

# Mothers Seeking Sanctuary: Wellbeing, Learning, and Education in Wales

*"Education...it's the most  
important thing in the World."*

## *FINAL BRIEFING REPORT – MAY 2022*

Report Prepared from Presentation at the Wales  
Assembly of Women Conference in November 2021  
as an Audrey Jones Research Memorial Awardee. As  
this report was produced during an ongoing PhD  
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## 1 Introduction

This briefing paper is based on research findings from my PhD project that were presented to the Wales Assembly of Women in November 2021, when I was an awardee for the Audrey Jones Memorial award. The purpose of this report is to provide the information presented in November 2021 in a written, briefing report, format for further dissemination with the Welsh Government, Third Sector organisations, and Education Institutions.

The research on which this report is based on the lived experiences of mothers who are seeking asylum or are refugees living in Wales. The scope of the research project, and therefore this report, is the experiences of informal learning and formal education. The Welsh context was important for both generating and analysing data; the context of devolved Education policy but UK Immigration policy. My own role as a researcher was influenced by being a racialised, British mother who therefore shared some experiences (e.g. motherhood) with my participants but not that of living as a sanctuary seeker in Wales. The research methods were therefore participatory and collaborative, to help ensuring participants' voices and perspectives were the key focus and not my own assumptions.

My findings show that there are gaps in existing literature, policy, and service provision for sanctuary seeking mothers and their learning and education in Wales. However, my findings also show evidence of good practice in refugee support and of resourcefulness and resilience amongst my participants. This report does not cover all my findings in detail but provides an overview of two key areas. Firstly, how misrecognition of sanctuary seeking mothers' capabilities acts as a barrier to accessing learning. Secondly, the social wellbeing benefits for mothers and communities when mothers do gain access to learning spaces. I finish the report with some initial, high-level, recommendations

The main focus of this report is on intangible barriers and wellbeing. It is important for me to acknowledge that existing research shows clear evidence on the issue of tangible barriers, particularly childcare for sanctuary seeking mothers and on the relationship between education and employment.(Crawley and Crimes 2009; Chick and Hannagan-Lewis 2019; Holtom and Iqbal 2020) The need for childcare provision for asylum seekers has also been made clearly to the Welsh Government (Oxfam Cymru and Women's Equality Network Wales 2020). I therefore do not repeat those points in the main body of this report but I do return to them in my recommendations.

## 2 Definitions

### 2.1 International Law

#### **Asylum Seeker**

*“Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution”* –Article 14 UN Declaration of Human Rights 1948

#### **Refugee**

*“owing to wellfounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”* is outside country of nationality and cannot return  
Article 1 UN Convention on Refugees 1951

### 2.2 UK

#### **Asylum seeker**

Someone who has lodged a claim to be granted asylum

#### **Refugee**

someone who has been granted ‘Leave to Remain’ in the UK with ‘refugee status’  
Granted either prior to arrival in UK through an international scheme  
Or granted to an individual who has claimed asylum after arriving in UK

#### **Sanctuary Seeker**

Term used by the Welsh Government to refer to refugees and anyone who has been through or is in the UK asylum system

#### **Additional Terminology**

If an asylum-seeker does not meet the (1951) criteria for refugee status, they may be granted ‘leave to remain’ on other grounds, such as ‘humanitarian protection’ or on ‘compassionate grounds’. Or, of course, claim may be rejected!

### 2.3 Definitions in relation to women<sup>1</sup>

UN 1951 Refugee Convention & 1967 Protocol

Key criteria is “Fear of persecution/safety on grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”

There is nothing specific for

- Sex or gender
- Sexuality
- gender identity

However, fear of sexual violence, sexual exploitation, gendered violence are now internationally recognised issues faced by women and girls, as a “particular social group”. These issues are now ‘recognised’ in the UK legal system too.

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<sup>1</sup> Women here refers to cis women. The project was open to any sanctuary seeker who described themselves as a mother. No trans women volunteered to participate in the study and therefore the specific issues faced by trans asylum seekers are outside the scope of this report

## 3 Context

### 3.1 Global Context

According to the UNHCR there were 82.4 million people ‘forcibly displaced’ across the world at the end of 2020. That figure includes:

- 26.4 million refugees
- 48 million internally displaced
- 4.1 million asylum seekers
- 3.9 million Venezuelans displaced abroad<sup>2</sup>

### 3.2 UK –Asylum Claims and Resettled Refugees

This section provides a brief overview of the context in the UK:

- UK ‘offered protection’ to 9,936 people in 2020
- That figure for 2020 was 52% lower than 2019 and lowest figures since 2014

#### 3.2.1 Refugee Programmes

In 2014 the UK government pledged to settle 20,000 Syrian Refugees Over 5 years (2015-20) through the Syrian Voluntary Resettlement Programme (VPRS). 20,319 Syrian people had been settled across the UK by March 2021

In 2021 the UK government pledged protection to 20,000 Afghan refugees, with 5,000 in year 1 as part of the Afghan’s Citizen Resettlement Scheme (ACRS). To date, some Afghan refugees have been settled in Wales, but the UK government faces criticism for not fulfilling its promises, with reports of 12,000 Afghans in hotels, rather than in areas of resettlement, at the end of December 2021.<sup>3</sup>

#### 3.2.2 Legislation and Policy

This section briefly summarises the key legislation relevant for this report. It is not an exhaustive list

##### **1999 Asylum and Immigration Act**

- Introduced the dispersal system that led to the creation of four dispersal centres in Wales (Cardiff, Swansea, Newport, and Wrexham) and first significant numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Wales.
- Introduced the prohibition on employment for asylum seekers and created the National Asylum Support Service to coordinate no-choice dispersal and housing and financial support. The latter was set at 75% of the income support rate at the time – approximately £35. Families with children under 12 months can claim an additional £5 and pregnant women and families can claim £3. The basic rate of support was increased to £40.85 at the start of 2022.

##### **2012 Hostile Environment Policy**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/28/12000-afghan-refugees-to-start-new-year-stuck-in-uk-hotels>

This policy was first announced by the, then, Home Secretary Theresa May in 2012. It was a deliberate and conscious plan to harden existing harsh measures for migrants and refugees through greater emphasis on deterrent, detention, deportation. The policy had a goal to coerce people, through hostility, into leaving the UK 'voluntarily'. The following legislation was part of this policy.

### **2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts**

- Introduced more internal bordering with greater responsibility checks on immigration status required in housing, healthcare, and other sectors

### **2021 Nationality and Borders Bill**

Proposes to:

- delegitimise those who arrive to claim asylum via irregular routes, e.g. in small boats via the channel
- allow criminalisation those who save the lives of asylum seekers at sea
- Extend the UK government's powers to strip individuals of British citizenship without notice.
- Allow suspension of asylum claims indefinitely
- Introduce new rules for use of (discredited) age assessments
- Change definition of term 'particular social group'

The Bill has been widely condemned internationally and across the UK and is likely to disproportionately affect women feeling domestic, sexual, and gendered violence.<sup>4</sup>

## **3.3 Wales –Nation of Sanctuary**

### **3.3.1 Welsh Government Policy**

In contrast to the UK Government's increasingly 'hostile' policies towards migrants and refugees, the Welsh Government has delivered a plan to be a 'Nation of Sanctuary'. The beginning of that documented strategy includes the following statement:

*Refugees and asylum seekers often arrive in Wales following traumatic experiences in their countries of origin and on their journeys to the UK. We want to ensure that these individuals are supported to rebuild their lives and make a full contribution to Welsh society.*

Jane Hutt

► Welsh Government Nation of Sanctuary Plan 2019

### **3.3.2 Statistics for Wales**

In 2021 there were 2,829 asylum claimants living in Wales, which represented 6% of all asylum seekers in the UK. Asylum seekers are primarily spread across the four dispersal centres in the following proportions (which do not vary much year on year)

- 45% Cardiff
- 31% Swansea
- 18.3% Newport
- 5.4% Wrexham

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gardencourtchambers.co.uk/news/the-nationality-and-borders-bill-legal-opinion-prepared-by-garden-court-barristers-for-women-for-refugee-women>

However, at least 10 local authority areas have asylum seekers claiming what is known as ‘Section 95’ support (under the 1999 Act). Additionally, the four dispersal centres do not typically include refugees arriving on resettlement programmes – the programmes for Syria and Afghanistan. There are further areas of resettlement across Wales for those programmes. By end 2019 approximately 1,000 Syrian Refugees had been resettled in Wales. In 2020

In total, estimated figures from the Welsh Refugee Council for the total numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in Wales are approximately 10,000 people <0.5% Welsh population<sup>5</sup>

### 3.3.3 Countries of Origin

Home Office statistics Jun 2021: Top 5 countries of origin in Wales vs UK

Wales		UK	
Iraq	362	Iran	3,795
Iran	188	Albania	3,486
Albania	173	Eritrea	3,093
China	166	Sudan	2,331
Nigeria	139	Iraq	2,138
Other	1,382		

