Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into asylum support for children and young people

December 2012

Introduction

The Refugee Women’s Strategy Group is a group of refugee and asylum seeking women, supported by Scottish Refugee Council and funded by Comic Relief, whose aim is to ensure that the voices of refugee women are heard. We work together to represent the views of refugee and asylum seeking women in Scotland to key decision makers and service providers to influence the policy and practices that affect our lives. Our group is an integral part of the Scottish Refugee Policy Forum, a federation of Refugee Community Organisations in Scotland.

Our group has around 15 members, many of whom also represent other refugee-led groups in Glasgow. Although a number of our members have now received leave to remain in the UK, all are either currently receiving asylum support or have lived on asylum support for varying periods of time, ranging from six months to ten years. Almost all of our members have children in the UK.

As a group, our current priorities are: working to ensure that the asylum process is gender sensitive; improving access to sexual violence services for asylum seeking women; addressing the barriers to employment for refugee women; and, facilitating information provision to women in the asylum process.

We welcome this opportunity to give our evidence to the panel. We all have personal experience of life on asylum support - most of us with our children - and feel that it is extremely important that women’s voices are heard on these issues. Our views in response to the questions for organisations and practitioners are presented below. We have not answered all of the questions but we have provided two case studies based on two members of our group to illustrate the points we make.

Overview

Many people, including families and children, spend years in the UK asylum process. This means that living on asylum support is often not a short-term situation. Frequently, delays in the asylum process are a result of poor quality decision making by the UK Border Agency and administrative glitches in the system. We know that decisions in women’s asylum claims are almost twice as likely to be

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overturned on appeal than the average\textsuperscript{2}, that women wait longer than men for their asylum claims to be resolved\textsuperscript{3}, and that women with children wait even longer\textsuperscript{4}.

Life on asylum support, living on just over half the amount someone on basic income support receives, means living life below most poverty measures. Bringing up our children in poverty is extremely challenging and only makes harder the everyday stresses of finding our way through a very complex asylum process haunted by memories of what we have fled, to rebuild our lives here in the UK.

Questions for organisations and practitioners

Q2. The government’s stated objective for the asylum support system is that it provides for the ‘essential living needs’ of those who would otherwise be destitute. In your view is this currently the case and please explain your reasoning with references to any evidence or examples.

Q3. Are the current levels of support provided to asylum seeking children and families adequate in meeting the needs of children and young people? Please explain your reasoning.

Our experience is that current levels of asylum support in the UK fail to provide sufficient financial support to cover the essential living needs of asylum seeking families and children. Many people, including those with serious health issues, are struggling to meet their essential needs. The rates of asylum support are below most poverty measures and have not increased significantly over the last 10 years.

Food

Families are often unable to afford food that is appropriate to their dietary, religious or cultural needs. Halal meat is more expensive and therefore can be unaffordable on current levels of support. We are not able to buy nutritional food, particularly fresh fruit, meat and vegetables, on a regular basis as these items are too expensive. This is particularly problematic for the healthy development of our children. Asylum support does enable families to buy the very basics, but we know from experience that it is a constant daily struggle. Whole families can be found queuing for charity hand-outs and, as one of our members said, “You have to become an expert in knowing where to go for bargains and cheap food”.

Clothes and toiletries

We are often unable to buy toiletries or clothes, particularly warm clothes, which are expensive. Most families struggle to buy clothes and shoes for their children, and normally, we must sacrifice essentials from our weekly food shop to be able to buy items such as these.


\textsuperscript{4} “55% of women with children waited for more than two years to get status compared to just 42% of women without children”, Mulvey, G. (Scottish Refugee Council Integration Study: final report, forthcoming)
**Babies and young children**

We are unable to afford what we need to care for our babies and young children. There is not enough money to afford a pram, toys or books, and nappies are very expensive. While we understand that toys and books might not be classed as ‘essential items’, it is widely recognised that they are hugely important for the development of children.

**Education and older children**

The current levels of support do not take into consideration that young asylum seekers are not entitled to Education Maintenance Allowance. It is a struggle for us to pay for school books, uniforms and other essentials for our older children. If we need these things, we often have to sacrifice something else, normally food, to afford them. Under the current system a child’s support is reduced when they reach 16 years-old from £52.96 to £39.80, despite the cost of supporting a young person of this age increasing: clothes are more expensive, they need more food and school books cost more. For young people over 18 years-old, the amount reduces even further to £36.62 despite them not having access to any other benefits or any right to work. It is almost impossible to send our children on organised school trips, so they often miss out.

**Q4. Is the accommodation provided to asylum seeking families effective in keeping children safe and promoting their welfare?**

We are concerned about the appropriateness of the accommodation provided to many asylum seeking families and children.

