

The Struggle to Contribute

A report identifying the barriers encountered by refugee women on their journey to employment in Scotland

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1. Introduction

Employment is a key issue for refugee women in Scotland. Ethnic minority women face more barriers to employment than the white Scottish population, and refugee women are even further disadvantaged in the labour market. This report is based on the views and experiences of the refugee and asylum seeking women who attended our Women's Employment Information Event on 24 February 2011 in Glasgow. The event was organised by the Refugee Women's Strategy Group in partnership with Scottish Refugee Council, Poverty Alliance and Women's Support Project, and was funded by the Women's Voluntary Sector Network with a contribution from Scottish Refugee Council.



2. Background and context

The Refugee Women's Strategy Group is a group of refugee and asylum-seeking women, supported by Scottish Refugee Council and funded by Comic Relief, whose aim is to ensure that refugee women's voices are heard by policy makers and service providers at all levels. We work together to represent the views of refugee and asylum seeking women in Scotland to key decision-makers, in order to influence the policy and practices that affect our quality of life. Our group is an integral part of the Scottish Refugee Policy Forum, which is a federation of Refugee Community Organisations and Framework for Dialogue Groups who aim to tackle issues collectively.¹

As a group, the two key issues that we have prioritised are:

- Ensuring that women's needs are met within the asylum process and that the asylum process is genuinely gender-sensitive

- Addressing the barriers that refugee women face when trying to access the labour market.

Within our own group, we identified the key barriers that refugee women face on their journey to employment, and began to consider how these could be tackled. We organised the Women's Employment Information Event in order to address the large information gap we had identified and to consult with the wider community of refugee and asylum seeking women.

¹ Framework for Dialogue (FFD) groups were established with the support of Glasgow City Council and Scottish Refugee Council in 2001, with funding from the Scottish Government Equalities Unit, as a way for local residents to play an active role in local community life, promoting integration and racial equality through dialogue between different communities.

3. Aims of the employment event

The aims of the event were to:

- Address the information needs of refugee and asylum seeking women by providing a range of employment information in a variety of formats;
- Consult with refugee and asylum seeking women, providing an opportunity for women to discuss their experiences of accessing employment and employment services;
- Give women the opportunity to identify barriers to employment and consider ways in which they could be addressed.



4. Format of the event

The event was attended by 41 refugee and asylum seeking women, with seven language groups represented. Many of the women that attended the event were in the asylum process and therefore, in line with regulations, for the most part prohibited from accessing employment. There were approximately 16 women (39%) with permission to work.

To open the day, Jan McLeod (Women's Support Project) and Ahlam Souidi (Refugee Women's Strategy Group) welcomed everyone to the event, and Sanaa Alsabag (Refugee Women's Strategy

Group) provided a keynote speech based on her personal experience of looking for a job.

A range of employment and support services (see Section 10) provided information stalls throughout the day and participated in the workshops.

By far the most important element of the event was the discussion groups, which took place in the afternoon and gave women the opportunity to share their own experiences of the journey to employment.

5. Summary of discussion groups

“Access to employment was identified as pivotal to the process of settlement and integration by both refugees and asylum seekers. Many expressed a desire to provide for themselves and to positively contribute to Scottish society, and disliked being reliant on state benefits.”

Charlaff et al (2004) Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Scotland: A Skills and Aspirations Audit, Scottish Executive and Scottish Refugee Council (online: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/47171/0025531.pdf>), p.47

5.1 Experience of accessing employment

Although many women were unable to access employment, due to restrictions in the asylum process, all were extremely keen to access employment once granted status and felt that it was important to prepare for the future. Women felt that work was not only about earning money but also about contributing to society, assisting integration and improving women’s physical and mental health. Many women were involved in voluntary work of some sort in different capacities.

Of the 16 women who had permission to work:

- Four were currently in employment, including one who was self-employed
- Two had worked part-time in the past, but were not currently employed.

Of the women who were not working:

- Six had tried to access employment without success

- Six had been unable to seek employment for a number of reasons including, that they had only recently got status; an inability to match their qualifications to UK equivalents; language barriers; college commitments; and childcare responsibilities.



