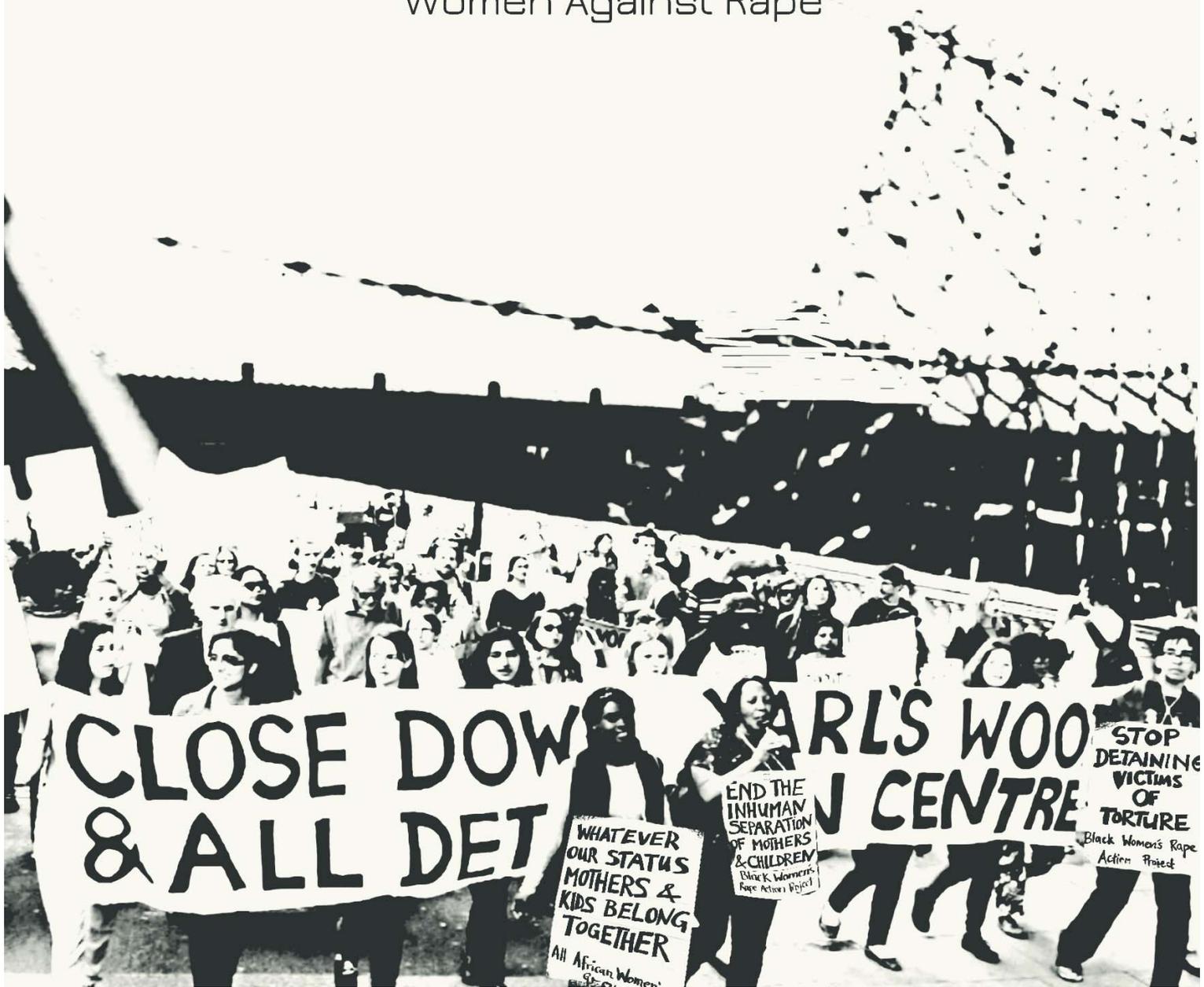


RAPE AND SEXUAL ABUSE

IN YARL'S WOOD IMMIGRATION REMOVAL CENTRE

2005 - 2015

Black Women's Rape Action Project
Women Against Rape



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RAPE AND SEXUAL ABUSE **IN YARL'S WOOD IMMIGRATION REMOVAL CENTRE.**

"If you have to open your legs you will. You think that is the only way that you are able to speak to your family. You have to give in." – former detainee Yarl's Wood.

