

Refugee Council

policy response



Refugee Council response to the Government consultation paper *Together we can end violence against women and girls*.

May 2009

1. About the Refugee Council

The Refugee Council is a human rights charity, independent of government, working to ensure that refugees are given the protection they need, that they are treated with respect and understanding, and that they have the same rights, opportunities and responsibilities as other members of our society.¹

We achieve this mission by:

- supporting refugees and working with them as they build a new life
- speaking up for refugees and ensuring that refugees themselves have a strong voice in all areas of UK life
- building links with people from across our society to increase mutual understanding of refugees
- making the case for a fair and just asylum system
- taking a leading role in helping to build up a vibrant, sustainable and successful refugee sector in the UK and internationally.

2. Introduction

The Refugee Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on a cross-government strategy to combat violence against women and girls (VAWG). We endorse the cross-governmental approach being taken, and welcome the wide-ranging nature of events and high profile initiatives that have been used to engage stakeholders and the public in the consultation. We particularly welcome the initiative to hold a focus group with asylum seeking and refugee women as part of the consultation process. This has enabled some of the refugee and asylum seeking women with whom the Refugee Council works to feed their experiences and expertise directly into developing the VAWG strategy. We urge the Government to take note of the issues that these women have raised, and to ensure that they influence and feed directly into the strategy that is agreed.

The Refugee Council strongly supports the Home Secretary's statement in the consultation document that 'violence against women and girls is unacceptable, whatever the context, whatever the circumstances'. In recognising that such violence is always unacceptable, we believe that the strategy to combat violence against women and girls must fully include and address refugees' and asylum seekers' particular needs and experiences. In the context of violence against women and girls, the nature of an individual's immigration status should be immaterial to whether or not they are protected, and supported to recover, from violence. Further, in many cases, women and girls are exposed to violence precisely because they are refugees or asylum seekers: this fact must be addressed by the cross-government strategy.

The Refugee Council considers that it is never acceptable to use women's immigration status as an excuse for failing to address the violence that they experience. We urge that the strategy will specifically seek to ensure that refugee and asylum seeking women, as well as those who are not refugees, feel safe and confident in their homes and in our communities, so that they can live freely, contribute to society, and prosper in their daily lives. We believe that the Government's commitment to tackling violence against women can only be taken seriously if a clear signal is sent to refugee and asylum seeking women that their experiences of violence will be treated as seriously as those of other women. Refugee and asylum seeking women and girls cannot be excluded from the services and support mechanisms they need if their vulnerability to violence is to be reduced and if those who experience violence are to be supported and enabled to recover.

¹ Unless given in a context where precise immigration status is directly relevant, 'refugee women' should be taken in this consultation response to mean women and girls who have sought asylum and whose claims are undecided or have been refused, as well as those who have sought asylum and been granted refugee status, humanitarian protection, indefinite or discretionary leave to remain.

The Refugee Council is keen to contribute our expertise to the developing strategy and we offer to work with colleagues across government and the voluntary sector wherever we can in order to reduce the extent to which refugee women and girls are exposed to violence. In this response, we address the issues raised in the consultation document which have particular relevance to refugee and asylum seeking women and on which we possess particular expertise. We outline the issues that we feel must be addressed by the strategy on violence against women and girls. A list of our recommendations is included at the end of our response.

3. Background

Refugee women are more affected by violence against women than any other women's population in the world. Refugee women are vulnerable to violence during conflict; during their flight to safety; in the UK, the country of asylum; and, for those who are returned to their countries of origin, during the return process. It follows that a significant proportion of refugee women in the UK have experienced violence, including rape or sexual violence. In 2006, the Refugee Council set up a Vulnerable Women's Project to address the specific needs of refugee and asylum seeking women survivors of rape and sexual violence. Our project offers a mixture of practical support and therapeutic counselling to women who have been victims of rape and sexual violence in their own countries of origin and here in the UK.

