

## The Gender Politics of Closing Down Yarl's Wood



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Recent events have brought a measure of media and public attention to the detention of women asylum-seekers being held at Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Center (IRC). Including a **whistleblower**, **sex abuse claims**, and the **cancelled UN inspection**, many on social media are calling to **#ShutDownYarl'sWood** and **#SetHerFree**. A **petition** put forth by Meltem Avcil on **change.org** has, at the time of writing, garnered 46,846 signatures requesting that Home Secretary Theresa May "end the detention of women who seek asylum," drawing on Avcil's experience and that of her mother in Yarl's Wood.

While I find the abuse happening at Yarl's Wood reprehensible, there is something happening in this particular situation that doesn't sit well with me. What is different about Yarl's Wood that merits special attention out of the **11** other IRCs throughout the UK? Abuse has been documented at many (if not all) of them, and the problematic carceral approach to managing asylum-seekers undergirds the entire system. So why Yarl's Wood?

The simple answer is women. Yarl's Wood holds primarily women.



Image credit: [Indymedia UK](#)

But of course answers are rarely that simple!

Here we must recall the political and colonial/neocolonial background of the category "women." Women as a symbol function as political fodder for both the political left and right, as well as for organizations purportedly outside of the political arena. Deploying the category of "woman" elicits a particular affective response from constituents that can be translated into political capital. Further, liberated and empowered women have become a symbol of civilization, modernization, and enlightened consciousness, meaning that those nations/religions/political parties/individuals (etc.) who are not seen to favor the liberation and empowerment of women are the **opposite**: uncivilized and backward. This colonial understanding of temporality (what Anne **McClintock** has

called “anachronistic space”) functions to justify the “civilizing mission” that underpins much of neocolonial development and military interventions. But again, this is not only true abroad: left critiques of conservative parties and policies often employ this same temporal framework. As a political trope carrying significance that stretches far beyond a simple man/woman differentiation, it is important to think through what happens when we invoke “women” in our campaigns for immigration justice.

Sherene Razack (1995), writing about asylum-seeker hearings in Canada, posits that “women’s claims are most likely to succeed when they present themselves as victims of dysfunctional, exceptionally patriarchal cultures and states” (p. 51). This also appears to be true with regard to producing a successful subject for political mobilization. I want to explore this idea by focusing on two particular discursive instances, one in a statement by novelist Zadie Smith and the other in a recent article in the Guardian, both of which rely on a specific understanding of gender. Smith released a **statement** in support of the campaign to shut down Yarl’s Wood, whose “continued existence” she describes as “an offence to liberty.” She further asks how the “illogical” detainment practices reported by the “victims of rape and torture” detained at Yarl’s Wood could happen in a “civilized nation” like Britain. More recently, this **article**, written to remind those at the Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict to remember the survivors of sexual violence being detained at Yarl’s Wood, concluded with the statement: “It’s time to stop locking up rape survivors who come to the UK for safety.”

It is important here to consider what kinds of subjectivities these statements put or hold in place. These raced and classed women (asylum-seeking migrants from the Global South) must be represented as always already vulnerable victims of past abuse that cannot endure being “locked up.” The change.org petition and a **report** by Women for Refugee Women highlight the depression and despair that accompany detainment—but is that only applicable to women? Are men somehow more capable of enduring or dealing with detainment? Fundamentally, is it more acceptable for men to be locked up than women? Could this privileging of Yarl’s Wood in our campaigns work to legitimize the other 11 IRCs? If we focus exclusively on shutting down Yarl’s Wood and ending the detention of women, do we send the message that our primary issue is that women are being detained in IRCs, not that they are detaining people at all? I by no means wish to minimize or trivialize the devastation of rape and torture or the abuses at Yarl’s Wood, but rather to open up new avenues of thinking about our political action and its implications.

Some may see this as a form of Gayatri Chakravorty **Spivak’s** “strategic essentialism,” or strategically embracing identities that we might not actually accept as given or fixed for political reasons. I maintain, however, that there are always exclusions and ramifications to strategies that those employing them cannot control. Implicated here is our enhanced affective response to the plight of a detained woman over a man. Why does it tug at the heartstrings to a greater degree or elicit a more impassioned outcry when we talk about detained women than men? Is it because we understand these women to be weaker, or more in need of help and protection? Also likely at work is a bias toward understanding women (particularly women from the Global South) as passive victims of men’s active violence. A passive victim is more readily represented as noble, virtuous, and thus a subject deserving of our pity and empathy—which is always already a hierarchical relation of power between the more powerful (white, Western) and the less powerful (nonwhite, non-Western) subject.

Representing detained women in these ways to allow for a stronger affective response can indeed produce results—often in the form of viral hashtags. I understand the **viral outcry** against the detention and deportation of Yashika Bageerathi on Twitter (**#FightforYashika**) to be largely due to intersecting gendered discourses such as those described above, in addition to constructions of her as a child and an ideal student—thus both a vulnerable victim in need of our saving hashtags *and* a good or deserving asylum seeker and potential citizen. Despite the fact that Yashika was still detained and deported, it is clear that gendered discourse is a powerful tool in garnering wide public attention and support. But are attention and support stemming from affective responses our primary goal? Are the gains from such a deployment worth the reinforcement of racialized stereotypes of detained women as weak, perpetual victims, and in need of (white) saviors? ^

This approach to representing detained women leaves in place, quite untroubled, dominant binary oppositions of civilized and uncivilized, logical and illogical, liberated and non-liberated. It is implied that Britain inhabits (or *should* inhabit) all of the former characteristics, while others (though unnamed, they are easily understood as the countries the women detained at Yarl's Wood have left) make up the latter. Following Razack (1995) and Audrey Macklin (1995) this functions within the state's interest of representing itself as a civilized and "non-refugee-producing" state, the polar opposite of the other state that produced the refugee at issue. What is interesting here is that these women must *first* be marked as victims of violence in their uncivilized, othered countries of origin, in order to articulate detainment as so pernicious. If a woman has not been the victim of some prior violence, particularly in the Global South, could we still recognize detainment as an "offence to liberty"? This also situates violence against racialized women and incarceration more generally in the UK as exceptional or somehow particularly shocking. But if one looks at patterns of violence and incarceration in the UK as a whole, is it really that surprising?

What follows from this is a much larger critique of the relatively recent carceral turn [1] in neoliberal states as well as an engagement with normalized structural violence against women in the UK. This issue is not one that can be resolved simply by shutting down Yarl's Wood. It is complexly interwoven with issues of race, gender, neocolonialism, neoliberalism, and violence—both physical and discursive. If we agree with Audre Lorde that **the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house**, then we must recognize our own complicity in reinforcing the underlying operators within dominant discourses. Making these processes visible is difficult and complex work, but in order to imagine alternative futures free of detainment and the abuses inherent to carceral approaches to social justice, it is a critique with which we must engage.

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[1] Noah De Lissovoy defines the carceral turn as a "central expression of neoliberal culture" and more specifically "the tendency toward authoritarianism and punishment in the state and civil society" (p. 740). See also: Angela Davis, 2003; David Goldberg, 2008; Julia Sudbury, 2002; and Loïc Wacquant, 2009, among others.

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