

# Women and Equalities Committee

## Oral evidence: Equality and the UK asylum process, HC 726

Wednesday 23 March 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 23 March 2022.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Caroline Dinenage; Jackie Doyle-Price; Kim Johnson; Anum Qaisar; Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

Questions 107 - 142

### Witnesses

I: Kathryn Cronin, Barrister, Garden Court Chambers; Pip McKnight, Head of Policy and Advocacy, Refugee Women Connect; Priscilla Dudhia, Policy and Advocacy Co-ordinator (Destitution), Women for Refugee Women; Annie, Ambassador, VOICES Network and Roxana, Ambassador, VOICES Network.

Written evidence from witnesses:



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Kathryn Cronin, Pip McKnight, Priscilla Dudhia, Annie and Roxana.

Q107 **Chair:** Good afternoon, and welcome to this afternoon's meeting of the Women and Equalities Select Committee. This is the third evidence session of our inquiry into equalities and the UK asylum process. Can I start by thanking all of our witnesses for coming to give evidence this afternoon? We have Kathryn Cronin, barrister at Garden Court Chambers, who is appearing via Zoom; Pip McKnight, head of policy and advocacy at Refugee Women Connect; Priscilla Dudhia, policy and advocacy co-ordinator for Women for Refugee Women; and Annie and Roxana, who are both ambassadors for the VOICES Network. Thank you all for coming to give evidence this afternoon.

Members of the Committee will ask you questions in turn. Could I just check, are you all content to be referred to by your first names? I have nods from everyone. Thank you very much; that is much appreciated. I will start the questions, which I am going to direct first to Annie and Roxana.

We have had a lot of written evidence, from people who have taken part in this inquiry, about the experiences they have had within the Home Office and as part of their interview process and their asylum application. Can I ask what your experience has been of the attitudes you have had when going through that process? Shall I start with Roxana?

**Roxana:** Thank you very much for giving me the chance to speak up in this lovely Committee. I have been living in this country for more than 10 years now, and I have been in the asylum system for more than five years. It is very difficult to explain my experience in the system in a few lines, because I know what I have been through in the last five or six years.

Since the day I claimed asylum in this country, I have felt like a third-class citizen in this mighty kingdom. The way they treated me—from the screening interview to the last moment—made me ashamed of being an asylum seeker. The way they questioned me was very intriguing and very defaming at the same time. Imagine, from a student, overnight I became a victim and I started feeling like a criminal. The day I claimed asylum, I was not given any handout to know where to go for help, so I had a private solicitor at that time. Literally, I was paying that person just to be abused by the system. He was hiding information from me just to milk money from me for his own benefit.

Q108 **Chair:** Has your experience of legal representation been consistently poor or varied during the process?

**Roxana:** It is very poor. When I was given the opportunity to seek help from legal aid, I had to wait four months just to receive a call from the solicitor. I later found out that the solicitor was so busy he just did not bother to take my case. Through the British Red Cross I had to look for



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

different solicitors. By doing that I lost a really valuable opportunity because I had already started the process. There is a rule that if someone waits over a year for a decision, then they have the right to work. In my case, I awaited the decision but I was denied the right to work. Literally, I kept writing to the Home Office and they denied me any response to those emails and letters. While I was waiting for the decision, I was looking for a solicitor, but because I could not find a solicitor who would take my case, I could not take that opportunity.

**Chair:** Thank you. Annie?

**Annie:** Thank you for the question. My experience has been of a system that is shrouded in mystery, lacking in dignity, mistrusting, fearmongering and pretty slow. I think I said that before. When I say it has been slow, I had to wait for a year for my initial interview. The fear from the managers of the house where you are living is constant. They are constantly threatening that they are going to tell the Home Office when you ask for something or when you ask for clarification. The mistrust is when you go through the interview; the people who are interviewing you are making you feel like you are lying, "You have no right to be here. You are lying." In many ways, people make you feel like you have no right to claim asylum.

Q109 **Chair:** Can I ask something? Both of you said it took a long time. Annie, you said it was "shrouded in mystery."

**Annie:** Yes.

**Chair:** What sort of information did you get up front about how to claim asylum, and who from?

**Annie:** I did not. My initial contact as an asylum seeker was when I met a lawyer and I explained that I had come in by a visa and I wanted to renew my visa. I did not know that I could claim asylum. When I explained to him why I was running away from home, he is the one who said to me, "Oh, you realise you are actually an asylum seeker? You should be an asylum seeker." That was a way for me to get into the asylum system. That is how I found out about the asylum system. I did not know about the asylum system. I just knew that I was safe. From being safe, I realised I needed to be safer by seeking asylum and being legal in this country, so there is that mystery.

It may be different for other people, but when you are running away you are in flight mode. It is as if you decompress and by the time you try to figure out where you are and what the laws of the land are, maybe some time has passed or lapsed. That was the first time I learnt about a place called Croydon, where I needed to make an appointment. Just before my visa expired, I made my appointment but I was given an appointment way after my visa had expired. That came back to bite me later anyway because by then I had overstayed. I really had no contact—



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Chair:** At no point did you feel you could go to the Home Office and ask for information about what the process was? What do I need to prove? How can I demonstrate that my claim is genuine?

**Annie:** No, I was not aware. I did not have any information and, more than that, I was afraid.

Q110 **Chair:** Thank you. Can I turn to Priscilla? Your written evidence indicated that the “culture of disbelief” is not so much a matter of a lack of knowledge that can be rectified through guidance. How can it be addressed, because we have heard very powerfully from Annie that she felt that she was not believed and that she was afraid. How can we address this culture of disbelief?

**Priscilla Dudhia:** In short, what we need are two things: structural change and cultural change. If I can start off by explaining why we said in the evidence that it is not a matter of addressing the guidance. If you look at the guidance—which I am sure the Committee has done—on gender claims in the asylum system, it is pretty decent. It talks about the effects of trauma. It talks about just how difficult it can be for women who have experienced the most horrific acts of violence, and talking about these experiences and telling your story in a consistent and coherent manner. It talks about how late disclosure should not automatically prejudice a woman’s credibility. It talks about the difficulties that a woman might experience in gathering supporting evidence.

A lot of the violence, as the guidance acknowledges, can take place in the private sphere in a domestic setting, and that sort of abuse can be so much more difficult to corroborate, and SGBV survivors, of course, do not always have the physical scarring that other forms of torture may leave. It is not an issue of addressing the guidance.

When I refer to structural change, I guess the elephant in the room is the Nationality and Borders Bill. Without a doubt, that legislation is going to further entrench disbelief. If we are having a serious conversation about how to address it, the Bill needs to be scrapped or large parts of it need to be amended. I am sure we will get to the Bill later on, but one of the provisions, for instance, is about information notices that can be slapped on traumatised women, requiring them to provide information by a certain deadline. If they fail to do that within a certain timeframe, decision makers are encouraged to treat that evidence with minimal weight. They are encouraged to treat that as potentially damaging to their credibility.

Of course, there is also the change in the well-founded fear test, which will introduce an additional burden of a heightened test in proving that you qualify for refugee protection. That is the sort of structural change that I am referring to, but alongside that, and perhaps more importantly, what we need in the long term is a cultural change. We need a message of empathy and compassion from the very top of the Home Office.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

We know from previous studies—most recently the Wendy Williams inquiry into the Windrush scandal—that there is pressure from the top to treat these cases with disbelief and to treat the person with suspicion. Until we see a sea change in the attitudes of people at the top of the Home Office—and, I would argue, in other areas of Government too—we are going to have a continuation of these harmful and discriminatory narratives that essentially sow the seeds for harmful structures, such as the Bill.

**Q111 Chair:** We know that there is massive turnover in decision-making staff. Apologies if I have forgotten the figure, but I think on average they might serve 18 months in that sort of role. How hard is it for cultural change to percolate down to that level when the churn there is enormous?

