

Getting gender on the agenda: personal reflections on the Women's Project at Asylum Aid

By Debora Singer MBE

Introduction

When the Women's Project suggested providing childcare during asylum interviews, the Home Office laughed. Now they provide childcare across the UK.

When we suggested female asylum seekers be automatically allocated female interviewers for their asylum interviews, the Home Office said this was operationally impossible. Now they tell us that their pilot in Glasgow proved very successful.



Debora Singer MBE

Over its twenty years, the Women's Project (formerly the Refugee Women's Resource Project) at Asylum Aid has been unique in focusing solely on asylum decision making from a feminist perspective. It has also provided a model for working on women's issues within a mainstream organization.

The Refugee Women's Resource Project

By the time I joined, RWRP was nearly 5 years old and had a high profile within the refugee sector. The RWRP was set up at Asylum Aid in 2000 by the Refugee Women's Legal Group (RWLG). This was a group of refugee women, academics, lawyers and practitioners, including Asylum Aid's caseworker, Monireh Moftizadeh (front row, second from left), herself a refugee.



The Refugee Women's Legal Group

The RWRP had a range of functions:

- providing legal advice and representation to women applying for asylum
- asylum support advice for women
- researching and campaigning on issues related to women seeking asylum
- training on women's asylum issues
- producing country information on domestic violence
- circulating a monthly newsletter, Women's Asylum News

The RWRP started with three staff and by the time I joined there were six whole-time equivalents.

What about the men?

Every so often my colleagues and I would be asked: what about the men?

The answer lies in the Refugee Convention. Written after the Second World War and the Holocaust as the Iron Curtain descended over Europe, it is a product of its time. The idea of a refugee was of a white heterosexual male persecuted for his political activities.

Following the work of many feminists such as Heaven Crawley, and the production of gender guidelines by UNHCR, the idea that the Refugee Convention could be interpreted in a gender-sensitive manner began to be accepted. As the RWRP's first caseworker, Monireh was involved in ground breaking work on cases of women who had experienced gender-based persecution such as FGM.

Women are more likely than men to experience gender-based persecution such as rape, sexual and domestic violence, FGM and forced marriage. Despite happening in the private rather than the public sphere this can be considered to fall within the Refugee Convention, as long as there is no state protection and the reason for the persecution is due to one of the Refugee Convention grounds. However this type of experience is harder to evidence and there is no ground for gender in the Refugee Convention.

So decision making in women's asylum claims is particularly complex and most claims are refused on the basis of credibility.

The Women's Project at Asylum Aid

The focus of the Women's Project is very specifically on decision-making in the asylum process. It does not include other areas of women asylum seekers' lives such as why they were forced to flee, their journeys, their accommodation, finance and support or their integration in the UK. I believe it is this very narrow focus that has made the project successful. We were able to develop an expertise on these topics on both the legal and policy front. RWRP's original policy work had focused on trafficking but, as this was a crowded policy field, I decided that it would be more effective if our research and policy focused on women seeking asylum and decision making, where there was no equivalent ongoing work.



The project benefitted from its niche status but after a few years there were tensions in being a separate project. Also the RWRP had succeeded in imbuing the whole of Asylum Aid with gender sensitivity. We decided to mainstream the women's legal work into Asylum Aid as a whole. Meanwhile our research and policy continued to focus on women's issues. We were able to maintain our women's specialism partly because Asylum Aid's external profile was very closely associated with this specialty and also because we had specific funding for both legal and policy work focusing on women. This specialist but integrated model was unusual and was I believe a key feature of our success. Women in Crisis replicated this model at the Red Cross in London.

A few years later we decided that our name had become confusing so we became the Women's Project at Asylum Aid.

Over subsequent years, reduction in funding meant the loss of research and legal policy capacity in the Women's Project. Most recently I have been the only directly employed member of the Women's Project and we have brought in consultants to undertake research work. This has resulted in a reduction in how much research we could do and a gap in legal analysis. At the same time we have benefited from dedicated input from Asylum Aid's communications staff.

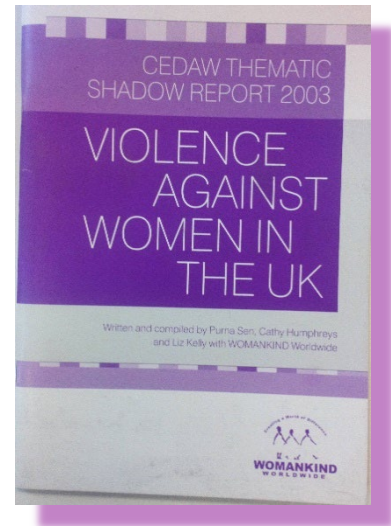
Drawing on two constituencies

Following its setting up, the Women's Project very quickly became a trusted and respected source of expertise.

