



“I’ve Been Hurt Every Single Day Here, You Know:” A Feminist Abolitionist Analysis of Immigration Detention

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Abstract

While gendered violence against women at home, in intimate relationships, and in the workplace is widely acknowledged, the relationship between border control and gendered violence has only recently been addressed, often narrowly. To address this gap, this article examines the United Kingdom immigration detention system through an abolition feminist lens. Drawing on research conducted inside and outside detention sites, experiential knowledge from lived experience and solidarity work, and secondary sources, we highlight the entangled and mutually constitutive relationships between intimate/interpersonal and institutional/state violence. Inspired by Monica Cosby’s *Intimate Partner Violence and State Violence Power and Control Wheel*, our analysis reveals how immigration detention constitutes a form of racist-gendered state-corporate violence. Importantly, those who travel under the sign *women* understand this violence as directly linked to the gendered abuses they experienced outside detention. This underscores the inseparability of post-national struggles against carceral border regimes from feminist transformative efforts to eradicate gendered violence.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, violence against women has increasingly entered national and international agendas as a significant public concern. Feminist movements have redefined it as a human rights issue, underscoring its structural nature as “gendered violence” (e.g., Istanbul Convention). Whilst gendered violence against women at home, in intimate

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relationships, and in the workplace is widely acknowledged, albeit with gaps, it is only recently that the relationship between border control and gendered violence has been addressed, often with a narrow lens.¹ The reality is that gendered violence has long been perceived as a private issue but is often invoked to justify repressive measures aimed at securitising cross-border migration and the public space (e.g., Farris 2017; Non Una di Meno 2017).

Critics have long noted that borders and border violence impact people differently. Women, queer, trans, and gender nonbinary people face specific and heightened forms of harm, both during migration and upon arrival in destination countries (e.g., Canning 2020; Luibhéid 1998; Luibhéid and Chávez 2020; Marmo 2023; Marmo and Gerard 2020; Rigo and De Masi 2019). In his analysis of the British (cr) immigration system, Bhatia goes a step further, arguing this “architectural plan of control and captivity is shaped by the racist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist state that has historical connections with slavery and colonialism” (2023:485). However, the systemic gendered and sexualised violence perpetrated by state actors and their proxies at and through borders remains largely unaddressed (Marmo 2023), especially in the context of immigration detention. Empirical analyses of everyday life within detention sites remain scarce, and studies often adopt male-centric views (for exceptions, see Bosworth et al. 2018; Bosworth and Kellezi 2014; Canning 2017; Esposito et al. 2019b; Gerlach 2023).

Building on these critical insights and other seminal intersectional analyses of the violence of border and detention regimes (e.g., Boochani 2018; Canning 2020), in this article, we examine the United Kingdom immigration detention system through an abolition feminist lens, highlighting the interconnected and mutually constitutive relationships between intimate/interpersonal and institutional/state violence in the experiences of those who travel under the sign *women* (Ahmed 2017, p. 14).² In other words, rather than interpreting immigration detention experiences as springing solely from the nature of women’s confinement and the institutions in which they are held, as scholars relying on the ‘pains of imprisonment’ framework (Sykes 1958) or viewing detention centres as total institutions (Goffman 1961) have done (e.g., Bull et al. 2012; Fernández de la Reguera 2022; Gashi et al 2021; Longazel et al. 2016; Peterie 2018), we choose a different path.

Following Bosworth’s (2023) call and aligned with abolitionist feminist analyses on border violence (Cowan et al. 2024), we understand pain in immigration detention as political. Crucially, we argue that these institutions operate in conjunction with a wider network of power structures and relations. Doing so, we challenge the binary categorisation of private versus public violence, pointing towards the need to abolish immigration detention as a way to eradicate gender violence. Our goal is ultimately to expand existing discussions on immigration detention by stressing how gendered violence is a constitutive component of the day-to-day operation of this racist system, and as such, should be placed in relation to the various forms of violence women face outside detention. Such a conceptualisation is at the core of abolition feminism, as opposed to carceral feminism (e.g., Cowan et al. 2024; Davis et al. 2022; Lembe 2013).

¹ See the Border Management and Gender tool, part of the Gender and Security Sector Reform Toolkit (Mackay 2008; DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, and UN Women 2019).

² In this article, we use the term “women” to refer to a plurality of subjectivities defined by intersecting axes of power and difference, such as race, class, sexuality, ability, citizenship and immigration status, among others. According to Sara Ahmed (2017), this umbrella category encompasses both those who are recognised as women by society and those who are not recognised as women despite their self-identification, including transgender, cisgender, intersex, and endosex women.

The article proceeds as follows. We first present our theoretical framework. We then give a brief overview of the United Kingdom immigration detention system, along with a methodological note. We present and discuss our empirical findings, triangulating them with secondary sources and organising them into sections, reflecting the most salient abusive tactics as these emerge from protagonists' first-hand accounts. In conclusion, we explain how immigration detention, as a tentacle of carceral border regimes, co-constitutes regimes of intersectional violence affecting (trans, cis, intersex, and endosex) women in specific ways, connecting our insights to ongoing discussions on border abolition feminism (Cowan et al. 2024).

Intersectional Continuums of Violence: An Abolition Feminist Framework

As highlighted by Bosworth (2023), the United Kingdom immigration detention system is an authoritarian political tool shaped by a racist ideology (see also Longazel et al. 2016). Whilst detention and deportation measures are portrayed as "neutral," based on the idea that law is race-blind, people subject to detention powers are racialised as "law-breaking" migrants, enabling their abuse and exploitation in this more contemporary articulation of carcerality (Davis 1997).

