Women for Refugee Women creates platforms for refugee women—some of the bravest, most inspiring, and most resilient women in the world—to tell their own stories.

We build women’s confidence to speak out and we organise cultural projects and events with influential individuals, which engages the mainstream media. We aim to create more empathy among the public so that we can shift policy and create a fairer asylum process, so that women can get a fair hearing and a chance to rebuild their lives.

Over the last 10 years we have seen real changes as a result of our work: refugee women speaking out and telling their own stories, new audiences listening, influential people speaking about this issue, and initial policy wins that we hope will build towards lasting change.

This is the story of our approach and the strategies that have enabled us to grow, endure, and achieve—and our learning and growing continues. This report is intended for social justice advocates in the UK and across Europe, in both the women’s rights and refugee and migrant rights sectors, as well as for our supporters.

Every year, around 10,000 women claim asylum in their own right in the UK. They are looking for safety and a chance to rebuild their lives and integrate into their new communities. The majority of these women are survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, such as rape in war, female genital mutilation, or forced prostitution, in their home countries or on their journeys.

On arrival, women seeking asylum deserve to get a fair hearing and to live in dignity. However, they often struggle for justice and can experience destitution and detention, which only increase their trauma.
We empower women to influence the public to change policy.

Our approach is grounded in three interlocking strategies:

**EMPOWER**
- We empower women who have sought asylum to gain confidence and become effective advocates.
- **We provide English classes and further training** for women who are interested in speaking out – including drama workshops and training in public speaking and campaigning.

**INFLUENCE**
- We influence the public by communicating the experiences of women who have sought asylum.
- **We engage with influential individuals**, which attracts media attention.
- **We work with cultural projects, events and the mainstream media** to find ways to connect with new audiences who may not have previously heard from refugee women.

**POLICY CHANGE**
- We create policy change by engaging with politicians and policymakers.
- **We lead campaigns** that are centred on the voices of women seeking asylum. We conduct extensive interviews that feed into our research and provide the basis for our recommendations.
- **We link women** who have sought asylum directly with Parliamentarians and policymakers.

**We need to give opportunities for refugee women to speak for themselves, and not be spoken for.**

- Mina Jaf Iraqi Kurdish refugee

**2017 IN NUMBERS**
- We worked with over 300 women through drama, English, IT, and other services.
- We enabled refugee women to speak at over 20 events.
- We saw at least 40 media pieces that mention our work.
- Our work was mentioned in Parliament more than 10 times.
We launched our multi-year #SetHerFree campaign in 2014, resulting in major media attention and policy shifts with refugee women leading the way.

The #SetHerFree Campaign aims to end the detention of women seeking asylum in the UK.

Refugee women have shaped and led the #SetHerFree campaign.

We’ve held three National Refugee Women’s Conferences in London and Manchester to provide a space for refugee women to come together in solidarity.

Influential supporters and creative campaigning techniques have enabled us to reach wide audiences through the media and at events.

The Victoria and Albert Museum, the Women of the World Festival, and other institutions across the UK exhibited a huge Solidarity Quilt knitted by refugee women in partnership with the local Women’s Institute.

We support refugee and asylum-seeking women to speak regularly at Parliamentary events and with individual policy makers. MPs and peers of all major parties have mentioned our findings in parliamentary debates.

Influential women, including Angelina Jolie and Zadie Smith, have supported the campaign. In 2015, we invited 99 inspiring women, including Anoushka Shankar, Charlotte Church and Noma Dumezweni, to write messages of support to women in detention.

Major media outlets, from Channel 4 News to Sky News, from the Guardian to the Telegraph, from Newsweek to Teen Vogue, have covered #SetHerFree.

Through training in advocacy and drama, refugee women develop the confidence to tell their own stories of detention. At the 2017 Women’s March on London, a group performed their #SetHerFree poem to an audience of over 80,000 people.

Talented artists and photographers have worked with us to convey women’s stories, including a filmed animation by Priya Sundram. High-profile actresses, such as Juliet Stevenson and Cush Jumbo, have performed short testimony plays that we created.

Working in collaboration with other organisations, we have created policy change. In 2016, the government introduced a 72-hour time-limit on the detention of pregnant women and stopped male staff from watching women on suicide watch in Yarl’s Wood. The Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Women’s Equality Party and the Green Party have all called for an end to indefinite detention.

We have worked closely with politicians and policy makers to create changes in policy and practice.