As a project that provides services to and campaigns for and with women seeking asylum, the Women's Project has two constituencies to draw on:

- the refugee sector
- the violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector

Having a foot in both sectors means we can contribute to and build support from both sectors. We support the refugee sector by providing coordination of work on women's asylum issues. We support the VAWG sector with information on how women asylum seekers escape VAWG in their countries. In return each sector strengthens our work.



Research

By publishing research on an annual basis the Women's Project creates strong evidence for advocacy. Due to concerns about confidentiality, this research proved more valuable than obtaining evidence from our legal team. We seldom produced research without an accompanying advocacy strategy.

Advocacy model

The advocacy model we developed for our campaigns has three targets:

- influencing the Home Office through policy and lobbying work
- influencing lawyers through sharing research and information
- empowering women seeking asylum by informing them of their rights.

This model ensures that reports are not simply left for the Home Office to choose whether or not to implement recommendations. By knowing the rights of women seeking asylum both the women themselves and their lawyers can be making demands which also put pressure on the Home Office.



Information is power. Alongside our research we produced practical tools to help women understand their rights and build confidence. For example this leaflet about the asylum process which we translated into ten languages.

Policy work

Originally we had limited contact with Home Office officials. However, by the time we published *Unsustainable: the quality of initial decision making in women’s asylum claims* we were trusted well enough for the civil servants to take the recommendations on board. This resulted in the Home Office introducing training on gender issues and disaggregating statistics on overturns on appeal for the first time. It also meant that our campaigns became more successful as we built relationships with the people we were trying to influence.

The project’s reach included giving evidence at the Home Affairs Select Committee, contributing to recommendations of the European Parliament, and being quoted in a report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.



Visit of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. Left-right: Yakin Ertuk (UN Special Rapporteur), Hannah Siddiqui (Southall Black Sisters), and Debora Singer (RWRP)

Charter of Rights of Women Seeking Asylum

In 2008, Asylum Aid's Director, Maurice Wren, and I set up the *Charter of Rights of Women Seeking Asylum*. This was to try to overcome the piecemeal implementation of women's policy – the Home Office didn't seem to understand the overarching nature of gender. As just one example, a woman with children was booked in for her interview in Cardiff on a Wednesday despite childcare being available on a Tuesday.



The Charter proved phenomenally successful as a framework for work on women's asylum issues and creating strategic significance across the whole asylum sector. It raised the profile of these issues and provided a mechanism to create a network of 360 organisations including grassroots groups, refugee charities, women's and faith groups, and unions to support new campaigns and enable cooperation and coordination.

The Charter had its own logo, separate from Asylum Aid's, and nobody needed to ask my permission to use it. This resulted in organic developments and enabled organisations to take ownership of the Charter and use it to their advantage. For example, Medical Justice ran the list of Charter supporters over the front of their report demanding the end to the detention of pregnant women because this was a Charter demand.

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

Jonathan Ellis, Advocacy Campaigns Director

However during its first year the Charter did not cause any changes in the asylum system. It took the Every Single Women campaign to get the first Charter demand implemented – when the Home Office appointed a Gender Champion. It varied as to how effective this role was, but it was particularly useful for the Protection Gap campaign. Running campaigns under the Charter meant we had an easily reachable group of supporters to draw on – whether just through the numbers of supporters, or organisations like the TUC or Fawcett Society publishing our blogs, or through coordinated approaches.

Partnership

For about a decade a number of posts focusing on policy on women's asylum issues were funded by Comic Relief in a range of NGOs, including Refugee Council, Scottish Refugee Council, Asylum Support Appeals Project and Rights of Women. This made a natural coalition of people to work with more closely. This strategic funding provided the capacity for increasing the rights of women seeking asylum. However although the sector gained dedicated policy resources, it lost the contributions of refugee women, who had been fitting in policy work around their frontline work.

Campaigns

Prior to joining Asylum Aid, I had worked for ten years at Victim Support. Because of this, I was very aware of the gap between how victims of sexual and domestic violence were treated within the criminal justice system and how victims of the same abuses were treated by the asylum system. All three campaigns we ran under the Charter were based on this comparison. This created a rationale that was easily understood and hard to undermine.



Each of our campaigns got more focused and therefore more successful as time went on. Every Single Woman had quite vague demands. The Missed Out campaign had specific demands for actions to be included in the Government's VAWG strategy but did not follow up with the need to implement these actions. The Protection Gap campaign had very specific practical demands which we required to be implemented.

