

**Surviving Colonial Systems: Bureaucratic Violence, Mental Health,
and the Politics of Belonging in the UK's Asylum Regime**

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Introduction

The United Kingdom's current asylum is increasingly characterised by precariousness, administrative hostility, and the routine production of uncertainty. While refugee mental health is often framed as an individual clinical issue, this paper reframes it as a form of social and political belonging. Wellbeing will be viewed as politically and structurally produced, rather than merely clinical. It aims to offer insights into how people survive systems that are not designed and built for them to belong. Bureaucratic practices do not simply regulate asylum seekers, they actively generate psychosocial harm and undermine any sense of belonging (Gupta, 2012).

Drawing on decolonial theory, the paper situates the contemporary asylum system within histories of racialised classification and control. Colonial logics persist in the language, assumptions, and power relations that shape who is deemed to be 'credible', 'vulnerable', or 'deserving' of protection (Mayblin, 2017), thus the persistence of colonial influence today. Understanding these continuities is essential to explaining why poor mental health outcomes endure.

The analysis combines policy and legal discourse, media representations, and quantitative data to trace how harm is produced through ordinary administrative processes. It asks how bureaucratic violence is experienced in the asylum process, how policy shapes mental health, how race, gender, and immigration status mediate these experiences, and how colonial legacies inform asylum governance. The paper concludes by outlining what a trauma-informed and justice-oriented asylum system might look like.

Manifestations of Bureaucratic Violence in the UK Asylum System

Bureaucratic violence refers to the slow, administrative production of harm through what may seem to be ordinary institutional procedures (Herzfeld, 1992). This is harm that is often hidden beneath the neutrality of paperwork, rules, and managerial language. In the UK asylum system, this form of violence is most evident in the everyday encounters refugees have with processes that are designed to "support" or "manage" them. These encounters include, but are not limited to, extended waiting periods,

rapid or repeated relocations, dispersal to unfamiliar regions, restrictive accommodation, surveillance, and the constant possibility of sudden removal.

Credibility testing is another site of bureaucratic violence. The requirement to narrate trauma in a way that satisfies institutional expectations is not simply invasive, it forces a performance of suffering that aligns with state-defined narratives of vulnerability. Discrepancies due to memory, fear, cultural expression, or the non-linear nature of trauma are frequently interpreted as deception (Herlihy et al., 2012). This dynamic positions the asylum seeker as a suspect figure whose honesty must be proven. The psychological burden of this suspicion, combined with the need to relive traumatic experiences in adversarial settings, materially affects wellbeing.

Accommodation conditions extend this violence into the realm of the everyday. People are often housed in overcrowded hotels, repurposed military barracks, or facilities with little privacy and limited access to healthcare or social support. These environments produce the sense of being warehoused rather than welcomed. Structural neglect, such as mould, infestations, lack of heating or nutritious food, then becomes a quiet but pervasive form of degradation. Quantitative data underscores the scale of administrative harm produced by the UK asylum system. The House of Commons Library reports that 68% of applicants wait longer than six months, delays that experts note are strongly associated with heightened anxiety, chronic uncertainty, and psychological distress. The Refugee Council's analysis further demonstrates how prolonged waiting, combined with the inability to work and placement in under-resourced accommodation, creates structural conditions that steadily deteriorate mental health and intensify the harms of everyday bureaucratic precarity (Home Office, 2025; House of Commons Library, 2024; Refugee Council, 2024). In this way, bureaucracy governs not only legal status but the conditions of daily life, producing an embodied sense of non-belonging.

These harms raise questions about the motivations of the UK government in maintaining such procedures. While harsh processes are often justified as necessary to deter fraudulent claims and to protect the integrity of the asylum system, the systematic and rather predictable production of psychological harm suggests that deterrence itself may be an objective, rather than an unintended consequence. Enduring prolonged suffering becomes a coerced cost-benefit analysis, where the hope for protection is weighed against severe mental harm, not freely chosen, but imposed by structural constraint.

Policy, Process, and the Production of Refugee Mental Health

Mental health outcomes among asylum seekers are deeply shaped by the policies and processes that structure their lives. Policy is not a neutral framework but a mechanism that distributes resources,

rights, and forms of recognition. In the UK, asylum policy routinely constructs refugees as administrative subjects to be managed, monitored, or deterred rather than as people with rights. These policy choices can also be read through competing conceptions of justice. Rawls would question whether policies producing predictable harm could be justified under fair conditions, while Young's structural account of justice highlights how institutional processes themselves generate marginalisation rather than merely unequal outcomes (Rawls, 1971; Young, 1990).

