

**EMPOWERMENT AND RESISTANCE:
A STUDY OF WOMEN REFUGEES AS MEMBERS OF
SELF-ORGANIZED GROUPS IN UK**

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ABSTRACT

In relation to the theoretical and empirical construction of my research this study focuses on refugee and asylum seeker women as members of self organized groups and how these have contributed to women's empowerment and the debate surrounding gender interests and women's political mobilization. To do this research, qualitative methodology was conducted using semi structured interview technique to gain in-depth data from the four refugees/asylum seekers from different countries. A positive impact of belonging to a collective movement for women asylum seekers and refugees has been found in this study. Because they have found a space for resistance and empowerment by organizing collectively around their specific needs. This research has also shown that ethnicity and gender are clearly very important factors in creating and maintaining group solidarity amongst the women.

Key words: Refugee, asylum seeker, women empowerment, self organized group, gender interest, political mobilization.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on self-organised groups of refugee and asylum seeker women, and the ways through which these groups serve to empower women. Eighty percent of the eighteen million refugees in the world are women and children (www.unhcr.org.uk). An increasing amount of research, particularly feminist research, has focused on refugees and asylum seekers in relation to gender, highlighting the need to understand the particular problems faced by women. As Crawley argues, "refugee and asylum seeker women particularly are marginalized group because facing the same problems as men apart from facing the same problem as men face women have to manage the additional dangers of sexual assault exploitation and negligence. Refugee and asylum seeker women form a self-organised group to empower themselves to deal with these issues of gender, ethnicity, nationality and asylum.

This paper will address the following research questions 'In what ways does being a member of a self-organized group empower refugee and asylum seeker women?' and 'In what ways does being a member of a self-organized group contribute to the consciousness of the members, as African women refugees in Britain?'

Literature Review

The official definition of a 'refugee' in international law, governed by the 1951 'United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees'¹, is widely criticized by feminist

¹ The term 'refugee' shall apply to persons who: (2)...Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protections of that country, who, not having a nationality

academics and practitioners. Among others, Moussa (1993) and Crawley (1999) argue that gender oppression is excluded and the special protection required for women refugees due to gender inequality in the countries of origin and the host countries is unaccounted for. However Indra points out that the concept of 'refugee' is now contested; "Once assessed in terms of generic, universalized, genderless standards, even some Northern governments now assert that gender oppression should be officially recognised as criterion for political/legal refugee status" (1999: 7). In 1991 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recognized human rights violations of women, creating 'Guidelines on the protection of women' (UNHCR, 1991).

This acknowledged that the definition of "a refugee could encompass gender-related claims, including sexual violence, gender-related persecution, and severe gender discrimination"². However this definition is not universally accepted and few countries recognize gender-persecution in law, including the UK. Crawley (1999) criticizes the public/private dichotomy in UK asylum policy, which "marginalizes women's experiences of persecution, conceptualizing them as 'private', and women's resistance is not deemed 'political' " because it often occurs within the 'private' sphere of the home, meaning women are denied refugee status on the basis that they do require international protection.

The term 'asylum seeker' refers to a person who makes an application for asylum, and if this is accepted by the government, based on the UN Convention (1951) definition, the person is accorded refugee status. The women I am focusing on in this study are both refugees and asylum seekers, according to the official definitions, because some of the women's claims for asylum

and being outside the country of his/her former habitual residence, is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (United Nations, 1983, Article 1 A (2) : 12 and 39)

²Rape and other forms of sexual violence when committed for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or particular social group and when they are condoned by the authorities concerned. Inhumane treatment because a woman refuses to abide by accepted cultural practices. Forcible abortion or sterilisation, as well as female genital mutilation (UNHCR, 1991).

have been accepted and they are recognized as refugees, while some are in the process of applying or are waiting for a decision by the Home Office or are in the process of appealing against a rejected claim, and are therefore officially regarded as 'asylum seekers'.

Indra (1996) argues that themes and issues surrounding debates on refugees are often focused on male refugees, and the problems suffered by women refugees are regarded as a special topic, implying that other issues are not gendered. She argues that "people are refugees first, women and men second...gender is never a variable" (1993, in Moussa (1999:17). Indra points out that it is important to recognize that women refugees are not a homogeneous group and their experiences, including the way they experience gender identity, may vary widely particularly in relation to "class, race, culture, nation, age, personal biography...place and context" (1996 : 35). However she also makes the point that it is important for researchers and practitioners to recognize and understand the similarities shared by women within and between different refugee populations. This point is particularly relevant for this study to examine the way in which members of women's self-organised groups may differ, for example in terms of nationality, age and family circumstances. Because this study intends to focus on the shared experiences that bring the women together as a group.

