

Women and Asylum – Looking at the Athlone Case from a Equality Gender Perspective

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In the following article Ms. Mbugua draws on her vast experience to argue that the circumstances of women (and the children they care for) in the asylum system differ greatly from those of men and she presents the recent separation and deportation of two Athlone based Nigerian women from an African women's perspective.

Introduction

Women may not benefit equally with men when looking for asylum. Their experiences in their countries of origin often differ from those of men. For example women's involvement in political protest and action is not as widely publicised as that of men and their inability to produce evidence, both oral and documentary may alter their asylum claim.

Violence against women is a common occurrence in their homelands but is not recognised when asylum applications are made. Njoki, a Kenyan woman and teacher by profession had her eyes plucked out by her husband who suspected her of having a relationship with another man. While working in Uganda I came across women with similar horrifying stories. One was beaten almost to death by her husband for casting her vote for a different candidate to that of her husband. Another woman was thoroughly beaten for attending a meeting without the prior approval of her partner. We have all heard of cases such as that of Amina from Nigeria with whom everyone sympathised with as she was threatened to be stoned to death for getting pregnant outside wedlock. There is yet so much unrevealed about what women from southern countries go through. Human rights are undermined in many countries. Where war breaks out the most vulnerable section of the population are the women and children. Women who fail or refuse to comply with behavioural norms face punishment or ill-treatment. Domestic violence is often seen as a cultural norm. In many Kenyan traditional cultures a man is permitted to discipline his wife by physical means, while in Uganda wife beating is viewed as a husband's prerogative. There are no laws in almost all African countries prohibiting spousal rape.

Reinforcement of Women's Subordination through Gender Specific Violence

The occurrence cited above are not isolated incidents experienced by an unlucky few. They are common to most cultures as is the threat of their occurring. Many women still have to go through the inhumane ritual of Female Genital Mutilation. From my work with some women from Nigeria living in Athlone it is obvious that within the Benni tribe in Edo State, Nigeria, all women have to go through this ritual at puberty, or at latest before marriage. There are known cases of women having this procedure carried out in the 7th month of pregnancy with their first child.

Women and children are still viewed as men's property in many cultures. The practice of paying Bride price reinforces "wife controlling, discipline and abuse". In recent times women from many African countries have been learning about their rights as human rights. More than ever before they desire greater independence. They are more educated and have greater confidence than past generations. They want to assert their rights and freedom. However coming from male dominated cultures women have encountered serious opposition and abuse as they try to earn their basic rights as individual women. Many women become the target of punishment and have received death threats for merely speaking their minds.

Ireland has seen many people arrive in the last decade seeking asylum. Many women, mostly parenting alone have made long journeys to arrive in the hope of safety and security. Recently however women and children in the asylum system have been made to feel like criminals and constantly feel under threat and insecure. As well as the physical cultural specific abuse that many have carried with them, their psychological well being and that of their children is now under attack.

Separation and Deportation Cases in Athlone

Athlone was shocked by the deportation of Elizabeth Odunsi and Iyabo Mwanzi. Their deportations which occurred on 15th March 2005 has brought people from Athlone closer together which has to be positive in creating a more diverse society. A group called Athlone Families Together was formed to campaign for Elizabeth and Iyabo to be brought back to Athlone where they had lived for 4 years. Three of their children were left behind. They were not given time to prepare or look for their children. The normal routine of reporting to the Athlone Garda Station saw them being put in a van and being informed that they were going to be returned back to Nigeria. These two women were traumatised before coming to Ireland but they left Ireland more vulnerable and traumatised than before they had come.

They lived in Willow Park, nicknamed 'Lagos' due to the fact that many asylum seekers and refugees from Nigeria live in the estate since rent is reasonable. Later as neighbours watched the Garda van enter the estate they knew all was not well and were horrified with what they were seeing. "When he saw the Garda van the young boy jumped out of the window and disappeared", one woman explained. The department official entered into Our Lady's Bower without permission in search of one of the children.

Iyabo and Elizabeth spoke of the inhuman treatment and humiliation of those who were being deported at the Dublin airport. "One woman was very upset she was very disturbed, teared her clothes off. A number of Gardi lifted her into a wheel chair and then called a female doctor who stuck a needle into her arm". The women said they felt they were treated like criminals yet they had not committed any crime. What pains them most is the fact that their children were left behind. Many people hold the opinion that these two women left their children deliberately but the fact is that some of the children were in school, while others were playing outside and took off when they saw the Garda van. As Athlone Families Together continue to campaign for reunification of Iyabo and Elizabeth with their children they have managed to expose the way deportations are carried out and the treatment of those being deported.

Dispelling Myths regard Women Asylum Seekers

There is a belief in Ireland that 85% of asylum seekers are bogus and that people are coming to Ireland to scrounge off the social welfare system. Migrant women in Ireland have been used as scape goats for government's failure to address other problems such as congestion in maternity hospitals and failures in provision of social housing. The fact is that a large proportion of nurses, carers and nannies just to name a few are migrant women. Iyabo and Elizabeth would have loved to work if they were given the opportunity to do so. Instead for the 4 years that they lived in Ireland they were denied the right to work and therefore were given €19.05 per week and half that amount for each child dependent. Despite this they integrated well and became part and parcel of the Athlone community. They felt a sense of belonging. They participated in different activities and were involved in voluntary work.

The negative perceptions being put out are heart breaking. They are false on the one hand and are designed to make a negative generalisation against all migrant women on the other. Irish asylum policy needs to be reviewed to address discriminatory and gender blind operations. Many women from southern countries living in Ireland today are victims of gender specific harm including female genital mutilation; marriage related harm, violence within family, forced sterilisation, forced prostitution and abortion, trafficking, and societal and legal discrimination. While some of the women asylum seekers may not qualify for refugee status under the strictest interpretation of the Geneva Convention, gender specific harm has to be taken into account. Governments have been urged to adopt **Asylum Gender Guidelines** to facilitate the needs of women seeking asylum. Countries such as Canada, Australia, and the USA have introduced gender guidelines. The ICCL in corroboration with NCCRI has developed such guideline in Ireland; the Irish government should accept and implement these guidelines.

Ireland also needs to be more sympathetic in how it deals with asylum cases especially in the case of women and children. It is quite worrying that in recent times that refugee status or protection is being denied to women from war torn countries such as Somali, Congo and Liberia and all southern and less developed countries that have very poor human rights records.