Taking a step further and adding gender to the analysis of this system's workings and effects, we argue that the violence and harms produced by detention are not only racist in their nature³ but also co-constitutive of gendered violence. In doing so, we align with other critical scholars who have emphasised how race and class histories significantly structure the ways gender and sexual identities are produced, contested, and sanctioned at the border (Luibhéid 1998). Particularly, we elucidate the specific modalities in which this happens in the context of immigration detention.

Whilst much of the literature has highlighted the various forms of pain, deprivations, and humiliation experienced by people in immigration detention (e.g., Gashi et al. 2021; Longazel et al. 2016), feminist critical scholars have demonstrated that the UK's increasingly punitive immigration law and policy landscape extends and compounds the continuum of intersectional violence experienced by women rather than ensuring their "protection" (Canning 2017, 2020; see also Esposito 2021; Cowan et al. 2024). We build on these critical insights, and on the acknowledgement of the political nature of pain in detention (Bosworth 2023), to develop our abolition feminist analysis of the intersectional violence of the UK immigration detention regime. To do so, we utilise the *Intimate Partner Violence and State Violence Power and Control Wheel* designed by Chicago-based abolition feminist Monica Cosby (2020), a framework previously employed to demonstrate that "prison is gender violence" (Davis et al. 2022:114–115) (see Fig. 1).

³ We are here relying on Stuart Hall and colleagues' (amongst others) notion that "race is the modality through which class is lived and experienced" (Hall et al. 2013: 394).



Fig. 1 Monica Cosby's *Intimate Partner Violence and State Violence Power and Control Wheel*, illustrated by Sarah Ross. Note Published by permission of Sarah Ross

Cosby's Wheel expands the Power and Control Wheel developed in the early 1980s by Ellen Pence, Michael Paymar, and Coral McDonald, highlighting the continuity between intimate forms of violence and the violence enacted by state-corporate powers. As Cosby elucidates:

If there is anybody out there who has never been in prison, but understands violent relationships, it is the same. Just because he (the guard) was insulted, he retaliated against us, and I ended up in solitary (confinement). It just kind of clicked. And I think it had been knocking around in my head for a while that what was happening to me inside (the prison) was what happens in violent relationships. (Davis et al. 2022:115)

Cosby's analysis demonstrates how the Power and Control Wheel, which emerged from first-hand accounts of women survivors of domestic violence, captures the varied modes in which state-corporate violence is enacted on the bodies of imprisoned women, thus pointing to the inappropriateness of carceral responses and the harms they (re)produce.

We use this framework to make sense of immigration detention as a form of carcerality predicated on the criminalisation of bodies marked by the intersection of race, class, and gender, as well as citizenship and immigration status (see also, Damsa and Franko 2023). Importantly, our analysis illuminates how immigration detention fundamentally perpetuates a system of racist-gendered abuse (Bhatia 2023), which, from the perspective of the women we met, is perceived as reproducing forms of gendered violence they experience outside of detention walls. This approach, which connects intimate/interpersonal and institutional/state violence, ultimately challenges state punitive responses masked as a form of protection (Davis et al. 2022; Lembe 2013). Importantly, it points to how border and detention regimes critically work to perpetuate and exacerbate the continuum of intersectional violence experienced and resisted by those governed as migrants, and as such should be abolished.

Immigration Detention in the UK

At the time of writing (August 2023), the United Kingdom immigration detention system encompassed immigration removal centres (IRCs), (residential) short-term holding facilities (STHFs), pre-departure accommodations (PDAs), and holding rooms at ports, airports, and reporting centres (Silverman et al. 2022). Notably, people can be detained in prison under immigration powers. Whilst most custodial sites are designed for both men and women, according to a gender binary logic, the majority of those within them are classified as men. In November 2021, a women-only detention centre, Derwentside IRC, opened in county Durham (North of England), replacing Yarl's Wood (South of England), the sole detention site for women since 2001.

In the year ending March 2023, 20,416 people entered detention; this is a downward trend compared to the peak in 2015 when 32,400 people were detained, but an upward trend compared to 2020 and 2021 (Home Office 2023a).⁴ Men represent between 81 and 94% of those detained, with the smallest share (2%) of women and girls recorded in 2021.⁵ It is worth noting that the Home Office (2023b) reports only a few individuals as "unknown" in terms of gender (one, two, six, respectively, in 2021, 2022, and 2023), probably using this label for those who do not fit into cisgender institutional logics of classification. However, the number of transgender and gender nonconforming individuals entrapped in this system is likely higher, as detained people are usually forced into gender-binary categories for detention statistics.

Most women entering the UK detention system come from Nigeria, Brazil, China, India, Pakistan, United States, Romania, Eritrea, Jamaica, and Ghana (Fig. 2). This evidence strongly suggests the system is designed to target racialised bodies, particularly those marked by colour lines, exposing its inherent racist nature. In addition to being fewer in numbers, women tend to be detained for shorter periods—although most are still locked up for up to 28 days (Silverman et al. 2022). Some women are taken from prison sites after serving their sentence, often having also spent a period of imprisonment under

⁴ These data do not include people detained in so-called holding rooms.

⁵ This is related to the rising detention of individuals arriving by small boats crossing the English Channel; in 2021, 83% of these were men.

