

# Together

NEWS FROM JRS UK  
SPRING 2026

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“ I have the privilege of working with many women seeking asylum, who show the most amazing resilience. They fight on and stand up to resist the dehumanisation and injustice of the asylum system, and they are calling for change. We must stand with them.”

Sophie, Senior Policy Officer

# The price to pay: being a girl in South Sudan



**“When we reach the age when we can get married, our families arrange a compromise with a male peer in exchange of lands, cattle, and money. But for that, you need to be “worth it””**

**Wilma, 14**

In Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, JRS Eastern Africa runs a protection centre for women whose lives are in danger due to gender-based violence. Among them are many young South Sudanese girls who have refused early or forced marriage. In some communities, refusing such arrangements is perceived as a breach of family honour, with punishments sometimes reaching death.

Poverty increases the likelihood of gender-based violence. Many families face extreme hardship, and some men may exploit these pressures by offering financial support in exchange for girls. Girls in coercive relationships are at heightened risk of being disowned or forced into marriage if they end up pregnant. Some are abandoned if they contract sexually transmitted diseases.

Girls also face barriers to education, with many families deciding not to send their daughters to school, instead prioritising housework and domestic responsibilities.

**Education is not only a basic right but also a vital form of protection.** It reduces risks

such as child labour, early and forced marriage, recruitment by armed groups, and helps connect people with specialist services. **The right to education does not cease to exist when a child is on the move, and it should not vanish even in a place with few resources or systems, such as refugee camps.**

JRS Eastern Africa, with local partners, promotes education for girls and young people. Through scholarships, learning materials, and safe learning environments, JRS works to ensure that students can access quality education and opportunities for growth.

**“If your dreams don’t scare you, then you’re not dreaming big enough. I urge every girl to wake up and chase her dreams”**

**Cecilia**

**“I Will Tell You My Story: voices of Eastern African girls”** shares the stories and testimonies of girls supported by JRS Eastern Africa in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. Each story highlights a different theme: the role of girls at home, the denial of the right to go to school, the taboo related to menstruation, sexual violence, and war.

You can read it at: [ear.jrs.net/en/resource](https://ear.jrs.net/en/resource)

## Message from the editor



Dear friends,

For too many women seeking safety – fleeing war, persecution, and gender-based violence – the journey itself is marked by danger. The continued lack of safe routes forces people onto informal routes where exploitation, trafficking, and sexual violence are tragically common.

**Recent proposals for asylum reform will make it even harder for refugees to rebuild their lives in the UK**, placing new barriers at every stage of the process: at first arrival, when trying to access basic asylum support, when appealing flawed decisions – nearly half of which are later overturned – and even after some form of leave to remain is granted. (If you'd like a refresher on the many 'stages' of the asylum process – and how rarely they feel linear or fair – see *Together* Autumn 2025 at [www.jrsuk.net/autumn2025](http://www.jrsuk.net/autumn2025)). These proposals will disproportionately affect women seeking sanctuary, who already face particular injustices, as Sophie, our Senior Policy Officer, explains (pages 8-9).

At JRS UK, we see every day how quickly vulnerability deepens when people cannot work, when people are forced into destitution, and when decisions take years. **Your companionship changes that story.**

**Last year, your support enabled over 2,000 moments of vital accompaniment for refugee friends:** helping people access asylum support,

secure shelter or emergency accommodation, and receive vital medical services. This work is transformative: our caseworkers not only help people meet urgent needs, but also ensure refugee friends understand their rights and can make informed decisions about their own lives (pages 4-5).

Disturbingly, the Government's asylum reform proposals also include changes that would make it even harder for survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking to get help. As David, our Director, notes: when protection is withheld, exploiters fill the vacuum (pages 6-7).

And yet, there is so much that brings us hope: your prayers (see Elizabeth's reflection on praying and waiting on page 10), your advocacy and witness, and the creativity and commitment of people like Carmen, one this year's London Marathon runners (page 11).

Here in the UK, we've often seen women's rights and refugee rights pitched against one another. We cannot allow this to happen. When protections are rolled back, *everyone* – women, men, and children – is placed at greater risk.

