



RAISING REFUGEE WOMEN'S VOICES

Exploring the impact of Scottish Refugee Council's work with the Refugee Women's Strategy Group 2011-2015

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To compile this report, we carried out 19 interviews with key stakeholders. 15 interviewees were current or former members of RWSG, ranging from founding members to women who had joined the group more recently. In addition, we interviewed representatives of four organisations who have engaged with RWSG over the years: Glasgow Violence Against Women Partnership, UK Visas and Immigration Scotland and Northern Ireland, Asylum Aid and Queen Margaret University. We also drew on advocacy and action plans, minutes of meetings, and reports from Scottish Refugee Council's women's project and partner organisations. We have anonymised the quotes from interviewees throughout the report.

We begin the report with an outline of the rationale for the women's project and the particular model it developed, combining community development with policy influencing and advocacy. Chapter 3 discusses the impact of RWSG and the women's project approach collectively on the lives of refugee women, and individually on its members. Chapter 4 outlines next steps and makes recommendations for future work in this area.

"Look, we are in a new country, we don't know the country, and the people here don't know us; I think we need to organise ourselves, so that our voice can be heard."

(Founding member of RWSG)



2. THE WOMEN'S PROJECT AT SCOTTISH REFUGEE COUNCIL

2.1 Why a women's project?

In 2014, half of the world's refugees were women and girls.¹ Refugee women experience forms of gender based persecution, such as forced marriage, 'honour' crimes, trafficking, female genital mutilation and sexual violence, because they are women. But they also experience the kinds of persecution faced by men in their communities, based on their political opinion, beliefs, ethnicity or nationality. However, women face particular gendered barriers to accessing protection at all stages of flight and their journeys to safety.

In 2014, 33% of asylum applicants in the UK were women, with 27% of asylum claims made by women as main applicants.² The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, has said that *"the scale of sexual and gender-based violence [faced by displaced women, is] 'deeply disturbing'"*.³ Gender based persecution is often inflicted by private actors rather than the state and *'can lead to difficulties "proving" the persecution [women] have suffered'*.⁴ Although the Home Office has published guidelines for decision-makers on 'gender issues' in asylum

¹ UNHCR Global Trends: forced displacement in 2014, UNHCR, p.40

² UK Government, Immigration Statistics, July to September 2014, Volume 2, [https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics?departments\[\]=uk-visas-and-immigration](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics?departments[]=uk-visas-and-immigration)

³ 16 Days Against Violence: UNHCR deeply disturbed by scale of violence against women, UNHCR, 25 Nov 2013, <http://www.unhcr.org/529350c56.html>

⁴ Refugee Women – "Survivors, Protectors, Providers", 2011, UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org/resources/monthly-updates/november-2011-update/refugee-women-survivors-protectors-providers.html>

claims⁵, women continue to face many barriers to accessing a fair asylum process in the UK as existing policies are often not implemented.⁶ Research in Scotland found that 49% of women (compared to just 22% of men) waited for more than two years for a decision on their asylum claims.⁷ Deficiencies in the availability of quality legal advice, guidance for the judiciary, gender-sensitive country of origin information, a lack of childcare provision during asylum interviews, and a lack of gender-specific information for applicants, are just some of the barriers women face.⁸

In 2009, Scottish Refugee Council and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, along with partners in Belgium and Italy, carried out a study with recently arrived asylum seeking women, which found widespread experiences of violence and poor mental health among women in all three locations.⁹ 70% of women interviewed for the study reported experiences of physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime and 54% said that their mental health had deteriorated in the host country, reporting high levels of depression and anxiety.¹⁰ A longitudinal study of refugee integration in Scotland, which looked at a range of indicators of integration, including employment, English language, health and social isolation, found that refugee women also face significant gendered barriers to integration.¹¹

If I was a man I would not have waited seven years to get leave to remain. When we flee to the UK, we think we have reached heaven. But when you come here there is another type of violence. This asylum system is violence to us. It broke me. It broke me down to depression... We came here to find a place where we can live in freedom, far from war; I didn't think I had to fight another war here. But I didn't give up. I still continue to fight. RWSG achieved very important things in terms of women-specific issues... The women who are claiming asylum right now have the chance that their special needs are considered. A man has a higher chance to succeed in a new environment than a woman. There are many obstacles women have to break in order to integrate fully. For example, if you do not have childcare, you cannot go to study. The man can think about his career, there will not be many family obstacles preventing him from going far. If I had come here alone, I would have gone to university; but I had to take care of my two boys. RWSG was at the forefront of taking care of specific needs of women, it made a big difference.

