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Asylum interviews in the UK: do they follow the Home Office's interview guidelines?

A pilot study

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SEREDA: Sexual & Gender Based Violence against Refugees from Displacement to Arrival

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Introduction

As of mid-2023, there were 110 million forcibly displaced individuals worldwide, 6.1 million of whom were asylum seekers, individuals who have sought international protection but whose claims for refugee status have not yet been determined. In the UK there were 95,252 cases (relating to 128,786 people) awaiting an initial decision number on their asylum claim at the end of 2023 (Home Office, 2024ab).

Until recently, nearly every individual seeking asylum would have to undergo at least one substantive asylum interview with a case worker in which the nature of their claim would be assessed. During the interview the caseworker is tasked with asking questions to determine whether the individual is at risk of persecution in their country of origin. The UK Government states that, to stay in the UK as a refugee, individuals must demonstrate that they are unable to live safely in any part of their own country due to fears of persecution. This may be because of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or anything else that puts them at risk due to social, cultural, religious, or political situation in their country of origin, including their gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation (*Claim asylum in the UK, 2024*).

Interviewing is one of the main mechanisms by which information is collected in support of a claim. To ensure that substantive asylum interviews are fair and trauma-sensitive the Home Office has produced the *Asylum Interviews* guidance. The purpose of the study reported herein was to ascertain whether it was possible to assess the extent of caseworkers' adherence with the interview guidelines. We focus on interviews with sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) survivors because the SEREDA¹ project identified that survivors found interviews particularly traumatic. The SEREDA project concluded that survivors needed to be interviewed in a way that is both trauma- and gender-sensitive. The current project built on these findings by examining interview transcripts to explore the extent to which interviews met these criteria.

After an asylum application has been made, a screening interview is conducted with an immigration officer. The applicant must outline the details of their case and can also present written evidence to support their claim. During the screening process, the applicant is also photographed and their fingerprints are taken. The interview should be undertaken in a way which follows the Home Office's own asylum interview guidelines, which are meant to ensure that interviews are trauma and gender sensitive. After this initial screening interview, the caseworker determines if they think someone's case can be considered in the UK or whether it is 'inadmissible' (*Claim asylum in the UK, 2024*). If the case is deemed admissible, a substantive asylum interview takes place. This interview is supposed to occur soon after the screening takes place. In reality the full interview may take place months or even years after the screening interview.

In some instances, refugee status may be granted without having to attend an interview. This is the case for those who were sent an Asylum Questionnaire as part of the 'Streamlined Asylum Process' (SAP), introduced in 2023. The SAP model was used as part of a range of measures to clear the backlog. It was used to process "manifestly well-founded cases", from nationals of countries with high grants rates of refugee status – initially Afghanistan, Eritrea, Libya and Sudan, and later Iran and Iraq (Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, 2024; Home Office, 2024c). In most cases, a substantive asylum interview is conducted in order for the Home Office decision makers to learn more about how the applicant was persecuted

¹ Sexual and gender based violence in the refugee crisis: from displacement to arrival (SEREDA)

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/superdiversity-institute/sereda>

in their home country and why they fear further persecution. The Home Office states that this interview may include questioning about difficult topics, but that explaining these events is crucial to the asylum process. During and since the COVID-19 pandemic, most asylum interviews have taken place over video-call. The audio will be recorded, and a copy should be provided to the applicant afterwards. Sometimes the interview transcript is only provided in note form (as taken by the asylum caseworker conducting the interview) and is not a full verbatim record.

Many respondents who receive an initial negative decision then appeal the decision at an independent Immigration Tribunal. They may therefore be asked to provide an account of their experiences on several occasions: at the interview stage, at appeal, and any time they present a new case.

This project builds on the findings of the SEREDA project at the University of Birmingham, which collected data across five countries looking at SGBV across the refugee journey.

How the interview is conducted is of great importance. Caseworkers are expected to provide an environment that is conducive to disclosure and wherein claimants feel able to share their story. The Home Office guidelines were introduced to guide interviewers how to carry out effective substantive asylum interviews within which they can establish whether or not a claimant meets the requirements for a human rights or asylum claim to succeed. More specifically, the guidelines provide guidance on interview arrangements and formalities, how to prepare for an asylum interview, and how to investigate an asylum claim. The section on 'Investigating the asylum claim' includes information about principles, questioning techniques, and factors that may influence a claimant's ability to provide adequate evidence. The guidelines outline what the interview will involve for the interviewer, including shared responsibility between the

interviewer and the interviewee to establish relevant aspects of the claim, individual assessment of the claimant based on their background and circumstances, objective and impartial assessment by the interviewer, the importance of the interviewer focusing on material facts, the importance of establishing nationality, and giving the claimant the opportunity to address any significant credibility findings.