Together, we can ensure people seeking sanctuary are met not with hostility, but with hospitality – and the chance to flourish.

With gratitude,

*Victoria*



## From our kitchen to yours

### Enny's Vegetable Stew

#### Ingredients:

1 aubergine  
1 courgette  
2 carrots  
1 onion  
1 beetroot, peeled  
1 leek  
2 sweet potatoes, peeled  
1 cup lentils  
1 can chopped tomato  
2 tbsp tomato puree  
2 tbsp vegetable oil

#### Seasonings:

1 tsp Dried thyme  
1 tbsp Curry powder  
½ tsp Nutmeg  
½ tsp White pepper  
1 Bay leaf  
1 tsp All-purpose seasoning  
Salt to taste

#### Method:

1. Chop aubergine, courgette, carrots, onion, beetroot, leek and sweet potatoes into small-medium chunks
2. Place a large saucepan on medium heat and add vegetable oil
3. Add the chopped tomatoes and tomato puree. Stir and let cook for 5 minutes
4. Add all the seasoning spices to the pan and stir for 10 minutes
5. Add all other vegetables to the pan
6. Cover with water bring to the boil
7. Once the carrots and sweet potatoes are soft, add lentils and let it simmer for another 10 minutes

# A day in the life of a caseworker

There is never a dull moment in the life of a JRS UK caseworker. Every day is varied, working with people to access asylum support, connecting them with other JRS UK teams and arranging access to essential health services.

The support that our Advice and Casework Team offers is part of our wider support system that includes access to food, clothes, & toiletries, accommodation, legal assistance, and wellbeing activities.

## Here is one day in my life:

### 9.15am – Opening the day

I check my mobile and emails for any messages that have come from refugee friends or partner agencies overnight. I reply to a few messages, and review case notes for the appointments I have later.

### 10am – Team meeting

Our Advice and Casework Team is made up of caseworkers, practical support coordinators, and befrienders. We debrief on cases from last week and share what we have planned for the upcoming week.

### 10.30am – Appointment with Gail

Gail, from Eritrea, has had her asylum case refused. Every year, thousands of people wrongly refused asylum are later found to have needed safety all along (read more in *Together Autumn 2025*). She has a place in a night shelter until the end of the month, but must leave after that, and she is worried about the prospect of rough sleeping.



Gail's solicitor is working on a fresh asylum claim, but her paperwork is still a few months away from submission to the Home Office. Until her application is submitted, Gail is not eligible for accommodation.

We discuss options, including a place at Emilie House, JRS UK's house for refugee women.

### 11.30am – Finalising Gail's accommodation referral

After our appointment, I finalise Gail's referral form for living in Emilie House and submit to my colleagues who lead on JRS UK's accommodation work.

I notify the shelter where Gail is staying about our action plan and ask for a possible extension in her stay there, while we make the necessary arrangements.

### 12.30pm – Appointment with Wali

Prior to Wali's appointment I review his case file. Wali needs a Bengali interpreter during meetings, so I call our interpretation service to help us during our appointment. Many of our refugee

friends require interpreters, a service that is made possible by donations from JRS UK supporters.

Wali needs to register with a GP and go through the process to access support for his prescription costs, so I advise him on the next steps. Wali is also struggling with meeting basic needs, so together we apply for a hardship grant from one of our partners.

Wali shares with me that he'd like to improve his English, so I also arrange for him to take part in the English lessons run at our centre.

### 1pm – Lunch

I grab a sandwich and a smoothie.

### 2pm – Appointment with Remi

Remi is pregnant and has just moved into asylum accommodation.

She is not yet receiving any financial assistance from the Home Office, so I arrange to follow this up.

Together, we complete a referral to a baby bank for nappies, clothes and other things that she will need when the baby arrives.

Remi is worried about being charged for pregnancy care at the hospital. I talk her through her eligibility, so that she can confidently attend appointments and seek help if she has any concerns about her health or the baby.

### 3.30pm – Case notes

I take some time now to record everything that has happened with Gail, Wali, and Remi in our database.

