

How can social learning play a role for mothers seeking sanctuary¹ in Wales?



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In the past few years, there has been an increasing divergence in some areas of policy between the Home Office and the Welsh Government. In 2019, the Welsh Government delivered its Nation of Sanctuary plan (Welsh Government, 2019). It continues to reiterate its commitment to becoming the world's first nation of sanctuary (MSJ, 2023), supported by votes in the Senedd (Welsh Parliament) against both the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023. These developments make Wales a distinct context within the UK. Yet, the lives of asylum seekers and refugees, particularly women, in Wales remain under-researched.

The human rights objections to both of the above acts highlight their disproportionately harmful effects on women. Women are known to already experience specific and disproportionate harms in the UK asylum systems and as refugees globally, and from the impact

of gendered social norms and barriers to accessing childcare (Freedman, 2010; Women For Refugee Women, 2021).

MY RESEARCH

My qualitative research sought to fill the gaps highlighted above by focusing on mothers seeking sanctuary in Wales and the role of social learning, whereby both formal and informal learning may be means through which an individual and a community develop together. My findings show that mothers seeking sanctuary are more nuanced and complex than can be explained by a reductive biological essentialism that has often reduced their experiences to – undervalued – caring responsibilities (Loneragan, 2015).

In the rest of this article I focus on the stories of two mothers, Sarah and Olena, reflecting and representing the tone and content of my interviews with them. They

described how community based settings helped them to move into formal education and rebuild themselves as individuals and members of their new communities, as well as mothers.

SARAH'S STORY

Sarah became a single mother and an asylum seeker when she fled an abusive spouse. She told me about the devastating impact of the asylum system, and of the exclusionary entry criteria to the university course in Wales that was most relevant to her professional experience. 'What is happening to your confidence? It goes to the floor. And that is what happened to me.' She felt destroyed; but for her children's sake, she picked herself up and set about rebuilding her own and their lives. She said, 'It's about you as a woman and what you, the society put you through, and for the sake of the children what you have to do to make them responsible adults because it's [in] my hands to help these boys to be what they can be'. Sarah explained how vital community groups were, providing places where she could go with her children and 'do some artwork and sit with other women and chat while the children play'. In these community spaces she learned about and enrolled on short courses supported by third sector organisations. Sarah commented that the groups 'look little, but they are life savers for some people'. As a result she learned of and was encouraged to apply for a postgraduate course in a new subject area for her. While studying on the course she gained the required practitioner hours as a volunteer in the same community groups in which she had started. Thus she was able to build a new life for herself and her children and become an active, social and professional community member, supporting other sanctuary seekers. The image on the previous page is a photograph taken by Sarah during a period of lockdown in the Covid-19 pandemic. It depicts her working remotely in her community role, which was a way for her both to remain supported by colleagues and to maintain some support for her community members.

OLENA'S STORY

Olena also described how critical informal and community based learning had been for her, providing her with a path through to higher education. She 'couldn't function for one year' when she arrived in the UK due to the traumas that had destroyed her home, her life and her sense of self. Like Sarah, Olena knew she had to function for her children. Although she obtained mental health support it did not help, so she became active in her community as a volunteer in third sector organisations; in those spaces Olena began to regain her identity. She learned about sanctuary scholarships and developed sufficient confidence to apply for a postgraduate course that would give her the

UK qualifications required to work in her profession. Olena told me how it felt to physically enter a higher education institution: 'I think when I was leaving the building, I was feeling like a bird. I was thinking I will just open my arms now, and I will fly!'. She described her postgraduate studies as 'like a medicine' that did more for her mental health than any medication had done. Olena's experience of education in Wales was a process of social learning through which she was able to contribute to the community and gain the support she needed to obtain a place on a postgraduate course and start to rebuild her professional identity.

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Sarah's and Olena's experiences illustrate a social learning process from community groups into higher education, in which they play a role together, rather than in isolated silos. Community based learning provided vital support for both mothers that enabled them to rebuild themselves as women and as members of a community, and take the path into formal education institutions.

¹Refers to asylum seekers, refugees and anyone who has been through the asylum system in the UK.

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