

Mental health and the asylum process

Key Findings and Recommendations

My PhD tried to understand what affects people's mental health during the asylum process. I had the privilege of working with many incredible Afghans and Iranians, who spoke to me about the asylum process. I am forever grateful for the personal stories, insight, and opinions they provided. As a small step to repay your efforts, I have produced this summary of research findings and recommendations. For my PhD I:

1. Summarised 49 studies on mental health risk factors during the asylum process (e.g. unhygienic accommodation, unemployment).
2. Worked with three Iranian and Afghan organisations on mental health projects to understand how to work with migrants in a beneficial way.
3. Interviewed people on their experiences and opinions of the asylum process. I spoke to people who had sought asylum, those who worked with them, and Iranian and Afghan community members.

I aim to do everything I can to do your contributions justice. I am working with migration charities, mental health practitioners, migration researchers, and the Iranian and Afghan community to try positive changes based on this research. Please let me know if you would like to be involved in this work. This could include:

- Speaking about the research findings at a conference or event.
- Helping present findings to migrant organisations and policy makers.
- Providing your opinion on the recommendations.

Finding 1: Sanctuary seekers are silenced through discrimination and marginalisation

Sanctuary seeker experiences during the asylum process was characterised by neglect and social exclusion, alongside discrimination. This negatively affected mental health. Participants reported feeling invisible and that their suffering was rarely acknowledged. People felt they were framed as parasites by the media and wider society and, in the process, dehumanised. Life in London was a battle against Home Office restrictions and there was an wariness in existence.

Recommendations:

- Sanctuary seekers should be given opportunities, by migration charities and local authorities, to counter negative public perceptions. Self-organised and charity-supported networks (e.g., [Survivors Speak Out](#) and [Freed Voices](#)) may be useful. As might the burgeoning sanctuary seeker theatre scene (e.g., the [Borderline theatre](#) ensemble at PSYCHEdelight and [Phosphoros theatre](#)).

- Sanctuary seekers should be supported by migrant charities in reshaping the everyday environment they live in to reflect their identities and histories.

Finding 2: The minoritisation and deprivation of the asylum process destroys people's identities

Sanctuary seekers went through a process of minoritisation once they arrived in the UK, accelerated by Home Office restrictions on access to employment, education, and welfare. Sanctuary seekers did not have enough money for their everyday needs, including for food. They were unable to provide for themselves having been denied the right to work. Due to Home Office restrictions, people found it hard to learn and grow during the asylum process. They stated that they were losing their professional and social identities, and their humanity. Consequently, many participants found it difficult to give and be relied upon. Parents implied they could not fulfil their roles of providing for their family and nurturing their children. Participants spoke about a sense of detachment, being outside of one's own body, and becoming unrecognisable even to themselves.

After the interview, sanctuary seekers felt trapped in an unending cycle of overwhelming bureaucracy, gradually grinding down their will to continue. While waiting, people watched their plans for the future unravel. Waiting was associated with a loss of dignity and a fearful uncertainty. The bureaucracy figuratively kept people between life and death, while limited asylum support accomplished this more literally.

Recommendations:

- The Home Office should provide the right to work for people seeking asylum. They should also raise asylum seeker support from its current rate of £39.63 per week to the destitution threshold of £70 a week (as defined by [Trust for London](#)).
- The Home Office should reduce asylum process waiting times by giving people status if they have waited a long time without a response. They should also provide regular updates of asylum application progress.
- Where cases appear conclusive, the Home Office could grant asylum to some Iranians and Afghans based on the initial screening interview and documentation.

Finding 3: Home Office officials are suspicious of sanctuary seekers and expect them to speak in a certain way

Participants reported feeling attacked, threatened, disbelieved, and re-traumatised by the asylum interview. They were betrayed by the institution and process they had anticipated would protect and support them. The asylum process forces sanctuary seekers to speak and act in a certain way. Firstly, there is an expected behaviour of that people must speak an unfiltered truth to Home Office officials. Secondly, there are limited and specified spaces in which sanctuary seekers can speak about their experiences, namely the asylum interview.

Finally, the Home Office only accepts certain types of asylum stories. Stories need to have exact dates and timelines, and describe a helpless victim.

Recommendations:

- Home Office representatives should be burdened with proving applicants wrong, rather than applicants being burdened with proving that their cases are credible, as is currently the case.
- Asylum interviews should constitute a series of conversations over a few weeks, each lasting no more than an hour or two, rather than a single interrogation. During the interview, interviewers should have a believing, not sceptical, attitude.
- Asylum applicants should have an opportunity to speak to and get to know the interviewer and interpreter beforehand, and be given examples of likely questions, specifically around difficult experiences.
- Mental health therapy and peer support groups should be made accessible to sanctuary seekers before, during and after interviews.

Finding 4: People need safety and stability amidst the insecurity of migration journeys

Participants had few stable physical spaces in which to feel safe and recover from difficult migration experiences. Unhygienic and isolated accommodation perpetuated feelings of instability, insecurity, and rootlessness among sanctuary seekers. Accommodation conditions, alongside policies of forced dispersal, undermined access to legal advice and mental health and other forms of support. When describing the spaces in which they recuperated from asylum process stresses, only a few people referred to charities. This could be because charities struggled to maintain a stable space, with organisations often being forced to move accommodation due to financial issues. It may also be linked to charities being orientated towards practical services (related to asylum claims, welfare, and language training) rather than providing an informal social space.

Recommendations:

- Sanctuary seekers should be accommodated in urban centres linked to diaspora, voluntary sector, and sanctuary seeking community networks, close to amenities, and in clean housing.
- Migrant organisations should create and support online spaces of safety. Charities could support and grow such groups by providing people data, smartphones, and basic tutorials to overcome potential digital exclusion, as well as forum moderation.

Finding 5: Sanctuary seekers had a positive and negative relationship with the diaspora community

Though there were tensions between established diaspora members and more recent sanctuary seeking arrivals, the diaspora could be supportive. This support was on the basis of shared values around responsibility, reciprocity, hard work and enduring personal relationships. Diaspora networks were effective at providing practical support, such as information about the asylum process, familiarity, or even accommodation. They were less effective at providing the emotional solidarity needed to manage mental health during the asylum process. In particular, listening to mental health and asylum process difficulties with belief and empathy, and providing space for people to talk about the migration injustices. There were anti-migrant attitudes among the Afghan and Iranian diasporas, as well as migrant community organisations. Analysis of interview data indicates that, in the face of a muted diaspora welcome, many people joined sanctuary seeking communities. These typically multi-national communities could be formed around shared acculturation issues.

Recommendations:

- Migration charities should promote mentoring and peer support programmes for sanctuary seekers. They should work with established members of the Iranian and Afghan diasporas who have more positive views towards recent migrants.

Finding 6: Internal sanctuary seeker strength was critical to managing mental health problems during the asylum process

Sanctuary seekers were resourceful, and had a determined strength and patience. This kept people going through the gruelling asylum process. Cultural dignity, spiritual beliefs, and education were protective mental health factors. Retaining and reminding themselves of their cultural roots could help people cope with the asylum process. Sanctuary seeker resilience during the asylum process often involved understanding and adjusting to its practical reality. The asylum process described by interview participants contrasted with the one described on Home Office government websites and by international law.

Recommendations:

- Migration charities should support cultural heritage activities, such as poetry workshops. Poetry can be a useful way of talking about mental health.
- Migration charities should provide information acceptance rates based on nationality, and the importance of credibility in the interview. They should also translate the publicly available Home Office country guidance used by officials to make asylum decisions.