**Priscilla Dudhia:** That is something what needs to be fixed. There is a need for more caseworkers and more skilled caseworkers, and to do that we need to look at staff retention—why people are not staying. From what has been unveiled in previous inquiries, it is that “culture of disbelief” that is then translating into targets, and into a pressure to refuse cases. What we really need is a change in the attitude from people at the very top. We need a Home Office that takes pride in refugee status determination and, ultimately, for there to be a culture of protection.

**Q112 Chair:** Thank you. Kathryn, we have heard from both Annie and Roxana about legal representation and some serious questions about the quality of representation they are receiving as part of the asylum process. How would you say it compares with other areas of the law?

**Kathryn Cronin:** Very poorly. I have been practising in this area since 1980, and there has been a sea change in the funding and the arrangement of representation over that period of time. When I began, for probably the first 10 or 15 years, you did have really very good representation at a budget. You had a legal aid system that was not awash with money, but you had really competent and dedicated lawyers in multiple law centres who took the great majority of cases. That is not the case now. The cases are taken by small private firms who very frequently have very junior and unskilled staff. Some of them are very poor in their ethics or honesty. You have whole areas of the UK where you get no proper immigration representation at all.

It adds to the cost of the whole working immigration system, because we get called upon to do fresh claims when someone is being removed. I would say that out of every 10 of those you would probably have seven that need a fresh claim because it has been badly presented in the first instance. It is so common to see a whole array of issues that were not addressed, evidence that was not produced or statements that are so poor that they did not properly set out the client's case. You are doing cases sometimes two or three times over because of the poor representation at the bottom of the system.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Home Office has got to get rid of a target culture, particularly a target culture to say no. At the same time, you will never get a properly running system from within a bureaucracy as large as the Home Office. The improvements have to come from the representation you provide outside. With a more pragmatic and practical fact-based assessment of how you are spending money on the system of immigration appeals and reviews, you would come to the conclusion that you have really got to start putting money into the bottom level of it so that proper cases are recognised and pulled out of the system quickly and granted status and people are not left in the position where they are having to go through repeat and traumatic litigation in order to stave off a removal.

Q113 **Chair:** Thank you for that. I have two questions that follow on from it. What evidence do you have of a Home Office target for refusals of asylum claims?

**Kathryn Cronin:** You hear it from presenting officers. I have certainly heard from presenting officers that there was a period of time—I must say it appeared to be relatively short-lived—when they were given vouchers depending on how many cases they were successful in, so they needed to get their tally up. I have certainly had a presenting officer say to me that he had asked to be transferred to an appeal centre which had a very high rejection rate because he was losing too many cases, so he had to get his refusal rate up.

**Chair:** When was that?

**Kathryn Cronin:** That would have been possibly 18 months to two years ago. It was certainly before covid because it was within the appeals system. There was some media discussion of the idea that they were given vouchers. I remember it appearing in one of the newspapers.

Q114 **Chair:** Thank you. Is there any quantifiable evidence—and I completely get the case that you are making—that better legal representation more widely across the asylum system would enable faster, correct decisions first time? I think you said that 70% of the cases that you saw could have been presented better the first time. Is that quantifiable?

**Kathryn Cronin:** It has not been quantified, unfortunately. I can talk of it through my experience because I have been through the system over such a period of time. You now get so many more of these cases that are meritorious cases that are having to be litigated through judicial review just prior to removal litigation. That is expensive. You are in the High Court, you have an unsatisfactory form of litigation because it sends the case back in many instances. It is a poor way to analyse your cohort of cases and how you should be structuring your appeal system.

Years ago, I was appointed to Australia's Standing Committee on Migration, and I advised them on all of the changes that they made to their immigration system in the late 1980s, including bringing in provisions that are now part of this upcoming Bill. We had a number of



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

senior immigration officers come to that tribunal, and one of the key experts was a Canadian who said that they had transformed their system by saying to their staff, “If, when you read a case, you think you are going to have to say yes, say it now and not at the end of the process.”

**Chair:** Thank you. We have to move on. Can I bring in Anum Qaisar, please?

Q115 **Anum Qaisar:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, everyone, for joining us today. Roxana and Annie, I just want to start off by saying that you are speaking so powerfully and we are so thankful for your contributions today. You have spoken about feeling like a “third-class citizen” and that the system is “shrouded in mystery”. In your own words, can you please describe how long the Home Office’s decision-making process took, and also how that made you feel, how that affected you mentally and physically while you were waiting for that outcome? Roxana, can we start with you?

**Roxana:** Thank you again for giving me an opportunity. I will start with a little bit of background. As I said earlier, I have been in the system for quite a long time—more than five years now. The decision I received at the beginning was slow, it was late and it went against my case. When the actual interview happened, I literally had only 10 days to prepare myself. I was living in Bradford at that time and my solicitor was in London, so I did not get a chance to speak to my solicitor face to face or to review my old papers. After three years of claiming asylum, I had to be prepared within a couple of days without my previous papers, do the actual interview and receive the decision within the next few weeks. It is completely unjustifiable.

On the culture of disbelief, I would say that in my experience women in politics still face a really big stigma, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so it is really hard to make the Home Office understand and believe that if people are active in politics, that can go against them, and they can become victims of politics in an abusive system in different countries.

My suggestion would be that the Home Office should judge cases according to their history and their clients’ history and rely on the evidence rather than age-old country policy guidance. Those country policies are not justifiable. Maybe someone did research 10 years back, but judges still rely on that country guidance.

Getting back to how it is affecting me, when I was up north I had heard that the rejection rate was very high there because most of the asylum accommodation was up north at that time. The judges got more cases so they had less time to determine the cases and maybe they just did screening on the cases and gave their decisions on the basis of the evidence they had, rather than have a thorough understanding and insight of the case.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Getting back to how it affected me, I would say that at one point it demolished my self-confidence. As I said, from being a really active person, someone who was studying and working at the same time, I became a person who is much less capable of moving around in this country with freedom. The Government has a policy just to make us wait in limbo rather than using this time to contribute something to society. I started computing, and now I am doing engineering from the beginning. I can say there are many, many professionals here who have a lot more experience in the healthcare sector and in other highly qualified professional sectors as well, but all they are doing is living on £5 a day and they are not able to use their skills. That is really frustrating.

I have listened to many people like me talk about how that affected their mental stability and how it affected them physically as well. From my experience, I can say I have been hospitalised a few times because of stress-related problems. I was bleeding inside as well because of the traumas, the problems I was going through. We saw how, during the pandemic, when many professionals had to work from home—even though they had money because they used to get their salaries regularly—it still affected their mental stability because they were not able to go out.

The point is that the more the system delays cases and delays the process, it not only affects asylum seekers; it affects the economy as well. The Government is wasting money every week on these delays. They are spending more than £4 million every day just on accommodation for asylum seekers, which is a complete waste. Is there any other question for me?

**Q116 Anum Qaisar:** No, that is perfect. This is obviously very personal to you, so thank you very much for sharing that with us. Annie, can you give us a couple of words on how you feel the process has impacted you, please?

**Annie:** The process leaves you feeling institutionalised. You get depressed, you get lonely, you become helpless. If a man or a woman has no hope or has hope that is defiled and continues to be defiled, it is hard to bring them back. It is hard for you to keep me on a holding pattern for four years. After four years, if I am lucky enough—because it becomes luck—then you give me 28 or 29 days to assimilate into society. How do I do that?

Personally, I have a child. She is watching me. She wakes up in the morning. She goes to school. She leaves me in the house. She comes back in the evening. She finds me in the house. What am I teaching her? Who is she going to become? They learn by watching us. I am a mother. Sometimes when I wake up I ask myself, “Did I do the right thing? Did I do the right thing to protect her, to protect myself?” How do I feel? I feel broken. I feel broken. Yes, that is how I feel.

**Q117 Anum Qaisar:** Annie, that was incredibly powerful. I do not want to keep using that word but I cannot describe how thankful we are for you to



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

come and speak about something so personal to you. We have heard some really important testimonials on the decision-making process from Roxana and Annie. I am interested to know what steps the Government could take to expedite that process, because we are hearing words like “broken.”

**Priscilla Dudhia:** It is so hard to follow that testimony. There are several things that the Government could do to ensure that fairness is at the heart and that cases move quicker, which is absolutely what needs to happen. Obviously, first and foremost, we need to ensure that the system is properly resourced in terms of having enough caseworkers, skilled caseworkers and so on. Obviously, when we talk about delays, it is not just the delay in getting the initial decision, but also the appeals and the fresh claims, as Kathryn was saying, and for that we have to improve the accuracy at that initial stage. There are various things that can be done in that regard, but I do think that the view of Women for Refugee Women, based on everything we have seen since 2007—with a network of over 400 women—is that dismantling that culture of disbelief is absolutely key, and that that has to be supported by quality legal representation.

I totally support everything that Kathryn was saying, in that gender-based claims are inherently complex because of the trauma, because there is no gender ground, because a lot of the violence is in the private setting, so women first have difficulties in corroboration, and then there is that extra hurdle that you have to go through in showing that the state cannot protect you.

These are difficult claims for a variety of reasons. It is not just important to have a solicitor or a good lawyer, but often the women want a female lawyer and they want someone who understands not just the effects of trauma, how that affects disclosure, but also how that specific violence falls within the refugee convention, which is the real issue here, and how that triggers the UK’s obligation to grant asylum. We absolutely need an overhaul of the legal aid system.

Finally, I would like to add that when we talk about delays, it is really disappointing that some of the most vulnerable women are completely forgotten in that conversation. I am referring to women who have been refused, often unfairly refused, and they are being pushed into destitution. You know that once your appeal right is exhausted, your support and your housing is withdrawn generally 21 days after that, so we are aware. We did a big piece of research and I believe some of the women who I have the pleasure to work with today have brought copies of the report, if any members of the Committee would like to see it.

The Home Office does not collect statistics on the number of people who are pushed into destitution. We heard from 106 women—no small sample—and the findings of that research were just devastating, and I hope to share more with the Committee on that later. The point is that these women are pushed into homelessness, pushed into incredibly precarious, dangerous situations that not only are cruel and re-



traumatising, but that stop them moving forward. It keeps them trapped in this limbo.

Some 93% of the women we spoke to said that being destitute negatively affected their ability to think about their claim and to plan for a resolution that they were so desperate to do. We know that these women have legitimate claims. They fear a real risk of persecution. We know they have compelling stories and they have no intention of leaving because they fear persecution. What they are doing is just staying here. It is heartbreaking. They are staying here in this really dangerous situation, desperately hoping that one day a compassionate Home Office caseworker will listen to their story, will support them to share and get them the protection they so desperately need.

**Q118 Anum Qaisar:** Thank you for that, Priscilla. Pip, if I can just come to you. We have heard a lot about legal representation, and I am sure that members of the Committee will agree with me that when we get Home Office cases so often it is not just about speaking to the Home Office or the lawyers; we are actually trying to signpost our constituents to have an understanding of what to expect in interviews and if they need language interpreters. How widely available are these specialist services from non-lawyers to help people through the process?

**Pip McKnight:** The AIRE contracts, which are meant to prepare all asylum seekers for all stages of the asylum process, were given to Migrant Help. At the point where an asylum claim is put in, Migrant Help has the contract to ensure that all that information is given. What we have found is that sometimes that information is too much or too soon. The information about the interview process might be given two years before the interview actually takes place. It is also extremely general. Particularly as we are looking at the experiences of women, there is not so much of a gendered lens that is put on that information.

With Refugee Women Connect, we—together with a number of organisations across the UK—were part of a programme called Early Action, and the idea is that you are giving that information in a much more detailed way. We have created a programme that is much more gender-sensitive. It considers caring responsibilities. It considers reproductive health and access to maternity care. This is quite piecemeal and it depends on where you are. There is no statutory obligation or a statutory contract for NGOs to give this information.

What we have found is that it has made such a difference to women in preparing for that interview and actually knowing that you can ask for a female interpreter. Often, women do not know that they can ask for a female interpreter or that childcare will be provided because they often go there and they are scared because they do not know what is going to happen to their child, or they might have to describe horrific gender-based violence with their child there. They just do not have that preparation. We recommend that there is a system of using NGOs with



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

their specialisms, particularly when it comes to protected characteristics, to make sure that that information is being given.

Q119 **Anum Qaisar:** Migrant Watch has that UK perspective and your expertise is in Liverpool with Refugee Women Connect. Do you know of good practice up and down the country?

**Pip McKnight:** Early Action is up and down the country. It is a scheme that has been put together by Refugee Action. The first phase of that programme has reported really well and it can be adapted to different specialisms, for example LGBT issues or gender-specific, such as ours. That is a really good example of good practice that you might want to look at.

Q120 **Chair:** Can I just ask a follow-up question to Priscilla? What evidence or information do you have about country guidance being given through a gendered lens? For example, all of us in this room might understand that if you are a woman journalist or politician in perhaps Afghanistan, Iran—just two examples I have plucked out of thin air—you would have a very different experience from that of a male politician or journalist claiming asylum here. Could giving better country guidance expedite claims in those sorts of examples?

I know from my own constituents' experience that there is a massive backlog of people claiming asylum from Afghanistan—huge. To my mind, it would be very straightforward for the Home Office to auto-grant them because we are not going to send people back to Afghanistan, are we, and it would remove significant numbers from the backlog? Is there evidence that the country guidance is adequate and looking at things through a gendered lens?

**Priscilla Dudhia:** It is a really good question, and it is difficult to answer in a way, because obviously I do not know exactly what the country policy and information team relies on, how detailed it is, or how often it is updated and reviewed. What I can say—and I am sorry to keep on repeating this—is that the culture of disbelief is a huge impediment here in that what we have seen from women's claims over the years is caseworkers in their refusal letters selectively using country guidance to justify the refusal even when there is compelling evidence to the contrary to support the woman.

I will give a classic example and call her Fiona to protect her identity. Fiona was refused. She was a survivor of extreme sexual violence. She had fled on the basis of her sexual orientation. The Home Office said, "Oh, we have found some evidence that a gay man can safely relocate, so we think you can too," which completely disregarded the information that was out there that showed the risks that a lone woman in her country of origin would face, including the risk of further violence and abuse. The short answer is: yes, it is always great to have the policy guidance, it is really important to review it, but it is not going to make a meaningful difference until the culture changes.



**Chair:** Thank you for that. Can I just ask our professional witnesses to make their answers as succinct as possible, please? I am very conscious that I want to make sure Annie and Roxana have enough time to give their stories. Thank you. Kim.

Q121 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Chair, and I welcome our panellists. I wanted to say a special thank you to both Annie and Roxana for being very brave in supplying us with your personal testimonies and your personal experiences. You have been very brave, so thank you.

Priscilla, you have already mentioned how you believe that the pernicious Nationality and Borders Bill is going to have an impact on women. Given that a fifth of applicants for asylum in the UK last year were women, but globally women make up more than 50% of displaced people, can you tell us what are the key barriers for women and girls entering the UK process for claiming asylum?

**Priscilla Dudhia:** From what we have heard from women in our network, a lot of them will sometimes not even know—as has already been mentioned by Annie, I think—that they can claim asylum even on the basis of their gender-based persecution. Trauma, obviously, is a massive barrier. Also, these women, aside from suffering the most intimate and horrific forms of violence, do come from patriarchal societies where there is a social silencing of women and they will not always know what their rights are. It is not normal to talk openly about your experiences and those can be significant barriers.

