

# Challenges for People Seeking Asylum

## **The Application Process**

The process, described by Les Allamby of the Law Centre as, 'a war of attrition', can include delays, difficulties with translation, and limited access to financial and social support. There can be high levels of fear and anxiety. People who have been tortured or abused find the questioning difficult. It is also hard for most people to back up their cases with evidence. Research has shown that people fleeing from repression often have difficulty in recalling the details of traumatic events. They do not make the best witnesses.

## **Fear**

People who have had to flee for their lives fear return to their home country. They may fear officials if they have suffered at the hands of their government. They also fear the shame of being put into jail-like detention when they have committed no criminal offence.

For more information see **Enforcement of Immigration & Asylum Legislation**

**Language:** The language barrier is a problem in the asylum application process and in developing a normal social life. The Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) uses volunteers to provide one-to-one teaching and will also access grants for Further Education English classes at Belfast Metropolitan College as people seeking asylum can rarely afford to pay for language classes. (In England, Scotland and Wales free classes are available to people seeking asylum and there is pressure from NGOs to allow that to happen here.) Volunteering can also help people to improve their English and feel more at home during the stressful period while their application is considered.

**Isolation:** Many people have lost all contact with friends and family and a way of life where they had worthwhile jobs and status. People here may not understand their culture.

**Harassment and Discrimination:** Most people will experience verbal abuse either on racial grounds, or because of the stigma attached to being 'an asylum seeker'. The sense of rejection can be powerful.

**Enforced Idleness:** Inactivity makes hours of anxiety seem longer, and people feel shame at living off the state, because most are not allowed to work during the asylum application process. Some find volunteering helpful.

**Poverty:** The basic allowances leave no leeway for emergencies, especially where there is none of the family support that exists for local people. There can also be administrative glitches that leave people temporarily without even enough to eat. There are people at different stages of the process who get no support at all and are forced to rely on charity. This destitution is a major cause for concern. (For allowances see: [http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/asylum/support/cashsupport/currentsupportamounts/.](http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/asylum/support/cashsupport/currentsupportamounts/))

**Exploitation:** Asylum applicants who work illegally, or failed applicants who stay and work in the underground economy are often exploited, in their working hours and the conditions in which they live and work. They are vulnerable to abuse by their employers.

**Negative attitudes towards people seeking asylum:** People have developed many myths about people seeking asylum and even the word 'asylum' provokes negative responses. People are made to feel unwanted and some are subject to racist attacks.

'I am made to feel as if I smell and there is zero tolerance for the non-existent smell of an asylum seeker. I escaped from Kenya because I wanted to live, but in Middlesbrough all I can think about is how much I want to die.'

Kamwaura Nygothi, a Kenyan business woman,  
on being 'dispersed' to Middlesbrough,  
*Guardian* 8 July 2004.

### **Health, Stress and Depression**

All the challenges can have consequences on health. Some people will be suffering from the after-effects of wounds and torture, or the death of relatives. Pre-existing illnesses and injuries may be made worse by poverty, living conditions and climate. Trauma and the worry about failing to achieve refugee status is an additional precondition for chronic depressive illness. It is widely accepted that having confidence in your place in society and a sense of self-esteem are plus factors in preventing suicide. Isolation, humiliation, destitution or racist attacks can be devastating. People seeking asylum have little control over their lives and helplessness and despair can take over.

Research among women seeking asylum in Scotland, published in September 2009, revealed that 57% were suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, 22 per cent had already attempted suicide, while one in five had considered ending their own life in the seven days prior to interview.

(See: [www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/Media\\_women](http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/Media_women) .)

An Institute of Race Relations report in 2006 catalogued 57 cases where people seeking asylum had killed themselves. (See: <http://tinyurl.com/yhq7457>.)

People who are detained in **Removal Centres** also come under severe stress. In 2004 it was noted that 10 people had taken their own lives in UK removal centres since 2000. (See: <http://www.irr.org.uk/2004/july/ak000016.html> .)