Women's challenges and gender inequality implications in the UK Home Office's streamlined asylum process: A practice-based posthuman perspective

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Women's challenges and gender inequality implications in the UK Home Office's streamlined asylum process: A practice-based posthuman perspective

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Abstract

This conceptual article scrutinises the challenges faced by women seeking asylum in the United Kingdom, focusing on the impact of the Home Office's streamlined asylum process. Despite mention of gender-based issues in official guidelines, the system exhibits hostility and inadequacy in addressing the unique obstacles women encounter. Through a posthuman, practice-based theoretical framework, the article examines recent gender-based concerns raised about the Home Office's use of questionnaires, machine translation, and informal linguistic assistance in lieu of interpreted asylum interviews for selected nationalities. It also highlights the implications of technologisation and bureaucratisation on linguistic access, arguing that the revised asylum-seeking process not only reinforces women's marginalised position but also diminishes crucial resources like interpreting, in turn contributing to gendered power asymmetries between asylum seekers and the justice system. The article contends that this approach transfers the burden of language understanding to women, contributing to a climate of sociomaterial exclusion that curtails the rights of female asylum seekers to be adequately heard.

1. Introduction

Women fleeing human rights abuses and seeking asylum in the United Kingdom is a well-established phenomenon (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR 2015). Although gender-based claims are acknowledged in the Home Office's asylum-seeking guidelines (UK Home Office 2018), asylum-seeking women encounter distinctive obstacles in a system which is particularly hostile and unresponsive to their needs. These include difficulties in disclosing personally- and culturally-sensitive information; recurring dependence on one's husband for legal status claimant procedures; and a culture of disbelief surrounding the credibility and unique circumstances of women's stories, paired with the trivialisation of gendered forms of persecution, including rape, domestic abuse, forced marriage, and honour crimes (Hunt 2008; Baillot, Cowan & Munro 2012; Maryns 2013; de Angelis 2020). Furthermore, communicative difficulties arising from language, culture, and narrative convention differences make interpreting part and parcel of the asylum experience (Inghilleri 2005; 2007; Jiménez-Ivars & León-Pinilla 2018; Killman 2020). Specifically, interpreting is configured as a space for praxis that facilitates women's narration and sensitive disclosure in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways (Celik & Cheesman 2018), upholding the quality of legal and social support (Todorova 2020).

While the asylum system in the UK has traditionally relied on interpreting (Inghilleri 2005; Killman 2020), recently concerns have been raised about the Home Office's *streamlined* asylum process; that is, the use of questionnaires in lieu of official interpreter-mediated interviews to clear the backlog of 117,000 asylum applications as of 2023 (Ozkul 2023). Claimants are required to reply in English by relying on machine translation or informal language assistance within twenty working days, pending asylum refusal. The circulating translation and interpreting discourse has been quick to underline the perils of mistranslations and the necessity of employing qualified professionals in such a high-stakes context (Chartered Institute of Linguists, CIOL, & Institute of Translation and Interpreting, ITI 2023; National Register of Public Service Interpreters, NRPSI 2023). Nevertheless, this discourse has neglected

to acknowledge several core implications of the bureaucratisation and technologisation of asylum processes: namely, that they are central to the exercise of institutional and gender-unequal power, and that they have direct implications for female asylum seekers.

This conceptual article questions the UK Home Office's streamlined asylum process, analysing the complex relationship between gender and the technologisation and bureaucratisation of linguistic access. It argues that the UK Home Office measures not only reinforce women's marginalised position, but also reduce the resources at their disposal in the asylum process by withdrawing the support of interpreting. My argument is grounded in practice theory (Schatzki 2002; Nicolini 2012) and its convergence with posthumanism, especially in its feminist version (Haraway 1991; 1997; Barad 2003; 2007). This convergence has been conceptualised as posthuman practice theory (Gherardi 2017). Posthuman practice theory grants equal onto-epistemological status to humans and non-humans, providing the context for a discussion of the constitutive entanglement of the social and the material. Harnessing the explanatory potential of such a perspective, the article problematises how the revised, technologised, and bureaucratised asylum-seeking practice and the lack of formal language assistance are implicated in the sociomaterial challenges faced by women asylum seekers. Women's high degree of digital exclusion stands out, as it prevents access to important information, advice, and support through technology, including machine translation itself (Choudhry 2022; GSMA 2023). The challenges are compounded by women's small support networks, often contingent on domestic partners and potential exploitative marital situations (Ogbe et al. 2021). They are further exacerbated by limited access to legal advice (Tastsoglou, Petrinioti & Karagiannopoulou 2021) accompanied by low levels of financial means (Hunt 2008) and forced reliance on local communities' *linguistic charity* in lieu of formal interpreting and intercultural mediation services. These challenges often lead women to experience loss of their voice (McKinnon 2009; Maryns 2013).

Overall, the article contends that the implementation of the new asylum-seeking practice transfers the burden of language from the justice sector to women, feeding a climate of sociomaterial exclusion that significantly restricts the

right of female asylum seekers to be adequately heard. The theoretical harness of a posthuman practice approach contributes by tracing the ramifications of constantly-evolving migration and language policy, highlighting that we cannot view them in isolation but rather that we must consider them as embedded in institutional forms of power, contexts of socio-material and discursive deprivation, and their larger configurations (Boéri & Giustini 2024). To address these challenges and ensure that women asylum seekers navigate complex procedures and communicate their experiences effectively, it is crucial to ensure the provision of language support practices that do not further compromise their agency.

This article is organised as follows. Having established a foundation through this introduction, the article does not reprise well-established theorisations of asylum interpreting. Rather, it first outlines a posthuman, practice-based theoretical framework. Then, it discusses the interrelation between gender inequality implications and the technologisation and bureaucratisation of asylum practices in the United Kingdom. In so doing, the article concludes by elaborating on the application of a posthuman practice perspective to the streamlined asylum-seeking process in the United Kingdom. The intention is to contribute to scholarly discourse by offering a renewed analytical perspective within the confines of this framework.

