

UK Public Policy affecting Women Seeking Protection  
and Migrant Women with No Recourse to Public Funds

**Policy and Advocacy  
Casework Report 2024  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



*Baobab Women's Advocacy*

# Introduction and Findings

## UK Public Policy affecting Women Seeking Protection and Migrant Women with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)



*“...legislative changes to asylum policy have become even more draconian, with a clear shift towards restricting the freedom and rights of forced migrants to Britain.”*

**May 2024 marks exactly 12 years since former Home Secretary Theresa May announced that the UK government's aim was to create “a really hostile environment” for migrants to the UK, deeming them “illegal” and calling them people who “come here and overstay because they're able to access everything they need”. Since she made those remarks to The Telegraph, legislative changes to asylum policy have become even more draconian, with a clear shift towards restricting the freedom and rights of forced migrants to Britain.**

Two of the most notable and disturbing of these changes are the Illegal Migration Act, which was passed in July 2023 and essentially criminalises all forms of clandestine entry to the UK by those fleeing from conflict or persecution in their countries of origin; and the Safety of Rwanda Act, which was enacted in April 2024 and opens the path for the Home Office to deport thousands of people who arrived in the UK on or after 1 January 2022, as well as other refused asylum seekers. It is important to note that both of these policies have been met with fierce criticism and moral outrage not just from organisations fighting for migrant justice, but civil servants enforcing removals to Rwanda, and the public at large.

It is in this tumultuous climate of populist xenophobia and state-sanctioned bigotry towards migrants that the Baobab Women's Project is publishing this casework report, based on our findings working with and alongside women seeking protection over the last few years. We are a Community Interest Company (CIC) based in Birmingham, and our mission is to support refugee and migrant women in the West Midlands and across the UK to acquire

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residence, housing, financial resilience and an understanding of their rights and responsibilities in the UK while being treated with dignity and respect. Everything we do comes out of a spirit of solidarity with women facing challenges while trying to settle in the UK, and we are proud of the fact that our activities pertaining to community advocacy are led by women with lived experience of the immigration system.

*“...we organised group discussions that enabled migrant women seeking protection or those who had no recourse to public funds to offer their valuable insights and suggestions on the public policies that have shaped their lives...”*

Alongside Women With Hope, a sister-led grassroots charity organising social activities for women, we organised group discussions that enabled migrant women seeking protection or those who had no recourse to public funds (NRPF) to offer their valuable insights and suggestions on the public policies that have shaped their lives and which continue to place constraints on how they live. These discussions were very much led by the women themselves, and were carried out in a safe, nurturing and caring environment where each woman's voice was equally valued. Our learnings from these discussions, coupled with conversations that our staff had with individual women during casework, have coalesced in this report.

While we appreciate that the current state of UK immigration policy is extremely volatile, we hope that our findings and recommendations in this report will push policymakers and the Home Office to take migrant women's needs into greater consideration when pursuing administrative and legislative changes.

## Our Findings

Key issues that our women identified as being major areas for improvement were:

- The processing of asylum claims
- Accommodation and support
- Legal advisers, interpreters and the presentation of claims
- Further challenges encountered by women who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF), have suffered from domestic violence or are living undocumented
- Healthcare, mental wellbeing and education

## Processing Asylum Claims

Baobab recognises that the Home Office has achieved significant progress in reducing the latest backlog of asylum claims made before 28 June 2022. The Home Office should be given due credit for having cleared 95% of the over 90,000 cases in this backlog between December 2022 and December 2023.

However, the women we work with have told us that they are still experiencing major delays in wait times for both their screening and substantive interviews, forcing them into destitution and vulnerability. One woman whom Baobab is supporting waited seven months for her screening interview, while some of our other service users reported waiting between three months to over five years for their substantive interviews. These heavy delays not only hinder women's access to the weekly support they are entitled to from the government; they also exacerbate the women's mental health, which may already be bad due to past trauma.

Other problems relating to the processing of asylum claims include the lack of childcare support for women attending Home Office interviews; trafficking survivors not being properly directed to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), the government's official system for identifying victims of modern slavery and trafficking; inability to afford often expensive travel costs incurred when attending Home Office interviews or going for mandatory reporting; extremely long waits of up to eight years to receive an initial asylum decision; and hiccups in receiving the right documentation after residence was granted.

## Accommodation and support

The women we work with have observed that there is generally confusion around what asylum seekers are entitled to receive from the Home Office. This is compounded by inconsistency in how the locations of their accommodation is decided, and the frequency of poor quality accommodation.

