



Statement on legal aid for Shamima Begum

Young Legal Aid Lawyers (YLAL) notes the media reports stating that legal aid funding will be granted to Shamima Begum, the Bethnal Green schoolgirl who travelled to Syria to join ISIS at the age of 15.

YLAL staunchly believes that public funding should be available to all those who cannot afford to pay for their own legal advice and representation. Access to justice is a fundamental human right, and a crucial component of the rule of law in our democratic society.

In order to make access to justice effective and equal, legal aid must be available to all – subject to appropriate financial means tests – irrespective of any crimes of which they are accused. This is particularly important in cases such as this, where a British citizen has had her citizenship revoked by the Home Secretary, Sajid Javid.

Stripping a person of their citizenship is one of the most drastic steps that any government can take against its citizens. It is vital that a citizen has the right to challenge that decision in court, and that they should be granted public funding for legal representation where they are unable to afford it themselves.

Regardless of the nature of the activities of which Shamima Begum has been accused, she has a fundamental right to challenge the decision of the Home Secretary. This can only be properly done if she is able to access legal advice and representation, paid for by legal aid, in order to ensure her right to a fair hearing.

YLAL is disappointed and concerned to see the further demonization of legal aid and legal aid lawyers by parts of the media. We urge politicians of all parties to provide honest and balanced information to the public regarding the legal aid system and its importance to our democracy and freedoms.

YLAL rejects the calls for legal aid funding to be withheld or revoked from Shamima Begum. Legal aid is fundamental to ensure that those who are impacted by decisions of the state are able to challenge and scrutinise the legality of these decisions, and that there is effective and equal access to justice regardless of a person's financial means.

Legal aid is essential to ensure that the rule of law and the fundamental principles of our democracy are upheld. We will continue to campaign for the restoration of legal aid in areas such as family, housing, immigration, inquests and prison law.

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