

Charter of Rights of Women Seeking Asylum

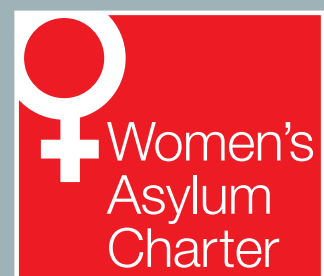
2 years on: impacts and actions

July 2010

Women's Asylum Charter
campaign — I think that this
has been a great example of
partnership working for a
common cause.

Jonathan Ellis

Director of Policy and Development
Refugee Council



The Charter of Rights of Women Seeking Asylum

2 years on: impacts and actions

28 June 2008	Launch of <i>Charter of Rights of Women Seeking Asylum</i>	*
1 July 2008	Liberty endorses the <i>Charter</i>	
2 July 2008	Women Asylum Seekers Together Manchester endorses the <i>Charter</i>	
3 July 2008	Women's National Commission endorses the <i>Charter</i>	
9 July 2008	Immigration Law Practitioners Association endorses the <i>Charter</i>	
16 July 2008	Oxfam endorses the <i>Charter</i>	
18 July 2008	CEDAW (UN Women's Convention) concluding observations refer to the need to implement asylum gender guidelines	*
1 August 2008	The <i>Charter</i> is featured on Woman's Hour on BBC Radio 4	
20 August 2008	Amnesty International UK endorses the <i>Charter</i>	
13 Sept 2008	Women Asylum Seekers Together London endorses the <i>Charter</i>	
10 Oct 2008	Scottish Refugee Council launches the <i>Charter</i> in Scotland	
22 Oct 2008	The <i>Charter</i> is launched in Parliament	
23 Oct 2008	Nearly four months after its launch, UKBA meets with Asylum Aid about the <i>Charter</i>	
28 Nov 2008	A few minor <i>Charter</i> recommendations are formally accepted by UKBA	
4 Dec 2008	<i>Charter</i> workshop participants create an action plan to improve the situation for women in the asylum determination system	
6 Jan 2009	UKBA 'Code of Practice for keeping children safe from harm' comes into force	
28 Jan 2009	The Chief Inspector of the UKBA describes gender as a golden thread running through his inspections	
5 Feb 2009	Refugee Council holds conference and launches literature review on vulnerable women	*
27 Jan 2009	<i>Charter</i> workshop participants create an action plan to improve the situation for women in terms of financial support and accommodation	
2 March 2009	Lewisham Refugee Network Vulnerable Women's Project conference	
5 March 2009	<i>Charter</i> workshop participants create an action plan to improve the situation for women in relation to detention and removal	
8 March 2009	The Welsh Refugee Council and Oxfam Cymru launch the <i>Charter</i> in Wales	*
19 March 2009	Immigration Minister, Phil Woolas, acknowledges the need for UKBA to make progress towards a gender sensitive asylum system during a meeting of the National Stakeholders Forum	
April 2009	UK Government initiates consultation on integrated strategy to end violence against women and girls	*

23 July 2009	The Testimony Project is launched to give a voice to refugee women and the organisations that support them	
Sep 2009	UKBA introduces childcare facility in Leeds – a key <i>Charter</i> recommendation	*
29 Oct 2009	Home is where the heartbreak is published in The New Statesman	
25 Nov 2009	UK Government publishes 'Together we can end violence against women and girls strategy'	*
26 Nov 2009	European Women's Lobby endorses the <i>Charter</i>	
26 Nov 2009	The Green Party endorses the <i>Charter</i>	
26 Nov 2009	First public showing of Every Single Woman film at Rights of Women meeting	
30 Nov 2009	Every Single Woman campaign launched	*
30 Nov 2009	We need a gender-sensitive asylum system published in Guardian Comment is Free	
1 Dec 2009	1 day after the launch of Every Single Woman , the news has been emailed to 1032 addresses and tweeted to 5262 followers. The video has been viewed 275 times within the first 24 hours and website traffic triples	
10 Dec 2009	Oxfam Cymru hold conference in Wales on Women in the asylum process: Where are we now?	*
14 Dec 2009	Home Secretary responds to a Parliamentary Question regarding the rights of women seeking asylum	*
18 Dec 2009	HM Inspector of Prisons releases report regarding the conditions for women in Tinsley House	*
1 Jan 2010	Over 200 organisations have now endorsed the <i>Charter</i>	
12 Jan 2010	UKBA Chief Executive meets with <i>Charter</i> endorsers	
14 Jan 2010	UKBA and <i>Charter</i> endorsers agree terms of reference for engagement process on operational issues	
26 Jan 2010	Asylum Aid and UKBA jointly present <i>Charter</i> update and Every Single Woman campaign at National Asylum Stakeholders Forum	
Feb 2010	UKBA opens childcare facility in Glasgow – a key <i>Charter</i> recommendation	*
24 Feb 2010	Human Rights Watch publishes ' Fast-Tracked Unfairness ' on women in fast track detention	*
21 Feb 2010	UKBA announces new Gender Champion	*
2 Mar 2010	UKBA explains measures taken in relation to women at Tinsley House	*
2 Mar 2010	Interministerial Group on Violence Against Women briefed on <i>Charter</i> in House of Commons	
8 Mar 2010	The new Gender Champion sponsors a Home Office Women's Network meeting on International Women's Day to showcase progress made on gender issues in the asylum system	*
11 Mar 2010	TUC Women's Conference passes a motion calling for a gender sensitive asylum system	*
19 Mar 2010	Royal College of Midwives request UKBA change its guidance on support for pregnant asylum seekers	*
22 Mar 2010	Women seeking asylum: shame and isolation published on Open Democracy	
27 May 2010	First meeting of Asylum Aid with new Gender Champion	*
10 June 2010	Asylum Aid's work on the <i>Charter</i> highly commended by the Charity Awards 2010	*