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We have also found that the asylum-seeking women we support are given less to live on than those under the poverty line, because of the assumption taken by the Home Office that they do not have bills or utilities to pay. Current support rates are £49.18 per week to cover food and essentials, or £8.86 if meals are provided with accommodation. For instance, a single woman seeking asylum would get £205 per month under the current immigration system, compared to Universal Credit of between £311.68 and £393.95 for a single person who is not seeking asylum. Likewise, a single mother of three children with one child under one is entitled to £854 in asylum support as opposed to Universal Credit of £1,221.

The women we spoke to indicated that these low rates of support were not an immediate cause of concern for them as they were themselves able to scrape by, but were worried about their children missing out on paid-for opportunities like school clubs, which are often critical to their children's social inclusion.

Delays of up to nine months in receiving the ASPEN cards that store the monetary assistance asylum seekers receive from the Home Office also caused our service users distress and anxiety.

With regard to accommodation, women told us that their living conditions were often unsanitary and overcrowded. It is not unheard of for a whole family of four people crammed into just one room. Health and safety violations were also rampant, with our service users reporting recurring bedbug infestations, mould, heating issues, dirty carpets and unsafe fixtures. It is also ubiquitous for male housing officers to enter women's rooms without prior notice, leaving them without a sense of safety or privacy.

Several women mentioned that they were afraid to raise substandard accommodation as an issue for fear of being sent elsewhere to live in the UK when they had already put down roots. Others gave feedback that they had been herded onto transport to their new accommodation at late notice, without being told where they were being sent until they had already boarded the vehicle. Collectively, these experiences made the women feel dehumanised.

## Legal advisers, interpreters and presentation of claims

Many women who come to Baobab were initially refused protection because their verbal evidence was not considered credible, but they were later granted refugee status on appeal. This is testament to the importance of good solicitors acting on their behalf, as well as the weight of statements provided by mental health or country experts, which were not previously available or considered.

We believe it is unfair that women have to contend with a culture of disbelief until a professional legitimises their stories. Our service users have reported feeling disrespected and mocked by interviewers and interpreters at their Home Office interviews, especially in cases where trauma-specific experiences such as rape were being discussed. In contrast, when women were interviewed sensitively by the Home Office, they reported feeling good about having had the opportunity to explain their experiences.

As we write this, there is a legal aid “Armageddon” – a term that appeared in a University of

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Birmingham report – referring to the 90% decrease in the number of migrants able to access legal support. This is due to massive cuts to government funding for legal aid, which means that scores of asylum seekers are being forced to attend their immigration interviews and hearings without any form of legal representation. The impact of having no legal aid, coupled with disorganised requests by the Home Office for the women to submit their papers ahead of their appearance before the Tribunal, has resulted in what we feel are usually unjust refusals of asylum. Under these circumstances, women have told us that they feel suicidal and deflated.

## NPRF, domestic abuse and living undocumented

We have assisted a small number of women without residence papers for non-asylum reasons. They had initially arrived in the UK to work, study or to be close to family, but became undocumented after overstaying a visa, or had European dependents but had not yet received settled status. Some women came to the UK on a dependent or spousal visa but the relationship broke down following domestic abuse. In all of these cases, the women have No Recourse to Public Funds (NPRF) and are legally unable to work. The women, if they have children, are entitled to Section 17 support. We received a mix of positive and negative feedback from these women on a variety of issues around their encounters with social workers, the support they have received in terms of their practical needs, and their hotel accommodation.

We most wanted to draw their attention to the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC). It is critical for migrant women to be aware of this policy: if they have come to the UK on spousal or refugee family reunion visas, if they hold pre-settled status as the partner of an EU national sponsor, or if they arrive on other routes but are subsequently granted leave to remain as a partner but experience a breakdown in their relationships, the Concession enables them to work and access benefits in the UK while their applications for indefinite leave to remain are being considered.

We have found that the MVDAC makes women feel safer and offers them clarity with regard to the routes to support available to them. We would warmly welcome the introduction of similar legal residence schemes for other migrant women who have not experienced domestic violence specifically, or do not have grounds for claiming asylum in the UK. These groups of women may still be left vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

## Healthcare, mental wellbeing and education

*“The women we work with reported having to confront several barriers in accessing healthcare and education.”*

The women we work with reported having to confront several barriers in accessing healthcare and education. These included difficulties in getting through to the receptions at their respective GPs, lack of interpreting services when accessing healthcare services, women with NPRF being deterred from seeking care after being sent large bills post pregnancy and birth of their child, and unsuitable or unsafe accommodation for pregnant women. We approach these challenges from a place of compassion and understanding, as we appreciate that the NHS has been overburdened for years. However, we hope that healthcare professionals who are in gatekeeping positions (such as receptionists) can exercise more awareness and sensitivity in their treatment of asylum-seeking women.

