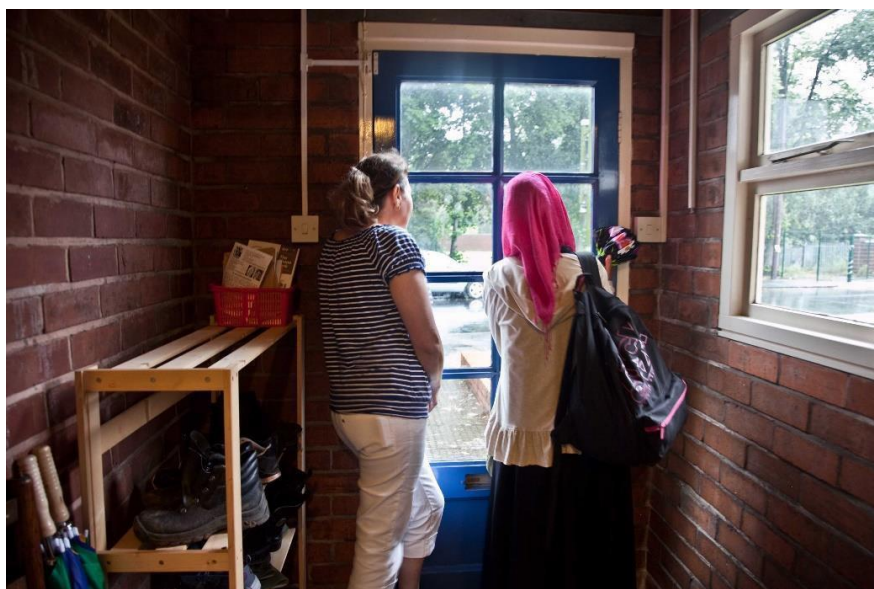


## Aims of this report

This report aims to consider how Home Office immigration policy and charity advocacy impact on the social circumstances of refused asylum-seeking women in Birmingham. The report highlights how destitution changes over time, taking note of causes, processes, consequences and strategies used by women and the organisations supporting them in their dealings with the Home Office and the immigration system. The key research questions included:

1. What immigration, housing and subsistence needs impact on asylum seekers' social positions?
2. In what ways are different needs addressed by charitable agencies, and how does this intervention impact asylum seekers' social circumstances?
3. Is there a link between immigration decision-making and support?
4. What are asylum seekers' perspectives and experiences of destitution and the immigration system, including barriers facing asylum seekers in relation to accessing support?
5. Which gender-related issues affect women?
6. How can access to support be improved, and destitution reduced?

The report findings identify ways Home Office policy and charity intervention interact. It illustrates the places, people and strategies that assist asylum seekers to gain subsistence and housing support, while also considering ways to improve support and engagement with the immigration system.



## Context and methods

The UK Government changed immigration policy in 1999, to exclude all persons subject to immigration control from non-contributory benefits. It has been argued that this was a reaction to a growing number of non-quota or spontaneous refugees (Sales 2002:461). People claiming asylum were also denied the right to work. Asylum seekers are supported in a parallel social system providing cash and housing which are both terminated if asylum claims are refused. The Government states that if people are refused asylum, they must return to their country of nationality; however, a large number of people cannot be forcibly removed. It has been estimated that 90% of refused asylum seekers remain in the UK and brave destitution rather than elect to leave (Blitz and Otero-Iglesias 2011:662).

People choosing to live underground lives rather than returning to their country are often vulnerable and exploited. A new social category of 'asylum seekers', separated in policy and discourse from refugees, stigmatises them as 'bogus' and 'undeserving' (Sales 2002:464).

Women may face gender-specific issues, including rape and sexual violence, trafficking, female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced marriage (Bennett 2008:8). Whilst there are many informative reports of women's experience of refuge and the asylum system highlighted later in this section, there are no gender-specific studies on destitution and charity support. This report goes some way to help fill this gap by focusing on section specifically on women's experiences of destitution.

Destitute people who have been refused asylum have complex needs encompassing immigration, housing, subsistence, health, education and language. This report focuses on the former three aspects, bearing in mind that all needs and experiences are interlinked. Information to address these issues and practical assistance from communities, charities and advice services is invaluable. If this assistance were reflected on, it could continue to make a real difference to the lives of a growing number of migrants who face destitution in the UK and improve practices. As one woman explained:

*'When I was at the worst time of my life, when I was battling with so much, I wanted someone to help and you actually sprung up and helped. It gave me hope again'*

The report looks at how the Hope partnership works, how destitution is currently addressed by organisations and how this can be improved.

The research utilised qualitative methods and principles of grounded theory alongside the adoption of a feminist constructionist standpoint. The research was conducted inductively; as analysis of findings developed, categories emerged reflectively. A feminist approach made the researcher the central actor within the research process. All research and interviews were conducted adhering to the University of Birmingham's ethical standards. Further information regarding the methods and data analysis can be provided by the author on request.

## Information and background context

A brief outline of issues that affect destitute asylum-seeking women is considered by defining destitution and then moving on to consider key findings from previous destitution studies. The next section discusses subsistence and housing support provided by a range of organisations nationally and across the West Midlands. Women's issues are highlighted by considering the actions of campaigning groups and research findings. The immigration rights of asylum seekers will be set next, before turning to address benefits and entitlements.

### Destitution

Destitution is poverty so extreme that one lacks the means to provide for oneself (Oxford Dictionary: 2015). In terms of social policy, six Acts of Parliament between 1993 and 2006 were brought into force which denied asylum seekers access to employment and the welfare state, ostensibly to deter refugees from seeking asylum in the UK (Ginsberg 2009:388). A change in status from asylum seeker to refused asylum seeker leaves individuals exposed and impoverished (Blitz and Otero-Iglesias 2011). Many refused asylum seekers find themselves 'street-homeless' or 'sofa-surfing'. They rely on family, friends and community members for basic support such as food and shelter (British Red Cross and Boaz Trust 2013:5).

There is a growing body of literature addressing the needs of destitute asylum seekers. The majority of this literature is produced by or with campaigning or charitable organisations. It makes similar recommendations based on humanitarian ethics to change policy and advocate for less restrictive border controls. These reports include:

- Refugee Action's (2006) report describes destitution from personal perspectives. It considers the fairness and the impact of destitution alongside questioning whether the current government policy of exclusion is working.
- The Citizen's Advice Bureau (2006) report highlights problems with Section 4 (asylum support, explained on page 12) delayed administration, poor Home Office decision-making and the New Asylum Model system.
- ICAR Briefing by Morrell (2006) suggests it is intentional government policy to cause destitution for asylum seekers in order to create incentives for voluntary return. Statistics are given to illustrate the number of destitute asylum seekers in different places in the UK, including Birmingham. The briefing discusses the causes, effects, initiatives towards and legal challenges that destitute asylum seekers face.
- The Children Society's (2008) study focuses on destitution in the West Midlands. This charity produced a follow-up report (2012) which provided personal testimonies from destitute families and support organisations to show severe destitution, deprivation and exploitation among asylum seekers, refugees and migrant children.

- The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) has produced a third report on this topic (Lewis 2009). The survey shows high levels of destitution, for prolonged periods of time. The report concludes that the previous JRFT report's recommendations are implemented (Adie et al. 2007).
- Crawley's (2011) Oxfam report provides a comprehensive and detailed description and analysis on survival and livelihood strategies of refused asylum seekers.
- In Scotland the Refugee Survival Trust (RST) reports (RST and British Red Cross 2009 and 2011) consider the policies, practices and responses regarding asylum and destitution in Scotland. The 2011 report has the same recommendations as the 2009 report, indicating the difficulties of influencing policy change in this area.
- The British Red Cross and Boaz Trust (2013) destitution report in Manchester provides a similar summary of issues, recommending governmental change and strategic partnerships.

## **Projects addressing destitution: housing and subsistence**

The No Accommodation Network (NACCOM 2014/2015) highlights how destitution is being tackled through various charity interventions across the UK. These organisations have different working practices, but the same aim, to alleviate destitution through subsistence and to deliver housing and advocacy projects that support destitute asylum seekers to re-enter the immigration system. In the West Midlands Hope Projects (2015), Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre (2015), Coventry Peace House (2015), BIRCH (2015) and the Catholic Worker Austin Smith House provide housing, shelter and hosting schemes to destitute asylum seekers. The Housing and Migration Network, JRF, Metropolitan Foundation and Hope Projects produced a practice pack on housing associations and provision for destitute migrants (Housing and Migration Network and Hope Projects 2012) explaining the nuts and bolts of Hope Projects housing and practical assistance.

The Asylum Support Appeals Project (ASAP) works with people refused housing support from the Home Office, by representing them at the Asylum Support Tribunal in London. Based on their work they have produced various reports including 'Unreasonably Destitute' (Hickey 2008), which highlights the difficulties faced by those trying to get support, and considers the lack of credibility in UKBA decision-making and Section 4 support (Fishwick 2011). These documents, along with other ASAP (2015) documents, are useful to help understand what support asylum seekers are entitled to and in what circumstances.

## **Women's asylum issues**

Women's projects across the UK provide assistance and mutual self-help to asylum-seeking women. They address gender-based violence as well as

other reasons people seek refuge. One leading group at London's Crossroads Women's Centre is the All African Women's Group; outside the region there is also Women Asylum Seekers Together in Manchester. Documents, and Web posts written by these groups (Crossroads Women's Centre / WAST 2015) illustrate their support and solidarity with those who have suffered rape and sexual violence as well as discrimination and disbelief within the asylum system. There are many other small community groups supporting women across the UK, as well as mixed-gender campaigning groups like Movement for Justice.