* see report for more detail

Charter of Rights of Women Seeking Asylum

The **Charter of Rights of Women Seeking Asylum** calls on the UK Border Agency (UKBA) to commit to treating women seeking asylum with fairness, dignity and respect.

The *Charter* provides an overarching set of principles aimed at persuading the UKBA to take both a strategic approach to the needs of women seeking asylum and to put in place the operational procedures and safeguards that will remove the discriminatory barriers they face.

In March 2004 the Home Office incorporated the Asylum Policy Instruction on gender issues in the asylum claim (gender guidelines). Despite this and some further progress by the UKBA, by 2008 those working in the sector were concerned that such initiatives tended to be piecemeal. This suggested a failure to recognise gender as an underlying factor fundamental to creating a fair system. In addition they noted that there was often a disconnection between the policy and the operational parts of the UKBA, particularly on gender issues. To ensure women's rights are recognised the *Charter* proposed that it is essential to create a gender-sensitive culture within the UKBA as a whole.

The *Charter's* launch in June 2008 by the Women's Project at Asylum Aid followed an extensive consultation process with asylum seeking women and with agencies across the refugee, women's and human rights sector. Organisations which supported the *Charter*, many of which work directly on issues affecting women seeking asylum rapidly endorsed it. By the time of the *Charter's* official launch in Parliament in October 2008, over 100 organisations had endorsed the *Charter* and at the time of publication of this report, the *Charter of Rights of Women Seeking Asylum* had 211 **endorsers**.

The *Charter* provides a framework for work on women's asylum issues across the UK. The following report demonstrates the range of activities that have been undertaken under the *Charter*. This has involved a wide range of organisations, large and small, within and outside of the refugee sector. It also demonstrates the impact (so far) of those activities.

This report has been written to bring together many of the *Charter's* actions and impacts in one place to take stock of current progress. It is through the work of many individuals and organisations that progress is being made and this report demonstrates the power of working together. It is hoped that this will further motivate current and future *Charter* supporters. In addition it is hoped that the UKBA will use it to encourage the developments that are beginning to emerge in their work to create a gender-sensitive culture.



Number of organisations that have endorsed the Charter: 211

Thank you for working hard and coming up with the Charter. We are confident this will be a useful tool in engaging with UK Borders and ensuring that women are treated better during the asylum process

Harris Nyatsanza, Gender and Refugee Project Officer
Oxfam Wales

Action plans

Four action-planning workshops were held soon after the *Charter* was launched, three in London and one in Cardiff. 60 people from organisations that had endorsed the *Charter* across the UK participated in these. The workshops provided an opportunity to identify priorities and activities with the aim of influencing changes by UKBA and to assess how participants might cooperate with each other. As a result an action plan of eighty discrete actions was compiled, focusing on the three topics covered by the *Charter*, namely the asylum determination system, accommodation and support, and detention and removals.

What an example of time-keeping, coordination and scene setting you gave. And an enjoyable day too – good to mix with organisations that are rarely at the tables I sit by, and always reinvigorating to spend time with frontline workers.

Kat Lorenz, Policy and Information Manager

Refugee Action

United Nations recommendation on women seeking asylum

As a state that has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the UK is legally bound to put its provisions into practice by undertaking measures to end discrimination against women in all forms. They are also committed to submit national reports, at least every four years, on measures they have taken to comply with their obligations under CEDAW.