Reed (2003) cautions that focusing specifically on women refugees may marginalize their experiences, instead of locating them within broader debates on refugees and migration. She advocates a gendered approach to research, exploring the experiences of women refugees in contrast to men's, in order to fully understand the differences between men and women and between women. Indra supports Reed's notion of a gendered approach to research on refugees, arguing that focusing on women in isolation may contribute to a "representational gender ghetto" (1999 : 4).

Callamard argues that "refugee women's experiences before becoming refugees, in flight and during asylum can lead to empowerment through a process of politicisation and self-awareness" (1999: 202). Collins (2000) argues that empowerment involves a change in consciousness and this will encourage people to improve the conditions of their lives. Therefore this study also

examine the ways in which being a member of a self-organised group contributes to the consciousness of the members, as African women refugees in Britain. In relation to African American women, Collins refers to consciousness as “the ‘inside’ ideas that allow black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality” (2000 : 98). She argues that African-American women have used black community organisations as spaces for resisting oppression and advancing their empowerment and this study aims to investigate how African refugee/asylum seeker women have used self-organised groups to resist the social injustices they face in Britain.

In her discussion of the political mobilization of women Molyneux (1986) conceptualizes gender interests as ‘strategic’ and ‘practical’. Strategic interests are associated with feminism and a feminist consciousness, focusing on gender equality, aiming for broad structural changes to tackle women’s subordination, such as abolishing the sexual division of labour. On the other hand, practical gender interests arise from women’s subordination but do not directly tackle it. These interests are formulated by women themselves and are concerned with the practical issues women face as a result of their position within the division of labour, such as a lack of basic necessities like healthcare. She acknowledges that practical interests are shaped by class and ethnicity and points out that economic necessity more often leads to action from poorer women. Molyneux argues that practical interest must be taken into account when forming strategic interests and “it is the politicization of these practical interests and their transformation into strategic interests that women can identify with and support which constitutes a central aspect of feminist political practice” (1986 : 285).

Radcliffe and Westwood (1993) criticise Molyneux’s (1986) conception of ‘practical’ and ‘strategic’ gender interests for maintaining the public/political and personal/private division, ignoring the feminist assertion that the “personal is political”. They argue that this theoretical framework is inadequate for understanding women’s participation in politics because it is universalising and assumes that progress is made when women’s organisations shift away from ‘practical’ gender interests to focus on ‘strategic’ interests, implying a hierarchy between the two.

Radcliffe and Westwood argue that political identities are fluid and women organise politically in diverse sites.

Schirmer (1993) also criticises Molyneux for assuming binary categories of ‘female consciousness’ and ‘feminist consciousness’ in relation to politically active women. She argues that this imposes a hierarchy privileging feminism, particularly a Western notion of feminism. Molyneux’s categories are exclusive, implying it is not possible for a group to be both ‘female’ and ‘feminist’, with both ‘practical’ and ‘strategic’ interests. Schirmer argues feminist theorists have not adequately accounted for the way in which women who organise around pragmatic and strategic campaigns for human rights learn to link this to the pragmatic and strategic struggle for women’s rights. She believes it is possible for women’s groups to have multiple and changing ‘strategic’ and ‘pragmatic’ interests, referring to this as “womanist feminisms” (with a small f), which often (but not necessarily) bridge these two interests” (1992 : 61).

Schirmer’s argument is illustrated by her study based on the CoMadres of El Salvador, a committee of mothers and relatives of the ‘disappeared’ and politically assassinated, and CONVIGUA, a group of Guatemalan women widowed due to the political repression in the early 1980s. She argues that both of the women’s groups contribute to an understanding of how women gain a gendered consciousness through different experiences. Schirmer refers to these as ‘motherist’ groups, “where women act as disobedient female subjects of the state turning their powerlessness, as protected females within the family on the state” (Radcliffe & Westwood, 1993 : 17). She argues that the mothers and widows link women’s rights with human rights, through challenging constructions of ‘feminine’, ‘masculine’ and ‘security’ and ‘justice’. These women confront the public/private divide in their lives, for example mothers in their domestic clothes have protested outside parliament, bringing them into the public arena. Schirmer argues that the two groups “represent the defiant transformation of the powerless victim into the political actor” (1989 : 4). She argues that liberal feminism based on notions of individualism is insufficient to understand the collective citizenry of members, who feel a strong sense of responsibility to pass on the collective memory to the next generation so as

to avoid recurrence of the repression they have experienced.

Blakeney, Dirie and MacRae argue that through organising collectively and independently the women progressed from “a relatively passive, accepting stance of “victim”-whether victim of torture, or victim of housing problems, or victim of immigration injustices- to a more active stance as ‘survivor’ and ‘advocate” (1996 : 297). Although the women were from different clans, and clan warfare had been a significant political issue in Somalia, the group experienced no problems concerning inter-clan hostility. “The common problems the women faced as women, as wives and mothers, as newcomers to Canada, and as torture victims transcended any clan divisions” (Radcliffe and Westwood, 1996 : 24). There was also significant diversity between the women in terms of age, educational backgrounds, rural and urban backgrounds, and varying degrees of Islamic religious orthodoxy, however this was found to strengthen group cohesion.