5.2 Experience of accessing employability services

The majority of women that attended the event had not accessed any employability services and did not know of any services that could help them with employment issues. This is partly due to the fact that some women were still in the asylum process; others did not know where to go for help or advice.

In three of the workshops (consisting of a total of 30 women, of whom approximately eight had permission to work), the only employment service that women could identify was Job Centre Plus. It is worth noting that if any of the eight who had permission to work

had been granted refugee status, they would have been referred to the Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) at Scottish Refugee Council. However, they may not have considered this an ‘employability service’ as such, which could indicate a lack of awareness about integration services at Scottish Refugee Council.²

In the fourth workshop (consisting of a total of 10 women, of whom approximately eight had permission to work), the majority had accessed employability services, including Job Centre Plus, Local

Regeneration Agencies and A4E, through Scottish Refugee Council's RIES Service and Careers Scotland. Again, women who had not used services before did not know what services were available or how to find out about such services.

The small number of women who had used employability services gave varied responses as to the usefulness of services. Several women highlighted concerns about the service they had received from Job Centre Plus, including:

- **Difficulties accessing advice about National Insurance Numbers:**
 - An asylum seeking woman who had permission to work had gone to Job Centre Plus to get a National Insurance Number and was refused. She was not offered any further information or advice about how to go about getting one, despite having a right to work.
- **Customer service:**
 - A woman who had a basic level of English felt that staff did not communicate with her appropriately and the attitude of the staff member who attended her left her scared to ask for clarification or ask any further questions.
 - Several women felt that the Job Centre was not helpful and did not assist with the job application process or provide information about how to get a job

- Some women reported feeling under pressure from Job Centre staff to enter any kind of employment with no real guidance or understanding of the implications. For example, one woman felt she had been forced to take a job that she did not feel was appropriate to her level of English.

- **Problems with benefits:**
 - Women spoke of delays in accessing benefits when they moved from asylum support to mainstream benefits (for example Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit). This issue affects women in particular, as they are more likely to have childcare responsibilities.
- **Insecure/part-time work:**
 - Women reported being offered jobs that were insecure or part-time and which resulted in cuts to benefits, making it impossible for them to survive financially or support their families

.....
³ RIES was a UK Border Agency funded service at One Stop Shop services across the UK (including Scottish Refugee Council), which came to an end in September 2011. Scottish Refugee Council has indicated that it will continue to offer a refugee integration advice and advocacy service through its One Stop Shop, at least until March 2012.

“There are definite patterns of disadvantage for people from minority ethnic backgrounds which need to be acknowledged and tackled... There are also commonalities of experience, particularly in terms of discrimination and racism.”

Barnard, H. & Turner, C. (2011) Poverty and ethnicity: A review of evidence, Joseph Rowntree Trust (online) www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/poverty-ethnicity-evidence-summary.pdf

6. Key barriers to refugee women accessing employment and possible solutions

6.1 Lack of information about a range of employment issues, including services available

All four workshops highlighted a significant lack of available information about employment issues and employability services, with few women having any idea how to find out about the range of services available to them.

The following areas were identified as particularly lacking in information:

- employability services and how they can help
- training and courses
- benefits entitlements

- how the labour market in the UK works
- careers advice
- employment advice
- preparation for employment
- employment rights

It was suggested that there should be a central point of information and that agencies should provide information in a range of formats including written and verbal information, and organising information events or focus groups.

“Net discrimination in favour of white names over equivalent applications from ethnic minority candidates was 29%.”

Wood et al. (2009) A test of racial discrimination in recruitment practice in British cities, DWP Report No. 607, Norwich: TSO

6.2 Racism and discrimination

All four workshops identified racism and discrimination as major barriers to refugee women accessing the labour market. In one group, several women identified their foreign accent or foreign name as the reason for their unsuccessful job outcome. One woman, who had applied for many basic grade jobs but had not had any interviews, believed that racism may have been a factor. Women also identified employers' lack of knowledge about immigration status and the documentation surrounding permission to work as a reason for their reluctance to employ asylum seeking and refugee women. It was also raised that refugee women can experience discrimination on a range of grounds, including gender, race and disability.

In order to address discrimination, women felt that employers needed to be trained in work-related immigration regulations and that women needed to have better access to information about their rights

enshrined in the Equality Act 2010, so that they know what to do or where to go for advice if they experience discrimination.