The guidelines also stress how crucial it is that the interviewer be aware of individual factors that may influence the information gathering process during an interview. These include past treatment by authority figures, education or literacy levels, language barriers, and other factors unique to each claimant such as sexual orientation, the social position of certain members of society, and the fallibility of human memory. Additionally, the guidelines provide information on interviewing techniques. These include the importance of asking open-ended questions to give the claimant an opportunity to share their account without interruptions, and the appropriateness of closed questions such as when the interviewer needs to draw out a statement or fact. The extent to which these guidelines are followed may impact on the conduct of the interview and the extent to which asylum applicants feel able to share details of former persecution. Given the well-established sensitivities around disclosure of SGBV (Papoutsis et al. 2022), it is particularly important that these guidelines are followed when interviewing SGBV survivors.

This project builds on the findings of the SEREDA projects at the University of Birmingham, which collected data across six countries looking at SGBV across the refugee journey. The projects demonstrated that structural violence perpetrated by national states has a key role in determining survivors' ability to integrate into their countries of refuge. A key finding in the UK-based SEREDA projects was that survivors and service providers reported that asylum interviews were undertaken in ways which re-traumatised individuals and did not follow the Home Office's interview guidance (Pertek and Phillimore 2021).

The SEREDA projects also identified poor treatment of sexual and gender-based violence and torture survivors in asylum interviews. Following discussions between HBF and the SEREDA team, it

was decided to engage in a pilot project to examine the ways in which the Home Office's Guidelines were implemented in the interviews undertaken with a small number of HBF's clients. Following a successful funding application to the IGI Gender Theme at the University of Birmingham this project was undertaken to explore, through analyzing transcripts of asylum interviews, the extent to which interviews are conducted in line with the Home Office's own asylum interview guidance, most recently updated in June 2022.

This project has been undertaken in collaboration between the University of Birmingham and the Helen Bamber Foundation. The Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) was founded in 2005 by Helen Bamber, a human rights activist who, after years of working with Holocaust survivors, torture survivors, and trafficking survivors from around the world, founded the organization to provide care and support for refugees and asylum seekers who have experienced severe violence, abuse, and exploitation. Over the course of the Helen Bamber Foundation's work with asylum seekers in the UK, multiple asylum seekers reported poor treatment during the substantive interview, especially in regard to the extremely sensitive material they had to disclose in order to support their asylum claim.

The aim of the project is to identify the extent to which it is possible to assess whether the guidelines are implemented using available transcripts and areas of improvement which need addressing by the Home Office. We also look at the kinds of information that can be ascertained from such an analysis. This report outlines our findings. The report proceeds by setting out the methods utilised before moving to discuss findings and conclusions and setting out an agenda for future research on this topic.

Methodology

Every substantive asylum interview is meant to be recorded and transcribed and is the property of the interviewee. We sought to access substantive interview transcripts for a range of HBF clients so that we could systematically analyse these to examine the extent to which the Home Office Guidelines were followed. The first stage of this project involved accessing transcripts from SGBV survivors. All previous or current clients of the Helen Bamber Foundation should have copies of their interview transcripts. HBF and the SEREDA team collectively designed a script and consent form and trained HBF volunteers to use these documents to approach clients who had received a positive decision and request access to their transcript. We only approached clients who had received a positive decision at this stage because HBF felt that clients who were in some way engaged with the asylum system might fear that sharing their transcription might influence their unresolved or possible future asylum claim.

Volunteers (with staff overseeing them) contacted clients who were granted status in the past three years where they had already signed a consent form indicating they were willing to be contacted about research projects. Due to the higher than expected refusal rate, we extended this period back by a further two years. The volunteer then carefully read through the script describing the project and what it would entail. Where the client indicated that they would like to be involved the volunteer read through the consent form with them (including using an interpreter where needed).

HBF approached over thirty clients known to have experienced SGBV and to have received a positive decision with the hope that 20 would give consent to share their substantive interview transcript. However some could not be reached and others were nervous about participating and understandably wanted to move on with their lives. Twelve former clients agreed to participate. Notably more women than men declined to participate meaning that the sample ended up 50% male which is not representative of the profile of forced migrant SGBV survivors who are predominantly female. A breakdown of the sample of clients included can be found at Table 1.