This study aim to examine the significance of Molyneux’s analysis of ‘strategic’ and ‘practical’ gender interests and Schirmer’s concept of ‘womanist feminisms’ in relation to the women’s groups. Like Schirmer, the authors of this paper like to focus on whether the refugee women challenge traditional constructions of ‘femininity’ and how alliances based on cross-class and cross-ethnic relations arise and articulate themselves among the women. It focus as on the campaign work that the women’s groups carry out and how this may contribute to their empowerment and their consciousness as African refugee women. This study also explores the diversity between members and the effect this may have on group solidarity, as discussed by Blakeney, Dirie and Macrae (1996).

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were carried out to gain in-depth data from a sample of four women, using a gatekeeper. The interview data was analysed through coding by identifying and comparing themes and concepts to form analytic categories in relation to the literature. The data also includes other material produced by the women’s groups, such as letters, pamphlets, press releases and national and local newspaper articles written by members.

The sample

The interviewers were:

- ‘Respondent 1’ is from Eritrea and is a member of the All African Women’s Group (AAWG).
- ‘Respondents 2’ is from Congo and is a member of the Black Women’s Rape Action Project (BWRAP) and AAWG.
- ‘Respondent 3’ is from Uganda and is a member of Women Against Rape (WAR).
- ‘Respondent 4’ is from Britain and is a member of Legal Action for Women (LAW).
- All four of these groups are based at the Crossroads centre for women and are part of the Crossroads Coalition for Justice for Asylum Seekers (CCJAS). For background information on the women’s groups see appendix A.

As the sample is small the results will clearly not be representative, however the aim of this research is to gain qualitative in-depth knowledge and insight into the lives of the refugee women as members of self-organised groups. The women’s ages ranged from 25-50, the women were single without children, with the exception of respondent 1 who was a single mother with a young infant. I interviewed women from four different groups in order to obtain a range of perspectives, allowing comparisons and contrasts to be made. Interviewing a British women from LAW enabled the authors to gain an ‘outsiders’ perspective from someone who worked closely with the groups and possessed specialist knowledge of the issues that affected women refugees/asylum seekers in Britain.

Analysis and Discussion

This section will discuss themes and concepts that have emerged through analysis of the interview data and other material produced by the groups, in relation to the research discussed in the literature review.

Resistance and Empowerment through Campaign Work

In their study of a group of women refugees from Somalia, Blakeney, Dirie and MacRae (1996) argue “organising collectively and independently raised the women’s consciousness, making them more aware of their own situation and the social injustices they have experienced as refugee women, helping their transition from ‘victim’ to ‘survivor’ “. Related to this Schirmer argues that both the CoMadres and the CONVIGUA, groups

set up by mothers and widows in Latin America, challenge the image of the “essentialist female victim” (1993 : 57).

The findings of this study support these arguments. The interviewed women are ‘fighting’ and ‘pushing’ (in their own words) against the social injustices they have suffered both in their home country and in Britain. They are challenging the stereotypical image of women, particularly refugee women, as passive victims by speaking out in public about their experiences and seeking to change the public’s perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers. They are also challenging the State by openly criticising the British government for their policies regarding asylum seekers, particularly women asylum seekers, and are actively campaigning to change the law. This can be seen in the WAR campaign for official recognition of rape as persecution and torture and therefore grounds for asylum.

We (at the Crossroads Women’s Centre) want to provide a platform for the women to be able to speak. People say women are invisible but it’s just that they don’t have the opportunity to speak or they are not listened to.
(Respondent 4).

Traditionally, asylum seekers in this country have remained silent for fear of deportation. We have allowed others to speak on our behalf, but because the situation we find ourselves in here is disastrous we are starting to speak up for ourselves. (S. Fesshaye, founder member of the AAWG, Rape, Hunger and Homelessness in ‘The Guardian; 1.11.03)

The women are actively resisting the negative labels and stereotypes associated with asylum seekers, particularly those promoted by the media. The women voice their desire to work and criticise the government for denying them this right before they are granted refugee status, challenging stereotypes of asylum seekers as ‘welfare shoppers’.

We want to educate people and make them more aware. We want people to realise that asylum seekers don’t just come over here for benefits and we want them to know that happens to us when we’re here.
(Respondent 2)

I was a successful businesswoman in Kenya and I would love to work and contribute taxes to British society rather than get benefits-but I’m not allowed to. (K. Nygothi, BWRAP, ‘Every Moment for me is fear’, The Guardian, 8.7.04)

This supports Moussa’s (1993) findings from her study of Ethiopian and Eritrean women refugees living in Canada. She found that the women wanted to work, rather than remain dependent on the state and regarded Eritreans and Ethiopians as hard working people who contributed to the economy. The women were resentful of media images portraying refugees as burdens to society and thought representations of Ethiopians as starving people reinforced the image that they are under-developed people, lacking in employment skills.