### 3.3.4 Women Seeking Sanctuary in Wales

There is not a lot of recent data on women specifically. However, in the 2000s we know that:

- 30% asylum claims in Wales were from women
- 50% all refugee households in Wales headed by women
- 62% of women in a 2007 study (Ameen) educated to Further Education Level or above. Compared with 57% of men

## 4 Public Perceptions of Women-seeking Sanctuary

Existing research (Seu 2003; Olivius 2016; Reynolds and Erel 2016) shows common themes across Europe and in the UK, with the following type of language/ideas used to describe asylum seeking and refugee women and mothers

Vulnerable, scroungers, beggars, values in conflict with British values, poorly-education, inward looking.

<sup>5</sup> <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-07/050720-learning-insight-asylum-seekers-refugees-en.pdf>

There is much stigma to being an asylum-seeker, as evidenced by women in the author's research. Some were ostracised by diasporic community, even when previously accepted when living in the UK as working migrants. That stigma does not go away when granted Refugee Status or Leave to Remain. That is shown by the discrimination Munira describes in

## 5 Research Methods

This was a qualitative PhD project focused on lived experiences, with full ethical approval from the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. Fieldwork was primarily conducted in refugee women's groups (and homes) across Wales. The researcher interviewed women in spaces where they were comfortable. The project also involved participatory or collaborative elicitation of visual data – drawings, photographs, and some visual and digital stories as an addition to language (English) form of expressing and representing experiences.

Participants were all self-defined mothers with children of varying ages from babies to young adults. Most of the mothers lived with their children but a few were living as transnational mothers, with their children still in their home countries. Participants came from a range of countries including nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia, and the 'Middle East'. Most had completed post-compulsory education in their home countries but two had finished education at secondary school level and one woman had not completed primary school.

To maintain confidentiality and protect women's identities all identifying data has been removed or adjusted. Pseudonyms are used, for example, and world regions, not countries, are named and any jobs are described as generically as possible.

Twenty-six mothers participated, in total, covering 30 interviews (3 conducted remotely during a lockdown), with 18 drawings and 8 sets of photographs generated. All photographs were elicited remotely and digitally due to the covid-19 pandemic.

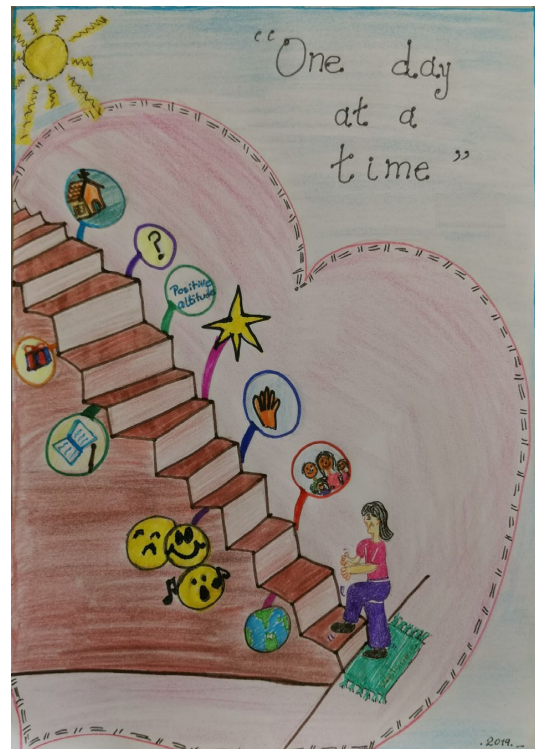
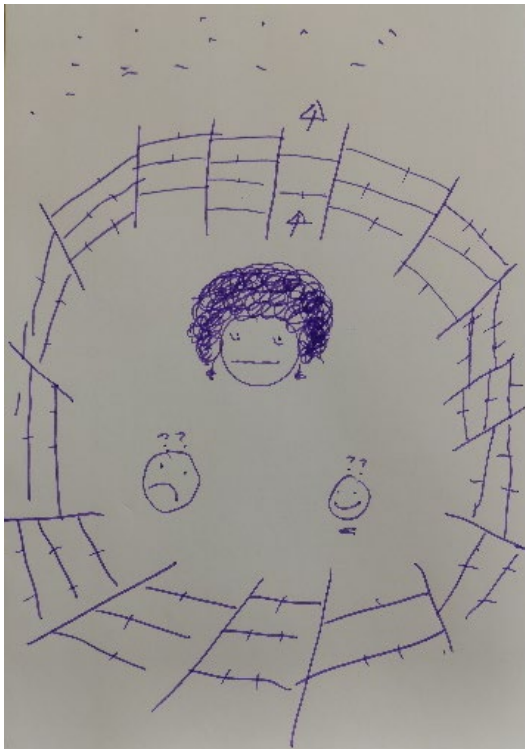
Data was analysed thematically in a systematically and rigorous manner, using procedures suggested by leading academics Braun and Clarke. Further narrative analysis was conducted but that work is outside the scope of this paper.