2. A practice-based, posthuman approach: Framing the assemblage of sociomaterial inequality

This article brings together converging ideas from practice theories (Schatzki 2002; Nicolini 2012) and posthumanism (Haraway 1991; 1997; Barad 2003; 2007) as posthuman practice theories (Gherardi 2017). These approaches present interconnected questions about "sociomaterial entanglements" (Orlikowski 2007, 445), which help to frame how women's gendered struggles and the lack of formal language assistance might coalesce in asylum seeking.

Posthumanism encompasses critical socio-philosophical theories focused on understanding how the human, the non-human, and the technological are

articulated in the world. Notably, posthumanism "marks a refusal to take the distinction between 'human' and 'non-human' for granted" (Barad 2007, 32). While a humanist approach conceives of humans as sites of embodied understandings, posthumanism interrogates how all the social and material elements hold together and acquire agency in being entangled. Posthumanism owes much of its conceptual underpinnings to the pioneering work of feminist scholars including Donna Haraway (1985; 1991; 2016) and Karen Barad (2003; 2007), who have led it through the traditions of science and technology studies and new materialism.[1] Ontologically, posthumanism attends to the production of reality by people and things (Cozza & Gherardi 2023), recognising that as knowing subjects, we are becoming with the world and that "the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter" (Barad 2007, 185). A key contribution of posthuman thought has been to demonstrate how all matter is interlinked, mutually dependent, and co-evolved, whether this is the impact humans have on technology and vice versa, or how gender, sexuality, and social relations have all been reconfigured through the incorporation of technology (Haraway 1985; 2016) and the ethics of these developments as they affect humans, the law, policies, and the social order.

In turn, practice theories are ontological orientations that take *practices* as the lens for understanding social life. Practices are open-ended, organised sets of materially mediated doings, sayings, and ways of relating, which are socially legitimised among people (Nicolini 2012). While the intellectual grounds of practice theories include the work of Marx, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Latour, Bourdieu, and Giddens, it is the second generation of practice theorists (Schatzki 2002; Nicolini 2012; Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012) that has insisted on "the critical role of the body and material things in all social affairs" (Nicolini 2012, 4). Practice theories decentre the role of actors to argue instead that it is the interrelation of materials, individuals, and purposeful

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[1] The former explores the development and impact of science and technology in their historical, cultural, and social contexts. The latter attends to the interrelation of matter and discourse as an underexplored scholarly question.

action that plays an active role in equally constituting and perpetuating practices as the very fabric of the social. This principle of symmetry in the performative accomplishment between humans and nonhumans, jointly shared by posthuman and practice approaches, is epitomised by the concept of *sociomateriality*. Popularised by Wanda Orlikowski (2007) together with Susan Scott (Orlikowski & Scott 2008) in the practice-oriented tradition of organisation studies, sociomateriality is inspired by the feminist onto-epistemologies of Donna Haraway (1991; 1997) and Karen Barad (2003). Sociomateriality—purposely written without a hyphen—emphasises the entanglement of the human and the material subject, both being equal and mutually-influencing actors in creating meaning and in shaping social (inter)actions (Gherardi 2017).

Hence, posthumanism and practice theory converge through their sociomaterial roots in a relational epistemology. This relational epistemology, dubbed "posthuman practice theory" (Gherardi 2017), assumes that human beings and things coexist as entities that interact and impact each other in a constitutive entanglement. In other words, sociomateriality becomes the *glue* that connects the human and non-human (including technological) elements of a practice. Importantly, another point of convergence between the two approaches into a posthuman practice approach relates to the sociomaterial co-dependencies of practices.

From one side, practice-oriented scholarship is sensitive to the political, historical, institutional, and material conditions of practices: context matters (Nicolini & Korica 2021). By *context*, it is meant that practices never exist in isolation; they always associate with one another in larger formations (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012). For instance, meal planning practices are linked to grocery shopping, driving, or walking to the supermarket, navigating grocery store aisles, storing food, etc. These practices form configurations; the way individuals plan, shop for, store, and cook groceries contributes to their existence and is influenced by historical, cultural, and social contexts. Notably, practice theory suggests that large societal issues such as inequality are outcomes of the ways practices combine into varying sociomaterial textures of advantage (i.e., access to material resources) and modes of participation

of human agents (i.e., the social) (Nicolini 2012; Shove 2023). It follows that the "grand categories of social theory—power, ideology, class relationships, legitimation, alienation, patriarchy" (Pred 1981, 20) should "be treated as features and expressions of the range of practices enacted in society" (Shove 2023, 109). Hence, forms of inequality result from the sociomaterial organisation of everyday life; that is, from practices combining across social, political, institutional, legal, and other contexts, and from the ways that human beings are associated with them. For instance, in the asylum-seeking process, individuals who are more proficient in navigating practices entangled with legal systems and who have better access to related resources including money, translation, interpreting, and legal aid may have an advantage over those who lack access to the practices and resources in these domains. In sum, practices empower certain sociomaterial courses of action (including those positioned to take them) over others. They shape a distinctive space for collective and individual agency, even though access to such agency (that is, power by any other name) is unevenly distributed (Nicolini & Monteiro 2017).

From the other side, posthumanism shares a political critique of issues of power, domination, and exclusion with the emancipatory ethos of practice scholarship. For instance, by stressing the gendered location of the human subject, feminist posthumanism does not adhere to a "notion of equality that assumes an unproblematic belonging to the same category of humanity" (Braidotti 2017, 21). Instead, as Karen Barad argues (2003), meaning and matter are inextricably fused; that is, they are always "intra-acting" in practices. Intra-action understands agency as not an inherent property of a human, but as a dynamism of forces (Barad 2007, 141) in which all designated *things* (human and non-human) are constantly influencing each other. Famously, Barad uses the example of linguistic and discursive practices—which are most relevant to this article—to argue against a separation of the social and the material world, proposing instead that they are mutually constitutive. It is not just that these entities interact; they *intra-act*, dynamically defining each other in the process. In the context of the gendered challenges of the streamlined asylum process in the United Kingdom, as I shall show, intra-

action has important implications for issues of linguistic access, power, and inequality. In fact, with intra-action comes a responsibility—or response-ability—an ethical need to acknowledge that sociomaterial practices may give rise to conditions of possibility for some people and exclusion for others (Haraway 1997; Barad 2007). From a posthuman perspective, we cannot merely pay attention to what and who matters, but we need to consider what and who is *excluded from mattering* because of how conditions of participation in practice are shaped.

Against this backdrop, this article conceives of streamlined asylum practices as an onto-epistemological viewpoint rather than an empirical phenomenon only, in which "meaning and matter, the social and the technological, are inseparable and they do not have inherently determinate boundaries and properties; rather, they are constituted as relational effects performed in a texture of situated practices" (Gherardi 2017, 40). The conceptual affordances of posthumanism and practice theory inform the article as an apparatus for approaching relations of power and language that perform gendered becomings. In the following sections, this paper draws upon a corpus of seventy secondary data sources: academic and policy reports, governmental documents, law and migration associations' documents, and media articles to develop its arguments and theoretical insights. Given the study's conceptual nature, emphasis is placed on a posthuman, practice-based interpretation of these sources rather than on specific methodological procedures such as coding. The secondary sources were selected because they hold both empirical rigor and analytical force in mapping gendered experiences of asylum seeking. As Lenz Taguchi and St. Pierre (2017, 643) argue, using "concept as method" articulates an onto-epistemological arrangement that does not necessarily begin with systematised, instrumental methodologies commonly used in social science inquiry. Instead, the concept can orient the researcher's thinking, including towards unconventional research practices. The absence of a traditional methods procedure is consistent with the study's aim to offer an exploratory encounter to advance onto-epistemological knowledge on gender, technology, and communication. Thus, the article invites us to consider the points raised as resources to think with.

3. The streamlined asylum process in the United Kingdom

Societies are witnessing high indices of asylum seeking: armed conflicts, human rights violations, famines, and natural disasters are causing millions of people to flee. The number of forcibly displaced individuals worldwide increased from 41.1 million in 2010 to 114 million in 2023—a 178% rise in thirteen years (UNHCR 2023a). Asylum seekers—not "refugees" until the host country government accepts their claim—may never be able to return to their country of origin (UNHCR 2016).

In the past decade, the UK has experienced a significant increase in the number of asylum-seeking applicants. In September 2023, 75,340 applications (relating to 93,296 people) were recorded, 111.8% more than in 2019 (British Refugee Council 2023). To claim asylum, individuals must apply upon their arrival, or as soon as it would be unsafe to return to their country. The more a claimant waits, the more likely the application is to be refused (UK Home Office 2023a). The first step is the screening, a meeting with an immigration officer. During the screening, claimants are photographed, have their fingerprints taken, are asked why they want asylum, and are required to submit supporting written evidence, including travel documents, IDs, birth and marriage certificates or school records, and proof of a UK address. If their application is positively assessed, the claimant will undergo one or more asylum interviews (in-person encounters with authorities) until the final adjudication. Claimants must wait for the outcome, reporting to a caseworker regularly. Thousands wait years for a final decision.

For asylum applicants, part 11 of the UK Immigration Rules, paragraph 339ND states that the Home Office—the ministerial department of the British Government responsible for immigration, security, law, and order—must provide, at public expense, professional interpreter services wherever and whenever necessary (UK Home Office 2023b). The Home Office works with its own Interpreter Language Services Unit as well as commercial providers and public sector bodies (e.g., the National Register of Public Service Interpreters, NRPSI) to ensure the best sector-wide ethical and quality standards (UK Parliament 2021). In fact, the role of professional interpreters

is pivotal in asylum contexts where individuals may recount deeply sensitive and traumatic experiences. By engaging professional interpreters, the Home Office aims to support individuals in sharing their narratives without apprehension of interference or bias. While acknowledging the potential involvement of community members as ad-hoc interpreters in certain instances, the standard practice is to employ professionals to safeguard asylum seekers' testimonies.

This situation is now compounded by the *legacy backlog*, meaning cases awaiting an initial decision, which has reached a record high. In September 2023, 165,411 people were waiting for an outcome (British Refugee Council 2023). To address the backlog, the Home Office decided to streamline the processing of applications by December 2023. This process makes fast decisions for claims lodged before 28 June 2022 from seven countries: Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. On 26 July 2023, the policy extended to add Sudan (UK Home Office 2023c).

The streamlined asylum process is based on a questionnaire, substituting the interview(s). To date, 12,500 people have received a questionnaire with the request to complete and return it within twenty working days. An extension of ten working days can be granted upon application. If more evidence is necessary, interviews might be undertaken. Since the process implementation, the media has reported that, while 75% of the questionnaires were returned to the Home Office within the timeframe, only 10% were properly completed (Dathan 2023, cited in Hodgson 2023). While allegedly poorly completed questionnaires are not grounds for asylum refusal (Jenrick, Minister of State for Immigration 2023), the need to seek more information defeats the policy aims: to make swift decisions without a substantive interview (Immigration Law Practitioners' Association 2023; UK Home Office 2023c, 4). Moreover, an asylum claim can be treated as implicitly withdrawn if caseworkers attempted to contact a claimant "at least once on all possible contact methods available" and the questionnaire is not returned (Immigration Rules, 5 October 2023, para 333C). A withdrawn claim is worse than a refusal because claimants then have no right of appeal (Refugee Action 2023, 3).

The questionnaire has been singled out for overwhelming claimants with complex requests, being prefaced by a cover letter and five pages of instructions. It contains forty-two questions that the Home Office requests applicants to "please explain" since the questions "are important to answer in your response" (Streamlined asylum process letter template, 23 February 2023, n 27, cited in Hodgson 2023, 10). A most pressing issue relates to the questionnaire being in English. Presently, the Home Office does not plan to translate it into other languages (Immigration Law Practitioners' Association 2023). In the words of Robert Jenrick, concerning the questionnaire: "It is standard practice for the Home Office to communicate with asylum seekers in English" so that staff can consider the information submitted (2023, 2). The application must be submitted alongside identity documentation with accompanying translations from individuals who are highly unlikely to have funds for them (Immigration Law Practitioners' Association 2023). Furthermore, the questions are often phrased in dependent clauses containing legal expressions that claimants may be unfamiliar with; for instance, concerning human trafficking and modern slavery. It also makes several demands of people who speak or write little or no English, such as: "Do you have any documents or other evidence to confirm your country of origin? If not, why? If you don't fear officials in your country such as the government or police, can you obtain documentary evidence such as a birth certificate, national ID card, passport or driver's licence?" The UNHRC equally states that,

> the questionnaires are poorly designed, lack clear instructions and are only available in English […] some of these weaknesses, along with information technology system issues, may mean the Home Office is unable to achieve the expected decision-making increases from the new questionnaires. (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee 2023, 10).

Furthermore, the questionnaire has dismayed legal experts, as it places unreasonable demands on vulnerable individuals who cannot access legal advice and language assistance on time (Syal 2023). Currently, the UK is facing a shortage of free immigration advice, in which qualified professionals assist individuals through legal aid and translation support. Many asylum seekers wait for months for an appointment (Refugee Action 2023, 5). Through

the new streamlined asylum policy, they are invited instead to "seek support with understanding the language through community links such as charity organisations, non-governmental organisations, friends, family, online translation tools and other networks" (Jenrick 2023, 3) to complete the questionnaire. However, only immigration advisors registered at Level 2 (who are permitted to do casework but not advocacy and representation) or solicitors are qualified to assist in this regard (UK Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner 2022). Language assistance must not stray into immigration or asylum advice, which may damage the claim and the people involved and may lead to criminal charges (Right to Remain 2023). Therefore, asylum charities increasingly refrain from providing translation assistance to people wanting to complete the questionnaire themselves (Hodgson 2023). They also advise asylum seekers not to resort to friends or community members' linguistic assistance, since lack of training in legal terminology may result in mistakes, misunderstandings, and mistranslations (Refugee Action 2023, 6). Still, the urgency due to the compressed timeline compels claimants to submit the questionnaire without immigration advice, often resulting in not being able to put their best case forward (Hodgson 2023, 17). Non-profit organisations such as the British Refugee Council and Right to Remain have produced translated guides to the questionnaire, including answers to frequently asked questions and a template letter to request a deadline extension from the Home Office in the Amharic, Arabic, Armenian, Dari, Tigrinya, Farsi, Kurdish Kurmanji, and Kurdish Sorani languages. Translated questionnaire forms cannot be submitted to the Home Office; the form must be submitted in English.

4. The streamlined asylum-seeking process in the United Kingdom: Gendered implications and impact on women

4.1 Linguistic dependency and lack of credibility

Throughout the past decade, one third of UK asylum applicants have been women (UK Home Office 2017; European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2022). Women claim asylum mostly due to gender-based harm, inflicted for political,

religious, or racial reasons, or for same-sex sexual conduct; or for reasons which are in themselves gender-based, such as domestic violence, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and "honour"-based crimes. Additionally, women claim asylum where the harm (e.g., imprisonment) is not gender-based but the reason is (e.g., violation of a dress code, or the activities of a male relative) (Clayton et al. 2017). Within the asylum process, women are considered a highly vulnerable group because they face specific barriers in disclosing violence and in accessing specialist support services, and because they are at greater risk of continued abuse and financial instability (British Refugee Council 2021).

Women and men also experience different migration patterns. These patterns result from the gender norms that permeate our world and shape women's employment trajectories, their caring responsibilities, their family roles, and their lives overall (Reis 2020). While inequality affects women everywhere, displaced women experience the sharper edge of the social divide. They struggle to find employment[2] and to rebuild their lives as they confront the double stigma of being both a woman and a refugee, at the same time as they carry the trauma of adapting to a new country, community, and culture while fleeing violence. Displaced women also shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work (British Refugee Council 2022).

Speaking the host country language is arguably an important skill that asylum seekers need to navigate its society and labour market. Available evidence suggests a disadvantage for female asylum seekers. In the United Kingdom in 2014 the share of refugee women who only had basic or no knowledge of English was larger than among refugee men (26% and 18%, respectively) (Liebig & Tronstad 2018, 26). This disadvantage lingers on. In the United Kingdom, asylum seekers are provided free language learning up to Level 2[3] (an advanced level) through English for Speakers of Other Languages

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[2] Asylum seekers cannot be employed, even for a voluntary organisation, unless they are granted permission under Paragraph 360 or 360C of the Immigration Rules.
[3] Level 2 here refers to an advanced language proficiency level equivalent to C1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), indicating a high degree of fluency and comprehension.

(ESOL) classes. However, most ESOL providers report growing waiting lists of more than 1,000 students due to a lack of funding (Dono 2023). Additionally, eligibility for free classes requires learners to have been in the United Kingdom for at least six months, which clashes with the twenty working day timeline of the questionnaire. Learners must also demonstrate either unemployment or qualification for specific means-based benefits. Despite many female asylum seekers having a desire to acquire better English language skills, their class participation can also be impeded by the absence of past formal education, domestic and childcare responsibilities, travel distance, economic inaction, and self-regulated reluctance to engage with mixed-sex classes (Choudhry 2022; Dono 2023). These factors can constrain women's linguistic autonomy, with repercussions on the asylum process, adding to the "hostile environment"[4] of immigration in the United Kingdom (Reis 2020).

Without opportunities to access ESOL classes or translation and interpreting services, many asylum-seeking women turn to informal sources of language support (Baillott & Connelly 2018) such as friends, community, or family members. In addition to placing the burden of linguistic labour on women, these practices may affect confidentiality and claimants' safety, particularly when concerning domestic violence or sexual crimes. In the streamlined asylum process, these dynamics can further decrease women's opportunities to tell their stories via the questionnaire. The act of transposing a traumatic experience to a community or family member, or entrusting it to a machine translation tool—practices that the Home Office itself suggests, despite their questionable legal and ethical validity (Jenrick 2023, 3)—can be severely challenging. Community and family members' assistance may result in inaccurate renditions. They may have personal biases or conflicts of interest that could influence what they convey, and how, in the questionnaire writing. Communities' cultural norms and social dynamics may also limit women's ability to express themselves freely. Information about

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[4] "Hostile environment" refers to legal restrictions the UK implemented in 2012, including increased application costs, punitive measures for the undocumented, and prioritising immigration checks over services like healthcare.

gender and sexual violence may be reported selectively (or not at all) due to guilt, stigma, and fear of being ostracised. Finally, women may fear retaliation in a newly-found community if gender-sensitive information is shared, leading to self-censorship and partial narratives. For instance, as McFadyen (2019) highlights, women may see disclosing gender-related information (including forced marriage, rape, and domestic violence) as a dishonour for both her family and the wider community. Hence, women may avoid at all costs disclosing the violence they suffered in the questionnaire and to language assistants due to the stigma attached.

This entails considerable financial and economic insecurity risks, as well as a less secure immigration status. Most female asylum seekers arrive in a context of family migration as two-thirds (68%) are on family and dependant visas (Liebig & Tronstad 2018). Women's immigration status and income, thus, are often tied to a man's, increasing financial dependence, the likelihood of becoming victims of coercion and control, and the necessity of depending on husbands or male family members' claims, bills, tenancy agreements, and bank accounts, or being expected to delegate these matters to them (Reis 2020, 5). In Baillot and Connelly's report for the British Refugee Council, 90% of survey respondents had dealt with cases involving a perpetrator who was a partner or ex-partner, while 60% of respondents had worked on cases where extended family members were the perpetrator(s) (Baillott & Connelly 2018, 27). Perpetrators often use women's limited language proficiency and insecure immigration status to prevent them from communicating with authorities, manipulating fears about deportation back to their home countries (Baillott & Connelly 2018).

Finally, while the decision-making process is fraught with administrative difficulties that affect both women and men, the former are disproportionally affected by incredulity about their experiences and a lack of advisors with expertise on gender issues (Reis 2020). The primary role of asylum caseworkers and immigration judges is to assess whether fears or experiences of persecution fall under the asylum protocol. They do this by evaluating evidence and narratives, as well as the claimant's credibility in terms of likeliness of the story and emotionality (McKinnon 2009). The issue of credibility is especially controversial in the case of women due to a culture of disbelief, "a set of practices, structures,

and power relations [which] manifests itself pervasively within the asylum system," and which erases comprehension of "systems of persecution, especially gender persecution […] by those making the decisions" (McFadyen 2019, 178–179). McFadyen underlines that only 30% of female asylum seekers in the United Kingdom are granted refugee status at the initial stage. Recent studies juxtapose the higher level of rejection of women's asylum claims to men's to the *double negative* culture in operation in the British judicial system, the attitude that "asylum seekers are lying, and that women are lying" (McFadyen 2019, 169). The double negative, paired with the lack of language assistance in the streamlined asylum process, may silence female narratives.

Furthermore, botched renditions into English, either due to informal language assistance or machine translation, can exacerbate institutional mistrust. The Home Office argues that silence, incoherence, and inconsistencies within narratives damage the claimant's credibility, particularly if the translated version alters the meaning or the circumstances of an applicant's words (Refugee Action 2023). Since it is common that mistakes by professional interpreters resulting in inconsistencies in an applicant's account are used by the Home Office as grounds for refusal (Immigration Law Practitioners' Association 2023), similar language-driven occurrences can further feed rejection. According to the Minister of State for Immigration (2023), while minor errors in translation and in non-native English submissions will not be considered, core discrepancies between questionnaires and evidence submitted will impact someone's credibility. For example, Refugee Action warns asylum seekers that the UK Visa and Immigration may think they are not telling the truth if "you use incorrect words in English, or if an online translation tool alters the meaning of your words" (2023, 4).

In sum, the new procedure places the burden of linguistic access onto asylum seekers, despite both research and policy evidence showing that language barriers impact the ability of ESOL speakers to navigate the asylum process, including legal and immigration advice. Yet, while language is central to the storytelling practices that compound both asylum seeking and the questionnaire, the gatekeeping of interpreting services and face-to-face interviews in favour of tech-mediated and/or informal language assistance may impede women from communicating independently of external influence.

4.2 Access to legal aid

Changes to how some nationalities can lodge an asylum claim have made it an additional challenge for women to access legal representation. When a person claims asylum, they are encouraged to find a solicitor to build a strong argument. Recent analyses show that 40% of applicants in the United Kingdom are being denied legal aid due to austerity policies. Since 2022, there has been a deficit in legal aid provision related to 24,000 new asylum applications (Crosby Medlicott 2022). Those who do not speak English and cannot access legal aid on time are still expected to arrange for completing the questionnaire. However, evidence collected on the first six months of the streamlined asylum process shows that law and immigration experts always advise claimants to wait for legal assistance (Hodgson 2023). Assistance is vital to ensure continuity between a claimant's initial screening interview, the content of the questionnaire, and anything reported at later stages, preventing any adverse conclusions being drawn as to internal consistency.

However, it is harder for women than for men to access legal aid because their cases, mostly linked to gender-based violence, are less likely to succeed. Despite the 2002 Guidelines to Gender-Related Persecution within the context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR 2022), gender-based violence is not officially recognised under the United Nations Refugee Convention (United Nations 1951). The complexity of such cases remains a strong deterrent for solicitors. Women must fit their gendered experiences into court precedents, which may not reflect their actual experiences (Anker 2002; McKinnon 2009). It is also difficult for women to provide evidence for persecution that has occurred privately or deals with embodiment, such as domestic violence, rape, and sexual assault. Additionally, without legal assistance, a woman is unlikely to bring forward evidence such as how survivors of gender-based and sexual violence are treated in her society. In its report *Gender Gaps in Access to Civil Legal Justice*, the Women's Budget Group (Haque 2023) conducted an online survey of 115 organisations, services and individuals in the field and found widespread concern about women's barriers to justice. Among respondents, 85% said vulnerable women, including

asylum seekers, were unable to access civil legal aid. Furthermore, 77% reported that many women's circumstances reach a crisis point before they receive any legal help.

4.3 Digital access and the use of machine translation

In many forcibly displaced communities, women face multiple barriers to the digital ecosystem. These barriers stem from limited access to digital devices, affordability, low digital literacy, and sociocultural norms (Alam & Imran 2015; Singh 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR 2023a). Regulatory country requirements such as those in the United Kingdom also mandate that an individual's identity be authenticated before accessing a mobile connection (i.e., SIM registration). For forcibly displaced women without valid IDs, these requirements significantly hinder their access to technology. As a result, many use informal workarounds such as asking local people to buy SIM cards on their behalf, which can lead to exploitation, including transactional sex for mobile connections (UNHCR 2023b). Deep-rooted gender norms may also discourage women from accessing technologies; access to devices is often dependent on male gatekeepers (GSMA 2023). Similarly, female asylum seekers in the United Kingdom tend to have lower levels of access to the Internet (Choudhry 2022). Nonetheless, the Home Office encourages them to seek language support through online translation tools to complete the questionnaire (Jenrick 2023, 3). These intersectional challenges raise questions about the fairness of a process that fails to account for women's lower levels of digital and linguistic access, perpetuating a system that risks jeopardising their right to seek asylum, or exacerbating their dependence on third parties.

Substituting face-to-face interpreted interviews with written questionnaires and machine translation may add to the struggles and isolation that typically compound female refugees' experiences. Machine translation, deviating from the conventional practices involving interpersonal interactions with officials and interpreters, can affect women's embodied narratives. Entrusting such narratives to automated systems may intensify voicelessness and unfamiliarity

with technological materiality. It is likely to contribute to a heightened sense of vulnerability, as women may fear handing over their deeply personal stories to an entity that lacks the nuanced understanding inherent in human interaction, with no control over the output. As a structural counterpart, insights drawn from the US context warn about machine translation-related dynamics which may well extend to jurisdictions with similar asylum claim processes, such as the United Kingdom. In the United States, Respond Crisis Translation reported that they have seen cases of women's asylum applications being rejected because of machine translation mistakes (Deck 2023). In the case of a Pashto-speaking woman who had fled Afghanistan, a machine translation tool had interpreted an "I" in her written statement as "we," causing a discrepancy with subsequent interviews and making it seem as if the application was for more than one person. The discrepancy was large enough to result in asylum rejection. They also recalled the case of an asylum-seeking woman who described her perpetrator in a case of domestic abuse as "mi jefe" in her application. The expression is a Spanish colloquialism for "my father," yet the translation rendered it literally as "my boss," and asylum was denied (Bhuiyan 2023).

Beyond individual cases, systemic reliance on machine translation in the UK immigration system may be problematic for the following reasons. First, machine translation does not have cultural awareness. Written statements, such as those required by the questionnaire, particularly if using regional colloquialisms, metaphors, idioms, or turns of phrase, may not make any sense if taken literally or if decontextualised. It is crucial, however, to recognise that advocating for human interpreters in asylum proceedings is not solely rooted in the assertion that machine translation makes mistakes. Acknowledging that both machines and humans are prone to errors is a realistic perspective. However, the argument in favour of human interpreters is grounded in the accountability and transparency they offer, elements that are essential in the delicate context of asylum applications, providing a mechanism for oversight and recourse. In the event of an error, individuals involved trace responsibility back to the interpreter, allowing for corrective measures and fair assessments. In contrast, the opaqueness of machine translation-generated mistakes poses a significant challenge. Improving machine translation systems is a complex task, often

requiring advanced technical expertise and resources that may not be readily available in the context of asylum proceedings. This is particularly the case for *low resource* (that is, "minority") languages, which perform poorly in machine translation due to the limited (or no) volume of parallel data employed to train neural models (Forcada 2023; Ranathunga et al. 2023). Most of the languages spoken by the nationalities included in the streamlined asylum process in the United Kingdom, such as Pashto, fall into the low resource language category. Consequently, asylum seekers in need of translation assistance for these languages may encounter limitations even in accessing the online applications, thus finding themselves at even more of a loss. Additionally, the matter is not simply about access to and the role of technology, but about establishing a system that allows for the proactive mitigation of errors, to avoid mistakes and lack of linguistic resources (including in neural language models) that may result in a denial of the fundamental right to seek asylum. Since the Home Office frequently weaponises small language technicalities to justify deportation, there is a significant risk that the lack of training data for low resource languages, as well as mistakes produced by machine translation which remain unaccounted for, may lower application standards, particularly in terms of credibility, which disproportionately affects women.

Finally, a word of caution about intersecting inequalities. The transition from an oral to a written process in asylum seeking may disproportionately disenfranchise illiterate women. This issue is particularly pertinent in contexts where gender disparities intersect with limited access to education, resulting in greater illiteracy rates among women. Among the eight expedited countries, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria show relatively medium to high levels of female literacy. However, in Afghanistan the literacy rate among adult females (aged fifteen above) is 23%, in comparison to 52% for men (World Bank 2023). Under Taliban rule, Afghanistan has also banned girls from schooling beyond the age of eleven, with implications for literacy rates. Similarly, 41% of males and 61% of females in Yemen cannot read and write (Al Alsimah & Governorates 2020), while in Sudan 45.2% of women and girls aged fifteen twenty-four are illiterate (UNICEF 2020).

Policy and research evidence found illiteracy to be a barrier in women's ability to learn English and to access English courses in the United Kingdom. Not reading in

their mother tongue (functional illiteracy) means they could only gain information from personal interactions: printed information in their native languages is still inaccessible as a result (Dono 2023). The consequences of illiteracy, including the inaccessibility of information, disenfranchise women from conveying their narratives in the written format of the questionnaire and to comprehend related written legal documents. Additionally, women lacking literacy skills in their native language and in English encounter significant barriers in utilizing both speech-to-speech, text-to-speech, and speech-to-text technological translation solutions in the source and target languages. Illiteracy and digital illiteracy can also compound each other. Women's inability to read or write may extend to an unfamiliarity with utilising digital devices, which further restricts their ability to navigate online tools, including accessing information or electronic documentation. Consequently, illiterate women face heightened barriers in communication and information retrieval, exacerbating their marginalisation vis-à-vis the already vulnerable category of female asylum seekers.

5. Discussing the streamlined asylum process through a gender-based posthuman sensitivity

In this section, this article draws upon a practice-based, posthuman approach to re-articulate the Home Office's streamlined asylum process as a politics of re-materialisation of gender inequality and of de-responsibilisation of the legal system. Women's asylum claims can be understood as gendered questions of intra-action, in which human and non-human elements of practices including law, language, and translation tools impact on the power dynamics between asylum seekers and decision-makers. As I detail in the following discussion, this "entanglement of discursive processes, material contexts, animate bodies, social norms and practices […], context and positionality" (Strom, Mills & Ovens 2018, 5) is inseparable from female asylum seekers' experiences as a question of sociomateriality (the co-constitution of the social and the material).

The streamlined asylum process, ostensibly aimed at expediting refugee status determination, solidifies power dynamics shaped by both State and

judicial influences, thereby constraining women's agency. The bureaucratised practices of the judicial system, primarily by substituting interviews with questionnaires, are intertwined with the absence of formal interpreting mechanisms, leading to women's reliance on informal practices including community-based linguistic assistance and machine translation for navigating the asylum process. This reliance elucidates that practices inherently carry power dynamics by associating with one another across contexts (Nicolini & Monteiro 2017). In transposing power from the institutional settings of the asylum and justice systems, the streamlined asylum process enables specific sociomaterial courses of action, including limiting the agency of certain practitioners. In asylum seeking, the use of machine translation especially becomes a sociomaterial practice that wields considerable power, as it substitutes interpreting practices that were tasked with carrying the linguistic and cultural aspects embedded in claimants' narratives. As women lose the opportunity to engage with interpreting, their agency and narratives become entangled with the material practices imposed upon them by the immigration and judicial systems, primarily through the forced use of digital devices and machine translation to both access online information and lodge asylum claims.

Notably, these materialities do not only force women to renounce one social and communicative practice (interpreting) for a more bureaucratised one (the questionnaire); it also alters the traditional dynamics of linguistic exchange between asylum seekers and the asylum system. In this altered exchange, the bureaucratised and technological interventions empower only the agency of specific actors who already control the practices of the system, and enjoy labour carried out elsewhere. This is the case of decision-makers and institutional workers, who can manage asylum claims in their native English by relying on machine-translated content and the linguistic labour of women, migrant communities, and legal aid associations alike. Yet, women are forced to deal with the complexities of their own stories and asylum claims via alternative practices and tools, irrespective of their legal right to interpreting. Thus, the sociomaterial relationship becomes unbalanced in that female asylum seekers must bear the brunt of digital, bureaucratic, and linguistic impositions.

Indeed, the issue is "not simply about responsible actions in relation to human experiences of the world; rather, it is a question of material entanglements of how each intra-action matters in the reconfiguring of these entanglements" (Barad 2007, 160). In fact, the reconfiguration of material entanglements (as through questionnaires and machine translation) clashes with female asylum seekers' capability to fully exercise their agency as a dynamism of forces, or intra-action (Barad 2007, 141). Rather than seeing humans and *things* constantly working together, exchanging and diffracting, here we witness an asymmetrical influence of the material-digital and the bureaucratic over the human. Institutions, asylum seekers, and communicative practices should be working—intra-acting— inseparably to produce effective intra-action (in the sense of linguistic and legal understanding). Yet, this does not materialise, especially for two reasons.