6.3 Childcare

All four workshops identified childcare as a major barrier to refugee women (particularly single mothers) accessing the labour market, as women are more likely to have childcare responsibilities.

Women felt that it is crucial that affordable childcare and assistance with childcare costs are available for both education and employment, especially for ESOL classes. Many felt that women were more likely than

men to be offered part-time or insecure employment without being able to access any assistance with childcare. Women at the event felt that childcare was critical to enabling their participation in society, particularly as current budget cuts are putting more pressure on families and thus may isolate more women even further.

6.4 Lack of specific and appropriate services for refugees

“The [survey] results suggest that employers are more likely to make discriminatory assumptions about young ethnic minority women than they are of white women.”

Botcherby, S. (2006) Moving on Up? Ethnic Minority Women & Work, Equal Opportunities Commission, (p.12) http://www.northamptonshireobservatory.org.uk/docs/docbme_gfi_women_employment_survey070410145059.pdf

Two workshops identified limited specific refugee employment services as a key issue in terms of meeting the needs of refugees and asylum seekers. Women felt that there was a need for more specialised services for refugees and refugee women in particular. Women also raised that they needed more practical support with the job application process and more help to find an appropriate job.

Women felt that the role of the Job Centre should be to provide practical support with the application

process itself, to assist them with understanding their entitlement to benefits, the implications of taking on a particular job, and to provide information about appropriate vacancies. It was felt that the Job Centre could provide a more welcoming atmosphere and that staff in some cases could be more helpful. There was also a suggestion that the Job Centre could provide information about other relevant services.

6.5 Lack of employability preparation before being granted status

Women in two workshops highlighted the fact that they had not accessed any careers or employability advice while in the asylum process itself and felt that there was a need for employment preparation for both asylum seekers and refugees.

It was suggested that this should include the

provision of careers and employment advice, as well as assistance for women to develop a personal plan with short- and long-term goals in order to achieve their aims. Women also felt that there was a need for more full-time placements to enable them to continue to develop their skills and experience.

6.6 Training

Many women raised the need for appropriate training and information about courses available to them, including preparation for employment training and basic vocational training such as customer services training.

It was also suggested that women could be trained

as childminders. Two workshops suggested that women could be trained as childminders and could then develop social enterprises, which would address childcare issues and provide training and employment opportunities for women.

6.7 Recognition of qualifications

Recognition of qualifications was raised as a key issue in two of the workshops. It was also felt that many refugees were underemployed in jobs that did not reflect their qualifications.

It was felt that women were more likely to be underemployed than men and that however highly qualified refugees were, they had to start out in low paid jobs, even more so in the case of refugee women. It was also felt that refugee women were segregated occupationally into certain sectors of

the labour market, such as social care, catering and cleaning, and that they found it extremely difficult to move into other sectors.

One woman, who had practised law in her own country, raised the issue that her law degree had not been recognised in this country and that even if she were unable to practice law in Scotland, then surely her degree could be given some recognition so that she could access postgraduate level courses in another discipline.

6.8 Benefits issues

Women raised a range of issues around benefits, which included the complexity of the benefits system and the lack of information about benefits entitlements, with many women fearing that employment would lead to immediate cuts in benefits. Women felt that they were caught in a poverty trap and that jobs they were offered were often temporary or part-time and would affect their benefits and their families as a result.

Women highlighted the need for access to knowledge about benefits entitlements and for benefits checks to be carried out before they moved into employment. They also suggested that they should be offered appropriate and secure employment that could assist them to provide for their families rather than forcing them into employment which could adversely affect their benefits and the needs of their families.

“I was a qualified vet in my own country and have tried to get my qualifications recognised but need to improve my language skills and get into further exams to be able to practice as a vet here. As this is going to take me some time, I have tried to get any job in community development, the field in which I have been working on a voluntary basis for more than five years. I have applied for lots of jobs in development and advocacy but haven't been successful.”