## 6 Summary of Findings Misrecognition vs Recognition

This section provides a summary of initial findings. Data was analysed through the lenses of Intersectionality, as first defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), and Social Justice theories of recognition from Nancy Fraser (1998). This section, therefore, focuses on the impacts that misrecognition of needs and capabilities had on women in this study and contrasts that with the impacts of recognition that enabled women to access and participate in places of learning and education. The two images below represent those contrasting impacts.

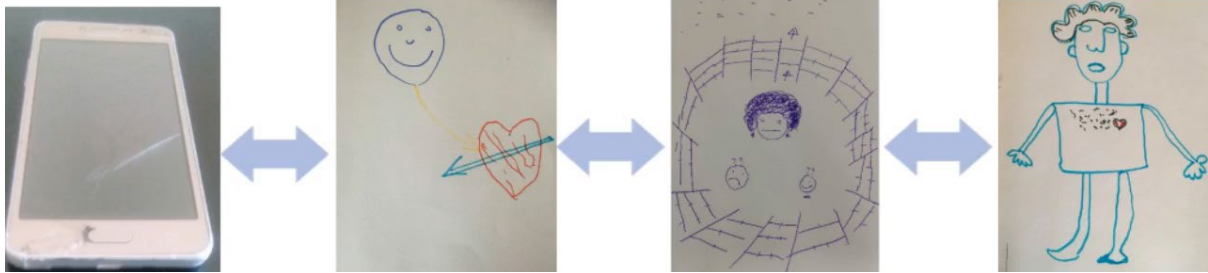
The next two sections each provide a visual summary of the findings, using women's drawings, followed by more detail and explanation using women's words and some analysis of the data presented. The focus of this section is the women's own expressions of their experiences, in line with intersectional feminist research approaches. The analysis is therefore concise and aims to highlight the points represented by the women, rather than re-interpret them or overshadow them.





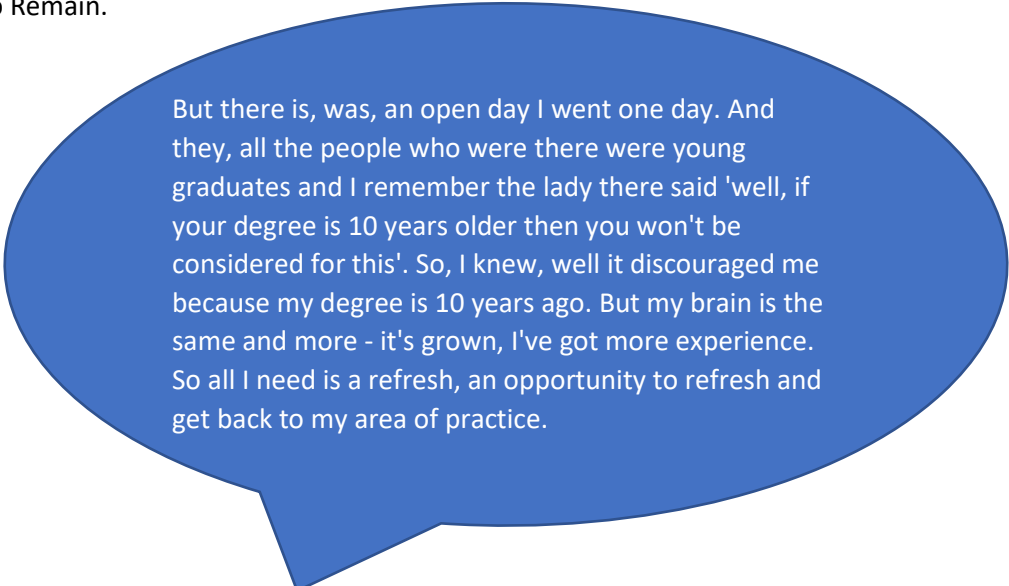
## 6.1 Impacts of misrecognition in learning spaces