Some groups also compile detailed reports into why women claim asylum and the treatment of these women; studies include:

- Women for Refugee Women reports, include 'Refused: The experiences of women denied asylum in the UK' (Dorling et al. 2012), and 'Detained: women asylum seekers locked up in the UK' (Girma et al. 2014).
- Asylum Aid research reports on asylum and gender issues, including 'I feel like as a woman I'm not welcome' (2012), 'Unsustainable' (2011) and 'Relocation, Relocation' (2008).
- IARS, user-led research reports on the experiences of women who have been survivors of abuse and power 'Abused No More: The Voices of Refugee and Asylum Seeking Women' (Challenger 2013).

In terms of campaigning about the rights of women there has always been debate and disagreement over issues which affect progress. This continues and is shown through looking at how the abuse of women, sexuality, power and money interact as an inflammatory subject. The Bindel and Atkins (2008) Poppy Project 'Big Brothel Survey' highlights forced prostitution and trafficking of women for sexual exploitation, and recommends increased law enforcement. The Prostitutes Collective (2015) argues the report conflates prostitution with violence and the criminalization of prostitution makes sex workers more vulnerable to violence. The right to remain in the UK negates some power for working women; how 'illegal' status opens doors to exploitation is discussed later in the findings.

## Immigration law and rights

UK immigration law allows an asylum applicant to request to be recognised as a refugee under the 1951 Geneva Convention (UNHCR 1951/1967). Immigration rule 334 describes under what circumstances applicants will be granted asylum. Immigration rules 336 and 338 describe the process when an application does not meet the criteria and asylum is refused and people are liable to be removed (UKBA 2013). In 2013, 36% of asylum applications were accepted initially (Blinder 2014:2). Applicants if refused have a right to appeal to an immigration judge; in 2013, 78% of rejected applications lodged appeals, with a success rate of 24% (Blinder 2014:5). If rejected, asylum seekers can submit a fresh claim if they feel they have not had a fair hearing, and further information and evidence is available to argue their right to stay in the UK on grounds of persecution. Fresh claims are addressed in paragraph



353 of the Immigration Rules 1999 (UKBA 2015).

The British Government adheres to the 1951 Geneva Convention. However, in response to the influx of refugees and the concomitant expenditure impacts, they have crudely reshaped refugee and asylum policy to fulfil the twin objectives of deterring and preventing long-term settlement and reducing public welfare spending (Zetter and Pearl 1999). Increasing deterrence of those seeking refugee status in the UK and growing restrictionism in the reception and integration of those who do gain entry are now the dominant characteristics of the refugee policy framework (Zetter, Griffiths and Sigona 2005).

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is an international agreement that includes the UK (European Courts of Human Rights 2010). It sets out certain rights as articles, which individuals are granted. The Human Rights Act 1998 makes the ECHR enforceable in national courts (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2014:6). The Human Rights Act and the ECHR are relevant for both the right to reside and for asylum support; particularly article 3, which addresses the right not to suffer inhumane and degrading treatment, and article 8, the right to family and private life (Lambert 2005:40)

## **Benefits and entitlements**

The 1996 Asylum and Immigration Act withdrew welfare benefits for in-country applicants and those appealing a decision (Sales 2002:462). Part IV of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, 'Section 95', states that the Secretary of State may provide or arrange for the provision of support for asylum seekers or dependants of asylum seekers who appear to the Secretary of State to be destitute (UK Government Legislation 2015). When asylum claims are decided, support is stopped within 21 days (if refused protection) or 28 days (if granted protection) (ASAP 2014). If granted status, people move into mainstream benefits and into work to support themselves; if refused they are expected to leave the UK voluntarily (Refugee Action 2015).

Under the National Assistance Act 1948, local authorities were made responsible for supporting some of those deemed destitute, including asylum seekers. This made Social Service departments agents for the provision of support (Sales 2002). In 2008, the Slough judgement stopped support to destitute asylum seekers, unless they were deemed to have a 'need for care and attention' other than those resulting from destitution (House of Lords Bingham et al. 2008). Women with children can be assisted by Social Services under section 17 of the Children Act, but this is dependent on them having outstanding representations (ASAP 2013).

According to the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, 'Section 4' support allows provision of subsistence vouchers and housing to asylum seekers who have had their claim refused. To qualify for support asylum seekers must satisfy criteria found in the Immigration and Asylum Regulations (2005). Firstly they

must be destitute. Having established their destitution, a former asylum seeker must then show they meet one of the five conditions in Regulation 3(2)(a)-(e) (ASAP 2014):

- She is taking all reasonable steps to leave the UK or place her/himself in a position in which s/he is able to leave the UK
- She is unable to leave the UK because of a physical impediment to travel or for some other medical reason
- She is unable to leave the UK because in the opinion of the Secretary of State there is no viable route of return
- She has applied for judicial review of the decision on her/his asylum claim and s/he has been granted permission to proceed
- The provision of accommodation is necessary to avoid breaching a person's human rights.

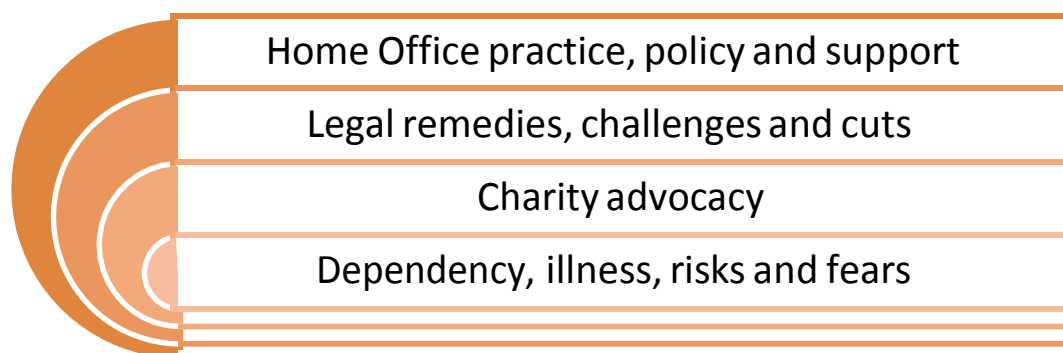
The majority of refused asylum seekers are either unaware of Section 4 benefits or do not apply for them (Blitz and Otero-Iglesias 2011:662).



## Findings and analysis

### Immigration, housing and subsistence needs that impact on asylum seekers social positions

Information for this section was collected from the West Midlands asylum and migrant destitution group minutes and refugee organisation contributors' comments. The four main themes that affected women's social positions were:



**Home Office practice and policies** around immigration cases and support decisions were described as a cause of destitution. Third-sector advocates found:

- Delays, inconsistencies and penalties were common.
- There was 'systemic disbelief' of evidence produced in asylum applications, and hence unfair decisions.
- The 'system forced dependency' on the state for those claiming asylum, and dependency on others for those refused asylum.

**Legal representation** as part of the asylum process highlighted current issues of policy and funding rather than specific legal practices. For example:

- 'Some 75% of asylum applications requested judicial review, only 6% of cases were actually being heard.'
- At the time of the research the Home Office introduced a new application form to request leave to remain based on statelessness. This allows stateless people the opportunity to make new claims.
- The proposed Legal Aid cuts were causing anxiety as it was widely acknowledged the quality of representations would be affected. It was feared that cuts, and lack of means to pay privately, would cause increased destitution in the future.

**Advocates** challenged Home Office policies, mitigating delays and alleviating destitution through casework. Sharing knowledge helped charity strategy develop to improve coping with destitution. It also allowed some issues to be



highlighted to the Home Office at a strategic level.

**The impact on asylum seekers' social position** as a consequence of destitution was summarised to include:

- A drop in self-esteem
- Negative physical and mental health effects
- Exploitation
- A need for community support

Agencies stated that refused asylum seekers feared reporting at the Home Office and subsequent detention. This lowered asylum seekers' engagement and interaction with the system, potentially leading to the criminal activity of working that impacts on their right to stay.

Home Office policy and practice are militant in their refusal of applications for refugee status or humanitarian protection. Legal representatives were fighting for the rights of asylum seekers in increasingly restrictive conditions. Charity-sector organizations were supporting those made destitute and trying to alleviate the impacts of destitution through advocacy and lobbying, mitigating immediate problems and some fears. Findings point to the inevitable fact that asylum seekers are controlled and judged by the Government, while being heavily reliant on legal advisors and charity advocates. Their social position was exploited, dependent, fearful, with low self-esteem that reflects this control.



## Ways different needs are addressed by support agencies, and how this impacts asylum seekers

Firstly, the different needs that are addressed by support services are reviewed. Secondly, the impact on asylum seekers is illustrated.

Data was collected from studying West Midland asylum-seeker and migrant destitution group minutes, refugee organisation contributors and Hope Housing project case files. Five main themes summarise findings how needs are addressed:



**Housing and subsistence:** poverty and homelessness are alleviated through subsistence and accommodation projects. Subsistence was facilitated through:

- Food parcels: St Chads Sanctuary, Church Welcome Projects, food-banks (e.g. the Trussel Trust)
- Supermarket vouchers: British Red Cross Destitution Project
- Cash money: Hope Destitution Fund, Hope Projects
- Essential item packs: St Chads and Church Welcome Projects

Accommodation needs were addressed by:

- A local night shelter: Coventry Peace House
- Housing: Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre, Hope Housing, Hope Projects, and the Catholic Worker Austin Smith House
- Hosting schemes: Birmingham Community Hosting (BIRCH)

**Partnerships and humanitarian advocacy:** partnerships between refugee agencies share knowledge and work together. Advocacy is a vibrant charity activity and includes casework and well-being support, within a compassionate ethos from organisations including Restore, Hope Project, ASIRT, Lifeline Options, British Red Cross, Narthex, Refugee Action, Refugee Council and the Children's Society.