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
- 22% had been sexually abused
- 20% had gynaecological problems as a result of their experiences
- 15% had become pregnant as a result of being raped
- 9% had been threatened with rape or sexual abuse while in detention in their country of origin
- 5% had had a child as a result of being raped

It is the experiences of these women, along with evidence from our extensive advice, support and capacity-building work with refugee women and children in the UK, that form the backdrop to this consultation response.

The Refugee Council believes it is important that the cross-governmental strategy recognises that refugee women in the UK who have fled conflict zones are especially affected by violence: 'war rape' has reached epidemic proportions and rape is regularly used as a weapon of war. Further, many refugee women have been separated from the father or partner who would normally protect them, and the change in gender roles brought about by displacement can lead to high levels of domestic violence.

With almost no avenues for international travel open to them, many refugee women in the UK have been forced to take ever greater risks in order to find protection. The Refugee Council is aware of many cases of women being raped by smugglers, or forced to 'exchange' sex for passage to safety, and a growing number of refugees outside the UK are at risk of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Many 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 of more of the groups that are at higher risk of

rape than the UK average,² and the risks of violence are particularly acute for the thousands of asylum seeking women who are left destitute when their asylum claims are refused.

It is because such a high proportion of refugee women in the UK have experienced violence and are particularly vulnerable to the risk of it, that the Refugee Council believes that the cross-government violence against women and girls strategy must explicitly address their needs.

The Refugee Council recommends that:

- The cross-government VAWG strategy addresses explicitly the particular needs and vulnerabilities of refugee and asylum seeking women and children in the UK.
- The VAWG strategy addresses the disproportionate extent to which refugee women in the UK are affected by violence, including rape and sexual violence.
- The VAWG strategy pays particular attention to situations in which women and girls are exposed to violence precisely because they are refugees or asylum seekers, including those whose asylum claims have been refused and who are consequently destitute and highly vulnerable to violence.
- Equality impact assessments conducted by all public bodies should specifically address impacts on refugee and asylum seeking women and children.
- The UK increases its support for the UNHCR Women at Risk programme to identify extremely vulnerable women and transfer them rapidly to a country where their safety can be ensured.
- The UK increases the number of Women at Risk who are resettled to the UK, as this is the only solution for the small number of highly vulnerable refugee women who are at continued risk in their region of origin.

4. Particular issues of concern to refugee women

The following are particular issues that affect refugees and which require addressing in the context of a cross-government violence against women and girls strategy.

4.1 Preventing violence against refugee women and reducing their fear of violence

i. Tackling violence against refugee women outside the UK

Action to address the high prevalence of violence affecting refugee women outside the UK should form a specific part of the cross-government strategy. Women from conflict zones are especially affected by rape and other forms of violence, and those who flee their homes, particularly girls, older women, disabled women and girls, those living in camps and in urban areas, are further exposed to risk.

The Refugee Council recommends that:

- The strategy includes initiatives by the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to address high levels violence against refugee women outside the UK.

² 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*.

ii. Recognising and supporting the role of Refugee Community Organisations

Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) in the UK play a vital role in supporting refugees, assisting them through the asylum process and aiding their effective integration. RCOs are often the first port-of-call for refugees, and work with significant numbers of women who have experienced, or are at risk of, violence. Many RCOs possess particular expertise on issues including FGM and 'honour crimes'. It is vital that their expertise and their role in supporting women and children, is recognised and supported by the VAWG strategy.

Many of the RCOs that support women and children to recover from violence are deemed to be single identity groups, and struggle to access funding for their work as a result.³ The Refugee Council believes that it is vital that RCOs be supported to access funding to enable them to continue to provide essential services to protect women and girls from violence.