Yarl's Wood opened in 2001 and began accepting women and families in 2002.

In 2005, research¹ based on interviews with over 100 women in Yarl's Wood, published by Legal Action for Women, found that 70% of women in Yarl's Wood were victims of rape and/or other sexual violence prior to their detention. It was the first time that we know of that complaints of "sexual intimidation from guards" were documented. Since then, many more women have come forward with allegations of sexual harassment, abuse and even rape from guards.

This dossier brings together the many allegations that have been reported to two anti-rape organisations – Black Women's Rape Action Project (BWRAP) and Women Against Rape (WAR) – with other reports that have appeared in the media. It shows that a regime of predatory sexual abuse (including racist sexual abuse) has been allowed to flourish, that the guards responsible have stayed in post through takeovers by different private companies that over the years have had responsibility for running Yarl's Wood. Where reports of abuse have surfaced, the response from the authorities specifically Serco, the company which now runs Yarl's Wood, has been one of denial and cover-up. BWRAP and WAR work closely with the [All African Women's Group \(AAWG\)](#), a self-help group of women asylum seekers, many of whom have been detained in Yarl's Wood. Many of the reports documented here come from AAWG members.

Imprisoning traumatised and vulnerable women is inhumane and sadistic (and flouts the government's own guidelines²). Giving guards power over women enables them to exploit women's vulnerability and abuse with impunity. It is grotesque and must be stopped.

Parliamentary efforts to address this have stalled. Despite a cross party All-Parliamentary Working Group recommending: detention should be limited to 28 days, that there should be no detention of rape survivors and pregnant women and expressing concern about the Detained Fast Track, healthcare and the denial of legal representation, no effective action has been taken. In June 2014, a parliamentary committee led by Keith Vaz MP summoned Serco officials to answer questions but never gathered information from women complainants and despite a [protest](#) by women seeking asylum at the committee, conducted the session in such an ineffective way that Serco was let off the hook.

On the basis of the information gathered in this dossier we are asking MPs and anyone concerned about violence against women and our right to live in safety free from abuse, to

¹ "A Bleak House in Our Times – an investigation into women's rights violations at Yarl's Wood Removal Centre", Legal Action for Women, 2005.

² Home Office guidelines state that people with independent evidence of torture (including rape) should only be detained "in very exceptional circumstances": Detention Rule 35 Process: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/257732/detention-rule35.pdf

support the demand for the closure of Yarl's Wood on the grounds that it is irredeemably corrupt.

1. A sample of incidents reported to Black Women's Rape Action Project and Women Against Rape:

- In 2005, Ms A, a rape survivor from Uganda, reported that a male guard entered her room when she was semi-naked. She described how she had been raped by prison guards in Uganda and was fearful that this guard was going to do the same. She tried to commit suicide shortly after.
- In 2005, a woman reported that a semi-naked woman was sat on by male guards and badly hurt as a result but when her lawyer tried to pursue what happened the CCTV footage of this deportation had disappeared³. She also reported seeing other women pulled along the ground by guards so that their clothes were ripped off.
- In 2008, a pregnant woman reported a guard continually propositioning her for sex:

*"He flirted with me. I was scared, fragile and pregnant. The guards double date the women. Some women believe that a guard has their best interests at heart but they are easily taken in because they feel they have no other option to get help. Guards give the impression that they have the power to get women released."*⁴