**Pip McKnight:** When we speak about the culture of disbelief, it should be assumed that displacement is inherently traumatic. It should be assumed that where there is displacement there will be trauma. Trauma also impacts your memory; it impacts your ability to consistently give evidence. Once you get to a place of safety, it can take a really long time to be ready to give that testimony and it can take psychological support and the conditions have to be right for that. Not having a trauma-informed approach in the asylum system and having the opposite of that, having this “culture of disbelief” is the biggest barrier.

I would also say that a huge barrier to women and girls in the asylum system is this practice of husbands being the lead applicant on asylum claims. It means that the women are basically subordinates. They are treated like children and their evidence will not be heard. They may have a better claim to asylum than the husbands, but the claim will not be discussed with them. Their evidence will not be taken, and that can increase the risk of violent dependency where it is difficult to leave a husband in cases of domestic abuse.

Q122 **Kim Johnson:** Annie, we have mentioned gender-sensitive policies and the availability of childcare, and I just want to know whether you were aware of any of that support at the time and were you offered any of that support? You mentioned that you were interviewed by a man. Did you know that you could be interviewed by a woman, and that you could have



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

childcare and other support, to put you in a better position for the substantive interview?

**Annie:** When I put in my claim for asylum, I was asked, "Would you want a male or a female interviewer?" and knowing where I was coming from, I knew I did not want to relive that scenario with a man. On the day of my initial interview, I got a dishevelled young man, maybe he was 28, maybe 26, who showed up late—the interview was for 8 am and he came at 9.30 am, so I was sitting there. He was so callous about it. To me this was a defining moment, and he made me feel it too. Even before I left, I knew that I was not going to get it because he said something to me along the lines of, "Could you have run off earlier? Why did it take you so long?" I already knew he did not believe me. Not only did he not believe me, but he even vocalised it.

Somebody talked about the quality of representation that you get when you are putting in your paperwork. Honestly, my experience is that person was actually an administrative person. What they did was fill out a form for me and sit down and ask me to relate and write a story and tell me, "Okay, I will put this in for you, and we will get back to you." I never heard anything from them after that until two days before the interview date, when they said, "Oh, you have an interview and you should come in and we'll go through this." I went in and they said, "Well, you should be okay tomorrow. Show up on time," and that was that. Really that person was admin. I did not know how the system works. I was not prepared. I was not ready. Also, since I did not have other people around me who could feed in and maybe tell me what would happen next in the process, I was clueless. I just walked in and I had this conversation with somebody who felt important, and he showed me he was important.

Q123 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you very much for sharing that, Annie. Roxana, do you have any similar experience of not being able to access gender-sensitive policies and support?

**Annie:** Yes, absolutely. As I said, when I was in the screening interview, I did not have any choice between a male and female interviewer, so there was a male and a female. The experience I received from the female interviewer made me so scared and when the interview happened, I literally refused to have any female interviewer as she was very insensitive.

I could not rely on my information to her, because after the interview I literally had evidence that she was ruminating about me because she is from the same community. I feel there was a lack of training and guidance towards them, with very minimal education. I am not only pinpointing the education; it is training as well. Someone can become an interpreter. That person literally has no idea or any knowledge of how to acknowledge someone who has been through that much trauma and discrimination.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

About sensitivities, I would like to introduce some ideas on how it is. I came to this country with dreams of colours of the garden. Over time I forgot how to dream, how to chase opportunities. After 10 years, I even find it difficult to remember my parents' faces sometimes. I was not there at my only brother's school graduations and many more parties. I wasted my teenage life in this country, my golden time. I do not have many friends now. I feel lonely. I feel desperate to go out and have fresh air sometimes when it becomes very hard to just breathe in and swallow all this information and keep it in. Obviously, I have to relive the memories every single day because I have to remember them to present in the court.

Coming from that experience and with that background, when we go to the court, especially me, I did not have any legal representative when I have been there. In Newcastle, up north, I could not find a solicitor. The only remark I received from my caseworker was that, "Your case doesn't have any merit, so what's the point of getting a solicitor?" How insensitive that was. When I was in the court I was trying my best to deliver what I was capable of, to represent my case at that time. The way I was treated by the representative from the Home Office was horrendous. He was literally calling me a liar. It felt as if he was calling me names in front of the judge.

It was very personal. When I was sharing the experiences about how I have been manipulated, abused and exploited by the system, even by relatives who tried to keep me as a household help, I was literally asked why I did not get help from there, why I did not seek asylum before and stuff. It was very difficult to make them understand, "Look, even my passport wasn't safe with the people I was living with at that time."

When I came here, I came with hope; I believed them. I was a teenager so I did not have much experience of life. Over the period of time when I understood, when I went through so much and I was at the court I felt like I was being persecuted because of the system, because of my bad luck and because of the mistakes of my solicitor, literally. It has to be very sensitive when it comes to questioning someone in our position.

Q124 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Roxana. I think that picks up on the point that Priscilla made about the lack of trauma-informed investigations. Thank you both for sharing those experiences. Maybe the people who voted for the Bill yesterday should have listened to that in advance. My next question is to Kathryn. We have heard that the heavy reliance on a single substantive interview is particularly problematic for women making gender-based claims. Can you give some examples from your work, please?

**Kathryn Cronin:** There are just so many, in part because—as you have heard from the speakers this afternoon—the understanding that people need is an understanding as to what the issues are. "What are they interested in, in finding me to be a refugee?" That is a legal definition.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

You have to break it down and take a client through the features of it so that they understand the nature of the questions.

There is also, as everyone has said, trauma and the delay with that. The examples of trauma are so extreme. I have had clients who are so disfigured by abuse they have suffered, and it takes some significant time for them to be able to speak about what has happened to them. They need a protective set of arrangements for that disclosure. I always arrange for the interview to be done by a psychologist and not by a lawyer, because it needs someone who has an understanding of trauma and how to elicit information from a person who is traumatised.

There is also the other feature, which no doubt will come up later in questions, and it is incredibly important: the number of women here who are trafficked and who are still under the control of traffickers. Again, I would say, from my experience, it is very common to find that a client is still being controlled by the trafficker in one form or another. Sometimes they are married to them and you have to set up particular arrangements to have their story elicited from them because they are still very frightened of telling it.

All of these features are there in the system, and I must say that the idea of the Bill going through with all of its presumptions, which are essentially negative credibility presumptions, is just so worrying because it will exacerbate this situation so much that I just cannot imagine the sort of refugee system that you will have after it comes into force.

Q125 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Kathryn. Finally, Pip, how could the evidence-gathering process be improved to better understand women's gender-based asylum claims? As briefly as you possibly can, sorry.

**Pip McKnight:** I would really recommend, particularly when you have cases of gender-based violence, a system similar to the EDVA, an independent advocacy system where, when there is known or suspected gender-based violence, there is an advocate who could not be a trafficker, who could not be anyone but a specialist advocate, but also a specialist team within the Home Office. If you had a gender-informed team that dealt with cases where there were suspected or disclosed gender-based traumas, then it could make that so much better for the women. It could make the system so much smoother as well because if you have a five-hour interview where somebody can be extremely distressed, how can you take good evidence from them? It is just impossible. I would recommend specialist teams and independent advocacy.

Q126 **Kim Johnson:** Priscilla, do you have anything else that you would like to add?

**Priscilla Dudhia:** The only other thing that I would add is just the need for women to have mental health support. So many women who need support do not have that when they start the journey towards



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

regularising their status and sharing what are incredibly painful things to talk about, so mental health support from the outset is something we would absolutely support as well.

Q127 **Kim Johnson:** Kathryn, did you have anything else that you would like to add to that question?

