

# **Focus Groups with Refugees: Report to the Welsh Refugee Council**

## **Findings**

During 2005 researchers from the Cardiff University School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies ran a series of focus groups with refugees. This document provides a summary of their findings.



- Inclusion begins on day one; through Home Office delays, enforced unemployment, dispersal and poor quality NASS housing, asylum seekers are made to believe that they are not welcome in this country. Some say these are more traumatic experiences than they suffered in their home countries.
- Refugees most need information on their entitlements, opportunities and sources of support, as well as on British and Welsh norms and values. But this is difficult to find, and service providers do not use translation services consistently, creating discrimination.
- Racism, anti-refugeeism and Islamophobia are common experiences for refugees. Many express the desire to integrate with whites, but cannot force them to be friends. Many receive invaluable support from their own communities. These under-funded BME voluntary groups and refugee community organisations need both bonding capital to continue to receive refugees, and bridging capital to enable greater integration with whites.
- More refugees are unemployed here than they were in their home countries. Their qualifications and experience are not recognised, they have gaps in their CVs and those who do find work tend to end up in low paid, low skilled, exploitative occupations. WAG's refugee doctor scheme was, however, a limited success and needs to be extended.
- Refugee children suffer racist, anti-refugee and Islamophobic bullying in school. Some multi-cultural schools have good practices against this but predominantly white schools have yet to learn. Yet refugee children do access mainstream culture through schools and have high ambitions to show for it.
- Poverty underlies many refugees' problems. Many experience inappropriate emergency accommodation and poor quality council housing. Councils can discriminate by refusing to refugees the three housing choices other tenants are granted. One good example, the Refugee Homefinder service, is now defunct.
- Many refugees are in need of mental health support, but there is no dedicated service in Wales.
- The children of asylum-seeking mothers who are unable to speak English are especially vulnerable. Some may not be receiving the support to which they are entitled and are at risk of starvation. Destitute asylum seekers are also at risk of starvation, rape and murder.

## **Language.**

Refugees want to learn English to make friends, get jobs and live as ordinary people in Wales, and they do it themselves by watching TV and asking bilingual friends. But some are prevented by poverty from accessing free ESOL lessons, and the teaching does not match individual needs. Worries about practical problems (e.g., household income) make it harder to learn, especially for long-term asylum seekers, for whom uncertainty is their biggest barrier. The use of translation services by public service providers is patchy, creating discrimination. Refugees often find it difficult to find adequate information on their entitlements and suffer from their lack of knowledge about British culture. The transition period is the most acute time of need for fast, accurate information for refugees.

## **Building Strong Communities.**

Racism, anti-refugeeism and Islamophobia are common experiences for refugees in Wales, and are intertwined. They occur in everyday situations such as shops and schools, as well as at the front desks of public service providers. Refugees are likely to consider their neighbours to be good ones if they are not abused by them. White youths and men are the most likely attackers. Whites are the least integrated with refugees. White Welsh culture has exclusionary aspects such as alcohol-drinking and gender-mixing, and refugees are rarely approached by whites offering friendship. Refugees feel most comfortable in communities they can identify with, such as their national group, other refugees or those with the same professional background. Voluntary organisations provide vital support for refugees, and all refugees who have spoken of them in the focus groups said they had a positive impact on their lives, yet the groups are under-funded. Refugee community organisation leaders argue they could do much more to improve refugees' lives and their chances of integration.

Religion is also important to most of the refugees in the focus groups, and it can be an important site of integration and support, though a limited number are prevented from accessing the place of worship of their choice by poverty. The media spreads the fear of white prejudice amongst refugees, and did so particularly in the aftermath of 7/7, when refugees suffered incidents of prejudice to a greater extent than usual. The police are inconsistent in their provision of services, with some officers providing excellent support and others acting and speaking in a racist/anti-refugeeist or Islamophobic way. A considerable number of refugees feel that they get a lesser service than whites and do not therefore report incidents of prejudice. Refugees are disenfranchised in the current electoral system – only Commonwealth refugees can vote. There is little concern about their lack of voting rights, except amongst those who have realised how it impacts on their life, (e.g. they are not offered Visa cards), who consider the extra rights of Commonwealth refugees to be discriminatory and the children of refugees, who may identify themselves as British.

## **Fulfilling Potential**

### *Employment*

Nearly three-quarters of the refugees in the focus groups were unemployed, yet over half had been employed in their countries of origin. Those who are employed tend to find worse jobs than they had previously had. Their qualifications and experience are not recognised. Enforced unemployment during their asylum seeking years makes a gap in their CVs and ensures that they cannot get references and those who owned their own businesses cannot get licences. Many women with children would also like to work, but cannot afford childcare. Nobody preferred to get benefits rather than work, except for a disabled person and full-time mothers. Professional people and men particularly spoke of their shame of being un- or under-employed, and of it damaging their chances of integration. Under-employment (for example, the doctor with twenty years experience and all the requisite certificates for the UK who works in a take-away) takes place at low pay, at irregular and long hours, in largely unregulated forms of unskilled labour where exploitation and discrimination are endemic. Refugees can also suffer racism/anti-refugeeism/Islamophobia at work, even at work in the offices of public services. An example of good practice is in the WAG funding of a scheme for refugee doctors to gain work experience, but it was too short to impact on their chances for employment, although they did gain useful knowledge of the NHS system. Professional people like these particularly complain of inadequate service from the JobCentrePlus, which they feel urges them into under-employment in order to close their files.

