

Voices from Burnside Jail: Immigration detention stories

I ran away from Iran, when I was 23 years old, to escape my family who wanted to kill me, and to be able to live in a country where I could have rights as a woman. When I arrived at the airport in Halifax, Nova Scotia, I explained that I was a refugee and needed protection, but I was not allowed to enter and was only questioned about my identity documents. After one day, they said were taking me somewhere to hold me for a while, not like a jail but better. I thought they were going to help me. But when they took me to the jail and I realized it was a jail, I was so scared. I can't explain. There are no words to explain my feelings. I didn't speak any English then and I remember I needed water but didn't know how to ask. I was alone in a cell by myself for the first 3 days. The CBSA officers came in once a week to meet with me with an interpreter but the rest of the time in jail, I couldn't understand anything. When CBSA came, they were angry that I hadn't made any contact to get more documents but when I asked the jail, I was not allowed to make any calls. I was so hopeless. I was stressed and depressed and couldn't eat. I fainted many times. Twice I was taken out of the jail to the hospital and they put shackles on my feet so I couldn't walk around. All the other people at the hospital stared at me like I was a bad or dangerous person. I was so humiliated. Sometimes in the jail there were violent fights and I was terrified. I was crying every day and sick with high blood pressure and no one cared. And I cried more because no one cared. I was released after 40 days, thanks to my lawyer, but this experience still lives with me. Now it has been 4 years and I don't tell anyone, my friends, my fiancé, no one around me knows about this as it is so painful and shameful for me still. Back home in Iran, all the time, I was hearing that in Canada they care about rights and about women. When I arrived here, I was so scared from my past and my journey and I thought that I would finally be able to be safe and live free. I was honestly shocked when I arrived in Canada and was put in jail. - **Nasrin**

*When I was detained and sent to the Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility at Burnside, I suffered one of the most agonizing anxiety attacks ever. The only way to describe my first night was to say that it was hell. Not only because I was literally a prisoner in a small, cold, dark room but at the same time I was freaking out because the CBSA agents said they were deporting me, sending me back to a country where I was in danger. I truly believed that I was going to die that night because my mind was going to explode. Life in prison was incredibly stressful and difficult. Everyone I developed a friendship with ended up getting beaten up at some point. I learned to keep my head down. I had to be constantly vigilant, and this weighed on me. Everyone knew I was there for immigration reasons, but sometimes they got suspicious that I had been planted there. When I was finally released from detention, I had lost my job and owed several months of back rent to my landlord. I felt like the people I knew treated me differently than before, like they thought I was a criminal now and they suspected me. - **Alan***

Canada is among the few countries in the world to rely on an immigration detention system with no upper limits. I came to this country seeking asylum in fear of deportation after fleeing my country as a child and living undocumented in the United States for a decade. After I arrived in Nova Scotia, I spent 10 months in Burnside Correctional Facility which was mentally and emotionally challenging for me. Every month I would go to a hearing and the same argument was made to keep me confined. Negative assumptions of my character were made based on my actions during desperate moments of my life. It made me sad because every month I would have to go listen to someone say that I am someone that I'm not with little evidence. - **Djibril**

*I was in immigration detention, in jail in Burnside for almost two months. I left my country to save my life as I was in danger because of my sexual orientation. I stand with human rights against this contract of holding people in these jails, including vulnerable people, without a time limit. Being in jail affected my health in extreme ways, until I started thinking about ending my life. This needs to stop, please. - **Adam***

After running away from my country where I was scared to be killed or taken to jail for my beliefs, I found myself imprisoned for 15 days in Burnside jail, N.S. This experience it felt as my worst nightmare. As an asylum seeker I was treated as a criminal being locked 23 hours per day in a cell by myself allowed to have one hour for shower and listening to 24/7 racist words from other prisoners and some correctional officers. In fact, one of these officers when I called home to speak to my family and request my documents, she threatened me if I spoke to them on a different language rather than English or French she will end my call. I know the time I spent in jail was just 15 days but the consequences of this awful experience have harmed me mentally and it has taken me long time to recover. Is for this I kindly request to stop taking newcomers looking for protection to detention for no reason. We have done nothing wrong, we are seeking only for protection. – **Idir**

[The above testimonials and quotes were collected from previous clients of the Halifax Refugee Clinic (pseudonyms used) detained on immigration grounds at the Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility]