

# Nigerian women seeking asylum in England on grounds of sexual violence

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## Abstract

This study aims to give voice to the experiences of Nigerian women seeking asylum in the UK on the grounds of sexual violence. It draws upon in-depth narrative interviews with 10 Nigerian women, aged between 27 and 46, seeking asylum on the grounds of sexual violence. Women's accounts were analysed thematically, and the contextual factors that influenced the outcome of their asylum claims were explored. Findings show that women's asylum applications were affected by factors relating to lack of evidence, use of words and/or phrases that do not align with the English language meaning of sexual violence, Home Office's lack of understanding of cultural issues specific to women and peculiarity of women's narrative construction and the de-commissioning of legal assistance. Findings also suggest that asylum organisations play a key role in providing holistic support to women. Recommendations are made for the Home Office's policies following these findings.

## INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom ranked seventh among the most destination countries Nigerians apply for asylum (World Data, 2021). Although migration pattern suggests that in most cases, men are the main applicants in asylum applications (Ogbuagu, 2012), however, evidence shows that Nigerian women are now increasingly the sole applicants in asylum applications (International Organisation for Migration [IOM], 2017; Refugee Council, 2020, 2022). Nigeria remained in the top 10 countries for female applicants in quarter three of 2022 and was also reported as one of two countries with the highest number of female applicants, with female applicants (82) constituting 54%

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of the total applications made by Nigerians (Refugee Council, 2022). These figures show a decrease in the number of applications compared to previous quarters. For example, the last quarter of 2019 saw 470 applications by Nigerian women (Refugee Council, 2020). The decline in the overall number of applications has been attributed to the impact of the coronavirus (Refugee Council, 2022). Despite the increasing number of applications made by Nigerian women, very little is known about how they experience the asylum system in the UK. Though limited by scale, this study contributes to this knowledge gap as it examines the experiences of Nigerian women seeking asylum in the UK on the grounds of sexual violence. The following section provides a discussion of sexual violence claims and refugee status determination (RSD) in the UK. Next, the research method is described followed by the research findings. The discussion of the findings and its implications for Home Offices' policies concludes this article.

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE CLAIMS AND REFUGEE STATUS DETERMINATION IN THE UK

On the whole studies examining sexual violence as grounds for women's asylum claim in the UK is limited. Studies report on a number of gender-related claims that included acts of sexual violence, family or domestic violence, rape and sex trafficking (Baillot et al., 2012; Bögner et al., 2007; Canning, 2011, 2014, 2019; Cowan et al., 2009; Stepnitz, 2012). These studies further examined if all such disclosures influence RSD. It is known that the primary legal tool used by the UK in RSD is Article 2A of The Refugee Convention, 1951, which states

... and owing to well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

Feminists have argued that this framework for the determination of refugee status poses a structural concern with regard to women claiming asylum on grounds of sexual violence (Chantler, 2010; Chantler & Thiara, 2017). This is because most of the persecutions covered within the framework fall within the public sphere (Cowan et al., 2009), whereas women experience violence that sits within the private sphere, for example sexual violence (Musalo, 2007). This creates a public-private divide, thus, making it difficult for women to meet the requirements of the convention (Freedman, 2008). Furthermore, feminists opine that women experience violence as a result of unequal gendered power relations grounded in interactions within a male-dominated society (Yllö, 2005). This means that sexual violence can be interconnected and embedded in everyday interactions between males and females (Cockburn, 2004). This aligns with what Kelly (1988, p.75) termed 'the continuum of violence'. According to Kelly (1988), conceptualising sexual violence as a continuum allows for the consideration of the broader range of experiences and the many contexts in which sexual violence occurs.