**Kathryn Cronin:** The only other thing that I would mention, the other categorisation that is problematic is the dependent claims: the wife whose claim is put forward by a husband, but also the children whose claims are put forward by parents. In both of those situations, the Home Office has a system where they are essentially silenced. In their guidance they have reasonable arrangements for them to put in a fresh claim at any stage, but none the less so many parts of their claims are lost. A very good case for the Committee to have a look at is a case called "A (a Child)". It is an FGM case—2020 EWHC 323. In that case it is a little girl whose claim was FGM, her mother was the appellant and gave evidence in her claim, and she was considered to lack credibility, so the claim of both the mother and the daughter were rejected. The local authority initiated a family court case seeking a family court protection order. In those family proceedings the mother had an advocate assistant, so that she was assisted to give her evidence, and the judge commented on how disabled she was in narrating the story. But the child had a children's guardian, and the judge ended up by saying of that case that it was one of the strongest and clearest cases of FGM risk—that up until that family court intervention, both mother and daughter would have been sent back home.

Q128 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Kathryn. Roxana or Annie, do you want to add anything on the evidence-gathering process?

**Roxana:** Yes, about the evidence-gathering process. I just really do not know how to put them in words in three lines, because obviously it is a very lengthy process. Within the process there are so many different stages—it is very difficult to keep it consistent. I would suggest the Home Office be a little bit kinder and compassionate about the cases and about the females especially, who have been through so much. Then when they are judging, there are some people who are crossing the channel, sometimes they lose their precious life, the children there. I saw one lady, she lost all the family members on the journey, she does not know if they are alive or not, and the trauma she had to go through, she just literally became silent. How could the Home Office expect from her to be very detailed about the experiences, about the trauma?

There could be some gaps in between the links, there could be some lack of evidence. But, as Priscilla suggested, there should be a psychologist who has the better understanding of the human mind and how it works, so that they can give testimony on that, that the person is telling the truth or not, rather than testifying or giving judgment just on the basis of some written forms or something you are hearing from someone who may be literally insane, or not in actual mind to talk about it. Thank you.



**Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Roxana.

**Annie:** With time I am learning about trauma, and in trauma you tend to compartmentalise so that you keep moving. When somebody says to you on demand, “Give your story, give me evidence”, how do you give that evidence, half of which you cannot remember? The half that you can remember, probably they want you to have, if you walked into a police station or whatever it is that you did. In asking me that when I am leaving, when I am running away, I am not gathering evidence; I am looking for safety. I am not even thinking “How many, did I carry all the dresses I need?” I am not thinking about the clothes I will wear tomorrow, I am thinking, “How do I get to safety?”

Again, they need to go back to the culture, they need to go to getting re-educated as to the people they are dealing with. Not everybody has the capacity, just like the way we have doctors who are surgeons, doctors who are this and doctors who are that, not everybody has the capacity to be able to get all the information from you. Probably you will give information, but you will have gaps. But the way they translate gaps is that you are lying, perhaps because that training is not there it makes it difficult. Maybe they have, I do not know. I can only say that I feel like there was no training, from my experience. But if there is training at all, then that person should have the capacity to understand that they may not get everything in one go from you, but also to ask you for some of this evidence—it is not going to be forthcoming because where do you get it? It is not like you had a preview of what they were going to ask you and you gathered a folder that this is what I am going to hand over to the Home Office. You are looking for safety.

It is that culture of disbelief that maybe they need to change. I think it is on paper that the service is supposed to be sensitive to the service users, but in practice it is not, so there is a gap between what they say is. On paper it looks beautiful, it says, “You can ask for this person, you can ask for that”, or they can ask you, “Do you want a man or a female?” but in practice it is not there—it is a tick box.

Maybe we need to go back and see what it is that they are doing, and how they are doing it. At what point do you, as a person who is interviewing say, “Oh, this is not my docket, I think this is somebody else’s.” I think it is looking at it and having people who have lived experience to also be able to do what we are doing, speak into the systems that they are going through, so that people are not looking at it without thinking of a person-centred system. It is a Home Office system, it is not person-centred. By person-centred, it is the 26 women who we did this report with, who went through this system and felt a certain kind of way; they were left feeling vulnerable or that they were not heard, and they wished it were different.

Somebody said, “It is the culture change”—there is a culture of disbelief and that needs to change. There is that turnover, and maybe that is why



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

there is no consistency in the service, because maybe you are there for two months, and by the time this new training is not there but you are put on the forefront, because things need to move. But it is better not to have that interview than to have an interview that is substandard, which is detrimental to you in the long term. But that might make it three years, and then you have to claim again, in a fresh claim, and relive that trauma of again going for another interview, that is speaking of the same.

Yes, there is change that needs to be done. But I hope that with consultation with people who have lived experience, they will bring that other perspective of what is really on the ground. It is not just what you are thinking is good, but is it practical?

**Kim Johnson:** Thank you so much, Annie and Roxana, for your very powerful testimonies this afternoon. Thank you, Chair. Those are all my questions.

Q129 **Chair:** Pip, can I just ask you a follow-up question about the difference that specialist services can make to women like Annie and Roxana in helping that evidence come out, and what their availability is like?

**Pip McKnight:** As I said before, it is really the luck of the draw. It depends on whether you have been referred, or whether you have been lucky enough to come across a gender-specific service, such as Women for Refugee Women and Refugee Women Connect, who have that expertise. Gender issues are not mainstream in the asylum system, and in fact we hear a lot, especially through the debates about the Nationality and Borders Bill, that it is young men who are coming to this country, and it is just not the case. It is women, women with children, families and it is about equal in terms of gender, but the male experience of that is skewed.

In answer to your question, it just is the luck of the draw really—where you land, who you are referred to. It is often word of mouth, so it often may be Migrant Help who might say that there is this person and that person through the AIRE contract, but some people are missed. We would really recommend that those kinds of specialist streams are looked at. Because especially if you look at LGBT asylum seekers coming through, they have a very specific set of issues, and their evidence that they need to give is that there is a kind of assumed heterosexuality, where you have to kind of prove your relationships and previous sexuality. It is really difficult to do, and is completely mortifying for a lot of people. I know we are not talking about LGBT today, but if you come from a place where that is forbidden, how do you even get to where you can talk about that, or feel safe to talk about that? Having those streams are really important.

Q130 **Jackie Doyle Price:** I would like to ask some questions now about housing and accommodation and dispersal. Perhaps if I could start with you, Annie, what was your experience of accommodation when you



came?

**Annie:** Sorry, I just smiled because—I finally smiled [*Laughter.*]

**Jackie Doyle Price:** I can see this is going to be a really good story.

**Annie:** I do not even know why I am smiling, because I have gone through the different stages, and now I am in dispersant accommodation. But I have been in a room with two bunk beds, me and my daughter and some strangers. I have been on a floor in an office, I have been in a house that when you open the door, somebody said it smelled like feet. I have been in a house where we could not use the toilet—my daughter could not go to the toilet because it was just so bad. I have been in a house that had the ceiling literally falling in the kitchen, because my bathtub was on top and it was leaking, and they said, “It’s going to be another 30 days.” I have been in a house where the manager has a key to the house and can knock on the door, and if I do not open in two minutes, you will meet him in the hallway. I have been in a house that had camping chairs—that was what was provided—that you would sit on and it two days they would start warping, because they were camping chairs, and if you are a little bit heavy they would start falling apart. But mostly it is working in a house that is fully carpeted and you are handed a broom, and when you ask about, “How do I clean the house?” you are told, “You use the broom and a mop”. When you ask about a vacuum cleaner you are told, “We don’t give vacuum cleaners because people go with them,” and you say, “Go with them where? They are for cleaning. Lend me the vacuum cleaner, I will clean today and then you pick it up later?” “No, we cannot do that.” Like I said, I have been in a room with bunk beds with strangers, with a child.

