

Women's Asylum News

Women's Project at Asylum Aid

IN THIS ISSUE

Pp. 2-5 Lead article: [Closing the Protection Gap](#)

Pp. 5-6 Sector Update: [Asylum Aid contributes to Beijing+20](#)

Pp. 6-7 Significant Legal Issues: [R \(on the application of BA\) v The Secretary of State for the Home Department \[2014\] EWHC 4223 \(Admin\)](#)

Pp. 8-11 National News: [Channel 4 undercover in Yarl's Wood](#)
[Petition urges UK government to ratify the Istanbul Convention](#)

[New Home Office Guidance on LGB asylum claims](#)

Pp. 11– 13 International News: [Dire conditions for displaced women and girls in Afghanistan](#)
[Women and Girls Safe Spaces](#)

Pp. 13-14 UK Training and Events: [Workshop: The fear of FGM as grounds for seeking asylum](#)
[Counselling training for refugee women](#)

[Event: From silence to solidarity, violence to visibility](#)

Pp. 14-15 Publications: [Removing gender discrimination from nationality laws](#)

[28 Too Many Report on FGM in the Gambia](#)

Pp. 16 Charter Update: [UCL STAR](#)

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Closing the Protection Gap

The Protection Gap campaign, run under the Charter of Rights of Women Seeking Asylum, draws its demands from the International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict. If provisions are appropriate for women affected by rape during civil war in countries such as the DRC or Somalia, the campaign argues, they should also be appropriate for the women who flee such human rights abuses and seek protection in the UK.

The initial postcard phase of the campaign ran from 8th December 2014 to 10th March 2015. This campaign builds on the two previous Charter campaigns:

- Every Single Woman (2009) –raising awareness of rights of women seeking asylum needing to be equivalent to women settled in the UK
- Missed Out (2012) –demanding inclusion of women seeking asylum in VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls) action plan

Key impacts:

All five Protection Gap campaign demands were included in the revised Home Office Women's Asylum Action Plan.

Empowerment of beneficiaries, ie women asylum seekers and refugees, through providing their case studies, lobbying Baroness Helena Kennedy, signing postcards and promoting the campaign.

The first time Asylum Aid supported by other Charter endorsers raised the theme that was to become the Protection Gap campaign formally with UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) was in June 2014. It was suggested that UKVI could transfer learning from the Global Summit on sexual violence in conflict protocol into their own work for instance regarding psycho-social assistance, gender of interviewing officers, childcare during interviews, training for decision-makers. Some of the provisions in the EU Victims Directive could also be transferred. The Istanbul Convention, which the UK has signed and is yet to ratify, would ensure victims of VAWG would be protected regardless of their immigration status.

The Protection Gap Campaign demands are:

- ◆ Guarantee that women can have a female interviewer and interpreter if they choose
- ◆ Provide childcare during screening and asylum interview
- ◆ Training for interviewers and interpreters on sexual violence, trauma and memory
- ◆ Counselling and support for trauma for women who have experienced gender-based harm
- ◆ Information about the asylum process, rights and entitlements specific to women seeking asylum

The choice of these measures was solely because they are in the International Protocol. However a much longer list of demands in the Refugee Women's Strategy Group's 2013 report [Making Asylum Work for Women](#) includes all our demands.

To obtain the impacts:

- The Charter group, represented by Debora Singer (Asylum Aid), Anna Musgrave (Refugee Council) and Nina Murray (Scottish Refugee Council), obtained their first meeting with Sarah Rapson, Director General of UKVI where they discussed the demands in detail. Sarah Rapson agreed that all the Protection Gap recommendations would help women escaping VAWG in their home countries and could improve disclosure and credibility issues leading to improved decision making and reduction in overturns on appeal. She wanted the recommendations to be put together as a package in the UKVI Women's Asylum Action Plan.
- 1223 postcards were sent by individuals to their MPs to ask the Home Secretary to implement the demands.
- Four refugee and asylum seeking women from London and Glasgow told Baroness Helena Kennedy directly of their concerns in relation to the campaign when they presented her with the postcards.
- A Parliamentary Question was asked in the House of Lords by Lord Hylton which resulted in the Protection Gap campaign being mentioned by Government and a letter from Lord Bates, detailing their intentions for taking forward the demands.
- Ken Macintosh MSP's motion lodged in the Scottish Parliament highlighting the campaign in the context of particular barriers to accessing protection faced by women has been signed by 32 MSPs to date and gained cross-party support.
- Organisations including the TUC, Scottish Refugee Council and Refugee Women's Strategy Group, Fawcett Society and Migrants Rights Network published blogs about the campaign.
- Articles were published in Open Democracy 50:50, Politics.co.uk, Lacuna Magazine, Thomson Reuters Foundation and International Political Forum.

Campaigns under the Charter are always set up so that Charter supporters can own and use them as they wish thus providing a multiplier effect.

The Scottish Refugee Council, working with the Refugee Women's Strategy Group was the organisation that took up the campaign most, accounting for the sending of more than 150 postcards to MPs. They published three written and three video blogs about the campaign. They involved local partners, including Rape Crisis Scotland. In addition Rape Crisis groups all over the country picked up on the campaign very proactively. During the course of the campaign, ten new organisations endorsed the Charter.

Beneficiary involvement

It became apparent that the process of involving women asylum seekers and refugees was empowering, both for those directly involved and others. This demonstrated that the campaign had resonance with refugee women. Beneficiary involvement thus became a secondary but major impact of the campaign.

In preparing and implementing the campaign Asylum Aid worked closely with the refugee

and migrant students of Evelyn Oldfield Unit's Research in Action and Influence Programme. This work included messaging, campaigning and lobbying.

The Refugee Women's Strategy Group in Glasgow, which is supported by the Scottish Refugee Council, got very involved with the campaign, signing postcards and making short video blogs to support the campaign.

A Women's Aid Group in Bury, Lancashire whose members have experienced domestic abuse or are asylum seekers and refugees asked for 50 postcards to sign and distribute so they could take them to their MP stating "It would give us some courage and enthusiasm to be part of this larger campaign."

Feedback from the Coordinator of the Red Cross Refugee Services Women's Support Group in London stated:

Women felt heartened to know there are organisations trying to make positive change, and empowered that they could be a part of that change. The [Protection Gap] campaign also provided a platform for women who do not usually have a voice to speak out about their own experience as an asylum seeker. Women realised they were not alone with their problems, and this intimate sharing built solidarity between the women was extremely powerful.

To highlight the end of the postcard phase of the campaign a photo opportunity was arranged by Asylum Aid supported the Scottish Refugee Council. On 10th March 2015 Baroness Helena Kennedy received the postcards outside the Houses of Parliament. Two women from the Evelyn Oldfield Unit and two from the Refugee Women's Strategy Group spoke individually to Helena about the campaign as they presented the boxes of postcards. This event provided direct access for beneficiaries to influence a member of the House of Lords.

In February 2015, the Joint Committee on Human Rights published its report on Violence Against women. The headline when the report was published read "The Government's domestic policy on VAWG is lagging behind its efforts abroad" which mirrored the campaign messaging and two of the recommendations also mirrored ours (female interpreters for women at asylum interviews, childcare during asylum screening interviews). We were able to use this opportunity to reinforce the campaign message.

In March 2015 Channel 4 broadcast undercover footage from within Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre. We used this to support the campaign, arguing that if the protection gap were closed, women would not be sent to Yarl's Wood.

This was the first Charter campaign to include social media which proved very effective in reaching a wide range of people and organisations. Supporters tweeted out photographs of individuals and groups holding up their postcards. This included famous writers, Caroline Criado-Perez and Bidisha.

Future plans

The intention is to continue the Protection Gap campaign until all the provisions are

implemented nationally, not just listed in an action plan. This could take a few years. The timing of the pre-election period (purdah) provides a natural break for the campaign. This allows some time for UKVI to do what they have promised and for us to consider how to progress the campaign.

