

## Rape and sexual violence: the experiences of refugee women in the UK

March 2010

### About the Refugee Council

The Refugee Council is a human rights charity, independent of government, working to ensure refugees are given the protection that they need, are treated with the respect and understanding that they are entitled to, and that they are assured the same rights, opportunities and responsibilities as other members of UK society.

#### 1. About this briefing

This briefing summarises the Refugee Council's key concerns about the situation of refugee and asylum seeking women in the UK who have survived rape and sexual violence, based on our experience of working with women to provide specialist support, practical help and counselling.

The briefing sets out key information about the prevalence of rape and sexual violence experienced by many women seeking asylum, highlights the casework experience of the Vulnerable Women's Project, and puts forward five key priorities for policy change to improve the situation of refugee women in the UK:

1. An end to destitution
2. A fair and gender-sensitive asylum process for women (implementation of a gender sensitive asylum system, adequate time to disclose experiences to inform the decision on an asylum claim, providing childcare during asylum interviews)
3. Early access to appropriate legal advice and representation
4. Access to appropriate and free health services
5. Mainstream violence against women strategies that fully and explicitly address the needs of refugee and asylum seeking women.

## 2. Background

Refugee women<sup>1</sup> are more affected by violence against women than any other women's population in the world.<sup>2</sup> Many of them specifically suffer sexual violence, which has been described by a senior United Nations official as "one of the worst global protection challenges due to its scale, prevalence and profound impact".<sup>3</sup> This results from the multiple situations of vulnerability in which refugee women find themselves: the lack of protection in their countries of origin<sup>4</sup>; their flight to safety; their position in the UK (the country of asylum); and for those returned to their countries of origin, their experiences during and after the return process. As a result, a significant proportion of refugee women living in the UK have experienced violence, including rape or sexual violence.

Refugee women in the UK who have fled conflict zones are especially affected by violence, as 'war rape' has reached epidemic proportions and rape is regularly used as a weapon of war.

With limited opportunities to seek protection within their own countries and restrictions on international travel, many women survivors of violence are forced to subject themselves to further risks of violence in their quest for protection. There is increasing research showing cases of women being raped by smugglers, or forced to 'exchange' sex for passage to safety to the UK, indicating that a growing number of refugees are at risk of trafficking for sexual exploitation as a result of the limitations to accessing protection.<sup>5</sup>

The Refugee Council's experience is that significant numbers of refugees in the UK report suffering physical and sexual violence before, during and after their journey to the UK. Once in the UK, refugee women are highly likely to belong to one or more of the groups that are at higher than average risk of rape, and the risks of violence are particularly acute for thousands of women who are left destitute when their asylum claims are refused.<sup>6</sup>

30% of applications for asylum in the UK are from women, though the actual numbers of female refugees is much higher as many apply for asylum as dependents.<sup>7</sup> As has been documented in general research on women survivors of violence, it is difficult to provide accurate figures on the number who have experienced rape or sexual violence given the difficulties in reporting and tracking cases.<sup>8</sup> Although there is a gap in statistical data of refugee women who have endured violence and who may be at risk of further violence, individual service providers such as voluntary organisations and refugee agencies, as well as mainstream providers interact with and provide services to these women on a daily

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<sup>1</sup> The use of 'Refugee women' in this policy briefing refers to women and girls who have sought asylum and whose claims are undecided or have been refused, as well as those who have already been successful in their asylum claims and granted refugee status, humanitarian protection, indefinite or discretionary leave to remain, unless otherwise specifically indicated.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR Deputy High Commissioner L. Craig Johnstone, reported in UNHCR backs 16 days of opposition to violence against women press release, UNHCR 25 November 2008 available at [www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org). The Advocates for Human Rights Stop Violence Against Women website give additional evidence for the heightened levels of violence against refugee women as cited by the UN, UNHCR, Human Rights Watch, and World Health Organisation see [http://www.stopvaw.org/Sexual\\_Assault\\_Against\\_Refugees.html](http://www.stopvaw.org/Sexual_Assault_Against_Refugees.html).