Sanaa Alsabag, Chair of
Karibu African Women's
Association

6.9 Language barriers

In three of the workshops, women felt that, if they spoke fluent English it would be easier to access the labour market. Women raised the fact that there was a need for:

- Information about ESOL classes
- More ESOL classes in order to address waiting lists
- Classes with more contact hours

6.10 Impact of the asylum process

It was identified that being unable to work during the asylum process led to an erosion of skills and a lack of confidence and self-esteem. In addition, this was seen to affect women's mental health and their ability to work.

Women felt that asylum-seekers should be able to work during the asylum process and that, currently, accessing employment was difficult due to gaps in

- Work-related ESOL classes
- Intensive ESOL support at the beginning of the asylum process

There were concerns raised about budget cuts and the impact that this would have on ESOL classes and childcare.

work history and difficulty in obtaining references.

Several workshops cited volunteering as a way in which women could gain experience, develop skills and provide a source of professional referees, acting as a stepping stone for employment. There was also a suggestion that women could set up their own community groups to provide support to other women.

6.11 Education

While women welcomed the fact that the Scottish Government had made changes to allow young asylum-seekers to access full time Further and Higher Education without paying tuition fees (if they meet certain criteria), they highlighted that they would like to see the criteria extended so that all young

people in Scotland could access Further and Higher Education. They felt that it was unacceptable that young people were leaving school and being put in a situation where they were unable either to study or to work.

6.12 Lack of knowledge of the system

Women spoke about their lack of knowledge about the UK labour market and how the job application process works. Some women raised the fact that in

their own countries jobs were often obtained through informal networks and informal processes.

“...the indication is that refugees are in a constant struggle to access the labour market.”

Mulvey, G. (2011) Refugee Integration in Scotland: Statistical findings from stage one, Scottish Refugee Council, http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0000/2285/Refugee_Integration_in_Scotland.pdf

7. Recommendations

In order to address the issues raised, the Refugee Women's Strategy Group has made the following recommendations:

- All refugee and asylum seeking women should have the right to work, whether a decision has been made on their asylum claim or not
- Refugee and asylum seeking women should have access to a central source of relevant information in a range of formats and languages on a range of employment issues, including employability services, employment rights (including under the Equality Act), how and where to access support or legal advice, and benefits entitlements
- All relevant employment agencies and services should review their information strategies to ensure that information is accessible and appropriate and that it reaches refugee and asylum seeking women
- Job Centre Plus should consider providing and disseminating a range of information on benefits and employability services and should ensure women have access to and are assisted to complete applications for HMRC based benefits such as Working & Child Tax credits and Child Benefit
- Working tax credits should be available for women who work less than 16 hours per week
- Scottish Refugee Council should ensure that all refugee women are aware of and have access to their integration and employment services, following recent changes to these services
- Scottish Refugee Council should ensure that asylum seeking women have access to information on entitlements and opportunities for volunteering, education, training and employment preparation
- The Department for Work and Pensions and the Scottish Government should ensure that up-to-date, gender sensitive guidance and information is issued to all employers to actively prevent discrimination
- Employability services for asylum-seekers and refugees should be effectively co-ordinated across Glasgow and Scotland to address some of the issues highlighted, including the need for co-ordinated information provision for refugee and asylum-seeking women
- The Scottish Government should implement a scheme that would enable the recognition of the qualifications and/or experience of asylum seekers and refugees for the purpose of furthering their education and/or employment in Scotland
- Gender and wider equality impact assessments should be carried out by the Scottish Government to monitor the impact on (refugee) women of cuts to benefits and employment services as a consequence of welfare reform
- Affordable and accessible childcare and assistance with childcare costs should be provided to all women who need it
- The Scottish Government, through funding programmes such as the Bridges Programme, should make available more work placements and employment preparation services to enable asylum-seekers to develop their skills and experiences while in the asylum process and once they have leave to remain
- There should be more co-ordinated ESOL provision provided to asylum-seekers, including classes with more contact hours at initial stages of the asylum process, and work-related ESOL provision
- Community development support should be provided to refugee women to enable them to address issues collectively and to develop their own ideas and groups, such as support groups, work clubs and social enterprises

8. Conclusion and way forward

The Women's Employment Information Event highlighted the key barriers that refugee and asylum seeking women experience and provided our group with a set of recommendations to bring about improvements.

Our group will work to progress these recommendations by:

- Widely disseminating this report
- Incorporating the recommendations within our action plan
- Engaging with relevant agencies on key issues
- Presenting our findings at a workshop at Scottish Refugee Council's Autumn Conference in November 2011
- Evaluating progress and providing feedback to all of those women and organisations who participated in the event
- Promoting awareness amongst women of their rights in line with Equalities legislation

9. Acknowledgements

Our group would like to acknowledge the support and funding provided by the undernoted organisations. Our sincere thanks to:

- **Scottish Refugee Council**
- **Comic Relief**
- **Glasgow Women's Voluntary Sector Network**
- **The Poverty Alliance**
- **Women's support project**

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We would also like to thank the undernoted organisations for participating and/or contributing to our Employment Information Event:

- Amina Muslim Women's Resource Centre (AMWRC)
- Business Gateway (Glasgow)
- Careers Scotland (Glasgow)
- Ethnic Minorities Law Centre
- Glasgow South East Regeneration Agency (GSERA)
- Glasgow Women's Library
- Job Centre Plus
- Maryhill Citizen's Advice Bureau
- Poverty Alliance
- Volunteer Centre Glasgow

Appendix 1

Participant Evaluation of Employment Information Event, 24 February 2011

41 women attended the event and 24 women filled in the evaluation questionnaire (although not everyone filled in every question).

Q1. Usefulness

Participants were asked whether they had found the event “Very useful”, “Useful”, “Slightly useful” or “Not useful”. 17 answered that they had found it “very useful” while 7 answered “useful”. None of those surveyed selected either of the other options.

Q2. Enjoyableness

Participants were asked whether they had found the event “Very enjoyable”, “Enjoyable”, “Slightly enjoyable” or “Not enjoyable”. Of those surveyed, 14 answered “Very enjoyable”, 6 answered “Enjoyable” and no-one selected either of the other options.

Q3. What was the best thing about the event?

In answering this question participants were not given options but were asked to write about the event in their own words. A range of comments were given with the responses being overwhelmingly positive. There was a notable emphasis of the access to important information regarding working, volunteering, services and available support options, as something that was particularly appreciated. Some specific comments to this effect include:

“To know what to do and where to go for help if you are if you are in difficulties and what to do before you start work”

“Getting information about services we need.”

“Finding out about where we can go for work and how they can support us”

“Finding out about places that can support us and give us advice”

“Smiles and enthusiasm”

Additionally there were a number of comments simply stating that information and knowledge provided had been the best thing about the event.

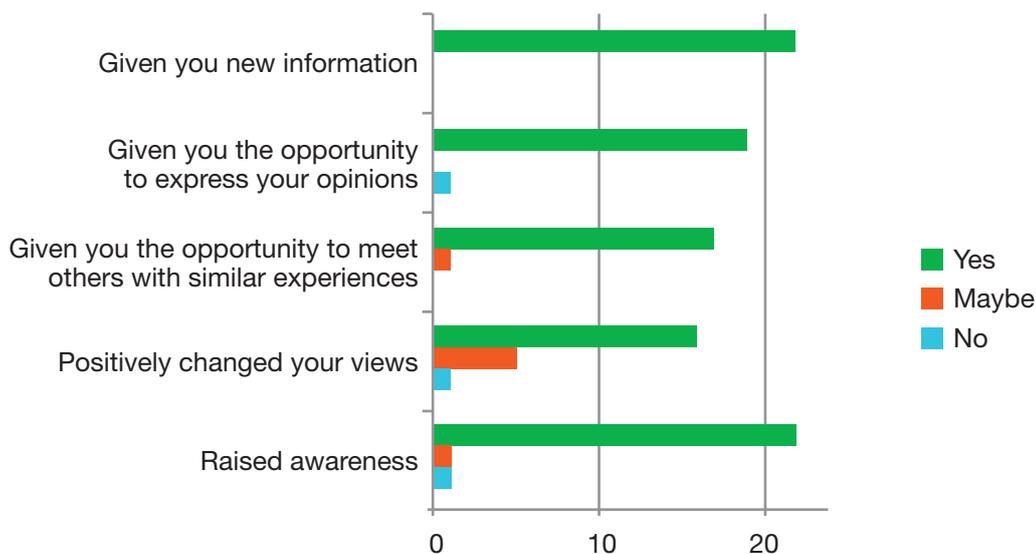
Q4. What was the worst thing about the event?