The asylum system in the UK is one of the harshest parts of a wider hostile immigration environment intersects with sexism and racism and Islamophobia. Women are mothers seeking sanctuary are often excluded from educational learning opportunities as their abilities and motivations are simply not recognised. Mothers I met talk to me about the impacts of that exclusion and misrecognition of who they really are in education learning settings. Those impacts on all parts of their lives financial social emotional psychological physical and, of course, in turn impacting their children. Those impacts are represented in the images below:



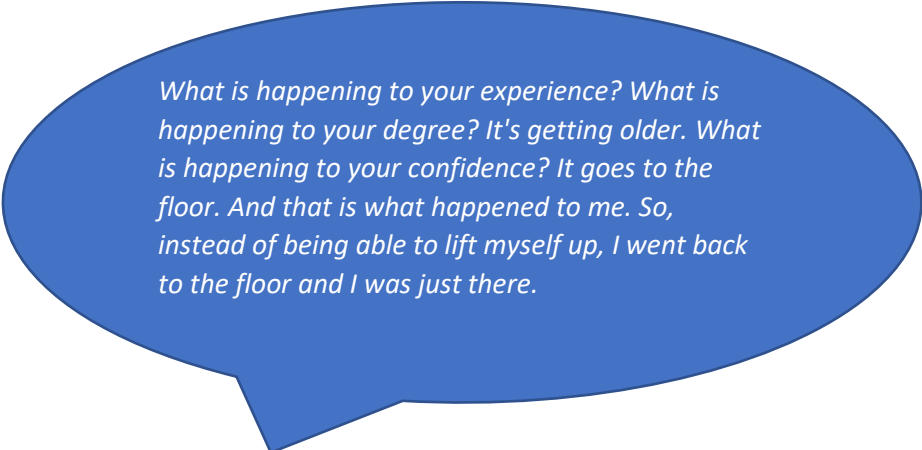
### 6.1.1 Sarah

Sarah claimed asylum after feeling domestic violence as a voluntary migrant on a spousal visa. She has two children and lived through a decade of asylum claims before the Home Office finally granted her Leave To Remain.



But there is, was, an open day I went one day. And they, all the people who were there were young graduates and I remember the lady there said 'well, if your degree is 10 years older then you won't be considered for this'. So, I knew, well it discouraged me because my degree is 10 years ago. But my brain is the same and more - it's grown, I've got more experience. So all I need is a refresh, an opportunity to refresh and get back to my area of practice.

Sarah's description is of an inflexible system that excludes people with useful skills and experience. Sarah cannot use her existing degree directly in the UK but there is not a clear path for her to use that education and a decade of experience either. Sarah's degree may not have been recent but, at that time, her experience and therefore knowledge was. She was not just a graduate in the field but an experienced professional. Sarah's qualification not recognised in the UK, and neither was her experience. This shows a lack of equity through recognition of the diversity of prospective students in the university Sarah visited (Moskal and North 2017). Sarah would have been bringing skills and professional expertise in a needed area – a highly-skilled, economic and social contributor (Anderson 2013, chap.3). Sarah, at that stage, was not facing the well-documented issues associated with mothers and education – barriers of childcare, and transport (Bloch 2002; Crawley and Crimes 2009). Neither was she excluded by legal restrictions for eligibility (Oliver and Hughes 2018). She faced exclusionary institutional entry criteria that does not recognise the diversity of backgrounds of potential applicants. There is no recognition in the system for supporting sanctuary seekers in Sarah's position (NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) 2009). It is several years since that open day and Sarah has not returned to her previous profession and still thinks that door may be closed to her. She talked to me about the effect that had on her wellbeing and on her children:

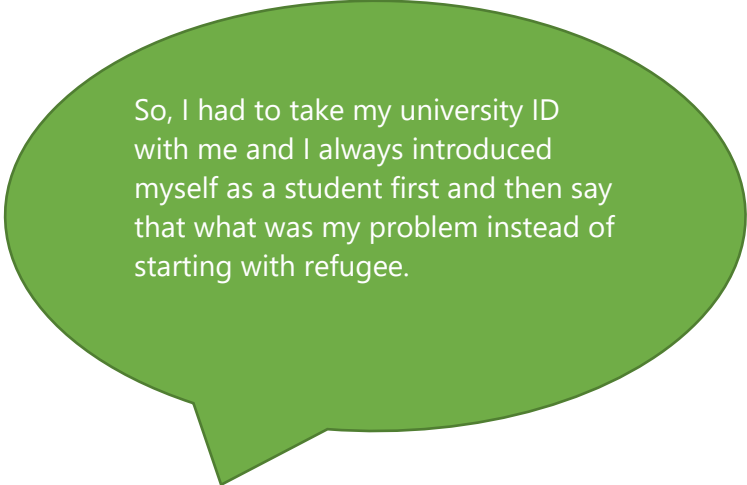


*What is happening to your experience? What is happening to your degree? It's getting older. What is happening to your confidence? It goes to the floor. And that is what happened to me. So, instead of being able to lift myself up, I went back to the floor and I was just there.*