Schirmer (1993) argues that the groups of Latin American mothers and widows she studied link women’s rights with human rights, through challenging constructions of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’, aiming to overcome the public/private divide. For example mothers in their domestic clothes protested outside parliament, bringing them into the public sphere. The AAWG, BWRAP, WAR and LAW have also campaigned in a similar way, with members speaking out in public arenas about the discrimination they have suffered during the asylum process and the suffering they have endured due to the lack of adequate protection and provision for women asylum seekers. The women have spoken at numerous press conferences and in schools during National Refugee Week and have campaigned outside Parliament, the High Court and the Refugee Council and have staged a sit in at a church. A delegation of forty women from the AAWG also met with an MP.

Members of the AAWG had a meeting with some MPs at Westminster, but only one turned up-Oona King. A representative from each country spoke. She listened to us and said she would write to the Solicitor General...We are drawing attention to think about our lives. This is suffering. (Respondent 3)

I spoke at a school about my experiences. I told the children that I was pregnant and I had to sleep in a bus shelter. The Children couldn’t believe it...I was very surprised at how sympathetic they were... We also talked about the group (AAWG) at the schools, not just our own experiences. (Respondent 1)

Blakeney Dirie and MacRae (1996) discuss how the Somali women they studied regained a sense of control over their lives through forming an independent advocacy group to campaign against discrimination over access to public housing, which directly led to the Minister of Housing announcing an end to this exclusion of refugee applicants. The authors argue that this greatly increased the women's self-confidence and they became more conscious of their ability to act to improve the situation for others as well as themselves.

This relates to the findings because the campaign work of the groups and the victories they achieved have increased the women's awareness of their own collective power and have motivated them to continue their activism. A good example of this can be seen in the alliance of the groUps in an extensive campaign against Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002), meaning that asylum seekers would receive no benefits and no accommodation unless they make a claim for asylum as soon as is reasonable possible after their arrival in the UK. The campaigners protested that in practice this often meant people were denied support because they failed to apply within 24 hours. Forty women from the CCJAS campaigned outside the High Court and women from the AAWG spoke about their suffering when they first arrived in Britain, with many sleeping on the streets and on night buses.

We at the AAWG formed and began to meet at the Crossroads Women's Centre because we are suffering under section 55 and no other organisations would help us. When we went to the Refugee Council we were refused housing so we lobbied the One Stop Shop in Brixton and also Channel Four to tell the public what we were suffering. (www.allwomenscount.net, 27.08.03)

Section 55 was overturned at the beginning of July 2004 and the interview data reveals that this increased the women's confidence in their own collective power and gave them hope for the future.

The government scrapped Section 55. This would mean no benefits, no housing, nothing. This given us hope. We will carry on fighting...I have a vision that this group will grow. There will always be wars so we will always be here. This centre will expand and there will be different floors. If you want to talk about your case you go the third floor,

if you want to get a job you go to the fourth floor... (Respondent 2)

Credit for the defeat of Section 55...must go, first of all, to the women asylum-seekers who, with the support of grass-roots organisations, led fierce protests against this return to Dickensian pauperism...the impetus for us to work out how we can come together to defeat the current two tier apartheid system, which causes misery for asylum-seekers and undermines everyone's rights. (N. Adams, CCJAS, We all have rights in 'Morning Star' 30.03.04)

Collective Citizenry

The concept of 'collective citizenry' used by Schirmer (1993 : 48) in relation to the mothers and widows groups, describes "the strong sense of responsibility to pass on the collective memory to the next generation in order to prevent a future occurrence of the political repression they have experienced." This concept applies to AAWG because they clearly feel a sense of responsibility for the future generation, which can be seen in the way in which the women aim to raise the awareness of children by speaking in schools about their experiences, as part of a campaign against segregated education for children of asylum seekers. As a self-help group the women also feel a strong sense of responsibility toward other members.

One grandmother from the AAWG states;

"The next generation must not suffer like me but move forward and be raised up. We must stick together."
(Letter from AAWG written for the European Day of Action for the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers, 30.01.04)

If someone has a hearing for their case well will all go along and support them, or if someone has to go to the benefit office. It can be scary if you haven't done it before. We all help each other.