The introduction of the particular social group (PSG), which is one of the five protected grounds in which women that are victims of violence in their country of origin may be considered for refugee status (Millbank, 2009) marks a move in the right direction. The PSG sees that violence against women such as domestic violence, forced marriage or female genital mutilation (FGM) occurring in countries of origin are recognised as a 'public' concern (Chantler, 2010). In response to this, the UK has adopted the Gender Guidelines (1998) which provide procedural guidelines in dealing with gender-related forms of persecution. The guide also recognises the uniqueness of women's claims in addition to providing consideration for case owners on how to conduct interviews in a culturally sensitive manner. However, studies have argued that this guideline does not influence women's experiences of the asylum process nor the outcome of their asylum claims (Canning, 2019; Cowan et al., 2009). In Baillot et al.'s (2012)

study, it was found that while the disclosures of sexual violence in asylum applications were noted as relevant by various stakeholders, its relevance for the asylum determination process was often perceived to be limited. Freedman (2008) also points out that 'rape and sexual violence are often not considered in the same way as other forms of violence suffered by refugees, but are effectively normalized, and considered as part of the usual relations between men and women' (p. 160).

Apart from the invisible nature of sexual violence (Chantler, 2010), it has been reported that factors such as late disclosures of rape and lack of full disclosures at the screening interviews continue to negatively influence the credibility of women's stories and in turn, their asylum determination (Baillot et al., 2012; Bögner et al., 2007; Canning, 2014, 2019; Cowan et al., 2009). Studies have pointed out that women's inability to fully disclose their experiences of sexual violence was a result of the 'lack of trust in the case worker and interpreters, self-silencing, practical issues of children present at the interviews, and in some cases, an ongoing dependence on a male partner' (Canning, 2019; Cowan et al., 2009, p.54). Others reveal that the culture of shame, previous trauma experienced, 'vocabulary and narration, and a lack of understanding of, or engagement with the asylum application process' influenced women's late or lack of disclosure (Baillot et al., 2012, p.281; Bögner et al., 2007). It is argued that apart from these limiting factors, the UK asylum process potentially limits women's ability to disclose their experiences of sexual violence (Canning, 2011). For example, the lengthy asylum process which compounds women's traumatic experiences (Aid, 2011; Cowan et al., 2009) is a case in point. Also, the lack of appropriate rooms and culturally appropriate interpreters have been found to limit women's ability to produce complete narration (Baillot et al., 2012; Canning, 2014, 2019; Cowan et al., 2009; Stepnitz, 2012). Despite these shortcomings, women are required to create a detailed and coherent narrative, with accurate chronology of events, and where this was not so, the credibility of the story was questioned (Baillot et al., 2014). Baillot et al. (2014) also report that in some cases, there is a complete lack of engagement with the allegation of rape and a general 'culture of disbelief' regarding women's claims of sexual violence. Indeed, this poor response by Home Offices' officials could work to negatively influence the outcome of women's asylum claims. No wonder Canning (2011) argues that the UK asylum process replicates social and emotional harm and subjects women claiming asylum on the grounds of sexual violence to multiple forms of victimisation.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study was approved by the PSYSOC Research Ethics Committee of the author's University. The women that took part in this study were contacted through organisations that work directly with Refugees and asylum seekers. Practitioners in these organisations passed on information sheets and spoke to women in groups about the study. The researcher also attended women's group meetings to speak to women about the study and was contacted privately afterwards via telephone by women who wished to take part. Purposive and snowball sampling was also used to invite women to take part (Curtis et al., 2000). Ten Nigerian women, living in the northwest of England and seeking asylum on the grounds of sexual violence took part in this study. Out of the 10 women, eight were appealing their asylum decision, and the other two has had their appeals rejected. Informed consent was renegotiated before the interviews and a consent form was signed by the participant and researcher before the interviews commenced. Interviews were conducted in English and were based on a narrative inquiry approach, utilising the 'telling of stories' as a data-gathering strategy (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p.2).