This campaign would not have been possible or so effective without the involvement of Charter supporters and individuals. In addition to the 360+ Charter organisations the campaign now has over 360 individual supporters and has gained many contacts in parliament and the media who can be called upon to support future phases of the campaign. The campaign will continue to use a mix of policy, parliamentary, communications and media initiatives to influence the UKVI until all the demands are implemented.

Sector update

Asylum Aid contributes to Beijing+20

Asylum Aid has contributed to a review of the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#). This international declaration for women's equality and empowerment was adopted by the UN in 1995. The review of progress made in the implementation of the declaration ([Beijing+20](#)) took place at the [Commission on the Status of Women](#) at United Nations Headquarters in New York from 9 to 20 March 2015.

In preparation for this review the UK produced a [report](#). Asylum Aid's [response](#) states:

- Asylum Aid is concerned that refugee and asylum seeking women are completely omitted from the UK report.
- All women and girls have the right to protection from violence regardless of their immigration status.
- The UK should increase the number of Syrian refugees arriving under the Vulnerable Person's Relocation scheme for resettlement in the UK.
- The UK should bring in guidelines/practice direction for immigration judges on dealing with gender issues.
- Asylum Aid is concerned that the provisions from the Global Summit and Girl Summit include no parallel commitments for women seeking asylum.
- Detention has no place in the asylum process and asylum seekers' cases can be heard while they are living in the community at much less cost and with less trauma.

Asylum Aid contributed this information to a [Shadow Report](#) produced by UK Women's NGOs brought together through the [CSW Alliance](#). This Shadow Report evaluated

progress on women's rights more widely and highlighted the critical areas of action for the UK Government as it strives towards realising gender equality.

The [Statement](#) of Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women, to the Commission on the Status of Women on 13 March 2015 included issues very relevant to women seeking protection from human rights abuses:

“Progress over the last 20 years has been slow... Much of what was gained is under threat. Many countries have overhauled their legal codes, but left unchanged the daily experience of customary and traditional practices...Some changes have brought benefits to women. But the reality is that the world has not changed for men. Even good men still continue to enjoy patriarchy... We need to work with men and boys. We need to make sure they take their responsibility to be partners, to be in solidarity, and to make the fundamental changes needed. Men must say, ‘I will not marry a child’. Men must say, ‘I will not be involved in violence against women’...”

The Political [Declaration](#) agreed at the end of the Commission on the Status of Women expresses “concern that progress has been slow and uneven, that major gaps remain and that obstacles ... persist in the implementation of the ... Platform for Action, and recognizes that 20 years ... [on] no country has fully achieved equality and empowerment for women and girls...” It also recognises “that new challenges have emerged and reaffirm our political will and firmly commit to tackle the challenges and remaining implementation gaps.”

Significant Legal Issues

R (on the application of BA) v The Secretary of State for the Home Department [2014] EWHC 4223 (Admin)

The issue in this case was whether the Claimant, BA from Eritrea, had been unlawfully detained at Yarl's Wood immigration removal centre.

BA was discovered in the UK on 17 October 2013 exiting a lorry that had just entered the country. She was detained at Yarl's Wood pending her removal to Italy – the country responsible for examining her application under the Dublin 2 Regulation.

BA filed a claim for judicial review on several grounds, one of which was that her detention between her arrival in the country on 17 October 2013 and her being granted bail on 17 January 2014, was unlawful. By the time the claim was heard this was the only ground of review remaining.

HHJ McKenna, sitting in the Administrative Court, held that the detention had indeed

been unlawful. He noted the Secretary of State's policy, set out in the Enforcement Instructions and Guidance Chapter 55.10, that where there is independent evidence a person has been a victim of torture that person should generally be considered unsuitable for detention, unless very exceptional circumstances justify it. The Secretary of State is obliged to follow that policy absent good reason not to do so (*R (on the application of AM) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2012] EWCA Civ 6521).

