



Refugees' Experiences and Views of Poverty in Scotland

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Destitution amongst asylum seekers in the UK, including those who have had their initial claim refused, has received a significant amount of interest in recent years (Green 2006; Mulvey 2009a; Sim 2009; Williams & Kaye 2010). However, the experiences of those who have leave to remain has received considerably less attention leading to the development of this research project. This report provides the results of a small scale study conducted by the Scottish Poverty Information Unit (SPIU) for Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) to explore the experiences and views of poverty amongst refugees in Glasgow.

While the terms asylum seeker and refugee are often used interchangeably, both are legal terms which bring different sets of entitlements. This small study focused on exploring the experiences of those with status as a refugee as outlined in Article 1 of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees¹ which defines a refugee as a person who:

“owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...”²

Poverty in Scotland

Around 860,000 people in Scotland live in poverty (2008-09, before deducting housing costs) - this represents 17% of the population (Scottish Government, 2010). This estimate is based on household incomes and includes 21% of children in Scotland (210,000) and 16% of adults. Although many of the people who are in poverty are in households where no one works, around 6% of people are in households where someone works (in-work poverty). The risks of being poor are lower for people in households where someone works, particularly if at least one person works full-time.

¹ For further information on the 1951 UN Convention see www.unhcr.org.uk

² http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/Fair_Play

Scottish Poverty Information Unit

Refugee Poverty

There is a body of research across the UK that provides evidence of the experience of poverty amongst asylum seekers (for example, see Mulvey, 2009a; Hamilton and Harris, 2009; Doyle, 2008; Malfait, 2008). However, the situation of refugees is much more difficult to glean from existing research, so much so that, in their report on economic inequality in the UK, Hills et al could say little about refugee poverty, except to anticipate on the basis of qualitative studies that some asylum seekers and refugees “may be highly disadvantaged” (2010:5). Refugees are not obliged to declare their status once they have leave to remain therefore become invisible in statistical terms. Existing evidence suggests that refugees face poverty and disadvantage in ways that are similar to other marginalised groups in society (Mulvey 2009b).

About the research

This research was designed to inform policy and practice by identifying:

- The nature and experience of poverty amongst refugees in Glasgow;
- The factors that influence such experience;
- The impact this is having on their integration; and
- Recommendations for policy change and further research

There were two stages to the research project:

- i). Six interviews with staff working in various refugee support roles across Glasgow at both operational and strategic level. The findings from these interviews informed the development of the second stage of research.
- ii). Four focus groups were held with a total of 12 refugees; three of whom had received status through the legacy process and nine who had received status under the New Asylum Model (NAM).

Factors influencing poverty for refugees

The refugees who participated in the research were either in low paid work or receiving benefits, leading to low income emerging as a key reason for refugee poverty in Scotland. It was evident that participants struggled to manage on their limited income. However, difficulties with money appeared to be more to do with low income levels than with poor money management. In addition, some participants had experienced difficulties with paying utility bills. This can be related to a combination of high fuel costs in Scotland and making the transition from living in UKBA accommodation as an asylum seeker (when utility bills are included in the support package) to becoming a refugee with responsibility for all household bills.

Other financial inclusion issues also had an impact on the experiences of research participants. For example, most participants had major difficulties in opening a bank account. Most had experienced difficulties providing the types of proof of identification requested by banks. A basic bank account or a Post Office Card Account appeared to be the only options for some participants despite the fact that some were in paid employment. The struggle to manage a low income was compounded by participants sending money to family in their country of origin despite having very little themselves. Refugees living on benefits sometimes sent as much as £100 each month to support family members.

Employment

All refugees we spoke to saw work as the main route out of poverty. There was no sense that anyone thought that they would be worse off in work. All participants wanted to take paid employment regardless of their circumstances, whether they related to family responsibilities, health issues or language problems.

Difficulties in finding employment were mainly linked to lack of recognition of skills and experience by employers. Participants found the focus on work experience in Scotland frustrating and (lack of) recognition of qualifications also emerged as a significant issue. One refugee stated that: ‘in the UK you have to be an engineer to be a mechanic’. Some participants were involved in volunteering in an attempt to gain relevant work experience. Volunteering was seen as a way to get experience although there was some concern that, if the work was there, people should be paid for it.

Education

The main concern for refugees in terms of education was accessing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. Although everyone had been involved in some ESOL classes, there was frustration at the lack of availability of classes with as much as two year waiting lists being cited by several participants.

Housing

Housing and accommodation issues were clearly of high importance to participants and impacted upon their experiences of poverty in Scotland. Most socially rented properties in Glasgow have two bedrooms and refugees often have larger families, so need larger houses of three bedrooms or more. At the other end of the scale there is a relative lack of accommodation suitable for single people who make up a significant proportion of the refugee population. Over and above the size of available homes, the standard of accommodation was a recurring concern, with participants experiencing overcrowded conditions, hostel accommodation and poor quality accommodation.

Health

Participants were largely satisfied with the health services they received and generally were aware of how to access health services and where to go for medical help when they needed it. However, mental health as an issue for refugees was threaded throughout the discussions about almost all other issues. Social isolation and the lack of social support were viewed as particularly problematic for the mental health for refugees, together with their experiences of trauma. It was argued that specific services are required to address the experiences of trauma among refugees and mainstream mental health services may not have sufficient resources or staff with appropriate skills to support refugees towards positive mental health.