<sup>3</sup> Jan Egeland, UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, addressing the UN Security Council, 21 June 2005.

<sup>4</sup> This is often as the result of conflicts and political instability in their home countries that result in not only the removal of protection for these women, but place them at greater risk of enduring conflict induced violence. This lack of protection has additionally been experienced in the camp setting (Women and Armed Conflict Fact Sheet Number 5, UNHCR 2000).

<sup>5</sup> See Refugee Council (2009) The Vulnerable Women's Project: Refugee and asylum seeking women affected by rape or sexual violence; a literature review.

<sup>6</sup> These groups include young women; poor women; women living in social housing; women in poor health; and single, separated or divorced women. See Refugee Council (2009) The Vulnerable Women's Project: Refugee and asylum seeking women affected by rape or sexual violence; a literature review.

<sup>7</sup> Home Office (2009) 'Control of Immigration Statistics United Kingdom'. Home Office Statistical Bulletin. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs09/hosb1409.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> See Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (2007) Violence Against Women in the UK: Shadow Thematic Report.

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basis. These organisations continue to advocate for further support in meeting the needs of refugee women, and propose policy changes to protect these women from further violence in the UK.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The Vulnerable Women's Project

In recognition of the experiences of refugee women, the Refugee Council's Vulnerable Women's Project (VWP) was established at the end of 2006 with the support of Comic Relief to address the needs of refugee and asylum seeking women who had been subjected to sexual violence, including rape. The project has provided a holistic or multi-dynamic approach to assisting refugee women who have survived rape and sexual violence by the provision of therapeutic casework, including counselling, advocacy, and practical support.

Between 1 December 2006 and 31 August 2008 the Vulnerable Women's Project assisted over 150 women. Of these women:

- 76% had been raped, either in their country of origin or the UK
- 76% were experiencing trauma-related psychological distress
- 35% had suffered some form of violence
- 27% had physical injuries from their experiences of violence
- 22% had suffered sexual abuse
- 20% had gynecological problems as a result of their experiences of sexual violence
- 15% had become pregnant as a result of rape
- 9% had been threatened with rape or sexual abuse while in detention in their country of origin
- 5% had a child as a result of rape

From 31<sup>st</sup> August 2008 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2009, 65 women were assisted. Of these, 16 have received on-going therapeutic casework support from the project worker, 26 were referred to specialist organisations for counselling and 20 were assisted with registration with a GP. Fourteen were referred to Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) clinics.

Of the 65 women supported:

- 84% had been raped
- 47% were exposed to some form of violence, either in their countries of origin or in the UK.
- Five of the women experienced domestic violence
- 25% women were sexually abused
- 5% were threatened with rape or sexual abuse while in detention in their countries of origin
- 18% of the women became pregnant as a result of rape and two had children as a result of being raped
- 61% were experiencing trauma-related psychological distress, including nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety, low mood and hyper-vigilance
- 25% had developed gynaecological issues as a result of their experiences

For many of the women, choices are very limited as they are at the end of the asylum process and are destitute. Being in direct contact with the project worker enables us to reduce the risk of their re-victimisation and sexual exploitation. We are able to advise them about their rights and entitlements and support them when thinking through their options.

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<sup>9</sup> This has led to the establishment of the Women's Asylum Charter documenting the needs and proposing rights that should be guaranteed to refugee women in the UK. This Charter has been influenced and supported by over 200 organisations in the UK. (See Asylum Aid's The Rights of Women Seeking Asylum: A Charter and Exploratory Notes [http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/pages/charter\\_of\\_rights\\_of\\_women\\_seeking\\_asylum.html](http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/pages/charter_of_rights_of_women_seeking_asylum.html)).