Our reports, Detained, I Am Human, The Way Ahead and We Are Still Here, expose the impact of detention on survivors of sexual violence and make pragmatic recommendations for improving the system and moving away from detention.

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Influential women, including Meltem Avcil whose story you can read on page 4.

Through training in advocacy and drama, refugee women develop the confidence to tell their own stories of detention. At the 2017 Women’s March on London, a group performed their #SetHerFree poem to an audience of over 80,000 people.
Empowering individual women is the heart of our approach.

At the heart of our approach is lifting up women’s voices, ensuring their safety, and meeting their basic needs. We provide a women-only safe space in which refugee women can support and learn from one another, and develop their confidence to become effective advocates.

We work with women who have sought asylum to communicate their own needs and tell their own stories to policymakers and other decision makers. We offer women courses in public speaking, working with the media and advocacy. We also host a drama programme, which helps to build women’s confidence and creativity. This group has performed at high-profile festivals and events, including at the Women’s March in 2018, for an audience of 80,000 people.

We work in partnership with similar groups elsewhere in the UK, including in Birmingham, Manchester and Coventry, aiming to create a country-wide network of empowered refugee women.

Simultaneously, we meet women’s most immediate and basic needs for a safe and supportive community in which they can heal and grow. Every week, we host over 100 women for activities such as yoga and English classes, including for mothers and children together, as well as a hot lunch cooked by a fellow refugee.

Meltem’s Story

In 2007, when Meltem Avcil was 13 years old, she was taken into Yarl’s Wood immigration removal centre with her mother. They had arrived in the UK fleeing persecution as Kurds in Turkey five years earlier. Meltem had been going to school, making friends, and was ambitious to live a successful life in the UK. But one day their lives were upturned, when immigration officers arrived at their house at 6am and dragged them to detention. Meltem spent three months locked up with her mum, and learned fast that nobody would help them if she didn’t speak up. She got in touch with journalists, campaigners, lawyers, and with the help of Women for Refugee Women, eventually secured their release.

Meltem did not stop there. After her own release Meltem went on speaking out for other children in detention with Women for Refugee Women and other organisations. The UK government agreed to stop detaining children in 2010 and now child detention has fallen by over 90% in the UK.

Meltem is now 24 years old but the memory of her own detention still drives her on. In 2014 she spoke at the launch in Parliament of Women for Refugee Women’s campaign Set Her Free which aims to end the detention of all women seeking asylum. “I am free now,” she said, “but we must not forget all the women that are still locked up.” She began an online petition which secured over 100,000 signatures. She does not give up: “I thought, I have two options: I either carry on with my life, and just create an illusion of happiness, or I do something about this.”

I am free now, but we must not forget all the women that are still locked up.
- Meltem Avcil
While we have seen some encouraging changes, there is still a long way to go.

At a time of unprecedented global migration and displacement, refugee women are in greater need than ever for protection. While we are proud to have created some small changes in detention policies for refugee women, we still have a long way to go. Women who are survivors of sexual and gender-based violence are still being locked up in detention while they seek asylum. This must end.

Over the next few years we want to develop our work by:

- Building on our success and impact to date, we want to expand our media and communications work to reach new and mainstream audiences, particularly those who are disengaged from the debate.
- We want to expand our work outside London. We currently partner with similar groups in Birmingham, Manchester, and Coventry and are looking to improve and strengthen our network of refugee and asylum-seeking women throughout the UK.
- We want to broaden our services and empowerment programs, such as English, IT, and drama workshops, that we offer for refugee women.
- We intend to bring our energy and potential to create policy change not just to the campaign against detention but also to the need for dignity throughout the asylum process.

We invite you to partner with us to advance this important work.

Volunteer with us.
Check [www.refugeewomen.co.uk](http://www.refugeewomen.co.uk) for latest information

Campaign with us.
Organise an event, add your voice, and contact us for speakers and materials

Donate!
Donations of every size make a difference in a grassroots campaign like ours. We partner with individuals and philanthropic institutions to advance our work.

You can even take up a fundraising challenge like a sponsored walk or a bake sale!

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It does seem like we, as women, are at a moment in history where real global change is possible. It’s important that this change is extended to the most vulnerable women in our societies.

- Marchu Girma, Grassroots Director of Women for Refugee Women
Acknowledgements

We thank all those who have supported us on this journey to date, and especially the women who have shown such courage in speaking out with us. Despite all the challenges they face, if they are given the chance, women who are crossing borders can help us build a fairer, freer world.

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For more information about Women for Refugee Women or to learn how to get more involved, please contact:

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