Under the current rules, if a person in immigration detention alleges they have been tortured, they should be examined so a provisional report can be sent to Home Office officials – a process known as a Rule 35 report. A Rule 35 report can constitute independent evidence of torture, depending upon its content (*R (on the application of EO & Others) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2013] EWHC 1236 (Admin); *R (D & K) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2006] EWHC 980 (Admin)).

A Rule 35 Report had been prepared for BA on 19 October 2013. In that report the medical practitioner, Dr Hayes, expressly stated that he had “*concerns that this detainee may have been the victim of torture*”.

The Secretary of State argued that this did not constitute independent evidence of torture as it was simply just a recording of BA's account provided to the doctor. The Secretary of State highlighted that Dr Hayes had said that BA had no scars to corroborate her allegations of torture, which included an allegation of rape.

HHJ McKenna did not accept the Secretary of State's arguments. The crux of his reasoning is set out at paragraph 22 of the judgment:

“A doctor does not have to prepare a Rule 35 report if he does not have concerns and the doctor is also entitled to state that the report is nothing more than a repetition of an assertion made which does not give rise to a reasoned medical concern. However in this case Dr Hayes did not give any indication that the Claimant's account was doubted by him. He has therefore given some credence to what the Claimant reported to him and that is sufficient to amount to independent evidence. As it seems to me, it can be assumed that the doctor was expressing a concern of his own since that is implicit in what he in fact did in ticking the box and indeed in choosing to make a report in the first place...[W]here, as here, the allegation is of rape it is difficult to see what the doctor could have added, scars being irrelevant and other discernible evidence of rape not being expected.”

The Judge was particularly concerned that if the Secretary of State's arguments were accepted, Rule 35 reports would hardly ever be an effective safeguard where the torture in question took the form of rape.

Having ruled that the Rule 35 report was independent evidence of rape, the Judge held that the detention was unlawful as there were no exceptional circumstances justifying the detention, as required by the Secretary of State's own policy. He awarded BA damages for false imprisonment.

Asylum Aid and Rights of Women are working together on joint strategic work to disseminate legal information on gender, asylum and refugee issues. Asylum Aid would like to thank Rights of Women's *Eirwen Pierrot*, for sharing the above case summary.

For more information and case summaries, you can join the Women's Migration and Asylum Network. Email wman@row.org.uk or visit www.rightofwomen.org.uk/current.php

National News

Channel 4 undercover in Yarl's Wood

Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre was the focus of an under-cover investigation which Channel 4 News aired on 2nd March 2015. The detainees at Yarl's Wood are asylum seekers who have exhausted their appeals, those in the Detained Fast Track and women with other immigration issues. The investigation revealed:

- Numerous incidents of self-harm
- Questions over standards of healthcare
- Guards showing contempt for detainees

Channel 4 News obtained figures through the Freedom of Information Act that showed there were 74 separate incidents of self-harm requiring medical treatment at Yarl's Wood in 2013. This is despite the Home Office Minister Lord Bates telling Parliament on 24th February 2015 that there had been no serious incidents of self-harm at Yarl's Wood in the past two years.

Pregnant women are only supposed to be detained if their removal is imminent. This is one of the most controversial aspects of the government's detention policy. The investigation included one woman who was treated with disdain before and after suffering a miscarriage whilst at the Centre.

Finally Channel 4 News filmed guards speaking of the women in extremely offensive and derogatory terms.

The Channel 4 investigation supported the findings of the Women for Refugee Women research, [I am Human](#), published in January which showed how women are subjected to harassment by staff and treated with a lack of privacy and dignity. Women's Asylum News recently published a [summary](#) of this.

As a result of the allegations, the Home Office has ordered "*thorough and immediate investigations into all matters raised by this programme*" and told Channel 4 News that they "*will not hesitate to take whatever action we think appropriate in response.*"

The management of Yarl's Wood has been outsourced to Serco since 2007. The company has always robustly rebutted allegations of sexual abuse and degrading treatment. Immediately after the Channel 4 programme Serco appointed the former barrister Kate Lampard to "carry out an independent review into our work at Yarl's Wood" in response to the investigation.