Interviews were conducted between May 2017 and August 2017. The interview guide included briefings, introduction and background questions for building rapport, and possible follow-on questions to help in eliciting further and rich narrations from the women. Interviews were conducted in settings that women chose, audio-recorded and lasted for about 60min. The sample size that represents a very limited number of Nigerian women could be seen as a limitation of this study. Nonetheless, the method of data collection provided rich data and in-depth insights into women's experiences of seeking asylum in the UK on the grounds of sexual violence,

thus improving the key criteria for qualitative studies' authenticity and credibility as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Because the women all received either a £10 gift voucher or £10 cash as an appreciation for their time, the question of if this gesture influenced their participation was considered. Ultimately, altruism (Oakley, 2016) was seen as the main motivation for the women's participation in the research. This is because some women commented on how good they felt to see another Nigerian woman (the researcher) interested in giving voice to their experiences. The recruitment method meant that women were pre-warned about the sensitive nature of the research. Other safeguarding strategies included, allowing participants to dictate the pace of the interview, offering regular breaks to participants during the interview, reaffirming participant's strengths at the end of the interview and ensuring participants were debriefed using a debrief sheet which contained information and contact details of three relevant and accessible sources of help in case they required further support.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The audio-recorded interviews were listened to three times: first, for familiarisation with the data, second, for verbatim transcription of data and third, to fill in gaps missed by the first transcription. Each woman's transcript was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity, therefore, all names used in this study are pseudonyms. Transcripts were uploaded onto the NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software before applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. Each transcript was worked with one at a time, identifying repeated patterns of meaning and interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set to generate initial codes before coding them into themes and sub-themes. All data relevant to each potential theme were gathered. During this process, care was taken to retain the interactional context in which the words were spoken including the progression of themes within the interviews (Squires, 2008), in so doing, 'sequence and the wealth of the detail contained in long sequences were preserved' (Riessman, 2008, p.74). Readers should note that because some of the women had limited England language abilities, some of the quotes have been edited for more clarity.

## THE WOMEN

The length of time women lived in the UK ranged between 2 and 13 years. Out of the 10 women, only one woman (Sarah) applied for asylum as soon as she left the abusive situation. Speaking about her marriage, Sarah said: 'it was so abusive that I couldn't just take it, so I had to just run away'. She further stated, 'when I came here, I had to go to the police to report myself that am here'. Other women lived with friends and/or relatives after leaving or escaping their abusive situations for years before applying for asylum. Some women, however, expressed how difficult it was for them to rely on such support, as Asaro stated: 'it wasn't easy, because at the beginning nobody was ready to keep me'. Even when she found a friend who offered her a place to stay, she stated: 'I was sleeping in their sitting room, my bag could be... imagine your bag is under the staircase or the storage and you sleep in the sitting room'. Titi also noted: 'I was managing, coping with people, living with different people'. Another woman who expressed this difficulty was Bisi who was living temporarily with church members, she stated: 'it's just like burden to them with two kids'. Just like in Netto's (2006) study, women did not identify themselves as homeless until they were asked to leave. For example, Efe who escaped sex trafficking in Holland said she lived with a number of friends and relatives for about 10 years before she was advised by social services to apply for asylum due to experiencing homelessness. She said, 'social service said they cannot do anything that I haven't got my stay and that I should go and seek asylum' (Table 1).

Two women said they were picked up by immigration officials. Temi stated, '...one morning, immigration came to the house around 6AM, they found me and my children. That was how I entered problem, they said I should come and be signing in ...'. Asaro, on the other hand, was detained under the Immigration Act powers. She describes how she was arrested in the extract below.

TABLE 1 Summary of key demographic variables relating to women.

