

The right to work is a fundamental right. It is a right that people have fought for through the centuries and across the world. It is a right that is being denied to one of the most vulnerable groups of people living in the UK today.



Who are asylum seekers?

Asylum seekers have been driven from their homelands by persecution, human rights abuses and conflict. Of those who decide to make the long and arduous journey to Britain to seek asylum, many will have seen and experienced terrible things: their loved ones may have been killed, they might have been beaten and raped, or unjustly imprisoned because of their beliefs. They arrive here looking for a place that will provide sanctuary and protection from the horrors of persecution that they are trying to leave behind. By searching for safety in the UK, people are exercising a legal right that we all share: the right to claim asylum, as is laid out in the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention.

Of the thousands of people who apply for asylum in Britain each year, a small proportion have their need for protection recognised by the Home Office, and are granted refugee status. However, the majority of people who apply for asylum will have their claims refused. In 2007, an estimated 16,800 people became refused asylum seekers. This means that the government determined that they have no right to be here. Many of these people will remain in Britain however, as conditions in their country mean it is too dangerous to return.

Why can't they work?

Asylum seekers have not come here for economic advancement and to increase their career prospects. They are not economic migrants in pursuit of a job. However, whilst they are here, people seeking asylum would like the opportunity to support themselves and their families.

Under current government rules this is not possible. In 2002, the government altered their long standing policy, which had allowed asylum seekers to apply for the permission to work after they had been in Britain for 6 months. From then on, the government declared, any asylum seekers arriving in Britain would be prevented from working under any circumstances. Some minimal concessions have been made since, which allow a small number of asylum seekers to apply for permission to work after one year, under limited and exceptional circumstances. Those that apply for permission however, have no guarantee that their request will be granted.

Without the permission to work, people seeking asylum are forced to live on limited financial assistance from the UK Borders Agency (UKBA). Barely at subsistence levels, these handouts push asylum seekers into unacceptable levels of poverty. Those whose cases have been refused receive no support from the government at all and will be forced into destitution.

What impact does this have?

• Poverty

Exclusion from paid employment limits the capacity of asylum seekers to provide for their families. The financial assistance that UKBA provides to people seeking asylum currently stands at 70% of income support, meaning that an adult asylum seeker over 25 or a lone parent over 18 currently receives £41.41 a week. Subsistence at this level of support is very hard. People seeking asylum can find it difficult to buy healthy food, and products like children's toys, new clothes and even bus tickets can be unaffordable. This minimal assistance has left an estimated 100,000 vulnerable children 'condemned to a childhood of poverty, uncertainty and fear' (Barnados, 2008).

"When you go to the shop you can't afford things. Maria asks for things, 'Mummy...' and I was desperate. Sometimes when I came back from the shop, I start crying. I can't give her things. Kids they love things like chocolate. You can't afford it all the time. I was crying all the time, all the time. And when I was crying, she was crying too. I have to just be strong and talk to her and try to make her understand, but at that age it was so difficult for her to understand the kind of life we were in."

(Anonymous, Barnados, 2008)

When asylum seekers' applications are refused, the poverty that results from not being able to work is even worse. 3 weeks after an asylum seeker's case is refused, their financial support is stopped and they are thrown out of their accommodation. They are then expected to voluntarily leave the UK, or face potential removal by force. However, for many people whose asylum claims have been refused, returning home is not an option. Often, asylum seekers' home countries are too dangerous to return to, and they fear they



STAR is calling for the government to let asylum seekers work.

They can work. They want to work. Let them work

will face further persecution or even death if they go back.

Many people also feel that their case for asylum has not been fairly heard. In 2006, 47% of Somali nationals whose cases were initially refused had this decision overturned at appeal. Flawed decisions are endemic to the asylum system and many people would rather stay in Britain with no financial assistance than go home without contesting an unsound decision on their claim. In these circumstances, people with refused asylum claims are left to fend for themselves, forced into destitution, which is designed to drive them out of the country.

- **Skills, employability and the economy**

People seeking asylum in Britain are a highly educated, skilled and qualified group of people. In a recent survey carried out by the University of London on behalf of the department for Work and Pensions, 56% of asylum seeker and refugee respondents above the age of 18 had a qualification before their arrival to Britain. However, whilst asylum seekers are refused the right to work, they are unable to use and develop these skills, and practical qualifications in fields such as IT can even become out-dated; rendered irrelevant by the fast pace of technological advances.

Although there are many asylum seekers who are unfairly denied the chance to stay in Britain, there is still a notable proportion annually that are granted either full refugee status, or some form of discretionary leave to remain. In 2007, the number of initial applicants that were granted refugee status stood at 16%. However, the long term prospects of those granted status –and thus permission to work- are greatly reduced by the extended periods of enforced unemployment they experience during the asylum process. Unemployment rates amongst refugees are unacceptably high, and even those who do manage to find meaningful employment may not return to professional jobs despite pre-migration experience.

- **Integration and Emotional Wellbeing**

Seeking asylum in Britain is an experience in which people's destinies are largely taken from out of their own control. Subject to the policies and regulations of unaccountable organisations and officials, people seeking asylum often feel disempowered and constrained whilst waiting for a response to their claim.

"I don't choose anything, anything. Everything is chosen for me here, everything is chosen by the government, where to live, when to go, what to do, everything. [...]"

(Anonymous, Refugee Council 2007)

Amongst such uncertainty, the opportunity to work can help people to re-gain a sense of control over their life and repair the emotional and mental damage that is regularly the result of the experience of exile. Engaging in work can help people seeking asylum to improve their English; meet new people; make friends and contribute to the community; helping to instil a feeling of acceptance and inclusion in British society. Current government policy that stops asylum seekers from working massively restricts these opportunities for asylum seekers to establish and rebuild their lives within the UK. Instead, people seeking asylum

are placed in a state of frustrating limbo, in which denial of a working life compounds the traumatic upheaval and uncertainty of the asylum system.

What is the alternative?

Refusing asylum seekers the right to work impacts upon all elements of their lives. It reduces their ability to support themselves and their families, negatively affects their emotional and mental wellbeing, hinders their chances of integration and limits community cohesion. It also actively de-skills them and reduces their employability. It is a policy which is not only inhumane but makes no economic sense.

Asylum seekers should be able to work from day one.

This would mean that British taxpayers would not have to pay for the financial support of asylum seekers, whilst their productive potential was being frustratingly wasted. Britain's economy and community could benefit from the skills and expertise of people seeking asylum, and those granted refugee status could continue to contribute whilst they remain in the UK.



Want to know more?

STAR is joining forces with The Refugee Council, TUC and Brighter Futures for the next year to campaign for the right to work for asylum seekers. For more information on the impacts of current government policy, and to find out how students across the country are supporting the right to work for asylum seekers and taking action throughout the year, visit:



www.star-network.org.uk