Good notes are essential for good support: they mean colleagues can step in if I'm away; they also help avoid re-traumatising people by reducing the need to retell painful experiences. I find the process useful as a reflection exercise, reviewing how I work with people in a trauma-informed way.

### 4.30pm – Phone call from a refugee friend

I receive a call from a refugee friend about booking an appointment to collect food and clothing from our centre and accessing our fortnightly financial support.

### 4.45 pm – Preparing for tomorrow's appointments

Before leaving at the end of the day, I check tomorrow's appointments and send reminder texts to the people I will meet (we also provide phone credit so they can stay in touch). I book meeting rooms for any appointments that need more privacy.

I send off a few final e-mails and then log off, grateful for a day where I've been able to help people who are seeking sanctuary to meet some of their urgent needs.

I'm all too conscious that for every person we are able to help, there are others who we can't help – people who we're not able to register at JRS UK because of capacity, or people who don't know where to find help. So many people, unable to access mainstream support, housing, or employment, can be left vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

This is why I'm so grateful for all our supporters, who make this work possible. **Thank you!**

#### In 2025, you made possible:

**2,145 interactions** with refugee friends, providing specialist support and advice

**13 people securing safety** - moving out of destitution and beginning to rebuild lives with safety and stability



# Called to Freedom: St Josephine Bakhita and the fight against modern slavery

David Ryall is Director of JRS UK – before joining us in May 2025 he worked with the Church and NGOs tackling modern slavery and human trafficking.

On 8<sup>th</sup> February we celebrated the feast of Saint Josephine Bakhita. She is both patron of Sudan and of every woman, man, and child who is trafficked or suffering in modern slavery.

Born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, St Bakhita was herself kidnapped as a child by slave traders, sold multiple times, and endured the most horrific ordeals before eventually finding freedom and entering religious life. Her witness is one of resilience, dignity, and hope.



In 2026, her story could not be more relevant. We think first of Sudan, where millions of women, men, and children continue to be driven from their homes by horrific violence. We also remember the tens of millions globally - including people here in the UK and those trying to reach sanctuary in our communities - who are victims of human trafficking or held in modern slavery.

For years, the Church and Catholic agencies, such as the Jesuit Refugee Service, have been at the forefront of confronting these atrocities, standing alongside survivors, and defending human dignity. As Pope Leo XIV explains in *Dilexi te*:

**“...the mission of the Church, when she is faithful to her Lord, is at all times to proclaim liberation. Even today, when millions of people - children, women and men of all ages - are deprived of their freedom and forced to live in conditions akin to slavery, this legacy is carried on by these orders and other institutions and congregations working in urban peripheries, conflict zones and migration routes. When the Church bends down to break the new chains that bind the poor, she becomes a paschal sign.”**

## When policy closes doors, traffickers open them

Successive UK governments have voiced similar commitments to tackling human trafficking and modern slavery. Yet the reality is very different: policies introduced in recent years are actually increasing people's exposure to forced labour, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, organ harvesting and coerced criminality.

As legal pathways to protection are shut down or restricted, people fleeing war, persecution or poverty are pushed into the hands of traffickers and forced into dangerous journeys.

At the same time, refugees who reach the UK often face enforced poverty and prolonged insecurity, leaving them in extremely vulnerable positions. One refugee friend reflected in our report *Destitute and in Danger*:

**“For women, it can be even worse because some men take advantage of them because they are vulnerable. They sometimes end up forcing themselves into relationships they don't want to be in so they have a roof over their heads.”**

Our Detention Outreach Team also frequently accompanies victims of human trafficking held in appalling conditions with limited access to healthcare or legal support. As the government expands its use of immigration detention, these victims go unnoticed while the criminals enjoy impunity.

Such outcomes are not accidental. When protection is withheld, exploiters fill the vacuum. The moral test is whether policy reduces the risk of human trafficking and modern slavery or deepens it.

## Bakhita's witness: prayer, proximity, and action

St Josephine Bakhita calls us to a response rooted in prayer, proximity, and practical solidarity:

**Prayer** for those trafficked or enslaved, for people displaced by violence - especially in Sudan - and for all working in defence of their rights.