In three cases we have been able to assist women to secure accommodation by reviewing their cases and liaising with the UK Border Agency on their behalf. Homelessness and 'sleeping rough' increases the risk of sexual assault and rape. Our holistic approach of providing both practical and emotional support to refugee women has focused on lessening the impact of their experiences through supportive and non-judgemental listening and assistance in accessing health care.

All of the women using the service have accessed the Brixton office Day Centre. During the day, this Centre continues to be a warm and welcoming place where staff can give practical help and advice to clients with the aim of minimising the impact of destitution and improving their lives. We continue to provide hot meals, showers and laundry facilities, and emergency provisions such as sleeping bags, clothing, food parcels, toiletries and baby packs. We also distribute condoms and sexual-health self-test kits. Clients can also learn English and participate in our Women's Groups. The Women's group is a crucial opportunity for our clients to have a voice within a system that renders them powerless, and a safe space in which to share their experiences, concerns and ideas. This has included contributing to focus groups to influence the Home Office and the Department of Health.

The experiences of women who have been supported by the VWP and the staff working directly with women, as well as evidence from our extensive advice, support and capacity building work with refugee women and children across England, inform the following policy recommendations.

#### **4. Priorities for policy change to protect refugee women**

The Refugee Council is seeking cross-governmental action and further policy change in five key areas. In addition, the Refugee Council is an active supporter of the Charter of Rights of Women Seeking Asylum, coordinated by Asylum Aid and endorsed by organisations across the UK.<sup>10</sup>

##### **4.1 Destitution**

There is a paucity of published studies examining the links between destitution and violence and exploitation. However, poverty has specifically been documented as increasing the risk of sexual violence. Research shows that women living on less than £10,000 a year are more than three times as likely to report being raped as women from households with an income of more than £20,000. The vast majority of asylum seekers live in poverty and many refused asylum seekers are completely destitute with no financial support, or are reliant on the limited weekly amount provided by the UKBA through section 4 payment cards. This places women at greater risk of being subject to violence, which is further increased by the fact that they lack the right to work or a means by which to provide for themselves and their families independently.<sup>11</sup>

The Refugee Council has worked with many women, including young women who arrived in the UK as children, who have been raped and subjected to violence because they are refused asylum and are not entitled to accommodation or any financial support, leaving them destitute and vulnerable.<sup>12</sup> Ten of the women we worked with in the first phase of our vulnerable women's project told us that they had been

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<sup>10</sup> See reference 9 above for further information on the charter.

<sup>11</sup> Around 80% of female asylum claims are rejected, so destitution is a reality for the majority of female asylum seekers who find themselves unable to return to their countries due to fear of persecution and lack of protection (see Home Office Asylum Statistical Bulletin 2007 Asylum Statistics UK <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs08/hosb1108.pdf>).

<sup>12</sup> Examples of cases of destitute women who have been subjected to sexual violence as a result of their destitution are contained within the Refugee Council's Vulnerable Women's Project publications (2009) *The Vulnerable Women's Project: Refugee and asylum seeking women affected by rape or sexual violence*; a literature review and Good Practice Guide: *Assisting Refugee and Asylum Seeking Women affected by Rape or Sexual Violence* at [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk). Further examples are contained within the Refugee Council research publication 'I hate being idle': *Wasted skills and enforced dependence among Zimbabwean asylum seekers in the UK* and in The Children's Society (2008) *Living on the edge of despair: destitution amongst asylum seeking and refugee children*.

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forced into prostitution or exchanging sex for somewhere to stay because they were destitute. One woman explained<sup>13</sup>,

“The money we’re given to live on – £30 per week – is far too little, and I have to cover everything for myself – food, clothes, everything. So I have to use my body to earn more- sleeping with people for money to eat, because I have to cover everything for myself.”