My friend has food as benefits and she brought it in to share with me...They are good here. If you don't come to a meeting they call you after and ask if you're ok. (Respondent 2)

Many asylum seekers are still out on the streets including pregnant women...sometimes up to five women sleep on the floor of my small room

because I know how hard it is to sleep rough and to have absolutely nothing. (S. Fesshaye, founder member of the AAWG, Rape, Hunger and Homelessness in 'The Guardian' 1.11.03)

Language

Schirmer (1993) found that members of the widows group in Guatemala were unsure of how to organise themselves as a group at first, and many were illiterate and could not speak Spanish. This point also comes out in the interviews with the members of AAWG, with many women lacking basic skills and unable to speak English before they arrived in Britain. Learning these basic skills has increased the women's ability to organise and campaign.

Here (the Crossroads Women's Centre) we have learnt things like faxing, and photocopying and typing and using the computer and emailing. Some people hadn't even used a phone before they got here. But we learn these things here and this helps us to fight our cases. (Respondent 2)

Schirmer argues that through learning to speak Spanish "women learn the language of bureaucracy, law and power as a way both to make their demands known and to protect themselves" (1993: 54). This also applies to the women from AAWG, WAR and BWRAP who were learning to speak English, illustrated aptly by one interviewee when she said "language is power" (respondent 1).

It's good to learn English. It makes you feel more confident to speak about your experiences and be heard...When we get here we know nothing about our rights. But here we learn about our rights and what we have to do. (Respondent 2)

Group Solidarity and the importance of Gender and Ethnicity

The data shows that the women from BWRAP and AAWG in particular feel a sense of solidarity due to their shared experiences as black women refugees/asylum seekers in Britain. Racism emerged as a significant theme, particularly for women asylum seekers who had been dispersed to regions outside London. This is expressed in an article in The Guardian written by a woman who received help from BWRAP.

"I was given a flat on a council estate where I am the only black person...Racism is not a concept I was familiar with in Kenya and only now that I

have been moved to Middlesbrough do I properly understand what the word means...I am made to feel as if I smell and there is zero tolerance for the non-existent smell of an asylum seekers. I escaped from Kenya because I wanted to live, but In Middlesbrough all can think about is how much I want to die."

(K. Nygothi, 'Every Moment for me is fear', The Guardian, 8.7.04)

Another article in The Observer featured a woman who had joined BWRAP after similar experiences:

Maggie came from the Congo last January and was dispersed to Sunderland, where she suffered racist attacks. When she came back to London and met with the National Asylum Support Service her support was cut off. "I slept on the ground in a church for three months," said Maggie. "I'm here, I've lost my children and my husband, and I'm being treated not like a human being, but like an animal". (P. Donovan, 'Out of the Frying Pan', The Observer 26.10.03)

In her study of Ethiopian and Eritrean women refugees Moussa (1993) also found that the women had never experienced racism before living in Canada. She argues that the women's experience of racism was effected by their nationality and culture and because they were refugees. The women quoted above experienced racism specifically as black African refugees living in the North-East of England. As Moussa argues, the women here are facing a new perception of their colour and ethnicity, and "are having to reorient their identities as newcomers, as not belonging to the dominant racial and ethnic group as well as linking with the diaspora of black people globally" (1993: 229)

Women from AAWG feel a sense of commonality because they are all African women, with the interviewees from the group emphasising this aspect:

We have members from different countries in Africa but all of our members are from Africa, nowhere else. (Respondent 1)

The All African Women's Group was originally named the Eritrean Women's Group but changed their name recently due to the number of women from other African countries joining the group. This inclusion shows that the women feel a certain

solidarity with women from other countries in Africa.

We protested outside their offices (the Refugee Council) to tell the public what we are suffering. That's how we met women from many different countries, Cameroon, Comoros Islands, Congo, Ethiopia, Uganda who are going through similar experiences. They started attending our meetings and were welcomed. (S. Fesshaye, founder member of the AAWG, Rape Hunger and Homelessness, 'The Guardian' 1.11.03)

In their study of a group of Somalia women refugees, Blakeney, Dirie and MacRae (1996) found that although there was significant diversity between members in terms of age, educational backgrounds, rural and urban backgrounds, and varying degrees of Islamic religious orthodoxy, this strengthened solidarity because they shared similar experiences as refugees in Canada. This can also be seen among members of AAWG. There are approximately 200 members from many different countries and from different class backgrounds, and they range in age from teenagers to women in their sixties. The family circumstances of the women also vary. Most are single women, some have young children and six of the younger women are pregnant. Although the women are from different countries and different backgrounds they found they shared similar experiences as African women asylum seekers/refugees in Britain.