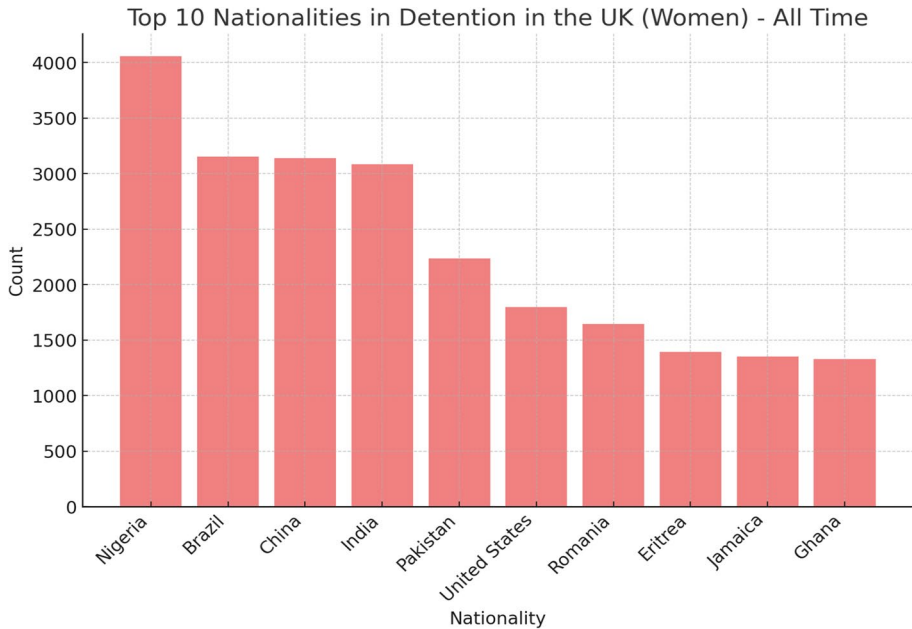


Fig. 2 Nationalities of women in UK immigration detention, as recorded in detention statistics (2010–2023) (Home Office 2023b). *Note* (Thanks to Oxford Migration Observatory and Jason MacKillen for data analysis.)

immigration powers.⁶ Others are arrested at ports of entry for entering the country without documentation or during in-country immigration controls, often in the form of immigration raids, when they overstayed their visa or violated its terms. Many women are also apprehended at immigration reporting centres while awaiting or appealing decisions on their asylum claims. Women seeking asylum who arrive in the UK by crossing the English Channel by boat can also be detained.

Regardless of their different backgrounds and pathways, most women in detention are survivors of gendered violence, including sexual, domestic, and/or reproductive violence (Girma et al. 2014, 2015; Lousley and Cope 2017). Many have sought asylum in the UK at some point in their trajectory (Silverman et al. 2020; 2021; 2022), but their experiences were not acknowledged as grounds for protection. Contrary to recommendations (Shaw 2016), in the UK pregnant women can also be detained, for up to 72 h (IMB 2023; FOI 72097/2022 and FOI 74035/2022).⁷

The fact that detained women constitute a ‘minority’ among those subject to detention has often rendered them invisible (Bosworth and Kellezi 2014; Esposito et al. 2020; Lousley 2020), making it crucial to examine the ways detention impacts their lives.

⁶ Some of these women were born and/or brought up in Britain but are not recognised as citizens.

⁷ Thanks to Claire Mullany of End Deportation Belfast for these FOI requests.

Methodological Notes

This article is the outcome of several research projects and activist engagements *vis-à-vis* the UK detention system. These projects included 50 interviews of varying lengths conducted by Francesca and Teresa, both within and outside detention facilities, with people with lived experience of detention, visitors, activists, legal and medical practitioners, and some detention officers.⁸ For the purpose of this article, we only used interviews with women with lived experience (n=30; 2 trans women and 28 cis women) and advocates, including visitors, activists and legal workers (n=20). This empirical material, collected between 2019 and 2023, is complemented by experiential knowledge gained through the authors' grassroots solidarity experiences and Aminata's first-hand experience of detention. To substantiate our main argument, we incorporate secondary sources, encompassing statistics and reports produced by monitoring bodies (HMP 2018a, b, 2021, 2023; IMB 2023) and activist groups (BWARP and WAR 2015; Girma et al. 2014, 2015; W4RW 2023).

We draw on this body of evidence, especially on protagonists' powerful accounts of everyday life in detention, to illuminate the intersectional regimes of violence at play in these sites of confinement and show how they impinge on women's lives from the "bottom-up" (Lykes and van der Merwe 2019). In doing so, we wish to acknowledge our positionalities and the standpoint from which we engage in this analysis, as part of our broader commitment to anti-detention and no-border struggles. While Teresa and Francesca, as white Italian cis women, have personally navigated the precariousness of migration (Teresa) and the scrutiny associated with immigration control regimes in post-Brexit Britain (Francesca), they are acutely aware of the privileges afforded by their whiteness, European citizenship, and academic affiliations. By interrogating and reorienting these privileges, they construct their work as scholar activists and strive to build solidarities with those at the sharp end of carceral border regimes. On the other hand, Aminata, as a Black African cis woman engaged in community-based work with first-hand experience of detention, has a different positionality. Her activist research work is shaped by her proximity to those resisting detention from within and by the value of her personal experience as a source of critical insight into the system. Below, we present the key findings derived from the analysis of our data, which was guided by Cosby's *Intimate Partner Violence and State Violence Power and Control Wheel* (Davis et al. 2022). Given space constraints, we highlight the most salient abusive tactics as they emerged from women's first-hand accounts: emotional abuse; intimidation and stalking; coercion and threats; economic abuse; minimising, denying and blaming; and, finally, isolation.