Appropriate safeguards must be developed to ensure that asylum seeking and refugee women are not forced into living arrangements that make them more vulnerable to sexual violence exploitation.<sup>14</sup> The Refugee Council believes that the government policy of enforced destitution has very clear gendered impacts, as it exposes women to unacceptable risks of violence, and forces them into exploitative situations, including prostitution, in order to survive.

The Refugee Council recommends that:

- The UKBA re-examine and take action to address the gendered impacts of destitution, and in particular, the extreme vulnerability of destitute refused asylum seekers to violence, including sexual violence and exploitation.
- In order to reduce violence against asylum seeking women, asylum seekers must not be left destitute and should be entitled to work or to receive cash support throughout the asylum process, until they are granted status or leave the UK.
- Priority should be given to developing appropriate safeguards to ensure that asylum seeking women are not forced into living arrangements that make them more vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation.
- Equality impact assessments conducted by public authorities and service providers must address the particular impacts that policies and practices have on refugee and asylum seeking women, including those whose asylum claims have been refused.

## 4.2 Speed and flexibility of the asylum process

### i. Implementing a gender-sensitive determination system

A lack of gender sensitivity in the asylum procedure and evidence assessment of asylum claims has further restricted women’s access to protection in the UK. While a number of improvements have been made, survivors of sexual violence still suffer from a shortage of female interviewers and interpreters, from being wrongly detained during the process, from decision-makers lacking the skills to assess gender issues and making incorrect assumptions about their credibility in the face of medical evidence, and from the poor quality of information used about women’s situations in their countries of origin.

Gender violence can amount to persecution under the UN Refugee Convention and European law, yet asylum seeking women must convince UKBA decision makers that they qualify for international protection. The UKBA introduced asylum gender guidelines in 2004, which sought to improve the gender sensitivity of the UK asylum process.<sup>15</sup> However, despite these and the existence of case law, evidence points to a consistent failure by UKBA decision-makers to take account of women’s experiences when interpreting refugee law. Disappointingly, a 2006 study of the implementation of the Home Office’s gender guidance identified a few examples of good practice, overwhelmingly demonstrated a

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<sup>13</sup> This focus group was organised by the Women’s National Commission (WNC): women’s voices to government in conjunction with the Refugee Council as a part of the consultation of the cross-government strategy Together we can end violence against women and girls. The results of this focus group were fed to the Home Office.

<sup>14</sup> JCHR 2007

<sup>15</sup> These guidelines were additionally revisited by the agency in 2006. See <http://www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/policyandlaw/asylumpolicyinstructions/apis/genderissueintheasylum.pdf?view=Binary>. The Immigration Appellate Authority additionally published a similar document in 2000 see [http://cgrs.uchastings.edu/documents/legal/gender\\_guidelines/UK\\_guidelines.pdf](http://cgrs.uchastings.edu/documents/legal/gender_guidelines/UK_guidelines.pdf).

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lack of awareness of gender issues and of the guidance not being followed by decision-makers.<sup>16</sup> Although gender training is a part of the guidance implemented by the Home Office, this training needs to be delivered across the board to increase the levels of gender sensitivity.<sup>17</sup>

## ii. Time scale for processing gender based asylum claims

The UK's criminal courts have recognised that the trauma of rape can cause feelings of shame and guilt which might inhibit a woman from going to the police. However, an asylum seeker is obliged to immediately tell a stranger, in the form of a UK Border Agency representative, of any violence, including sexual violence that might form the basis of her asylum claim. She must submit to intense questioning if she is to avoid her case being processed in the detained fast track (an accelerated detained process for determining cases deemed to be 'straightforward') or risk appearing to lack credibility.<sup>18</sup> Women asylum seekers who have survived rape and sexual violence are penalised if they fail to disclose the full extent of their experiences at their asylum interview. This is despite well-documented evidence that refugee survivors of rape and sexual violence may find it incredibly difficult and distressing to disclose their experiences to officials with whom they do not have a trusting relationship.

