



gender action for peace and security

GAPS Network statement in response to the Home Secretary's announcement of new UK asylum and returns policy

The asylum and returns policy announced by the Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood marks a deeply concerning shift in the UK's approach to refugee protection. At a time of rising global conflict and instability, the Government has chosen to withdraw protection to those most vulnerable, continuing the hostile environment and failing to provide moral and political leadership. The proposals focus on restricting rights rather than ensuring safety and protection. Measures include limiting refugee support; withholding indefinite settled status for 20 years; removing automatic family reunification; replacing the duty to support destitute asylum seekers with discretionary power; ending hotel accommodation and moving people to large-scale sites including military bases; exploring third-country transfers for people with refused claims; removing long-term support for families and imposing annual cap on arrivals. These changes will cause serious harm to people fleeing persecution and weaken the international system of shared responsibility.

Women seeking asylum already face heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence, on their journey, and including when they arrive into the UK. The proposals do nothing to address these risks and instead increase the likelihood of further harm. This directly contradicts the UK's commitments under the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict initiative (PSVI), where the Home Office holds obligations to prevent gender-based violence, support survivors, and meet the needs of women and girls. Twenty-five years after United Nations Resolution 1325, such policy incoherence between domestic and international commitments is deeply troubling.

Although the Government states it will continue to provide refuge through safe and legal routes, the UK currently offers only extremely limited pathways – currently primarily for Ukrainians. Even these schemes have been inconsistent, slow, and difficult to access, leaving many people at risk. There is no commitment to expanding safer routes and people fleeing conflicts are left with no viable option other than make risky journeys to claim asylum, a system that the Government is simultaneously weakening.

These reforms come as the Government reduces its own capacity to address root causes, including through cut to overseas Development Assistance and reductions in conflict-resolution expertise within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The UK cannot meaningfully address forced migration while weakening its role and tools in preventing conflict and instability.

By drawing on approaches in other European countries, the policy contributes to a worrying 'race to the bottom' in the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. These reforms entrench an exclusionary approach, risk breaching the UK's legal obligations, and deny protection to those most in need.

GAPS urges the Government to move away from this hostile direction and uphold an asylum system consistent with its international obligations. The UK must uphold its international commitments and global responsibility and ensure that women, girls, and all people fleeing conflict and persecution can access safety and protection.