Table 1: Description of claimants

| | | Afganistan | Albania | Algeria | China | Kazakhstan | Nigeria | Sri Lanka | Syria | Total |
|-----------|--------------|------------|---------|---------|-------|------------|---------|-----------|-------|-------|
| Gender | Cis-woman | | 2 | | 1 | 1 | 2 | | | 6 |
| | Cis-man | 3 | | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| Sexuality | heterosexual | 3 | 2 | | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | | 9 |
| | Gay | | | 1 | | | | | | 1 |
| | Lesbian | | | | | | | | | |
| | Other | 1 | | | | | | | | 1 |
| | Not known | | | | | | | | 1 | 1 |
| Age | 18-24 | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| | 25-34 | 2 | 1 | 1 | | | | | 1 | 5 |
| | 35-44 | | | | | | 2 | 1 | | 3 |
| | 45-54 | | 1 | | | | | | | 1 |
| | 55-64 | | | | | | | | | 0 |
| | 64+ | | | | | | | | | |
| Religion | Muslim | 3 | | 1 | | 1 | | | 1 | 6 |
| | Christian | | 2 | | | | 2 | 1 | | 5 |
| | Other/none | | | | 1 | | | | | 1 |
| | Not Known | | | | | | | | | 0 |

Once consent was obtained, we sought to access the interview transcripts. Where HBF did not already possess the transcript, they contacted the client's former lawyer to obtain a copy. The retrieval process took some time, and we were reliant on legal representatives having ready access to the transcript. In some cases, files were archived and had to be retrieved before we could be provided with the transcript.

Once HBF had access to the transcript, the volunteers redacted any identifying information. Each transcript was double checked by a member of staff to ensure that GDPR requirements were complied with. Once the transcript had been redacted and specific data points related to demographic information were logged, it was sent securely to the SEREDA team for analysis. We generated themes encapsulating the Home Office's asylum interview guidelines and then used these to assess what information it was possible to gather from the transcript and to what extent specific components of the guidelines were followed. Each interview transcript was read several times and annotated with the themes. Material from the themes was then grouped together under the main codes for discussion in this report (see Table 2).

These included topics covering interview logistics, the conduct of the interviews, interview techniques, questions about the basis of the claim, approaches with victims of torture or SGBV and interview needs for particularly vulnerable individuals.

All of the clients who agreed to participate had some sort of disability, primarily post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or major depressive disorder (MDD). Across the sample, more than 60% were survivors of state torture, and nearly 40% were survivors of sexual exploitation.

Ethics

Ethical approval was received from the University of Birmingham Ethical Review Committee. All transcripts were collected from HBF clients who had received decisions on their asylum claims after 2018. We ensured that all interviews were undertaken in the period covered by the guidelines, which were introduced in 2014 and most recently updated in 2022. Data was collected with informed consent, with clients assured that all identifying information would be removed by HBF prior to transfer to the University of Birmingham for analysis.

Table 2: Description of claimants

| Code | Subcodes |
|--|---|
| Interview logistics | Childcare, Language choice, Interviewer demographics, Breaks in the interview |
| Conducting the interview | Establishing rapport, Assisting the claimant, Individual assessment, Objectivity, Conduct, Establishing nationality, Credibility findings, Inadmissibility, Awareness of individual factors |
| Interviewing techniques | Types of questions asked, Summarise and signposting, Verifying witness statements, Sensitive topics, GBV, Detail, Sensitivity |
| Questions about the basis of the claim | Religion or belief, Interpreter, Blasphemy or apostasy, Sexual orientation or gender identity |
| Victims of torture or other trauma | Interviews with victims of torture or trauma, Proof, Distress, Gender-based persecution, Scars |
| Particular interview needs | Learning difficulty or disability, Self-harm and suicide risk |
| Concluding the interview | Submission of further evidence, Conclusion, Read over, After the interview |

Findings

In this section we outline our findings according to each of the main themes each relating to the topics covered in the Home Office guidelines.

Interview logistics

The first code in the interview guidelines is 'interview logistics,' which contains the subcodes 'childcare,' 'language choice,' 'interviewer demographics,' and 'breaks in the interview.' The majority of these subcodes appeared as tick boxes on the interview forms rather than open-ended questions, so while it is possible to see that they were acknowledged, it is not possible to see how they were actioned.