The previous month the Home Secretary commissioned an independent [review](#) of the welfare of detainees in Immigration Removal Centres to be conducted by former prisons ombudsman Stephen Shaw. Shaw will examine the mental health of detainees and will review how effectively Home Office policies are being applied as well as judging their appropriateness. Shaw will also assess which detainees should be deemed as vulnerable, with suggested groups including pregnant women, victims of trafficking and those with mental health or disability issues. However the review's terms of reference are narrow and will not examine the decision to detain.

The [Report](#) of the Inquiry into the Use of Immigration Detention in the United Kingdom, a Joint Inquiry by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Migration, chaired by Sarah Teather MP, was published on 3rd March. Its recommendations relating to women include:

- that women who are victims of rape and sexual violence should not be detained and this should be reflected in the Enforcement Instructions and Guidance.
- that gender-specific rules are introduced for all IRCs to prevent [such] intimidation.
- that pregnant women are never detained for immigration purposes.

Meanwhile in advance of the General Election, both Labour and Liberal Democrats include the end of indefinite immigration detention in their manifestos. In its manifesto the Labour Party additionally states that it would end indefinite detention for pregnant women and those who have suffered sexual violence.

Petition urges UK government to ratify the Istanbul Convention

Asylum Aid has lent its support to IC Change's [campaign](#) calling for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention on Violence Against Women and Girls.

The strength of the Convention lies in the fact that it clearly recognises the rights of women escaping gender-based violence and seeking protection in another country. We particularly support the Convention's acknowledgement that women have the right to

protection from violence, regardless of their immigration status.

As well as political persecution, many of the women who claim asylum in the UK are fleeing forms of gendered violence such as rape, domestic violence, forced marriage, FGM, honour crimes or persecution because of their sexuality. Many come from countries where there are no laws against these human rights abuses or the laws are not enforced.

However, the rights of women seeking asylum are all too often missed out of national and international protocols and strategies – as the Women's Asylum Charter campaign to close the Protection Gap demonstrates.

The Istanbul Convention is one of the few protocols that links the issue of violence against women and the protection of women seeking asylum.

It's time to close the protection gap and stop women seeking asylum being missed out. All women deserve protection. It's time for the Government to ratify the Istanbul Convention.

New Home Office Guidance on LGB asylum claims

The Home Office has revised its [Asylum Policy Instruction](#) on sexual identity issues within the asylum claim, following a critical report by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration. The Chief Inspector's report found that asylum interviews for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) asylum claimants contained stereotyping and inappropriate questions likely to elicit a sexual response.

It also takes into account the recent case from the Court of Justice of the European Union *in A v Staatssecretaris van Veiligheid en Justitie (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) intervening)(Judgment)* [2014] EUECJ C-148/13; stating that "The interview should be a sensitive enquiry into the development and exploration of the claimant's sexual identity".

The first section deals with the legal interpretation of LGB asylum claims under the Refugee Convention and considers how the five Refugee Convention grounds may be applicable in such types of claims. The document considers what type of treatment may amount to persecution and how the type of ill-treatment that LGB asylum seekers may be subjected to may fit into the Refugee Convention. The document further considers the availability of country information and how this may be relied on to make better decisions. The concepts of state protection and internal relocation are also discussed within the framework of LGB asylum claims. The section on interviews summarises the authorities on conducting appropriate interviews, for example, not asking questions of a sexually explicit nature. It recognises that LGB asylum claimants may have very different

narratives of their sexual identity due to the societal, cultural and religious circumstances in which they grew up.

The next section covers issues of credibility, including issues relating to late disclosure and unavailability of country of origin information. The final section includes guidance on how to apply the four stage test in *HJ (Iran) and HT (Cameroon) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2010] UKSC 31.