Asylum Aid was instrumental in ensuring that the government included its policy on women asylum seekers (the gender guidelines) in its report to the UN CEDAW Committee for its formal examination in New York in July 2008. In addition, a number of *Charter* endorsers contributed to two shadow reports. In relation to women seeking asylum, these reports particularly highlighted the need for gender guidelines to be comprehensively integrated into all aspects of the asylum determination process. The concluding observations of the CEDAW Committee included the Committee's concern at the situation of immigrant women and women asylum seekers who may be subject to multiple forms of discrimination. The Committee called upon the State party [the UK] to pay specific attention to the vulnerability of women asylum seekers while their claims are under examination and to ensure the full implementation of the Asylum Gender Guidelines.

Providing childcare during asylum interviews

When Hazel Williams from the Refugee Council in Yorkshire and Humberside asked her UK Border Agency (UKBA) regional office to provide childcare during asylum interviews for all clients coming to the region who required it, the UKBA official laughed it off as impossible and too costly. Two years later the same official contacted the Refugee Council and invited Hazel to join a working group on childcare. Now UKBA is paying for a local charity to provide play sessions at Waterside Court in Leeds so that children can be in a supervised play room while their mum or dad has their asylum interview.

Kristian Armstrong (UKBA Children's Champion) and Jeremy Oppenheim (UKBA North East Regional Director) attended the opening of the facility in September 2009 and UKBA has featured it in their internal newsletter as a positive project.

Clearly women face difficulties if they have their children with them during asylum interviews. As well as being a distraction, they feel unable to disclose their full story in front of them particularly if (as is likely) this includes details of torture, rape or similar harm.

Following encouragement by the Welsh Consortium for Refugees and Asylum Seekers and their partners, the UKBA office in Cardiff has been providing childcare since September 2007. The UKBA office in Glasgow started providing childcare early in 2009 after persistent lobbying by the Refugee Women's Strategy Group and the Scottish Refugee

Council. The Refugee Council is raising the issue in the West Midlands and in London. The Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit is following this lead in the North West.

Senior UKBA officials have told *Charter* endorsers that they fully support the idea of all seven UKBA regions considering providing childcare.

Meanwhile Asylum Aid focused on the consultation on a new UKBA Code of Practice on Keeping Children Safe from Harm. Published in December 2008, this stated "UKBA staff must ensure that arrangements are in place so that parents are not required to give an account of personal victimisation or humiliation (in an asylum claim, for instance) if their children are present." However Asylum Aid is still working to try to prevent this being watered down in the statutory guidance that replaces this Code.

Cross-governmental strategy to end violence against women and girls

In April 2009 the government initiated a consultation on an integrated strategy on violence against women, entitled *Together we can end violence against women and girls*. Asylum Aid and the Refugee Council each responded stating that if a strategy to end violence against women and girls were to be truly integrated, the rights of women seeking asylum must be included. In particular, they stated that for a strategy to end violence against women to be cross-governmental, UKBA and the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal (now the Immigration and Asylum Chamber) must provide a similar standard of service to women asylum seekers who have experienced or are at risk of rape, domestic violence, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, etc as the criminal justice system provides to female victims of similar violence against women in the UK. They concluded that this would require UKBA and the Immigration and Asylum Chamber to undergo a cultural shift to adopt gender sensitive policies and practices in a way that ensures they are implemented.

Every Single Woman Campaign

On 30th November 2009 the **Every Single Woman** campaign was launched as part of the *Charter*. Its aim was to bring ministerial pressure to bear on the UKBA as *Charter* supporters were concerned at the lack of progress being made. *Charter* endorsers were involved in compiling a detailed briefing and producing a campaign film.

The Every Single Woman campaign focuses on the disparity in the treatment of women who are seeking asylum compared with women settled in the UK. For example, there is a marked disparity between the experiences of female victims of sexual and domestic violence going through the criminal justice process in the UK and that of women asylum seekers who have experienced the same crimes abroad and are going through the asylum process in the UK. Whilst the purposes of the two processes are not the same – one is to investigate a crime and the other is to determine refugee status – the sensitivities required are similar. To rectify this disparity, the campaign argues, the lessons learned by the criminal justice system needs to be transferred into the asylum system.

The Every Single Woman campaign was launched just after the cross-governmental strategy on violence against women was published. *Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls* listed the many reforms brought in through the criminal justice system. Although the new policies are still not implemented consistently, there has clearly been progress as nearly 100 pages are devoted to these reforms. Meanwhile the section on women asylum seekers covers less than a page and includes no plans for future action.

To overcome this disparity, the Every Single Woman campaign stated that a change of culture designed to produce a genuinely gender sensitive asylum system is urgently needed to ensure that women seeking asylum receive a comparable standard of treatment to women in similar situations settled in the UK.

The letter which *Charter* endorsers sent to the Immigration Minister regarding the Every Single Woman campaign commended the Government for overseeing many criminal justice reforms affecting women but outlined their disappointment that there appeared to be no equivalent plans to make similar progress in respect of women fleeing gender specific human rights abuses in their countries of origin.