Sudden, random dispersals also resulted in women feeling stressed or depressed, especially if they had already built a rapport with their GP and their local community, and were undergoing mental health support.

Likewise, access to education was found to be limited. Women told us that Level 1 and 2 courses, generally seen as being pre-GCSE qualifications, were free for asylum seekers, but those who wished to move on to Level 3, which is a basic requirement for employment, were prevented from doing so. There was also a lack of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes available within Birmingham.

# Recommendations



*“...we believe that any solutions to the aforementioned issues are most feasible when they come directly from the women we work with.”*

**In line with our community advocacy, we believe that any solutions to the aforementioned issues are most feasible when they come directly from the women we work with. We organised several fruitful sessions to discuss how best to tackle the loopholes in current policies, and the women had many suggestions, which we have listed below.**

## **Processing Asylum Claims**

Our service users also provided numerous suggestions on how to address these issues. These include but are not limited to:

- Making the questionnaire that is currently available to claimants from five different countries (Afghanistan, Eritrea, Libya, Syria and Yemen) easier to understand and widely available to asylum seekers of all nationalities
- Distributing leaflets with clear instructions and links to resources and support for all asylum seekers arriving at ports of entry across the UK, similar to the well-publicised Homes for Ukraine scheme
- Holding screening interviews within a month of claimants dialling the asylum claim intake line, and travel expenses to these interviews to be funded by the Home Office
- Limiting the wait time for the substantive interview to one year, with the Home Office to explain in writing to claimants if there are valid reasons for the delay
- Not only offering but also promoting information about and providing childcare for women during their asylum interviews
- Reducing the frequency of mandatory reporting to once every six months;
- Most importantly, giving asylum claimants the right to work.

## Recommendations

### Accommodation and support

Our recommendations in this area are to:

- Dispense asylum support more quickly and efficiently
- Provide pregnant women with appropriate accommodation more than 11 weeks before they are due to give birth
- Give written travel dates to women at least seven days before they are due to move
- Stop inhumane evictions, especially for refused asylum seekers
- Backdate payments on ASPEN cards when women report experiencing delays in receiving asylum support
- Give women ample notice of room inspections, especially in the case of male housing officers

### Legal advisers, interpreters and presentation of claims

We recommend that:

- Female interviewers should always be offered in the first instance to asylum-seeking women, and that all interviewers and interpreters should be gender and trauma-informed in speaking to claimants
- More funding be funnelled into legal aid to fill the current gap in this vital service
- Home Office representatives make every effort to listen carefully to women's fears and concerns during their interviews, without dismissing them or implying that they are being deceitful
- Home Office representatives should send through all required documentation to the Tribunal in a timely manner
- Legal aid representatives should offer their clients a full debrief within 14 days of a refusal to discuss their cases, and also provide resources to women that enable them to better Specialist legal advocates similar to NRM support workers be assigned to women throughout their cases, enabling them to access legal advice and receive healthcare services in relation to past trauma.

### NRPF, domestic abuse and living undocumented

Our women recommended:

- That the Domestic Abuse Home Office policy (2022) should be amended so that women fleeing abusive partners can access funding for refuge spaces while they are in the process of seeking asylum
- That the guidance on Section 17 support should be made clearer and more accessible

### Healthcare, mental wellbeing and education

We recommend that:

- The Home Office should give pregnant asylum seekers adequate housing that takes their mental and physical health needs into account, including their need for privacy;
- Interpreters should be present at all appointments attended by asylum-seeking women, and healthcare professionals should make it a core value to treat asylum-seeking patients with respect and kindness.

# Acknowledgements



The report was co-authored by women with lived experience of irregular status in the UK immigration system, who are best placed to help others understand the problems they have encountered and suggest solutions to them. We are honoured to have worked in solidarity with Women with Hope who facilitated group discussions with the women who contributed their insights to this report.

Design and photography by Brian Homer.

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With thanks to Songhee Han for talking to the women and helping write the case-studies and Nisha Vamadevan for suggesting improvements to the final report. Both were students on placement from the University of Birmingham.

We also acknowledge with thanks funding from the Barrow Cadbury Trust

## **Published by Baobab Women's Project**



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