The Refugee Council believes that women's claims should never be subjected to the detained fast track process, and that the asylum procedure and its timescales must be sufficiently flexible in order to enable these women to fully disclose their experiences in support of their asylum claims. The consequences of the failure to do this are severe: women will continue to have their asylum claims wrongly refused resulting in creating unnecessary situations of destitution in the UK, leaving them excluded from accessing support services, and vulnerable to further violence and exploitation.

## iii. Providing childcare during asylum interviews

Failure to provide childcare at asylum interviews in all UKBA regions is adding a layer of risk to the security of women and their families. Failure to provide childcare places women in a difficult situation of having to disclose experiences of violence in front of their children. While some UKBA regions have started introducing childcare for women at asylum interviews, this is not a universal practice. Therefore asylum seeking women often without support systems in place in the UK are forced to bring their children along to asylum interviews in which they are then expected to reveal the details of their experiences of violence, which may include sexual violence that is particularly painful to share. In one recent case, a woman had to attend an interview with her children and recount the domestic violence she had suffered at the hands of their father. This places women in a difficult position; either they disclose this information in front of their children which may have devastating affects on their well-being, or they withhold detailed information in order to protect their children and risk their claim being improperly refused. One refugee woman stated,

"Children should not be in the room when their parents are interviewed, as this can be very distressing for them – as well as their parents – there are personal things about what's happened to you that shouldn't be said in front of a child."

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<sup>16</sup> Ceneda and Palmer (2006) 'Lip Service' or implementation? The Home Office Gender Guidance and women's asylum claims in the UK. Refugee Women's Resource Project at Asylum Aid

<sup>17</sup> Asylum Aid (2007) 'Asylum is not gender neutral: Protecting Women seeking asylum.'  
[http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/data/files/publications/70/Asylum\\_is\\_not\\_gender\\_neutral.pdf](http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/data/files/publications/70/Asylum_is_not_gender_neutral.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Research by BID (Bail for Immigration Detainees) in 2007 (see 2008 briefing paper at <http://www.biduk.org/pdf/Fast%20track/BID%20briefing%20paper%20on%20DFT.pdf>) showed that significant numbers of women detained at Yarl's Wood detention centre had experienced violence and their cases were unsuitable for the fast track system, however these cases were wrongly allocated to the procedure.

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The Refugee Council highlights that if childcare is not provided, women will continue to be placed in impossible situations, leading to their claims inadvertently refused, and their families being placed at further risk.

The Refugee Council recommends that:

1. The UKBA redoubles its effort to ensure and monitor implementation of the gender guidelines and gender-sensitive asylum procedures.
2. The monitoring of timescales in the asylum procedure be reviewed to ensure that they are sufficiently flexible for women survivors of rape and sexual violence to be able to fully disclose their experiences in support of their asylum claims.
3. The detained fast track asylum determination process be suspended for women's claims.
4. Relevant training be provided to staff on a regular basis to assure understanding of women rights and their implementation.
5. The provision of childcare to asylum seeking women during interviews should be universal to all women in need of the provision to ensure that women survivors of violence are not disadvantaged in the asylum process.

#### **4.3 Access to appropriate legal advice and legal representation**

It is essential that women are able to benefit from high quality legal advice and representation in order to ensure that their asylum claims are determined fully and fairly. Women survivors of sexual violence require specialist advice and representation to ensure that their claims under the UN Refugee Convention benefit from decision makers having a thorough understanding of the particular forms of persecution and human rights abuses that women experience. The Refugee Council believes that women asylum seekers should be able to access female representatives with relevant expertise in gender violence. Further, there is a need for representatives trained specifically in advocating for survivors of sexual violence as establishing trust, along with confidentiality is vital in assuring that these women are able to reveal the complete basis of their asylum claims. Without this, factors such as fear, trauma, or shame which may inhibit their ability to express the extent of violent experiences and persecution endured or feared.