The Refugee Council recommends that:

- The VAWG strategy recognises the contributions made by Refugee Community Organisations in preventing, combating and responding to VAWG; that RCOs are represented on bodies to monitor and assess the impact of the VAWG strategy; and that the strategy emphasises the importance of funding being made available to enable RCOs, including 'single identity' RCOs, to provide services to prevent VAWG and to support those women and children in their communities who have experienced violence.

iii. Safe accommodation for women and children

The Refugee Council is concerned that the nature of the accommodation that some asylum seekers are housed in by the UK Border Agency exposes them to additional risks and fear of violence. Many asylum seeking women who we work with, report feeling insecure in the mixed accommodation in which they are required to live. In one accommodation centre in which we work, women have been subjected to nightly searches of their rooms by all male housing provider staff, checking for food in their rooms. Refugee women, particularly those who have experienced sexual violence, have been traumatised and terrified by men knocking on their doors at night and entering their rooms. We are additionally concerned that unaccompanied girls seeking asylum whose age is disputed by statutory authorities are often placed in adult, mixed accommodation until they are deemed to be children. This leaves them vulnerable to violence and exploitation from older men living in close proximity to them.

Refugee and asylum seeking girls who are accepted by Local Authorities as being aged 16 and 17 are often placed in situations of enhanced vulnerability to violence because they live with other children of the same age and thus receive limited adult supervision. It is our experience that where girls are not living with a carer, they are more vulnerable to exploitation by boys and men. Experiences of violence and exploitation are less easy for social services to detect in unsupervised accommodation, and the

³ In June 2007, the independent Commission on Integration and Cohesion recommended that local councils and other public bodies should avoid funding "single identity" groups aiming exclusively or primarily to support a particular community "unless there is a clear reason for capacity building." The Commission also suggested that a condition of funding for any single groups might be that they were encouraged to take steps to promote interaction with others.

The Department for Communities and Local Government consulted on this issue and concluded that 'It is clear that there is often a delicate call to be made about single group funding. Based on the evidence we have received, we consider that it is only local leaders who can properly understand the context, assess the local circumstances, and be in a position to make a truly informed choice. Therefore we have concluded that guidelines from central government are not the way forward. Instead, we look to local leaders to show a measured approach, drawing on their knowledge of what's happening in their neighbourhood: taking tough decisions if necessary and being prepared to explain and answer for them: and using all their ingenuity to bring people from different backgrounds together.' See DCLG (2009) *Cohesion Guidance for Funders Consultation: Summary of responses*. The Refugee Council remains concerned that RCOs that are deemed to be single identity groups, including many that work on violence against women issues, will struggle to find funding as a result of the Commission's recommendations, and the DCLG position.

onus is often on the child to alert authorities to any actual or feared violence. Unaccompanied children seeking asylum are particularly vulnerable to violence because their extended support network of family and friends is usually not present in the UK.

In the case of girls whose age is disputed, we are concerned that public authorities tend to prioritise resolving a girl's age before providing protective services. If girls are to be supported to recover from any violence that they have already experienced, and to be protected against future violence, it is essential that protective services are put in place as a matter of priority. Where there is any indication that a girl is at risk of violence, protective placements must be sought immediately, and any doubts over the girl's age resolved subsequently.

The Refugee Council recommends that:

- The Strategy require the UKBA and Local Authorities to monitor the extent to which providers of accommodation to refugee women and girls, including those who claim but are not believed to be unaccompanied children, are taking steps to enhance their perceived and actual safety.
- Protected and supervised places are provided to all unaccompanied asylum seeking girls in order to reduce the risk that they can be exploited and subjected to violence by adults.
- The Strategy require the UKBA and social services to put in place action to ensure that girls whose age has been disputed are protected from harm immediately and that the issue of establishing their age is resolved as a matter of secondary importance.

iv. Ensuring asylum seekers' safety in dispersal areas

Asylum seeking women's fear of violence often stems from their status as asylum seekers. Women who apply for accommodation from the UKBA while their asylum claims are being determined are dispersed to new areas, as accommodation is usually provided on a no-choice basis. In the case of women who have already been in the UK for some time,⁴ they are dispersed away from friends, family and other support networks. Asylum seekers are often dispersed to areas where they experience hostility from host communities, and we are concerned that hostility will worsen as the economic climate deteriorates.