*'Red Cross refer to us, we connect to Hope Projects. If someone is destitute, we can help get a roof over their head and some money.'*

**Legal advice:** a number of agencies provide OISC-registered advice or legal support.

- The Asylum Support and Immigration Resource Team (ASIRT), Brushstrokes and Lifeline Options offer up to level-3 OISC immigration representations.
- The wider partnership offers mediation and support with legal representatives.
- Precipitated by Legal Aid cuts, a new Migrants' Union legal model is being piloted. This was developed from Hope Projects and Advice Birmingham, but aims to be an independent member-led organisation.

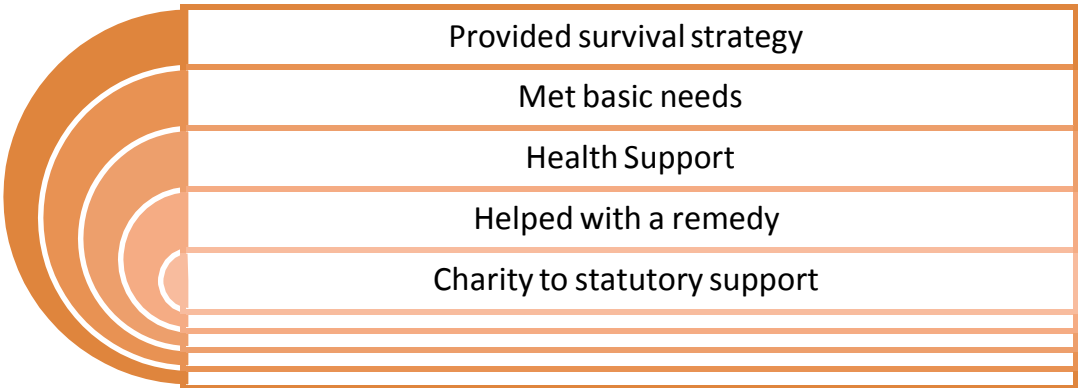
*'The Migrants' Union is about self-help, like claimants' unions, working with people to empower them to work better with their own immigration problems.'*

**Campaigning and awareness-raising:** campaigning has involved carrying out strategies for changing micro-parts of the system based on individual cases, and macro-parts, for example rallies on overarching issues. Awareness-raising includes information-sharing, training and talks. Organisations all do this in their own way.

**Social networks** formed to alleviate isolation and depression are important for solidarity and emotional support.

- Churches provide support groups and places for asylum seekers to meet, in particular Restore, Halesowen, Elmwood and Solihull Welcome projects.
- There are also various awareness-raising and campaigning groups that include destitute people, including City of Sanctuary, Migrant Voice, Celebrating Sanctuary, Birmingham Asylum and Refugee Association (BARA), Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group (CARAG) and Women with Hope Group.

The impact of charitable intervention explained above will now be illustrated.



- Charities provided support during an individual's destitution experiences when they are in the **survival strategy** process.
- Charities helped individuals to **meet basic needs**: for example sleeping in safe houses or shelters and not outside or in exploitative circumstances.
- Having needs met was said to **impact positively on health**, socially and emotionally. Support to access a GP and antenatal services meant women's health improved.
- Support helped people **formulate a remedy** and work with advocates on this strategy, meeting needs as much as possible. Some charities encouraged self-help engagement and personal advocacy.
- Impacts and outcomes of advocacy in terms of **charity referrals and applications to statutory support** included:
  - Trafficked women were referred to the National Referral Mechanism. Women with children or ill women, accessed Social Services care.
  - The most common outcome was gaining Home Office Asylum Support.

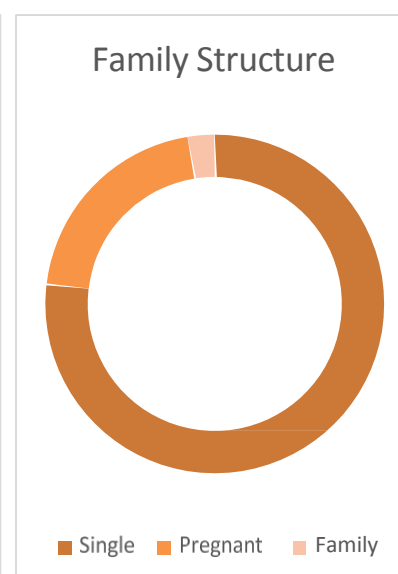
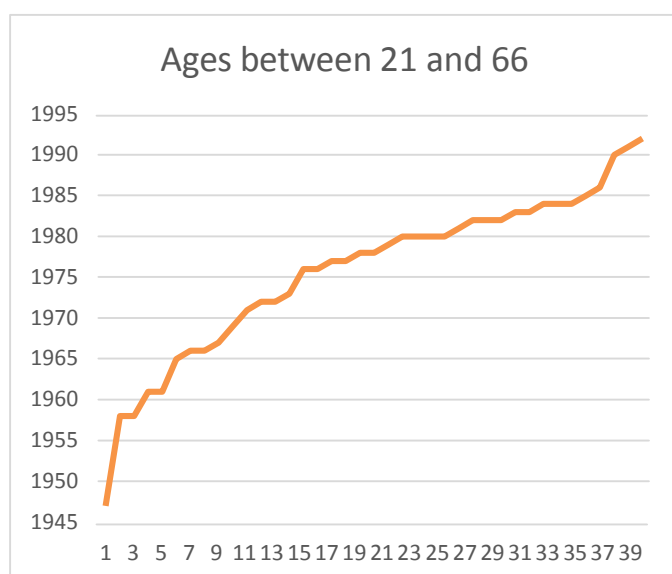
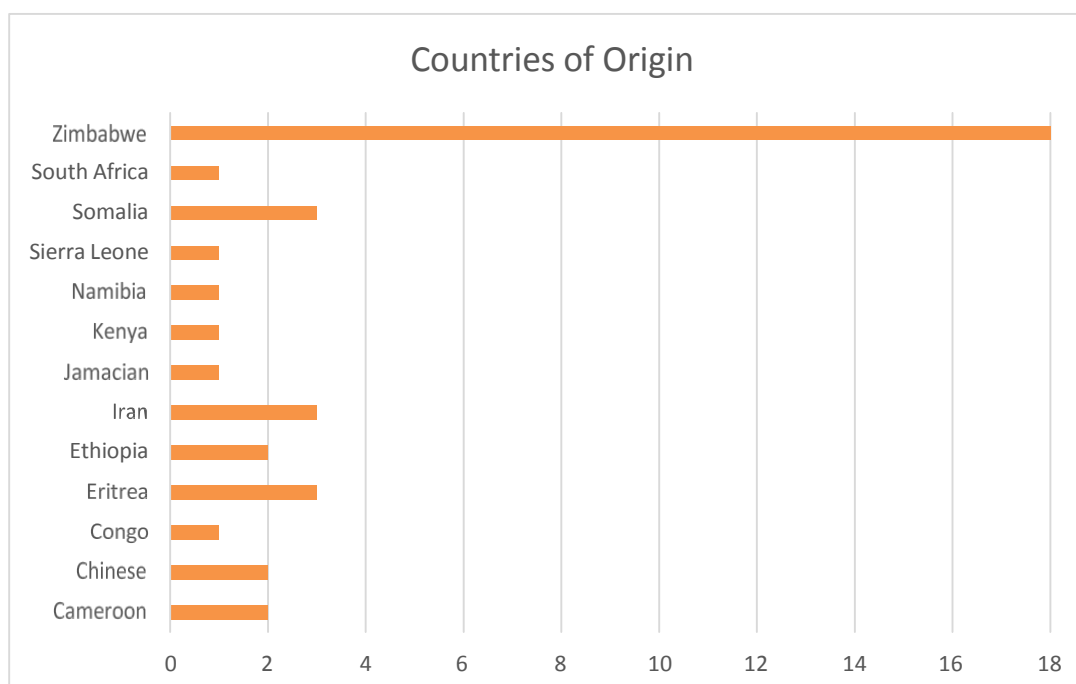
Charity remedies impacted women by providing a path to access the Government asylum process and subsequently a chance to receive the right to remain. Interventions occurred after something went wrong or an alternative support strategy failed. Limits to remedies included professionals feeling they:

*'Have little power to change things as asylum seekers are an excluded group'.*

Positive impacts of charity intervention include partnership, legal help and advocacy. Legal and advocacy solutions are argued to exist within the restrictive legal framework set by Government but are regarded as having little real impact on changing asylum seekers' social position unless they are granted the right to remain. Considering the impacts of charity help, it was found to sustain a bare minimum for survival, at best a single room, £20 a week cash and some food. By providing housing and subsistence, it could be argued that charities are sustaining dependency. Can we curb altruistic giving, and encourage popular protest to facilitate legal self-subsistence routes? Or, in the time waiting for change can we help people be independent? The asylum journey, while varied for each person, is fixed by Government law. Ongoing activities and ideas around empowerment and social change need to be developed with greater urgency to stop people being left in limbo.