The women we talked to have talked of houses where they were with children, and they also had people who did not have children, and it was really difficult for them to co-exist in the kitchens and the bathrooms. Because you have children, and somebody is saying “The Children are making noise.” It is just sensitivity to how you are housed. But also, some people have spoken about being in really bad neighbourhoods where next door there is a drug dealer. You have children, and you are wondering if they are going to groom your children to become runners for them.

Also, the interesting thing about accommodation is that you get what you get, you get moved where you get moved, you can be given an hour to move, and you will be wherever it is going to be. Housing is what makes you feel safe and makes you breathe a sigh of relief.

Q131 **Jackie Doyle Price:** To be fair, that extends to everyone actually, and lots of people have housing conditions which leave a lot to be desired. Roxana, could you share your perspectives about housing and accommodation?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Roxana:** I beg your pardon, because from the beginning when Annie started talking, I cannot stop smiling, because from my experience it varied. It is very undignified—my experience of living in different accommodation. It evolved from sharing floors to a proper room now. It took ten years and in that time I was moved nearly 20 times. When I claimed asylum I applied for accommodation as well, and just because the person who was interrogating me—it was a proper interrogation—she was literally barking at me, asking, “Do you have shelter for tonight?” When I said yes, she just denied my right to claim accommodation. Even though I was by law able to claim that accommodation, she was denying me because I had someone who would give me shelter for one night. Imagine what would have happened after that night.

Since then I did not have any accommodation from there to move on to the covid period. The system has been a bit more sympathetic because everyone had to be in isolation, so there was a system introduced by Government to put us in different accommodations. When I applied through Red Cross and Refugee Action, finally they allowed me an accommodation. But the day the driver came to collect my baggage and me, on this particular day and time I came to know that I am not getting proper accommodation, I am being accommodated in a hotel—imagine how uncertain it was. I had to live there for one and a half months in a mixed accommodation, where obviously I was not sharing a room with a man, but there were various different people living in one accommodation who had no regard for women. One day someone knocked on my door and literally was calling me names because he was high on drugs and alcohol. I just got up from the bed, I was not in very good physical condition, I dropped on the floor—I did not faint, I just became blurred for a couple of minutes—I hurt my head and my hip, and the police came. From there they have given me another accommodation to a hostel, but it was within a couple of hours’ notice. I had fever, but they told me on Friday night, at 11th hour, that I am going to be dispersed on Saturday in the morning. All the offices and Migrant Help, everything is closed, so I did not have any chance to go and seek help, and say that I was not in a condition to pack everything and move overnight, but I had to do it. In the morning I was dispersed to that hostel. Would you believe me, in one single building I had to move seven times? The remarks I have heard from the people who work there, “These people, they are getting everything,” mentioning us basically, “They’re getting everything, they are getting free accommodation, they are getting money for food, they are living in luxuries,” which is very untrue.

Just whenever they had a customer or a client who needed to rent a room, I had to be removed from the flat to a different one, just because the authority of the hostel believed that the person who is paying for the flat is more worthy of that room. But one day I had to voice that: “Look, I am not getting that room for free. No matter if I am paying for it or the Home Office is paying for it, someone is paying you the rent, that is why I’m in this accommodation.” That is how very disrespectful it is to live in an accommodation like this.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Then, to give a few more examples, when I was removed from that accommodation to a proper house, again the dispersal came and I was given notice to move to outside of London, which was one time in Bristol, maybe one time in a different area, I do not remember. My daughter is here, you know a house, an accommodation is a place of comfort, so when we live in one area we have our solicitor, our doctor and our caseworkers there, and mental health supporters for me. When we moved, what happened to me when I had to move to Newcastle? I had no one there, I was feeling lonely, my mental health condition was deteriorating over time, I had to face the cold by myself. When they were moving me this time to a different place I just denied it, because I was taking medication and healthcare assistance from the doctors.

The third time when the decision came I was hospitalised, and literally I received the dispersal notice in the hospital. I had to take the decision then and there and get an early discharge from the hospital as well, to take this accommodation. The day I was moving out a minibus came but the lady who was driving the car literally denied to take other luggage because I had to do it in a hurry, and I was tired as well. I did not have any energy to repack everything in two bags, I had one or two bags extra. But even though the car was empty, she did not let me take my baggage—I had to request the people in the hostel to keep them for me, and I had to go another day to collect them. We are not given any extra money when we are in permanent accommodation. Imagine, I have to buy sanitary products, pay for food, some medication and vitamins, and at the same time I have to even do a taxi—that is how harsh the environment is.

One incident I have to mention. The first hotel I was living in, someone realised it who supported the BML or something like that—I do not remember the abbreviation, but they are the left wing who do not support asylum seekers. They literally came and started interviewing people, so they saw coloured people there, basically. You have to pardon my language but I do not know how to explain it another way. So when they saw many brown people, from Africa and Asia, they literally started following the people asking them questions, filming for YouTube. You can find the evidence on YouTube, if you go and search for what happened in the Bell Hotel in Essex, you will know what really happened there. Imagine those people, they just came to a country, they do not have any idea how the environment is going to be, and they are facing these difficulties and this inhuman attitude towards them. Basically they started, they do not even know proper English and how to explain and how to deny to talk, they do not even have that type of idea. They were chasing them, interviewing.

Suddenly one day, two parties started protesting in front of the hotel—one from the left wing, one from the right. One was saying “Let them live”, the other was saying, “Get them out,” which even provoked the neighbourhood to talk against it, to go against the asylum system and asylum seekers. That is the harsh truth of accommodation.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

When we live in accommodation on a no-choice basis, we have been denied multiple times just to know where the accommodation is. Are we prisoners? Are we going to detention centres? What are we? Are we jailbirds that we do not even have the right to know where we are heading to? We are completely blindfolded. We find a house, we find a room. No matter if you can live in this house, if it is mouldy, if the bath works. In my house the bath still does not work properly, it takes half an hour to add just the water and the water does not go properly, because it was not meant to be a shower. That is how it is. We live with people who have got children, and there are single women like me who were studying and were working in Red Cross or maybe in other organisations alongside their asylum cases. The people who have got children, I am very sorry to say, but whenever we raise an issue, we are always being told that they have more rights over you because they have children. At that time I feel like okay, maybe my mother was right when she used to remind me how ladies or girls should be getting married at an earlier stage of their life and having children. Now I think that in my culture that is a very good practice, to get married and have babies so you can have more rights over other people. That is how it is.

**Chair:** Thank you very much for that, Roxana. I think Jackie has to leave us.

**Jackie Doyle Price:** Apologies, I have to leave, but thank you for your evidence.

Q132 **Chair:** Pip, can I just turn to you, if you were going to write an accommodation policy specifically for women, how would you do it? Should there be a different one for women and for men?

**Pip McKnight:** Particularly single women, women who are not coupled or single women with children living in accommodation, particularly initial accommodation and contingency accommodation with many men, can be an extremely daunting and scary experience. We have had reports of women facing sexual harassment in mixed-sex accommodation, broken locks on toilets and men just walking in, being harassed by male staff unfortunately. Often these male staff in initial accommodation have come from a security background, so they do not really have that sort of sensitivity of realising that this is somebody's home. I know we have a case of a woman who was put in contingency accommodation during the pandemic, and she was one woman in a hotel of 80 men, and she just did not leave her room.

Q133 **Chair:** Can I ask specifically what you would do?

**Pip McKnight:** Sorry. So what we need is the option of having single-gender accommodation, and we need well-trained female staff. But we also need to be careful about how often we disperse people. Roxana was talking about when she was dispersed to Newcastle, when she went far away from all of her social networks, and those are really important, especially for single women, who are extremely vulnerable within that



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

system. Those social networks and those services that they access and the healthcare they receive are really important in keeping them safe from exploitation, being able to continue to access the services they need. Minimising dispersal, single-sex accommodations as an option and better trained female staff.