Oxfam Wales Conference: Women and the Asylum Process

The Every Single Woman campaign was launched in Wales on 10th December 2009 at a conference organised by Oxfam Wales which aimed to empower and enable asylum seeking women to be informed of their rights under the gender guidelines. Aimed at the various stakeholders involved in the asylum process, including refugee and asylum seeking women, policy makers and the UKBA, the conference was attended by the regional UKBA Director and a number of leading Welsh politicians. Participatory workshops were used to try and help women gain a better understanding of the UK Border Agency's position and key priorities on gender and, inversely, for the UKBA to obtain a better insight into the problems that were affecting women seeking asylum in Wales. One workshop was used for women seeking asylum and other stakeholders to draw up an action plan of activities they wanted to be undertaken in relation to the *Charter*. It was noted that, although there is still much to be done, the authorities in Wales are providing a lead on gender issues with their participation in events such as this and more tangible actions, such as childcare provision in Cardiff.

I thought the film was beautifully and skillfully done, and really speaks for the injustice and sense of betrayal that my clients talk about almost every day in relation to their experience of claiming asylum as women.

Emma Brech, Vulnerable Women Project Coordinator
Lewisham Refugee Network

Home Secretary questioned in House of Commons about reforms for women seeking asylum

The Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees, Neil Gerrard MP, tabled a Parliamentary Question at Home Affairs Question Time on 14th December 2009. This is recorded in Hansard:

Mr Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow) (Lab): Following on from the strategy that was recently announced to tackle violence against women and girls, which will include some reforms to the criminal justice system, what plans does the Secretary of State have to make comparable reforms to the asylum system in relation to women and girls who have suffered similar forms of violence and in their countries of origin?

Alan Johnson (The Secretary of State for the Home Department): That issue was raised during our very wide consultation on violence against women and girls. The publication of our strategy is not the end of the issue; in fact, it is the beginning. We have looked at taking out certain strands, including the issue my hon. Friend mentions, getting much more information on it and tackling it as part of the ongoing strategy.

Gender Champion appointed

The first recommendation in the *Charter* states that the UKBA should appoint a member of the senior management team as a Gender Champion to ensure that there is a strategic overview on women's issues. In January 2010, following the launch of the Every Single Woman campaign, Lin Homer, Chief Executive of the UKBA agreed to do this and appointed the Head of Immigration, Matthew Coats to this role.

On International Women's Day in March 2010, Matthew sponsored a meeting of the Home Office Women's Network to celebrate women working within the agency and to showcase some of the joint progress made in relation to addressing gender issues in the asylum system. The speakers included Meg Hillier, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Home Office and the Every Single Woman film was shown.

In May 2010, Matthew Coats proposed to Asylum Aid an engagement process for taking forward women's asylum issues at a strategic level. These included:

- ensuring gender issues are part of the internal review on asylum
- meeting with the police to learn about their gender sensitive strategies
- considering provision of childcare during asylum interviews across the UK
- ensuring the implementation of the gender sensitive question (being asked at screening whether you want a male or female interviewer)
- engagement of *Charter* endorsers with regional managers

UKBA and *Charter* endorsers in talks

Also in January 2010 terms of reference were agreed for a process of engagement between UKBA officials and *Charter* endorsers focusing on operational issues relating to women seeking asylum. The process aims at covering issues raised in the *Charter* as well as other issues that UKBA could progress to make the asylum system more gender sensitive. It involves a three-pronged approach covering the asylum determination system, support and detention. Active engagement is now underway with meetings being held between appropriate UKBA staff and *Charter* endorsers with relevant expertise.

Of all the public authorities (including the police and Crown Prosecution Service) we have greatest concern about the UKBA ... (which) has not adopted a gender-sensitive approach in its responses to women at risk of or experiencing violence.

Measuring up? UK compliance with international commitments on violence against women in England and Wales, Rights of Women, June 2010

Women isolated in Tinsley House

In January 2010, the Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees (AVID) with the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group (GDWG) followed up a report released by HM Inspector of Prisons in December 2009 of a follow-up inspection of Tinsley House, an Immigration Removal Centre near Gatwick airport. This emphasised the unacceptable conditions in Tinsley House, especially for women detainees who were disproportionately outnumbered by a ratio of over 20 men:1 woman. This left the woman feeling vulnerable and isolated, with documented cases of women not leaving their rooms or feeling too intimidated to eat in the communal dining area. Many asylum-seeking women have already suffered trauma and violence, which can be compounded by living in a male-dominated environment.

