

<http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org/blog/entry/we-can-no-longer-ignore-nauru-atrocities-against-women-and-children-plague>

We can no longer ignore Nauru: Atrocities against women, children plague

Australian detention center

Frances Nguyen/Contributor

Women Under Siege

In the middle of the Pacific Ocean lies the tiny, remote island of Nauru, which has come under scrutiny recently by the media and human rights groups.

The Australian government, which provides direct aid to Nauru, uses the island to indefinitely hold asylum seekers who have traveled to Australia by boat. Whether or not they are identified as refugees, anyone who comes to Australia by boat is sent to Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island for "mandatory detention" as part of the Australian government's policy. At the end of June, *The Guardian* reported, 442 people—338 men, 55 women, and 49 children—were being held at the center on Nauru.

Nauru's Regional Processing Center closed in 2008, with Australia promising a more compassionate response to asylum seekers. But, as the numbers continued to grow, the detention center [reopened](#) in 2012. Since then, reports of abuse, sexualized violence, and suicide have [steadily](#) increased. Despite [condemnation by human rights groups](#), the Australian government has repeatedly turned a blind eye to the center's conditions, denying any responsibility since it is [owned and operated under Nauruan law](#).

Then on August 10, *The Guardian's* Australia edition published a large trove of documents that was [leaked](#) to the outlet by an unknown source. Since then, media coverage has exploded, and the Australian government has been scrambling to provide answers to an enraged international public. Now, the plight of the center's detainees can no longer be ignored.

What are known as the "Nauru Files" feature a raw and unflinching look at an offshore detention system that costs Australian taxpayers [\\$1.2 billion](#) a year to sustain. The articles listed here illustrate the uniquely torturous and long-standing abuse of the refugees and asylum seekers—particularly women and children—who have been held for years on this tiny island nation, without hope for freedom

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or safety.

This video, narrated by the newspaper's Ben Doherty, is a short and damning history of how the detention center on Nauru came to be, its role in Australia's larger program of offshore processing, and the horrifying depth of injustice that is taking place on the island.

Earlier this month, *The Guardian* Australia published more than 2,000 incident reports by detention staff, cataloging the dramatic scale and severity of mistreatment of refugees and asylum seekers within its walls.

The most disturbing revelation from the Nauru Files is the alarming [dominance of incidents involving minors versus non-minors](#), including incidents of sexual assault: "They show how the Australian government has failed to respond to warning signs and reveal sexual assault allegations—many involving children—that have never been previously disclosed."

In a joint statement, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International detailed the breadth of abuses reported on the island, including several instances of sexualized violence committed by local Nauruans, as well as the largely nonexistent response from police and government officials, which has been [corroborated elsewhere](#). One woman said, "We are always scared, all the time. I am always checking the door to see if it is locked. We can't go out alone."

Anna Neistat, senior director for research at Amnesty International, tells NPR about what she found when she visited the island and spoke to refugees and asylum seekers. She lists incidents of machete attacks from the local population, sexual abuse of children, and suicide attempts of one mother who couldn't protect her son after he was attacked by a guard.

Even more heartbreaking is her testimony of who these refugees are: "The refugees I met on Nauru were amazing, and, I don't say it lightly," she says. "These people *do* stand out. All of them are highly educated. They're nurses, art teachers, electrical engineers. ... They would be such a great asset to any society, including the Australian society."

Former Save the Children aid workers who were stationed on the island as child care protection workers or in similar roles [released a statement](#) that validated the incident reports [published by *The Guardian*](#). They also attest to the culture of fear

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and secrecy instilled in workers. Detention center personnel can face up to two years in jail if they speak out about their experiences.

“It appears from looking through the published database that nowhere near the full extent of the incident reports written on a day-to-day basis have been released,” said Jane Willey, a former teacher for Save the Children. “What you are seeing here is just the tip of the iceberg.”

An Australian Senate inquiry heard in September about the alleged rapes and abuse of women and children within the processing center. The Senate committee’s “Majority Report” urged then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott to remove all children “as soon as possible.” No government action has been taken to achieve such a goal.

Australia’s immigration minister, Peter Dutton, used his first press opportunity since the publishing of the Nauru Files to say, simply, that asylum seekers were making false allegations of sexual assault and self-harm to get to Australia and denied the reports of sexual abuse of children. The Department of Immigration and Border Protection provided further support to Dutton when it issued a statement claiming that many of the reports included in the Nauru files were “unconfirmed allegations or uncorroborated statements and claims.”

Australia’s harsh immigration policy has been thrown into question, most recently in October, when the story of a 23-year-old Somali refugee woman known as “Abyan” caught the attention of Australian media, and shocked people.

After becoming pregnant from an alleged rape by an unknown man on Nauru, Abyan begged for weeks to be flown to Australia for an abortion, which is illegal on Nauru. She was flown in October to Australia for the abortion, then secretly sent back to Nauru less than a week later on a private charter, without any opportunity to speak to her lawyers. After public outcry and [pressure from the United Nations](#), Immigration Minister Peter Dutton announced she would return to Australia for “medical advice.” Her story has since become [emblematic](#) of the treatment of refugee and asylum seekers on the island.

Life outside the camps, and among the Nauruan community, is no less dangerous. *The Saturday Paper*, an Australian weekly, published an article that follows the story of a woman who was abducted, raped, beaten, and left for dead after taking a day trip away from the detention center. After several attempts at

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suicide, she was flown to Brisbane for medical attention. Her story is a familiar one.

Of life for women refugees who have resettled outside of the camps and in the local community, Martin McKenzie-Murray writes: "It's a settlement program that releases vulnerable single women to remote parts of the island, where they are preyed upon with impunity, and for whom justice is thwarted by their frightened reticence and a compromised police force. To this day, no convictions have been recorded for assaults on refugees."