The majority of those surveyed did not provide an answer to this question with the only response given being:

“To be honest everything was good”

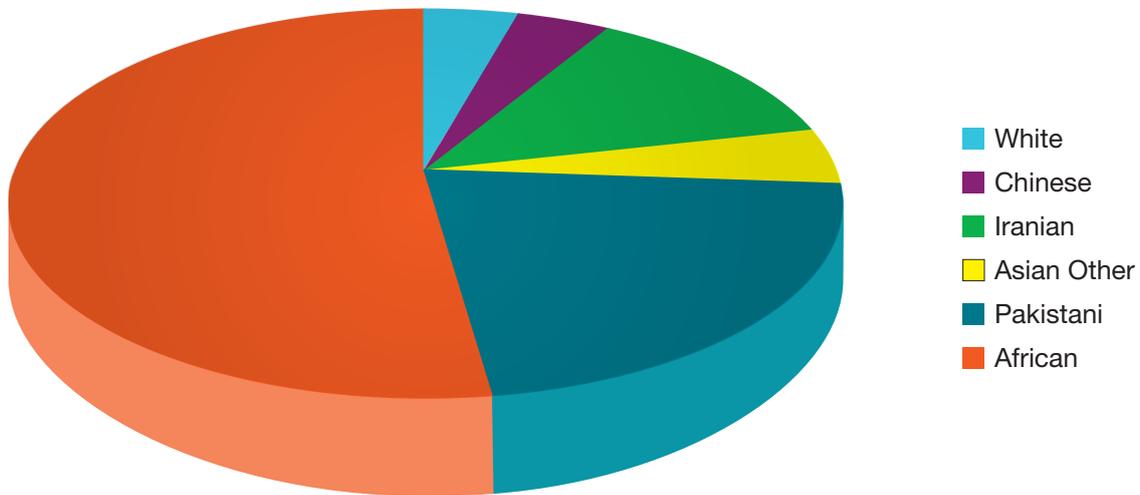
Q5. Participants were asked to identify the extent to which the aims of the event had been met.

The graph below illustrates the responses.

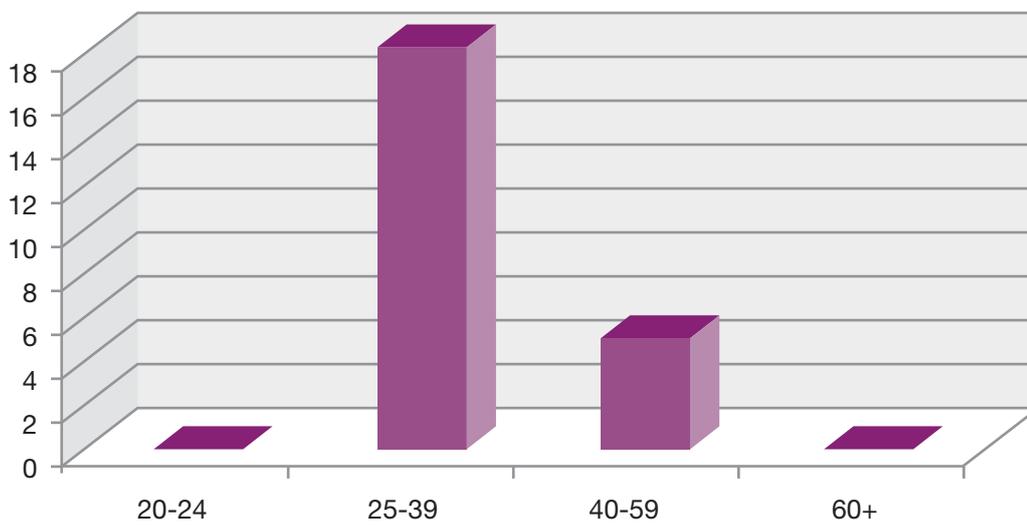


Demographic Information

Ethnicity/Nationality



Ages of participants



NB. Women identified themselves from a range of Ethnicity/Nationality categories provided on the participant evaluation forms – we have extracted the most popular ones.