### *Education and Welfare of the Refugee Child.*

Racist, anti-refugeeist or Islamophobic bullying is a common experience of the refugee child, although there are some examples of good anti-bullying practice in multi-cultural schools. Refugee children have learnt to be ashamed of their immigration status and do not admit to being a refugee in school. Predominantly white schools sometimes fail to have the requisite knowledge concerning refugees and a range of welfare measures such as free school meals, book discounts etc. Some teachers practice active discrimination in schools against refugee children and their parents. Others turn a blind eye to discrimination by other children. However, schools can also be places of integration, where children and parents mix with the host communities. Parents are pleased that their children are accessing a mainstream service, which does not label them as refugees. Parents and younger, and female children also appreciate the extra English classes (EAL), although older males profess to be embarrassed, and all the children find their friends the best source of language learning. The children have high ambitions, and tend to be more involved in sporting and cultural activities than their parents. However, refugee children are vulnerable to poverty, which can negatively impact their life chances (see section 5).

#### **4. Accessing Core Services.**

##### *Housing*

Most asylum seekers are accommodated by NASS, and the serious shortcomings of this agency damage prospects for integration from day one. Common complaints concern the poor quality of the housing, in dangerous neighbourhoods far from local amenities. People with different religious backgrounds, different cultures, different ages are forced to share bedrooms. Houses can be without basic equipment such as ovens and fridges. Dispersal is a source of anxiety and can destroy a person's efforts to integrate overnight. Multiple dispersals can also lead to children missing school. Many refugees complain about the rudeness of employees of NASS or their subsidiary agencies. When a decision to remain is granted, the new refugees find it difficult to find accommodation in 28 days. Most go on a waiting list for council house or housing association accommodation, and as supply is limited, some are forced into temporary or emergency accommodation, which can be as poor quality as NASS houses. There they must share with white drug addicts, alcoholics and those with mental health issues. One example of good practice is the Refugee Homefinder Service, which has recently been discontinued in Cardiff but was praised by refugees as helpful. Problems such as lack of space, poor maintenance and poor location do not disappear when refugees finally access council or housing association accommodation, as these are common to people experiencing poverty. Some refugees, however, have found they are discriminated against by the council as they do not receive the three housing choices that non-refugee clients are offered. Few refugees can afford private rental, and are also disadvantaged for references, but those who seek it do so because it is a sign of their autonomy and it works positively for integration.

##### *Health*

Many refugees have received excellent service from the NHS, and thank the doctors and nurses who helped them. However, there are still gaps, such as the patchy provision of translation at hospitals or GPs surgeries. Some problems, such as lengthy waiting lists, are common to UK citizens. Yet if refugees without this cultural knowledge can interpret them as discriminatory, just as they experience it in other fields. There may be a reluctance to prescribe expensive drugs, and asylum seekers have been refused operations. Doctors also need to be made aware that if their opinion on whether a person has been tortured must reach the Home Office before the case is closed. However schemes intended to improve access to GPs can result in the addition of another layer of bureaucracy for the refugee to negotiate. Mental health treatment is a chronic need for many refugees. There is no dedicated service in Wales to deal with problems of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Acute Stress Disorder (ASD) that can arise from experiences such as imprisonment and torture, fleeing the home, the loss of loved ones, a traumatic journey and several years spent in the UK in enforced poverty. The one counter-example, where counselling was given to a woman referred by the Medical Foundation, shows that it was very positive for the woman herself and for her chances of integration.

## **5. The Vulnerable**

### *Safety*

Safety is relative for refugees, and they are likely to say they feel safe because they are safer than in their home countries, even as they suffer racist/anti-refugeeist/Islamophobic abuse. Only destitute asylum seekers say they are not safe.

### *Children*

Poverty makes refugee children vulnerable. A few asylum seeking mothers in the focus groups are suffering extreme poverty on limited NASS assistance such as vouchers they can not use to buy baby food. Problems with the delivery of NASS vouchers and social services support can result in the threat of starvation for children. Children also suffer most from inadequate housing, and some have developed asthma and allergies from damp, badly maintained accommodation. All the children in the focus groups still missed family and friends in their country of origin, and were therefore vulnerable to changes such as moving house and schools, to which they are subject more often than host children. Poverty prevents children from taking up life chances in fields such as sport, where equipment is required. Poverty constricts the lives of the parents of refugee children, particularly mothers, who cannot afford childcare after school and during holidays. Children of asylum-seeking parents, who may have spent up to seven years in the UK school system, may be unable to go to university. Without a positive decision for their parents, they would have to pay the considerably more expensive overseas fees. Some are being discouraged at college from applying to universities.

### *The Destitute*

Destitute asylum seekers are sleeping rough, reliant on friends and charity for everything, including clothes, food and a bed for the night. They cannot earn money and move from place to place in fear of deportation. They do not use homeless shelters for fear of deportation. They have no means of contacting relatives who are also destitute asylum seekers. Females have additional fears of rape and concerns around feminine hygiene issues; they may be obliged to sell sex in return for accommodation.