Charities working for the rights of LGB asylum seekers have welcomed the new guidance, which is clearly a more extensive and accurate reflection of existing guidance, understanding and authorities on deciding LGB claims, both from a procedural and decision making perspective. It remains to be seen however how well caseworkers will implement the guidance to ensure better decision making in LGB asylum claims.

International News

Dire conditions for displaced women and girls in Afghanistan

A [report](#) by the Norwegian Refugee Council on displaced Afghan women and girls has shown that those uprooted by the ongoing violence in Afghanistan are extremely vulnerable to abuse and forced confinement in refugee camps. According to the report, women and girls are being “held like animals” by male family members in the camps surrounding large cities.

According to the report, launched in cooperation with the Afghan NGO, the Liaison Office (LTOP), more than 800,000 Afghans have become internally displaced by violence between the Taliban and other militants. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) living on the fringes of society are most vulnerable to hunger, exemption from education, and illiteracy. Among IDP’s women are doubly marginalised, leaving them largely dependent on familial ties.

Large informal settlements have formed around large cities with insufficient water and sanitation facilities and extreme food insecurity.

It was found that many women are fearful of being subjected to domestic abuse in their unmonitored surroundings, where prolonged unemployment and crowded living conditions have led to increased rates of drug and alcohol consumption among men. Common to all ethnic groups, a woman’s ‘purity’ is linked to a man’s honour, with a high likelihood of violence for women who defy societal control, including veiling and *purdah* (forced seclusion).

One woman in Kabul told the NRC that women are being sold “like animals”. 60% of

women interviewed by the agency said that they are forbidden by their male family members to leave their accommodation to visit friends or family, cutting off vital social support networks as well as education and vocational opportunities.

Last November, Oxfam reported that over 4 million Afghan girls were in school – the highest in Afghan history- however this is not the case for those living in informal settlements, where 71% of displaced women reported that they had never attended school. The report highlights how women and girls face significantly enhanced gender constraints under camp conditions than they experienced in their natal villages. Displaced women and girls also face a greater risk of forced or early marriage.

The Report also highlighted that an alarming number of women expressed suicidal thoughts, or regret at having been born. Women are disproportionately at risk of suffering from isolation and marginalisation, and describe “prison-like” conditions. The high levels of psychological trauma Afghan IDP women face is aggravated by the lack of mental health assistance to support them.

Women and Girls Safe Spaces

The creation of women and girls’ safe spaces (WGSS) has emerged as a key strategy for empowering vulnerable women and girls in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, according to a [report](#) by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Along with its partners in Jordan, Syria, Turkey and Lebanon, UNFPA has produced the guidance note based on lessons learnt from the Syrian crisis.

A safe space is defined as a formal or informal place where women and girls feel physically and emotionally safe. The creation of these spaces is intended for women and girls to feel comfortable, free of the fear of violence or abuse, and encourages freedom of expression without the fear of judgement.

The key objectives of WGSS revolve around social rehabilitation and socialization, enabling women to receive social and communal support and rebuild their social networks after experiencing the trauma of the Syrian crisis. The WGSS additionally provide access to safe and non-stigmatizing multi-sectorial gender-based violence response services, including medical, psychological, and legal aid.

The Safe Spaces initiative acknowledge that in the Syrian context, gender divides pertaining to the division of labour and a restriction on female mobility have been aggravated, and consequently women have become more isolated since the start of the conflict. While mobility was restricted prior to displacement, the fear of sexual violence or harassment has increased post-displacement. The safe spaces have been set up as a way

to counteract the growing social fragmentation for Syrian refugees, and to strengthen women's social assets through leadership and empowerment skills. The WGSS are not intended to be isolated units, but an extension of broader community life.

The WGSS aim to provide holistic forms of integrative community building, encouraging women to engage with a variety of culturally and age appropriate activities and services while also providing time to socialise. The UNFPA is still in the early stages of creating WGSS, and the report includes an initial assessment which outlines the necessity for participation and actively engaging not only women and girls, but men, boys and community leaders. According to the report the WGSS should disaggregate data on the basis of gender, age, and other relevant factors in order to ensure better programming and the effective establishment of relevant centres.