First, the ability to utilise digital tools is not uniformly distributed, meaning that the Home Office practices promote a texture of disadvantage which exacerbates women's challenges when interacting with machine translation. Moreover, the digital literacy disparities between migrant men and women in the United Kingdom can aggravate this power dynamic, as those proficient in navigating technology hold an advantage in the asylum process. Women may also feel compelled to trust their claims to male family and community members, since they are often reliant on men's digital skills and online access opportunities. In this process, the technological interface may become a barrier rather than a facilitator of genuine intra-action.

Neither is the support of emerging English speakers in the local migrant community in lieu of formal translation and interpreting support necessarily a benefit for women. The completion of the questionnaire through language assistance becomes a significant nexus where practices intersect and produce further gendered challenges, power dynamics, and social influences. The engagement of community and family members in questionnaire writing validates a practice that not only introduces potential inaccuracies in the representation of traumatic, gendered experiences but which may also be fraught with personal biases and conflicts of interest, influencing the conveyed narrative. Within this assemblage, affective and normative factors such as guilt, stigma, and fear of ostracisation—legitimised practices within certain social

milieus—play a significant role, contributing to selective reporting or outright avoidance of certain information. Recognising these sociomaterial dynamics is crucial for understanding and addressing the complex inequalities that women face, particularly since the constant scrutiny of their claims through the lens of *credibility* transposes deeply gendered practices back into the asylum process. This scrutiny is rooted in institutionalised practices fostering incredulity towards women's experiences of violence and trauma, as existing literature highlights (Anker 2002; McKinnon 2009; Baillot, Cowan & Munro 2012; McFadyen 2019). Overall, the sociomaterial understanding of gender as a dynamic process, intertwined with discursive practices (the narration of abuse and displacement, the entrustment of narratives), points to the significance of interactional achievements in the assessment of women's asylum claims, and how these circulate back and forth between the asylum process and women's embeddedness in local communities.

Yet, Home Office practices of streamlined asylum claims seem to remove the *socio-* from the equation of sociomateriality (Haraway 1991; 1997; Barad 2003; Orlikowski & Scott 2008), stunning the reconfiguration of more positive forms of intra-action in the process. They force the use of machine translation and informal language assistance in the completion of questionnaires (the material dynamics) but do not necessarily account for women's embodied skills (digital literacy), their agency, and their socio-cultural contexts. The resultant isolation of material and social practices compromises a gender-equal commitment to understanding and redressing their lived experiences and to avoid their marginalisation as vulnerable individuals (see British Refugee Council 2021). This lack of commitment and gender awareness leads to a partial exoneration of the immigration and judicial systems, which absolve themselves from addressing language and gender barriers and providing necessary, targeted support. Indeed, this neglect only serves to complicate matters ethically and legally, resulting in a lack of inclusive decision-making in asylum cases and of institutional responsibility. Conversely, the lack of appropriate gender- and language-sensitive practices shifts the responsibility to the asylum seekers, who, without experience in this difficult process, have to go through it because their stay in the United Kingdom is premised upon it. This triggers vicious

connections in asylum seeking that may lead to practical consequences not previously imagined by the Home Office and by practitioners who are closely involved in the asylum granting process. Adhering to the new sociomaterial practice of streamlined asylum seeking without adequately considering the needs of female claimants sets in motion a feedback loop where the very practices intended to aid asylum seekers further marginalise those it should protect. Achieving more equitable gender procedures and linguistic access thus emerges as a pivotal factor influencing the trajectories of intra-action, creating opportunities for female asylum seekers to reconfigure power relations and action within the asylum process.

Overall, this study suggests there is no innocence in the way the streamlined asylum process constructs the entanglement of particular decisions and actions which influence practices of linguistic and technological access. It is, effectively, a question of material entanglements and of how each intra-action between female asylum seekers, language access, technology, and bureaucracy impact the reconfiguring of these entanglements (see Barad 2007, 160) and the ways that practices in and beyond the asylum process contribute to gender inequalities, precluding and potentially altering certain outcomes for women. It is, in fact, through the combination of these practices (and the removal of supportive ones), plus the ways women become associated with them in the process, that power asymmetries and gender inequality are exacerbated and perpetuated in the asylum context (see Shove 2023). If we want practices that empower, rather than constrain, sociomaterial courses of action (including those positioned to take them), then we need an enactment of a full spectrum of possibilities for claimants; for example, through the provision of interpreting, translation, and intercultural mediation services. In other words, to forge a distinctive space for women's agency, we need "responsibility—the ability to respond to the Other—and accountability—that is, accounting for what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (Cozza & Gherardi 2023, 43, also Haraway 2016, 34). In this regard, responsibility and accountability mean acknowledging and taking stock of the benefits, as well as the harms inflicted by practices associated with and underpinning the asylum and legal systems, both materially, socially, linguistically, and discursively—therefore accounting for assembled practices that reproduce gendered, unequal, and silencing outcomes.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has attempted to put sociomaterial activity at the centre of considerations of women's probable trajectories under the new streamlined asylum process in the United Kingdom. Leveraging a posthuman practice-based perspective, the article suggests that the bureaucratic, linguistic, technological, and gender practices that interconnect throughout the streamlined asylum process are not a neutral assemblage but a profound materialisation of inequality. Unveiling the lived experiences of women within the asylum-seeking apparatus lays bare the social and material complexities of a gendered and inequitable system, emphasising the imperative for a comprehensive and humane approach that addresses the tangible and nuanced dimensions of the asylum-seeking journey. To this extent, future scholarship could further examine the intersectionality of gender, language, and technology within asylum-seeking processes, questioning how various factors such as socioeconomic status, education level, and cultural background intersect with the technologisation of language access. Additionally, researchers could interrogate approaches to mitigating women asylum seekers' marginalisation, including policy-based language support initiatives and culturally-sensitive technological solutions. Finally, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term impacts of language policy changes on the outcomes of women seeking asylum, shedding light on their effectiveness and equity over time.

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