## Links between immigration decision-making and support

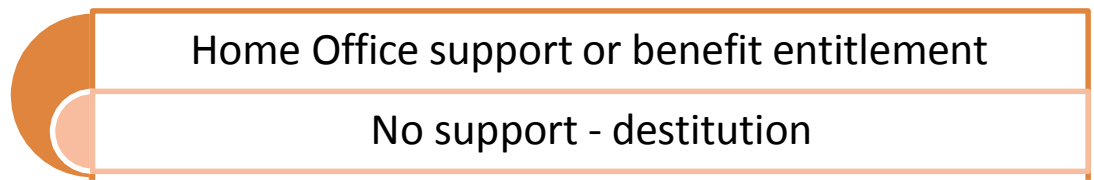
We consider links by analysing Hope Housing statistics from 2012-2013, that relate to 39 women, from 13 different countries, aged between 21 and 66, who were single, pregnant or in a family. Characteristic information:



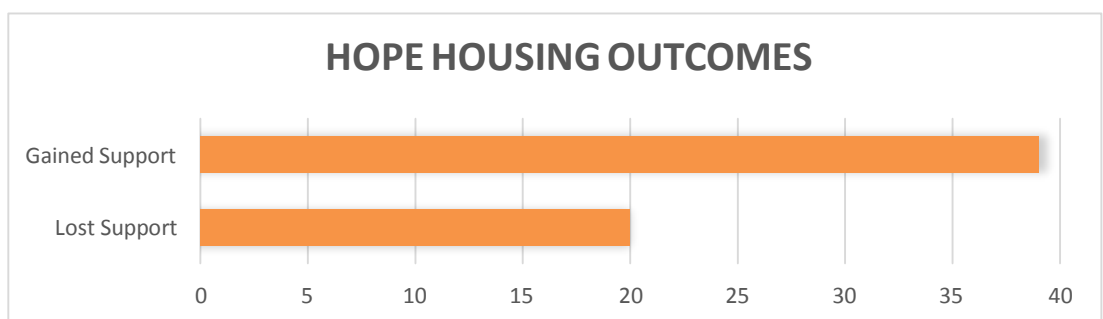
Destitution was found to be a complex process, with varying results, depending on people's stage in the immigration system; see the immigration wheel on page 23. People usually used the Hope Projects once, but three women came back when they found themselves destitute for the second time. There were 39 moves to Asylum Support, which is temporary, while cases are being considered. 20 women were initially refused support and had to think of an alternative remedy, which eventually resulted in Asylum Support. Two of the 39 women were granted indefinite or limited leave to

remain in the UK, and so became entitled to mainstream benefits and work rights.

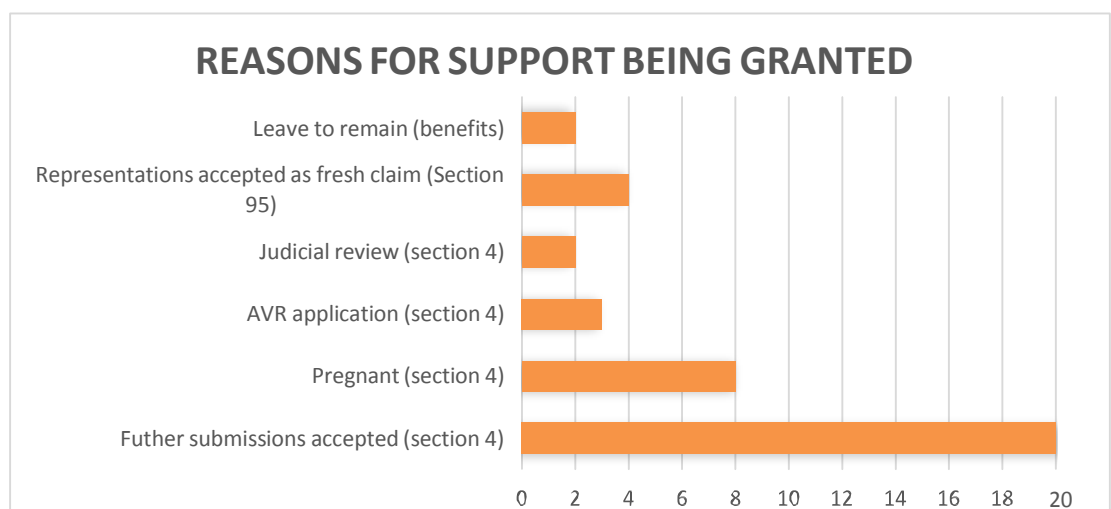
People were shown to have, or have not:



The comparison below shows the number of people who managed to gain successful resolution against continuing destitution:



**Home Office support or benefits:** asylum seekers who had outstanding representations with the Home Office or the Courts, applied to return to their country, were pregnant or were given the right to remain, received support. The small number of women granted leave to remain shows longevity of waiting.



**Destitution:** Those who had been refused, or whose strategy ended, lost support as a consequence, and became or continued to be destitute.

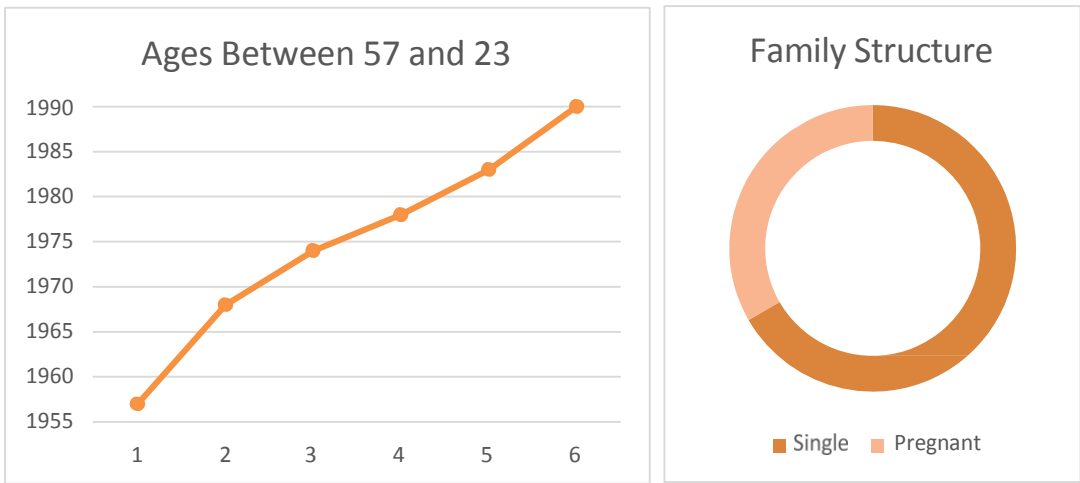
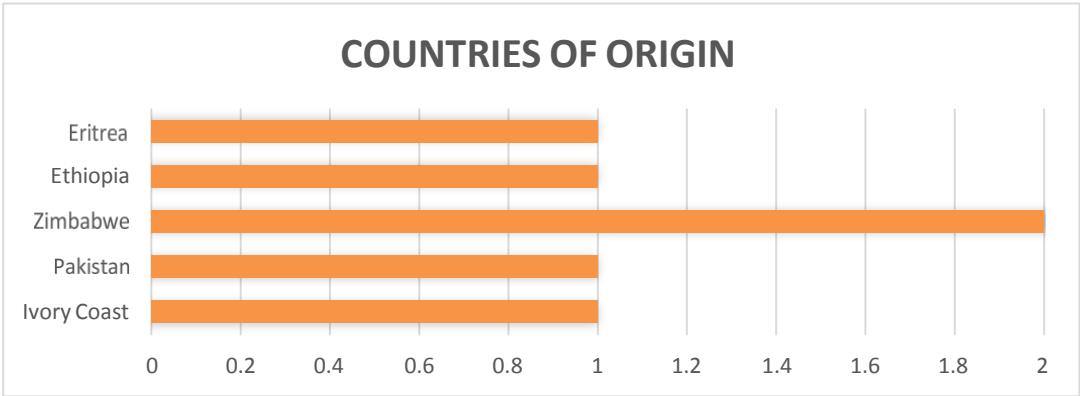


The data above highlight the link between Home Office decision-making and support, giving figures around destitution in Birmingham as food for thought. The large number of Zimbabwean women getting help from Hope Projects suggests that language and networking could play a part in accessing support. Mary, chair of the Zimbabwe Association, attended a NACCOM conference in 2011, learning about destitution projects and referral routes.

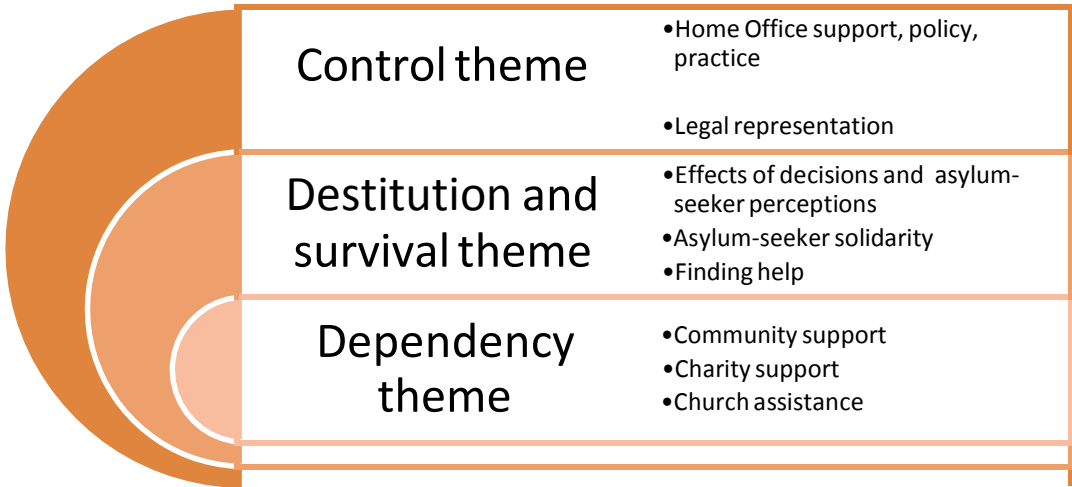
Single women also appear to be more prevalent than families, due to the fact Home Office Asylum Support does not end for families when their cases are refused.