**Educating ourselves about the signs of slavery** and how we can report it. Slavery is a serious criminal offence and can be reported to CrimeStoppers or the police.

**Advocating** for policies that protect people from exploitation: safe routes to sanctuary, essential support for refugees, and an end to use of immigration detention.

**Together - inspired by Bakhita's courage - we can help bring about a society where no one's freedom is for sale, and every person's dignity is protected.**



# The impact of asylum reforms on women seeking safety

Sophie is the Senior Policy Officer at JRS UK. Here, she shares how the government's proposed asylum reforms will affect women seeking sanctuary



The government's latest proposals represent a further attack on the very principle of asylum. They have been billed, in a high-profile Home Office document, as "Restoring order." In fact, they are deepening cruelty, making it even harder for refugees to secure safe haven. And they will have a particularly severe impact on women seeking asylum.

**Already, women fleeing sexual and gender based violence are disproportionately impacted by a culture of disbelief in the asylum system.** As women recount hugely traumatic experiences of sexual assault, decision-makers are often looking for reasons to conclude they are lying. This will only be worsened by plans to rapidly refuse cases deemed 'unmeritorious'.

A major challenge is that women fleeing gender-based violence often come from countries that produce fewer refugees overall, because the threats they are fleeing may not be tied to a war or major geopolitical upheaval. **In any context where asylum claims are summarily dismissed, rather than carefully and sensitively considered, there is a huge risk that women in desperate need of safety will be unheard.**

Furthermore, **government plans to replace asylum judges with 'a new appeals body' are very likely to reduce the independence and effectiveness of the asylum appeals process. Roughly half of asylum refusals are currently overturned on appeal to the courts** and the appeals system, though far from perfect, is a vital safeguard to prevent refugees being denied protection. Women fleeing sexual and gender-based violence, who are especially likely to be victims of poor government decision-making, will suffer if this is eroded and made less independent.

The government also plans to make it even harder for survivors of modern slavery to get recognition, support, and protection, placing women who have survived sexual exploitation in renewed danger. **JRS UK regularly works with survivors of modern slavery and trafficking, and we know how difficult it is for them to get support.** Women who have been trafficked to the UK and exploited in brothels are regularly held in immigration detention, which subjects them to fresh trauma. It is horrifying to think what this will look like if protections for modern slavery victims become weaker still.



**Finally, new barriers to accessing asylum support will increase destitution among people seeking asylum,** placing more women at risk of exploitation and abuse.

All this occurs in a context where **the government has already closed refugee family reunion.** As we discussed in the last edition of *Together*, this was a rare safe route for refugees to come to the UK, with the large majority of reunion visas issued to women and children. Ending it will force more women and girls to make dangerous journeys, putting their lives at risk. What's more, **on informal migration routes into and across Europe, women and girls face a huge risk of exploitation and gender-based violence.**

Reflecting on this, it would be easy to lose hope. But **I have the privilege of working with many women seeking asylum, who show the most amazing resilience. They fight on and stand up to resist the dehumanisation and injustice of the asylum system, and they are calling for change. We must stand with them.**

There are lots of things we can all do, including writing to our MPs about the harm this latest asylum overhaul will cause to women and girls.

**Women's rights and refugee rights cannot and must not be pitched against each other – they stand and fall together.**



# Watching and waiting

## Elizabeth Harrison from the Jesuit Institute reflects on the women waiting for Jesus' resurrection

Anyone who has sat at the bedside of a loved one through a grave illness – or waited from afar to hear news if they live far away – will understand something of how Martha and Mary feel in the gospel we hear on the fifth Sunday of Lent (John 11:1-45).

Martha and Mary are feeling increasingly powerless to help Lazarus, waiting for signs of improvement. What can they do? Martha tends to him on his sickbed with her sister, and they are both praying for his recovery. The two sisters send for Jesus to let him know. Perhaps Jesus could heal him? Yet they must wait again while Jesus 'stayed two days longer in the place where he was.' When Jesus arrives, we hear that Lazarus has already died, but Martha is given this unique opportunity to express her faith in the Resurrection. Her words to Jesus and his reply to her have given many much comfort in similar times of distress, illness and grief. Mary's tears also move Jesus. In the happy ending we all hoped for, Lazarus is raised from the dead.