The Refugee Council recommends that:

- Local Authorities be required to work with refugees, NGOs and RCOs to increase the perceived and actual safety of refugee and asylum seeking women in all areas to which asylum seekers are dispersed.

4.2 Ensuring that the asylum determination system responds to the needs of women who have experienced violence

i. Implementing a gender-sensitive asylum determination system

Gender violence can amount to persecution under the 1951 Convention and European law, but 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

⁴ This includes women who entered the UK for a purpose other than that of seeking asylum, and were forced to claim asylum as a result of conditions changing in their country of origin, making their safe return impossible.

the UK asylum process. However, despite case law and the existence of the gender guidelines, evidence points to a consistent failure by UKBA decision-makers to take account of women's experiences when interpreting refugee law. Women are disadvantaged by a presumption that rape is a private act rather than an act of persecution linked to political opinion; by an emphasis of civil and political rights over deprivation of social and economic rights; and by the development of asylum law based on a 'male paradigm'.⁵ Disappointingly, a 2006 study of the implementation of the Home Office's gender guidance identified a few examples of good practice, but 'the overwhelming impression was one of a lack of awareness of gender issues and of the Guidance not being followed by decision-makers'.⁶

Women and girls seeking asylum are disadvantaged by a lack of female interviewers and interpreters, which inhibits full disclosure of experiences, and by decision makers lacking the skills to assess gender issues and avoid making assumptions in the face of medical evidence. The quality and use of country information is also problematic, and decision makers are often uninformed and fail to take into account women's situations and status in their country of origin.

Women asylum seekers who have survived rape and sexual violence are regularly 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. While 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, an asylum seeker is obliged to immediately tell a stranger 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 being locked up in the detained fast track or risk appearing to lack credibility. The Refugee Council believes that the asylum procedure and its timescales must be sufficiently flexible in order to enable 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 refused, and end up in situations of destitution in the UK, excluded from accessing services to help them recover from their experiences, and vulnerable to further violence and exploitation.

ii. Providing childcare during asylum interviews

The Refugee Council believes that the failure to provide childcare at asylum interviews is putting women and children at risk. There has been some recent progress in that some UKBA Regions have recently introduced childcare for women at asylum interviews, but this is not the case in all regions. As a result, women are continuing to be forced to take children with them to interviews where they are expected to disclose distressing details of sexual violence in front of them. For example, 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. If women choose to protect their children and withhold information that is vital to the consideration of their asylum claim, then their claim is more likely to be refused. As a result, there is a risk that women will become destitute, or be sent back to their country of origin where they are at risk of further violence and persecution. Women will continue to be placed in an impossible situation for as long as UKBA fails to ensure that childcare is provided to all women during asylum interviews. The Refugee Council strongly believes that the provision of childcare to women should not be a matter of discretion, but must be provided as a matter of urgency to all women who need it, to ensure that women survivors of violence are not disadvantaged in the asylum process.

iii. Access to high quality legal advice and representation

It is essential that vulnerable 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

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

⁶ Ceneda and Palmer (2006) 'Lip Service' or implementation? *The Home Office Gender Guidance and women's asylum claims in the UK*.

violence require specialist advice and representation to ensure that their claims under the 1951 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.

iv. Ending violence against women in the context of detention and removal

We are particularly concerned about the use of detained, accelerated procedures for deciding women's asylum claims at Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre. The detained fast track (DFT) processes claims from women that are deemed to be straightforward, yet inadequate screening processes mean that women who have experienced rape and torture are detained in contravention of the policy. DFT claims are decided in a matter of days, and women have little opportunity to gather medical or legal evidence needed to support their case. The vast majority are refused (97%). Those who lodge an appeal have little time to prepare, and many appear before the court without legal representation.⁷

The Refugee Council believes that there is no justification for processing women's asylum claims in detention, particularly given that there is now a speedier process for all claims under the New Asylum Model. We are concerned that women who have experienced persecution are being denied protection as a direct result of the DFT. We recommend that the DFT is not used for women. As part of this cross-government strategy, we recommend that the UKBA and the Ministry of Justice work together with NGOs towards ending the use of DFT. Until this change is implemented, there should be immediate action to improve safeguards against women survivors of sexual violence being wrongly placed in detention, developed in consultation with NGOs.