AVID and GDWG raised the issue with UKBA to underline these concerns and urge them to reconsider the policy of holding single women at Tinsley House until the facility is brought in line with other establishments where single women are detained. UKBA confirmed the immediate actions and longer term considerations being enacted with regards to this report, including:

- A 'key worker' scheme to ensure women's welfare needs are met and to try and negate feelings of isolation
- Arrangements for women who wish to eat separately
- Opportunities for single-sex access to facilities such as the gym
- An upper limit of 72 hours on the length of a single woman's stay before being transferred to an all-women facility such as Yarl's Wood

In the longer term, UKBA stated, 'we are considering whether alternative accommodation can be found...so as to free Tinsley House from this responsibility.' AVID and the GDWG are continuing to lobby on this issue.

Human Rights Watch criticises fast track detention of women

In February 2010, Human Rights Watch launched a new report, *Fast-Tracked Unfairness: Detention and Denial of Women Asylum Seekers in the UK* documenting how women asylum seekers with complex claims are being routed into a system designed for much simpler claims. The women are held in detention largely for the UK's administrative convenience, have very little time to prepare a legal case, and have only a few days to appeal if refused. But the claims often involve such sensitive and difficult issues as sexual violence, female genital mutilation, trafficking, and domestic abuse. There is little time for lawyers or other representatives to build the trust with their clients needed for them to explain their claims or to obtain medical or other evidence needed to verify them.

"The 'detained fast track' system doesn't meet even the basic standards of fairness," said Gauri van Gulik, women's rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. "It is simply not equipped to handle rape, slavery, the threat of 'honor killings,' or other complex claims, and yet such cases are handed to it regularly ... The UN, numerous groups that work with immigrants, parliament, and even its own quality assessment team have been telling the Home Office for years that 'fast track' is failing women. The UK Border Agency's failure to fix this suggests that deporting women is a higher priority for the agency than protecting them."

TUC women's conference passes motion calling for a gender sensitive asylum system

The following motion was passed unanimously by the TUC Women's Conference on 11th March 2010, having been proposed by the Prison Officers' Association, Lewes Prison.

Conference expresses concern that women held in detention centres seeking asylum in the UK are not given the same consideration as women held in prison.

Many of these women have been abused, tortured or raped in their own country. Whilst they wait for their application for asylum to be considered they may find themselves the only female detainee surrounded by 100 or more men.

With such a disproportionate number of males to females, women can feel intimidated, scared and isolated. Women would never be placed in a men's prison in this way, so why in a detention centre? Conference calls on the TUC and the Women's Committee to challenge the UK Border Agency and Immigration Minister to produce a genuinely gender sensitive asylum system. Therefore, to ensure that women seeking asylum receive a comparable standard of treatment to women in similar situations.

Number of articles published about the *Charter* and the *Every Single Woman* campaign: 56 including

[The Charter on Woman's Hour \(BBC Radio 4, 1st August 2008\)](#)

[Home is where the heartbreak is \(New Statesman, 29th October 2009\)](#)

[We need a gender-sensitive asylum system \(Guardian Comment is Free, 30th November 2009\)](#)

[Women seeking asylum: shame and isolation \(Open Democracy, 22nd March 2010\)](#)

Thanks for this article from the New Statesman. I've shared it with my students as well and it lead to some great discussion

Sedigheh Keshavarzi
London South Bank University

Support for pregnant asylum seekers

Maternity Action, Asylum Support Appeals Project, Royal College of Midwives and Asylum Aid are arguing for changes to UKBA's guidance on support for pregnant women. This guidance states that refused asylum seekers who are pregnant are entitled to accommodation and financial support from six weeks before the expected date of delivery. This is because they are unable to travel by air to their country of origin at that stage of pregnancy. The six week timeframe is based on airline policies which refuse travel to women who are 36 weeks or more pregnant. However the airline policies also state that women cannot fly without a 'fit to fly' certificate when 28 weeks or more pregnant or where the pregnancy is complicated. Maternity Action and its partners are arguing that the UKBA guidance should reflect this aspect of airline policy. This would enable pregnant asylum seekers to obtain support earlier in their pregnancy.

Project for vulnerable women in London leads to national reports

A priority for the Refugee Council is to ensure that the UK offers protection to those who need it, and runs an asylum process that is fair and humane. From our work with thousands of refugee women, we know that the current system lets women down. So we have been pleased to be an active partner with Asylum Aid in pushing for change to ensure a gender sensitive asylum system, as part of the *Charter*. In February 2009 we held our Vulnerable Women's Project conference and published two reports:

- *The Vulnerable Women's Project: Refugee and asylum seeking women affected by rape or sexual violence; a literature review*
- *Good Practice Guide: Assisting Refugee and Asylum Seeking Women affected by Rape or Sexual Violence*

Our policy briefing on refugee women, published in March 2010, sets out the needs among refugee women and calls on policy makers to ensure they are addressed. We have been active in challenging the detention of women in the detained fast track and calling for childcare at all asylum interviews.