- In 2010, Verna Joseph, a woman from St. Lucia, who was in Yarl's Wood for seven months, reported how *"guards would come into my room and ask me for sex."* She described how one of the guards planted condoms in her room and that there was absolutely *'no respect'* for the women with guards continually invading their privacy.⁵
- In 2011, a woman reported that a woman she knew had been made pregnant by a guard. This was corroborated by the media and the officer was suspended.⁶
- In 2013, women inside spoke about the rape of a woman by two guards.⁷ The guards were fired but no criminal proceedings were brought against them.
- In October 2013, at an event organised by AAWG, BWRAP and WAR, women described a number of incidences, some of which were then reported in the *Guardian*⁸:
 - *"A male officer grabbed me when I was naked and still in bed. I started screaming and he covered it'.*
 - *"Guards watch naked women in the punishment room."*
 - *"Strip searching and suicide watch are used to harass and sexually humiliate women. Male guards are present when women are strip searched. If you are put on suicide watch, the guards watch you when you go to the toilet, they come into your room when you are sleeping. I woke up and a guard was standing over me shining a light in my face. I was very scared."*
- In 2015, a woman who tried to commit suicide had her pants taken down by male guards – she was trying to hide her mobile phone so they couldn't take it from her.

³ Press release, Legal Action for Women, 1 August 2005

⁴ Member of All African Women's Group, who was detained while pregnant and again (with her baby) after she gave birth

⁵ Video interview with BWRAP

⁶ <http://www.bedfordshire-news.co.uk/Yarls-Wood-guard-probed-pregnant-detainee-claim/story-21716908-detail/story.html>

⁷ Women Against Rape internal correspondence. Reported in The Independent, Tues 29 October 2013

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/yarls-wood-immigration-detention-centre-needs-more-female-staff-after-detainee-abused-by-officers-8909563.html>

⁸ <http://womenagainstrape.net/content/serco-whistleblowers-yarls-wood-sex-claim>

- Reports of sexual abuse and violence are often compounded by extreme racism from staff. The 2005 research mentioned above included reports from women detainees that guards called them “black monkeys” among other abuse.⁹

2. In 2014, allegations of sexual abuse were corroborated in a [report](#)¹⁰ by the charity Women for Refugee Women which found:

- Of the 38 women interviewed, 33 alleged that guards had seen them in an "intimate situation" including 13 who said a man saw them naked, 29 who said they were seen partially naked, 16 who said men saw them in the shower, and 14 who said men had seen them using the toilet (including one incident where a male guard came into the bathroom when a woman was changing her sanitary towel). Six women said that a member of staff had made a sexual suggestion to them and three said they were touched sexually.
- A woman who was raped before she arrived in the UK, said men coming into the room unannounced "*brought on all those memories.*"
- One woman woke up to find a male guard in her room contrary to [guidance from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#), which specifies that: "*Officers do not enter women's cells without knocking and waiting for a reply, except where there is an operational need.*"¹¹

3. Reports of rape and sexual abuse in Yarl's Wood have been picked up by the media.

The Guardian/Observer journalist Mark Townsend did a [series of reports](#)¹² some based on interviews with former detainees who are members of the AAWG where women bravely spoke about what they had seen. Channel Four also covered the issue extensively. Reports from women detainees to these and other media outlets include:

- Sexual abuse by a healthcare worker against one woman on three separate occasions. He told her "*she did not need medication but needed his penis*" and held her hand and "*placed it on his penis and that he touched her vaginal area outside her clothes*".
- "*There was a lot of flirting. Within two or three days the officers start to come on to them, touching the younger ones. They started touching my bottom.*"
- "*They made 'hand job' signs, saying, 'wow, you look nice.' They choose younger girls, the most vulnerable. They do whatever they want.*"¹³
- "*Some of the women are succumbing to whatever they are being propositioned to do. Some of the guards are touching the women; the girls are being promised that they are going to get their freedom. They say things like: 'You better be nice to me if you want to get out of here.' They make funny gestures: one puts his finger in his mouth and winks at me.*"

⁹ "A Bleak House in Our Times" *ibid*

¹⁰ http://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/WRW_IamHuman_report-for-web.pdf

¹¹ Section 2.2 Respect HMIP: Expectations Version 1, 2014 http://www.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2014/02/final-womens-expectation_web-09-14-2.pdf

¹² <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/sep/21/sexual-abuse-yarls-wood-immigration>

¹³ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/sep/14/yarls-wood-immigrant-sex-abuse-tanja>