All but two of the interviews noted the language of the interview and whether an interpreter was being used. The two that did not note the language of the interview were recorded on different forms where there was no dedicated space to note this information. The main subcode drawing our attention in this section was 'breaks in the interview.' In the interview guidelines it states that claimants should be told that they can request breaks and that requests made will not affect their claim. This practice occurred in the majority of the transcripts. Some claimants had breaks offered to them multiple times throughout the interview, while others only had breaks offered once. Breaks were usually offered in response to the intensity of the conversation topic. For example, one transcript included five breaks initiated by the interviewer. After the claimant became distressed when discussing her mother's death, the interviewer asked, 'are you feeling okay would you like to take a break now?' Once in an interview where a claimant who was extremely distressed about an incident involving her children, the interviewer said 'okay I think we should take a few minutes whilst you compose yourself, just take a few breaths' (F, 35-44). In other cases, the break was used as a way to split up topics of conversation, such as when one interviewer said, 'Okay, I think it's a good time for a break now, when we come back we will talk a bit about your journey to the UK, okay?' (M, 18-24).

Conducting the interview

The second group of codes in the guidelines is 'conducting the interview', which contains the subcodes 'establishing rapport', 'assisting the claimant', 'individual assessment', 'objectivity', 'conduct', 'establishing nationality', 'credibility findings', 'inadmissibility', and 'awareness of individual factors'. As with the previous section, it was easier to make assessments around some subcodes than others.

Assisting the claimant occurs when the interviewer helps the interviewee by establishing relevant aspects of the claim and encouraging the disclosure of all relevant information, but it was impossible for us to assess what is relevant and therefore appropriately included or inappropriately excluded. Additionally, awareness of individual factors was difficult to establish because the subcode is described as the acknowledgement of how certain factors may influence the task of obtaining information, such as past treatment by authority figures. If an interviewer did not explicitly state, however, that they were tailoring their questions in accordance with certain individual factors, it was impossible to ascertain if this was being practiced during the interviews. Language comprehension could potentially fall under this subcode. In one case repeated questions to a woman from China about why she did not reach out for help in England, despite not knowing any English, indicated that the interviewer was not acknowledging individual factors that would have affected the claimant's journey. When asked why she did not call the police when her captor was asleep, she stated: 'How could I call the police? I didn't know the number, I was in a totally new and strange place, I didn't know the language.'

The most pertinent subcode from this theme was 'establishing nationality,' which was often attempted through repeated questioning. For example, one respondent from Nigeria was asked 49 questions about what she knew about Nigerian culture, including what languages were spoken,

what common foods were, and what TV programmes were broadcast when she was growing up. She explained multiple times to the interviewer that she was kept locked on a compound and was not exposed to much outside information, but the interviewer kept questioning her. While there is no quantity specified in the guidelines that might deem a line of questioning as excessive, 49 questions appeared to trouble the applicant and is likely to have been more than necessary.

Another case concerned a man from Afghanistan who was kidnapped when he was 12, held captive for six months, continuously sexually abused, and finally smuggled to Iran. In this case the interviewer asked many questions to establish his nationality that an uneducated child would not have known. These included 'can you remember the major towns and cities that exist in that province?' and 'can you remember the different amounts of Afghani notes that you could get in Afghanistan?' The interviewer also asked him to name his local school, his local mosque, and more questions that he was largely unable to answer. These repeated questions are also relevant to the 'conduct' subcode, which states that interviews should not be too detailed or exhausting. It was evident from the interviewee's response that these questions generated stress.

Another subcode from this theme that we were able to discern multiple times in the transcripts was 'credibility findings'. The guidelines state that claimants should be given the opportunity to address any contradictions or inconsistent information. One example of this came from an interview with a Nigerian woman who was describing an instance where she and her children were kidnapped. From the transcript it is clear that she misunderstood what the interviewer was asking her about. He then told her 'okay so I need you to listen to the questions carefully because earlier I had asked about your children not the gunmen is that okay?' In another interview, the interviewer tried to distinguish between differences in the claimant's immigration timeline and says 'On the 20th September 2018 you stated to immigration officials that you were 18 when you were taken to Nigeria from Greece and in your witness statement you have stated you were taken from Greece to Nigeria at three years of age. In today's interview you are saying you were five years old. Can you explain this please?' There were multiple other points in this

interview in which the interviewer tried to clarify inconsistencies between the witness statement and the current interview. As the interview progressed the interviewer's tone appeared to switch from clarifying to accusatory although the lack of an audio recording makes it difficult to assess the change in tone.

Interviewing techniques

The third group of codes in the guidelines is 'interviewing techniques,' which contains the subcodes 'types of questions asked,' 'summarising and signposting,' 'verifying witness statements,' 'sensitive topics,' 'GBV,' 'detail,' and 'sensitivity.' The subcode 'types of questions asked' outlines to interviewers the importance of using open questions and avoiding compound questions, practices which were largely followed throughout all interviews. Summarising and signposting information, which, according to the guidelines, is good practice in order to inform the claimant about what upcoming questions would be about, was another important subcode. This is especially helpful when interviewing claimants who have experienced SGBV, as they will be able to prepare for a line of potentially re-traumatising questioning.

We found, however, that only nine of the twelve transcripts included clear signposting, with the quality of such signposting varying significantly. In some instances, the signposting was clear and helped ensure that the claimant was content to move to another line of questioning. For example, one interviewer asked, 'We're going to move on now to talk about your life growing up and your realisation of your sexuality, okay?' (M, 25-34). In another interview, however, the transcript just read 'signpost – asylum claim' and 'signpost UK' (F, 55-64). While it is impossible to say if that is truly how the signposting went during the interview, since everything else appears to be transcribed fully, it is fair to assume that that is also how the signposting occurred.

One of the key subcodes in this theme was the 'GBV' subcode, which is described as the importance of the interviewer being aware of euphemisms that may be used to describe sexual violence, such as 'he hurt me' instead of 'he raped me.' In the transcripts analysed, these euphemisms were rarely used, and the actual incidents were hardly mentioned. It is

possible that SGBV had already been described in witness statements and the interviewer was sparing the interviewee. However, we were surprised to see very little evidence of the possibility of SGBV explored by interviewers. The information provided in the transcripts we analysed was often insufficient to ascertain whether or not there had been an incident that had led to the asylum seeker fleeing their country, and we were frequently left uncertain about what act or threat of violence or persecution had precipitated an individual's flight. As a result, it was not possible to analyse language used around SGBV as, in two cases for example, the interviewer simply referred to 'the day in which you were abducted and taken by the men you've mentioned in your witness statement' and 'after I lost my daughter' (M, 18-24; F, 35-44). On checking with HBF whether these cases had indeed contained SGBV, we heard that all cases had. One case was particularly extreme. In none of these cases had the interviewer engaged with the possibility of SGBV victimisation. Research elsewhere has identified that women are sometimes penalized for disclosing SGBV in later interviews but are not aware, or too ashamed, to disclose SGBV in early engagements with interviews (Baillot et al. 2012). This is especially the case for those who do not have adequate legal advice.

Questions regarding SGBV, such as those surrounding trafficking and forced prostitution, were often focused more on the logistics of the violence than on the violence itself. For example, one of the transcripts came from a woman who was trafficked from Albania to the UK via Italy and was then forced into prostitution. During her interview, she was asked whether she had personal possessions in the house, how the clients were brought to her, what her working hours were, who prepared her food, etc. (F, 25-34). There were no euphemisms about violence, just references to incidents that may have involved violence. Without the internal notes that HBF provided us with to help us to understand the nature of such cases, we would not have been aware from the interview content that an applicant had been sexually exploited.

Another subcode under this theme is about sensitivity, which again was difficult to analyse due to the lack of discussions of instances of abuse. For instance, in an interview of one woman from Nigeria,

who we know witnessed her daughter being raped to death per notes from HBF, the closest information to that event that appears in the transcript we analysed is when the interview asks what her reason for claiming asylum is. She states 'the reason why I claim asylum is because terrible things happened to me my son and my daughter.' The interviewer goes on to ask other questions that make her emotionally distressed, such as questions about her relationship with her family. As the interviewee cries when discussing her mother's death, as noted in the transcript, the interviewer immediately asks if she would like a break or if she is okay to continue with the interview. A large portion of her interview is spent discussing her husband's political affiliations and a kidnapping with her children that eventually led to her fleeing Nigeria. Before asking about this event, the interviewer signposts that they know the next part of the interview is going to be difficult and that the interviewee is welcome to request a break at any time. When the respondent is crying talking about the kidnapping, the interviewer calls for a break so the respondent can gather herself. The interviewer also notes that if these topics are too stressful to discuss, the respondent can note them in a witness statement instead.

In another interview, this time with a young male respondent from Syria, while we could tell from HBF notes that he had been sexually abused by prison guards after being detained for two months, the interviewer barely explored this issue. The first part of the interview focussed on establishing his nationality. He was asked questions about where he grew up, what his local mosque was called, what countries bordered Syria, etc. When the interviewer asks about his arrest, he mentions being detained, beaten, and tortured. The interviewer does not ask any questions about what the torture entailed, but rather asks about how he was released from detention and how he left the country. This may be because the claimant was told to save this information for the main interview although HBF informed us that this would be very unlikely. Thus, because these sensitive topics were not discussed in the transcript, it is difficult to ascertain how interactions with the interviewers may have affected the wellbeing of the interviewees.

As with the previous interview, multiple breaks were taken, and the interviewer completed the interview by asking if the interviewee was happy with their

and the interpreter's conduct. It is important to note that it may have been difficult for claimants to complain about their treatment to the individual who had interviewed them and who was responsible for the decision on their claim.

In one interview, where the respondent had been extremely distressed discussing harm to her child, the interviewer said towards the end 'okay so we have less than an hour before the centre closes so I need you to focus on these next questions specifically, I know this is distressing for you but I cannot process your claim without clarifying some things and I don't want to have to ask you to return for another interview, do you understand me?' The claimant had been recounting an extremely harrowing incident for hours, and the interviewer's tone appeared harsh considering how distraught the claimant was.

Questions about the basis of the claim

This group of subcodes encompasses questions about the basis of the claim, including 'religion or belief,' 'interpreter,' 'blasphemy or apostasy,' and 'sexual orientation or gender identity.' There were no asylum claims in our sample that were based on belief-based conversions, so 'religion or belief' was not relevant. The 'interpreter' subcode states that interpreters 'should be able to translate concepts and terminology of religious or non-religious groups in the country of origin,' but again, these topics were not common talking points in our sample. The 'sexual orientation or gender identity' subcode states that the 'interviewer should focus on establishing the claimant's current sexual orientation or gender identity' and how it relates to their fears of harm in their home country. It was not clear, however, what exactly the limits are to trying to establish the claimant's current sexual orientation.

In one interview, for instance, a line of questioning (38 questions in a row) about the claimant's sexuality included questions such as 'you mentioned in your witness statement that you like both men and women, can you expand on what you mean by this,' 'would you have liked to just be open?' (with regard to being in an openly queer relationship within the Afghan community), and 'in the UK, relationships between men are legal and you can freely be in a relationship with a man

if you wanted to, why would you want to keep it a secret?' The claimant eventually gets fed up with this line of questioning and says, 'You are asking the same question 50 times...that's enough, I am tired of it' (M, 18-24). While the guidelines do state that the interviewer should focus on establishing the claimant's current sexual orientation and how it could be relevant to their fear of harm in their home country, this interview included 38 questions about the claimant's discovery of his sexuality or relationship with another man, which clearly made him frustrated. There appeared to be little attempt to adapt this line of questioning to allow for cultural sensitivities.

Victims of torture or other trauma

Within this code exist the subcodes 'interviews with victims of torture or trauma,' 'proof,' 'distress,' 'gender-based persecution,' and 'scars.' Interviewers are instructed to ask when, where, how, and by whom claimants were tortured, while taking care not to cause them undue stress. In one case, for instance, we know from the notes given to us by HBF, that the claimant was subject to state torture in Nigeria as a result of her husband's political activity and that one of her children was killed when she was kidnapped. Besides the death of her child, the rest of this information comes out during the interview. The interviewer asks relevant questions, including where she was when she was kidnapped, where they took her, how long she was kidnapped for, and how she was treated by the kidnappers. The details of the actual torture are not described in this interview, besides the claimant saying 'I was beaten up one night terribly and after everything..., ' but the claimant is also extremely distressed throughout this process and the interviewer frequently offers her breaks.

In another interview with a torture survivor, the interviewer's tone is brusque in places, though less so when the torture is being discussed. The interviewer begins the interview by asking if the claimant has any medical conditions that might hinder the interview process, and when the claimant says 'I have to do this interview, I have no life and want to find out,' the interviewer says 'I need you to answer the question' rather than acknowledging that the interviewee is perhaps not well enough to discuss previous events. When the torture is

being discussed, however, the interviewer asks questions that would align with the guidelines, enquiring about when the claimant was captured by the Taliban, why they were captured, and what the Taliban did to him (beat him). While the questioning does not seem excessive in length, the interview ends rather abruptly. After asking about harms that occurred as a result of the torture and if the claimant went to the police after being captured, the interviewer asks if anyone else knows about the incident, if the claimant has anything else to add, and then the interview ends. Additionally, the claimant twice mentions that he was sitting in a room with a dead body, and the interviewer does not acknowledge this statement or express any sort of sympathy for how difficult that may have been. The claimant notes 'there was another guy detained in the same place same room he was wearing jeans and he was beaten up so bad that he eventually died of his wounds and his dead body was in the same room as me the whole night.' The interviewer then asks, 'where were you detained?' without acknowledging the claimant's distress. Similarly, when the interviewer asks if the claimant has anything else to add and the claimant again describes how he is still haunted from being in the room with a dead body and how it has affected his mental health, the next line on the transcript simply says, 'end of interview.'

Particular interview needs

This second-to-last group of subcodes includes 'learning difficulty or disability' and 'self-harm and suicide risk.' The subcode 'self-harm and suicide risk' states that security should be called if the claimant says they will self-harm in the interview room and that certain steps must be followed if a claimant says they will kill themselves if their claim is refused. There were no instances of either, though there were discussions of suicidal ideation occurring separate from the interview but rather due to the traumatic events the claimants had experienced. In one interview, when the claimant is asked if she has ever had thoughts of harming herself before, she says yes and then they talk a bit about her self-harm and suicidal ideation. The interviewer asks if she feels if she is receiving enough support for her mental health before moving on to another line of questioning, and the claimant states that she is being supported by the HBF and her GP.

Concluding the interview

The final group of subcodes in the guidelines are 'concluding the interview,' which includes 'submission of further evidence,' 'conclusion,' 'read over,' and 'after the interview.' Depending on the form, 'submission of further evidence' and 'conclusion' seem to appear as either questions asked by the interviewer or a tick box on the interview form. All of the transcripts except one had a set 'concluding the interview' section already on the forms as standard questions to everyone, and this section included a question about whether the claimant wanted to submit more evidence and if there was anything they wanted to add or clarify. On the one form that did not have this set section, the interviewer asks if there is anything else the claimant would like to add or clarify and explains how to send evidence to the Home Office. It is unclear from the transcripts if any read overs were offered, and none of the transcripts had the 'yes' boxes ticked to confirm that that a copy of the transcript had been provided to the claimant. Four transcripts did have a boxed ticked noting that 'a copy of your interview transcript and audio recording if applicable will be posted to your representative.'

Discussion

Overall, clients reported experiencing multiple types of SGBV that had led to their asylum claim. This included state torture, honour-based violence, modern day slavery, and extreme human cruelty, among others. One of the initial goals of this research was to analyse how Home Office interviewers handled these sensitive topics when they came up in interviews. However, in the transcripts we received these subjects were scarcely brought up but were at times alluded to. The lack of enquiry into the possibility of SGBV could be problematic for interviewees who are likely not aware that they should offer a full account of the persecution and violence experienced in their interview. Even when there was some allusion to terrible things happening the interviewer did not enquire as to the detail of these things.

Although many of the questions were asked respectfully, and breaks and signposting were mostly used appropriately, some of the interviews also included questions that appeared unnecessarily repetitive, or where the interviewer's tone appeared harsh. Despite this, however, other interview guidelines appear to have been followed throughout, including the interviewer offering breaks in the interview, signposting before discussing sensitive topics (although there should have been more signposting), and asking for appropriate detail about certain events. Certain issues that we had hoped to evaluate, such as those concerning blasphemy, did not appear in any interviews. Furthermore it is important to note that all the transcripts we analysed were from successful claimants. It may be the case that their claim was successful because the interviewers followed the guidelines better than interviewers for those whose claim was rejected.

One issue that did occur multiple times was that of excessive questioning, although what counts as 'excessive' is difficult to quantify in the Home Office's guidelines. Questions about establishing nationality or clarifying sexual orientation were often quite extensive and may have been difficult

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or impossible to answer given the claimant's age or cultural background. Some questions would be impossible for the applicant to answer given their particular circumstances, such as the man from Afghanistan who was asked questions about Afghanistan that he would not have been equipped to answer because he was kidnapped as a child and then smuggled to Iran. The guidelines do note as part of the 'conduct' guidance that interviews should not be too detailed, prolonged, or exhausting, but it is not made clear what is considered too prolonged. Not all of the transcripts provided showed the start and end times of the interviews, but the ones that did ranged from four hours long to 8.5 hours long. Even with breaks and lunch provided, 8.5 hours is an extremely long time to be recounting personal traumas.

Future work and Recommendations

It is clear from our study that it is possible to ascertain whether some aspects of the guidelines are followed. It was at times difficult to grasp the tone of the conversation via just transcripts alone. A better assessment could be made if researchers were able to listen to the audio and if comprehensive information was available about every interview.

Research is needed which looks at the extent to which guidelines are followed in interviews with applicants whose claims were rejected on the basis of their interview. Future research should include transcripts of the interviews where the sensitive topics were discussed if they are available. Without these, it is difficult to evaluate how the interview guidelines were or were not being followed in relation to extremely sensitive topics. Additionally, qualitative interviews could be carried out with interviewees to ask them about their personal experiences with the asylum interviews. It is possible that when the interviewer asked if they were satisfied at the end of the interview, they said yes because of power dynamics, or a desire to move their asylum application process along and/or the desire to return to their children. Interviewing former caseworkers about interviews and how they were conducted would also be useful.

Because many of the subcodes identified in the interview guidelines did not appear in the interviews we had, such as 'proof,' 'scars,' 'learning difficulties,' and 'rapport building,' it would be valuable to have access to a wider range of interviews that may include this information. The 'proof' and 'scars' subcodes would be especially valuable, as we have seen herein that sometimes the claimants mention something extremely traumatic only for the interviewer to essentially ignore them and move on to a more mundane line of questioning.

The guidelines should include precise guidance about how to facilitate disclosure in a way that does not traumatise the individual as it was evident that in some cases this vital information may have not been covered. There is also a need to be more specific about what counts as excessive questioning and to what degree, and with what evidence, a person needs to prove their sexuality or nationality. It would be helpful for the guidelines to include examples of what constitutes an adequate line of questioning about these topics

so interviewers have a clearer idea of what an acceptable amount of questioning may look like.

Within the guidelines there could also be examples of what is deemed an appropriate response from the claimant so that the interviewer knows when they have obtained sufficient information. Many claimants seemed to be getting frustrated/stressed with excessive questioning around one topic. It was often unclear to us what the interviewer was hoping to hear by asking so many questions that received similar answers.

While most of the interviews contained signposting and summarising, these techniques were not used consistently throughout. Interviewers should be informed how important it is to alert the claimants about what is going to be discussed before the conversation switches topics. Such guidance must either be laid out more clearly in the guidelines or included in the training they receive, if not both.

In order to check that the guidelines are effective and that they are being adopted widely the Home Office should undertake a regular review of transcripts, randomly sampled, to ensure that interviewers are complying with the guidelines. With this oversight, it would be possible to identify whether additional trainings were necessary. Better oversight would help ensure that the claimants are not enduring undue stress during their interviews and that they were given adequate opportunities to disclose the events that had led to their flight. Without access to audio recordings of the interviews we cannot be certain about the tone of interviews. However there was evidence that, at multiple points, interviewers became frustrated with interviewees. When this happened they appeared to become short with their questions and responses towards the claimants. Regular reviews of transcripts will ensure that interviewers' behaviours are acceptable, and identify the need for additional conduct training.

Conclusion

Given the nature of the data we accessed we were not able to fully analyse whether the Home Office complied with their guidelines. We were able to demonstrate however that reviews of transcripts can reveal some information about some of the themes in the guidelines.

We have specific concerns around disclosure. In some interviews SGBV incidents were often alluded to, but we would not have known they had occurred if we not received additional notes from the HBF. We must ask how the interviewer was able to make an assessment of an individual's claim without this information. We are concerned that the credibility of future disclosures of SGBV may be questioned if they were not discussed in earlier interviews. Thus, it is important for interviewers to make sensitive enquiries into the possibility of SGBV experiences, particularly with women respondents given that some studies have identified that victimization is extremely common in women forced migrants (De Schrivjer et al. 2018). Interviewers may be reluctant to raise such questions for fear of causing distress, but the consequences of non-disclosure are huge. We would suggest training is needed to ensure they can ask such questions in sensitive and culturally appropriate ways. It will also be important to ensure that interviewers and interpreters are gender-matched to interviewees.

There were instances where signposting and summarising should have been used, and there were also instances where questioning became excessive and it was apparent that the claimant became frustrated and possibly stressed. Finally there was evidence of a failure to express empathy with interviewees when they recalled traumatic events. The lack of acknowledgement of individuals suffering in these circumstances may have led them to feel that their experiences were not being validated which may undermine their willingness to disclose further harmful memories.

It is evident that the transcripts offer a useful source of information to assess the gender and trauma sensitivity of approaches to interviewing and the extent to which many of the guidelines are followed. Much more work is needed by the Home Office and independent scholars to utilise the transcripts and potentially recordings as a source of data to give insight to interviews with vulnerable asylum seekers. A wider sample of transcripts which include interviews with refused asylum seekers will reveal further vital information about interview processes and practices.

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