Sarah Cutler
Head of Policy and Public Affairs
Refugee Council

Improving the provision of support to suspected victims of trafficking

Suspected victims of trafficking first came to our attention in 2008 when the Asylum Support Partnership agencies reported an increase in the number of young Chinese women approaching our advice services seeking support. These women often presented in the late stages of pregnancy or with young children, and in many cases they spoke no English at all despite having been in the UK for some time. Many of the women had claimed asylum several years ago, but had not kept in touch with the UKBA, had not claimed asylum support and had not pursued an appeal after refusal.

Many of the women we see are unable or unwilling to disclose an experience of trafficking so cannot enter the Government's National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for victims of trafficking. Most are also unable to apply for support because they are reluctant to give a full account of their circumstances, including where they have been living and how they have been supporting themselves, in order to prove that they are destitute.

We have equipped our frontline advisers to identify and advocate for clients who they suspect are victims of trafficking. Our experience has informed our negotiations with the UKBA in formulating an effective and rights-based response. We are working with the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice to improve the suitability of support for asylum seekers who have entered the NRM. The coalition Government has committed to tackling human trafficking as a priority and we look forward to working with the Government to ensure that all victims of trafficking are identified, supported and protected.

Sile Reynolds
Policy and Development Advisor
Asylum Support Partnership

Advice service tailored to women's needs in the north west

Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit successfully bid for a grant from Comic Relief to support women who are seeking asylum and who have been subject to gender-based violence including rape and FGM. As a result we have been able to offer an advice service tailored to the needs of women, and not restricted by the limits of Legal Services Commission funding. This service provides additional time to spend with women, access to female interpreters trained and familiar with the issues women face, the ability to commission specialist reports that can provide evidence to enable a woman to make a fresh claim for asylum, and childcare so that a woman can talk to her caseworker privately, not in front of her children, knowing that her children are being looked after nearby. Documenting the experiences of women has enabled GMIAU to demonstrate that better access to childcare improves women's' chances of making successful claims for asylum.

We support the *Charter* because it raises awareness of the issues that many women face and makes visible what would otherwise remain invisible.

Denise McDowell
Director

Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit

Why Refugee Women pledge

A positive thing to come out of the *Charter* in Yorkshire and Humber is the 'Why Refugee Women' minimum standards pledge which is in the process of being developed. It underlines the strengths of refugee women and their important role within communities, highlighting specific needs, why services should understand these needs and the minimum standards for working with refugee women in the Yorkshire and Humber region. It has been developed by a partnership of organisations working with refugee women in the Yorkshire and Humber region including Refugee Council, Northern Refugee Centre, WomenCentre and Oxfam.

Organisations who support the pledge will work towards raising standards for women by aiming to achieve the following:

1. Create an open and safe environment and treat all refugee women with dignity and respect
2. Ensure all workers are aware of the need for gender sensitivity and implement appropriate practices for achieving this
3. Understand gender based issues and act appropriately to take account of these
4. Offer the choice of female workers/interpreters to refugee women wherever possible
5. Ensure refugee women are routinely supported with childcare during asylum interviews so that they feel able to speak about confidential and sensitive issues
6. Ensure refugee women are aware of their rights and independence from their partners
7. Support others in understanding 'Why Refugee Women?'

Hi, I am in the process of applying for Asylum and my application was declined. I appealed against the decision and still it was dismissed. I come from Zimbabwe and I am really desperate not to be deported. I am writing to request for the film on Every Single Woman. I found it really touching and would like to order a copy.

Supporting women seeking asylum in the north

Northern Refugee Centre (NRC) continues to prioritise, develop and sustain regional work supporting women seeking asylum. In 2008 NRC developed its women only weekly advice service which provides asylum support in a gender sensitive space. NRC co-set up the first women only conversation clubs in Sheffield. Demand has been high for these safe spaces which develop skills and reduce isolation.

NRC campaigns with partners on issues affecting women including no recourse to public funds and childcare during asylum interviews. Commissioned research can support such policy work, for example NRC's report, *Safer, healthier and integrated faster: improving outcomes for families seeking sanctuary by addressing childcare difficulties*.

NRC's initiative, the Refugee Women's Development Project (RWDP) works on issues around women seeking asylum. The RWDP has delivered regional workshops on 'women asylum seekers and supporting survivors' to over 200 participants from organisations including the police, social services and counsellors since 2008. Workshops promote the *Charter* and Every Single Woman campaign. Postcard resolutions from participants include 'encouraging my organisation to sign up to the women's *Charter*'.

25 refugee women at all stages of the asylum process, from 15 different countries, volunteer for the project. Volunteers are invaluable and support the project in different ways, co-facilitating training, campaigning, organising events and advocating for refugee women within their communities.

