

# Made homeless by the state: Britain's assault on women seeking asylum



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**By Priscilla Dudhia**

I've spent the last year speaking with 106 women who've sought asylum in England and Wales about their experiences of being made destitute in the UK. These are women with no statutory financial or housing support and no right to work. Yesterday, [Women for Refugee Women](#), together with our regional partners, published a [report](#) on those harrowing findings. It's the largest recent piece of research on the effects of destitution on asylum-seeking women in the UK.

The women who shared their stories came from 29 different countries. A quarter of them were from DR Congo, famously referred to by one senior UN official as "the rape capital of the world". They had all fled various forms of brutal violence from the state or the community.

Seventy-one percent of women said that they had been tortured and around 60% said that they had been raped in their home countries. Others had faced FGM, forced prostitution, trafficking and forced marriage. A third of the women said that they had been targeted because of their gender and almost a quarter because of their political activities. Gay women from countries like Uganda, Cameroon and Nigeria - where homophobic violence is well-documented - were persecuted because of their sexuality.

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Many of these women then made dangerous journeys to seek safety. Almost half of those I spoke with told me that they had suffered rape, sexual violence, torture or captivity as they made their way to our shores.

But when these brave women arrived in the UK they were treated with suspicion and hostility. Josephine, who fled DR Congo after being targeted for her political activities, told me: "I was traumatised by this asylum system. I don't think my mental state will ever be the same again."

The Windrush scandal exposed an immigration system that is unjust and broken. But even before then, WRW and our partners - including Women Asylum Seekers Together Manchester, Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group, and Women with Hope in Birmingham - have been seeing hundreds of destitute women over the years. We have heard so many stories from them of the routine disbelief that people seeking refuge are facing under the Hostile Environment. The vast majority of women I spoke with for this research felt that they had not been believed by the Home Office, in a process that demands unrealistically high levels of consistency, coherence and credibility from traumatised individuals.

Women are additionally disadvantaged by an insufficient awareness among some Home Office decision-makers of how gender-based violence, particularly when inflicted by community or family members, falls within the UK's obligation to grant asylum. Mariam, who fled the war in Somalia, during which she was raped multiple times, waited ten years to receive refugee status after the Home Office made an incorrect decision on her initial claim. In the meantime, she became homeless, hungry and suicidal.

Over the years governments on both the left and right have hacked away at basic protections for people seeking asylum, who are banned from working and from claiming mainstream benefits. While their claims are being processed, they must turn to a separate and more restricted system for housing and support - support that equates to £5.39 a day to cover everything from meals, travel to legal and medical appointments, to warm clothes and period pads. But once their claims are rejected, often because they have been unable to attain a fair hearing, many women are left with no support at all.

The women I spoke with, whose claims were refused, feared an on-going risk of persecution if they were to return to their countries of origin. They have therefore remained in the UK in the hope that one day their stories will be believed. Meanwhile, they are forced into a state of indefinite and extreme poverty.

I say 'forced' because it is deliberate. It is a policy created by our government in the hope that pushing vulnerable people with insecure status into desperate and fearful situations will make them leave the UK.

The UK is the world's sixth largest economy and consistently reminds us of its "long and proud tradition of giving sanctuary". But my research revealed the most shocking statistics of harm experienced here by these women. One woman in our network, Saron, said: "It wasn't what happened to me in my country that broke me. It was what I went through here."

Almost all of the women I spoke with were hungry while they were living in the UK. Around half were made street homeless, while others sofa-surfed with strangers or were trapped in abusive relationships, just so they could get a meal and a roof for the night. Given their precarious living situations, many women were raped or suffered sexual violence. In fact, 32 women who were raped or sexually abused in the country of origin told us that they were subjected to rape or sexual violence again when living destitute in the UK.

Evelyn, who was trafficked from west Africa, said: "I was trafficked to the UK by a man who kept me locked up and raped me. When I managed to get away I claimed asylum, but the Home Office didn't believe what had happened to me. I had no accommodation or support for six years. It was so hard for me. I met a man who said that I could stay with him, but he forced me to have sex with him and abused me in other ways. I didn't want to be with him but I had no choice."

Like many other women I spoke with, Evelyn felt unable to turn to the police for protection because she feared that her information would be shared with the Home Office, who would then proceed to detain or deport her. Recent reports show that 60% of police forces have referred victims of crime to the Home Office, proving that these fears are very real.

In light of the cruel and humiliating struggles, it is unsurprising that almost all of the women became depressed when destitute. A third said that they actively tried to kill themselves.

There are no official figures on how many women and men are living destitute. But in 2017 the British Red Cross estimated that at least 15,000 people seeking asylum were destitute in the UK.

Echoing the views of other women who shared their stories with me, Agnes, from the Ivory Coast said: "I have a dream that, one day, everyone who seeks asylum will be treated with dignity."

On 14 February, Women for Refugee Women and our grassroots partners from across England and Wales will launch [Sisters Not Strangers](#) – a campaign to end the destitution of asylum-seeking women in the UK. In the current political climate, of increasing insularity and decaying empathy, this is a challenging time to speak up for women who are seeking asylum. But history shows us the potential for real change. I hope that some of you reading will join our movement in support of a fair and

humane asylum system, a system that believes women who have fled danger, and gives them the safety that they deserve.

**All names in this article are pseudonyms. The full report, Will I Ever be Safe: Asylum-seeking women made destitute in the UK, can be read at [www.refugeewomen.co.uk/not-safe](http://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/not-safe). Priscilla Dudhia is Policy and Research co-ordinator at Women for Refugee Women.**

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