- *"They give these ladies the impression that if you sleep with them they can help by putting in a word for you to be released or help with your case."*
- *"You find them coming in during the middle of the night when you are sleeping. I have been in bed lying down and someone has come into my room and I wake up and I am frightened. Why would a man be in my room at 2am?"*
- Undercover filming by Channel 4 News showed staff referring to inmates as "animals", "beasties" and "bitches".¹⁴

These media reports also documented:

- Guards responsible for sexual intimidation had remained in post for years with no disciplinary action taken against them: *"The woman from Lesotho alleges one guard who flirted with her in 2009 is still working there because a friend had complained to her about the same man when she was released from Yarl's Wood earlier this month."*
- That when women complained, they were deported or threatened with deportation: *"One woman who witnessed an alleged case of sexual misconduct was detained for deportation hours before a scheduled interview with police over the issue. Only when the Observer highlighted the deportation bid was she allowed to share evidence with officers."*¹⁵ *"Some of the officers said I was lying, they started giving me the cold shoulder. I didn't feel comfortable leaving my room for weeks. I felt very isolated and started self-harming." . . . "They told me that they are going to take me to court about making the complaint because there is no evidence."*¹⁶
- That a *"crackdown on immigration"* had made the situation worse because women inside the centre had become even more desperate to stay in the UK.
- That when Bedfordshire police were called to investigate one allegation of sexual abuse, *"instead of sending specialist sex abuse officers, they sent an ordinary constable."* They interviewed the victim for only 30 minutes, and according to the victim accused her of *"lying in order to stay in the country"*.¹⁷ Allowing a police constable to classify a report of rape as false is a breach of basic investigating standards.¹⁸

4. In 2014, reports of sexual abuse were corroborated by a whistleblower¹⁹, employed by Serco who described 'a culture of intimidation' and that:

- A Serco guard sexually assaulted *"a particularly vulnerable detainee with profound psychological issues"*. No action was taken against the guard and the woman was deported.
- *"Some women felt they had to flirt with staff to obtain everyday essentials such as toiletries."*
- *"A Serco female officer had told him of a 'blind spot' inside Yarl's Wood, which was not covered by CCTV and was a well-known location for trysts and where an officer had previously made a woman detainee pregnant."*
- *" . . . officers would go in [to women's rooms] without knocking."*
- *"I remember thinking is that not the guy who abused that lady? What is he still doing here?"*

¹⁴ <http://www.channel4.com/news/yarls-wood-immigration-detention-removal-centre-undercover>

¹⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/may/17/serco-yarls-wood-asylum-centre>

¹⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/sep/14/yarls-wood-immigrant-sex-abuse-tanja>

¹⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/may/17/serco-yarls-wood-asylum-centre>

¹⁸ Report of Independent Review into the Investigation and Prosecution of Rape in London, by Dame Elish Angliolini June 2015.

¹⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/may/24/serco-whistleblower-yarls-wood-pressure-immigration>

- *‘There is a lack of safeguards with mental health problems and it is very concerning. There are vulnerable people in there and they are not being assessed properly. You do not put vulnerable people into a category B prison.’*

5. Response from Serco, the corporation that runs Yarl’s Wood:

- Despite claiming that sexual abuse in Yarl’s Wood is not an “endemic” problem, in June 2014 Serco revealed it had dismissed 10 members of staff in relation to eight separate cases of sexual abuse over the last seven years.²⁰
- In 2013, the company paid an undisclosed sum to a 29-year-old asylum seeker from Pakistan who claimed she was sexually assaulted three times by a Serco health worker between November 2010 and January 2011, although the company did not admit liability.
- In 2014, when the *Observer* printed allegations of a sexual assault Serco took a “characteristically aggressive stance”, hired lawyers to demand the articles be amended.
- Serco took legal action to suppress an [internal report](#)²¹ into one allegation of sexual abuse. The report was eventually released on the orders of a judge and showed that: Serco failed to properly investigate the victim’s claims; that the female detention officer who believed the victim’s account should “*be given advice and guidance to assist her in being more objective in the future and that she should not be making judgments without knowing all the facts*”; the victim’s credibility was questioned on the grounds that she was taking action “*to thwart her removal directions*” and that her answers were “*very clinical and she didn’t appear distressed*”; that the alleged perpetrator was described by investigators as “*family man with strong religious beliefs and would have a lot to lose*”.
- After footage of guards racially abusing women detainees was shown on *Channel Four News*, Serco commissioned another investigation. This is being boycotted by some service and campaigning groups because of its lack of independence and credibility.
- In November 2014, the Home Office awarded Serco a £70 million contract to run Yarl’s Wood for another eight years. This contract must be rescinded.