Women	Age	Relationship status	No. of children	Nature of violence	Abuser	Location of abuse	No. of years in UK	Immigration status
Efe	36	Single	1	Rape, Sex trafficking, female genital mutilation (FGM)	Unknown male and Parents	Nigeria and Holland	11	Refused asylum seeker
Omola	42	Single	2	Intimate partner sexual violence (IPSV)	Male partner	UK	12	Asylum Seeker
Sarah	42	Separated	0	IPSV	Husband	Nigeria	2.5	Asylum Seeker
Orede	27	In a Relationship	1	Rape	A male family friend	UK	12	Refused asylum seeker
Asaro	43	Separated	0	IPSV	Husband	Nigeria	10	Asylum Seeker
Temi	42	Separated	4	IPSV	Husband	Nigeria	2	Asylum Seeker
Tope	35	Separated	1	IPSV	Husband	UK	9	Asylum Seeker
Lola	44	Separated	3	Sexual assault, IPSV	Husband	UK	13	Asylum Seeker
Titi	42	Separated	3	Physical violence related to FGM	Family	Nigeria	5	Asylum Seeker
Bisi	43	Separated	4	IPSV, FGM	Husband and Parents	UK and Nigeria	9	Asylum Seeker

... police and immigration came together. When they came to arrest me, they came very early, it was as if I was dreaming, I was like, is this real? They were shouting from the door, H, H, we are here for H, banging the door. I was like oh my God, should I jump through the window? ...and when they came in, they were like we have come for you, and I almost wee'd on myself immediately. I said am coming, am coming, they thought I was running. I said no, I want to use the toilet.

She continued. '...then in detention... although I stayed just 10 days, but that 10 days, when I came out, it took me 2-3 months to recover. It is a place that I will not even wish my enemy to go to'.

## WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF SEEKING ASYLUM IN THE UK

The eight women who identified themselves as asylum seekers were in the process of appealing their asylum claim refusals and were uncertain about the outcome of their appeal. For example, Temi stated

In fact, I don't know what will happen, I don't know, I won't lie, because I have been to court, they said no. I want to do upper tribunal now or what do they call it? and I don't know what is happening.

This uncertainty is reflected in the data from the Refugee Council (2017) which shows a high refusal rate for applications made by Nigerians in the first quarter of 2017 (around the time of this study). Of the 190 decisions made, only 16 applications were granted refugee status or one other form of protection. It has been argued that the UK's immigration policies limit the number of successful asylum claims, therefore, failed claimants are left with no choice, but destitution (Chantler, 2010). Two women (Efe and Orede) identified themselves as destitute. Destitution here means that these women's appeal rights have been exhausted and they have no recourse to asylum support (UK Parliament, 2013). They described a state of limbo while commenting on their experiences which included sleeping rough, lack of support, no hope and suicidal ideation.

I have two people that I go to in their house in em... (place). I have another one in (another place), but all my things are still in my uncle's house. During the day, I go there sometimes to sleep (Efe).

Her state of frustration and hopelessness is also apparent in the extract below.

I thought everything is going to be fine, 11 years now. I have gone through so many places for support. I am not getting any support. I don't even know what to do, sometimes for me to just hurt myself (sobs) (Efe).

Similarly, Orede stated, 'I don't know, I don't know, am just here, I don't know what to do'. Blanchard and Joy (2017) also note similar experiences, such as lack of support, rough sleeping and suicidal thoughts in their study which aimed to provide a portrait of the crisis facing refused asylum seekers who cannot be returned.

## FACTORS INFLUENCING WOMEN'S ASYLUM CLAIM

The following section reports on the factors that were found to have negatively influenced women's asylum application.

First, women expressed their experiences of seeking asylum around the 'culture of disbelief and denial' (Souter, 2011, p. 48) and lack of evidence as the following extracts show:

... all the things I said, they don't believe me (Orede).

You know, all the story you tell Home Office, they don't believe (Tope).

... I told them all these, but they have refused me, they said am lying (Temi).

One woman went as far as involving her local member of parliament (MP):

One time I went to meet MP, he wrote letter for me, they said they didn't believe (Bisi).

Bisi who involved her MP had to go through the dehumanising process of medical assessment several times to provide evidence to show she had undergone female genital mutilation (FGM). However, she reported that the evidence did not influence her asylum determination.

They said I didn't provide evidence for them, so the MP advised me that I should go back to the hospital, but the hospital have closed down now. So, they said I should go and book appointment in (city) to get the evidence. It is still not making any difference since over 2 years (Bisi).

