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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/04/04/the-parable-of-yarls-wood/>

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by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#) | April 4, 2010

Editors note: Today's guest post is by Dan Moshenberg, who directs the Womens Studies Program at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. He is co-convenor of the Women In and Beyond the Global Project, and coordinator of www.womeninandbeyond.org. His teaching and research focus in part on women in the global prison system, and it was from his email alerts and blog posts that we learned of the events unfolding at Yarls Wood immigrant detention center for women, north of London.

The guest post that Dan generously agreed to write for Solitary Watch arrived, appropriately, between the Passover and Easter holidays. The idea of refuge is a vital part of both the Jewish and Christian traditions: The Israelites fled persecution in ancient Egypt (in an Exodus marked by Passover); and Jesus, too, was a refugee, whose family fled his birthplace to escape a murderous ruler. In both traditions, the granting of asylum is considered a righteous act though its one we all too seldom see practiced today.

You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall and like the heat of the desert. Isaiah 25: 4-5

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. Matthew 25: 35-40

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Once, providing asylum to those who needed it was considered a sacred act. In the Book of Numbers, God ordered Moses to create cities of refuge or cities of asylum, for those fleeing unjust punishment. International conventions written following the Holocaust and World War II confer refugee status on people who face persecution, abuse, torture, or death in their own countries. And even today, the immigration laws of most Western countries have provisions for granting asylum to such refugees in theory, at least. In practice, it's a different story. [In the United States](#), refugees seeking protection have often found themselves in prison instead. In the United Kingdom, the situation is just as bad or worse.

The UK has [eleven immigration removal centres](#). Seven of them are privately run. Six are run by [G4S](#), the world's largest security provider; the seventh, [Yarls Wood Immigration Removal Centre](#), is run by [Serco](#). Of the seven prisons, two house women. [Tinsley House](#) holds 5 females, and Yarls Wood has [405 bed spaces](#), which divide into 284 single female bed spaces and 121 family bed spaces. Serco has responsibility for practically all the women and children who apply for asylum in the UK.

On February 5, at least 50 women prisoners at Yarls Wood went on a [hunger strike](#), which they [suspended on March 19](#). They may resume the hunger strike on April 9. The women were protesting the [Detained Fast Track Asylum System](#), which makes short work of asylum claims, limits appeals, and discriminates against those fleeing sexual and domestic violence. It is estimated that [over 70 percent of the women at Yarls Wood are rape survivors](#). The women were also protesting the length of time many had been detained. [One woman who spoke little or no English had been at Yarls Wood for two years](#). Generally, they were protesting [degrading and humiliating treatment](#).

According to Nigerian asylum seeker [Mojirola Daniels](#), on February 8, a few days after the strike began, about 70 women were herded into a long airless hallway and then locked down. They were denied access to toilets, water, anything. There was no heat. Women suffered hypothermia. Blood, urine, faeces covered the floor. Some women passed out. Others were beaten. Finally, hours later, the women were allowed to leave, in pairs: We were about 70 which consist of many Nigerians, Chinese, Jamaicans, Zimbabweans and some nationals that I do not remember. I have been traumatised and victimised because of this experience. I can never believe this can happen in the UK and I am still in shock. The accounts of hunger striker [Aisha and non-participant Victoria](#) both confirm what happened to the protesters.

[Another woman reported](#): One of the managers told the women they would regret what they have done; she called the Chinese women monkeys, and the Black women black monkeys. Four other women have been locked in other rooms for three hours, and have been told by room mates that their belongings have been packed. They are worried they face immediate removal even though their cases are still being considered. Fifteen women have been locked up in Kingfisher, the punishment wing. Kingfisher is an isolation ward. The UK Border Agency's response to the women's desperation was to place them in solitary confinement or worse while the [Home Office denied](#)

that the hunger strike was even taking place.

Thirty-five-year-old Jamaican asylum seeker [Denise McNeil](#) was identified as a ringleader, moved to another prison, and placed in [solitary confinement](#). [Gladys Obiyan](#) from Nigeria, [Sheree Wilson](#) and [Shellyann Stupart](#) from Jamaica, and [Aminata Camara](#) from suffered a similar fate. Others were suddenly [repatriated](#). [Leila](#), an Iranian prisoner, had been at Yarl's Wood for 20 months, 15 days. After taking part in the hunger strikes and other protests she was placed in solitary: I want to kill myself, I cannot live here. [Women do try to kill themselves at Yarl's Wood](#).

