



INDEPENDENT

Thousands of asylum seekers not reporting rapes due to Home Office stigma and ‘culture of disbelief’

Exclusive: ‘I came here because I was beaten nearly to death by my husband and the police did nothing. My claim for asylum was refused,’ says victim

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Thousands of rape victims seeking sanctuary in the UK are facing stigma from the Home Office that is preventing them reporting their sexual assault, campaigners warn.

Frontline service providers say rape survivors’ accounts of violence are routinely disbelieved by the Home Office and women are generally not asked if they have suffered sexual violence in asylum interviews.

Cuts to legal aid mean they are left with no support for months or pushed into the hands of “racketeer” private lawyers who urge them not to report their rape due to fears it will harm their application.

“Daunting bureaucratic hurdles” are also said to deter them from telling authorities about gender-based violence which would have been likely to make their asylum claims successful.



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Women Against Rape, which provides legal advice to victims, found two-thirds of asylum-seeking women using their services were destitute.

All the women surveyed had endured rape or other sexual violence in their home country but only one-third had been able to report the rape when claiming asylum.

Women Against Rape say the women who reported rape faced “hostility, stigma and discrimination” which included not being believed in spite of compelling evidence of the violence they experienced.

Sian Evans, who runs Women Against Rape’s Refuge from Rape and Destitution Campaign, said the sample for this study only includes 52 women seeking asylum but it only represents “the tip of the iceberg”.

She said women making asylum claims are sent all around the country and often end up in areas where they might be the only black and ethnic minority female.

Ms Evans added: “This is just a small sample of the women who find our way to us. We have worked with thousands of women. Women in this position are very isolated. They are living on the street with no money to travel to services. They are scared of anyone knowing their problems because their immigration is not sorted and they are terrified of being deported. They are suspicious and frightened. They are invisible. It is a really hidden experience.

“Some are warned by their lawyer not to mention their rape because they won’t be believed. Even when women do report, the Home Office routinely disbelieves them, and they are denied legal aid, proper representation and expert evidence to appeal. Women’s claims are closed without the rape they have suffered and its devastating impact being considered.

“They are made destitute as a result. Without any means to survive, a number of women we surveyed described being raped in the UK because they were forced to depend on people who abused and exploited them.”

The hostility faced by rape survivors who claim asylum is so bad most women are too frightened to report the abuse they have undergone, Ms Evans added.

She said any woman reporting rape is “very vulnerable” to discrimination and racism from the Home Office – adding the “number one way” such reports are treated is with disbelief.

Ms Evans said cuts meant legal aid lawyers were “up to their eyeballs” with work and recalled an instance where a legal aid lawyer said to a woman: “No, don’t even start telling me about rape, because if you start adding that in now, they won’t believe you.”

A woman seeking asylum, who cannot be named for legal reasons, said: “I came here because I was beaten nearly to death by my husband and the police did nothing.

“My claim for asylum was refused but I can’t go back because my son and I would be killed. The only contact from the Home Office was to try to bully me into returning voluntarily. Women Against Rape helped me stand up to them and make a new claim.”

Women claiming asylum in the UK often have to recount their stories to male interviewers or translators and sometimes have had their children in the meetings.

Toufique Hossain, director of public law and immigration at Duncan Lewis Solicitors, added: “They simply don’t believe women. There is a culture of disbelief. It comes back to the hostile environment. The confrontational environment and tone of questioning in interviews and the reasons for questions are all geared for rejection. The starting point is the woman is not telling the truth.

“Our experience is this is totally wrong. The vast majority of women who get to the UK and claim international protection have sadly suffered some sort of sexual or gender-based violence or trauma.”

Mr Hossain, who has worked in legal aid for almost two decades, said the emergence of “legal aid deserts” in parts of the UK made it difficult for some women seeking asylum to get support. He added that women who lived outside of cities were significantly disadvantaged.

He said they were being forced to turn to private lawyers who they could not afford to pay for the necessary “medical legal reports” which the Home Office require to prove sexual violence.

Government figures released in June showed more than half of all Home Office immigration decisions are overturned when challenged in court. More than 23,000 individuals had their refusals reversed in the year to March 2019.

Natasha Walter, director of Women for Refugee Women, which works with women who have claimed asylum in the UK, said: “We too find that the vast majority of the women we work with are survivors of rape and other gender based violence in their home countries.

“Whether they are survivors of rape in conflict, sexual violence as persecution for their sexuality, or trafficking for forced prostitution, these women all deserve a fair hearing in the UK asylum process. The hostility that they face from the Home Office means that many women are unfairly refused asylum and are then forced into destitution in the UK. It is shocking to see how women who come to the UK in need of protection are denied safety here.”

A Home Office spokesperson said: “The UK has a proud record of providing protection to vulnerable individuals and helping them to rebuild their lives.

“We take the wellbeing of asylum seekers extremely seriously, ensuring that victims of rape and sexual violence are given every opportunity to report these devastating crimes.

“Individuals identified as potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking are provided with free accommodation and specialist support.”

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/home-office-rape-survivors-sexual-abuse-destitution-homeless-a9250746.html>