The impacts Sarah describes here are for herself and her children. She talks of the impact on the well-being of the whole family. Sarah's qualifications and experience were left in stasis, making them less and less relevant and useful. As she says, "*What is happening to your degree? It's getting older*". That inactivity undermined and negatively impacted her human needs. She was a survivor of abuse and therefore fits public perceptions of victimhood and vulnerability, as an asylum-seeking mother (Nayak 2015; Patel 2021). Yet she was also a highly qualified and capable woman. The latter characteristic is often not treated as compatible with the social category of needing sanctuary, which left Sarah unable to use her skills and, initially, unable to gain new ones. She was stuck in limbo. The effect of this was to strip her of any confidence she had started to build (that had taken her to that open day): "*instead of being able to lift myself up, I went back to the floor and was just there.*" The situation harmed her mental and emotional wellbeing at a time when she needed to bolster it.

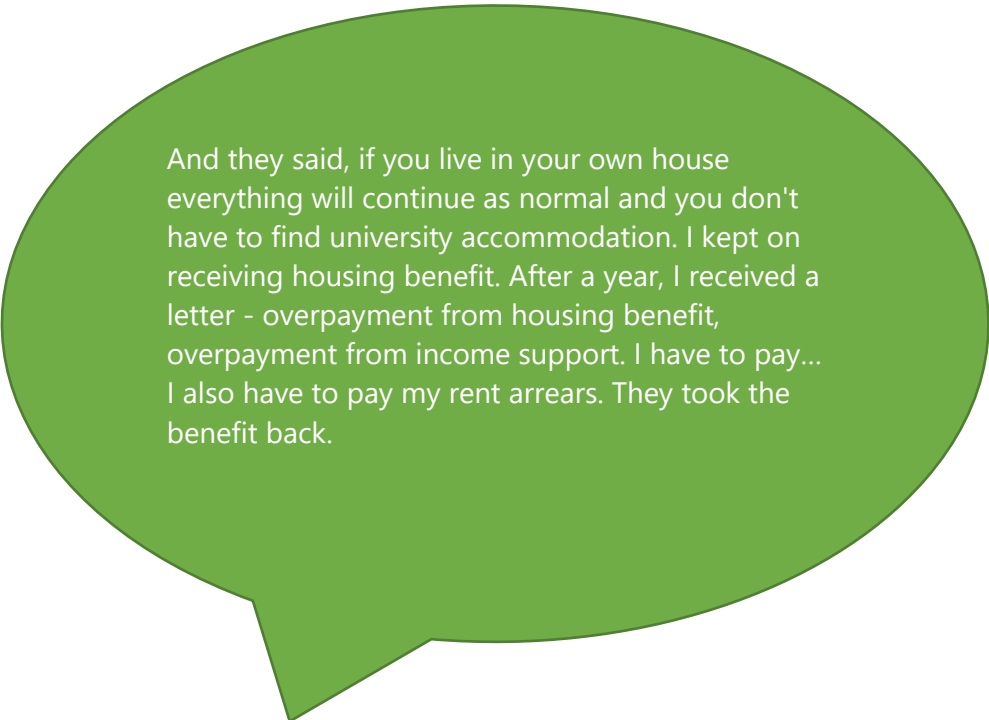
### 6.1.2 Munira

Munira arrived in the UK with her husband and child. Her husband's asylum claim was rejected under the Dublin Regulations, leaving him with No Recourse to Public Funds for some time. Munira was granted Leave to Remain quickly but lived as a single parent while her husband's claim as her dependent was processed. During that period of time Munira enrolled in a course at university, paying for the course and supporting her son through income from Student Finance Wales and Social Security payments from the Department of Work and Pensions.



So, I had to take my university ID with me and I always introduced myself as a student first and then say that what was my problem instead of starting with refugee.