UK Training and Events

Workshop: The fear of FGM as grounds for seeking asylum

Oxford Rights Workshops is offering a one-day workshop in Oxford on 22 July aimed at lawyers representing asylum seekers in the UK. The workshop aims to build an understanding of the legal status of FGM in the UK and abroad and familiarise participants with the relevant case law on the subject.

The course will also teach improved interview techniques, engagement with specialised country of origin information (COI) and how to anticipate common Home Office arguments for denying asylum applications based on the fear of FGM.

The course costs £200 to attend and further information and registration can be found here: <http://www.oxfordrightsworkshops.co.uk/product/fgmc-workshop/>

Counselling training for refugee women

The Evelyn Oldfield Unit is launching an accredited counselling skills course for women working for refugee and asylum-seeking women's organisations taking place in London from 15 June. The course aims to build capacity in refugee and asylum seeking women's organisations, as well as teach skills to the individual participant. The course will cover methods for supporting vulnerable women affected by violence or trauma.

For further information or to apply, please contact alexandra@evelynoldfield.co.uk

Event: From silence to solidarity, violence to visibility

The Manchester Lesbian Immigration Support Group, a support

Back to top

group for lesbian and bisexual women who are refugees in the UK or seeking asylum from persecution because of their sexuality, is holding a one-day event on 9 July.

The event will provide a space for women to share their stories, through talks, workshops and activities and support the founding of similar groups. It further aims to provide a social networking opportunity for lesbian and bisexual asylum seeking women, and to offer emotional and practical support to women in the asylum system.

For further information, please contact lisg.manchester@yahoo.co.uk

Publications

Removing gender discrimination from nationality laws

Statelessness campaigners and women's rights activists have achieved revisions of discriminatory nationality laws in Algeria, Morocco and Senegal, taking these countries an important step forward on the path to eliminating statelessness. In particular, the Arab Women's Right to Nationality Campaign has carried out "exemplary" advocacy, paving the way for pioneering reforms in nationality laws in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In a [good practice guide](#) published by UNHCR, the achievements of campaigners in Algeria, Morocco and Senegal are held up as models for continued efforts to end statelessness by removing inequality from nationality laws.

The paper highlights that in these three countries, there was commitment to reform at the highest level of government, a growing social acceptance of gender equality and, crucially, coordinated action by women's groups and civil society organisations to promote favourable attitudes among the public. An element of the campaigns that is highlighted in particular is the successful collaboration that took place in all three countries between groups working to eradicate statelessness and mainstream women's rights organisations.

The good practice guide remarks that a feature of the successful campaigns was the achievement of reform through simple legislation, replacing complicated clauses with a single sentence provision granting women and men equal rights to pass on nationality to their children.

In both Algeria and Morocco, campaigners engaged with the CEDAW Committee, which supervises the implementation of the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination Against Women, and aided in developing constructive dialogue between activists and government. In Morocco and Senegal, the paper notes, a favourable environment for change was much supported by measures to enable women to exercise political power more generally in the country.

The guide is the third good practice guide in a series that is being produced by UNHCR as

part of its [campaign to end statelessness within 10 years](#).

28 Too Many Report on FGM in the Gambia

In 2010, the national prevalence of FGM for girls and women aged 15-49 years old in the Gambia is 76.3%, a two point decrease from 2005, according to a new [report](#) published by 28 Too Many. The 2013 figure is expected to drop an additional 1.4%. However, in areas with the highest prevalence of FGM up to 99% of women and 71.5% of daughters have undergone the procedure.

The report notes that there is a possibility that the reported figures may have been compromised as there has been a fall in 'FGM Status' meaning that women may now falsely claim to be uncut.