⁸ As part of her postdoctoral research, Francesca conducted fieldwork in the women's short-stay unit at Colnbrook and Yarl's Wood (2019), when the latter was the primary facility for detaining women in the UK. She then conducted interviews with women with experiences of detention, inside and outside detention sites, and with NGO members, visitors, and anti-detention activists (2019-2020). Teresa conducted semi-structured interviews with supporters affiliated with the UK-wide AVID network during the first Covid-19 lockdown (summer 2020) and interviewed key informants in Northern Ireland for a project on changes in immigration detention after Brexit and Covid-19 (2022-2023).

Everyday Violence of the Immigration Detention Regime

Emotional Abuse

According to Cosby (2020), emotional abuse occurs on a daily basis in prison and is intended to psychologically break women down. It is enacted in a variety of ways, including calling people names, making them feel bad about themselves, humiliating and infantilising them, or making them feel they are crazy. Women in immigration detention identify similar tactics of emotional abuse at play across sites of confinement.

The hyper-regulation of life, characteristic of total institutions (Goffman 1961), has been highlighted as a significant mechanism through which those detained are controlled and abused, adding to the prison-like atmosphere, poor living conditions, and lack of privacy, activities, and stimulation experienced inside these sites (Coffey et al. 2010, Esposito et al. 2019a; Peterie 2018). Notably, the sense of loss of control over one's own life is acknowledged as an important determinant of one's wellness (Marmot 2004:2). Autonomy is systematically violated in immigration detention to the point where in some facilities, like Larne (STHF, Northern Ireland), women do not have dedicated space for social and religious activities (HMP 2018a:10, 2021:44). Reports highlight how, in some centres, women are denied safety and privacy, as they are always mixed with men. One of our interviewees, Wendy, said:⁹

The centre does not have a proper space for women who may come from different cultures, and may have different needs from men...that is also true for some gay people who may not want to share their room with [cis heterosexual] men. (Wendy, advocate)

In their conversations with us, women frequently described the psychological impact of not being able to decide when to wake up or go to sleep, or when and what to eat. Feeding practices in detention are commonly perceived as dehumanising, leading to frequent protests around food-related issues (Bosworth 2023; Carney 2013; Peterie 2022). The spectrum of food-related abuses includes staff neglecting women's requests for sufficient food, the provision of inedible, spoiled, or uncooked food, and a disregard for religious dietary restrictions. "Food is political," Aminata emphasised in a recent discussion on abolitionist care at the 2023 Lisbon Feminist No Borders Summer School, and "food in detention is rubbish." As eating is steeped in power, food can be used as a tool to discipline and abuse. At the same time, it can become a locus of resistance and solidarity: this is why protests in detention are often organised around food (Carney 2013; Peterie 2022).

Overall, women stressed how/that the hyper-regulation of life in detention infantilised and therefore degraded them. Hope recalled:

I was treated like a child. Yeah, I have to sleep at their time, when they want me to sleep, I have to sleep, I cannot sleep at my own time. Sometimes, they will just barge in my door, they're just like, when I want to go into my children's room, I will just go there and do what I have to, or, or call them, the, "Come, come, it's time up, you have to go to school". (Hope, Southern Africa, detained at Yarl's Wood)

Women are forced to yield to the rules and regulations of the detention system; if they refuse to do so, they are labelled "troublemakers" and punished (see "Coercion and

⁹ All participants' names are pseudonyms and identifying information has been removed.

threats"). The infantilisation women endure can be effective in exerting disciplinary control (Foucault 1995[1975]), or mortifying the self (Goffman 1961), whilst also causing harm comparable to the use of physical force, if not more profound (see also Sykes 1958; Longazel et al. 2016). However, women's infantilisation and humiliation here hold political significance, directly tied to the role of these institutions as dense points for articulating the nation-state's exclusionary politics of belonging. As Aminata observed when we were discussing our data:

It is like when detention staff manipulated women to participate in sport activities by telling them that if they didn't, it would be flagged against them, which would send a message to the Home Office that they can't "integrate" within the detention community, let alone the broader community.

These abusive and subjugating mechanisms effectively become integral components of the exclusion women face within the broader community. Furthermore, the detention system is designed to instil women a sense that they deserve such degrading treatment, echoing patterns observed in intimate partner violence. This mechanism shifts the responsibility of the violence onto those who are abused and is often internalised by detention survivors, leading to feelings of guilt due to their status as illegalised and, therefore, detainable (and deportable) non-citizens. Mayumi noted:

Yeah, we know that they got their policies here. They are the authority in here. We know that. But, they should...have this hearth as well, you know compassion to us... give us a chance, a chance to prove ourselves. Our worth in here. You know? That's the only thing. (Mayumi, Southeast Asia, detained at Yarl's Wood)

State control and state neglect are two sides of the same coin; in both instances, the lack of regard for people's subjectivity and emotions serves as a means to wield power over them—A power that is not only due to their being detained but also, perhaps most crucially, to the fact that they do not belong and are ultimately unwelcome. It is not surprising, then, that the majority of the women we spoke with felt no one really cared about them. As Bertha emphasised, "I think they don't care about our life here... That's my personal feeling. I've been hurt every single day here, you know" (Bertha, Central Africa, detained at Yarl's Wood).