The women are from many different countries in Africa and they have fled due to different reasons-war, religion, rape, torture, political involvement with opposition parties...it's good because women from different cultures can share their experiences. (Respondent 2)

You feel desperate when you get here-you feel like there is no hope-you will die anyway...but this group has given us hope. We are helping each other. (Respondent 2)

The data shows that the women from BWRAP.WAR and AAWG feel a strong sense of solidarity due to shared gender-specific experiences. Many of the women have experienced rape and sexual torture in their home countries under repressive political regimes or during civil war. Some women had also experienced rape since coming to Britain, while sleeping rough or staying in hostels. At the LAW National Conference

Cristel Amiss, from BWRAP stated that an estimated 50% of women refugees in the world have been raped. She went on to say that women often find it hard to speak to officials about their experiences and the impact this has had on their lives, meaning their claims for asylum may be rejected because adjudicators are not aware of the full extent of the women's suffering or the women are not believed. The group's campaign work aims to raise awareness of this issue and WAR in particular are campaigning to gain official recognition of rape as persecution, and therefore grounds for asylum. This aim is clearly in line with other feminist academics and practitioners who have criticised the official 'refugee' definition used in international law (Un Convention, 1951), for not recognising gender oppression, including rape and sexual torture, as discussed in the literature review.

There is a systematic process of denying women their rights. Lawyers discredit their credibility during interviews to determine whether they've been raped. For the women this is just as traumatic as their experiences in their home country. (Respondent 4)

We have been raped and tortured and when we come here we are raped and tortured again. It's the same. (Respondent 3)

We worked with women in Euro Tower (a hostel) who suffered rape and other violence, and found women from many different countries, Uganda, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon are going through similar experiences...A young woman was wrongly advised that she was not entitled to support and was raped while sleeping rough. (AAWG, www.allwomenscount.net 27.8.06)

Motherhood was another shared experience for many of the women, with some women becoming separated from their children after fleeing their home country. The CoMadres organised around their specific experiences as a group of mothers whose children had been assassinated or had 'disappeared' due to political oppression in El Salvador. Schirmer (1993) argues that the group use the image of the suffering mother, drawn from Catholicism, to campaign against the State. While motherhood is not as much of a central focus for the women from AAWG as it is for the 'motherist' (1993 : 31) groups of Latin America, publicising the suffering of mothers and their children and emphasising the important role that women play

within the family and community is an important aspect of their campaign work.

To disperse a mother is double torture—we and our children have fled war and conflict, and come here for our safety only to be brutally forced away from our friends and caring networks, which are not easy to make in an unfamiliar and often hostile country. (AAWG, www.allwomenscount.net, 27.08.06)

I had been homeless. I was seven months pregnant and I was sleeping in bus shelters. I went to a charity for help and they turned me out on the streets. Here (AAWG) I have met women like me. (Respondent 1)

The AAWG works with the No School Apartheid campaign, started by mothers and teachers, which particularly emphasises women's role as careers.

Women's vital struggle to keep families and communities together in the face of war and devastation remains the most hidden...This project aims to highlight women's experiences as mothers, grandmothers, sisters and young girls, and their contributions to our multi-racial schools and communities, and show what they have in common with women and girls everywhere. (Press release, AAWG June 2004)

Gender interest and 'womanist feminisms'

In this section discussion on data in relation to Molyneux's (1986) analysis of 'strategic' and 'practical' gender interests and Schirmer's (1993) concept of 'womanist feminisms', is presented.

In a letter written for the European Day of Action for the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers two members of AAWG, one of which was interviewed in this study.

We need food, housing, medicine and doctors, everything in life, the same as everyone else. These are political demands...Is politics not about changing the world so that we all get what we need? Why then are we told that our demands for our needs are 'not political'?...Who decides what is 'political', the men?...Women are not less political, but our politics are often more practical and concrete. We don't like abstractions, we like words and actions that speak about our situation and struggle for survival and justice.

This illustrates the link that the women make between strategic and practical gender interests, supporting Schirmer's (1993) and Radcliffe and Westwood's (1993) criticism of Molyneux's (1986) distinction between the two. Although access to food, housing and health care may be regarded as practical interest the women explicitly state that these are political demands and acknowledge the marginalization of their needs under patriarchal structures, clearly demonstrating their support for the feminist assertion 'the personal is political'.

In the same letter the women write;

If the rights of women are abused, so are the rights of men. For 9 months we carry everyone, and forever after we look after and feed everyone, but our work and struggle is left out...In Africa some of us are also soldiers in liberation struggles, we go to war, we get injured and killed and so do our children...Being raped, abused, tortured in prison and being disrespected and refused help when we escape, are examples of the sexism we suffer...Women's rights must be everywhere...because we do most of the work everywhere in the world, in the house, outside and in politics.

This shows that members of the AAWG are motivated by both 'female' and 'feminist' consciousness, with multiple practical and strategic interests, providing support for Schirmer's concept of 'womanist feminisms'. The women are acknowledging women's role as mothers and careers as well as women's political role. They advocate the need to respect women's rights and acknowledge that women's rights are human rights, clearly showing the influence of feminist goals.

