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scottish
refugee
council

Background Briefing



STUC Women's Conference 2012

Women asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland

Introduction

Scottish Refugee Council is an independent charity providing advice and information to women, men and children seeking asylum and refugees living in Scotland. We campaign for fair treatment of refugees and people seeking asylum and to raise awareness of refugee issues. Our women's project works to influence the policies and practices that impact on the lives of refugee women in Scotland and supports them to have their voices heard by decision makers.

It is estimated that there are around 20,000 refugees currently living in Scotland. Each year the UK receives around 20,000 asylum applications, one-third of these are from women as main applicants, and around 8-10% of asylum claimants are dispersed to Glasgow. Many more women and girls come to the UK as dependents on an asylum claim, effectively hidden in the statistics.

This briefing provides background to issues affecting asylum seeking and refugee women and solutions needed to ensure that women who have fled persecution and conflict have a fair and equal opportunity to seek safety and rebuild their lives in Scotland with dignity.

The asylum process

Some women seek protection in the UK for the same reasons as men, but many flee persecution that is specific to their gender (such as rape or sexual violence, forced marriage, domestic violence or female genital mutilation). Women in this situation deserve to be treated in a way that recognises their particular needs as women and how their asylum claims are affected by their gender. The Women's Asylum Charter and Every Single Woman Campaign¹ set out what must be done to ensure that women are treated with fairness, dignity and respect in accordance with international refugee and human rights conventions.

We work in partnership with the Refugee Women's Strategy Group and other organisations to advocate for change to the asylum policies and practice that impact disproportionately on women, such as the provision of childcare during asylum interviews and the UK Border Agency's understanding of the nature and impact of gender based persecution.

Destitution

1 in 4 people in the asylum process will experience a period of destitution. For those refused asylum, the destitution is severe and indefinite. The UK Government operates a deliberate policy of withdrawing all financial support and accommodation from people who have been refused asylum. We know that decision making in women's claims is particularly poor, resulting in many women being disbelieved and refused.² A recent report showed a higher proportion of women presenting destitute (38%) in Glasgow than among asylum seekers generally (30%).³ This is the devastating impact of a process that disadvantages women and puts them out onto our streets to face homelessness and further exploitation.

Our campaign to end refugee destitution on the streets of Scotland asks for proper support that continues until people are granted protection or can return home safely; the right to work for all

asylum seekers who remain in the UK for more than six months, including those who have been refused; and a better system that makes the right decisions on asylum claims and ensures the UK gives protection to all those who need it.⁴

Violence against women

In a study we carried out in 2009, 70% of women seeking asylum in Scotland had experienced physical and/or sexual violence.⁵ Findings from a 2012 study were strikingly similar: nearly 70% reported experiences of gender based violence.⁶ Support and specialist services are available to women in the asylum process, but they face many barriers to access, such as language, cultural barriers and fear. Many simply do not know that services exist or how to access them.

Through the Women's Asylum Charter, organisations across the UK are calling on the UK Government to ensure that asylum seeking women who have experienced violence are not 'Missed Out' from its pledge to end violence against women and girls; that the UK's own asylum policies are not placing women who have fled violence abroad at further risk here in the UK.⁷

We call on the Scottish Government and organisations working to combat and prevent violence against women here, to ensure that asylum seeking and refugee women are not 'Missed Out' from local and national planning to tackle and prevent violence.

Health

Scotland's approach to healthcare provision for asylum seekers is a progressive one. At this time of cutbacks and increasing restrictions to access in other parts of the UK, it is vital that Scotland celebrates its human rights-based approach and highlights the many benefits of providing access to free healthcare for the most vulnerable in our society.

Our study of refugee integration in Scotland found twice as many asylum seeking women as men rated their health 'poor' or 'very poor'. Mental health was an issue among those interviewed and women again fared worse than men.⁸ Maternal outcomes for asylum seeking women are another area of concern. UK Border Agency policies of dispersal, detention, support and the levels of anxiety caused by the asylum process result in significant risk to pregnant women and children. It is essential that women feel confident to access ante-natal care without fear that they will be charged and that the impact of asylum policies on support networks and care is minimised.

We must work to ensure that asylum seekers, organisations supporting them, and NHS staff alike are aware of the rules and guidance on entitlements to healthcare in Scotland, and that care is joined up, accessible and appropriate to the particular needs and experiences of asylum seeking and refugee women.

Employment

A report by the Refugee Women's Strategy Group (RWSG) highlights the barriers to accessing employment faced by refugee women in Scotland.⁹ They face many of the same obstacles as other women, such as access to childcare and gender stereotyping. But refugee women come up against multiple obstacles, including lengthy periods out of work whilst awaiting an asylum decision, lack of knowledge about the local job market, language barriers, discrimination and their qualifications and prior experience not being recognised by employers in Scotland.

Many of these barriers affect refugee men as well; however, asylum seeking women wait longer for a conclusive decision on their asylum claim, report less confidence in English language and are less likely to have accessed formal education in their home countries, highlighting the additional gendered aspect to these difficulties.

The RWSG have been working with the Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee and other stakeholders, including Job Centre Plus, to break down some of these barriers and raise awareness about the issues. The group would welcome the opportunity to develop its partnership working with other organisations and invites them to get in touch with the RWSG through Elaine Connelly at Scottish Refugee Council (Elaine.Connelly@scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk).

Notes

¹ <http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/pages/charterbackground.html>

² Asylum Aid (2011) *Unsustainable*, <http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/data/files/unsustainableweb.pdf>

³ Gillespie (2012) *Trapped*, GCU Scottish Poverty Information Unit,
http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0000/5050/Trapped_destitution_and_asylum_fin_al.pdf

⁴ www.stopdestitution.org.uk

⁵ SRC & LSHTM (2009) *Asylum seeking women*,
http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0000/0097/Asylum_seeking_women_violence_and_health.pdf

⁶ Dorling et al. (2012) *Refused*, <http://www.refugeewomen.com/images/refused.pdf>

⁷ http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/data/files/publications/195/MissedOutLeaflet_WEB.pdf

⁸ Mulvey G. (2011) *SRC Integration Study – Health Briefing*,
http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0000/3515/Stage_2_Briefing_-_Housing_SRC_Refugee_Integration_study_Dec2011.pdf

⁹ Refugee Women's Strategy Group (2011) *The Struggle to Contribute*,
www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_231770_en.pdf

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