**Safety**

Asylum seekers are dispersed on a no choice basis, often into deprived areas with their own deep-rooted issues, such as unemployment and addiction. Many of these areas are not safe for our children to play outside, which makes it difficult for them to form friendships in the local area and restricts their activities. As women, we often feel unsafe and isolated, which causes us to restrict how much we go out and what we allow our children to do.

**Overcrowding**

The accommodation we are sent to can be very cramped and several families in our group have been placed in studio accommodation (one room), which we do not think is suitable family accommodation.

**Moving accommodation**

We know families who have had to move accommodation several times, which creates a great deal of stress for the whole family. For children, this usually means

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5 EMAs were scrapped in England in 2010, but the Scottish Government continues to provide EMAs to students who are ordinarily resident in Scotland, [www.emascotland.com](http://www.emascotland.com).

moving school, making it impossible for them to form secure support networks and friendships and significantly disrupting their progress. The case study below illustrates the impact that this can have on families and children and is based on the experience of one of our members.

**Case Study 1 - Accommodation**

Ms Z arrived in the UK with her 4 year old daughter, Layla, in 2007 and claimed asylum at the airport. They spent 2 weeks in the London area in 3 different places, before being taken to Kent where they stayed for a month in temporary accommodation. They were then dispersed to Glasgow. In Glasgow, they lived for more than 4 years on asylum support. During this time, they were moved 7 times. Layla moved schools 3 times. Ms Z's health deteriorated, which had an impact on her daughter.

Their first night in Glasgow, the accommodation was empty: it had no furniture. The officer on-duty brought them some bedding and food to get them through the night. The next day, they were moved to a studio flat in the south of the city. They struggled as mother and daughter living in just one room, so, after Ms Z raised concerns, they were moved to a flat across town in the west of the city.

Here, they did their best to make a home for themselves. Layla went to the local school and they registered with a GP. After 2 years they were told they would have to move again: the landlord wanted the property back. The move caused significant disruption to Layla, who was settled in the local school and Ms Z had started an HNC at the local college. They were moved back across to the south of the city, but Layla couldn’t move school before the holidays so they travelled for over an hour by bus each morning and evening to get to school. Ms Z had to drop out of college as a result and became very tired. Her health deteriorated.

Just a few days after starting her new school, Ms Z had to tell Layla they were moving again. Once again, the landlord wanted the property back. But again, troubles arose. After just a couple of weeks, they were both covered in bedbug bites so they were moved to temporary accommodation in the east of the city. They had to share a flat with another mother and daughter, who were unhappy at them taking up one of their rooms and made them feel unwelcome.

Ms Z’s health deteriorated further. The hospital wanted to admit her but she refused as she had nobody else to look after Layla. To get to school in the south of the city, once again Ms Z and Layla had to travel for over an hour and a half on two different buses and had no extra help with transport costs. Ms Z would sit in the library waiting for school to finish or check herself into hospital while she waited for her daughter.

After two further moves to properties where Ms Z and Layla felt unsafe and threatened by drug use in their building, they were finally granted discretionary leave to remain in the UK. Ms Z decided that she would not accept government help to secure accommodation after all their problems and was able to get a loan from a relative to secure a private let. She feels that her housing problems were the reason for her depression, for which she now takes medication. She has lost count of the number of times Layla moved doctors, schools, teachers and friends. She said: “We have spent 10 years running from one place to another, from our country to here, from one house to another house. I am tired.”

Q5. Does the current asylum support system enable children in asylum seeking families to have a standard of living adequate for a child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development? Please explain your reasoning.
Q6. **Does the current system have any impact on children's long term outcomes and opportunities in the future?**

We believe that the asylum and support systems have a severe impact on our children’s mental and physical health, as well as their long term outcomes and opportunities in the future. Although this is very difficult to evidence, research has shown that living in poverty throughout childhood has a long term impact on children’s health, self-esteem, education and outcomes.\(^7\)

Furthermore, our children face stigmatisation and discrimination as they are often unable to engage in the same activities as their peers. As they get older, they can become increasingly aware of this. Once they leave school, our young people are often unable to attend university and they are unable to work. As mothers, we feel that the lack of control over their lives has severe implications for their mental health and self-esteem.

Children learn from the behaviour of their parents and the community around them. Living in areas where there is high unemployment and seeing their own parents unable to work has a significant impact on our children’s outlook and can limit their expectations for their own lives.

**Q7. How does the current support system affect families where there is a child or parent with a disability?**

Our experience has found that the current levels of support hugely affect families where there is a child or parent with a disability.