Schirmer (1993) discusses the way in which the women in Latin America organise around pragmatic and strategic campaigns for human rights, linking this to the pragmatic and strategic struggle for women's rights. The groups in this study link their aims for women asylum seekers to broader debates in society. This can be seen here in some of the aims of the groups as a whole.

- Official recognition of rape as persecution and torture and therefore grounds for asylum-giving the women's movement against rape a wider and more global focus, so it is useful to all women.

- The implication for everyone's human rights in the persecution of asylum seekers-it divides communities, paves the way for extremist parties, and invites violence and other racism against people of colour by individuals and by the police.
- Destitution and discrimination force people to accept any job, pushing down wages and undermining efforts to improve working conditions-this drives down expectations for society as a whole. (LAW National Conference Programme, 3.07.03)

Here the groups are recognising that the rights of asylum seekers are human rights and make links with wider debates about sexism and racism. For example in the first aim the explicit link is made between campaigns for women asylum seekers and other women's movements.

Alliances

Based on her research of women's participation in popular social movements in Brazil, Corcoran-Nantes (1993) found that as their awareness of gender inequality grew the women developed cross-class and cross-ethnic links with feminist groups and other women's organisations, giving them greater ability to campaign. The data clearly shows that the women's groups in this study developed cross-class and cross-ethnic links with one another. This is illustrated by the way in which AAWG, whose members are all black refugee women from Africa, formed alliances with LAW, whose members are predominantly white women from Britain. These alliances have contributed to the women's consciousness because working with anti-sexist, anti-racist organisations such as LAW has provided them with more information concerning their rights as women asylum seekers, and the encouragement and support to campaign for these rights.

We (LAW) want to provide a platform for the women to be able to speak...There are a lot of grassroots organisations and people who are sympathetic towards the situation of asylum seekers, who will stand up and say 'no, women shouldn't be treated in this way'. (Respondent 4)

The ladies from the Crossroads centre give us guidance. For example they'll know what to do about a certain case. We don't know but they can get access to lawyers, they can say 'go here and speak to these people'. (Respondent 3)

The way in which the women's groups link their own aims and objectives to other broader issues (as discussed in the previous section) has allowed them to form broad alliances with other groups, particularly women's organisations and feminist groups, which has strengthened their campaign work. For example the English Collective of Prostitutes have developed alliances with WAR, BWRAP and AAWG in campaigning against the deportation of women refugees/asylum seekers who have been forced into prostitution. The groups have also joined with Payday men's network (campaigning for payment of all unwaged work), among other groups, to form the Crossroads Coalition for Justice for Asylum Seekers (CCJAS), working together on particular campaigns, such as the protest against section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002).

The LAW National Conference is an articulation of these alliances. Community groups, church groups, asylum seeker and refugee groups, legal representatives, social workers and health professionals and many others groups from all over Britain come together to tackle the problems facing women asylum seekers and other related issues. The women's groups clearly recognise the importance of alliances between grassroots groups and professional organisations such as the British Association of Social Workers, the Medical Practitioners Union.

This determined and varied but largely hidden movement, beginning with the women who are central to it...has accumulated great skill, knowledge and insight. It can be even more effective if it is more visible and aware of its own successes. The conference will draw on the expertise of professionals whose thorough work and commitment to grassroots people are a great resource. We will look at the best way to combine the expertise of both the organiser and the professional in order to demand justice from the legal system and greater accountability from professionals.

(LAW National Conference Programme, 3.07.03)

The LAW conference also facilitated the development of regional alliances.

The group (AAWG) have now been working with a similar group from the North-East. Since the national conference all this stuff came out about racism towards asylum seekers in Middlesbrough

and the local newspaper ran a front-page story about it, saying 'we won't put up with this'. (Respondent 4)

The groups from CCJAS have also developed international alliances with other asylum seeker/refugee groups in France and Spain and speakers from networks in Europe spoke at the National conference. The members clearly feel that this has helped to strengthen their movement.

We send solidarity greetings and full support to your struggle for decent living conditions...We have supported the church occupations and other actions in France since 1996, and in Spain in 2001, where part of our network is based...the movement for papers for all has spread in Europe and North America, and it is reenergizing the movement here in the UK...What you are doing is an inspiration and a power for us. We hope you will also draw on our actions here to strengthen your struggle. (Letter from CCJAS addressed to Sans Papiers, a group of asylum seekers protesting in Paris, 12.07.03)

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated the positive impact of belonging to a collective movement for women asylum seekers and refugees because they have found a space for resistance and empowerment by organising collectively around their specific needs. The data has shown that ethnicity and gender are clearly very important factors in creating and maintaining group solidarity amongst the women. On a personal level the groups have provided the women with support and friendship, and a contest in which they can share their suffering and seek to understand the sexism and racism they have experienced, allowing them to regain a sense of control over their lives. Collins (2000) argues that empowerment involves a change in consciousness and this will encourage people to improve the conditions of their lives. This can clearly be seen in the women's groups because they actively campaign to change the social injustices they have suffered and demand greater recognition of their rights as women asylum seekers. This study has demonstrated that the women "represent the defiant transformation of the powerless victim into the political actor" (Schirmer 1989:4).