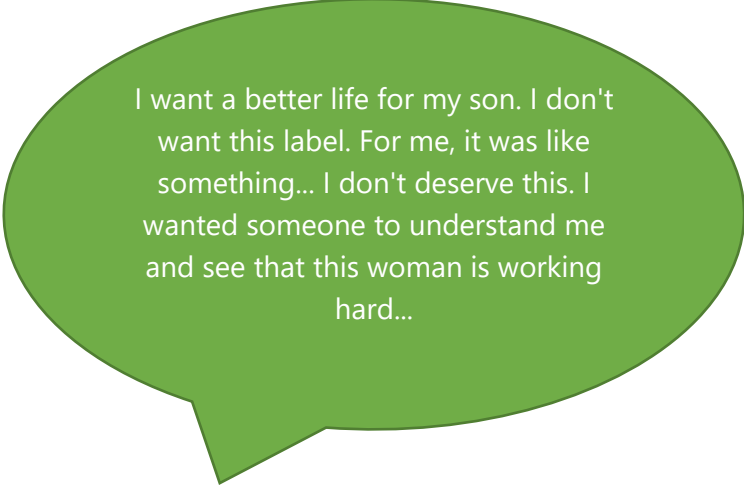
Munira experienced intersectional challenges as a refugee, mother and a student when attending appointments with Department of Work and Pensions officials. In her perception, revealing she was a refugee first there resulted in different treatment from being seen as a student first. She experienced discrimination as a refugee. Munira's experience echoes the findings, in England, of the Refugee Council on the lack of awareness and understanding of refugee issues in institutions of learning and of financial support (Doyle and O'Toole 2013). That institutional misrecognition in Wales had a significant financial impact for Munira,.



And they said, if you live in your own house everything will continue as normal and you don't have to find university accommodation. I kept on receiving housing benefit. After a year, I received a letter - overpayment from housing benefit, overpayment from income support. I have to pay... I also have to pay my rent arrears. They took the benefit back.

Munira had been proactive about financial support for student mothers, contacting the correct agencies and given them full details of her circumstances. She advised the benefits agencies that she was in receipt of the Welsh Government Learning Grant (WGLG), yet she was still given incorrect information and advice about her entitlements. She specifically asked about accommodation and was informed that she could continue to live in her home (social housing) and receive housing benefit and income support. She lived this way for a year, before the DWP calculated that she had received overpayments. The result of the financial misinformation was a debt of several thousand pounds. She has been repaying at a rate of £500 a month, just below the monthly equivalent of the maximum WGLG amount for living costs (Student Finance Wales 2021). From Munira's perspective, individuals or systems within institutions providing financial support, did not recognise her intersecting of needs as a student, a refugee and a mother.

Munira summarised her situation well, when she said:



I want a better life for my son. I don't want this label. For me, it was like something... I don't deserve this. I wanted someone to understand me and see that this woman is working hard...

## 6.2 Benefits of Education and Learning

Education and learning are really important to every woman I spoke to, be it as a means of building a future for herself and her family, of keeping busy for her mental health, for developing communication skills or being a part of the community. Without exception it was something that every woman did and wanted to do more of. My mothers talked to me about the benefits that education and learning brought to them. The mental health benefits they gained, the sense of humanity. The images below represent communication, survival, independence, and participating as an active member of the community.



### 6.2.1 Olena

Olena was a married mother of two, living in Wales as an asylum seeker for over five years. She was a qualified education professional and doing postgraduate study when we met. Olena spent her first year in Wales suffering from serious trauma symptoms, completely unable to function. Olena had been a woman product of her skills and accomplishments, plunged into a situation where she felt those same skills were not needed or valued. The impact on Olena was devastating, as discussed in my **misrecognition chapter**. After a year, she got mental health support, but it was not helpful for her. Irene did not give up; motivated by her motherhood, by her children to find a way to function more – education was her saviour.

Everywhere you are "no, no, no, no!" And then I was welcome and a lot of nice words and a lot of support. 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!

I see the improvement - **the difference between my life before any of these courses**. I realise it when I started doing the courses. Before that I couldn't dream. I couldn't, like, I couldn't see my future but at least I have a hope now.