(Founding member of RWSG)

⁵ Home Office Asylum Decision Making Guidance, Gender issues in the asylum claim, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gender-issue-in-the-asylum-claim-process>

⁶ Querton, C. (2012), 'I feel as a women I'm not welcome' – A gender analysis of UK asylum law, policy and practice, Asylum Aid, p.79

⁷ Mulvey, G. (2013), In Search of Normality – Refugee Integration in Scotland, Scottish Refugee Council, p.124

⁸ Querton, C. (2012), 'I feel as a women I'm not welcome' – A gender analysis of UK asylum law, policy and practice, Asylum Aid, p.79-80

⁹ Zimmerman, C et al (2009) Asylum-Seeking Women: violence and health, Scottish Refugee Council & London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, p.13

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.13

¹¹ Mulvey, G. (2013), In Search of Normality – Refugee Integration in Scotland, Scottish Refugee Council, p. 100

2.2 Why a Community Development approach?

It was in the context of this systemic disadvantage for women that Scottish Refugee Council sought funding from Comic Relief in 2011 to work in partnership with refugee women and agencies across the UK to strategically tackle this inequality with policy makers and service planners. In order to do this in a sustainable, informed and effective way, the organisation felt that it was critical to support the development of a strong voice for refugee women, not only to guide and inform its work, but also to build a lasting legacy for refugee communities in Scotland.

As such, the project sought to combine its policy influencing and advocacy with community development. The key purpose of community development is to collectively bring about social change and justice by working with communities in ways that challenge oppression and tackle inequalities, to identify their needs, opportunities, rights and responsibilities; plan, organise and take action; and evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the action.¹² The overarching aim of the women's project is to empower refugee and asylum seeking women in Scotland to have their voices heard by decision makers and to influence the policy and practices impacting on their lives.

Working in partnership with RWSG to deliver the project enables stakeholders such as the Home Office, NHS and Scottish Government to be in direct dialogue with a representative group of refugee women. However, there are many barriers to the meaningful participation of communities in decisions that affect them, including the value that is placed on their involvement and the willingness of agencies

to develop and sustain equal partnerships. Additionally, the stresses of the asylum process can affect the ability of women to participate in the work of the group both individually and collectively. Therefore, skilled community development support is critical to the success of the project.

Figure 1

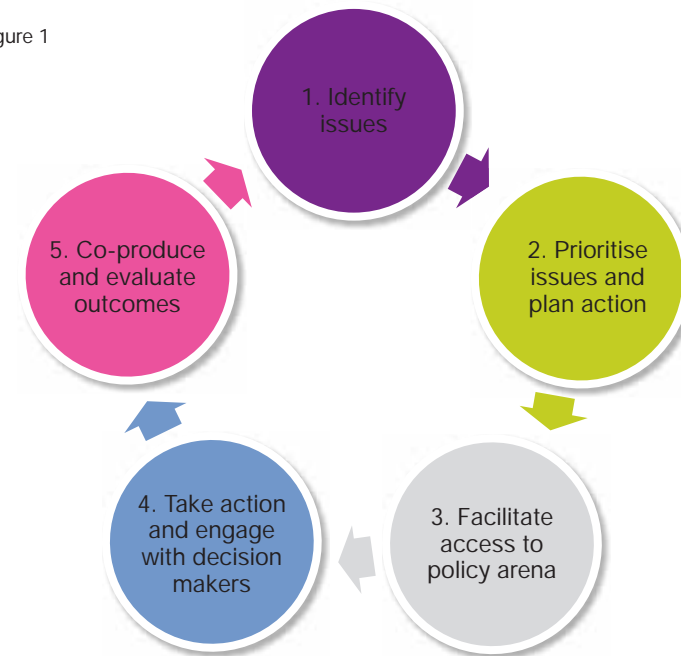


Figure 1 illustrates the different stages of the cyclical model developed by the project to implement an approach that combines community development with policy influencing and advocacy.

