



Who are asylum seekers?

Asylum seekers have been driven from their homelands by persecution, human rights abuses and conflict. Many who make the traumatic and distressing journey to Britain in search of asylum will have seen and experienced unimaginably horrific events: their loved ones may have been killed, they may have been tortured, beaten or raped. They arrive looking for a place that will provide protection from the horrors of persecution they are trying to leave behind.

Thousands of people apply for asylum in the UK each year, but only a small proportion of them are successfully granted protection by the Home Office and given refugee status. In 2007 there were around 23,430 applications made with only about 6,540 being given leave to remain. The majority of asylum applicants are refused. In 2007, an estimated 16,800 people became refused asylum seekers. They often become trapped here because conditions in their home country make it impossible to return, or they fear what may happen if they return.

Why can't they work?

Before 2002 asylum seekers were allowed to apply for permission to work if they had been waiting in the UK for an initial decision for 6 months. This right was removed in 2002.

There was a small change in February 2005 when the UK implemented a European Council Directive. This permitted a small number of asylum seekers to apply for the right to work if they had not received an initial decision after 12 months. However, those that apply for permission have no guarantee that their request will be granted.

Those refused asylum have no pathway for permission to work.

What impact does this have?

Poverty

Exclusion from paid employment limits the capacity of asylum seekers to provide for themselves and their families. The financial assistance that UKBA provides to people seeking asylum currently stands at 70% of income support. A single adult claiming asylum receives just £42.16 a week. Living 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)

If you are refused asylum you may end up with no support at all. After just 21 days of receiving a final, negative decision, all financial support is stopped and you are removed from your accommodation. You 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 or they fear they will face further persecution or even death if they go back.



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

Many people feel that their case for asylum has not been fairly heard. In 2006, 47% of Somali nationals whose cases were initially refused had the 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 and thus forced into destitution, effectively a government tool aimed at driving people out of the country. Moreover, for many there is no viable route home. For example, no one is currently being returned to Zimbabwe.

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. Practical qualifications in fields such as IT can even become out-dated or rendered irrelevant by the fast pace of technological advances.

The extended periods of enforced unemployment experienced during the application process can have long-term negative effects on skill maintenance and ability to work. This could be a contributing factor to the high unemployment rates amongst refugees, which was placed at 36% in the most recent studies (2003) and which is bound to be higher in the current economic climate. Thus denial of the right to work during the application process has continued negative ramifications for those who do receive refugee status or some form of discretionary leave to remain, which was 16% of all applications in 2007.

“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)

Integration and Emotional Wellbeing

Seeking asylum in Britain is a disconcerting experience which sees decisions on an individual's future being taken largely out of their 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.

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 dam-

age that is often the result of experiencing 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 into British society.

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.

Let people seeking asylum work. 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.



Want to know more?

STAR is working with The Refugee Council, TUC and Brighter Futures 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 visit:

www.star-network.org.uk