

# 'AM ONLY SAYING IT NOW'

## Experiences of Women Seeking Asylum in Ireland

Feminist  
Participatory  
Action  
Research



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In March 2009, AkiDwA developed an advisory group to look into the risks and vulnerabilities of women seeking asylum in Ireland's reception and asylum system. The group agreed that a survey was necessary in order to examine women's experiences. This report is based on those findings.

As of December 2009, there were 6,482 people living in direct-provision accommodation awaiting decisions on their asylum, protection and leave-to-remain cases. Of this number, there were 1,859 women and 987 girls, with 50 per cent of all residents in direct provision being families. Over half of all residents have lived in centres for two years or more, and almost a third have lived in centres for three years or more [1].

AkiDwA has been working with migrant women in Ireland for almost a decade, and developed specific projects in the areas of gender-based violence, immigration and employment. The organisation works with migrant women of every immigration status, including women seeking asylum, protection or leave to remain; women trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation or forced labour; female migrant workers, spouses of migrant workers, Irish or other European citizens; international female students and women of religious orders. AkiDwA prioritises outreach to vulnerable and at-risk migrant women, particularly women seeking asylum, protection or leave to remain.

According to 2005 migration research, there are approximately 175 million migrants dispersed worldwide - about 3.5 per cent of the global population - and about half of these individuals are women. Migration theory, policy and practice do not usually reflect, within a developmental perspective, the gender-equality concerns of migration, which can, at times, cause women to be 'invisible' within migration patterns [2].

While women have always represented a significant portion of the migrant population, the level of their involvement in, and their motivation for, migration is changing, representing a new trend in international migration streams. Women's reasons for migration can vary; many are fleeing persecution and violence. The ways in which persecution may manifest in women's countries of origin and the vulnerabilities and risks that they may face during their migration journeys can differ significantly from those of men. Additionally, women often migrate while caring for children or other family members. Female migrants may face stigma, poverty, violence and discrimination while travelling, as well as in their destination countries.

The average wait for an asylum, protection or leave-to-remain claim to be processed in Ireland is a minimum of two years, with some women waiting five years or more, during which time they and their families live in direct provision, having been dispersed to regional accommodation centres. Many women in direct provision accommodation are oftentimes battling poor living conditions, which can contribute to unsuitable or unsafe situations for them. Children are spending their formative years living in direct provision. Last year, AkiDwA's director spent time speaking to 121 women about their experiences of Ireland's reception and asylum system, and talking to them about their lives in direct provision. This report reflects those women's views and experiences.

## Key Recommendations

In response to the concerns cited by women in its survey, AkiDwA proposes the following key recommendations for immediate implementation:

- Gender guidelines in reception and asylum processes should be introduced and implemented [3]. Gender guidelines in asylum processes should be introduced into pending immigration legislation in Ireland.
- A mandatory code of conduct and Garda vetting should be introduced and implemented for all personnel, management, accommodation owners and government-department officials working with asylum seekers in the direct-provision accommodation system.
- An independent, transparent and confidential complaint and redress mechanism should be put into place for individuals seeking asylum, protection and leave to remain, and made accessible to all residents in direct provision.
- Mandatory training and capacity building should be conducted on a regular basis with key providers of State services to asylum seekers on the prevention of, and response to, abuse and exploitation.
- An independent commission of inquiry should take place to assess the mental, emotional and physical effects of long-term confinement of individuals seeking asylum, protection or leave to remain in Ireland.

## ABOUT AKIDWA

AkiDwA (Akina Dada Wa Africa, Swahili for 'sisterhood') is the only ethnic minority-led national network of African and migrant women living in Ireland. The non-governmental organisation with charitable status was established in August 2001 by a group of African women in order to address the needs of an expanding population of African and other migrant women residing in Ireland.

The organisation is a recognised authority on migrant women's issues and a representative body for all migrant women, irrespective of their national or ethnic backgrounds, culture, religious beliefs, and socio-economic or legal status. AkiDwA's advocacy approach is based on strengthening migrant women's voices by applying a gender and cultural perspective to policies and practices, and by promoting the equality of migrant women in Irish society.

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