¹² UK Government Department for Local Government and Communities, The Community Development Challenge, 2006, <http://www.cdf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/The-Community-development-challenge.pdf>

1. In the first stage, RWSG is supported to identify concerns and current issues through its members' experiences and their active connection to grassroots organisations. Key to the model is the representativeness of RWSG.¹³ Communities identify the issues they want RWSG to focus on, enabling RWSG to represent the views and aspirations of the wider community.
2. The next stage of the process involves the community development workers supporting the group to prioritise and plan action with the help of LEAP (Learning, Evaluation and Planning), a planning and evaluation framework, which supports the group to identify the difference it intends to make; to plan effectively; to work in partnership with each other and members of the community; and to learn and apply the lessons from experience. The LEAP framework encourages critical questions, self-evaluation and ensures that all those involved are working to the same agenda.¹⁴
3. The next stage illustrates the role of the policy development officer in the process, which centres on building relationships with external stakeholders and supporting the development of spaces and spheres of influence for RWSG to raise the concerns of refugee women directly with stakeholders. Thus, the policy officer advocates not only on behalf of refugee women, but crucially, in partnership with refugee women, and facilitates RWSG's access to the policy arena.
4. In Stage 4, the group is supported and enabled to take action and engage with decision makers. Examples of actions the group has taken include:
 - meeting decision makers to discuss policy development and service provision;
 - meeting elected members to lobby on priority issues;
 - contributing to the development of strategies, action plans and legislation;
 - participating in stakeholder meetings and events;
 - responding to UK and Scottish Government consultations and giving evidence to parliamentary committees;
 - participating in research;
 - speaking at events, and contributing to panel discussions, and participating in academic conferences and seminars.
5. The final stage reflects that the outcomes of the process are co-produced by RWSG and Scottish Refugee Council. The process does not end with the achievement of a particular outcome, but rather, the group is supported to continuously evaluate, review and prioritise issues on which to take collective action. As the needs of refugee women develop and change, the workers support the group to consult with the wider community of refugee women in Scotland, to refresh its agenda, and to be flexible to respond quickly to a fast-changing legislative and policy arena.

¹³ As of September 2015, RWSG membership represents 15 refugee-led community organisations as well as individual members with a particular passion and commitment to tackling the issues.

¹⁴ The Learning Evaluation and Planning (LEAP) framework was developed by the Scottish Community Development Centre to support a partnership approach to achieving change and improvement in the quality of community life (www.planandevaluate.com).



Workshop discussions at the Women's Referendum Event delivered in partnership by Scottish Refugee Council and RWSG, Jun 2014



3. IMPACT

In this section we analyse, within the context of the model described in Chapter 2, the impact that RWSG and the women's project approach has had, both collectively on the policy and practices affecting refugee women's lives, and individually on RWSG members. The key overarching aim of the project since 2011 has been that asylum seeking and refugee women have their voices heard by decision makers. Drawing on documentary evidence from the women's project and from the interviews carried out with key stakeholders, we explore the development of RWSG as a voice for refugee women in Scotland, the impact this voice has had on particular policy areas, and the benefits it has brought for refugee women both individually and collectively. Affecting measurable policy *change* in this area is particularly challenging, as it is heavily politicised and subject to rapid and complex shifts at the whim of governments of the day. Nonetheless, as we explore, despite these challenges and others, the group has achieved significant impact over the course of the project.

3.1 Impact on policy

RWSG has taken action and engaged with decision makers on a range of specific issues affecting refugee and asylum seeking women since it was founded in 2004. In the early years, the key priority for the group was the lack of gender sensitivity in the asylum process. As more women were recognised as refugees with leave to remain and settled in Scotland, the group began to identify barriers to integration, such as employment and education, as key priority areas. Housing, for both refugees and asylum seekers, increasingly became a priority. From 2011, with the increased support from Scottish Refugee Council, RWSG was able to build its capacity to work on both asylum and integration issues, as well as other areas of concern identified by women, such as gender based violence and information provision.

In presenting the findings from stakeholder interviews, we structure this section broadly around the LEAP outcomes identified by RWSG as its key priority areas for action over the course of the women's project:

- RWSG is a strong and influential voice for refugee women.
- The asylum process is more gender sensitive.
- Refugee women access housing that is appropriate to their needs.
- Refugee women access education and employment services that meet their needs.

