

‘Just no future at the moment’: Examining the barriers to community resettlement for foreign national women

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Research Paper 2020/01

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Abstract

This research examines the barriers to community resettlement for foreign national women who have been convicted of a criminal offence in the UK. Foreign national women are defined as women who have entered the UK from overseas to seek work or asylum, voluntarily or under coercion and who are not UK citizens. These women are often overlooked within the criminal justice system and their experiences have been the subject of limited research to date. This research draws on interviews with foreign national women living in the community, and with probation staff and practitioners who supervise and support them. Women in this situation face complex challenges. The research highlights the difficulties foreign national women experience including poverty and destitution and poor mental health exacerbated by their status. The findings highlight the need for a more systematic approach to support foreign national women in the criminal justice system.

Findings

- Foreign national women face multiple interconnected barriers to accessing support to aide their resettlement.
- All participants identified a significant lack of support options for this group of women; where women had been supported in the community by charities and other support services or faith groups, this support was described as critical for women’s survival.
- Support within the community was described overwhelmingly as inadequate and, in many cases, non-existent. Funding and resources were highlighted to impact both the quality and consistency of support provided.
- Community resettlement for foreign national women can be seen to replicate the conditions of confinement found in immigration detention centres in many ways; levels of emotional distress and mental health deterioration mirror those faced within detention.
- The No Recourse to Public Funds condition (NRPF), a lack of access to housing, and the ban placed on work, study, and in many cases volunteering for those awaiting the outcome of applications for leave or asylum has overwhelmingly detrimental implications for every area of women’s lives and resettlement.
- Practitioners strongly emphasised the inadequacy of current mental health provision, and the multiple barriers preventing women from accessing appropriate support.

Recommendations

- Case processing times within the Home Office should be improved to address the pains of indeterminacy for women whose status is uncertain.
- Adequate provisions should be put in place for women who are resettling from prison and who do not have recourse to public funds.
- There should be improved access to housing/accommodation for foreign national women to support community resettlement.
- The prohibition on working or volunteering for women awaiting the outcome of applications for leave or asylum should be lifted.
- Adequate financial supports should be provided to enable women to meet Home Office reporting requirements and/or the frequency of reporting requirements should be reviewed.
- Improvements should be made to communications between the Home Office and probation providers to ensure that sufficient supports can be provided to women in the community.
- Access to mental health supports should be improved for women through increased funding of community mental health services.
- Specialist training should be provided to all professionals across probation and voluntary sector services on the needs of foreign national women in the criminal justice system.
- Support, including clinical supervision, should be provided to professionals working with foreign national women in the criminal justice system.