Secondly, just like in Cowan et al.'s (2009) study, women in this study used words and phrases that were not consistent with the English language meaning of sexual violence. For example, one woman, commenting on her experiences of repeated marital rape stated: 'when I don't like it or not, he wants to have it' (Sarah). Thus, women are disadvantaged by not only their limited English language skill but their inability to provide valid verbal evidence. Third, women faced obstacles posed by the Home Office's lack of understanding of cultural issues specific to these women. For example, in the extract below, Bisi expressed frustration in the Home Office's lack of understanding of the gendered power relation that exists in a patriarchal society like Nigeria when it comes to a traditional practice like FGM.

So, they (Home Office) said that I should take my kids to another part of Nigeria. I said I relocated before, it is not... even, I tried to ... no matter what, you can't escape it.

This account points to an assumption by the Home Office that her children would be safe from FGM if she relocates to another part of Nigeria. Another woman who feared for the well-being of her daughter in relation to FGM was Orede. In this extract, she emphasised that women do not have the power within such a society to make decisions regarding the child:

When they (Home Office) told me to go back to Nigeria, I was thinking about my daughter as well because they do it (FGM) on her father's side. They will say they need to do it, and nobody can stop them... you know in Nigeria, it is the man that has power over the kids than the woman, so you can't say no (Orede).

This perhaps, points to the vulnerability of children born in the UK to parents who had undergone FGM or support the practice. Of note is that women's non-adherence to practices like FGM in Nigeria potentially carries consequences. The United Nations Children's Fund (2013) also points out that women who refuse this practice for themselves or their daughters may suffer severe repercussions as a result. Titi confirmed this viewpoint. She tells of how she faced losing her fingers due to her parents' non-adherence to the practice of FGM before her brother rescued her.

... So, they now said I will face the consequence, they said they will cut all my fingers because my parents refused, but my brother was the one that rescued me. This finger was cut (shows researcher the finger). Yes, they held me, and they wanted to cut, so my brother just ... oh my sister, I don't want to think about it, see this finger, I cannot bend it. It is two fingers, if you see, they cut this place, but it was stitched, you will see white vein (sighs heavily) (Titi).

This account seems to support the view that for women like Titi, fleeing Nigeria to seek asylum in the UK may be the only means of ensuring their safety and that of their children who may also be subjected to such practice (Kahn, 2015).

Fourth, some women's experiences of the UK asylum processes were impacted by the peculiarity of their narrative construction. Given the fact that these women are faced with the combined impacts of sexual violence and the lengthy and emotionally taxing asylum process (Bögner et al., 2007), it is not surprising that some women's narrative construction were adversely affected. For example, Orede stated, 'they rang me from Home Office, so they were asking me all the question again, I have forgotten a lot, but you know, I passed through a lot, I can't remember a lot of things'. She also confirmed that forgetting the past was her coping mechanism as she sates, '... and you know, if I don't want to go mad, I need to forget everything, you know what I mean?' Titi related her inability to present a coherent narrative to her experiencing depression. She said, 'there is a lot, but I have forgotten a lot... because the brain is not settled, and because somebody is really, really depressed'.

Fifth, most unsuccessful applicants will go on to lodge an appeal against their asylum claim refusal to the Independent Immigration and Asylum Chamber First Tier Tribunal. This is followed by 'the tribunal', which will lead to an in-person hearing presided over by an Immigration Judge (Baillot et al., 2012). It is assumed that asylum applicants will be assisted at this tribunal hearing by a legal representative, barrister, or immigration adviser, however, much of this assistance has either been cut or even decommissioned as Bisi noted:

Part of the problem is that we don't have money to pay solicitor for the asylum claim. They cut legal aid. They said if I have good solicitor with this my matter... but nobody to call to do that for me, and I don't have money to pay. The main thing is that if we can get a lot of support for solicitor, am saying this now because if I get solicitor, my case might be different.