3.1.1 RWSG will be a strong, dynamic and influential voice for refugee and asylum seeking women in Scotland

By far the strongest outcome that was evidenced in the interviews for this report was that RWSG, with the support of the women's project, has succeeded in developing as a strong, dynamic and influential voice for refugee women in Scotland. Almost all of the stakeholders interviewed for the report talked about 'voice', with a partner organisation describing the group as, '*the most authoritative voice among refugees*', and one current RWSG member emphasising: '*our voice...is our strength!*'

Interviewees regarded RWSG as a strong voice for refugee women, describing the group as credible, representative, diverse, and having direct experience. External stakeholders in particular spoke of the benefits of being able to understand and hear first-hand the direct experiences of refugee and asylum seeking women, and the fact that RWSG can provide real evidence based on real need:

We can say these are the lived experiences of women, they are irrefutable, they are not anecdotal, they are not hearsay, they are real, they are lived, the actual. I think there is tremendous power in that.

The impact of this on service providers was described in terms of the learning and knowledge that RWSG brings to meetings from the experiences of their members and the wider community. One external stakeholder described this as '*incredible... they taught me things I would never be*

exposed to under any other circumstances and I am very lucky I have the knowledge of it'. Another service provider spoke of how meeting RWSG and hearing their voices of experience had impacted on her own understanding of her work and how her organisation delivers its services:

After the first meeting, I remember feeling slightly alarmed at the extent of the barriers that are in place that I wasn't quite aware of. It almost made me feel a little bit sad, to be honest. It has definitely opened my eyes. It feeds into loads of aspects of my work, just to have in the back of my mind how our customers feel and how they view us.

Another spoke of the group's credibility, saying that the reports it produces are, '*... very constructive. They do the work behind the scenes. These are very important and give them the status of a credible organisation'*. Others spoke of their relationship with RWSG being mutually beneficial, as its direct experience and representativeness enables organisations to '*access the refugee perspective'* and gives their own work credibility: '*I think it is incredibly valuable we have the RWSG to consult with and to collaborate with. Whatever you are doing, it gives it validity'*.

RWSG members too talked about the value of their own direct experience, with one current member saying:

What is special about us is that we get to speak for ourselves. We are the ones who can best describe it... If I go there and tell

my story, my way, it is going to have an impact unlike if you are telling my story. That's what is special about us... we tell our stories as they are.'

All four of the external stakeholders interviewed were confident in RWSG's ability to represent the wider community and '*see the wider picture presenting common concerns rather than focusing upon their own individual concerns.'* Another partner reiterated this, highlighting the strategic relevance of the group's ability to be representative: '*they are able to think about issues in a broader sense and can use their experience in a focused and strategic way'*. A newer member of RWSG also recognised this as a strength that the group has developed:

A lot of women are scared of the Home Office; when they have problems they are scared to complain because they are scared that it may affect the decision of their asylum claims... I want to help to be a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves... be able to represent the issues that they face. RWSG can forward those issues to the powers. It is like standing in the gap between the women [and the decision makers].

The process of developing as a voice for refugee women was described by stakeholders as '*innovative'* as RWSG was the first representative refugee women led group to focus on policy; an approach that is now being developed by other organisations such as the London Refugee Women's



Forum. External stakeholders also described the group as professional, competent and well-respected:

Generally, I would say they come in with a good approach, sensible and logical. They definitely have the ability to see things from both sides, which I think is really useful in these situations.

Another reason why interviewees saw RWSG as a strong voice for refugee women was that the group is diverse and yet, it has a sense of common purpose. One current member highlighted this in saying that, *'we all share the same experiences, although we come from different countries, religions and cultures, we are all the same, we all face the same issues'*. Another said that, *'the group respects different*

cultures and the diversity in the group. It is a comfortable place for women.'

The sense of strength and the power of RWSG's voice came through in members comments, with one concluding: *'We have been heard. We have a strong voice! This is the power of women!'*

Not only has RWSG developed a strong voice, it has also become an influential one, creating *'a platform for refugee women to campaign for their rights'*. With the support of the policy development officer and the community development workers, the women's project has enabled RWSG to engage in dialogue with key stakeholders at different levels to raise their specific concerns.

One RWSG member described the key achievement of the group as having its voice heard at high levels of government, with the example of her own experience of giving evidence on behalf of the group at Westminster to a Parliamentary Inquiry on Asylum Support. At least two current members talked about being heard by the Home Office as a key achievement for the group, which was supported by an external partner, who pointed out that the Home Office rarely engages directly with refugee voices: *'It was the first time we had refugees join the [National Asylum Stakeholder Forum] meeting'*. This demonstrates that the group has some success in ensuring the participation of people in decisions that affect them, a point emphasised by another current RWSG member: *'the biggest achievement is getting decision makers to speak to people like us.'*

As well as being heard by decision makers at all levels, some RWSG members interviewed said that one of the group's key achievements is bringing diverse communities of women together and listening to their experiences. Examples of successful conferences and engagements over the years that have been critical to the development of the group's position as a strong, dynamic and influential voice for refugee women are:

- **Refugee Women's Conference (2004):** a small planning group of organisations and refugee women organised and delivered a conference attended by 120 refugee and asylum seeking women in Glasgow, which set the initial agenda and priorities of RWSG.

- **Our Voices Matter (2007):** Scottish Refugee Council supported RWSG to launch its first report, *Our Voices Matter*, at an event informing the wider community of refugee and asylum seeking women about the group's progress to date and updating the group's agenda.
- **The Struggle to Contribute (2011):** Scottish Refugee Council supported RWSG to organise and deliver an employment seminar, which provided the 40 women who attended with information and the opportunity to raise key concerns about the barriers to employment. RWSG later published a report summarising women's key concerns.
- **Speak for Yourself (2014):** from June–November 2013, RWSG developed and carried out an engagement initiative, which involved listening to the views of over 100 women through interviews, focus groups, meetings with refugee community organisations, and discussion groups at a refugee women's conference, enabling the group to understand the current needs of refugee and asylum seeking women.

Several interviewees spoke of the success of conferences and events hosted by RWSG. Two former members said of the founding conference in 2004:

The first conference, it really made a big difference because it came at a time when we were all stressed and broken down. It lifted us up. I cannot forget this first conference.

One of the greatest things was the founding conference in 2004 and to get funding and having a structured group to have the power to speak for themselves.

A current member reiterated the impact of RWSG's conferences and engagement with women:

The Speak for Yourself Conference was a success. I was one of the facilitators at one of the tables. To hear people speak about their problems was amazing for me, you hear people's stories and you think, "What I am going through is nothing compared to that". ...The conference was extra special... People having the confidence to come and speak at that conference meant that they had confidence in us to be able to carry on their message to the appropriate people.

In addition, interviewees identified the key role of RWSG members in disseminating information within their communities and raising awareness with women of their rights.

3.1.2 The asylum process will be more gender sensitive as an outcome of our work

The aspiration to achieve gender sensitivity in the UK asylum process is one that organisations across the UK have been

working towards for several years under the banner of the Women's Asylum Charter. A founding member of RWSG acknowledged the difficulties in influencing concrete change in this area, yet felt that RWSG raising these issues was critical to putting gender on the agenda:

We achieved not too much but very important things in terms of women-specific issues in relation to asylum cases: the Home Office listening to women specific issues was a big achievement.

Another current member reiterated this sentiment:

We are trying to make the asylum process gender-sensitive. This has a positive impact...although we haven't had the changes done, at least we have had our voices heard. They know that there is a group of women which is pushing for these issues. If we don't get a positive response, we keep pushing. We don't just drop it. We don't give up. We haven't succeeded yet. But I think it is a step in the right way.

Four group members interviewed described the fact that children are no longer detained as a major policy achievement. While this cannot be attributed directly to the work of RWSG, the detention of children is an issue that the group has raised in many forums and to key decision makers over many years: *'We made a lot of noise around child detention, now they are not put in detention anymore'.*

Another policy change that was mentioned by a number of interviewees was the introduction of childcare for asylum interviews. As one member said, 'we managed to get childcare for substantive interviews in Scotland for a period'. Another interviewee described the challenges of effecting change in this area when she elaborated: *'We... managed to have childcare for the main interviews, but unfortunately due to the cuts, the Home Office did not have enough budget to carry on with that; we are still pushing to have that back because it is quite important for women who are going into the interviews. There are things you cannot talk about in front of children.'*

One external partner spoke of a specific achievement that RWSG had been involved in and the value the group had brought to that piece of work:

We [did] an event on practice guidance for working with interpreters; we asked the RWSG to contribute to that. I don't think that document would have had half the validity if we hadn't had the information coming directly from women involved in the RWSG to contribute to that.

