

INTERVIEWER

What happens when refugees arrive in the UK?

DR VICTORIA CANNING:

Whenever people arrive in the UK, they will generally seek asylum, what's called seeking asylum, and are thus termed asylum seekers. Which can be sort of problematic but very specifically is the period in which somebody has formed a claim, put a claim in to Lunar House in Croydon, to the Home Office, and are awaiting the outcome of that based on reasons for persecution and whether or not the home office deems that person to have experienced the persecution that they've said that they've experienced.

So that can be a very long process. People might be in the asylum system for a few months, they might be in the asylum system for a few years, and I've known more than five women who've been in the asylum system for around 13 to 14 years. So whenever people are awaiting their asylum outcome, they aren't able to access work unless they have very specific conditions and over, and have been here for over a period of time, and thus are in a position where the only access to finances is through welfare dependency, which is also very little per week, so around £36 per week for a single person in the asylum system.

INTERVIEWER

What are the specific issues affecting women asylum seekers then?

DR VICTORIA CANNING:

Well the asylum system and the process is quite complex and bureaucratic in the United Kingdom. But for women specifically the issues around very little access to finance, for example, can leave women and men in destitution. But if women have children it can be a very stressful period, very difficult to access appropriate nutrition, health care. And if women are pregnant it's also not always clear what a woman is entitled to with maternity, whether or not she can access, what's free to access, what's not free to access. There's so much to learn when you go through the system that it's really quite difficult to know what you're entitled to as well.

The other things as well that can be quite problematic for women are if a woman's not able to speak, if a woman arrives for example with a man who is the first applicant, what's known as the first applicant, then a lot of the claim is based on perhaps the male's experience of or her partner's experience of persecution, and thus it can become quite dependent on that claim itself. And also if a woman isn't able to speak English and perhaps might be in a domestically violent circumstances, then lack of interpretation or

dependence on her partner as an interpreter doesn't allow for her to be able to convey maybe experience that she's had previously or currently to the Home Office

INTERVIEWER

So how do experiences of violence and sexual violence impact the experience of seeking asylum?

DR VICTORIA CANNING:

Well one of the things that quite different between women and men's asylum claims is that women are more likely to have been subjected to sexual violence or multiple forms of sexual violence throughout her life. So maybe even, you know, back to childhood, trajectories at different points, childhood perhaps in relation to state persecution, but also again in the domestic sphere. So being able to access support for sexual violent services can be quite difficult firstly where there are areas where perhaps there isn't anything available or in particular in the aftermath of austerity measures or the cuts that were implemented by two recent governments. There are very few specific support services for complex traumas for example. But the other thing as well that can be really difficult is conveying the experience of sexual violence, and while I can talk about that in a little bit more depth, later maybe, there was firstly a lack of interpretation, but also perhaps not even able to access services in particular areas.

One of the key issues for women who've been subjected to sexual violence is that the asylum system itself is so complex and unsure, there's a period of real almost a temporal limbo, where women aren't sure of their time, whether or not they would be deported soon, whether they might be detained in, for example, Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre. So there's that constant uncertainty that can put, increase experiences of stress and emotional anxiety that can compound the impacts of previous experiences of sexual violence. And thus the biggest problem is when women's lives can become the immediate future. What's going to happen next? Do I have enough money to get somewhere? How do I travel to my interview, my Home Office interview? All of those things are constant, and thus being able to have the time and space to maybe work toward recovery or coming to terms with or even thinking about experiences of sexual violence can be placed on the backburner for women.

INTERVIEWER

OK so these are all really difficult experiences. To what extent can women asylum seekers actually find support here and perhaps to what extent do they also create their own support networks?

DR VICTORIA CANNING:

I think that's a really good question. There are very different regional experiences of being able to access sexual violence, like specific kinds of support for sexual violence. So you can't, like I couldn't make claims across the UK, but there are certain areas

where there are organisations have recognised the importance of interpretation, the importance of outreach work to ensure that women are able to access or know what services there are to access, but also that women who've been through the asylum system are really heavily engaged in the support services themselves.

And I think that's really important because it's kind of much more experiential. It's not an add-on; it has to be sort of organic and central to an organisation. So that is regional in some areas. Areas where there may not be high concentrations of non-white populations for example, may not bring that into, there may not be a consciousness around that if that makes sense, but also impacts on funding has across the UK affected women's access to sexual violence and domestic violence support services more broadly.

So one of the key things I think with asylum, and as an activist I would say this as an activist with women in asylum groups, is seeing when women come together and women have an access to space and what can be done within that is quite phenomenal really. So support might be support for someone who's been through the asylum system, being able to give advice or just general discussions, but also just women being there as a collective, you know, and sort of moving forward to support each other through what can be difficult times. And also in other ways, just come together for the same reason that anybody would come together if you were having a bit of a tough time, maybe a cup of tea and a chat.

So the range it's not necessarily that there can be a prescriptive way that women would want support, but that comes from women who have been through the system or who are in the system developing support networks that are most conscious of the needs of women seeking asylum and the value of shared experience in that.

INTERVIEWER

So you've been doing many years of research on women, gender and asylum. Based on your research, what are the key issues which are not currently addressed in the UK's practice of processing applications by women asylum seekers who have been affected by sexual violence?

DR VICTORIA CANNING:

A number of key issues that have been recurring well beyond my own research include ways in which being able to discuss gender specific experiences of persecution are still not really addressed. They've been recognised but not necessarily implemented. So for example inadequate interpretation services for women to be able to convey their experiences, you know, accurately, and also with somebody that they might trust. The point of trust is really important in that. The conditions under which women are expected to disclose for example instances of sexual violence, torture or sexual torture still don't reflect what has been well recognised within broader psychology literatures and feminist literatures which is women-only spaces, the recognition of developing trust.

Women are often expected in a first interview, so while in a first interview you would say these are the reasons that I'm seeking asylum, these are the forms of persecution that I have experienced, it is quite unlikely that a woman or a man who's been subjected to sexual violence or sexual torture would find themselves wanting to disclose those instances of abuse or violence to someone that they don't know or don't trust. We know from feminist literatures and we know from, or I know from having worked with sexual violence organisations for about a decade now that many people don't disclose to anyone at all – certainly not in the first instances, very commonly in first instances of meeting with somebody.

So what then can happen is that if a woman were to say, in her second or substantive interview, I've been subjected to sexual violence in these cases or outlines forms of sexual abuse or torture that becomes well why have you not included this in your first interview? That leads to disbelief and impacts on credibility. So what you really have there are serious gaps in the implementation of gender guideline which have been in play and in place for almost a decade now as well. So there are real significant issues with that. So basically within that you've got the feeling of disbelief, you've got a feeling of not having your experiences recognised. And not being believed is one of the, you know, or is a real extra pain for people who have been subjected to violence to build up to being able to tell somebody that and for that to come down as not being recognised or not being believed or being discredited in the asylum process.

So really the asylum process can add a lot of emotional anxiety and as I've mentioned earlier stress in the process itself, but also if somebody has been subjected to sexual violence or multiple forms of sexual violence as persecution.

END OF INTERVIEW