During Holy Week, we don't hear much about Martha, Mary and the other women, but they were surely witnesses to the arrest of Jesus. They watched and waited, powerlessly, as he was questioned, tortured, forced to carry his cross and die. These women of the Passion, when all seemed lost, took practical action to tend to the body of Jesus, and to become the first witnesses of the Resurrection.



Our lives have periods when we feel in limbo and things are beyond our control, we wait for news, or we stand by as a loved one suffers. We might recognise these episodes in the lives of others, too: such as the people who are in the asylum system, waiting to hear if they will be granted refuge, perhaps also waiting to hear news of loved ones who - like Jesus - may have even been arrested or tortured.

What can they do? What can we do? Pray, like Mary; have faith, like Martha; call on Jesus; bear witness, like the women of the Passion. When the opportunity does arrive, as it did for them, do what we can, in ways big or small.

### Pray with refugees

Explore JRS UK's Lenten prayer resources at [www.jrsuk.net/praying-with-refugees](http://www.jrsuk.net/praying-with-refugees)

# I'm running... The London Marathon!



## Carmen is one of the runners taking on the London Marathon to fundraise for vital services for refugees in 2026.

When I started running way back in 2012, I never even imagined training for a run or an event as long as this.

I had asked my brother Peter to join me in walking the Malta Half Marathon for charity. We enjoyed it so much we decided we would start running. Many adventures, half-marathons, 10ks and 5ks later... here we are.

Last year, I kept seeing videos on social media of people finishing the London Marathon. The more I watched, the more I thought '...what if?'

I asked Peter if he would be interested in looking for a charity place, and it took him 3 seconds to say yes.



**Why JRS UK? In an ideal world JRS UK would not exist.**

However, today's world is far from equitable and just, and the need for these services is on the rise.

My parents left Malta in the 1950s for a better future in Australia. They talked often about those first few months in a foreign country, trying to make sense of everything.

I can only imagine how much harder it must be to be a person seeking sanctuary, fleeing war-torn countries and being forced to leave everything they know and then to face a hundred more challenges.

Resolving your legal status, finding food, finding a safe place to stay each night, accessing education, learning a new language, and battling the social isolation that comes from being systematically marginalised.

So many of the things I take for granted, things needed for survival, can be a daily challenge for people seeking sanctuary. My brother and I knew we wanted to fundraise for refugees and the more we read about the accompaniment JRS UK offers, the more we knew this was the right opportunity for us.

**And here we are!** Training for a marathon requires determination, especially for slow runners like me. Whenever I face an obstacle during training or I'm lacking motivation, I think about the courage and sheer resilience shown by refugees who are searching for safety and the chance to rebuild their lives. And off I go, every donation meaning more help and less hardship, with a clear picture in my mind of my brother and I, arms raised up high as we cross that finish line in April, cheered on by my husband, Peter's wife Joanne, and all the JRS UK family.

**Want to run with refugees?** See what opportunities we have and learn what you'll support you get at [www.jrsuk.net/challenge-events](http://www.jrsuk.net/challenge-events)

## Walk with women seeking safety this Lent

Support women to access vital advice and casework



Find out more: [www.jrsuk.net/lent](http://www.jrsuk.net/lent)

# The Jesuit Refugee Service works in more than 50 countries around the world.

**JRS UK is made up of staff and many volunteers who work to accompany, serve and advocate for destitute and detained refugees in the UK, of all faiths and none.**

If you can, please consider donating to JRS UK. With your support JRS UK can continue to accompany destitute and detained refugees in a spirit of hospitality, welcome and love.

## Donate today

Visit [www.jrsuk.net/donate](http://www.jrsuk.net/donate)

Email [uk@jrs.net](mailto:uk@jrs.net)

Mail your cheque/postal order made payable to Jesuit Refugee Service to the address on the right.



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