NRC aims to continue to support and develop gender sensitive work.

Rachel Cooling,
Refugee Women's Development Project Coordinator
Northern Refugee Centre.

Advocacy and practical support in the south west

In the two years since the launch of the Women's Charter, Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (GARAS) has worked to support women seeking asylum and irregular migrants and to ensure women's issues are considered through the asylum process. Working in partnership at a regional level, GARAS, Refugee Action in Bristol and the Red Cross developed our own response to the *Charter* that recognised the regional differences and the specific UKBA offices we engage with. This was presented to the Regional Asylum Forum who supported it and have taken it to UKBA in our region. A dialogue was started and we continue to fight to improve the situation women find themselves in. We have challenged particularly around fast tracking, women interviewers and caseworkers and an acknowledgement of the needs of childcare. We have created a specialist female caseworker post at GARAS.

GARAS attends the Domestic Violence meeting for the County and advocates for women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and their children in order that social services offers them housing. We work vigorously to ensure that women are not made homeless when their asylum support stops. We have managed to ensure that vulnerable women either take up asylum support or are found alternative housing.

We run a range of projects for women. Every Friday we run a sewing workshop for women asylum seekers and refugees. An ex-client from DRC has taken up a paid role running this workshop. The workshop has also proven to be the ideal platform for introducing health sessions, which are run in partnership with health visitors and midwives. Over the past year we have been co-running an art project in which several women participated. They found this to be an escape from normal daily worries. We are now hosting a therapeutic art project designed to provide an outlet for anxiety and stress.

Rachel Cheshire
Caseworker for Women
Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (GARAS)

Delighted to read the Every Single Woman charter and its gender appropriate recommendations.

Judge
First Tier Tribunal (Asylum Support)

Psychological impacts effect the asylum process

Many women seeking asylum in the UK have been through very traumatic experiences, including (but not restricted to) experiences of sexual violence. Within support organisations it is generally understood that one legacy of experiencing trauma is a difficulty in recounting those experiences. And within the criminal justice system it is increasingly well understood that women who have experienced sexual assault require particular types of supportive interviewing and treatment to recount their experiences. But this is not well understood within the asylum system.

The Centre for the Study of Emotion and Law carries out empirical psychological research into the psychological effects of trauma and the implications of these for a traumatised person going through the asylum process. Our research findings evidence what many have seen from supporting traumatised women refugees: that discrepancies in stories are due to difficulties recounting events, rather than a deliberate intention to deceive; that those who have experienced sexual violence are more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress symptoms, making recalling and retelling experiences very difficult; that women who have experienced sexual violence need privacy and support to disclose the assaults made on them.

We train legal representatives – with the aim of ensuring fair outcomes for traumatised refugees. And now we train voluntary sector supporters of traumatised refugees, to help advocate for their rights. Hopefully together we'll help bring about fairer outcomes, and through this work we'll help reshape the asylum process to make it sensitive to women's needs and experiences.

Clare Cochrane
Women's Research and Dissemination Worker
Centre for the Study of Emotion and Law

Women's voices heard in Scotland

Since signing the *Charter*, we have continued to develop our work with women in a number of areas. Internally, the *Charter* served as a springboard for us to develop a self-assessment checklist to evaluate our own services in terms of gender sensitivity and focus. This tool has been incorporated into our work on Quality Frameworks more generally.

We continue to liaise with UKBA Scotland to develop and promote their play facility which we campaigned for.

Our Community Development team continue to support women-led refugee community organisations and to assist the Women's Strategy Group to develop and feed into the Refugee Policy Forum, thus ensuring that women seeking asylum are able to contribute to policy discussions and have a voice in policy and practice debates on immigration, health and housing.

The initial findings of our joint research on women's experiences of violence and health (led by London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine) have had positive media coverage including in a Scottish tabloid. We have raised the report with UKBA officials and with the Chief Inspector of UKBA. A Scottish parliamentary motion was tabled in support. We also used the report to brief a parliamentary debate raising the fact that the Scottish government's strategy to reduce violence against women does not refer to asylum-seeking women. Finally we produced a leaflet for asylum-seeking women stating the key findings and sources of advice and help.

Much of this work has been sustained and inspired by the *Charter* and we continue to reference this as an essential tool for ensuring that we and other agencies in Scotland understand and address the needs and experiences of women seeking asylum.

Helen Baillot
Senior Asylum Support Adviser
Scottish Refugee Council

Thank you very much indeed for taking the trouble to come to Lewes – you made the whole issue come alive for us: we will be endorsing the Charter and are thinking of how best to use our MP's influence in this sphere.

Lewes group in Support of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

What next for the *Charter*?