# Asylum seekers' perspectives: experiences and barriers in the system

Interviews were conducted with 6 women, from 5 different countries, aged between 23 and 57, who were single or pregnant when destitute. The quotes in this section are taken directly from women interviewed. Some women who took part in the refugee focus group added comments they felt were important which are incorporated below. Interviewee characteristic information:



Three broad themes emerged, encompassing many issues:





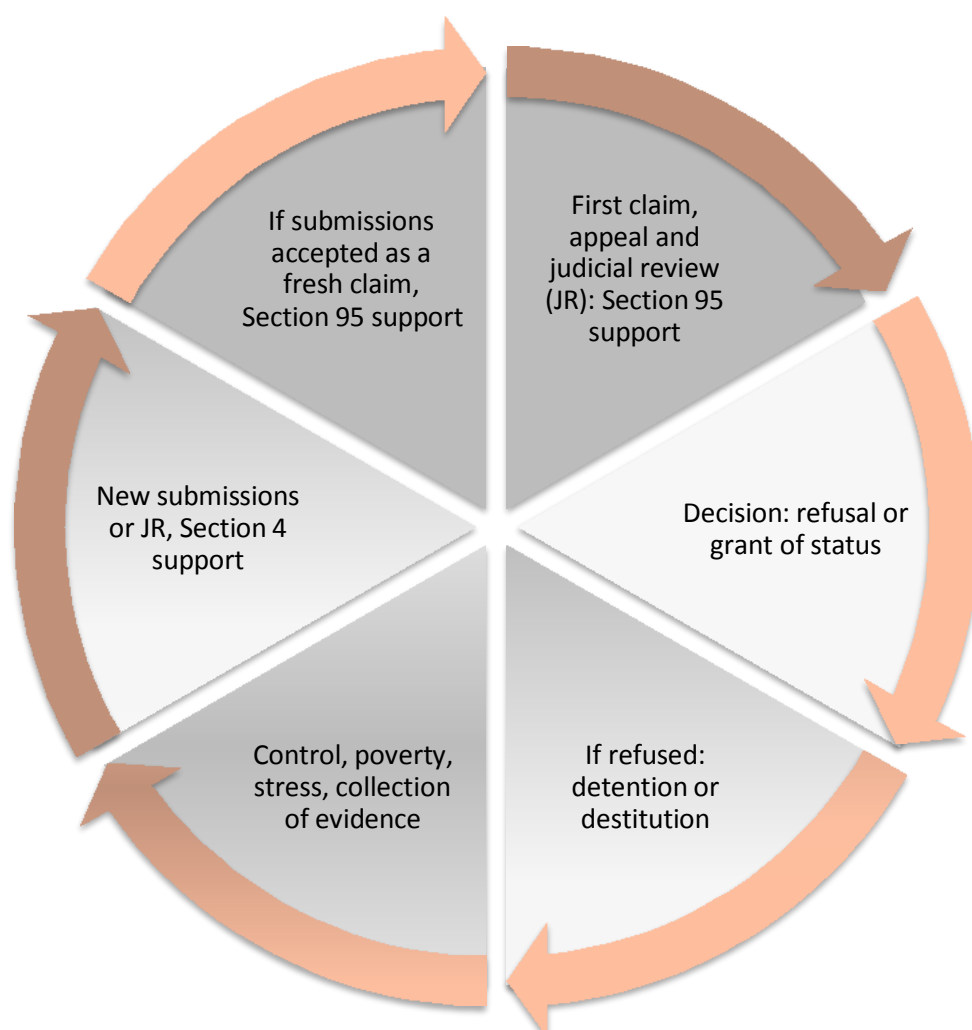
- Firstly, a **control theme**, which includes the Home Office, Social Services support and legal representation, as these actors are gatekeepers to support and people's right to reside.
- Secondly, a **destitution and survival theme**, concerning effects of decisions and perceptions of the system, solidarity with other asylum seekers and how to find help.
- Thirdly, a **theme around dependency**, which discusses how churches, community and charities, are linked to coping strategies.

## Control theme

### Home Office support, policy and practice

Home Office support described by women took a dependent, circular, repetitive form. Consequences of a negative decision were the main cause of destitution. There were also mistakes and misinformation that affected people having support.

Below is an asylum support decision wheel; in reality, steps can be missed, or inserted, as no journey is the same. If an individual is granted the right to stay at any point they move out this system.



Instances of social deprivation and destitution occurred when women claimed asylum and were not given support while their claim was processed.

*'In my first asylum claim, I didn't know I could ask for accommodation, lack of knowledge at the time'*

*'\*\*\*\*\* Refugee and Migrant Centre had no offices in \*\*\*\*\* for Section 95 applications, applied later for support, was refused'*

Women experienced long waiting times to get a decision on immigration cases. They felt life was passing them by, while they were waiting.

*'made a FC before my discretionary leave had expired, was waiting 3 years for decision, asked about what decision is, refused in a week'*

*'not answering anything, 2008-2013, submitted 3 representations, wrote letters, saw my MP, so I asked them what are you doing, they refuse my case and send me to detention'*

*'Give people the right to work, don't just grow old, by time you get papers, you're retired'*

One woman was detained before receiving a decision:

*'They didn't give me last result, prepared flight ticket, when I go to report, they detain me, give me ticket [6 days] to fly'*

Lack of care and understanding from workers within the Home Office was problematic.

*'Like a machine, mechanic, they don't have heart'*

*'Home Office see me as paperwork or file'*

*'Harsh look, face, the Home Office put your minds in negative things'*

*'So, so difficult when you're telling the truth and your being told your lying, very, very wrong, especially when people have been through a lot, they are damaging people worse'*

*'Home Office don't care what you are feeling they think everybody is lying'*

Asylum Support applications made when women were homeless took too long, or women were given the wrong support. Some women wouldn't apply for fear of the system.

*'I applied 3 months ago, when my support worker called, they said working on decision'*

*'Home Office need to be more organised, to find out in the wrong support 2 years later is not ok.'*

*'I think they arrest me because they give me support, if I not apply anything it's better'*

In terms of being evicted from houses, women felt threatened, scared, and uninformed of their rights.

*'Case refused, had appeal, but I worried not right thing (to stay in house), I stopped everything, worried I might be in trouble... every time I go to sleep I think I'm refused, they will stop it, maybe say you're doing a crime'*

Investigating Asylum Support provision is outside the scope of this research, but a thorough study is needed into Home Office and contracted-provider practices as women listed many problems. Houses were found to be inappropriate for health issues. There are negative dispersal effects, such as forced living in shared houses and inadequate housing repairs. Workers were described as operating in a dehumanising way, often lacking in care in initial accommodation, and being distrustful. There were also more serious allegations of theft, where women were not given their vouchers when moving into accommodation. Section 4 'Azure cards' are pivotal, as with them women are left without cash. They cannot travel to medical, solicitor or any other appointments. It leaves them isolated and increases stress and health problems.

*'\*\*\*\*\* dehumanised me, treated like cattle going to the dip, they don't care, you've no voice, no choice, no freedom'*

*'The health worker was there to test if people were HIV+, they could've done a positive job if they had focused on mental health, most of time you are in a state of shock'*



## Social Service support (for unaccompanied minors)

One woman who arrived in the UK as an unaccompanied minor reported she felt Social Services supported her emotionally and practically. She was engaged with, social workers helped her to become familiar with the system until she reached the age of 21. When her case was refused, she was signposted to the charity sector. They also channelled funds previously given for room furnishings to her to help when she was homeless:

*'I didn't know what they wanted, what they would do, what kind of help, not know language, every time I had appointment, I was scared, after I learned English, about the system, they help everything, always there to speak to them'.*

## Legal representation

Legal advice is equated with control, as legal representatives work with immigration law set by the Government. Generally women found the system confusing and relied heavily on their legal advisors. There was a mixture of Legal Aid, private and free representation, as well as self-representation. Women reported good solicitors had been supportive, communicative and hardworking, however instances of good practice were unusual.

*'Supportive, said straight, maybe nothing I can do, I'll see, asked what is your situation, what do you want to say to Home Office, case law stands like this'*

*'He worked hard on case, all evidence to collect he did, he did really well, great job'*

*'Advisor was honest, open, clear and listened'*

*'Exceeded expectations, supportive, said things straight'*

It was confirmed in later focus groups that bad practice, lack of knowledge and powerlessness is the norm when working with solicitors. Women's issues and barriers spanned from the initial claim to submitting fresh claims. Problems included:

- Time issues around not discussing cases well, delays in dealing with cases, wasted appointments and associated costs.
- Bad communication by not replying to emails and phone calls.
- Solicitors not listening to women's views, which was both disempowering and damaging to their case.
- Being dismissive and submitting unchecked cases.
- Not doing work when they say they had done it.

- Abusing positions and preying on vulnerabilities of women.

*'First they give me human rights to stay, then the Home Office appealed. The solicitor needed to appeal against this, he didn't do it, he told me he appealed. He never did'*

*'Things not being done on time, if you have 5 days to appeal, and this isn't done, need to deal with it not just leave it',*

*'Solicitors don't listen, expect you to listen, and what they say goes'*

*'Solicitor said you're going to report, come and get your fresh claim, but had no time to read and say about this and that, should have sat down with them'*

*'We were refused in May, we appealed, then our solicitor did not represent us, he did not do a judicial review, we wrote ourselves to the court, after that a refugee agency sent us to a free legal advisor, he helped us with a fresh claim'*

*'I was unaware of the system, relied on my solicitor for appeals, done, but refused, another chance of appeal, not done, lose case, very confused'*

*'Solicitors are not free to discuss, no time'*

*'Many people are crying because of their solicitors, take weeks to return a call'*

*'Most solicitors do not help in any way, have appointment to enquire about asylum case, wait, no letter, wait'*

*'Not enough time – 30 minutes'*

*'Legal Aid solicitor requested £300 to start off, or pay in instalments, when you get papers, we keep you get photocopy... or if we paid £3000 he said would definitely get our papers – we just had to do this job somewhere, and pay him... guaranteed papers, guaranteed, we were suspicious, thought no'*

Legal advisors were found to generally be unhelpful, and much more empowerment and advocacy is required. The emerging Migrants' Union may provide a forum for women to address legal issues, increasing understanding and the ability to present comprehensive cases resulting in more positive decisions.