We are also concerned that the very experience of being detained has a negative impact on women and girls. Women and girls can be detained within family units at the end of the asylum process. We have concerns about the impact of detention and the level of violence used by enforcement staff and privately-contracted escorts during detention and removal operations.⁸ We believe this VAWG strategy provides an important opportunity to review the issues of detention, enforcement and removal operations.

The Refugee Council recommends that:

- The UKBA redoubles its efforts to ensure and monitor implementation of the gender guidelines and of gender-sensitive asylum procedures as an integral part of the cross-government VAWG strategy.
- Monitoring of timescales in the asylum procedure be conducted to ensure that timescales 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.
- Childcare be provided as a matter of urgency to all women who need it, to ensure that women survivors of violence are not disadvantaged in the asylum process.
- Women should be assisted to be advised by female representatives and/or those with relevant expertise in gender violence on request. Contracts with legal suppliers, referral rotas, and the timing of interviews should be tailored and adjusted to allow this to happen.

⁷ For more information about the DFT see Bail for Immigration Detainees (September 2007) *"Refusal Factory": women's experiences of the detained fast track asylum process at Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre.*

⁸ For evidence of the impact of detention and the level of violence used during detention and removal see Birnberg Peirce & Partners, Medical Justice and the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns (2008) *Outsourcing Abuse: the use and misuse of state-sanctioned force during the detention and removal of asylum seekers.*

- UKBA and the Ministry of Justice work together with NGOs towards ending the use of the Detained Fast Track. Until this change is implemented, there should be immediate action to improve safeguards against women survivors of sexual violence being wrongly placed in detention, developed in consultation with NGOs. This must include urgent changes to screening procedures so that they are sufficiently robust to ensure that victims of sexual violence can be safely identified and removed from detention.
- Detention, enforcement and removal operations be reviewed in the context of the VAWG strategy to ensure that women survivors of violence are not treated inappropriately, and that women are not exposed to risks of violence as a result of detention, immigration enforcement or processes to remove women from the UK.

4.3 Ensuring that women survivors of violence can access the services they require

i. Exclusion of asylum seeking women from services

The Refugee Council believes that the VAWG strategy must explicitly aim to ensure that refugee and asylum seeking women have access to the support they need. Action is needed to address the current situation whereby asylum seeking women who have survived violence, including rape and sexual violence, but whose asylum claims have been refused, are prevented by Government policies from accessing the services they require. In the case of domestic violence, refused asylum seekers are rarely able to access shelters, which are unable to accommodate women with no recourse to public funds. We believe that exclusion from a service because of an individual's asylum status is not compatible with the Government's assertion that 'violence against women and girls is unacceptable, whatever the context, whatever the circumstances.' Women and girls who have experienced violence should be entitled to the same level of state support, regardless of their own personal circumstances.

ii. Supporting asylum seekers to report crime

Women whose asylum claims have been refused are often reluctant to approach criminal justice authorities, for fear that they will be identified as having no right to be in the UK and returned to their country of origin. For women who might not be safe if returned to a country where human rights violations, violence against women, repression or conflict are rife, their fear of return is often so great that they would rather remain as destitute, silent victims in the UK than report the crimes that they have suffered here. We recommend that criminal justice authorities build upon the positive work that has been conducted with RCOs and NGOs to ensure that refugee women are supported and encouraged to report these crimes.

iii. Ensuring culturally sensitive services with adequate interpreting

Refugee women face additional barriers in accessing the services they need where providers do not have access to adequate interpreting services, or lack appropriate cultural sensitivity. The VAWG strategy will be an important vehicle for re-stating the importance of all services relating to VAWG ensuring that they have sufficient interpreting and cultural/refugee awareness training in place so that women from refugee backgrounds are able to access services on an equal basis with other women.

iv. Ending the exclusion of refused asylum seekers from essential health services

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. The extension in 2004 of NHS charging to refused asylum seekers has 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 of the vulnerable: survivors of sexual violence who have been rendered destitute and homeless can be denied treatment for the long-term serious injuries that result from their rape, as well as being denied vital psychological support to assist their recovery. In 2006, we 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.⁹ We continue to work with women who have been refused services that are essential to their recovery from violence.