The campaign work is an articulation of the women's consciousness because they are collectively resisting the repression and

discrimination they face as African women asylum seekers/refugees in Britain and at the same time they are resisting the constructions of women asylum seekers as 'passive' through speaking out in the public arena to raise awareness of their suffering. Their campaign work has brought about changes, which have empowered them, increasing their consciousness of their own power to bring about change in their lives and the lives of other asylum seekers and refugees. The women recognise the need to connect their own personal struggles to wider issues concerned with human rights, which has enabled them to form broad alliances with other groups, helping to strengthen their movements.

In relation to the literature focusing on gender interests and women's political mobilization my findings support Schirmer's (1993) and Radcliffe and Westwood's (1993) critique of Molyneux because it is clear that the women's consciousness cannot be distinguished as either 'female' 'feminist', and nor can their interests be divided in terms of 'practical' and 'strategic'. The objectives of the groups are clearly influenced by feminism, this can be seen in the campaign to gain official recognition of gender-related persecution in the criteria for refugee status and in general the groups campaign against the sexism they have experienced as women refugees. But they are also motivated by what might be termed practical female interests, such as decent housing, and an aspect of their campaign work emphasises women's role as careers and mothers. However the women themselves do not make a distinction between their practical aims to obtain basic necessities for survival and their strategic struggle for the rights of women asylum seekers/refugees and women's rights as a whole. As members of AAWG state, "Women are not less political, but our politics are often more practical and concrete" (30.01.04). Therefore data of this support Schirmer's (1993) concept of 'womanist feminisms', which bridges 'practical' and 'strategic' interests.

Referring to the Brazilian women in her own research Corcoran-Nantes argues that whether the women describe their consciousness that has developed in relation to strategic gender interests, as feminist or not is irrelevant, "What is important for women of the popular classes is that their concerns are firmly on the political agenda" (1993 : 155). Although it is evident that the women's groups in this study are motivated by a gendered

consciousness and their aims and objectives are influenced by feminist goals, it may be irrelevant to them whether this consciousness is described as feminist or not. What may be of more importance is that UK asylum policy takes a more gendered approach, as Crawley (1999) advocates, recognising the rights of women asylum seekers by addressing the discrimination they face during asylum determination and the lack of adequate protection and provision for asylum seekers, particularly women.

This research has shown the importance of gender in issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees. There are clearly specific experiences that affect women asylum seekers and refugees both in their home country and in Britain and there is a need for this to be recognised in UK asylum policy. The data has shown that gender-related persecution is an important issue for the women, particularly rape and sexual torture, lending support to the argument advocated by feminist academics and practitioners, such as Moussa (1993) and Crawley (1999), that gender persecution and the protection required for women refugees due to gender inequality in the countries of origin, countries of resettlement and any transitional countries should be recognised in the official criteria for refugee status. The data documents instances of racist attacks on women asylum seekers in Britain and occurrences of rape while sleeping in hostels or on the street, illustrating a clear lack of adequate protection and provision.

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www.allwomenscount.net
www.crossroadswomenscentre.net
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APPENDIX A

Background information about the women's groups

- The all African Women's Group (AAWG) formed in 2003. They meet on a weekly basis and have approximately 200 members, all of whom are refugees or asylum seekers from various African countries. The group is a self-help group, where members provide support for each other, focusing particularly on winning their claims for asylums. They also actively campaign on issues that effect women asylum seekers/refugees in Britain.
- Black Women's Rape Action Project (BWRAP) was founded in 1991. The group provides support for black women and immigrant and refugee women who have suffered rape and sexual assault, from women who have similar experiences and are from similar backgrounds. They are campaigning for greater protection and resources for rape survivors.
- Women Against Rape (WAR) is a grassroots multi-racial women's group founded in 1976. They offer counselling, support and legal advocacy to women and girls who have been raped and sexually assaulted, including those who are claiming asylum from rape. They are campaigning for official recognition of rape as persecution and torture and therefore grounds for asylum.
- Legal Action for Women (LAW) is a grassroots anti-sexist anti-racist legal service for all women. Since it began in 1982 it has focused on providing free legal advice and support to low-income marginalized women, particularly asylum seekers. The group works closely with the AAWG, BWRAP and WAR.
- All four of the groups are based at the Crossroads Women's Centre in London and are part of the Crossroads Coalition for Justice for Asylum Seekers (CCJAS).