There is a need for further research documenting the ability of asylum seekers to access relevant and appropriate legal support in the UK, as well as recommendations for their successful acquisition of these services. A 2005 study commissioned by the Greater London Authority documented that due to continuing funding changes and difficulties it is increasingly difficult for practitioners to provide quality advice to asylum seekers in London.<sup>19</sup> The study proposes that more vulnerable asylum seekers, such as female survivors of violence, are most affected by this as practitioners do not often have the relevant training or resources to support this group. A 2003 survey conducted by Asylum Aid among asylum assisting caseworkers found that poor legal representation is a significant obstacle to the fair processing of asylum cases, particularly for women.<sup>20</sup>

The Refugee Council recommends that:

1. Women should have the option to be assisted and advised by female representatives and/or those with relevant expertise in gender violence on request. Contracts with legal suppliers, referrals, and the timing of interviews should be tailored and adjusted to allow this to happen.
2. Women should receive careful explanation of the details of the asylum process, including addressing issues of confidentiality.

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<sup>19</sup> Greater London Authority (2005) 'Into the labyrinth: legal advice for asylum seekers in London.'  
[http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/refugees/docs/labyrinth\\_report.pdf](http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/refugees/docs/labyrinth_report.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Refugee Women's Resource Project, Asylum Aid (2003) 'Women asylum seekers in the UK: A gender perspective, some facts and figures'. London: Asylum Aid.

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#### 4.4 Access to health services

Refugee women have complex health needs, arising from trauma and deprivation in their countries of origin, which is then compounded by trauma and deprivation in the UK.<sup>21</sup> High quality and appropriate health services, including psychological support, are essential if women are to be empowered to recover from the devastating impacts that violence, including sexual violence, have on their physical and psychological health. In 2004 charges were introduced for secondary health care for all refused asylum seekers, among other overseas visitors, on the basis that this was necessary to reduce 'health tourism'. This has had a profound and negative impact on refused asylum seeking women who have experienced violence, including survivors of rape and sexual violence. Health care can be denied to the most vulnerable individuals: survivors of sexual violence who have been rendered destitute and homeless can be denied treatment for the long-term serious injuries that resulted from their rape, as well as denied vital psychological support to assist their recovery. In 2006, the Refugee Council documented a number of cases of people desperate for help who had been denied access to health care, including pregnant women who were 'living rough', people with cancer who had been denied treatment, and a woman experiencing abdominal pains and bleeding after being raped.<sup>22</sup> Revised guidance has been issued following legal challenges, but despite this, our clients continue to struggle to access primary and secondary health services, at all stages of the asylum process. We continue to work with women who have been refused services that are essential to their recovery from violence. Our clients have also been pursued for unpaid bills that they cannot afford.

On 20 July 2009, the Home Office and Department of Health review of the charging policy for non-UK residents was published, recommending reinstating free care for some groups of refused asylum seekers. The promised consultation on this recommendation was published six months later, on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2010. We will be pushing for free access to health care to be implemented as a matter of urgency.

The Refugee Council recommends that:

- All refugees, asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers who require physical and psychological health services in order to recover from the violence they have experienced are entitled to services in the same way as other women survivors of violence.
- The government ensures that free, high quality and appropriate health care services are available to all women, including women whose asylum claims have been refused.

#### 4.5 The mainstream agenda on violence against women

The Government has begun to take action in combating violence against women in recent years, specifically with the development of the cross-government strategy for combating violence against women and girls'. However, many of these efforts have failed to adequately acknowledge that refugee and asylum seeking woman are at particular risk of violence and in need of targeted efforts to reduce their vulnerability and increase their ability to recover successfully from experiences of violence. The Refugee Council welcomes the growth of the violence-reduction agenda, however based on our work in the Vulnerable Women's Project, as well as our extensive experience in service delivery with refugee survivors of violence, we recommend that a particular consideration and inclusion of their needs is addressed in all wider violence against women strategies and action plans. This is of particular relevance as in many cases women and girls are exposed to violence precisely because they are refugees or asylum seekers. We believe that it is never acceptable to use women's immigration status as an excuse for failing to address the violence that they experience.

