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**DISABLED STUDENT LABELLED A 'CURSE' BY FAMILY TO BE SENT TO YARL'S WOOD
DETENTION CENTRE**

Kelechi Chioba moved to the UK as a postgraduate student in 2011

Exclusive: Legal representatives have raised 'serious concerns' for Ms Chioba's physical and mental wellbeing should she be sent to the detention centre

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A disabled student who was beaten and abused by her own family in Nigeria could be sent to the UK's most notorious detention centre while she waits to hear whether she faces deportation.

Kelechi Chioba, an asylum seeker who suffers from polio and mental health problems, was told she would be

sent to [Yarl's Wood Detention Centre](#) this month.

The 36-year-old scholar says her family believe she is a “curse” and that it is not safe for her to return home as a disabled queer person.



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Her legal representatives expect to hear whether or not she will be detained from Tuesday, but the decision has been delayed repeatedly over the past few weeks.

Ms Chioba said that “having been a victim of sexual abuse”, she was particularly concerned by reports of sexual violence towards inmates in Yarl’s Wood.

Speaking to *The Independent* ahead of the decision, she said: “I’m so scared, I don’t know what’s going to happen.

“I’m worried I will be abused because I’ve heard of so much of that going on in these places, and I won’t get the support I need as a disabled person.

“My mental health will suffer as a result because I will lose the support. It will be like being shut off from the world.”

A full time wheelchair user, Ms Chioba requires a number of different medications and relies on daily support from carers.

“I have scoliosis and it gives me pain all over my body every single day. That’s the problem I have – it’s hard for me to cope with normal activities, like getting myself dressed and cleaning up after myself.



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Using her life's savings to fund her education, she moved to Britain in 2011 to study for a postgraduate degree in health and social care at the University of Wolverhampton.

Ms Chioba was forced to suspend her studies in 2014, after undergoing a series of operations and further decline in her mental health. She applied for asylum the same year.

In 2015 the Home Office rejected her plea, telling her there was "nothing sufficiently serious in the family or private life circumstances that could possibly outweigh the need for immigration controls to be enforced".

On 20 March when reporting to the Home Office, she received a notice of Liability to Removal and was told she could be detained upon her next contact.

Her legal representatives have raised serious concerns that the detention centre will not be able to cater for Ms Chioba's health needs, however.

In a statement, Duncan Lewis solicitors said: "Kelechi is a woman who is passionate about fighting for the rights of the most vulnerable.

"We will now fight for her right to stay in the United Kingdom where she can be open about her sexuality free from persecution and free to continue her activism as a Black LGBT Disabled Representative.



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"Kelechi has been told she will be detained, something which has caused her significant psychiatric distress.

"We strongly believe that she is not suitable for detention and will do whatever we can to prevent this."

Two years ago, the chief inspector of prisons called Yarl's Wood a "place of national concern" following allegations of sexual abuse and intimidation of the women detained there.

Female detainees made six allegations of sexual assault against staff over a three-year period, it was reported.

A spokesperson for Serco said at the time that it takes any allegations "extremely seriously" but that there had been "no incidents of sexual abuse" in the period.

Speaking to *The Independent*, Medical Justice – a charity offering medical help to those held in immigration detention -- told of a "much wider problem" around how people with disabilities are treated and cared for in UK detention centres.

Emma Ginn, a spokesperson for the charity, said the group had assisted with a number of incidences where disabled detainees had suffered inadequate healthcare.

Examples included immobile detainees who had been denied a wheelchair, resulting in them not being able to get to the healthcare unit to see a nurse or doctor to get their medication.

"Some have gone hungry as they have been unable to get to the dining hall and fellow detainees have been stopped from taking food to them in their room," Ms Ginn added.

"A lack of mobility aids in their room has meant that some disabled detainees have not been able to properly use washing and toilet facilities."

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The charity, which receives around 1,000 referrals for detainees each year, also reported incidences where disabled detainees had been taken to the airport for removal from the UK without a wheelchair.

“These issues risk deterioration of both disabled detainees’ physical and mental health,” said Ms Ginn.

Speaking exclusively to *The Independent*, Ms Chioba said: “It was difficult to apply for asylum. To be honest I didn’t know anything about it, I didn’t know what it meant.

“But then someone explained to me that it was there to protect people who had been abused – which I had.”

As a student Ms Chioba said she was encouraged to apply for asylum early on, but she chose not as this would have interfered with her studies.

As an international student, she did not need asylum to remain in the UK – but when her health problems forced her to suspend her education, she no longer had the protection of student residency.

“The reason I hadn’t wanted to apply sooner was because I was told I would not have been allowed to continue my studies as an asylum seeker,” she explained, “it was all my life’s savings and I couldn’t throw that down the drain.”

But now, she says she is “penniless” and has lost her education too: “What does that leave me?”



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In 2015, more than 1,000 people signed a Change.org [petition](#) set up by students urging the Home Office to reconsider Kelechi's plea for asylum.

Fundraisers are said to have helped pay for her previous legal costs, as well as food and medicine.

But despite waiting more than two years for a verdict, the activist, who currently lives in Home Office accommodation, said she would go through it all again rather than be forced to return to Nigeria.

"Life as a disabled person in Nigeria is crazy bad," she said. "It's tough. I went through a lot because my family told me I was a curse, that I brought curse to the family and damaged the family's name.

"My mother was having problems with my dad, who was violent. He beat her up because he said she gave him a disabled child. She transferred that anger onto me and beat me."

If she were to return to Nigeria, where homosexuality is illegal, Ms Chioba says could be killed for her views and LGBT rights activism.

Homosexual relationships are punishable by up to 14 years in prison in Nigeria, and recent figures show a spike in violence against LGBT people in the country.

Despite the resistance she has faced, Ms Chioba said she hopes to become a British citizen and use her experiences to help other victims of violence.

"I'm someone who believes that disability is not the same as incapability," she said.

"I believe that I can do things with my life. I want to make a change, I want to progress. When I came to the UK the education system inspired me to become an activist.

"Thanks to the freedoms this culture offers me, I now have the courage to talk about what happened to me, and I want to help other victims of violence and abuse to talk about their experiences."

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She said she has volunteered in hospitals as part of her degree course and hopes one day to complete her studies and train as a social worker.

"Getting a degree will push me forward in life. I want to contribute to society and I want to contribute to the economy," she added.

Commenting on the case, Malia Bouattia, the president of the NUS, said: "I have known Kelechi for many years and she has been such a dedicated activist even when her own life and future is under threat.

"The government's hostile policies ruin the lives of so many and we can't stand by and watch this happen. I fear for Kelechi's life should she be detained or deported and call upon the movement and communities to please support Kelechi."

A Home Office spokesperson said the department did not routinely comment on individual cases, but added: "The UK has a proud history of granting asylum to those who need our protection. Each claim is carefully considered on its individual merits." ●

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