**Benefits**

Asylum seekers are not entitled to Disability Living Allowance or Mobility Allowance, even when they meet all the criteria for these. Although very few asylum seekers own a car, we are also unable to apply for a blue badge, which could be of benefit if friends or the community are helping us. We believe that this is unjust and greatly affects the ability of asylum seeking families with a disabled parent or child to manage on a daily basis.

**Dietary requirements**

Certain disabilities require supplementary foods or a specific diet. For example, one member of our group has a daughter who has sickle cell, which requires a healthy balanced diet including red meat and green vegetables. However, due to the limited amount of support, they are unable to afford these supplementary foods, and her health suffers as a consequence.

**Q8. Are there any other circumstances where children may be particularly adversely affected by the levels of asylum support?**

**Physical and Mental health**

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There is a very high prevalence of mental health issues among asylum seekers, often due to the enormous stresses we are under while we go through the asylum process and the trauma of what we have been through at home. Families struggle with the uncertainty of their situation in the UK, but the additional pressures of providing for our children with very limited money, poor housing, discrimination and stigma, and adapting to a new cultural and language. Our experience is that families' physical and mental health deteriorates while going through the asylum process, due to these stresses.

Single parents/childcare
From our experience many parents, particularly single parents, are forced to take their children with them to appointments with legal representatives, the UK Border Agency, and even to Tribunal hearings, because they have no-one to look after them and cannot afford to pay for childcare on asylum support. Even when there is not a requirement to do so, we might need to take our children out of school early to report, if we know won’t make it in time to collect them. We cannot afford childcare and the UK Border Agency does not normally provide it. This forces children to be present at sensitive and traumatic appointments, such as asylum interviews, appeal hearings or appointments with health and legal representatives.

Q9. What is the impact on children and parents of the fact that parents are not allowed to work?

We believe that asylum seekers in the UK should have the right to work, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 23). Our experience has shown that asylum seekers not being able to work hugely affects the development and mental well-being of both children and parents.

In February 2011, we held an employment information event in Glasgow, attended by 41 refugee and asylum seeking women, many of whom were mothers, to discuss the barriers they face on their journey to employment. Women felt that being unable to work during the asylum process led to an erosion of skills, inability to provide references or demonstrate valid work experience, and a lack of confidence and self-esteem. Additionally, women saw not being able to work as affecting their mental health and their ability to work once they were granted status.

We believe that our children’s development is also affected by our inability to work. Children experience discrimination and stigma in the community because they are different from everybody else and are denied certain resources. The negative impact on our own confidence and self-esteem is often passed on to our children as well.

Q11. How often do you see families with no financial support whatsoever?

Members of our group do not currently know any families who have no financial support whatsoever, however, we do occasionally hear about a family who is

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destitute and we are aware that this is an issue for a small number of families in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK.

Evidence of destitution
A week-long survey of asylum seekers accessing advice and support agencies across Glasgow in March 2012 recorded 11 families with a total of 21 dependent children asking for help because they were destitute. The same survey also identified 5 pregnant women and 2 new mothers seeking help because they were destitute. This statistic is similar to other research carried out across the UK, for example by Destitution Concern Bradford. It shows that the UK government’s policy of deliberate destitution affects a number of families with children.

End of process
We are aware that some families face destitution because their asylum claim has been refused. We know of families who are so fearful for their safety that they have felt forced to go underground rather than be forcibly removed from the UK. This is highly problematic as children leave behind school and friends and the whole family are placed at severe risk of exploitation and abuse.

End to end support
We believe strongly that women and their families should never be forced into destitution. The UK Government should ensure that end-to-end housing and financial support is provided for all asylum seekers (whether their claim is pending or unsuccessful) whilst they remain in the UK. From our experience, the deliberate policy of destitution or the threat of destitution does not result in families leaving the UK. Families in this situation feel that they do not have a choice and for many their lives are chaotic and so much about daily survival that they are not in a position to make an informed decision about leaving the UK.

Q12. Are there any concerns about the use of the Azure payment card in relation to children?

We have serious concerns about the use of the Azure payment card, particularly for women and children. We strongly believe that the Azure card should be abolished and replaced with cash support.

Travel and transport
It can be dangerous not to have access to money, particularly in an emergency. Families living on Section 4 support are unable to do the simple things that others take for granted, for example, making a phone call, catching a bus, buying something in a local corner shop. Without money those on Section 4 are unable to travel to appointments with their legal representatives or attend essential health appointments. Not having money for transport forces women to walk long distances.

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10 www.destitutionconcernbradford.org/
with their children to appointments and to supermarkets that accept the Azure card. They may have to walk through unsafe areas and often have to walk home after dark.