Importantly, women like Bertha, who was a survivor of domestic violence, connected these abuses to their previous experiences of gendered violence in interpersonal and intimate realms. As Hope poignantly articulated in her interview:

That's how we are treated [in detention], and therefore, when you are being abused, the men abuses you, he makes you like, feel like you, like you are nobody, and you know, as a woman, you, you cannot raise a hand to a man. A man is strong, so you become powerless, there's nothing you can do. So, Yarl's Wood is more or less the same thing. (Hope, Southern Africa, detained at Yarl's Wood)

Intimidation and Stalking

Intimidation and stalking are key tactics of perpetrators of domestic violence. Cosby (2020) identifies these mechanisms at play in prison settings, used here by state actors and private contractors working alongside them. These mechanisms include conducting cell and strip searches and displaying weapons, amongst others.

In the case of immigration detention, a specific mode of intimidation stems from the administrative nature of this form of imprisonment and the discretionary power granted to the Home Office. Women are consistently apprehensive that anything they may do or say to assert their rights could be weaponised against them. Mayumi, who had been verbally assaulted by a male immigration officer—an experience that reactivated her memories of past abuses (see “Coercion and Threats”)—recalled: “My brain is keep on telling me complain, complain, complain. But I’m thinking my subconscious [is] saying that it will not work out or it will affect your future application, this application” (Mayumi, Southeast Asia, detained at Yarl’s Wood).

This evidence underscores how abuse in these sites fits into a continuum of intersectional violence that women experience at the hands of different actors, encompassing both intimate/interpersonal and state/institutional domains. An illustrative example is the abusive practice known as “knock and walks,” documented by many¹⁰ (BWRAP and WAR 2015; Girma et al. 2014, 2015; Lousley and Cope 2017). This involves male detention staff entering women’s rooms without knocking first, or without waiting for a response. In discussions of the data, Aminata also emphasised that male staff in detention routinely search women’s belongings, both upon their entry into the centre and during their confinement. Having their personal possessions searched, including intimate items such as underwear and sanitary towels, is perceived by women as a sexualised invasion, reactivating past experiences of gendered abuse.

When sharing their experiences with us, detention survivors mentioned the practice of being placed under “constant supervision”, also known as suicide watch, as particularly abusive, especially since male staff are often in charge of controlling them (Girma et al. 2014, 2015). As activist groups point out, “strip searching and suicide watch are used to harass and sexually humiliate” women in detention (BWRAP and WAR 2015:2). In 2016, the Home Office¹¹ stipulated that “constant supervision” of women should always be undertaken by female staff, but this stipulation is often ignored.

During her confinement in Yarl’s Wood, Adiza’s roommate drank liquid soap and was subsequently placed under “constant supervision.” This took a toll on Adiza too, as they shared a room. The door was constantly opened, and Adiza said her privacy and dignity were violated. She commented: “If you want to go in the bathroom you need to take all your stuff with you. I felt it was a breach of privacy” (Adiza, West Africa, detained at Yarl’s Wood). Further evidence of the continuation of this practice appeared in a recent report on Derwentside; in this case, a male staff member was tasked with the “constant supervision” of a woman whose triggers for self-harm included the presence of men (HMP 2023:21). Overall, the evidence underlines how women can feel intimidated and sometimes stalked by detention officers and how this racist gendered violence is ingrained in the everyday operations of detention centres.

Coercion and Threats

Coercion and threats are mechanisms used in both abusive domestic relationships and prison settings. In the former case, perpetrators threaten to harm their partners (physically and psychologically, in family, social, or work spheres), someone they care about, or even

¹⁰ In their 2017 report, *Women for Refugee Women* (Lousley and Cope 2017:28) found that 18 of the 26 women they talked to had experienced “knock and walks” in detention.

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/women-in-detention>

themselves. In the latter case, coercion and threats concern the suspension of visits, reduction of activities, and placement in solitary confinement or segregation (Cosby 2020).

Immigration detention has been largely described as “mental torture” (Freedom from Torture & SOAS Centre for Human Rights Law 2019), and immigration detention centres as “torturing environments” (Manek et al. 2022; Pérez-Sales et al. 2023). As Mayumi emphasised, “What is hard for me is the mental aspect (...) I’m so mentally tortured.” This violence operates by instilling in those affected a profound sense of uncertainty and instability (Bosworth 2014; Esposito et al. 2019a; Griffiths 2013; Turnbull 2016). As noted by Wallerstein, the “lack of control over destiny produces a susceptibility to ill-health for people who live in high demand or chronically marginalised situations and who lack adequate resources, supports, or abilities to exert control over their lives” (1992:202). Immigration detention in the UK has no statutory upper time limit, leaving women unaware of how long their confinement will last and creating a pervasive sense of uncertainty. This uncertainty, which works to torture and exhaust people, is amplified by not knowing one’s future and whether or not they will be deported; for many women, indeed, deportation means being forced back into a context of gendered harm in which their life may be at risk (Esposito et al. 2019b).

Many women we met described the experience of being told about their deportation as profoundly traumatic, a response verified by Aminata who spent time at Yarl’s Wood. In Hope’s words: “The sort of men I can be taken to, is that man that abused me, you know? It... it drives you crazy” (Hope, Southern Africa, detained at Yarl’s Wood). The threat of deportation usually brought back memories of past abuse, compounding the mental anguish endured during detention. Some women also reported instances of racial abuse by officers handling their immigration cases, intensifying the harm experienced in these settings. Mayumi said the following:

I’m thinking he is so bully. He is racist to me.... And I’m so frightened, really frightened of him. Yesterday, I’ve seen, I’ve seen him. I was...starting again. The palpitation, the panic attack...every time I see him, I was hiding on beside the television. I’ve seen really, I’ve seen my abuser in him. Even it’s D. J., but I’ve seen J. P., the name of that abuser. (Mayumi, Southeast Asia, detained at Yarl’s Wood)

The prevalence of racist and sexist abuse has been documented in activist (BWARP and WAR 2015) and monitoring reports (IBM 2023). These reports overall evidence that coercion and threats against women in detention are frequently sexualized, highlighting also the disproportionate use of force against Black women.