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<sup>21</sup> Kelley, N. and Stevenson, J. (2006) First do no harm: denying healthcare to people whose claims have failed, Refugee Council. London: Refugee Council.

<sup>22</sup> See again Refugee Council 'First do no harm' document.

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Research has found that only 15% of rapes are reported to the police in the UK, one of the reasons for a lack of reporting has been cited as the result of insecurity over status and concerns over protection and deportation.<sup>23</sup> The Refugee Council believes that the mainstream violence against women agenda should seek to ensure that all women, regardless of status, feel safe and confident in their homes and wider communities, so that they can live freely, contribute to society, and prosper in their daily lives. Feelings of exclusion and protection by mainstream agendas are felt in the daily realities of life for refugee women, which affects their confidence to seek help and their ability to remove themselves from contexts of violence. One woman commented to the Refugee Council:

“The reasons women don’t seek help are because they don’t know about the services available, or that they fear accessing them, as well as cultural factors – in our society violence is often normal and accepted.”

“There are not enough services available to asylum seekers and refugees facing domestic violence – they are told that it should be dealt with in the family.”

On 25<sup>th</sup> November 2009, the Government published an ambitious strategy aiming to bring an end to violence against women and girls.<sup>24</sup> Though the Refugee Council welcomes the commitment to changing attitudes to violence against women, we are disappointed that the strategy fails to address the particular needs of asylum seeking women and refugees who have come to the UK to escape violence as a result of conflict and persecution in their own country.

While the ‘Together we can end violence against women and girls strategy’ outlines a commitment to ensuring staff working with refugees are trained to identify and respond to evidence of violence, and that UKBA guidance in offering appropriate support will be enhanced and strengthened, there is nothing in the strategy to ensure access to appropriate services for refugee and asylum seeking women fleeing violence will improve.

Although the Refugee Council, and refugee and asylum seeking women fed directly into the strategy and were specifically consulted, most of these recommendations have not been taken into account.<sup>25</sup>

We believe this is a missed opportunity to send a signal to refugee and asylum seeking women that their experiences of violence will be treated as seriously as those of other women’s. The Government must recognise that these women are in dire need of protection and support, and most importantly, that they have the right to feel safe in their homes and in wider communities.

The Refugee Council therefore recommends that:

- Future mainstream violence against women efforts explicitly address the particular needs and vulnerabilities of refugee and asylum seeking women and children in the UK.
- Mainstream strategy and action planning addresses the disproportionate extent to which refugee women in the UK are affected by violence, including rape and sexual violence.
- Mainstream strategy and action planning take into account the situations in which refugee women are exposed to violence, particularly those whose asylum claims have been refused and who are consequently destitute and highly vulnerable to violence.
- Criminal justice authorities ensure that removal action does not result from asylum seeking women whose claims have been refused reporting crimes of violence; and that they build on the

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<sup>23</sup> Home Office (2007) Cross Government Action Plan on Sexual Violence and Abuse. Home Office. Available at: [www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/sexualoffences.finalsvaap.pdf](http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/sexualoffences.finalsvaap.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/vawg-strategy-2009/>

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy/responses/2009/violence\\_against\\_women.htm](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy/responses/2009/violence_against_women.htm)

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work they have conducted with Refugee Community Organisations and the voluntary sector to ensure that refugee women are supported and encouraged to report crimes against them.

- Service providers to survivors of violence against women are allowed to include refugees and asylum seekers in their service delivery, and are further encouraged to review the accessibility of their services to refugee and asylum seeking women, to ensure that sufficient interpreting and cultural awareness training are in place.

*For further information, please contact Sarah Cutler, Head of Policy and Public Affairs  
[sarah.cutler@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:sarah.cutler@refugeecouncil.org.uk)*

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