Q134 **Chair:** Should there be a differential between single women like Roxana and mothers?

**Pip McKnight:** There should be a choice really, if you are with your husband or your partner there is an extra level of security unfortunately, it should not be that way but for single women it can be an extremely scary system to navigate. But people should be given the choice really—why are they not given the choices? Especially as they are coming to this country with a whole host of different experiences, maybe of violence, and with different needs. Some might be fine with it, but others would find it really difficult and problematic.

Q135 **Chair:** We just heard from Roxana that she did not know what her status was in that accommodation—if she was a prisoner or free to come and go. From your experience, how much information is given to people in dispersed accommodation about what their rights are?

**Pip McKnight:** Not an awful lot, so the information they get through the AIRE contract is pretty basic, and that happens right at the very beginning. Often when you come to initial accommodation, you put in an asylum claim, your head is spinning, you are in a safe place possibly for the first time after a very long journey, and there is a lot of information to take in. But there should be a system of checking in, of making sure that this is not just a bunch of information that is given at the beginning but a safeguarding check-in—“Let us review your case and where you are at.”

Again, as Roxana mentioned, it is really strange and like a prison sentence, but it is different from being a prisoner, because usually you would know the end point of that sentence, you would know when this is going to finish. Women just languish in the asylum system for year after year after year, with no idea when their interviews are going to be, when their claims are going to be heard, and what is going to happen. They are not able to move out of that position, they are held in this stasis where you are living in poverty—it is 50% of mainstream benefits, £5 a day, so there is not a lot you can really do with that. You are more vulnerable to exploitation and sexual harassment in this accommodation, and you just have no idea. You are not able to work to take yourself out of that situation, which is the difference between asylum-seeking populations and the rest of—

Q136 **Chair:** Thank you. Priscilla, we have heard from Roxana about the financial struggles and how an additional issue, such as needing to go back to pick up your possessions in a taxi, can completely cripple you. What are your thoughts on what the level of asylum support should be?



**Priscilla Dudhia:** Certainly, what asylum-seeking people are receiving at the moment is grossly inadequate. There needs to be a meaningful uplift in terms of the sorts of things that need to be taken into consideration— inflation, the rising cost of goods and, as we have heard, the specific needs of asylum-seeking people, and of asylum-seeking women too. We have done research in the past on the extent of period poverty amongst women, and just how difficult it is to afford period products and pads and tampons on this extremely small amount, and it is incredibly shameful and just really undignifying for these women, who often have to choose between food and pads when they are menstruating. Those sorts of specific needs do need to be considered. Campaigners have called in the past, and are still calling, for the level of asylum support to be set at at least 70% of mainstream benefits, and certainly Women for Refugee Women would welcome that change.

But I would say that there should be other options on the table too, so there was not always a NASS system, and previously asylum-seeking people were able to turn to mainstream benefits. There is definitely a question there about the extent to which having a separate, less financially generous system for asylum-seeking people actively perpetuates the harmful narratives that exist—narratives about asylum-seeking people not being entirely human, having different needs, being strangers, being burdens. I am not in a position to say that the solution is to get rid of NASS, but it is certainly something that should be explored if we are thinking about how to address this culture and the hostile environment that we have heard about today.

Q137 **Chair:** Thank you. Just going back very quickly to Pip—I am conscious we are running out of time—we heard from Roxana that she was moved to Newcastle, well away from where she was registered with a doctor. How should healthcare support be facilitated? What improvements would you like to see? Because obviously, if you are registered with a doctor in London—I am assuming, apologies—and you get moved to Newcastle, that adds a layer of challenge.

**Pip McKnight:** There is a real disconnect between the healthcare system and the asylum system, a lot of which is just a lack of understanding of the particular practical challenges that women in the asylum system face. In the health system you would assume a certain level of resource, so you would assume that there may be access to wi-fi, that somebody would have a smartphone or that someone would have the money to get a bus to an appointment.

Maternity care is a really interesting case study for this because with maternity care, if you have a straightforward pregnancy, then that is great. But if you have gestational diabetes and need to have scans twice a week, you have £5 to live on and you are having to choose between taking the bus or eating that day. The NHS guidelines just really do not go far enough in understanding what those challenges are and what those barriers to care are.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

We need much better training across statutory services, and it extends to social services as well, because a lot of those challenges are very practical in nature, and with better understanding of that lived experience, it could be much smoother.

It is really a paradox that asylum seekers who come to the UK are often the strongest in their societies, or the ones who are able to move. In Ukraine we are seeing older people and the infirm being left behind, and it is young women and their children who are moving. You get to the UK—and this is the healthy immigrant paradox—and your health is equivalent or better than the home population, and you have full access to the NHS as well so there is no reason why your health should deteriorate, but it just falls off a cliff as soon as they get here.

**Chair:** Thank you. Can I bring in Bell Ribeiro-Addy, please?

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Thank you to the panel, in particular Roxana and Annie. Having to relive your trauma is very difficult, I can understand, but it is so important that you are here speaking up for so many women, so thank you very much for that. I know that we have already heard and had evidence previously about the Home Office's lack of sensitivity when it comes to trauma. Priscilla and Pip, obviously we agree that Home Office officials need improved guidance and training, but are there any more fundamental reforms that they need beyond that?

**Priscilla Dudhia:** There needs to be a willingness to look at the harsher edges of the system. If we are absolutely committed to tackling violence against women and girls, and we know from the policy guidance that ensuring that asylum-seeking women do get the protection they need is a part of that commitment, apparently, do we therefore need to look at the policies of enforced destitution and detention? I am conscious of time, but if I can just quickly share some of the harrowing findings that have been revealed through our research?

With no support and no housing, these women are basically made street homeless—around half of them had slept on the streets at some point. Then the rest of the time, in order to avoid street homelessness, they were sofa surfing with strangers in very precarious situations. About 25% ended up being raped or sexually abused whilst they were on the streets or at a place that they were staying. About 35% ended up in unwanted relationships that they were forced to have, that the women explicitly said to us, "If I could meet my basic needs, I would not have been in this"—it was a way to avoid being hungry and homeless. Throughout the course of those relationships most of those women have suffered some form of abuse, including sexual abuse, and because of their insecure status these women were trapped, as there were very real barriers to reporting, and barriers to support. That policy needs to end. The justification for that is that it will push people whose claims have been refused out of the UK, but it does not work and we know that from our



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

research, it is cruel, re-traumatising and it delays women getting protection

Likewise with detention; it is incredibly re-traumatising. We have heard from women over however many years that we have been doing this work, that it reminds them of being sexually abused, it reminds them of coercive situations that they were trapped in. There is no time limit to detention, and that exacerbates mental health. We have heard of half of women being on suicide watch at some point, 40% of women being self-harmed. Again, as with destitution, what is the purpose? If removal is the purpose, then the policy is ineffective. We know that the vast majority of women are released into the community, so we need to be willing to look at this if we want the system to be better for women.

**Pip McKnight:** Can I just add that there are decent policies in the Home Office on dealing with domestic abuse, on gender considerations, and also on dispersal and pregnancy, for example. But what we are finding is that Home Office staff do not often know their own policies, so there is a real training issue. It is probably due to the high turnover of staff in the Home Office, but those policies are there; they are just not being followed.

Q138 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Annie and Roxana, a major issue with a lot of the policy around asylum is that the people who actually go through it are not consulted on it at all. I want to ask both of you in particular, what you think could be improved to make it safer for women and girls at risk of violence and abuse, how we could make the asylum process better for them?

**Roxana:** We have done some research through Red Cross, so from there we would like to suggest some ideas. Peer-to-peer support from other women going through similar experiences, where the women who have got lived experience in the asylum system can support other women who do not have that. I can guarantee that if I had that support from the beginning, my life would have been 50% better than now. I ended up having the information I needed at that point after eight years of living in this country. It took me 10 years to speak about all those experiences without having a meltdown, so yes, having support from others does help. Work with women to make the asylum process safer and fairer—women like us who have lived that life—because they could support and be involved in the process of making changes and introducing actual sensitivity and bring the policies into action.