The experience of trans women merits separate mention, as coercion and threats against them take specific forms (Anderson 2010; Human Rights Watch 2016; Vogler and Rosales 2023). When we asked Sonia if she could continue taking hormones during detention, she said the following:

Sonia: Because they need prescription, prescription paper from doctor. But I don’t have, because in [anonymised] I can buy hormone and take....I ask them, can I get hormone from my friend? They said no. We’re not allowed to...to get the hormone.

Francesca: I mean, can you stay without the hormones? It’s not, I mean, problematic?

Sonia: I don’t know. It’s like my hairs grow quick. My hair. But...my skin dry if I don’t take. (Sonia, Southeast Asia, detained at Yarl’s Wood)

Sonia's experience is, unfortunately, not rare (Human Rights Watch 2016; Vogler and Rosales 2023). It reveals how the racist-gendered violence constitutive of the detention regime impacts trans women in very specific ways.

Economic Abuse

In Cosby's framework, economic abuse, usually present in coercive relationships, takes the form of exploitative labour and extortionate commissary prices and controls over how women access and spend money within prison settings. Women in immigration detention are subject to similar forms of economic abuse.

The management of UK detention sites is contracted out to private entities. Transnational companies such as Mitie, Serco, G4S, and Geo generate between 20 and 40% of their profits through these custodial sites (Burnett 2022; Corporate Watch 2018; Longazel et al. 2016). For example, Mitie Care & Custody, which operated Derwentside until recently, signed a 10-year contract with the Home Office in May, valued at approximately £525 million (Mitie 2017).

Managing companies may turn a large profit, but people in immigration detention experience severe deprivation and exploitation. As noted by Aminata, the daily allowance provided to detained women is minimal (£0.89 per day and £5 per week as of recent rulings *R (Badmus) v. Secretary of State for the Home Department*, [2020] EWHC civ. 657:2), and private companies further profit by selling essential items at a price between two and seven times greater than in ordinary shops (University of Leeds 2023). Furthermore, those in detention who perform jobs for these companies are paid well below the minimum wage. In Derwentside, for instance, women receive just £1 an hour (IMB 2023), similar to other detention centres (occasionally £1.25 for "special activities"). At the same time, the Home Office "retains the power to exclude detained individuals from paid work if they do not comply with immigration processes" (IMB 2023:22) or exhibit disruptive behaviours, thus using jobs as a disciplinary means to coerce compliance with the system.

Overall, the detention regime, with its economic pressures, is bound to differentially impact people with different means. The women we met found themselves entangled in a distressing cycle of economic strain and emotional burden, often having the responsibility to provide for their families and children. This highlights the role of class histories in determining who is liable to become ensnared by carceral border regimes (Luibheid 1998), as well as in shaping the forms and mode through which power operates in detention sites.

A specific economic pressure detained women face is that of legal assistance. Accessing legal aid is usually challenging because of funding constraints, limited availability, and strict eligibility criteria (Wilding 2022). These challenges influence people's decision to return to their countries of origin, even if they have built a life in the UK. Maganda explained:

I don't have that much money to spend for the solicitor (...) Of course I've been here [in the UK] for a long time. It's difficult to go back again and start from zero, but I think this is the best decision that they have other than fighting, because my solicitor said it's 50 50 chance [of winning the case]. So, I said, I don't wanna gamble and having debts to my friends for the money, you know. (Maganda, Southeast Asia, detained at Yarl's Wood)

Like Maganda, many of the women we met in detention were troubled by economic constraints, and these significantly influenced the outcomes of their cases. For example, Sofía, whom Francesca met in late 2022, was asked to pay around £300 to return to her home country in Latin America after being detained at Derwentside. Sofía agreed to pay, partly because she wanted to get out of detention and reunite with her daughter and partly because the conversations she had with on-site immigration officers led her to understand this would allow her to return earlier to the UK (Francesca's fieldnotes, December). The length of a re-entry ban can vary depending on how long individuals have overstayed, whether they received a deportation order, or if they choose to leave the UK "voluntarily," paying for their deportation flight (Home Office 2021). This highlights, firstly, the coercive conditions under which women in these settings decide to "voluntarily return," and secondly, how deportation, similar to detention, is a strategy employed by the state and its corporate allies to extort people's money and further plunge them into poverty. This is how the border-industrial complex sustains itself.

