



Women at Yarl's Wood IRC plea for help, November 2017. Image: Novara Media, YouTube (CC)

Women starve for their basic humanity in IRCs



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Immigration Removal Centres are the shame of Britain, Katie McQue reports

Being gay in Uganda can cost you your life. It can also mean torture and life in prison, because of the African nation's extreme anti-homosexual laws. So when Theresa's family and husband found out she is a lesbian, she had no choice but to flee the country for fear of reprisals. The most violent threats came from her husband.

Theresa, 34, decided to fly to the UK to seek asylum, and she's lived there for the last two years. The past three months, however, she has been detained in Yarl's Wood women's Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) in Bedford, southern England. Her application for asylum denied and appeal rights exhausted, the British government intends to deport her to Uganda.

'The Home Office says they want me to prove I am gay. How, I don't know. They say they don't believe I'm gay. How are gay people supposed to look? They have a stereotype in their mind,' she says, during a telephone interview with the **New Internationalist**. 'My life is in danger in Uganda.'

Leaving the East African nation in the first place was unimaginably difficult.

Theresa had a good and stable job working in customer services for an

international bank. She also

has a daughter, who is almost five-years-old and lives with relatives in Uganda. Theresa tries to phone her when she can. But in their latest call her little girl didn't remember who she was.

We walk the same corridors and see the same walls every day. I'm locked up and it feels like there is no way out

Theresa is one of [more than 100 women](#) in Yarl's Wood that have been on a hunger strike since 21 February, protesting the conditions in which they are being held.

The [women's demands are clear](#):

end indefinite detention, and a 28 day limit for people for people held in an IRC; for the human rights of refugees and asylum seekers; an end to the detention of vulnerable people, such as people with disabilities and survivors of rape, torture and trafficking; and an end

to the employment of detainees for menial work for £1 an hour during their detention.

The UK government's Home Office has responded by threatening the women with accelerated deportation should the hunger strike continue.

'We walk the same corridors and see the same walls every day. I'm locked up and it feels like there is no way out,' says Theresa. She has not been given any indication of when she might be deported. 'It impacts people psychologically; your mind can't think the way it normally does,' she adds.

For Theresa, the worst aspect of being at Yarl's Wood is that the IRC staff – both female and male – can barge into her room at any time, and with no warning. This has left her with very little privacy or dignity, and



fearful for her safety.

'I feel very paranoid all the time. I can hardly sleep,' she says. 'Everybody has a key to your room, even janitors. Where is the safety in that? What is the point of having locks on the doors if everybody has keys?'

The UK operates one of the largest systems of immigration detention in Europe, holding around 3,500 individuals at any one time, and about 30,000 per year. There are 10 IRCs in the UK. Their running is largely outsourced to private contractor firms, such as G4S and Sirco. Both firms have been embroiled in accusations of physically, mentally and sexually abusing detainees in recent years.



'Imprisoning traumatized and vulnerable women is inhumane and sadistic. Giving guards power over women enables them to exploit women's vulnerability and abuse with impunity,' states the NGO Black Women's Rape Action Project in a dossier it published on rape and sexual abuse at Yarl's

Wood.

Human rights lawyers have also voiced concerns about the treatment of detainees in the UK's immigration removal centres.

The UK is the only country in Europe not to have a fixed time limit for somebody to be kept into detention. The Home Office's position is that people are detained for what it deems to be a reasonable amount of time. This can be several years, and there have been cases of people being detained for three-to-four years.

Connie Sozi, a solicitor at Deighton Pierce Glynn, is representing a person who has been in detention for two-and-half years. Dealing with the shock of being in detention for the first time can be the cause of, and exacerbate, mental health problems, she says.

Women in detention often find themselves in dire conditions. A majority have suffered sexual violence prior to being detained, and are not able to express these things in a detention environment, says Toufique Hossain, a solicitor and director at legal firm Duncan Lewis.

'They are made to feel like liars or criminals,' he says. 'We say it should be

up to the Home Office to do proper checks to see who has been subject to sexual violence.'

Sub-standard healthcare

Access to adequate healthcare is also a problem. Detainee conditions are grim. It is very much a prison, although healthcare provided in prison is more sophisticated, adds Hossain.

'The contractors that run the IRCs – they are there to make a profit. I doubt they have my clients' best interests at the front of their minds,' says Sozi.