The women in this report thought the Government was harsh and did not understand them. They did not discuss the type of evidence that could prove their right to remain. Neither did they question what type of situations get protection. Women experience different forms of oppression to men which are often not recognized due to patriarchal law (Crawley 2001). Women surviving

gender violence are beginning to be given protection as members of a particular social group (Querton 2012). This highlights the importance of awareness and campaigning around gender. More funding is needed for specific legal advisors who are sensitive to gender based violence and abuse.

## Destitution and Survival Theme

### Effects of decisions and asylum-seeker perceptions

Women felt fearful and confused by the Home Office and the legal system during support and when they found themselves destitute. Destitution increased vulnerability, but women found solidarity with others and learnt how to survive.

With regard to health, women suffered negative and depressive thoughts and felt mentally and physically ill. It was felt that psychological trauma was ignored and worsened by the asylum process. Health professionals medicated women for issues that were rooted in stress related to the system; one woman explained being unable to refuse medications:

*'Confidence broken, made me totally different, thought the Home Office would say yes, but they said no'*

*'Started blood pressure tablets, then psychiatric medicines. If you say no and collapse they say she refuse to take the tablets'*

*'I'm institutionalised as cannot cope, suffered a long time, high blood pressure, stress. My mental situation, doctor not understand, give tablets to control, why? You've got problems, still same, I know why my blood pressure keeps going up I've got stress'*

*'My body addicted to tablets, too much panicking'*

*'How is my life like this? No work. No freedom. My family I think always about my family. I want to live in my country'*

Health is a serious problem, using drugs to cope with stress is an unhelpful dependency and medicating to cope with social exclusion needs to change.

Women who lived without money or travel expenses found a need to prioritize help: first was housing, second was food, and third was clothes. One women coped with destitution by selling whatever she had to raise cash. Women regularly highlighted positives of strong faith. They often felt forced to act impulsively, taking bad decisions. Lack of information and knowledge about what to do in times of struggle was strongly mentioned for all women. Who or what you know was felt to impact them getting everything or nothing.

*'In \*\*\*\*\* initial accommodation, had no money, didn't know of help, not enough clothes, was cold, no-one said go to any places'*

*'He said Section 4, I didn't know what this is, I didn't know charity'*



*'Five years after being destitute I heard about charities'*

There were both real and perceived worries about moving to different places when homelessness was discussed. It was found homelessness pushed people towards crime as a survival strategy. Teaching within the community provided one woman with means to survive. When one woman was evicted and had nowhere to go and no right to work, she squatted in Asylum Support accommodation in desperation.

## **Solidarity and challenges of shared living**

Women found strength from others in the asylum system. Women referred to others as their 'family'.

*'Found many other asylum-seeking women there, gives strength that I am not the only one suffering'*

*'Sometimes when I look at others, and have lost hope with own case, look how they are struggling gives me more inspiration, let me try'*

*'A friend with NASS took us to her house to be warm'*

*'Women are like my family in \*\*\*\*'*

Like all communities shared living came with problems; some found sharing with other cultures very difficult as they were unable to communicate, or had different cultural practices.

*'Pray early in the morning, don't want to disturb others'*

*'Not understanding other people'*

*'Women make life difficult for each other'*



## Finding help

Women found help by word of mouth. Half of the six interviewees were introduced to charities by other asylum seekers, one was introduced by a member of her community, one by her social worker, another by her church. Getting to the right agency is found to be confusing and difficult; this was something confirmed as important in focus groups. Once receiving help from one charity, all women were signposted to other charities for a holistic approach to addressing their needs. Sometimes women felt they were being passed around without a remedy.

*'People go and tell their experience, another tell their experience, at end of day muddled up, confused, follow this one or that one?'*

*'No-one wants to help or take responsibility – case directed to different agencies, no-one wants to help out, thrown around as a ball'*

Women requested information and support to cope with their situation. Providing training and advice for women to understand the system they are subject to, and how to acquire their rights, would impact positively on their experiences during this time. However, they may still experience structural systemic racism which is very difficult to change. While understanding, training and advice is helpful, they will still face multiple barriers to inclusion. Women find solidarity from their current support networks. This would be increased through training and more support.

## Dependency theme

### Community support

When discussing community support the importance of *'personal relationships and trust'* was recognised. Generally feedback focused on barriers which included misinformation and incitement of fear, exploitation, lack of friends when in need, not being accepted by your community and lack of cultural support from individuals and communities because of not having the right to stay in the UK. One of the consequences of destitution was reliance on communities which created unhelpful dependencies.

*'It's difficult, people had a life before coming here, now like a beggar'*

*'We had been friends, after refused, said if you have any money, we can look after it for you, but you must leave the city / country, they will come and arrest you'*

*'It's not your home, you become like a child, you cannot do or have what you want, you don't work, can't bring what you want home'*

*'My community never accepted me because of my status',*



## Charity support

Charities are warmly discussed and appreciated by women. Women spoke about help with advocacy, Section 4 applications, legal case working and signposting. The humanitarian, 'you can do it' approach, education, training, groups and volunteer programmes were found to be empowering. Partnership and collective working together is praised.

*'All charities help, get something because of charities, like my family now, charities work for good, like branches from roots off main stem'*

*'Charities see me as human'*

*'Many charities good, share care of us.'*

*'7-8 months without support, xxx is a paradise'*

*'You ask them to call solicitor, they call solicitor'*

*'They know me, not new case',*

*'Low barriers, as well known to agency'*

*'Support talking to solicitor, building bridges between me and solicitor'*

*'Helped me find solicitor, spoke about old solicitor ask if could find another, they accepted me'*

*'A lot of emotional and other support'*

*'Before I think I can't do anything, they show me where to get things I needed, explained more things'*

*'£20 for bus fare to go to food bank and get clothes'*

*'Somewhere to stay, freedom to go in and out, it's my own house, freedom'*

*'Most important thing is your house, you can't eat what you get without a house, no food or clothes'*

*'I met people, make me feel useful, met a group of women we chat, talk'*

*'When support finished, went while other funding processed, very helpful and supportive, food bag, clothes, vouchers, so helpful, we were so happy'*

*'Very good at reassuring, feel better after talking, they treat each person as an individual'*

*'You talk to people, makes you more relaxed, someone to explain to'*

*'Always they want to help me, they work with me like family'*

*'No barriers, can call anytime, welcome anytime'*

*'I trust xxx'*

*'Very positive now empowered'*

*'xxx to me an angel sent from above to save my life, I owe a lot to him, college, community centres for lessons; besides going through the situation we are going through, we are better than that situation, we are individuals with aspirations'*

*'Gave confidence, helped me to remember I was a person, who was driven with goals, not a person feeling down about myself, lacked in confidence, not capable of doing things I'd dreamt of'*



Barriers regarding charity help include access problems, long waiting times for appointments, bad advocacy, lack of continuity with advisors, lack of knowledge of advisors, disbelief of advisors, no confidentiality, lack of help working on a remedy and lack of information about what is being done with and for women.

*'Some people voluntary, don't know system, no awareness or knowledge about things'*

*'No confidentiality, different things happen in past, have to explain all from beginning, everybody listen to everything you say, then you don't talk about everything'*

*'Realise you can do it, giving hurts ego, don't realise your becoming a beggar, should know how to improve the situation, get support but help as well. Not just sitting and getting, waiting and waiting.'*

*'Didn't read application properly, they ask me questions I answer, gaps in it, not properly filled up'*

*'If appointment doesn't do what you wanted to do there, take another appointment'*

*'He got answer, not me, just told refused.'*

*'Takes too long, many people to see in a day, when you have appointment, don't plan another thing'*

*'I took every letter, he said I'd done everything, the only thing I could do was section 4, and later solicitor took case, now refugee'*

## Church support

Churches are spoken of highly by women; the comments below show how much emotional support above the 'giving of food, clothes and bus passes' there is, with only one qualification.

*'Listening ear, lots of emotional support and hugs'*

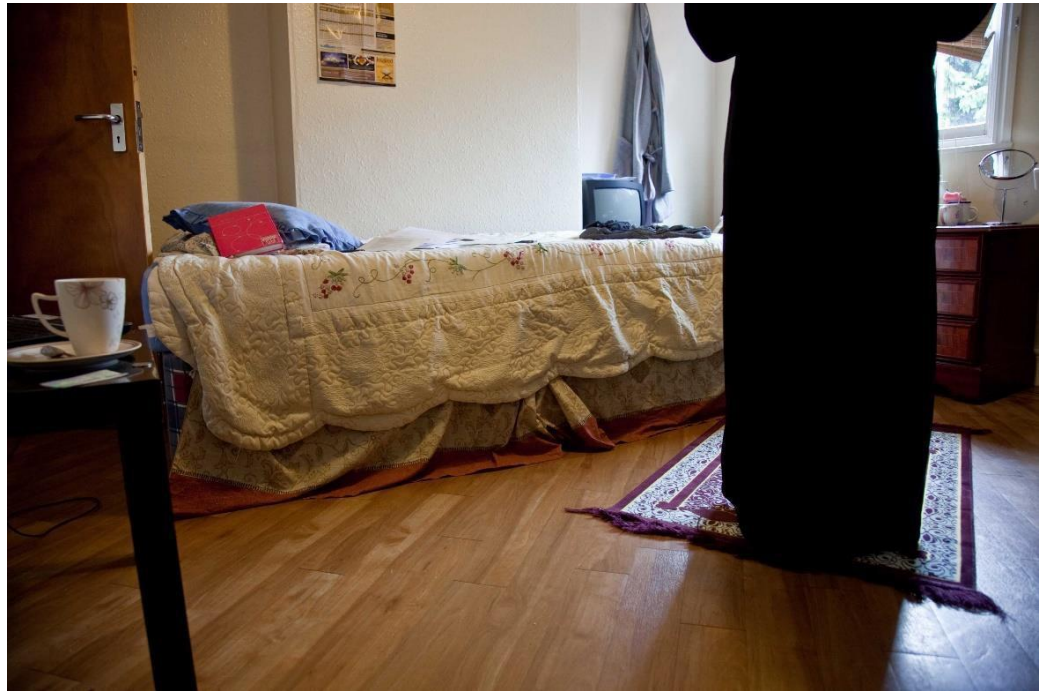
*'Churches welcoming, even though covering myself and Muslim, these people nice, not looking at my status, I come here, they give me help without getting anything back'*

*'Very nice to come out of Solihull reporting centre, have a cup of tea, calm yourself'*

*'Very supportive and helpful, they lend us their sane brains to help out, they are aunties and friends.'*

*'Tinned food – I don't like them, they always try and give me to help.'*





A number of women also find assistance from Islamic charities and communities. Faith is something that gets many women through the days.

