



RCD Women's News

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New Women's Charter to promote equal rights for female asylum seekers

By Anu Anand

When a British woman suffers rape or domestic violence, she has a right to expect the police and courts to deal sensitively with her ordeal. For example, she should be interviewed by a female officer. According to Debora Singer of the Refugee Women's Resource Project at Asylum Aid, women seeking asylum have the same rights on paper, but are often denied similar respect.

"If the criminal justice system here in the UK can change its culture towards women, then we don't see why the UK Border Agency, [which deals with asylum claims] can't make similar changes," said Singer. Although gender equality is already enshrined in European and British legislation, Singer says there is an urgent need for those principles to be practiced within the asylum system.

"We've had cases where it's clear the UK Border Agency haven't followed existing guidelines. There are a few examples of people not having even heard of these guidelines," she said. Of the 23,000 asylum applications filed in 2007, said Singer, seven thousand named women as the principal applicant. Many women have had their asylum claims rejected, especially under the new 'fast-track' system, yet many of those rejections were overturned on appeal.

Asylum Aid has drawn up a comprehensive Women's Charter to ensure that the rights of women seeking asylum are protected. It urges the UK Border Agency to provide a system in which its staff are fully informed of the types of persecution and human rights abuses women experience. It also addresses a woman's need for safety and dignity when it comes to issues of detention, accommodation and healthcare.

The Charter includes calls for action to:

- ensure that those women who may have been trafficked into the UK have full and appropriate access to the asylum determination system
- stop women who have suffered gender-based harm from being detained
- ensure girls and young women (including those where there is an age dispute) are placed in women only accommodation
- stop detaining women who are breastfeeding or at any stage of pregnancy
- end the detention of families with children

"We've deliberately included big recommendations—like ending detention, as well as smaller changes—like providing child care during asylum interviews," said Singer. "If a woman is offered the chance to discuss the sexual violence she's suffered without her children present, it allows her to talk more freely and strengthens her case."

The Women's Charter has already been endorsed by more than a hundred British bodies, including Amnesty International UK and the Refugee Council. But Singer says the more supporters, the better.

"Last year, when the UKBA adopted its gender equality guidelines," she said, "Asylum Aid made 18 recommendations. Not a single one was adopted." Singer says Asylum Aid is holding meetings with supporters over the next few months to discuss strategy. RCOs which already work with women can endorse the charter and can also use it as a framework for improving their own services. "If we can make one small change, it's worth it," said Singer.

To endorse the Women's Charter, visit www.asylumaid.org.uk. You can also join its online forum to discuss the charter. Information is available on the website.

Funding news

Lankelly Chase Foundation (UK)

The Chase charity provides revenue grants of up to £15,000 per year for projects – up to three years, in the areas of the arts, heritage, ***breaking the cycle of abusive relationships***, developing inclusive communities, mental health, reducing offending and supporting work with asylum seekers. In addition, the Chase charity can provide capital grants of up to £10,000. The Foundation tends to focus its funding on smaller charities. ***Applications can be submitted at any time.*** Applicants should be aware that the Foundation has reviewed its grant making policies to cover the next 4 years but the new guidelines will not take effect until the 1st April 2009. For more information see <http://www.lankellychase.org.uk/>

Conference

Child sexual abuse and exploitation

Date: Tuesday 21 October 2008

Time: 9.30 am – 4.30 pm

Venue: NCVO, Regent's Wharf, London N1 9RL

A conference for professionals covering issues such as best practice in working with children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse or exploitation, listening to survivors, supporting mothers/carers and working with young perpetrators.

Speakers include: Diane Abbott MP; Prof Liz Kelly, chair of the End Violence Against Women Campaign; and NSPCC

Who should attend?

- Professionals working with children, young people and families
- Domestic/Sexual Violence co-ordinators
- Organisations working with children and young people

Email info@niaproject.plus.com or call **020 7683 1270** for more information.

Training

Cambridge Women's Resources Centre are running a six week course for women only on how to develop the skills and confidence to run their own business.

Date: 3 October 2008

Time: 9.15am – 3pm for six weeks

Venue: Cambridge Women's Resources Centre, Hooper Street, Cambridge CB1 2NZ

Cost: £95 (£65 concessionary). A bursary towards the course fee may be available.

A crèche for pre-school children is available

Contact CWRC on **01223 321 148** or email admin@cwrc.org.uk or visit www.cwrc.org.uk for more information.

The Women's Design Service are offering free training sessions to support the launch of a new online resource for gender and the built environment: www.gendersite.org.

Everyone involved in the built environment world tries to meet the needs of their clients. Child-sized furniture is designed for nurseries, disabled parking bays are located next to entrances, sheltered housing sites are planned near post offices and shops. However, people are often unaware of the needs of women. With the introduction of the Gender Equality Duty there is now a legal obligation to consider those needs.

Date: 9 October 2008

Time: 2.30pm

Venue: The Building Centre, Store Street, London WC1E 7BT

To book, register at www.gendersite.org or email gendersite@wds.org.uk.

Rights of Women have developed this popular course: *Removing the barriers: domestic violence and securing women's position in the UK*, to enable participants to support women who have an insecure immigration status and are experiencing domestic violence. It offers a practical overview of immigration law and procedure.

Email training@row.org.uk or call **020 7251 6575/6** or visit www.rightsofwomen.org.uk for more detailed information.