Arguably, this account does lend some support to specific concerns about structural inequalities and the cycle of disadvantage experienced by asylum seekers.

## WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT

All the eight women seeking asylum said that they were in receipt of support under the Immigration and Asylum Act (1999) which makes provision for 'adequate, no-choice accommodation' and basic subsistence which includes a cash support of £45 for each person in their household per week (GOV.UK, 2023). However, women spoke much about deriving a variety of support from asylum support organisations. These include emotional, food, material, monetary support, information, advice and guidance as discussed below.

### Emotional support

Women derived emotional support from being able to speak about their experiences within a supportive network such as support groups. They expressed the view that the collective sharing of experiences in a 'safe space' that allowed them to speak freely, provided a strong bond between them, thus, strengthening their hope and resilience.



The extracts below from Omola, Tope, Asaro and Bisi, further reflect women's general view about attending support groups.

... when we are around each other like, everybody will talk their experience you will gain from A, you will gain from B (Omola).

... when we go to all these programmes, all these supports we hear a lot of experiences of other people, sometime when you want to stay at home and be thinking, when you get there, you will laugh (Tope).

So, you make yourself active going for those activities, that was what I did and the more you talk to people, the less the burdens (Asaro).

This place, it unites us and makes us... at least you share your own with me, we encourage each other (Bisi).

It appears that through support group provision, responses to the emotional and psychological impacts of sexual violence and the asylum process are targeted from a place of strength and familiarity, which is necessary for positive outcomes.

## Food, material and monetary support

Apart from being an important resource for women's emotional support, asylum support groups also featured in women narratives of accessing food, material and monetary support. For example, Sarah stated, 'they give us food and other stuff'. Some women also spoke of how workers within the support groups acknowledged the intersection of the government's 'no-choice' dispersal of asylum seekers policy, and the financial hardship resulting from insecure immigration status. For example, Bisi stated: 'I have to be rushing now to go and pick my kids because of the distance. Even sometimes (worker) had to give me money to pay for the after school because I can't meet up to pick them'. While highlighting the benefit of support groups with regard to helping to combat isolation and possible mental health problems, Asaro also commented on the financial benefit of attending support groups.

... what I did as soon as I claimed the asylum, I started joining groups, because one thing that we asylum people face is isolation and depression, so, in other to kill that, I had to join so many groups. So, going to these activities, one, they give you food and two, they give us transport, like this activity, yesterday we had 4 pounds, this activity today we are going to have 4 or 5 pounds depends on how much, and by the time you buy a week ticket, you can have some change.

By making financial provisions within their limited budget, asylum support organisations exemplified the application of an intersectional approach that minimises isolation. They recognised barriers that contribute directly to inequality of access to service provisions in relation to women in this study who were already disadvantaged by other intersecting factors.

## Information, advice and guidance

Some women identified information, advice and guidance as key support derived from asylum support organisations. While contextualising the multiple roles of an asylum support organisation, Bisi said 'These people, they

introduced us to doctors, counselling, all these organisations'. This, indeed, demonstrates good practice with regard to signposting women to relevant services. Apart from this example of good practice of making referrals to relevant agencies, staff in asylum support organisations provided support that is of practical nature, and which responded to women's needs. For example, Bisi stated '... like all these organisations are helping us, they will help us if we want to call, they will call for us. Like I had to get solicitor they are the ones that filled the form for me. All these things make it a little bit better'. Likewise, Efe describes the practical nature of support she received from her FGM support worker. '... so, she (FGM worker) was saying that we should put in a new application with FGM and the rape and all those stuff that happened to me, so that is what she is trying to do'.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to give voice to the experiences of Nigerian women seeking asylum in the UK on the grounds of sexual violence. It draws upon in-depth narrative interviews with 10 Nigerian women, aged between 27 and 46, seeking asylum on the grounds of sexual violence. Based on women's narratives, two key themes were identified and analysed. These included women's experiences of seeking asylum in the UK and women's experiences of support. This study reveals how different factors patterning to women's identity intersected with structural forces within the Home Offices' processes to reproduce disadvantages in women's experiences of the UK asylum process.

## WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF SEEKING ASYLUM IN THE UK

Studies (Baillot et al., 2012, 2014; Canning, 2011, 2014, 2019; Cowan et al., 2009) have examined the experiences of female asylum seekers in the UK who claim rape in their country of origin as part or the main grounds for their application. The findings of this study confirm some of the findings reported in these studies and further extend our knowledge of the complex ways some Nigerian women or indeed other minority ethnic women might experience intersectional discrimination through the UK asylum system. Souter (2011) argues that the United Kingdom's procedure for RSD suffers from a 'culture of disbelief' and the existence of a parallel 'culture of denial' (p. 48) which has led to the unjust refusal of many asylum claims. For the women in this study, this culture was implicated by other intersecting factors in operation in their lives. First, women fleeing sexual violence may not be in the position to provide evidence of the abuse to corroborate their story, thus providing the Home Office grounds for the refusal of their claim (Canning, 2014). For many women who are seeking asylum on the grounds of sexual violence, the intersection of sudden displacement from their home countries and/or being moved several times as a result of the no-choice dispersal of asylum seekers' policy (Immigration and Asylum Act, 1999) can make it difficult for them to present the evidence needed to support their claim.

Some women in this study used words and phrases that were not consistent with the English language meaning of sexual violence. Apart from limited English vocabulary, it is possible that women's use of such phrases may be related to the shame and discomfort associated with reliving the experience of sexual violence and perhaps, the cultural taboos around sexuality which may prevent a verbatim or direct articulation of sexual violence. These cultural issues relating to language may also reduce the severity of the experience they convey (Chantler, 2012). Women who feared for the safety of their children with regard to FGM were refused asylum based on decisions made using the UK context. Chantler and Thiara (2017) argue that such an assumption 'invokes a particular notion of a "self," as it does not consider the woman's socio-cultural context, but rather based on opportunities available in the UK' (p. 91). Indeed, decisions based on the UK context will be of limited help to women who because of the intersection of their gender and the enforcement of a harmful cultural practice like FGM, face different and unique obstacles to escaping such violence. Furthermore, it draws attention to how women could find themselves at the

intersection of two structural forces, the Home Office's discriminatory immigration processes, and the structural forces of patriarchy embedded in Nigerian society.

Findings suggest that women were impacted by their experiences of sexual violence and the lengthy asylum process. This in turn adversely affected the peculiarity of their narrative construction. This could become problematic in asylum claims where women are required to create a detailed and coherent narrative otherwise it would be assumed that their story is lacking credibility (Baillot et al., 2014). It is also argued that in assessing the credibility of an account, case owners have been known to capitalise on narrative inconsistencies (Baillot et al., 2014). This is what Trueman (2009) termed the 'manufacture of discrepancy' (p. 296). Predictably, under these circumstances, these women's narration is seen not to accord with the expected narrative convention, thus, their claims are denied (Cowan et al., 2009). Furthermore, with limited or no resources, women are left to either represent themselves or look for other means to fund a legal representative (Baillot et al., 2012). Given this picture, these women are squarely disadvantaged by the intersection of the government's no recourse to public funds policy, the economic climate, and their immigration status.

## WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT

Although asylum seekers are entitled to support in the United Kingdom under the Immigration and Asylum Act, 1999, however, studies have highlighted the dangers of only focusing on the physical and financial needs of women while ignoring the emotional and psychological impact of sexual violence and the asylum process (Canning, 2014, 2019). In this study, asylum support organisations played a key role in meeting women's emotional, food, material and financial needs, including information, advice and guidance. They acknowledged the intersecting nature of women's needs in addition to responding to barriers to accessing support. Women accessed emotional support by attending support group sessions. These sessions provided a safe space for 'talking' and 'sharing' experiences, thus, could be seen as a flexible and therapeutic intervention that accommodates protective factors which are pertinent to many ethnic minority women (Kanyeredzi, 2018). Also, given the interconnectedness that supports group sessions provide, it could be a key element in women's journey to resilience and in making sense of their experiences of sexual violence (Chantler, 2006).