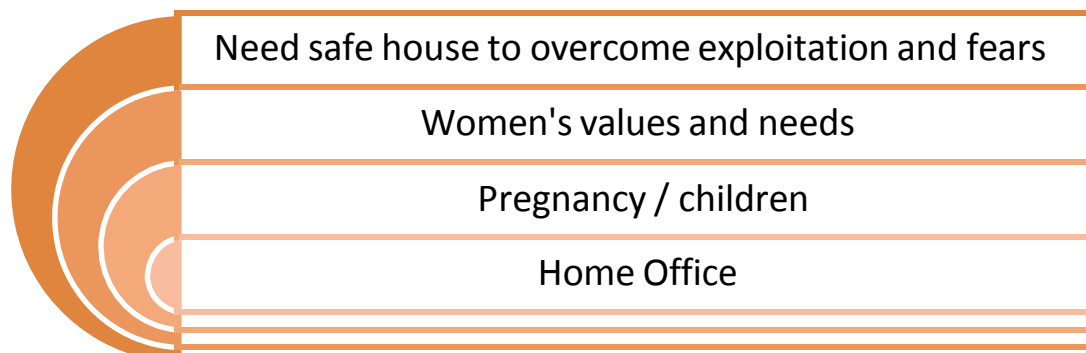
Positive comments around charity and church support show it is needed, and appreciated. But social change is too slow when humanitarian assistance facilitates survival over activism. The barriers to support identified above, highlight what we can do to improve everyday practice. Barriers people face need to be raised with people working in the refugee sector.

The level of need and small number of advisors suggests empowerment to women requires more resources to be shared in group work rather than paying workers. In terms of sustainable change, women need to be independent, in an equal and non-exploitative environment. Can the dependency culture be challenged by charities and churches offering real work opportunities and individual power?



## Gender-related issues and consequences arising from destitution

Gender greatly impacts women's social circumstance. Comments from the interviewees and focus groups centre on the vulnerability they feel as women, because of their gender. There were four main themes:



### Homeless women felt vulnerable to sexual and other exploitation.

Experiences and fears of abuse in community settings happened because they were powerless to support or defend themselves. Ironically, the ways some women survive includes prostitution and forced relationships.

*'He said, my wife is back home, you can come and sleep with me.'*

*'Exploited in 100 different ways.'*

*'Every time made homeless felt vulnerable as a woman, unsafe and insecure.'*

*'Vulnerable in the way treated by men and by other women in better positions to myself.'*

*'Harder for women, vulnerable, very vulnerable, things I've experienced since I claimed asylum never thought I'd experience. Learnt from them, but saddened had those experiences and they've affected me how they have.'*

*'As a woman you cannot sleep on the road, cannot sleep outside.'*

*'Make relationships that are not wanted but had nowhere to sleep, was exploited.'*

*'Temporary accommodation: helps people not to be a prostitute'.*

Charities providing shared accommodation for men and women are also feared.

*'She slept with me as I was really scared, over 20 men there and only me as woman, not safe there'*

*'Beginning we shared with men, you can lock your room if you're in, but, one day no one in, one man came in, I was so so scared, I was the only one in, so scared, that over quickly as men moved out, mixing men and women is dangerous.'*

**Keeping values, dignity and self-respect** was described as important:

*'Women must save her dignity, respect, when she goes somewhere. Women fight for case, keep proud, keep in proper position, hard no matter what background.'*

*'Men sleep at church or another place, women can't sleep anywhere.'*

They felt their additional **needs as women**, which included cultural food, personal care and emotional support from other women.

*'Money for menstruation pads a problem, went to friends, didn't tell them I didn't have pads, just went there and said, oh, I'm on, even though sometimes not menstruating, get pads, go home and keep.'*

*'Asylum Support sent me to Brum had to leave all stuff behind me, didn't have anyone to tell I didn't have a bra – entered shops bras £10-15, by time food (not heard of charities) – stand at till, food more needed than bra, you have to try again next week.'*

*'Underwear difficult to explain to anyone, things are intimate and personal. You've got enough to buy underwear, then you don't have money for milk, bread, butter...'*

*'Not having anyone to talk to or having anywhere to turn when you need help'*

When interacting with charities, some women expressed being more comfortable talking to women workers over male workers about personal care issues and other problems.

*'If they worked with a women would have been easier, at the time I tackled personal hygiene stuff, maybe if there was a woman to take aside and say, as a man I didn't feel I could tell him'.*

**Health provision around pregnancy** was found to be inadequate due to low or no income. For example, one woman was unable to attend pregnancy appointments as she could not afford to travel to the hospital. The Home Office policy of giving the right to remain based on article 8 ECHR was felt to encourage women to have children.

*'Women with children given status, women fall pregnant to get papers.'*

**Women who had children back home** suffered:

*'Down thinking of children, it's very difficult.'*

**The Home Office** were felt to put women in danger due to their lack of understanding about women's issues and lack of funds for women's items.

*'When you lose your support, HO don't think you're a woman where do you go?'*

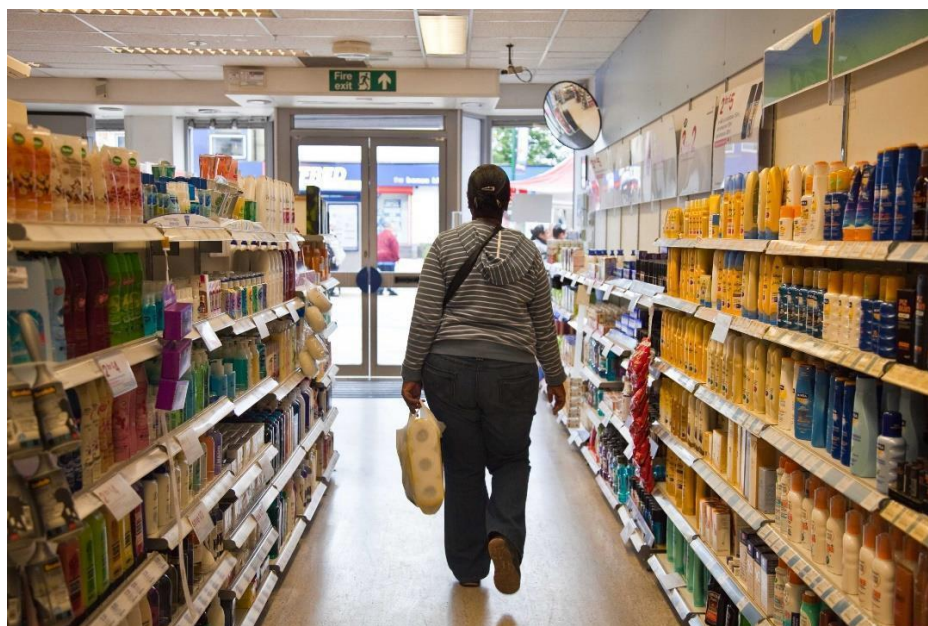
*'Women placed in ex-drug houses – they should do research, within 25 minutes of moving, someone knocked, could tell alcoholic / druggie, said no person doesn't live here. You can tell violence here, you can see someone trying to kick the door, puts women in danger.'*

A pregnant woman was detained, she found that very difficult and the authority's lack of understanding was apparent. Detention research fully explains the pregnant detained interviewee's story (Women for Refugee Women 2014:26/27).

*'I was pregnant in detention, couldn't eat the food there, we got 71p per day, after 2 days bought milk and cornflakes. My husband came and wanted to give me money, he bring dried food and a cold drink, not allowed to give me, I asked him for phone, they said no.'*

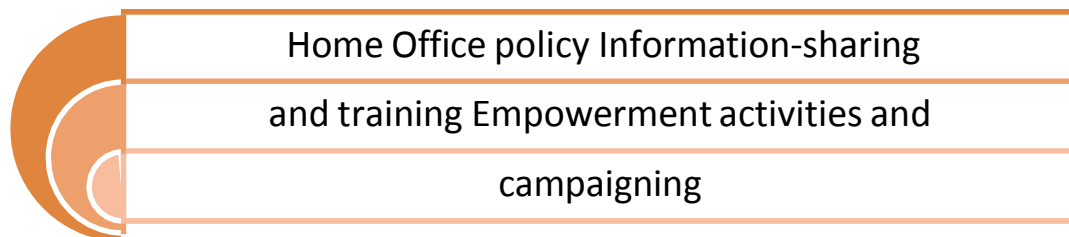
*'The doctor say come we see you, they say you try and eat, try eat, but I can't smell not good – they said come I will give you sickness tablets, when I eat more pain, gut hurting, not eat anything, they shouted at me.'*

Women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and undertake particular strategies and utilise personal networks as they are not able to work. How to restructure power relations so every woman is given the opportunity to be dignified and respected, needs the world system to be restructured? When will we move past liberal equality to practice equality of difference?