Minimising, Denying, and Blaming

Minimising, denying, and blaming are other abusive tactics used to exercise power in coercive relationships. According to Cosby, in prison, these tactics materialise in various ways, including framing women's incarceration as being for "their own good" and retaliating against them for making grievances (Davis et al. 2022:179). Similar forms of abuse take place in immigration detention. Adiza, for instance, explained:

The whole system is rooted in disbelieving people. The moment you seek asylum is a whole moment of disbelief...I don't think the Home Office believes anyone, as they have been programmed to ignore what people say and just go for what is on paper in front of them. It is always not enough for them what you provide as a proof. (Adiza, West Africa, detained at Yarl's Wood)

Women with experiences of gendered violence, the vast majority of those in detention (see Girma et al. 2014, 2015), are usually not believed by UK immigration officers. As Abji observes, "The claim that women are lying moves from 'lying about sexual violence' to 'lying about one's status' as a refugee" (2018:509), elucidating the complex ways gendered and racialised violence intertwine in these women's lives. Even in rare cases where immigration authorities acknowledge women's experiences of gendered and sexualized harm, they still presume, much like an abusive partner, to know what is best for them, viewing women as incapable of making judgments for themselves. As Hope explained, according to the Home Office, she could return to her country and only needed to change cities to be safe from the violence of her abuser. She told us:

They said they, they, they believe from my scars, from my story, they looked around it, and they believe I was a victim of torture. And the, but they cannot...I don't qualify for humanitarian protection, something like that, here, they refused it. (Hope, Southern Africa, detained at Yarl's Wood)

Whilst detained, the claims and needs of women continue to be minimised and disregarded; this is particularly evident in the realm of health issues. Numerous sources have highlighted the culture of disbelief and neglect amongst healthcare staff and detention personnel. The 2019 Home Affairs Committee report, for instance, noted that a woman detained in Yarl's Wood "was at risk of losing her eyesight," as she was already "blind in

one eye, and if left untreated for any short amount of time risked in order to ensure grammatical accuracy going blind in the other” (2019:77), Despite this situation being brought to the attention of the staff, the necessary medical treatment was not provided promptly. It is very common, as Aminata also emphasised, that when women express their health concerns, their statements are assumed to be untrue.

The minimisation of women’s lives by the detention system is also evident in the way they are moved across the country, from one centre to another, with total disrespect for their contacts, relationships, or the toll that this forced movement takes on them (IMB 2023). Overall, women are “routinely subjected to much longer and more frequent journeys than men” (IMB 2023:13). In many cases, detained women are moved back and forth from the South (Heathrow IRC) to the North (Derwentside IRC), sometimes stopping half-way (Manchester RSTHF), a journey of about 300 miles, taking approximately six hours in escorts’ vans (IMB 2023:13–14). Most such journeys take place overnight and do not appear to be based on any reasonable planning. Often this forced displacement means women can no longer be supported by local solidarity groups, as Yumi underlined:

She [detained woman]’d been moved; it was really difficult for bail because if she had stayed here she could be supported by organisations like [anonymised].... Had she been in the jurisdiction we would have gotten an address but because she was physically in another one we couldn’t then get a bail address....She was extremely vulnerable....she needed help and she just didn’t get it. (Yumi, advocate)

The systematic devaluing of women’s lives is evident in deportations as well. For example, Monica had just completed a short prison sentence and was about to be sent back to her country of origin, in East Asia, where she had last been 14 years earlier. Amy, as part of her solidarity work, asked authorities to look for Monica’s belongings. As Amy later recalled:

They [the prison staff] couldn’t find anything. So they couldn’t give me her phone... I couldn’t get a mobile phone for a girl that would have made her life so much... a thousand times better, going to her country of origin...because she could have contacted people she knew in [anonymised] with her phone. (Amy, advocate)

Beyond discarding and expelling her, the system had completely erased any trace of Monica’s existence.

Isolation

For Cosby, isolation functions as a fundamental mechanism in abusive intimate relationships, leaving women vulnerable by restricting, if not completely erasing, their family and social networks. Isolation is also a critical tactic in prison settings, achieved, amongst other means, through the supervision of prisoners’ communications (visits, telephone, email) and the implementation of solitary confinement (Davis et al. 2022:179). Similarly, it is an integral part of the immigration detention system.

Women who are detained under immigration powers are uprooted from their communities—where they may have lived for years, built projects, and forged affective ties—and locked up in remote places, making contact difficult. As Mayumi painfully expressed: “[It is] two months and two days now that I’m here (...) At first I was so so lonely (...) It’s not sinking in, you know it. I mean, I’m still in limbo” (Mayumi, Southeast Asia, detained at Yarl’s Wood). Based on this deliberate and intense isolation, some survivors interpret

immigration detention as a form of state-sanctioned kidnapping (see also Bosworth 2023). The situation is especially dire in isolated centres, such as Derwentside, where the combination of poor communications infrastructure and the remoteness of the facility significantly disrupts women's family/social connections, as well as their access to legal advice (IBM 2023:6). As Jasmine, whose account is reported by Crosby Medicott (2022), observed talking about her experience: "It was in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by tall trees, with high gates. It felt like they wanted to kidnap us." Overall, as Angela Davis (1998) powerfully put it, detention centres "disappear human beings."

The practice of confiscating women's mobile phones upon entering detention exacerbates this isolation, heightening the women's vulnerability to the system's violence. Alternative phones provided by private contractors lack cameras and sufficient credit (authors' experience). Without personal mobile phones, detained women cannot access their contacts' numbers, nor can they be reached from the outside. Furthermore, they are deprived of any items they may have stored on their devices, deepening the divide between the inside and outside world. Another problem emphasised in centres like Derwentside is that the SIM cards provided do not allow calls to Africa, exacerbating the impact on women who have family and friends there (IMB 2023:16). This further illuminates the anti-Black racism ingrained in the day-to-day operations of the detention system.

