



# Hear us

**The experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking women during the pandemic**

By the Sisters Not Strangers coalition:

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# Executive summary

Sisters Not Strangers, a coalition of eight organisations, surveyed over 100 asylum-seeking women from England and Wales to hear how they are surviving during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was completed by women seeking and refused asylum, as well as those with leave to remain. These responses were supplemented by a survey of 24 staff and volunteers who have been supporting asylum-seeking women since the outbreak.

The [government's review](#) found that Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) women are almost three times more likely to die from COVID-19, compared to white women. The intersection of gender, race and immigration status, coupled with the trauma of their past experiences, means that asylum-seeking women are among those BAME women most affected by the consequences of the outbreak.

With charities closed, women have been unable to access meals and small hardship payments that have become so crucial both for women within the asylum system, who live in poverty, and women refused asylum, who are so often left destitute. Three quarters of the women surveyed went

hungry, including mothers who struggled to feed their children.

A third of women were at high risk from coronavirus, reporting a serious health condition such as asthma, heart disease and diabetes. While the government emphasised social distancing, a fifth of women were homeless, relying on temporary arrangements with community members, and moving from one house to another. Self-isolation was impossible for the 21% of women who were forced to sleep in the same room as a non-family member. Frequent handwashing was a serious challenge for the 32% of women who struggled to afford soap and other hygiene products. A fifth of staff and volunteers had supported women who were trapped in unwanted or abusive relationships during the pandemic.

As women went hungry and struggled to secure safe housing, mental health inevitably deteriorated. Barriers to accessing NHS mental healthcare and a lack of IT equipment increased isolation, with a quarter of women saying that their mental health was "much worse than before".

Most of the women in our networks have fled gender-based violence, but their experiences of persecution are frequently disbelieved by the Home Office, whose practices have been shown to be racist. Women seeking asylum are further disadvantaged by sexism, with insufficient understanding of gender-based violence often shown by Home Office decision-makers. Shortages in legal representation and difficulties in disclosing traumatic experiences also jeopardise fair decision making. After refusal, many of these women are deprived of support but also of the agency to support themselves. Our findings show that refused asylum-seeking women are among the most vulnerable during the pandemic, going hungry, sharing rooms with strangers, and working illegally in exchange for shelter.

In exposing deep structural inequalities along existing fault-lines of gender, race, citizenship and class, the pandemic is testing our society. We cannot simply return to normal. We must seize this opportunity to build back better, and to create a society centred on solidarity and human dignity in which the lives of women seeking asylum, and women of colour, are fully valued.

# Key findings

Our findings are drawn from the experiences of 115 women who have claimed asylum, and who are currently living in England and Wales.

## Immigration status

- ▶ 47% of 113 women were seeking asylum.
- ▶ 38% had been refused asylum.
- ▶ 15% had some form of leave to remain.
- ▶ 35% of 112 women said they had a hearing on their asylum claim delayed or cancelled during the pandemic.

## Food

- ▶ 74% of 115 women were not able to get enough food during the pandemic.
- ▶ 47 women stated that they went hungry because they could not access their usual support from charities.
- ▶ Half of the 47 women with young families struggled to feed their children.
- ▶ 50 women said they were too scared to visit shops.

Three quarters of women were hungry during the pandemic

## Housing

- ▶ 16% of 115 women said they had moved from one house to another during the pandemic.
- ▶ 21% said they had slept in the same room as a non-family member/partner.
- ▶ 15% said they had slept in the same room as someone who was not their family member/partner and who had coronavirus or coronavirus symptoms.
- ▶ 21% of 113 women were homeless, staying with a community member or friend.
- ▶ Eight women said they were sleeping on the sofa or on the floor.
- ▶ Four women were in emergency accommodation provided by the local council.
- ▶ Two women were in emergency accommodation provided by the Home Office.
- ▶ One woman was sleeping outside.
- ▶ 14% of 111 women said they were forced into illegal work during the pandemic in exchange for shelter and other basics.