FGM has no health benefits, but has both immediate and long-term severe negative consequences on mental and physical health. In the Gambia there is strong in-country evidence of these adverse health effects, including high rates of neonatal death for children born to women who have had FGM. The most commonly practiced form of FGM in Gambia are Types I and II, or 'flesh removed', however there are also occurrences of Type III, 'sewn closed' practiced on 5-7% of women and girls in the country.

Despite FGM being widely acknowledged as violation of the human rights of women and girls, as well as a form of gender-based violence, the Gambian government remains unclear on its stance on FGM. While it imposes restrictions on discussion in the media and NGO policies, the government has made efforts to include FGM in its education system, including the national health curriculum. FGM remains legal in the Gambia .

FGM is predominantly practiced in 28 countries on the African continent, parts of Asia and the Middle East, as well as affecting thousands more women in the diaspora groups across the globe. In light of multiple initiatives, including 28 Too Many and the Girl Project run by DFID in the UK, the movement to end FGM has been gaining momentum. An upcoming re-evaluation of the Millennium Development Goals has prompted 28 Too Many to propose the re-positioning of FGM to a status of high importance at a global level on the basis of its research. 125 million women and girls are alive today who have experienced FGM in Africa and the Middle East, with an estimated 30 million more by the end of 2025.

Charter of rights of women seeking asylum



Endorsements: 365

Google group membership: 179

Camilla Omollo contributed this article from UCL STAR

As a university student in London, it is easy to get lost in the blur of the fast-paced city, in addition to assignments and competitive job applications. To avoid falling into this bubble, I became involved with UCL's Student Action for Refugees society (UCL STAR) as a weekly volunteer in my second year, and as a volunteering coordinator in my final year.

During this time, I took on a more administrative role in the society and missed the feel of hands-on volunteering, and of the conversations with refugees and asylum seekers I had the privilege of being a part of the year before. My success in quieting this longing was, however, short-lived. As part of the audience of one of UCL STAR's panel events, I listened to Asylum Aid's Zoe Gardner speak of the 'hypocrisy' of a widely-lauded public campaign for the protection of women globally that failed to account for the needs and rights of asylum-seeking women. Zoe's outline of Asylum Aid's Protection Gap Campaign struck a chord. It became clear that a lacuna in the rhetoric and policy of the protection of women (which had received little attention in the media) had grave implications for a group so much in need of assistance and empowerment.

After expressing a very keen interest to assist in the campaign, Zoe invited me along to present the Protection Gap Campaign Postcards to Baroness Helena Kennedy at the Houses of Parliament on 10th March 2015. I accompanied the group of Asylum Aid campaigners as well as refugee women. The photographic moments of glitz and grandiose outside Parliament were followed by a quiet coffee for the campaigners and supporters in a nearby café. This was a befitting way to wrap up the successful day. There came a special sense of fulfillment as such a diverse group of women shared their sentiments on everything from the plight of adjusting to life as an asylum seeker to the dominance of sandwiches as a distinct food group in the UK! In this space, there existed what had been missing in a busy final year of university; the bridging of different worlds through the powerful tool of conversation.

Back to top

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She was detained without charge

Nobody believed her story and no-one spoke up for her

Her family and friends didn't know where she was

Afraid...isolated...

She had no idea what would happen to her next

And that was after she sought asylum in the UK

Our asylum system is now so tough that, all too often, this is how people seeking help are treated. And that can't be right.

We believe the system should be fair and just and that every asylum seeker should have legal help to make their case - only then can we say in good conscience 'let the law take its course'.

Asylum Aid is an independent, national charity that secures protection for people seeking refuge in the UK from persecution in their home countries.

We provide expert legal representation to asylum seekers and campaign for a fair and just asylum system. Founded in 1990, we have since helped 30,000 people to get a fair hearing. In 2009 85% of our clients were granted leave to stay in the UK when decisions were made on their claims for protection.

Please support us

Your donation will safeguard our independence and enable us to stand up for fair asylum rights without fear or favour.

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womenasylumnews@asylumaid.org.uk

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