People in detention are deprived of other personal belongings (HMP 2018a, 2021) too. Whether arrested unexpectedly whilst reporting, or in other circumstances, in most cases, women are not allowed to collect their clothes and personal items before being taken to detention centres, even if they are later deported (author's experience). Isolation is also exacerbated by the fact that most information in detention is conveyed in English, intensifying the powerlessness and alienation of women who do not speak or understand the language well.¹² In many centres, legal advice—supposedly available for everyone under the Detained Duty Advice Scheme (DDAS)—is predominantly offered through phone consultations (IMB 2023; UK Parliament 2023; W4RW 2023). Relying on phone communication for such a crucial activity has a significant impact on women's cases, as it limits mutual understanding, especially for those for whom English is not their first language.¹³ These information/communication barriers constitute an intrinsic part of the violent architecture of immigration detention.

An additional mechanism of isolation through which women are punished is euphemistically called "separation" (see Rules 40 "Removal from association" and 42 "Temporary confinement", Detention Centre Rules 2001 [Home Office 2001]). As many have highlighted (e.g., Medical Justice 2015), this is a form of segregation within the already segregating environment of detention. As Aminata recalled:

Someone who is outspoken easily becomes a target for them [detention officers]. And then they develop these mechanisms to silence you. Sometimes they may say, "You are causing troubles" and take you to an isolation room, where you are separated from the rest of the community of detained women. Even to get food they bring it to you there....

Women who are isolated are often those who actively engage in protests and acts of resistance within the centres: in other words, those marked as "troublemakers." During our fieldwork, we encountered several women who were targeted with "separation" due to their

¹² This is further exacerbated by the fact that translation services are mostly available by phone, which limit the possibility of disclosure.

¹³ Translation services are not available by phone.

outspoken nature and their efforts in assisting others to fight deportation, a common form of collective solidarity and resistance in detention (Esposito et al., 2019b). Isolation is also a tactic used to facilitate smooth deportations (IMB 2023:15).

As highlighted by Medical Justice, “despite repeated damning critique from HM Inspectorates of Prisons (HMP) and Independent Monitoring Boards (IMB), the over use and misuse of segregation continues in IRCs across the UK” (2015:1). This highlights a disturbing reality where a significant number of people (men, women, gender nonconforming people) are institutionally abused and tortured. Segregation extends and compounds previous experiences of interpersonal violence women in detention have endured, reinforcing the continuity between intimate/interpersonal and institutional/state violence in their lives. Bertha commented:

Sometimes they’re [detention staff] walking in the night-time with keys, that reminding me of my past when I was broken inside the room you know. (...) sometimes I can’t sleep at the night-time because it’s like it’s bringing me in my past, so. (Bertha, Central Africa, detained at Yarl’s Wood)

Conclusive Notes

This article elucidates how immigration detention affects the bodies of “those who travel under the sign *women*” (Ahmed 2017, p. 14), constituting a dense point where violence is predicated at the intersection of race, class, and gender, as well as citizenship and immigration status (Damso & Franko, 2023). Drawing on abolitionist feminist analyses, especially critical frameworks emphasising the intertwined and mutually constitutive relationships of intimate/interpersonal and institutional/state violence (Cosby 2020; Crenshaw 2012; Davis et al. 2022), we illuminate the processes by which the state and its corporate allies establish detention regimes that perpetrate daily abuse.

Triangulating interviews, field observations, and experiential evidence with secondary sources, we applied Monica Cosby’s (2020) *Intimate Partner Violence and State Violence Power and Control Wheel* to expose the prevalent abusive tactics at play in UK detention centres. This analysis positions (trans, cis, intersex, and endosex) women’s first-hand experiences of detention and the rich insights derived from them at the core of understanding these systems and their lived effects.

The main tactics which emerged from our analysis include emotional abuse, intimidation and stalking, coercion and threats, economic abuse, minimising, denying and blaming, and, finally, isolation. We do not interpret these mechanisms and their lived effects on women through the ‘pain of imprisonment’ framework (Sykes 1958), thus adding to an ever-expanding list of pains (Gashi et al. 2021; Haggerty and Bucerusius 2020; Longazel et al. 2016), nor do we emphasise the distinctiveness of violence in these contemporary total institutions (Goffman 1961; see also, Bull et al. 2012; Fernández de la Reguera 2022; Peterie 2018). Instead, we conceptualise the multiple forms of abuse in detention as part of a continuum of violence, systematically and structurally generated.

Through these tactics, the state and its corporate allies co-constitute racialised, gendered, sexualised, and class-based subjects as detainable (and deportable), and subject them to everyday institutional violence legitimised in the name of their alleged status as illegalised, and therefore expellable, non-citizens. Importantly, in the case of women, as our analysis demonstrates, this violence is directly linked to the abuse they experienced in intimate/interpersonal realms, emphasising the inseparability of post-national struggles

against border violence from feminist efforts to combat gendered violence (on this point, see Abji 2018). In other words, women's accounts show how gendered, class-based, and racist violence are co-constituted through immigration detention specifically, and carceral border regimes more broadly. They also highlight how this violence is part of a wider mechanism by which exclusionary politics of nation-state belonging are organised.

As observed by Crenshaw, "there is not one way in which racially marginalised women are subjected to overlapping patterns of power" (2012:1425). Instead, multiple factors, relations, conditions, institutions, and structures intersect in their lives. This perspective underscores the inherently political nature of the lived experiences of women in detention (see Bosworth 2023), whilst also challenging the binary categorisation of private versus public violence. Ultimately it shows how gendered, class-based, and racist circuits of power converge, structure, and are simultaneously rearticulated through the immigration detention system, which, we argue, fundamentally constitutes a state-manufactured form of racist-gendered abuse (see also Bhatia 2023) against those governed as migrants. In this light, it becomes clear that challenging carceral border regimes cannot but be integral to any feminist struggle to eradicate gender violence for all.

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