The [women are now suing Serco](#). [Their lawyers noted](#): Serco guards intervened, and according to accounts from our clients kettled protestors inside and outside the building, injured some and locked the ringleaders in isolation for more than two weeks.

In the wake of this brutality, there will be [investigations](#) and reports; [hearings](#) and settlements; poems, plays, and performance pieces; testimony and more. (This does, at least, seem to be a bigger story in the UK than it would likely be in the U.S., with more news coverage and more protests in response.) Perhaps the fast-track asylum system will be slowed down. Perhaps detention for women who have been tortured and raped will come to an end. Perhaps no more children will be sent to immigration removal centres. One can hope for these changes.

But true asylum will not come until we turn our cities into cities of refuge. Asylum is a [sacred](#) responsibility, not only around [Passover](#) or Easter or any other holiday. The building of cities of refuge begins with the end of automatic incarceration for asylum seekers, and this begins in practice. End the practice of [shame and isolation](#) of women asylum seekers now. Walk with the women hunger strikers, [the innocent prisoners](#) of Yarl's Wood, for they are the architects and the carpenters of the cities of refuge to come.

Dan Moshenberg, dmoshenberg@gmail.com

Videos: Voices from Yarl's Wood

The thing we are hungry for is for justice to be done in this place.

[youtube=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_v8oInQgFQ&feature=related]

[youtube=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJQTingBaeA]

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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Eight months later Free the Yarl's Wood 3: <http://nobordersbrighton.blogspot.com/2010/12/free-yarl-s-wood-3.html>

you speak true those of us who fight the will of the tribunal rick pissing them off and it is those who fight best or who they hate moest the one who pisses them off moest if they are not strong willed and wise or allways ready it is us who dare to speak for what is right and tell them no that will be marked it is the brave and the bold who get the agrow and are moest likely to end up at thare mercy meny will fall but power tey have it is what those who do end at thare feet do or say that will make or brake the war stand strong for we stand for freedom and right ways those that fall let them inspire us to fight harder for if this is done the power they have is nothing in the end

On the serious side I found this article recently.

December 23, 2009

Americas Secret ICE Castles. Immigration agents are holding US residents in unlisted and unmarked

If you dont have enough evidence to charge someone criminally but you think hes illegal, we can make him disappear. Those chilling words were spoken by James Pendergraph, then executive director of Immigration and Customs Enforcements (ICE) Office of State and Local Coordination, at a conference of police and sheriffs in August 2008. Also present was Amnesty Internationals Sarnata Reynolds, who wrote about the incident in the 2009 report Jailed Without Justice and said in an interview, It was almost surreal being there, particularly being someone from an organization that has worked on disappearances for decades in other countries. I couldnt believe he would say it so boldly, as though it werent anything wrong.

You can find this article on:

<http://realcostofprisons.org/blog/archives/immigration/index.html>

Or download the PDF from:

<http://www.jacquelinestevens.org/ICEFieldSubfield0909.PDF>

On CBS Sunday Morning April 4, 2010 the fictional flamboyant character of Dame Ednas used his outrageously sarcastic humor in a skit on Americas relationship with immigrants:

I just love Americas immigrates! Yes I love them. Only in America can you have a slave class with a clear conscious.

I thought a bit of thought provoking humor could be useful.

I would like to share this sad related excerpt from a Larry King interview this weekend.

Caroline, I want to ask you a question about what happens to foreign girls when they are found to be involved in the sex trade in America versus what happens to American girls.

CAROLINE GERMANN, CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING SURVIVOR: Well, what Ive seen is usually, they have a human trafficking task force that will come in, and theyll offer supportive services to these women. From the minute that either the vice squad comes in and makes the arrest of the traffickers, theres a support for the foreign national victims. Not only that, but theyll provide visas and health care and whatever else to get the foreign nationals back on their feet.

With American victims what we typically see is the girls automatically go to jail. Theyre considered prostitution rings or gangs or criminals. But never have I seen I dont want to say never but very rarely do you see it where they are considered victims.

So, theyll go to jail, which is usually 180 days, and thats a good break for them. They actually appreciate that. But then when they get out, they werent given any job skills, they werent given any health resources. And then they get right back out and they have to go right back to the same thing over and over and over again.

And so, thats the difference Ive seen.

LING: Why are American girls, who have been forced to be involved in the sex trade, who have been exploited, why are they treated as criminals in this country?

<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1004/04/lkl.01.html>

Worldwide Crisis: Human Trafficking

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