

Demand grows for closure of UK's Yarl's Wood detention centre

Margot Miller and Robert Stevens
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UK Chief Inspector of Prisons Nick Hardwick has described Yarl's Wood immigration detention centre in Bedfordshire, England, as a "place of national concern."

His report of an inspection said in "some important areas the treatment and conditions of those held at the centre had deteriorated significantly. ..."

The inspection found "there was greater evidence of the distress caused to vulnerable women by their detention."

The report was published this month, following an unannounced inspection of the facility in April. Hardwick said conditions have deteriorated since the last inspection two years ago, despite previous recommendations to improve.

The Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre opened in 2001, and houses up to 410 women at any one time. Besides women and adult family groups, it also has a holding facility for adult males who are described in Hardwick's report as having "arrived in the UK as clandestine migrants on freight lorries."

A total of 443 women were deported from the UK via Yarl's Wood in the six months prior to the inspection.

Yarl's Wood is designated a "detention" or "removal centre." But to all intents and purposes, it operates as a prison, located in the middle of miles of open fields and surrounded by high fences and barbed wire. Those under detention are kept under lock and key, while their appeals for asylum are processed and until they are due for deportation or released.

The women at Yarl's Wood are among the most vulnerable, fleeing from war-torn countries in the Middle East and Africa. According to a report by Women for Refugee Women, of 46 interviewees, three quarters had been raped and 41 percent had been tortured.

Since it opened, Yarl's Wood has been mired in controversy, with allegations by detainees of verbal, physical and sexual abuse by staff, limited legal representation, scant access to interpreters and poor standards of health care.

The management of Yarl's Wood has been outsourced to Serco since 2007, while its health services are provided by another private conglomerate, G4S.

In February, Home Secretary Theresa May was forced to order a review into conditions at immigration removal centres in the UK, including Yarl's Wood, because of growing public concern. It will report in the autumn.

In April, dozens of detainees held a hunger strike in protest at the treatment of a female inmate whose husband died there, after suffering from shortness of breath. The man, Pinakin Patel, was forced to wait 15 minutes before healthcare staff tended to him.

The same month, guards used riot gear to break up a peaceful protest when women gathered in a bedroom to protest the imminent deportation of a Kenyan woman.

Another issue generating concern is the length of time some detainees spend there, never knowing when their incarceration will end. Seven women had spent more than 12 months in Yarl's Wood while their cases were processed and one had been detained four years.

In a foreword to a report published last year, "Detained: Women Asylum Seekers Locked Up in the UK," Philippe Sands QC, professor of international law at University College London, noted that in 2012, more than 28,000 individuals were held in immigration detention in the UK. These included 2,000 women. He states, "The United Kingdom is one of the few European countries that puts no time limit on such detention."

In June, hundreds of protesters gathered outside the gates of Yarl's Wood demanding its closure. They chanted, "Detention centres will fall, brick by brick, wall by wall."

A petition for closure secured 100,000 signatures.

In March, an undercover film by Channel 4 News provided disturbing evidence of the brutalised atmosphere detainees live under. In relation to 74 incidents of self-harm in 2013 which needed medical treatment, one guard is heard saying callously, "Let them slash their wrists. It's attention seeking."

Another said, "Head-butt the bitch, I'd beat her up." The detainees were referred to as "animals," "beasties" and "bitches." Many other remarks were of an offensive, sexual nature.

Describing the April incident where a group of women were set about by staff, with equipment normally associated with riot police, Hardwick's report blandly states it "caused us significant concern."

Describing the assault, the report notes, "A group of seven women had gathered in a room in a non-violent attempt to prevent a removal—they all sat on a bed. Centre staff felt under pressure to effect removal by a deadline and decided to use force after several efforts to persuade the women to leave the room had failed. Staff used personal protective equipment, including helmets and shields, because of intelligence that the women may have had weapons."

A video of the incident "showed an officer advancing on the women with his shield. Some of them raised their legs to push the shield away and he then used excessive force by repeatedly striking the bottom edge of his shield down on the outstretched legs of at least two women, effectively using it as a weapon, and causing injuries to the women's legs."

Despite the feigned concern over "instances of unacceptable individual behaviour" at Yarl's Wood, Hardwick's introduction to the report recommends only that a few policies and procedures be implemented in order to provide better "treatment." It calls for staff to have the "training and support they need to better understand the experiences of the women for whom they are responsible." It warns, "Staffing levels as a whole are just too low to meet the needs of the population," before noting, "There are not enough female staff."

Hardwick is forced to address growing public anger

and criticism of the policy of unlimited detention and recommends that a "strict time limit must now be introduced on the length of time that anyone can be administratively detained."

This fails to question the reason for the existence of such hideous places, which is to enforce a brutal system of the deportation of refugees and asylum seekers.

The savage brutality meted out against those forcibly held at Yarl's Wood and the other camps is not an aberration that can be corrected by changing a few policies. It is an integral aspect of a politically motivated system that has scapegoated and demonised refugees and asylum seekers for decades.

Further attacks on asylum seekers who reside in the community were enforced just this month.

In a recent statement, Immigration Minister James Brokenshire said that the "automatic right" to benefits would be withdrawn from asylum seekers in order to send a message "that Britain was not a soft touch on asylum."

Workers and young people must demand the closure of these hellholes. In its Statement of Principles, the Socialist Equality Party demands "the unconditional defence of the democratic rights of immigrants living in Britain. All the official parties and the media incite xenophobia, witch-hunting asylum seekers in order to divert attention from their own responsibility for the economic and social crisis. The Socialist Equality Party stands for the right of workers of every country to live and work where they choose. We condemn and oppose the entire reactionary framework of 'border controls' and anti-immigrant legislation, and call for full democratic and citizenship rights for all immigrants, including those classified as 'illegal'."

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