

The experiences of women in Australian immigration detention centres

by Yvette Zurek

Women asylum seekers locked up in Australia suffer unnecessarily due to the gender insensitivity of detention centre staff.

Asylum seekers who come to Australia by boat – mostly Iraqi, Afghan, Iranian and Palestinian refugees – are subject to mandatory detention in one of seven immigration detention centres. Immigration guidelines demand that all people who come to Australia without valid documents be detained while they are screened and while applications for protection are considered. My research is based on interviews and personal interactions with women who have arrived and made on-shore applications for refugee status since 1999 – the time when legislative changes introduced Temporary Protection Visas and detention as a means of deterring further arrivals. All women interviewed arrived in Australia before September 2001 and were housed in reception centres on Australian territory; those who have attempted this dangerous journey since September 2001 are sent to either Nauru or Papua New Guinea to be detained and processed.

All women spoke of being treated as though they were criminals, and sometimes even animals.

“There was much trouble because we did not want to be there. Nobody wanted to be there. No one tells us what happens. We feel like we, we feel like we not human beings. We feel like animals.” (Reeba)

No distinction is made between men, women, or even children.

“It was detention... it was like a prison, only there were men, women and children, all together... and all the people were scared, and instead of being criminals, many of the people in there were the victims... [We were treated]

like criminals. We were in a prison, so I guess they had to treat us like criminals. But we should not have been there. Nobody told us one single word about what was going to happen to us.” (Denya)

Provision of sanitary products

Although a number of information sheets provide guidelines for the processing of asylum seekers in Australia, little attention is paid to women and the possibility of individual or gender differences. When it comes to reception centres, only one document attempts to address the specific needs of women. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs has produced a fact sheet detailing guidelines for the provision of sanitary products within detention centres:

‘Under the Immigration Detention Standards Australasian Correctional Management (ACM) is required to operate in a manner that preserves the dignity and privacy of all detainees, including women. Request and distribution arrangements for sanitary products are therefore established to ensure that female detainees can be provided with their sanitary products in the most discreet manner possible.’

Actual experiences suggest a much more harrowing experience. The guidelines recommend that sanitary products should be dispensed by female correctional officers. However, many women explain that accessing a female employee was often not possible. All women spoke of the shame of having to approach a male officer.

“It okay for the man because they do not go [to the toilet] as much as the women. But it is very, very shaming when you have your women’s period. This time you have to say I be needing the women stuff. ... We must go seeing the guards and telling that we need the things...they would be saying ‘why do you be needing this?’ I be thinking, do not Australian men be knowing about the womens getting the monthly periods?” (Lita)

Not only was she unable to have access to a female officer but also the male officers with whom Lita had contact did not behave professionally. Their feigned ignorance meant her shame was increased unnecessarily as she had to explain in detail why she required sanitary products.

For three of the five detention centres mentioned in the guidelines, there was a limit to the number of products a woman could access each month, based on an average of what a woman was expected to need. Where the guidelines did not specify whether or not women could ask for more products, many of the women spoke of there being a specified limit which was very difficult to exceed. When I asked one woman if she received enough products, she explained:

“For me, yes, sometimes I would say I still be having my monthly period so other women could be using my supply. We could not use more than same amount, each woman, each month. There was other womens in my room who be needing more... they could not get more.”

Another woman explains:

“...if [a woman] would be needing more pads for her monthly period, the guards would be telling everybody. They would be yelling at her and saying this when everybody was in the room.”

To avoid such shame, women often did not dare to request more sanitary products. There was general agreement among the women that conditions were better when they had access to a female officer.

The struggles women faced in detention while menstruating were not limited to the provision of sanitary products. Ellena explained some of the side effects she suffered:

"When I am getting the periods I am getting very sick with this. I need to spend the many days in the bed. ... I could not come to the meals, and that was very bad. Without the food, I could not be getting the better. ... We could only get the food at the meal times, and in the meal rooms. No food was to be taken from this place... If you could not go to this room for the meals, you could not be eating."

Describing a similar experience, Laticia explained how she and her sister would sneak each other food when one was unwell and unable to get to the dining room:

"This is being the one good thing about this clothes we were wearing. There is very much clothes, and we would put in some bread under this chador so we could get the food to get better... Sometimes the crumbs would be falling in the beds and the guards would find this and punish us."

The women adopted measures such as these to address their own needs amidst the pressures to obey the rules.

Restricted access to showers and toilets

Other women spoke of restrictions placed on using showers and toilets within the centres. In one centre, there were only two female toilets. Women spoke of long queues and the need to rise early in the morning to ensure access. Detainees had to earn the right to have a shower by completing jobs around the centre; however, these jobs often constituted heavy labour, only suitable for men. In order to work their way around this, women had to 'charm' the officers. Alternatively, mothers were often able to shower while washing their children. As Magdalena explains:

"Sometimes there would be people coming in to see the children in the detention. At that time, the mothers were made to take their children to be washed and scrubbed and cleaned. Then, the mothers would be washing themselves and the clothes at this time. I could not do this. I did not have the children to take."

Women without children would often offer to help mothers – or pretend to be mother to another's child – in order to gain access to toilets and showers. The responses of detention centre officers when such schemes were detected were repressive and punitive. In describing the reactions from staff members who found her, one woman explains:

"Some, they would say to me, we will help to make you a mother, is that what you want? To be a mother?"

Conclusions

This paper offers only a sample of the experiences described by women who have been in Australia's immigration detention centres. It is clear, however, that the basic human needs of these women are not being met. Many of the women spoke of how the lack of gender sensitivity compounded the effects of the torture and trauma they had suffered in their country of origin.

It is not sufficient to recommend that guidelines to address the needs of women be devised and incorporated into the management procedures for detention centres. The experiences of women who have been detained suggest that existing guidelines are limited and depend on the discretion of individual correctional officers. Several conclusions can be drawn:

- The underlying problems experienced by women in detention centres must be recognised.
- Greater gender sensitivity should be incorporated into the guidelines for immigration detention centres.
- There should be better monitoring of and follow up to the implementation of guidelines in centres.
- More extensive research is needed to examine gender-based differences and how these impact on experiences of women in reception centres.

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¹ See the 'Provision of Sanitary Products to Female Immigration Detainees,' www.dimia.gov.au/detention/sanitary.htm. This gives details of individual arrangements at each detention centre.

House: loss, refuge and belonging



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