The Refugee Council recommends that:

- The strategy be used as an opportunity to ensure 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.
- Criminal justice authorities ensure that removal action does not result from asylum seeking women whose claims have been refused reporting crimes of violence; and build on the work they have conducted with RCOs and NGOs to ensure that refugee women are supported and encouraged to report these crimes.
- The VAWG strategy be used as an opportunity to conduct an investigation into the extent to which women with refugee backgrounds are able to secure justice after experiencing violence, including domestic violence.
- Service providers be encouraged to review the accessibility of their services to refugee and asylum seeking women, and to ensure that sufficient interpreting and cultural awareness training are in place.
- A serious commitment to combating violence against women requires the Government to ensure that high quality and appropriate health services are available to all women, including women whose asylum claims have been refused.

4.4 Ending the destitution of seeking women whose claims are refused

There is a paucity of published studies examining the links between destitution and violence and exploitation. However, 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 seekers who are not entitled to accommodation or any financial support and are therefore destitute and vulnerable.¹⁰ Many destitute women fear reporting incidents to the police for fear of being detained and removed from the country, and it is therefore likely that the incidence of violence among this group of women is severely under-reported.

⁹ Refugee Council (June 2006) *First do no harm: denying healthcare to people whose asylum claims have failed*.

¹⁰ Examples of cases of destitute women who have been subjected to sexual violence because are contained with 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* both available at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk. Further examples are contained within forthcoming 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*.

i. Destitution exposes women and girls to unacceptable risks of violence

10 (6.5%) of the women we worked with in the first phase of our vulnerable women's project told us that they had been forced into prostitution or exchanging sex for somewhere to stay because they were destitute. There is no evidence that the Government's policy of forcing refused asylum seekers into destitution in order to 'encourage' them to return home has any impact on whether asylum seekers actually return to their country of origin. Often refused asylum seekers, including women and children, will 'choose' to be destitute in the UK, and consequently very vulnerable to abuse, violence and exploitation, rather than return home to unsafe countries where they have a very real fear of further violence. The Refugee Council believes that this government policy of enforced destitution has very clear gendered impacts, exposes women to unacceptable risks of violence, and forces women into exploitative situations, including prostitution, in order to survive.

ii. Ensure access to work and support in order to reduce violence against asylum seeking women

The Refugee Council believes that all asylum seekers should be entitled to work or to receive cash support throughout the asylum process, up to the point at which they are granted status or leave the UK. The fact that destitute women are particularly vulnerable to violence makes reform of current UKBA policies and practices an essential component of the cross-Government VAWG strategy. As part of the strategy, priority must be given to developing appropriate safeguards to ensure that asylum seeking and refugee women are not forced into living arrangements that make them more vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation.

The Refugee Council recommends that:

- The UKBA be required, in the context of the cross-government VAWG strategy, to 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 the incidence of 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 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 policies and practices have on refugee and asylum seeking women and girls, including those whose asylum claims have been refused and who are destitute and thus particularly vulnerable to violence.

Summary of Refugee Council recommendations

The Refugee Council recommends that:

1. The cross-government VAWG strategy addresses explicitly the particular needs and vulnerabilities of refugee and asylum seeking women and children in the UK.
2. The VAWG strategy addresses the disproportionate extent to which refugee women in the UK are affected by violence, including rape and sexual violence.