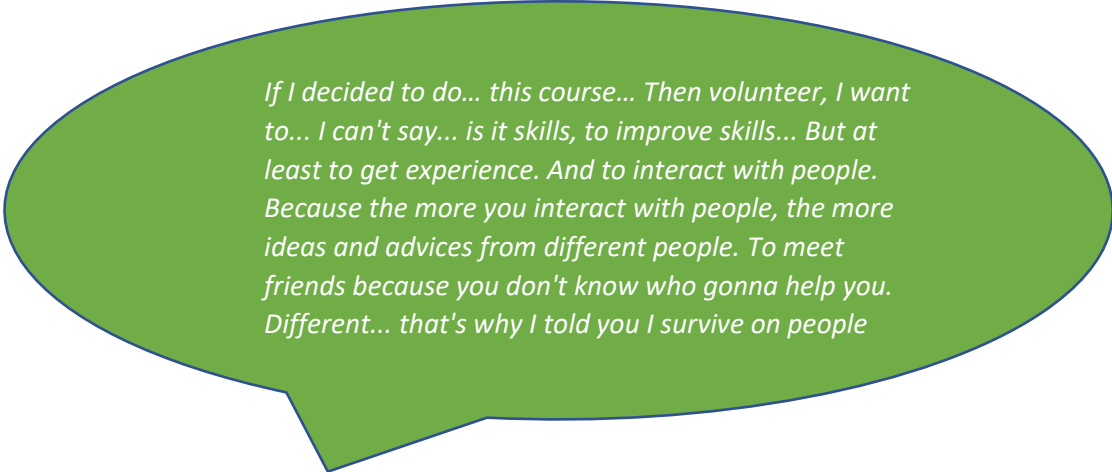
Finally, I am doing something for myself. I couldn't be with myself for five years before the university, so, I don't know how I survived ...*I just used this studies like this is like a medicine*

Formal education gave Olena healing through renewed hope, a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging and a way to dream. Although she has not stated explicitly in the words above, education helped Olena to be an active and present mother again. Through education Olena has rebuilt herself, enabling her to rebuild her role at home and find a place for herself in Welsh society.



### 6.2.2 Pam

Widow, living alone in Wales as a transnational mother. She first arrived and claimed asylum over a decade ago and has yet to be granted leave to remain. Initially Pam volunteered and took short courses as she hoped she would gain skills that could be useful when she got leave to remain. Pam does not want a “*professional*” job or to return to formal education, beyond short courses and English classes. She wants to be able to work and initially saw voluntary work as a great way to both keep busy, gain experience and show her employability in Wales.



*If I decided to do... this course... Then volunteer, I want to... I can't say... is it skills, to improve skills... But at least to get experience. And to interact with people. Because the more you interact with people, the more ideas and advices from different people. To meet friends because you don't know who gonna help you. Different... that's why I told you I survive on people*

Pam raises the importance of interaction gained through these more informal/‘lifelong’ and community learning experiences. The interaction she has in these places of learning can lead to further social, informal learning (Morrice 2007) of ideas, advice, and help. Those interactions are not just useful, they are how Pam survives.

## 7 Conclusions and Recommendations

This report is a simply briefing, focused on providing an overview of some ongoing research. It therefore does not contain detailed recommendations but some initial conclusions of the key areas that need attention in both policy and services provision across Welsh Government, the third sector, and education.

- There needs to be greater overt awareness of the heterogenous nature of sanctuary seekers as a group
- The media-generated public perception of sanctuary seeking women, particularly mothers, as 'vulnerable', submissive, poorly educated scroungers has filtered into policy rhetoric and service provision and that needs to change
- Services in Wales focused on basic physical needs are excellent, in some areas, but there remains a gap in supporting mothers who are skilled, experienced, capable and keen to learn
- The existing services (and any new or improved ones) need to be promoted and advertised appropriately and well to ensure excellent delivery.
- The benefits for individual mental health and social integration when learning and education goes well are very evident
- Greater provision of accurate information could be developed through improved collaboration between policy makers, refugee support organisations and education providers
- Educational Institutions and third sector/community organisations should work together to ensure staff in support organisations have core information to at least signpost effectively
- Educational Institutions and third sector/community organisations should work together to help universities identify exclusionary eligibility criteria and better opportunities for asylum-seekers and refugees to convert existing qualifications
- The Welsh Government needs to heed the existing calls and expand funding for free childcare provision to asylum seekers

## 8 Acknowledgements

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The project was granted full ethical approval by the School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at Cardiff University.

My thanks to all the women who shared their stories with me and gave me permission to share their stories in outputs from my research. You were all inspirational.

I appreciate the efforts of Welsh Refugee Coalition members who granted me access to spaces and supported this work, particularly Oasis Cardiff who helped get the project started as a name collaborative partner.

And a final thanks to the Wales Assembly of Women for the award an opportunity that led to this report.

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