



WOMEN FOR REFUGEE WOMEN

Our year: 2019-2020

Women for Refugee Women has a vision that every woman who comes to the UK in search of safety will get a fair hearing and the chance to rebuild her life with dignity.

The women we work with have fled persecution including rape and torture. Too often, instead of finding safety here in the UK, refugee women struggle to access the protection they need. Many become homeless, hungry and at risk of abuse, and others are locked up in immigration detention.

Against this backdrop of huge challenges, we are continually inspired by the courage and creativity of asylum-seeking women who speak out and advocate for a fairer world for all women. This year, we have seen growing energy and solidarity among asylum-seeking women in the UK.

This brief review of the year shares some of our highlights from April 2019 to March 2020, as well as an update on how we are adapting our work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our work with refugee women

We believe that if we [empower](#) refugee women to tell their own stories, we are able to [influence](#) new audiences, build support for a fairer asylum process and make real [change](#).

Empower

Empowering women who have sought asylum in the UK is the heart of our work. We support women who are seeking refuge from persecution, including rape and torture, to rebuild their lives and communicate their own needs and stories.

Building confidence and skills

Women for Refugee Women provides [activities](#) aimed at building women's skills and confidence to over 100 women every week in London, including English classes, yoga, advice, and a support group for LGBT women. We build pathways for asylum-seeking and refugee women to become advocates in the key areas that concern them. This year we enabled 12 women to participate in a [short course](#) on public speaking and storytelling with Ginger Public Speaking. We continued to run our successful drama workshops weekly which are a great source of solidarity and empowerment for 35 women. The London Refugee Women's Forum, our campaigning group, met regularly to develop their skills around speaking to the media and policy makers.

As well as specific training in small groups, we created opportunities for women across our large London network to come together and build relationships with one another. Once a month we ran a General Meeting for around 60 women, covering topics like sexual and reproductive health, climate change and feminism. In July 2019, we took over 100 women on a trip to the seaside for a wonderful day of fun and relaxation.

82% of women in our network say that they are more comfortable sharing their opinions since joining us.

Our empowerment work continues to provide support for very vulnerable women, and also to provide pathways for women to speak out. Our most recent evaluation, carried out in summer 2019, showed high levels of satisfaction among women who come to our activities. 82% of women say that they feel more comfortable sharing their opinions since joining us and 84% say that they have learned more about their rights as a woman seeking asylum since joining us.

The National Refugee Women's Conference in Birmingham brought together over 250 refugee women and their supporters.

Photo: Sara Sakharkar



Connecting refugee women

Our work at the grassroots during this year was strengthened through our regional partnerships. We have built a strong network with a number of organisations across the UK, including [Women Asylum Seekers Together Manchester](#), Women with Hope in Birmingham, [Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group](#) and [Refugee Women Connect](#) in Liverpool. During this year we worked closely with these organisations to build the confidence and skills of refugee and asylum-seeking women through workshops on campaigning and movement building.

We worked with these organisations and others on a large-scale research project to explore women's experiences of living destitute in the UK. We also worked with them to shape a new campaign against the destitution of women who have sought asylum in the UK. This campaign, [Sisters Not Strangers](#), was launched at a conference in Birmingham attended by over 200 asylum-seeking women in February 2020. The campaign continued on [International Women's Day](#) when women gathered in ten cities across the UK to sing songs of welcome for refugee women. Our work has enabled more refugee and asylum-seeking women to speak out about the issues that concern them, and to build confidence in trying to make change.

“Women for Refugee Women has given me a lot of hope. I can now speak for myself. I can now think for myself.”

On International Women's Day 2020, refugee women and their supporters gathered in ten cities across the UK to sing together and show solidarity.



Influence

Women for Refugee Women works through the mainstream media, digital media, creative projects and events to bring the voices and experiences of refugee women to wide audiences, in order to build empathy.

This year, we managed to ensure that refugee women's stories were told widely, gaining strong coverage in a range of outlets across the mainstream and digital media. We worked with individual women to build their confidence and ensure that sharing their story in the media was a positive and empowering experience. For our report on destitution, eight women went on to share their stories in detail with journalists, including for a feature in the [Guardian](#), a radio segment on [BBC Woman's Hour](#), a first-person article in the [Telegraph](#) and a filmed piece for [BBC London](#).

“Sharing my story made me feel strong. I thought, ‘Hear what I have survived, look how far I have come, know that there must be change!’”

We also found creative ways for women to share their powerful stories safely. The women who shared their stories for our report on Chinese women who had been trafficked to the UK and then detained at Yarl's Wood were not able to speak out individually for their own safety, so we worked with the actor Jing Lusi to produce a [short film](#) that told a composite story of a few of these women. We also ran a photography project with five asylum-seeking women in London to record their experiences of destitution, with photographer Sarah Hickson. This project enabled women who were less confident in speaking publicly to portray their lives on their own terms.

This year we participated in more than 20 events to reach new audiences, including at the Bloomberg Equality Summit, UK Black Pride and CARE International's March4Women. Our drama group performed their 'A Day in our Lives' play at the Southbank Centre and the Royal Central School for Speech and Drama's 'Collisions' Festival. We are glad that many refugee women's voices were heard at these events.