6. Other injustices highlighted by campaigners include:

Indefinite detention; the [detention of traumatised, vulnerable women](#) including those with severe mental health problems; [inadequate and negligent healthcare](#); [mothers and children separated from each other](#); [the detained fast track](#) which leaves no time for detainees to gather evidence of the persecution they suffered; poor or no legal representation exacerbated [by legal aid cuts](#); [private companies profiteering from detainees’ work](#); [violent deportations](#) (most notably the recent killing of Jimmy Mubenga). The systematic hostility, sexism, racism and discrimination faced by rape survivors has also been condemned. But calls for rape survivors who are seeking asylum to be afforded “*the same basic provisions as other survivors of this kind of horrifying violence*” ignore the reality of an appallingly low 6.7% conviction rate for reported rape when it is committed against women resident in the UK as well official indifference and cover up of rape in prisons.²²

²⁰ <http://www.channel4.com/news/yarls-wood-women-watched-male-guards-immigration-detention>

²¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/may/17/serco-yarls-wood-asylum-centre>

²² “Ministers urged to investigate prison rape”, September 2014, <http://www.howardleague.org/prison-rape/>

7. Demands for closure of Yarl's Wood and other detention centres.

Protests have burst out in many removal centres. In March 2015, hundreds of people in 8 out of 11 UK detention centres from Dover to Dungavel held spontaneous hunger strikes protesting human rights abuses. Some of the longest, [most courageous and most effective protests](#) from inside detention, which have brought together detainees across nationalities and even language barriers, have been of women. But this is often hidden including in the anti-detention movement. Hundreds of women have become jailhouse lawyers, using [Legal Action for Women's Self-help Guide](#) to win their own release and that of others.

30,000 people a year are detained in the UK, held without charge or conviction, or time limit. Internationally protests are having an enormous impact. In Greece, the Syriza government has started to close its detention centres. In Scotland the SNP has called for the closure of Dungavel. The [New York Times](#) is proposing that detention is ended. A recent 700 strong protest outside Yarl's Wood brought together detainees with supporters from many walks of life including MPs and celebrities.

One final issue that must be brought to public attention is that even when women seeking asylum fight and win their release from detention their suffering does not end. Over half of the 50 women who attend the AAWG fortnightly meetings have no income. They described recently that on release from detention "*we are made destitute – nowhere to sleep, no money, no food. Asylum seekers are not allowed to work so we are forced into exploitative relationships, prostitution or worse.*"²³ Worse still women left with no recourse to public funds are threatened with having their children taken away.²⁴

As the government lines up more repressive immigration legislation, we know that it must have thoroughly assessed the impact on women's safety, on our physical and mental health and on our ability to survive, and put a value on the number of lives that will be lost, including by suicide. When governments around the world appear to let thousands of people fleeing war and devastation drown, discussing this murderous policy before TV audiences, it past time that MPs speak up inside and outside of Parliament against detention and against the witch-hunting and brutality inflicted on asylum seekers and other immigrant people. None of us is safe. Destitution, cuts and repressive measures first imposed on asylum seekers have been extended to others. Women asylum seekers have protested: "*We didn't cause austerity. We were its first targets. . . . British, immigrant, asylum seeker... if we want a better world we should support each other.*"²⁵

Close Yarl's Wood IRC and all detention centres.

²³ <http://www.camdennewjournal.com/letters/2015/apr/election-2015-women-asylum-seekers-and-immigrants-are-targets-austerity>

²⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/jun/03/no-recourse-to-public-funds-children-poverty-uk-government>

²⁵ <http://www.camdennewjournal.com/letters/2015/apr/election-2015-women-asylum-seekers-and-immigrants-are-targets-austerity>