More than a fifth of women were homeless during the pandemic

## Mental health

- ▶ 82% of 101 women said their mental health had worsened during the pandemic:
- ▶ 59% stated that it was "worse than before".
- ▶ 23% stated that it was "much worse than before".
- ▶ 92% said they had felt lonely during the pandemic.
- ▶ 38% said they had "generally felt very alone".

## Health and hygiene

- ▶ 32% of 113 women struggled to access water, soap and cleaning products during the pandemic.
- ▶ 34% of 111 women said they had a serious health condition that could increase their risk of suffering a severe reaction to COVID-19.
- ▶ 13 women said they would not approach the NHS for treatment for this condition during the pandemic.
- ▶ 21 women said that they or a family member had COVID-19 symptoms and did not feel able to approach the NHS.

# Lo Lo's story

I came to the UK to seek safety, but instead I was forced into more exploitation. I spent many years homeless or being abused for work before getting any help.

This changed when I met a solicitor who explained to me about trafficking and asylum. She helped me to submit my asylum application based on the danger I face in my country, and the Home Office gave me accommodation. I hoped that this would be a new chapter in my life, but it was no better. The accommodation was filthy and overcrowded. There were cockroaches and rats everywhere and we didn't have any hot water.

**The accommodation was filthy and overcrowded. There were cockroaches and rats everywhere and we didn't have any hot water.**

I was in that accommodation for the start of this lockdown and I felt so unsafe there. I have serious health problems that mean it would be particularly dangerous for me to catch the virus. But it was impossible to self-isolate in that place. I was terrified because men kept coming into my room without permission, even while I was sleeping. I felt so stressed and my depression got worse.

I had been submitting complaints about the accommodation for months, but the Home Office wouldn't listen to me. In the end, I felt too afraid to be there so I left. For a week during lockdown, I slept on buses. I went from one side of London to the other, because it was free to travel on the bus then. I didn't have any money for hand sanitiser or a facemask but at least people were keeping their distance on the bus.

After a week, the local authority put me in a hotel which is being used for homeless people. The walls are mouldy and there are bed bugs. Because of my serious medical problems, I can't eat the food that they give us. For the first two weeks I had almost nothing to eat, until a charity gave me a supermarket voucher. Nothing is easy.

Now I am here it is hard for me to get to my medical appointments because the hotel is so far away from the hospital.

**Don't oppress me and take away my voice because I am a woman and because of my race. We are all the same. Listen to us, hear our voices!**

It feels for me as a woman that life is one big cycle of abuse. I would like the government to respect us, let us be safe and treat us with dignity as human beings. Don't oppress me and take away my voice because I am a woman and because of my race. We are all the same.

Listen to us, hear our voices!

# Recommendations

Women seeking asylum in the UK have faced unprecedented challenges during recent months. Their experiences show us why we need to build a more equal, caring and connected society as we move out of the pandemic.

**Our primary recommendation is for a grant of leave to remain to be given to all those with insecure immigration status, to ensure the safety of those seeking asylum, to protect public health, and to enable British society to rebuild more equally.**

The organisations compiling this report also call for other vital reforms, in order to build back better following this crisis:

## Equality

Everyone in the UK should be able to access sufficient income, safe housing and equality before the law.

- ▶ A meaningful uplift in asylum support, since £39.60 per week is wholly inadequate to meet basic needs;
- ▶ Financial support for all those who have sought asylum as long as they remain in the UK;
- ▶ Safe accommodation for all, so that women are not forced on to the streets or into abusive situations;
- ▶ Right to work for those seeking asylum whose cases have not been resolved within six months, unconstrained by the shortage occupation list;
- ▶ Reform of the legal aid system so that everyone seeking asylum can access quality legal representation.

## Care

Everyone in the UK should be able to access care for their mental and physical health needs.

- ▶ Increased investment in mental healthcare throughout the UK;
- ▶ Measures to prohibit data sharing between the NHS and immigration enforcement.

## Connection

Everyone in the UK needs to be able to access information about their rights and to be able to communicate effectively with others.

- ▶ Internet provision in all social housing, including that provided by the Home Office and that provided by local authorities.

All these reforms would enable women to rebuild their lives and to play a full part in their communities as sisters, not strangers.