Shopping
Restrictions on the shops that accept Azure cards mean that families are unable to meet their dietary, religious and cultural needs. There are very few supermarkets in Glasgow that sell halal meat, for example. There is a lot of stigma attached to paying for things with an Azure card in shops and women have reported to us that shops often question the card or decline it at the till. Families are made to feel stigmatised and ashamed as a result. We have heard reports of people trading and exchanging goods bought with the Azure card for items they are unable to buy without cash, leaving them open to exploitation or abuse.

Activities for children
While free activities for children exist in Glasgow, it is still difficult for families on Section 4 to participate due to travel costs. Parents are unable to take children to any activities that have a cost attached to them, even on special occasions. Even simple things like buying a juice from a museum café or an ice cream at an ice cream van is impossible for families on Section 4.

Case study 2 – Section 4
Mrs F and her husband were refused asylum in May 2009 and applied for Section 4 on the basis that she was 8 months pregnant. Their son is now 3yrs and they continue to live on Section 4 support three and half years later. This is her story:

“We receive £114 a week for 2 adults and a child. I was told it would be reviewed when my son turned one but this has never happened. It’s enough to provide a very basic standard of living. We can buy food (value brands) and we have a roof over our head, but we can’t afford to buy much else. If we do need to buy something other than food, we have to make sacrifices in our food shop.

The shops where you can use the Azure Card are expensive, like, Mothercare or Sainsbury’s. I think you can use it in a couple of charity shops but I’m not sure which ones and I’ve never tried. With the Azure Card, we have no choice over how to spend the small amount we have – we can’t go to the cheaper shops. All the things we need you can buy cheaply in the Sunday Market but with the Azure Card we can’t access it. We can’t buy the food that we like from African shops. We can’t even save a pound or two each week for our son’s birthday or for special occasions. Even my 3 year-old son understands that we don’t have money to spend. Sometimes when we are out, he will ask for something but then before I can reply, he’ll say, ‘Mummy doesn’t have any money’.

The worst thing about using the Azure Card is the shame and humiliation of it. I go to Morrison’s and the card is often declined. Everyone standing in the queue is looking at you and then they tell you ‘no’ and you have to walk away and leave all your shopping. Sometimes I am too scared to buy things. Often I just buy a few things to see if it works and if it does, I go to buy my full shop, but sometimes it still doesn’t work then. Every time I approach the shop, I wonder whether the card is going to work today. It’s embarrassing and depressing. On one occasion, my son only had one nappy left. I spent a couple of hours going to two different shops to buy nappies but the card was declined in both shops even although there was money on the card. I had to wait a full day until I could use it again and I
Q13. Do you think there are any adverse effects of increasing asylum support levels for children and families? Would greater levels of support attract greater numbers of asylum seekers and migrants?

There is no evidence to support the idea that increasing asylum support would attract more people to claim asylum in the UK. In fact, there is a lot of research, including a report commissioned by the Home Office,\(^{11}\) that finds the contrary, emphasising a lack of knowledge of asylum policies or welfare systems among asylum seekers coming to the UK.\(^{12}\)

It is our view that there would be no adverse effects of increasing asylum support. We do not believe that speculation is a justifiable reason for forcing any human being, let alone families with children, to live below recognised poverty measures. If we had a real choice, we would not choose to leave our homes in the first place, and we do not make choices about where we flee to on the basis of policy considerations. Some asylum seekers do not even know which country they are in on arrival.

The majority of asylum seekers come from countries with little or no state welfare provision; most of us arrived without any knowledge of what the ‘asylum process’ is; and most are not aware that there is such a thing as an asylum support system, let alone the details of it. The primary concern of people fleeing persecution is safety and protection of our human rights. The current asylum process and asylum support system do not even guarantee us this.

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Recommendations

In conclusion, we would like to make the following recommendations to the UK Government to ensure the safety, wellbeing and development of children and young people in the asylum process:

- Asylum support should be increased in line with inflation and should reflect current income support levels
- Asylum support should not be decreased when young people reach 16yrs, but should remain at the same rate as dependent children whilst young people remain dependent on their parents’ support
- Asylum seekers should be permitted to access Educational Maintenance Allowance (Scotland & Wales)
- Asylum seekers should be permitted to access Disability Living Allowance and Mobility Allowance
- The UK Government should consider reintegrating asylum support within the mainstream benefit system to avoid over-complication and stigmatisation
- Asylum seekers should be permitted to work after 6 months in the UK, regardless of the status of their asylum claim
- The Azure Card system should be abolished and Section 4 support provided in cash
- The UK Government should end its deliberate policy of making refugees and asylum seekers destitute by providing seamless, end-to-end housing and financial support
- Affordable and accessible childcare must be ensured for asylum seeking families so that children are not forced to attend difficult or traumatic appointments at the UK Border Agency, tribunal, or with legal representatives

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