Our drama group, Refugee Women's Voice, performing at the 'Collisions' Festival.

Photo: Holly Revell



Change

Despite the challenges that lie ahead, we believe that if we build solidarity we will be able to create genuine and long-lasting change for refugee women. We therefore continued our research and policy work to challenge two key injustices experienced by many refugee women in the UK: detention and destitution.

Detention

This year we continued the [Set Her Free](#) campaign against the detention of asylum-seeking women in the UK. In July we published an important report on the detention of Chinese trafficked women, [From one hell to another](#), showing that the government continues to detain women who have been trafficked, despite their own policy that states this should not happen. Jess Phillips MP led a Westminster Hall debate in Parliament on this vital issue.

As a result of the advocacy undertaken by us and other organisations, the number of people locked up in detention continued to fall this year. Indeed, since the start of the Set Her Free campaign the number of women held in Yarl's Wood has fallen by two-thirds. In 2014, when the campaign began, there were more than 300 women locked up in Yarl's Wood. By the end of December 2019, this had reduced to 92.

However, women seeking asylum are still being locked up under this inhumane and unnecessary policy. We will continue to campaign for the closure of Yarl's Wood and the abolition of all immigration detention.

The Home Office needs to recognise that immigration detention is harmful, costly and completely purposeless; quite simply, nothing justifies its continuing use.

- Jess Phillips MP

Screenshot from our video with actor Jing Lusi that tells the story of Chinese women who were trafficked to the UK and then detained at Yarl's Wood.

Video: Fran Freeman



I was taken from one hell to another.

Destitution

In February we published a large-scale report on the experiences of women who are forced into destitution after seeking asylum, [Will I ever be safe?](#) The research for this report was participatory and was carried out with the active support of partners in Birmingham, Coventry, Manchester, Dudley, Cardiff and Swansea. It explored the experiences of over 100 asylum-seeking women and showed how women who have already fled violence and persecution are made homeless, hungry and vulnerable to further abuse through being forced into destitution. We were very heartened by the response of the media to this report, which was helped by the bravery of individual women who spoke out and told their stories, and the support of many other organisations.

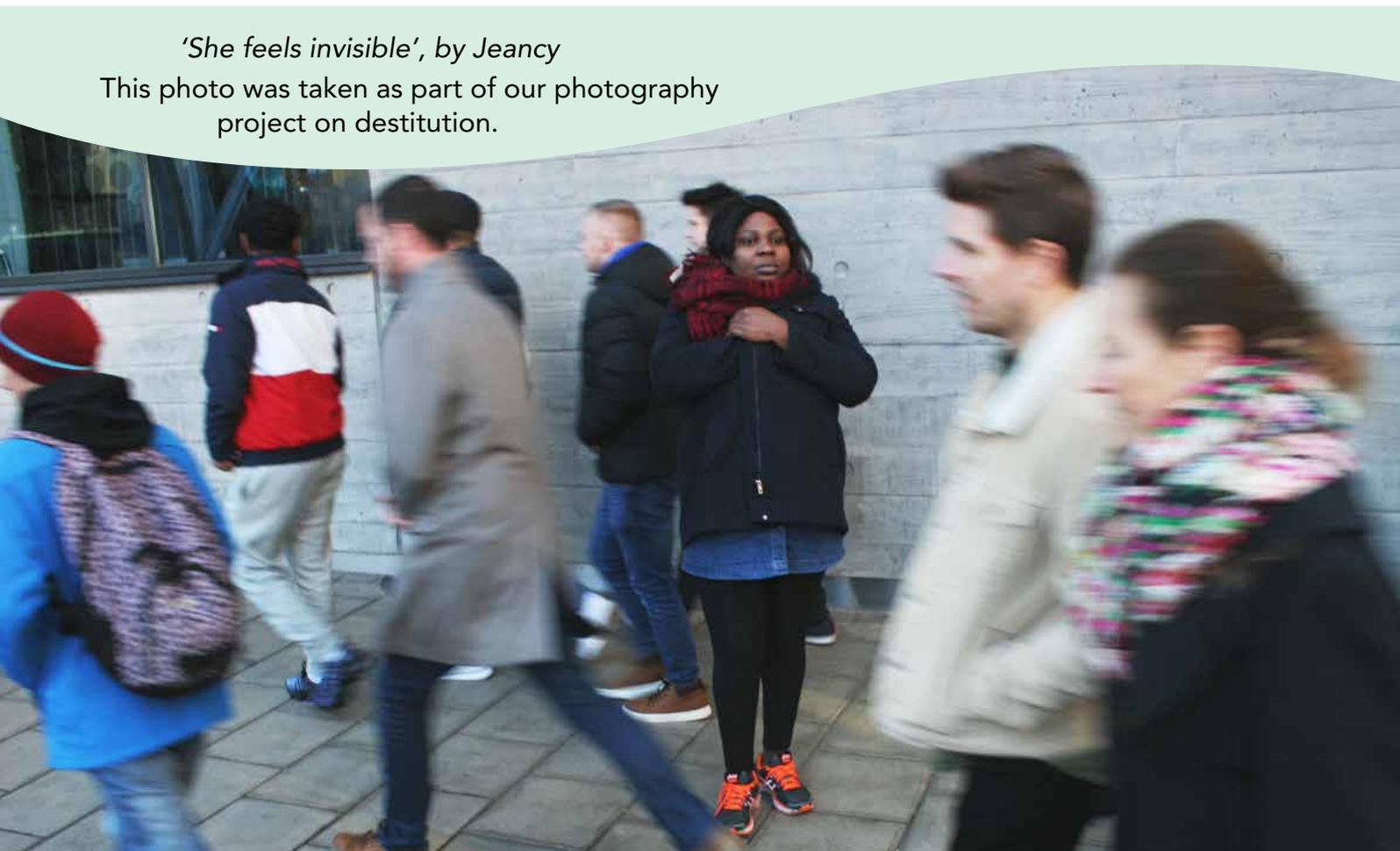
“Being destitute can make you feel that you are not being treated like a human. But now I know that I am not alone.”