## Ideas to improve support and challenge destitution

One practitioner and one refugee focus groups talked about moving forward. Three main themes for future work came out the discussions:



**The Government's immigration policy** was highlighted by professionals as a '*rights against managed migration*' issue which criminalises refugees, causing destitution.

*'Barriers, are caused by policy, or the delivery of it. Asylum seekers should have rights, managers should be applying Geneva Convention supporting asylum seekers. Mostly policy is purely managerial. Asylum seekers are treated like part of managed migration. No special sensitivity incorporated into the policies or practices.'*

*'Refused asylum seekers stop reporting, they are 'turned off' by HO and called 'criminals'. The Home Office are creating criminals running round the country. Could that be said to the Daily Mail, maybe if they weren't able to switch off, they would have to look at issues while solving the problem. Destitution is the country problem, not just asylum seekers.'*

The Government's policies of voluntary departure and deportation were seen as reprehensible, and not working.

*'Voluntary departure is shifting responsibility to the individual, when it is the social policy responsibility of the administration that has to be tackled'.*

A return to belief in protection was advocated, but it was acknowledged that this depended on political will and Government responsibility.

*'Improving access to support needs change, system needs to come back to core of asylum and protection, protecting refugees.'*

Social Services had opposing strategies: the Unaccompanied Minors Teams supported and nurtured young people's rights, whereas adult teams had a managed-migration focus.

*'Children's services have an awareness of children's rights as they all get professional safeguarding training.'*

*'Adults don't get help, many barriers to support.'*

The charity sector felt powerlessness as its aims were contradictory to the Government's aims and it was hard to progress cases.



*'The Home Office are not interested in making access easier. When you start from there, where do you go? Only get somewhere by politicized change, last thing that looks like happening at the moment.'*

*'Recognising how regularisation did work, but depends on political will.'*

*'Need to get back to where we were when legacy got going, now back to where we were before. How do you make happen – depends on who is in control. People running agenda make decisions, if UKIP nationalist policies, what are they going to do about people?'*

Discussion about independence from or dependence on Government funding to sustain charity work was considered necessary.

Charities have different ethics to Government policy, and this is something that cannot be resolved by charities. It is not just a return to protection but the inequality of race and wealth that requires consideration. If the Home Office prioritized humanity they would see everyone as equal. Not needing to judge suffering, they could start to think of ways nationals and migrants can be given the opportunity to live.

### **Information sharing**

Limits to people's ability, and charities' capacity are ongoing challenges. Regarding barriers around charity support, constructive comments were made by practitioners about the need for efficient practice and training on responsiveness to clients.

*'Inefficiency in larger Home Office contracted charities, largely institutional, builds up over time.'*

*'Do something together, a training people talking event, we all have resources to be more responsive to clients, so they have more confidence, and we don't treat them badly.'*

*'Many people have limits, community support in rotation, runs out regularly at certain points.'*

*'Motivation for micro issues hard to resolve as atmosphere degraded, resources degraded. Reflected in micro issues not managed correctly.'*

The practitioner focus group contradicted what was said in an interview, and some discussion around differing views of confidentiality are important to distribute power back to asylum seekers. The first quote was made by an agency employee, the second quote represents a women's perspective:

*'Confidentiality, different to confidant, people are willing to share stories openly, don't request confidentiality. Work using friend basis, friend of friend'*

*'1o confidentiality, different things happened in the past have to explain all from the beginning, everybody listen to everything you say, then you don't say everything.'*

The refugee women's focus group asked to be equipped to deal with the asylum system themselves. Volunteering within charities was seen as helpful to alleviate the pressure on overworked advocates, and have positive well-being effects. The focus group confirmed that they had struggled for access to support when attending statutory and community agencies. It was suggested that information on where destitute asylum seekers can find help should be promoted, but it was felt to be controlled by Government.

*'Want knowledge, advice how we go about it when things are like this...'*

*'Need information centres in hospitals, for prison discharge, benefits and housing office, Home Office, information where to go, how to start.'*

*'Not much support from mosque or Asian community, we need to feedback to them.'*

*'Organisation that tells us how to deal with the law, how to be independent and speak for ourselves.'*

*'This happens if you seek asylum... if refused this where you get help...'*

*'If dispersed away from networks, need introduction to charities that do help, tell us local situation when given accommodation. Officer giving information, places and numbers of charity.'*

*'Home Office never tell you this charity, want you to get out.'*

*'HO already say "get out", helpful for them to give charity information? They would say, if she goes to charity she would want to stay. So they don't give charity numbers and make more relaxed, give something to make cuckoo, just go all over the place.'*

Professional limits to capacity is an issue that coincides with women's desire to have more self-knowledge. While this is useful for those who understand English, for people who are speakers of other languages understanding the system is more difficult.

**Campaigning for policy change** was discussed. Charities, as the 'ethical minority', were deemed problematic by practitioners who felt political consciousness and the energy to support political change in local communities needs to grow. Asylum seekers volunteering and engaging with the public, which increases public understanding, was encouraged. Initiatives like the City of Sanctuary movement were recognised for their ongoing positive work with asylum and welcome.

*'RCOs [refugee community organisations] speak out, showing positives. Regional / local community strategy, integrated at regional level.'*

*'Little thing to change public attitudes / it's a slow process. You can get people to meet asylum seekers, if they are not desperately hostile but think there a nuisance then if they meet a few families people understand. Public understanding can become bigger, they become less of a minority.'*

*'Change public view on asylum seekers. The public do not like people, think not beneficial to society. Many asylum seekers are isolated. They should volunteer, do something good, many don't have access to that. When society sees asylum seekers do something free, get money but use public fund and doing something for them, improve public perception.'*

Lobbying and campaigning for wider social change was not something women in focus groups felt they could do. They felt powerless and without a voice.

*'We are nobodies, so there's no way to change it. No voice.'*

Change was said to be needed, but how this could happen was unknown. Women's mental and physical health was a strong theme during the discussion and comments were incorporated into previous sections. Group support is highlighted to be a useful activity to develop:

*'Only way forward meeting as group, it's the one thing that keeps me going. You feel like a person. You see somebody, feel she is having same problem. Other places – who is that one, is she the asylum seeker? You're not referred to as a person, you don't have a name, identity, your identity is an asylum seeker.'*

Campaigning for policy change needs more effort and attention, women need to be empowered to feel confident to speak out about what they experience in ways that protect their individual dignities. Linking with other groups to have greater solidarity is a way to develop this. Women also need relaxing, respectful and therapeutic spaces to live and feel human so they have the strength to face the exclusion and discrimination faced on a daily basis.



## Conclusion and recommendations

This research has outlined specific situations faced by women, from practitioners, file-data and personal perspectives. It has addressed the broad and systemic structures of inequality and oppression, not through making truth and justice claims, but through individuals narrating contextual experience.

Home Office immigration policies are restrictive, punitive and institutionally racist. Local charity support alleviates destitution through a partnership approach, providing mainly short-term survival strategies which perpetuate a dependency culture initiated by the Home Office. Women are disempowered by the system, and findings suggest that they need information and opportunities to live, not just charity to exist. Advocates need to think of new strategies to avoid dependency, challenging Government policy more effectively to end destitution.

In terms of overall recommendations, it is suggested that:

### **Home Office:**

- Value humanity and scrap the judgemental refugee system to allow freedom of movement and equal opportunity across borders,
- If the system exists, give timely, fair decisions, stop calling people liars
- Understand how history, international interventions, politics, religion, gender and culture create refugees coming to the UK

### **Charities:**

- Disseminate findings recognising good practice and highlighting barriers people face
- Campaign individually and jointly for structural change
- Consider how to stop sustaining dependencies, think of new ways to facilitate opportunities and subsistence living solutions, empowering individuals

### **Women:**

- Attend information and training sessions on the asylum system and women's rights to increase understanding
- Be involved in training charities and other alternatively paid work opportunities
- Promote good health, solidarity support and campaigning with other groups.

Many of these recommendations are not new and are already being implemented locally and across the UK. The presence of urban refugees can result in positive outcomes in cities where they live, if refugees are accorded

their rights and allowed to get on with their own livelihoods (Jabobsen 2006:284). This philosophically raises the belief in the progressivism of Marx, about bringing forth a social life that realizes human ideals, where all humans are valuable. Many questions remain regarding how to promote an effective mechanism by which social problems could be transformed into action; can the voice of people overcome political elite and large scale business and bureaucracy? Is the view, that public interest will be hemmed in by the interests and ideologies they hold making progressive politics doubtful, right (Hammersley 2000:56)?

### **Hope Projects have already begun working some of these issues:**

- They have modified their knitting group to a women's activism group. With the support of funding from the Hilden Trust and AW.60 they will increase links between women's groups, mens groups and campaigning organisations. This will increase knowledge of human rights and social activism solidarity.
- Hope Projects have published this report and will be offering workshops to refugee organisations in Birmingham to hear findings, improve working practices and consider how to overcome structural barriers so people's human rights are more respected.
- New funding from the Barrow Cadbury Trust has employed a housing worker to empower Hope Housing residents to help run the houses, learn information about migration and asylum and get involved in current campaigns. Women and men will engage together.



In time, maybe we can all dance.



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The registered office of the company is at  
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