Refugee Integration & Poverty

Refugee Community Organisations were recognised as important in providing support and advocacy for refugees and the social aspect of their role was particularly valuable for creating new social networks. All participants made an effort to make connections with people and to build relationships. The importance of social events which encouraged different cultures to come together to get to know each other and learn about their respective cultures was evident from the focus groups.

Some of the research participants had developed strong social networks in their local community, particularly the women. There was some evidence therefore, that social bonds, bridges and links (Ager & Strang 2004) were being created and maintained. However, there was less evidence of bridges between participants and members of different communities, perhaps with the exception of one woman who invited other women from her local community into her home. There was a feeling that resources should be directed towards creating opportunities for communities to organise events that bring people of all nationalities together.

Policy issues

The transition period from being an asylum seeker to having refugee status was viewed as a key issue in terms of vulnerability to poverty for refugees. Each of the issues discussed by refugees were intensified during the transition period, particularly in relation to housing and benefits. Once leave to remain has been obtained new refugees have 28 days to vacate UKBA funded accommodation and access mainstream benefits and services. The restrictions on employment for asylum seekers were viewed as having a negative impact on the skills and confidence of those who gain refugee status. It was viewed as having a demotivating effect on the person and their sense of being in the country on a temporary basis. Skills and confidence were lost during that time and there were suggestions that this could be addressed by enabling asylum seekers to take part in training during the period of their claim so that they would be ready to move into employment as soon as they got status.

Discussion and Conclusions

This small inductive study set out to gain some initial understanding of the experiences of poverty amongst refugees in Glasgow. It is important to note that the refugees who took part have connections with supportive services, in particular the Scottish Refugee Council. Because of this, it is possible that they are better informed about their rights and responsibilities than those refugees who are less engaged with the services and support structures available. Despite this, the research participants highlighted a range of concerns that contribute to the potential for many refugees to be at greater risk of poverty than the general population. These issues would benefit from being explored in greater depth with a larger number of refugees in different stages of the transition into mainstream society.

The refugees participating in this research showed that they are not passive recipients of what society offers them: they are resourceful and creative in seeking solutions to the barriers they face. All participants did, however, consider themselves to be living in poverty. The routes out of poverty for refugees would therefore appear to be the same as routes out for other disadvantaged groups but the avenues open to refugees are narrower.

Whilst research participants highlighted that their experiences of poverty are multidimensional, they also recognised that increasing their income would be a key factor in their moving out of poverty. Participants clearly viewed employment as the main route out of poverty, yet those in work tended to be in low paid unstable jobs. It is interesting to note that no participants spoke of saving for the future, only about coping day-to-day. This inability to prepare for the future has long term implications for refugees in the same way as it has for other disadvantaged groups (Green 2007).

Recommendations

The following key recommendations and policy suggestions emerged from the research. Although small scale, the study provided an important insight into the experiences of refugees living in poverty in Scotland and highlighted some areas where further research could be carried out.

The approach to further research amongst refugees in Scotland may need action in two different directions. Hills et al (2010) highlighted the lack of sources of quantitative information on the position of asylum-seekers or refugees across the UK, as this is not a status which the surveys generally ask about. They argued that this is a problem that needs to be addressed if we are to gain a better understanding about inequality and poverty amongst this group of the population.

While some quantitative data would be helpful, the lack of knowledge about the experience of poverty amongst refugees calls for qualitative participatory approaches. If possible this should include, an element of longitudinal research that will be important to gaining a clear understanding of the particular issues and needs of refugees and how they changes over time in the process of integration. This approach is likely to produce data that can inform agendas for service providers, policy makers and agencies responsible for addressing issues concerning inequality and discrimination. In addition, some gender differences emerged in the research that suggests that women and men have different strategies for dealing with the isolation and approaches to integration. These highlight the need for services and support organisations to take account of gender differences and to be sensitive to their different requirements and for better understanding of the importance of such differences over time.

While destitution is more common amongst asylum seekers than refugees (Green 2006), it continues to have an impact upon the experiences of poverty for a small number of refugees, both in terms of personal experience and where support has to be provided to family and friends who are destitute. Further research would increase our understanding of the gaps in the refugee support system that cause refugees to become destitute and aid the development of structures designed to reduce this risk. Green (2006) suggested that support in the immediate period following status being gained should be extended to include refugees who are part of the case resolution process which would go some way to addressing the concerns highlighted by participants in the focus groups. In addition, the development of a scheme similar to RIES would benefit legacy refugees and ensure that they were less likely to become destitute.

Research participants struggled to find work even though they are more engaged with services than many other refugees. This raises many questions about the journey towards sustainable employment for refugees including:

- The routes into employment and how they were affected by the length of time in the asylum process;
- The extent to which types of employment gained reflect the skills and experience of the individual;
- The sustainability of employment; and the extent of in-work poverty an issue for refugees living in Scotland

In-depth qualitative research over a longer period would allow these journeys to be explored in-depth and could contribute to the development of strategies and solutions to address the barriers refugees face in securing sustainable employment.

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