

# IS IT SAFE HERE?

## Refugee women's experiences in the UK

Written by Hildegard Dumper  
Commissioned by Refugee Action

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### KEY FINDINGS

- **Refugee women feel unsafe in the UK**

Newly arrived refugee women feel so unsafe in the UK that 83 per cent live under self-imposed curfew, locking themselves indoors by 7 o'clock each evening. Many (84%) live in accommodation without a telephone. A third (30%) walk everywhere because they cannot afford public transport, adding to their feeling of vulnerability, and a further third (30%) have been verbally or physically abused, including being spat on or shouted at.

- **Refugee women have lost their families and are isolated**

Refugee women come here having had to leave family members behind. More than two-thirds (70%) are here without a spouse, many because they have been widowed or separated by the conflict from which they were forced to flee. More than a third (37%) of those who are mothers are separated from their children. Most have no family links in the UK.

- **Refugee women find it difficult to get their health needs met**

The women interviewed in this research describe a life of loneliness, despair and loss. Refugee women suffer from severe stress, yet trying to communicate their needs is problematic. More than half (56%) suffer from depression. One in five (20%) found the first person they spoke to at the doctor's surgery unhelpful. Only half (50%) had access to interpreters when visiting their GP. With fewer than one in five (17%) describing their English as good or fluent, problems of communication are the main difficulty they experience when visiting the health services.

- **Refugee women want to improve their English**

Being able to communicate in English is recognised by nearly all the women as a prerequisite for survival in this country. However, half (50%) find they are effectively barred from English language classes by a lack of childcare facilities. More than half (53%) have secondary level education or above. Between them, they offer a range of occupations from hairdressing to accountancy, with teaching being the most cited profession.

- **Refugee women want to live a life of peace**

There is a clear message from respondents that they just want to live a life of peace. They were uncertain where their future lay. Most (65%) hoped to return home once there was an end to the conditions that led them to seek asylum in the first place. Whilst they are living in England, they want to learn English, study, and do something useful. Those with children abroad want to be reunited with their children. For all those with children, their main aspirations lay with their children's education. Some were so depressed they had no hopes for the future at all.

## **Background**

The UK receives just 2 per cent of the world's refugees, of whom 30 per cent are estimated to be women. They include women who have fled for their lives from the most war torn and politically unstable countries in the world.

It has been argued that asylum policy in the West and its associated services is still dominated by the stereotyped image of the male political activist escaping the persecution of the Soviet backed regimes that emerged during the Cold War. Indeed, it is often suggested that this was in the minds of those who drew up the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, from which national policy on refugees and asylum seekers is derived. The stereotype of the male asylum seeker permeates the implementation of policy at all levels and is reinforced by the lower numbers of women that make it to the West.

*"Most asylum seekers are young, single, men who have deserted their families for economic gain"*  
*Lord Rooker, Immigration Minister, May 2002*

The needs of refugee women are often marginalised and their voices not heard. This project uses action research methods to redress this imbalance and provides a vehicle for refugee women's voices to be heard. Refugee women were included at all stages of the research process from drawing up the questionnaire to analysing the findings. The interviewees were reaching isolated and vulnerable women, many of whom were so fearful that they needed much reassurance that the interview was not an attempt by the government to sabotage their asylum claims. By focussing the research entirely on women, it raises issues that are often ignored when legislating on refugees. It also makes a significant contribution to existing research, by filling in some of the gaps in our knowledge about the specific impact asylum policies have on women.

This research is important in the context of the new Nationality, Immigration & Asylum Act and the 1995 United Nations Platform for Action, of which Britain is a signatory, committing itself to assessing the gender impact of all new legislation. To date, there is no evidence of mechanisms in place for a systematic appraisal of the Act from a gender perspective. There is a danger that the particular experiences of refugee women are often overlooked in the process of shaping and implementing policy.

## **Methodology**

The views of a total of 149 women coming mainly from Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkish Kurdistan, Romania, Rwanda and Burundi have been covered by this report. 110 newly arrived asylum seeking and refugee women, living in emergency or NASS (National Asylum Support Service) accommodation under the government's current asylum support arrangements, were interviewed between July and August 2002. They were identified through Refugee Action networks as well as through personal contacts. The interviewees comprised eleven women, mostly from refugee backgrounds, recruited and provided with training to conduct the interviews. They were chosen for their interpersonal and professional skills as well as their knowledge of the languages used by the major refugee communities in the UK.

Focus groups were held in Liverpool, Leicester, Bristol and Margate, which included the experiences of a further 36 women. Interviews were also held with three women who had returned to London, in effect opting out of the NASS system.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Main Policy Recommendation	Description	Responsibility
Minimum standards of personal safety and security for any accommodation provided to refugee women.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent monitoring of the quality standards in accommodation, in particular the complaints procedure.</li> <li>• Access to a telephone</li> <li>• Locks on doors to private space and bathroom</li> <li>• Landlords to ask permission before entering the personal space of tenants</li> <li>• Single sex units and family accommodation as appropriate.</li> <li>• A stable and supported environment for pregnant &amp; women who have just given birth.</li> <li>• Each woman to be informed of her rights to protection from sexual and racial harassment through translated materials – written or oral</li> </ul>	Home Office Refugee Agencies
Local Action Plans to protect and support refugee women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure refugee women are part of plans to tackle racial harassment</li> <li>• Include the needs of refugee women in schemes to tackle domestic violence, such as Zero Tolerance</li> <li>• Social exclusion programmes should include clear references as to how the needs of refugee women are being addressed</li> <li>• Refugee women receiving Income Support or NASS support should be considered eligible for travel &amp; leisure cards</li> <li>• ESOL provision must take into account the needs of refugee mothers</li> <li>• Mother-tongue literacy classes</li> <li>• Befriending schemes to assist refugee women make use of existing support</li> </ul>	Local Authorities Regional Development Agencies  Voluntary Sector befriending schemes  Statutory & voluntary sector Community Development programmes
Towards a gender sensitive asylum policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The mechanisms for a transparent and systematic assessment of all new asylum policy for its gender impact should be in place</li> <li>• Extending the rights of family reunion to those with Exceptional Leave to Remain who are separated from their children</li> </ul>	Home Office
Protecting the health and well being of refugee women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing specialist counselling services, especially in the regions</li> <li>• Training for GPs and health service staff in greater sensitivity to needs of refugees</li> <li>• Self-help support groups</li> <li>• A fund for GP services to draw on for interpreting and translation services</li> </ul>	NHS  Local Authority & Voluntary Sector partnerships  Department of Health