'We know from various cases that healthcare in detention systematically fails detainees. There aren't adequate provisions to deal with mental and physical conditions,' says Hossain.

The low standard of healthcare also extends to detainees participating in hunger strikes, and detainees that refuse food or fluid for a number of other reasons.

 *We know from various cases that healthcare in detention systematically fails detainees*

There is a link between food and fluid refusal and mental health. This is overlooked and disregarded, says Hossain. 'There is a culture among the IRCs, Home Office of disbelief, where they feel people are using hunger strikes to get themselves out of detention. This isn't the case for mentally ill people,' he adds. 'They notify the detainees that hunger strikes will not lead to removal being stopped but will actually lead to it being expedited. They are keen that the person will not be released.'

In response to a Freedom of Information Request, the Home Office told **New Internationalist** that there were more than 3,600 cases of fluid and food refusal – a number it brands 'significant' – in UK Immigration Removal centres from the beginning of 2016 to the end of January of 2017. It refused to share any further details of these hunger strikes because it said the large volume of cases meant that it would take too long and be too expensive to search through the records.

There is evidence that the contractor staff at the IRCs will not record issues that could lead to problems or a detainee's release, notes Hossain. 'I doubt the figures given are accurate,' he says.

The Home Office provided a statement to the **New Internationalist**, saying: 'We take the welfare of our detainees very seriously and any detainees who choose to refuse food and fluid are closely monitored by on site healthcare professionals. Where healthcare professionals have concerns about a detainee's welfare as a result of refusing food or fluid, they are referred to the local hospital.'

'However, we are clear that those with no right to be in the UK should return to their home country.'

Exploitative labour

Detainees are offered jobs inside the IRCs as cooks, cleaners, launderettes, hairdressers and carers for other detainees. For this they are typically paid just £1 an hour. By contrast, the legal minimum wage in the UK stands at £7.50 an hour for adults aged over 25.

Theresa has not got a job but knows several people that work in Yarl's Wood kitchen. They become bitter and angry as they know they are being exploited, she says.

Moreover, the money the detainees earn cannot be saved to provide them with some security when they are released. The money they are paid instead goes on to a card they can only use in the IRC shop to buy stuff. In detention, the shop sells things like snacks, toiletries, and other consumerables at a premium price and the profits from this, and cost savings from not having to employ cooks and carers on a standard UK wage, go back to the contractors, says Hossain.

Serco provided a statement to **New Internationalist**, saying: 'Her Majesty's Inspector of Prisons in his report published in November 2017 found that there had been significant improvements at the centre.'

On the hunger strikes, it added: 'Anyone refusing all food is closely monitored and supported with the professional healthcare team and their situation is kept under close review.'

Released onto the streets

In 2017, 42 per cent of those detained were released back into UK society, according to government figures. However, little to no aftercare is provided to these often vulnerable and traumatized people. Detainees are just released onto the street, often to homelessness, says Hossain.

Those deported can find themselves in physical danger. The Home Office is also not supposed to deport detainees to war zones, although the countries it identifies as war zones change frequently. 'For instance, it is an accepted policy that the Home Office won't return people to Syria. However, the Home office sends people back to Mogadishu, Somalia,' says Hossain.

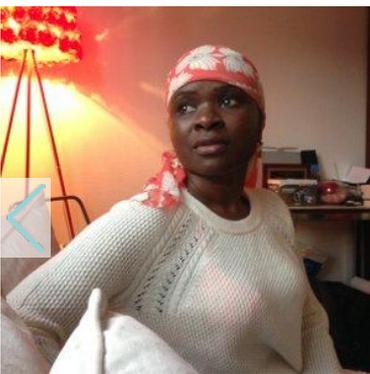
Somalia has experienced almost constant conflict since the collapse of its central government in 1991, which has killed an estimated 1 million people. Yet it is the Home Office's position that it is a safe place to return.

Those seeking asylum have a tough battle to prove they have been a victim of torture, their lives are at risk or that they face persecution, before the UK will grant them refuge.

Theresa knows this better than anyone. In 2014, the Ugandan government tried to introduce the controversial Anti-Homosexuality Act that included a provision for the death penalty. LGBT people's identities and addresses have been revealed in the country's tabloids along with calls for their execution. Lesbians in the country also live in fear of 'corrective rape' attacks. Despite this, her asylum application has been denied.

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