This overview of the actions undertaken under the *Charter of Rights of Women Seeking Asylum* clearly demonstrates that the *Charter* has enthused and motivated a wide range of organisations across the whole of the UK. By placing their work under the umbrella of the *Charter*, they enhance its profile and their influence. The *Charter* has also enabled endorsers to bring in funding for work specifically to do with women seeking asylum.

The *Charter* provides a unique model of partnership working. As a network of organisations with a common interest, it works informally rather than as a formal coalition. Although it is coordinated by the Women's Project at Asylum Aid, endorsers are free to banner their work under the *Charter* as they see fit. The *Charter* has a clear individual brand and *Charter* endorsers can use the Women's Asylum Charter logo without seeking permission. Despite the looseness of this arrangement, it is the framework that the *Charter* provides that makes the work for a gender sensitive asylum system so effective. For example, it made it possible to involve nearly twenty organisations in the UKBA/*Charter* engagement process within a very short timeframe.

It is also noticeable that the *Charter* has reached well beyond the dissemination lists of its endorsers. The Every Single Woman campaign has reached websites in all five continents. The campaign film has been seen numerous times and is still being requested. Perhaps the biggest public recognition is demonstrated in Asylum Aid's work on the *Charter* being highly commended by the UK's national Charity Awards in June 2010.

It is easy to attribute a campaign's influence when the wording of a new initiative comes directly from the campaign material. This was the case with the motion passed unanimously at the TUC Women's Conference. There was no liaison about this motion until just before the conference. This is another example of the *Charter* enthusing people and providing them with the material to take up an issue and progress it in their own way. The way is now open for us to work with the TUC Women's Section to help progress their resolution calling for UKBA to provide a gender sensitive asylum system.

The key practical impact of the *Charter*, which follows a campaign which had already been in progress in advance of the *Charter*'s launch, is one that has an immediate benefit for women seeking asylum. This is the fact that UKBA is now providing childcare during asylum interviews in three of its seven regions. This prevents women having to choose between telling of their traumatic experiences in front of their children or withholding information that could be relevant to their asylum claim. Both the UKBA Gender Champion and the UKBA Children's Champion have stated that this is an issue in which they take a keen interest. *Charter* endorsers will continue to lobby UKBA on this issue at both a national and a regional level.

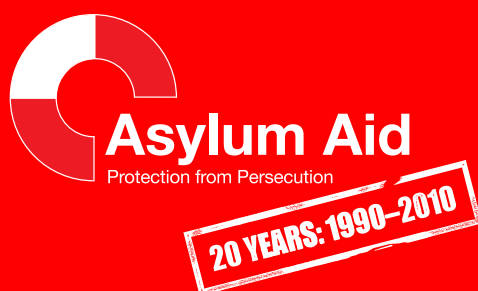
The draft cross-governmental strategy to end violence against women and girls omitted women seeking asylum completely. The fact that its final version did include mention of progress made by the UKBA in this area is likely to be due, at least in part, to the efforts of *Charter* endorsers. Although this mention was limited and did not include future plans, it demonstrates that UKBA is beginning to recognise that its work fits within this wider context. It is important that *Charter* endorsers continue to lobby to ensure that this recognition is extended so that the UKBA plays a stronger role in progressing this strategy. Again it is likely that the publication of this strategy just in advance of the launch of the Every Single Woman campaign was particularly significant to the campaign's success.

It was less than two months after the Every Single Woman campaign was launched that two major national impacts regarding gender issues occurred within the UKBA. As a key recommendation in the *Charter*, the appointment of a Gender Champion can be seen as a major success. Having a Gender Champion provides a focus for the strategic direction that UKBA can take on gender issues. The UKBA/*Charter* engagement process provides a mechanism for influencing UKBA at an operational level in relation to the asylum determination system, support and detention. Both these mechanisms mean that UKBA and *Charter* endorsers are better placed to make further improvements on issues that affect women seeking asylum and the progress made through these mechanisms will be keenly tracked by *Charter* endorsers.

Given these developments, now is a good time to look back to see how we have got to this point, and to renew our efforts to ensure that the progress made so far is capitalised upon. The UKBA has shown that it does take an interest in the *Charter*'s aim of a gender sensitive asylum system. This provides an opportunity for women seeking asylum and those of us who work alongside them, to ensure that the current enthusiasm and good intentions are not just rhetoric. Instead they must be converted into both strategic and practical changes that move towards providing an asylum system that is genuinely gender sensitive. Surely every single woman deserves this.

This report was written by Debora Singer and Caroline Chandler of Asylum Aid with contributions from a number of Charter supporters.

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Asylum Aid

Club Union House
253 – 254 Upper Street, London N1 1RY
Tel: 0207 354 9631 Fax: 0207 354 5620
info@asylumaid.org.uk
www.asylumaid.org.uk

Charity Number 328729 Company Number 2513874