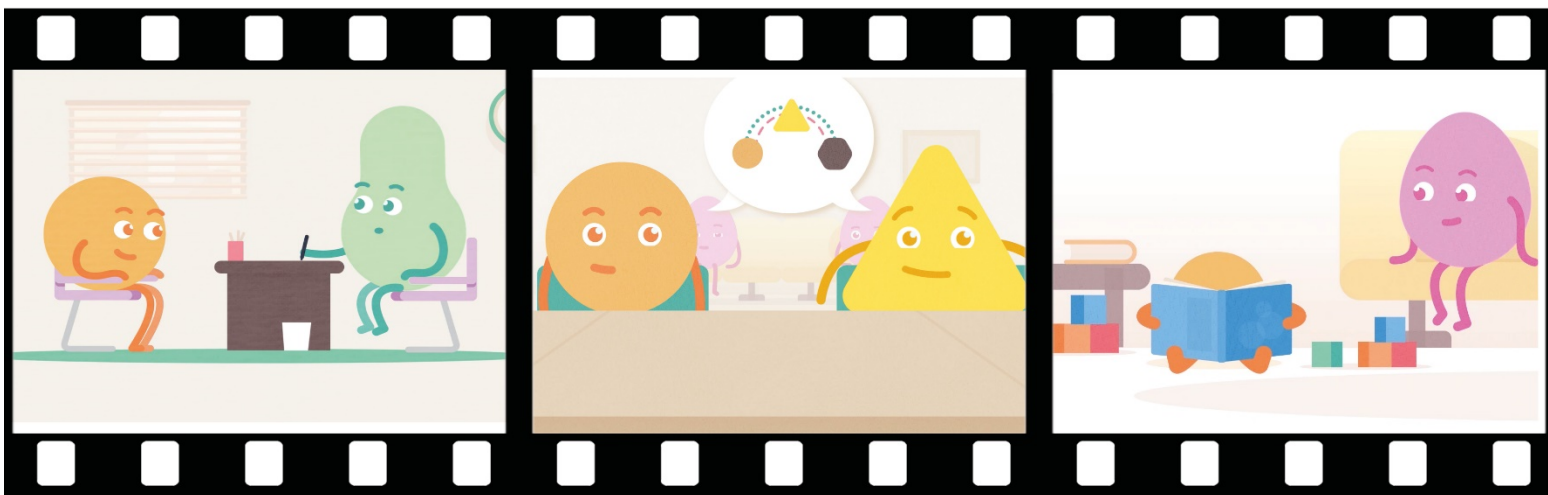
Childcare campaign

The childcare campaign resulted in our key impact – childcare during asylum interviews for parents with young children. The campaign went through a number of formats. Starting as a standalone campaign, it got rolled into the Charter and finally the Protection Gap campaign. Initiated by Kat Banyard from Northern Refugee Centre, the campaign was aimed at getting regional directors to provide childcare in their offices. It relied on NGOs with local contacts to lobby for this. Eventually the target became central policy and after 11 years the Home Office announced they were providing childcare during asylum interviews across the UK. We invited the Home Office to our celebration in the hope that their public commitment to childcare will make it more likely to become business as usual when the EU funding runs out at the end of 2020.

Soon after childcare at asylum interviews went national, we ran a short campaign to get childcare during screening interviews involving the Protection Gap Advocates in a lobby of parliament. Although this raised awareness of the need, it failed to obtain its objective.

Advocacy on appeals

Our advocacy on appeals, following our research *Through her eyes, enabling best evidence in UK women's asylum appeals*, again fitted our three-part advocacy model. Jointly with the University of Exeter, we produced an animation based on both our research findings to support asylum appellants when they go to their appeals. We disseminated this via grassroots groups, NGOs and lawyers. We also sent the research report and film to senior judges who agreed to share these with immigration judges.



Scenes from 'Going to Appeal', an animated film giving asylum applicants information they need to understand and prepare for the appeals process.

Empowerment

The evaluation I undertook after the postcard phase of the Protection Gap campaign showed those most involved in the campaign were women with lived experience of the asylum process. Due to this, we set up the Protection Gap Advocates (PGAs), a group of refugee (and later also asylum seeking) women who supported the campaign. Many PGAs are already human rights activists with skills and experience in campaigning. From the beginning they chose to use their experience to inform women currently seeking asylum of their rights. Thus rights obtained through policy work are promoted through women with experience of the asylum process, resulting in greater awareness and uptake. This is another example of our three-part advocacy model.

Unlike many similar groups, the PGAs are a campaign group, not a support group. When they speak in public it is about the campaign, not their personal stories. Also the PGAs support a campaign already in existence so this is not a traditional grassroots campaign.



The PGAs produced a short film, 'From Us to You' where they offer practical tips to other women going through the asylum process.

I feel emotional that this film [From Us to You], plus the trauma and ordeal that I and other women faced at our asylum interview, is being addressed by Home Office.