Apart from offering some relief through food and material support, the financial support provided by asylum support organisations in this study, alleviated the financial barrier women faced when accessing support. Arguably, addressing possible barriers to accessing service provisions is as important as ensuring relevant services are available to women who are seeking asylum. This also draws attention to the need for adequate service planning that considers and prioritises the ease with which women can access services (Burman & Chantler, 2005). This is important because women, may on the one hand be aware of vital services, but may not be able to access such services due to the financial disadvantage resulting from their immigration status. Service providers need to be aware of these larger structures of disadvantage that may shape women's access to support and effectively adopt strategies in their practice and planning to minimise this constraint. Furthermore, findings show that apart from providing information and advice, staff in asylum support organisations provided practical support which ensured that women accessed relevant support. This is a plausible demonstration of competent practice which could potentially improve outcomes for women, both emotionally and in relation to their asylum claims.

## IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS FOR HOME OFFICES' POLICY

Findings indicate five complex factors that influenced the outcomes of women's asylum claims. These included (1) the lack of evidence, (2) the use of words and/or phrases that do not align with the English language meaning

of sexual violence, (3) the Home Office's lack of understanding of cultural issues specific to women, (4) the peculiarity of women's narrative construction and (5) the decommissioning of legal assistance. This study found that women fleeing sexual violence may sometimes not have the required evidence needed to corroborate their story, thus, serving as grounds for the refusal of their claims. Thus, this article advocates that the Home Office be more open to women's stories, and when determining women's claims, consideration should be given to the circumstances in which they fled abusive situations and how this might impact their ability to provide evidence.

It was also found that women's use of phrases like, 'when I don't like it or not, he wants to have it' (Sarah) to describe their experiences of sexual violence may serve to minimise the severity of their claim. There is therefore a definite need for asylum decision-makers to be aware that the use of such phrases by women in their narratives may be due to their limited English language skills as well as culturally imposed taboos relating to the direct articulation of sexual issues. In addition, evidence from this study and others (Cowan et al., 2009) show that the psychological impact of women's experiences of sexual violence, and the asylum process, may manifest in ways that could impact women's ability to recall and recount their stories coherently. Thus, questions contained in the Home Offices' interview guidelines for case workers, for example 'when did it happen?' 'where did it happen?' (Home Office, 2021, p. 41) could constructively work against the success of women's asylum claims. Therefore, it becomes necessary that asylum decision-makers give favourable attention and consideration to women's stories and if possible, resort to other means of determining the credibility of their stories.

Although the Home Offices' guidelines on gender issues for case workers state that consideration should be given if a woman can reasonably be expected to relocate given due regard to the country of origin and their personal circumstances (Home Office, 2018), evidence from this study suggests otherwise. It was found that claims made on the grounds of FGM were assessed based on Eurocentric views that do not apply to women. It should be noted that women do not always have the power to make decisions regarding cultural practices like FGM and may face severe consequences if they do not adhere to such practices. This points to the need for those who are in a privileged position of determining women's asylum claims to give due consideration to the cultural context in which women's stories are based in the asylum decision process.

The findings of this study suggest that little or no legal resources available to women appealing their asylum decisions could amount to another form of revictimization. This is because women are already structurally disadvantaged by reason of their immigration status and poverty and are exposed to yet another form of structural barrier in appealing their asylum outcome. Therefore, consideration should be given to the funding of legal aid services for women within Home Office's policy. Also, in relation to this, it is imperative that adequate funding is made available to locally run asylum support organisations, because, for some women, particularly those who are destitute, their local asylum support organisation serves as an important avenue in meeting their emotional, financial, material, and social needs.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.13162>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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