



RCD Women's News

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Progress for childcare during asylum interviews

By Deborah Singer – Asylum Aid

When Hazel Williams from the Refugee Council in Yorkshire and Humberside asked her UK Border Agency (UKBA) regional office to provide childcare during asylum interviews for all clients coming to the region who required it, the UKBA official laughed it off as impossible and too costly. Two years later, the same official contacted Refugee Council and invited Hazel to join a working group on childcare. Now UKBA has arranged for a local charity to provide play sessions at Waterside Court in Leeds so that children can be in a supervised play room while their mum or dad has their asylum interview.

This progress is part of the campaign for childcare during asylum interviews initiated in April 2007 by a group of refugee women stakeholders concerned that women weren't able to disclose their experiences at their asylum interviews if they had to take their children in with them.

Following encouragement by the Welsh Consortium for Refugees and Asylum Seekers and their partners, the UKBA office in Cardiff has been providing childcare since September 2007. The UKBA office in Glasgow started providing childcare early in 2009 after persistent lobbying by the Refugee Women's Strategy Group and the Scottish Refugee Council. The Refugee Council is raising the issue in the West Midlands and in London. The Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit is following this lead in the North West. Meanwhile Asylum Aid focused on the consultation on a new Code of Practice on Keeping Children Safe from Harm. As a result this states "UKBA staff must ensure that arrangements are in place so that parents are not required to give an account of personal victimisation or humiliation (in an asylum claim, for instance) if their children are present."

This is an example of the progress that can be made when a range of individuals and organisations across the UK work in coordinated partnership. The childcare campaign now comes under the *Charter of rights of women seeking asylum*, an initiative by the Refugee Women's Resource Project at Asylum Aid. The *Charter* calls on UKBA to commit to treating women seeking asylum with fairness, dignity and respect based on the fundamental recognition of their human rights and of their particular experiences of persecution.

This means creating a system which understands the particular issues that cause women to seek asylum; issues like rape, domestic violence, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and honour crimes. It means UKBA should provide women with the support they need. For example, any women can better relate their experiences to other women. It means removing the 'culture of disbelief' which pervades the UKBA when handling asylum claims by women.

So far over 150 organisations have endorsed the Charter including the Refugee Council, REAP, Women Asylum Seekers Together, Kurdistan Refugee Women's Association, Tamil Relief Centre, UNDUGU - African Swahili Community Project and Amnesty International UK. Supporting the Charter means your organisation supports moving toward a more gender sensitive and understanding UKBA, to ensure that women who have had the courage to seek protection in the UK find a system which treats them with respect and understanding. For the Charter and current list of endorsers, please go to: **www.asylumaid.org.uk**. To endorse the Charter, send an email to: **charter@asylumaid.org.uk** with your organisation's name stating that you are endorsing the Charter.

Training

The Northern Refugee Centre is offering regional one day free workshops: ***Women, asylum and supporting female survivors*** to increase awareness of issues around refugee women (including specific effects of the asylum system on women).

Who should attend?

Front line staff working with/interested in refugees and asylum seekers. This includes police, prison services staff, detention centre staff, primary health care workers, social services, women's organisations, advocacy groups, survivor support services, community groups and volunteers.

When and where? (all workshops 10am-4pm)

Friday 23 October 2009: Huddersfield. Voluntary Action Kirklees
Wednesday 11 November 2009: Leeds. Refugee Council
Wednesday 9 December 2009: York. The Priory Centre
Wednesday 13 January 2010: Leeds. Refugee Council
Wednesday 24 February 2010
Bradford: Carlisle Business Centre
Wednesday 3 March 2010: Sheffield: Scotia Works

For more information contact **Rachel Cooling** at:
rachel.cooling@nrcentre.org.uk or call: **0114 241 2735**.

Funding news

BBC Children in Need general grant programme is open to organisations working with disadvantaged children and young people 18 years old and under.

Next deadline: **15 October 2009**. Visit:
www.bbc.co.uk/pudsey/grants/general_grants.shtml.

Community Sustainable Energy Programme has funding for community groups to install renewable energy technologies. Next deadline: **30 October 2009**. For further details visit:
www.communitysustainable.org.uk.

Bringing together the power of story telling and the age of the internet: a platform for political change

The Testimony Project, a new online interactive resource, was launched at Amnesty International on 23 July 2009. Speakers at the event included Monica Ali, Jon Snow and Jeremy Corbyn MP, all sharing their passion for the cause.

The Project aims to challenge the asylum system by creating a place for vulnerable women and refugee organisations to speak out about their experiences and the injustice of the asylum system, breaking down the culture of silence.

Women who come to the UK and apply for asylum are left to fend for themselves. Their first experience of seeking sanctuary often leaves them feeling suppressed, cut off and helpless. And the Home Office asylum system is the cause of these feelings.

Through the power of story telling, the Testimony Project is giving a voice to those that otherwise go unheard. Bella came to the UK at the age of 15, and experienced brutal deportation. Farhat waited seven years before being granted asylum. Naomi was detained for eight months, separated from her daughter. These women are just three of many stories that need to be told in order to create change. Women and the organisations that support them can also access legal and practical advice through the online resource.

If you have a story to tell, you need advice, or you simply want to promote these stories to as many people as you know, you can visit their website at: **www.testimonyproject.org**

If you would like to submit an article to *RCO Women's News* about your RCO's work, or would like to write about a topical issue, please email: **development@refugeecouncil.org.uk**.