Protection Gap Advocate

PGAs also serve on the Women's Project Advisory Committee and research committees. These committees have a huge impact in widening the scope of the work and bringing in external advice and contacts. Bringing in experts by experience proved much more successful once I involved individual Protection Gap Advocates with whom I had already built a relationship.

Creativity and innovation

When I wrote a play highlighting the barriers faced by women in the asylum system, *Random Acts*, people assumed I had done this in my spare time. In fact I wrote it sitting in the office. Asylum Aid's openness to creativity has been a key part of my experience at the Women's Project. In addition such initiatives have been far further reaching than we could have imagined.

Originally planned as a production for our AGM, the film of *Random Acts* is used for training immigration officers and judges as far away as Russia and New Zealand. Similarly I converted an academic chapter I wrote on credibility into a more accessible film, *Falling at each hurdle, credibility assessments in women's asylum claims*. Following the three-part model, this included a policy, legal and expert by experience viewpoint.



Filming of 'Random Acts'

[Random Acts] is a wonderful exposure of many of the gender issues which arise in refugee determination. It will be an essential training tool for refugee decision-makers.

Rodger Haines QC, New Zealand Refugee Status Appeals Authority

Funding

The Women's Project benefitted from a long period of steady funding from Comic Relief. When this ended and their new strategy did not include our issues, we did not obtain funding from other sources, other than one short term grant. By then the funding for many of our partners focusing on women and asylum in other NGOs had also fallen away.

Evaluation

A reflective session by the Women's Project Advisory Committee held in June 2019 noted the success of:

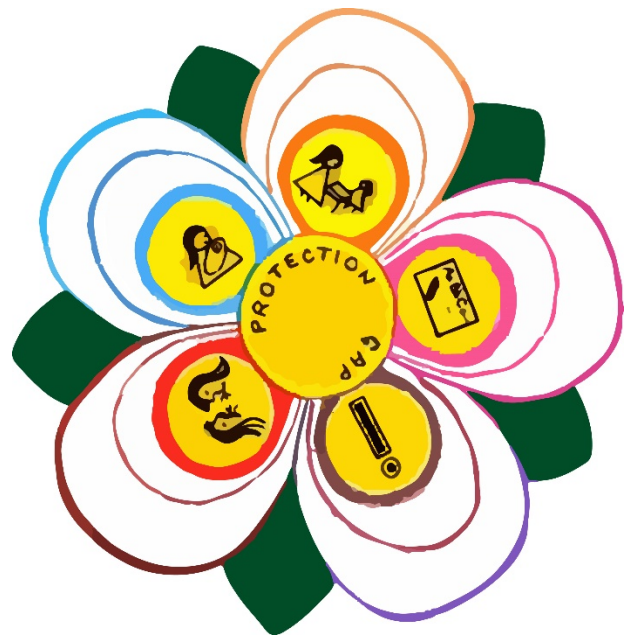
- engaging with policy through a cooperative approach
- collaboration with stakeholders
- genuine involvement of women seeking asylum at all stages
- engaging diverse expertise (interdisciplinary approach)
- focus and persistence

In terms of external recognition, the Women's Project won the Emma Humphreys Memorial Prize in 2006 and the Charity Awards 2019 for Campaigning and Advocacy for our childcare campaign.

What next

We have only completed half of one petal of the Protection Gap campaign (childcare during asylum interviews). The other demands remain on the Home Office's asylum gender action plan awaiting implementation:

- childcare during asylum screening interviews,
- gender matching of women interviewers and interpreters to women asylum applicants,
- training for decision makers and interpreters on how sexual violence and trauma affects memory,
- counselling,
- information on women's rights.



Our research showed how inappropriate it is to have children present during asylum appeals. The most pressing issue in relation to tribunals is therefore the need for childcare provision. As the Home Office can provide childcare during interviews, it should be possible to have childcare at hearing centres during appeals.



Princess Adenike Lawson, PGA (right) and Debora Singer MBE (left) with the Charity Award 2019 for Advocacy and Campaigning.

Conclusion

Twenty years after the Women's Project was initiated at Asylum Aid, it has demonstrated what a small project within a small organization can do with limited resources by working in partnership. It has shown how a niche issue can be progressed despite mainstreaming into an organisation with a wider focus.

Its successes include getting gender onto the agenda of both the Home Office and other NGOs. There is much greater recognition that women going through the asylum process should not be marginalised.

We salute the many impacts for women gained through other NGOs, particularly relating to domestic violence, pregnancy and health.

The practical impacts in the field of asylum decision making that we have spearheaded, such as women being asked their preference for female interviewers and interpreters and provision of childcare at asylum interviews, will have huge benefits for women seeking protection in the UK.

It has been a privilege to lead the project over its past 15 years.



Members of the Protection Gap Advocates and Women Asylum Seekers Together Manchester at the launch of the Protection Gap Campaign in Sheffield.