We then laid the foundations for a new campaign against women’s destitution, [Sisters Not Strangers](#). In February, we organised the National Refugee Women’s Conference in Birmingham alongside our partners in Manchester, Birmingham and Coventry. Over 200 asylum-seeking women came together with supporters to build solidarity and energy for the new campaign against destitution among women seeking asylum. Zarah Sultana MP and Jess Phillips MP spoke at the conference, and all the workshops and panels were led by asylum-seeking women.

The conference planned actions for International Women’s Day, and ten cities eventually participated in holding [circles of sisterhood](#) for the Sisters Not Strangers campaign, in which refugee women and supporters sang songs of welcome. In London, this took place at the start of the March4Women in Whitehall. The evidence we uncovered for the research report, and the solidarity we are building through our networking with regional grassroots groups and other organisations in the sector, form the basis for ongoing advocacy to challenge the forced destitution of women seeking asylum.

‘She feels invisible’, by Jeancy

This photo was taken as part of our photography project on destitution.



Adjusting to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic

The outbreak of Coronavirus is hitting the women we work with particularly hard, exacerbating the difficulties they already faced. Women are struggling to meet their basic needs and are particularly isolated as many do not have access to technology. Alongside other organisations in the UK, Women for Refugee Women has had to adapt quickly to new ways of working.

Empower

In order to empower women to be in a position where they feel they can progress their asylum claims, know their rights and speak out about their experiences, it is first essential that women can meet their most basic needs and are able to stay connected.

On Monday 16 March, we had to make the sad decision to suspend our face-to-face activities, but we are rapidly adapting to continue to support refugee women in other ways:

 Regular calls to 300+ refugee women in our London network	 Hardship grants so women can meet their basic needs	 Quality telephone advice on women's asylum claims
 Telephone counselling support for isolated women	 Referrals to other sources of support like food banks	 Improving access to technology & ability to stay connected

As well as the day to day support that we are able to offer the women in our London network, we are also continuing our work to build women's confidence, and to support a wider network of women's groups throughout the UK.



Our drama group, Rainbow Sisters group and London Refugee Women's Forum campaigning group are meeting weekly over video calls to share solidarity and continue to develop their creative work and campaigns.

We are supporting other grassroots women's groups across the UK to safely continue their vital work in their communities, with financial support and group calls.

Influence and Change

Alongside the work at the grassroots, we also continue our communications and advocacy in order to ensure that women's experiences are heard by supporters and wider audiences.

We continue to support women inside Yarl's Wood detention centre, connect them with lawyers and advocate for their release into safe accommodation. The majority of women who were detained have now been released.

We continue to ensure that refugee women's voices can be heard by working with the mainstream media. Recently we have spoken out on [BBC Breakfast](#), [BBC Woman's Hour](#) and in the [Independent](#) the [Daily Mail](#) and the [Metro](#).

We are working with other organisations in the sector on calls for change, and continue to engage with policy makers. For instance, we have submitted evidence about the impact of the pandemic on refugee women to Parliamentary committees.

In these ways we hope to sustain our work during this challenging and unpredictable period.

We could not have achieved this without you.

Thank you for your generosity, which enables us to support refugee women to rebuild their lives in safety and dignity.

Support refugee women through the coronavirus pandemic

We have supported women who have been made homeless during the pandemic, women who do not have the money to feed their children and women who are too afraid to access the healthcare they desperately need. And now we need your help to continue to support refugee women through the ongoing pandemic and beyond. [Please support our current appeal.](#)

Fundraise at home

We've been encouraged by all the creative and fun ways supporters have put their talents and free time to use to support refugee women during this difficult time.

From virtual pub quizzes and online yoga classes, to art sales, live-streamed music events and donating the cost of the usual weekly commute. If there's something you'd like to do to support refugee and asylum-seeking women, contact Carezza, carezza@refugeewomen.co.uk

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