I would like to give you some examples about safety, but first I would like to answer Pip's comment about the healthcare system when she said, "It's accessible anywhere." From my experience, when you move from one place to another, the joining time with a GP nowadays is six weeks. It takes six weeks, but even in the six weeks if you would like to go and see a doctor in a hospital, many times you can be denied to get access because of the covid situation. Because I have literally heard this from the healthcare practitioners, that people are dying, you are not dying and you do not have covid, so we have more priorities than you. Who do you



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

go to and turn up to? I have had arthritis since the age of 21. Whenever I go to the doctor, they are like "Oh, it's really unfortunate." One day I said, "Please, doctor, don't use this word 'unfortunate' in front of me. I know how unfortunate I have been in my life, so I just cannot bear that word," so that is part of that.

One more example is that last June I got shingles on my face. Again it is unfortunate, because nobody has shingles at my age—even the doctors were surprised, they did not know at first what it was. It took half of my face swollen, and it made me look so horrible that you would not believe that it was a human face, first of all. Thank God I have recovered from that. But when I was in the hospital, I heard that I could be blind, I can even die. I still have pain even after seven months, I have marks on the left side of my face. When I was at the hospital, sometimes I had to go in the evening or afternoon, wait five hours to see one doctor, and from there they would refer me to an eye specialist in a different hospital. The transport from one hospital to another hospital is free and by ambulance. But it happened three times that they dispersed me at 2, 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning.

One or two times they were being generous, they provided me the ambulance service, because the ambulance was passing through the road where my accommodation was, so they just gave me a lift. But the third time the lady at the reception started shouting at me. She was like, "Bring cash next time." I said, "Okay, you please go and tell the Home Office to give us that precious cash so that I can bring it. I did not make it myself and I am not looking pretty and happy in this condition." Literally, I could not eat, I had shingles even in the inside of my mouth, so I could not eat for over a week. Horrible pain, you cannot imagine how it was—swollen head and scalp, eyes popping out, lips shutting as they become so big.

At that point you cannot just be reminded of how you do not have access to money. You have a piece of plastic which you cannot use on the bus, you cannot take money out, you cannot use in the Post Office, you cannot book a taxi with it. Literally I had to beg one of my friends at 3 o'clock at night to book me a taxi. Trust me, I was feeling ashamed to death, because I knew I did not have any means to repay the money—I still did not repay.

The Post Office is the most frequent place we go to and use, because we always receive and send letters to the Home Office. As soon as we get something, sometimes we have to do fast-track deliveries, which is £7 to £8—where is the money coming from, honourable chamber? I really do not have an answer to those. To get access to the healthcare sector, it is obviously difficult when you are being moved so many times. I still have a dentist in north London, but I am living in east London right now.

About the accommodation: twice, one day police and another day people from court came to my accommodation. One day the police came and



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

started investigating early in the morning, saying that someone tried to deliver drugs to our house, and he was literally interrogating us, “Where are you from, where are your housemates from?” When they realised that one of my housemate is from Albania, eastern Europe, they took her name and other details, which is just completely against our human rights because we did not do any crime. We do not know who tried to deliver the drugs to the house and we do not want to be red-listed by the police when our case is still ongoing.

Another day a person from court came, and this house was mixed accommodation—guys and ladies lived together. One guy put CCTV camera in the bathroom, in the toilet, and he was selling the tapes to YouTube and other social media—how disgusting is that? One lady caught him red-handed, called the police, so this guy is not going to the police anymore, that is why they are coming to investigate us, and this is our daily lives.

Sometimes I am in a meeting with Red Cross, maybe I am in a big event, like I have worked with a few researchers and journalists, so maybe I am talking about very important points and trying to listen to something, and the manager is knocking the door. One or two knocks, and if he does not hear any reply, he will just open the door and come in. No matter how my situation is, if I have my hijab on, if I have my scarf on; it does not matter to them. I believe it is a complete violation of our privacy and human rights. I can—

Q139 **Chair:** Roxana, sorry to interrupt; it is only because we just have five minutes left and there are two more questions we wanted to get through. I just want to ask Annie if she had anything that she thought could improve the asylum process and make it safer for women who faced violence?

**Annie:** A more transparent system with clear feedback, so you are not interviewed today and told to go home, and if you do not hear, you do not know what to do. Even if you write to them, they might not get back to you, and tell you that you just have to wait, which contributes to mental issues. Updates on the processes, development of specialist services just to develop extra streams, and for them to hold the staff accountable. If they are giving them incentives to turn people down, then maybe they should be giving incentives to lawyers to get good cases going, instead of having lawyers who are just doing admin and passing it on, and so coming back again to be reviewed and appealed.

Maybe we need to figure out why there are such big numbers that are getting appealed? Is it because the people at the Home Office are not doing their job? Or is it the initial filing of the files is not done properly—that they are not complete files and there are a lot of gaps in them. If it is done better, does that mean that you get better information, that translates to you giving good and timely feedback? Yeah, those are the things that would help.



Q140 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Pip, you talked about asylum-seeking women being unable to access domestic abuse support, including refuges. Very quickly, is there any form of support for any woman seeking asylum, if they have experienced domestic abuse? Does any exist?

**Pip McKnight:** It does exist, so they are generally excluded from mainstream services, but there are Home Office protocols for domestic abuse, and that is to move women or the perpetrator away in cases of disclosure. But the issue that you find is that that access to specialist domestic abuse care is not always there.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** That is not there, okay.

**Pip McKnight:** Yeah, and they are at the mercy of the Home Office safeguarding systems, which often fall short of what is really needed. Again, you have this policy in the Home Office that is inherently dangerous, which is where women are listed under their husband's claim as the lead applicant.

Q141 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I want to follow up with Kathryn, very quickly. I think we have touched on this earlier, some of the consequences of categorising women and girls as dependants in the family asylum claims, rather than as claimants in their own right. Were there any that we missed when we touched on it earlier?

**Kathryn Cronin:** It is endemic through the system, and it works adversely. The working assumption is that the parent can present the case for the child, and that is not an assumption you should start with, and certainly not an assumption for a child who is able to speak themselves on behalf of their claim. We do have examples of young girls who do not want to disclose something that would put them at risk in their home country, but they do not want to disclose it to their parent. You cannot assume that they have an agreed understanding about what the risks are. What should happen—and it is a relatively simple reform—is to make all children into parties so that they are claimants in their own right. At least then, at the point of the appeal, they are in a position to get a lawyer, and no matter how old they are, a lawyer may be able to present a different and significant case on behalf of the child.

Q142 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Finally, and it will have to be a one-word answer, are there sufficient protections under the law for women who face abuse whilst they are going through the asylum process?

**Kathryn Cronin:** No, not at all, and it is endemic. As we have heard today, it is endemic in their accommodation. Trafficking victims are still very often under the control of traffickers, and also put in hostels where they are very susceptible to further abuse. You see it just replicating abuse all the way through the system.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Thank you very much, Kathryn, and thank you, panel.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Chair:** Thank you for that, and I am really sorry that we have a hard stop at 5 o'clock and cannot carry on. I am very conscious that we did not get to the section of questioning about the Nationality and Borders Bill. I hope all of our witnesses will not object to us following up in writing with the questions that we would have put to you. Thank you very much, that is hugely appreciated. Can I take this opportunity to thank in particular Roxana and Annie, for your incredibly powerful evidence this afternoon? It has been hugely helpful and enlightening, so thank you very much for coming along. I appreciate that it has not been easy for you, and we really do feel an enormous sense of gratitude that you were able to share that with us. With that, I must draw the meeting to a close.