Policy language itself is a tool of shaping wellbeing. Terms such as “safe and legal routes,” “bogus claims,” “economic migrants,” and “threats to public order” circulate widely in Home Office documentation and public political discourse. This vocabulary frames protection as conditional and scarcity-driven, implying that refugees must compete to prove their deservingness. Media analysis reinforces these dynamics. UK press coverage frequently frames asylum seekers' mental health through narratives of crisis, pressure, or burden, shaping public perceptions of who is deserving of care. For example, The Guardian has highlighted serious flaws in the Home Office's own quality-assurance system, noting that only around half of asylum decisions meet internal standards. This coverage amplifies applicants' anxieties about the fairness and competence of the system. Parliamentary discussion reflects similar concerns. In the Public Accounts Committee's *Asylum Transformation Programme* report, MPs criticised the lack of face-to-face engagement and systemic delays, noting that more than half of people awaiting an asylum decision had been waiting for over a year. Such political and media framings show how asylum seekers are positioned as administratively burdensome while the emotional toll of prolonged uncertainty is rendered inevitable rather than structurally produced. Mental health becomes a technical issue to be managed through referrals, screening, or resilience-building rather than something that should be addressed structurally.

Access to healthcare is shaped by immigration governance. Although asylum seekers are entitled to NHS care, bureaucratic barriers, including confusion about entitlements, refusal of GP registration, language barriers, and a lack of knowledge, create significant obstacles. Mental health services especially are overstretched, underfunded, and rarely equipped to provide culturally and trauma-informed care. Long waiting times for therapy mirror long waits for asylum decisions, paralleling feelings of stagnation.

Policies such as the Illegal Migration Act 2023 alongside the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 intensify this harm by threatening removal to third countries, restricting rights, and further embedding danger. Mental health deterioration is not an unintended by-product, but an outcome deeply connected to the political function of deterrence. When the system is designed to discourage claims, suffering becomes embedded within the structure of protection itself.

The Intersectional Politics of Mental Health

Mental health experiences within the asylum system cannot be understood without examining how race, gender, and immigration status intersect to shape vulnerability. Race plays a crucial role in determining who is believed, who is monitored, and who is constructed as a potential threat. Racialised stereotypes, about credibility, cultural behaviour, emotional expression, or political involvement, shape decision-making processes. Certain narratives, such as those involving sexual violence or persecution by extremist groups, are often seen as more credible depending on the claimant's identity.

Black and Brown asylum seekers experience unique forms of surveillance and suspicion. Racialised policing and constant monitoring contributes to heightened anxiety, diminished trust in institutions, and an internalisation of stigma.

Gender intersects with these dynamics in specific ways. Women seeking asylum often have to prove experiences of gender-based violence, yet are scrutinised if their narratives diverge from expected scripts of vulnerability. Cultural norms, shame, or fragmented memories can complicate disclosure, but these complexities are frequently interpreted as inconsistencies.

Immigration status also profoundly shapes mental health trajectories. The distinction between asylum seeker, refugee, and undocumented migrant is not simply legal, rather, it structures access to housing, healthcare, employment, and social networks. Prolonged periods in the asylum system produce isolation and dependency, while recognised refugees face abrupt withdrawal of support and pressure to quickly integrate despite years in limbo. For those refused asylum, the threat of detention or removal creates chronic stress that pervades everyday life. Reports from non-state actors mirror these findings. NGO and intergovernmental analyses consistently emphasise how administrative delays and racialised inequalities deepen mental health harms. The Refugee Council's statistical explainer shows that people from racialised backgrounds experience disproportionately long waits and more unstable accommodation processes, limiting access to support and intensifying psychological stress. Similarly, a House of Commons inquiry, echoed in the Public Accounts Committee's 2022–23 *Asylum Transformation Programme* report, has explicitly linked prolonged administrative delays to significant declines in mental wellbeing, noting that applicants with insecure or precarious immigration status are especially vulnerable to these harms. Together, these reports reveal how structural inequalities shape the emotional and psychological burden created by the UK asylum system's slow and inconsistent decision-making.

Public discourse further reinforces these intersectional harms. Media portrayals depicting refugees as threats, burdens, or cultural outsiders contribute significantly to a hostile environment that

slowly but surely seeps into interpersonal relationships and self-perception. These narratives are amplified by high-profile violent incidents, for example, far-right rioters attacked a hotel housing asylum seekers in Rotherham in August 2024, smashing windows and setting bins on fire. In July 2025, protests outside the Bell Hotel in Epping escalated, with demonstrators throwing flares, projectiles, and rocks at police. According to the Mental Health Foundation, these “racist riots” had a serious impact on asylum seekers’ mental health, with some afraid to leave their accommodation for fear of attack. When belonging is publicly contested in such a hostile environment, mental health becomes deeply entangled with the politics of visibility, identity, and value. Resultantly, people seeking safety must navigate not only the asylum system but also a social climate that continually dehumanises them.

Colonial Influence in Contemporary Asylum Governance

Contemporary asylum governance in the UK is deeply shaped by colonial logics that persist through language, classification systems, and processes of control. While the legal framework appears neutral, it draws on historical imaginaries about civilisation, protection, and the governing of racialised populations.

Colonial administrations relied heavily on bureaucratic techniques, categorisation, documentation, surveillance, and extraction, to manage subject populations. These techniques live on in modern border regimes, where paperwork determines legitimacy and movement. The asylum process continues the colonial practice of defining who counts as human in ways that carry legal and moral weight. The concept of the “deserving” refugee echoes colonial paternalism, where assistance is conditional on conformity to expected behaviours or narratives.

A central mechanism through which these colonial logics operate today is the “good victim / bad migrant” narrative, a racialised binary that structures who is deemed worthy of protection. The “good” refugee is imagined as passive, traumatised, grateful, and compliant, someone whose vulnerability aligns with state expectations. Those who appear angry, resistant, or politically engaged are reframed as suspicious, undeserving, or manipulative. This narrative is not incidental, it is a continuation of colonial classificatory practices that sorted subjects into categories of compliant versus threatening, civilised versus uncivilised.

Contemporary political and media discourse reproduces these colonial binaries. Coverage in the Financial Times has critiqued the government’s use of securitised terms such as “influx,” “control,” and “illegal migration,” noting how this vocabulary echoes imperial anxieties about managing racialised mobility. These patterns also appear across parliamentary discourse. In the Public Accounts Committee’s 2023 report, MPs refer to “waves” of migrants and emphasise the need for control and

deterrence, language that mirrors colonial-era framings of racialised populations as potential threats requiring containment. This rhetorical landscape reinforces the “good victim / bad migrant” binary, with only those who present as passive, suffering, and grateful being granted legitimacy, while individuals who express anger, resistance, or political agency are reframed as suspicious, undeserving, or fraudulent. In this sense, contemporary governance and public rhetoric continue to draw from imperial logics of classification, hierarchy, and behavioural expectations.

The production of non-belonging within the UK must also be read through colonial histories. Many individuals seeking asylum come from countries whose political, economic, and social structures were deeply disrupted or destroyed by British colonialism, conflict, and resource extraction. Yet the system simultaneously distances itself from these histories, constructing asylum seekers as outsiders whose presence requires justification. The erasure of colonial responsibility facilitates a politics in which the UK presents itself as benevolent for offering limited protection while ignoring the structural conditions that contribute to displacement.

Policy Recommendations: Creating a Trauma-Informed and Justice-Oriented Asylum System

A trauma-informed and justice-oriented asylum system requires a fundamental shift in how the state understands harm, belonging, and responsibility. A trauma-informed approach recognises that stability, predictability, and autonomy are essential for wellbeing. This would require clear timelines, transparent decision-making, and the elimination of practices that retraumatise individuals, such as repeated interviews, dispersal to isolated regions, or accommodation in jail-like environments.

A rights-based approach would prioritise dignity and agency rather than deterrence. This could include guaranteeing access to interpreters and culturally appropriate mental health services, improving GP registration processes, and providing safe housing that supports community-building rather than isolation. Trauma-informed care cannot function within a system that structurally produces harm; therefore, broader reforms are necessary.

A justice-oriented asylum regime goes beyond mitigating harm. It recognises the histories and global inequalities that shape forced migration and incorporates accountability into policy design. This includes participatory governance, where refugees are involved in shaping the policies that affect their lives, and transparent oversight mechanisms that monitor state practices. A justice-oriented approach also challenges the colonial logics that underlie current frameworks, seeking to dismantle racial hierarchies, paternalistic assumptions, and forms of administrative control.

Ultimately, reimagining asylum requires reimagining belonging. Belonging cannot be conditional or defined through suspicion. A humane asylum regime would view protection not as charity but as obligation, shared responsibility, and reciprocity. Such a shift would not only improve mental health outcomes but also challenge the broader politics of exclusion that currently define UK immigration governance.

Conclusion

The UK asylum system produces harm not through spectacular violence but through the slow, routine functioning of bureaucracy. Administrative processes erode wellbeing and foreclose belonging. These harms disproportionately affect racialised, gendered, and precarious groups, reflecting broader patterns of inequality.

The system is not simply inefficient, it is shaped by colonial legacies that persist in its classifications, assumptions, and practices, particularly the good-victim/bad-migrant narrative that continues to police who is deemed ‘worthy’ of protection. Understanding refugee mental health as structurally and politically produced reveals that bureaucratic harm is woven into the very essence of the UK’s asylum governance.

Reimagining the system requires trauma-informed, rights-based, and justice-oriented approaches that prioritise dignity and challenge the hierarchies embedded in current policy. A new politics of belonging, one that would truly recognise refugees as human rights-holders rather than as managed subjects or numbers, offers a path toward more humane and equitable asylum governance and policy.

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