3. The VAWG strategy pays particular attention to situations in which women and girls are exposed to violence precisely because they are refugees or asylum seekers, including those whose asylum claims have been refused and who are consequently destitute and highly vulnerable to violence.
4. Equality impact assessments conducted by all public bodies should specifically address impacts on refugee and asylum seeking women and children.
5. The UK increases its support for the UNHCR Women at Risk programme to identify extremely vulnerable women and transfer them rapidly to a country where their safety can be ensured.
6. The UK increases the number of Women at Risk who are resettled to the UK, as this is the only solution for the small number of highly vulnerable refugee women who are at continued risk in their region of origin.
7. The strategy includes initiatives by the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to address high levels violence against refugee women outside the UK.
8. The VAWG strategy recognises the contributions made by Refugee Community Organisations in preventing, combating and responding to VAWG; that RCOs are represented on bodies to monitor and assess the impact of the VAWG strategy; and that the strategy emphasises the importance of funding being made available to enable RCOs, including 'single identity RCOs, to provide services to prevent VAWG and to support those women and children in their communities who have experienced violence.
9. The Strategy require the UKBA and Local Authorities to monitor the extent to which providers of accommodation to refugee women and girls, including those who claim but are not believed to be unaccompanied children, are taking steps to enhance their perceived and actual safety.
10. Protected and supervised places are provided to all unaccompanied asylum seeking girls in order to reduce the risk that they can be exploited and subjected to violence by adults.
11. The Strategy require the UKBA and social services to put in place action to ensure that girls whose age has been disputed are protected from harm immediately and that the issue of establishing their age is resolved as a matter of secondary importance.
12. Local Authorities be required to work with refugees, NGOs and RCOs to increase the perceived and actual safety of refugee and asylum seeking women in all areas to which asylum seekers are dispersed.
13. The UKBA redoubles its efforts to ensure and monitor implementation of the gender guidelines and of gender-sensitive asylum procedures as an integral part of the cross-government VAWG strategy.
14. Monitoring of timescales in the asylum procedure be conducted to ensure that timescales 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.
15. Childcare be provided as a matter of urgency to all women who need it, to ensure that women survivors of violence are not disadvantaged in the asylum process.
16. Women should be assisted to be advised by female representatives and/or those with relevant expertise in gender violence on request. Contracts with legal suppliers, referral rotas, and the timing of interviews should be tailored and adjusted to allow this to happen.

17. UKBA and the Ministry of Justice work together with NGOs towards ending the use of the Detained Fast Track. Until this change is implemented, there should be immediate action to improve safeguards against women survivors of sexual violence being wrongly placed in detention, developed in consultation with NGOs. This must include urgent changes to screening procedures so that they are sufficiently robust to ensure that victims of sexual violence can be safely identified and removed from detention.
18. Detention, enforcement and removal operations be reviewed in the context of the VAWG strategy to ensure that women survivors of violence are not treated inappropriately, and that women are not exposed to risks of violence as a result of detention, immigration enforcement or processes to remove women from the UK.
19. The strategy be used as an opportunity to ensure 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.
20. Criminal justice authorities ensure that removal action does not result from asylum seeking women whose claims have been refused reporting crimes of violence; and build on the work they have conducted with RCOs and NGOs to ensure that refugee women are supported and encouraged to report these crimes.
21. The VAWG strategy be used as an opportunity to conduct an investigation into the extent to which women with refugee backgrounds are able to secure justice after experiencing violence, including domestic violence.
22. Service providers be encouraged to review the accessibility of their services to refugee and asylum seeking women, and to ensure that sufficient interpreting and cultural awareness training are in place.
23. A serious commitment to combating violence against women requires the Government to ensure that high quality and appropriate health services are available to all women, including women whose asylum claims have been refused.
24. The UKBA be required, in the context of the cross-government VAWG strategy, to 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.
25. In order to reduce the incidence of 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.
26. Priority 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.
27. Equality impact assessments conducted by public authorities and service providers must address the particular impacts policies and practices have on refugee and asylum seeking women and girls, including those whose asylum claims have been refused and who are destitute and thus particularly vulnerable to violence.

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