Although interviewees did not necessarily pinpoint many concrete and positive policy changes in the asylum process itself, it is possible to discern incremental improvements in the gender sensitivity of the UK asylum process in recent years. As one current member said:



*The asylum process is better now than what it was before. It is better because of what we are doing in this group. The main issue is childcare; we are still fighting for that one.*¹⁵

Examples of improvements include, the roll out of gender training for decision makers, improvements to the screening environment, the inclusion of asylum specific actions in the Home Secretary's Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls, and the prioritisation of gender as an area for improvement by the Home Office. The impact of RWSG within this collective movement for change is not only perceptible in the group's individual successes, such as securing commitments from Ministers, requests for input, or seats on regular stakeholder fora, but also critically in its unique position as a representative refugee women led organisation informing and shaping this work. As one current member pointed out: *'Most of the organisations, also in England, now know about [RWSG] and the work we are doing; it is being heard.'*

3.1.3 Housing will more effectively meet the needs of refugee and asylum seeking women

Another priority area for RWSG over the years has been housing. As a result of the work of the group in this area, the needs of asylum seeking women have been highlighted in research, advocacy and stakeholder discussions on the poor quality of asylum accommodation in Scotland. One

current RWSG member discussed how the group had ensured women's voices were heard on this area of work:

Single people need to share accommodation; they have different cultures, different opinions, a different style of life; [this] always causes problems... RWSG started to speak about it and spoke with staff at the Home Office about it face to face.

Following a visit to the homes of two RWSG members and a meeting with the group, the Scottish Minister for Europe and External Affairs, Humza Yousaf MSP, publicly committed to the de-commercialisation of asylum accommodation within any future devolved asylum support system. Through media work, the group has raised awareness of the many accommodation-related issues affecting asylum seeking women and engendered support for reviewing alternatives to the 'homeless route' for women with leave to remain in Glasgow.

3.1.4 Refugee and asylum seeking women will have improved access to education, training and employment and more responsive employment services

Again, although interviewees did not specifically mention this area of work, over the years, RWSG has ensured that the voices of refugee women are heard and acted upon by key stakeholders on employment and education issues.

¹⁵ The Home Office recently committed to a national policy on childcare provision across all asylum interview locations and is currently working with Scottish Refugee Council, RWSG, Asylum Aid and other Women's Asylum Charter member organisations to draft and implement this.

RWSG has participated in a high level Scottish Government summit on women and work, and its report, *The Struggle to Contribute*, was discussed in a debate in the Scottish Parliament, and received a detailed written response from Nicola Sturgeon MSP (at the time Deputy First Minister) to each of its recommendations.

RWSG continues to play a key role in the implementation Scotland's refugee integration strategy, *New Scots: integrating refugees in Scotland's communities 2014-17*¹⁶ and their particular contribution to the Education Implementation Group was recognised and valued in the Year 1 report on the strategy. The Scottish Government employability team proactively sought to work with RWSG to support the delivery of a pilot project with Glasgow ESOL Forum and Scottish Refugee Council, exploring the employability support needs of refugee women. RWSG members co-developed and participated in a tailored course¹⁷ over 12 weeks that was evaluated and disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders as a model of best practice. The pilot has since been referenced by a number of stakeholders as a model of best practice in the context of devolution of aspects of employment support provision to the Scottish Parliament.

3.1.5 Other areas of work

In addition to the four key outcomes above, RWSG has sought to address additional priority areas for women: gender based violence, information provision, and integration.

I am originally from Zimbabwe. I first arrived in the UK in 2001 and in 2014 I came to Glasgow. I only joined RWSG two or three months ago. In the beginning, I didn't really know what it is all about. But when I joined I realised that there is a very good cause for this group. When the group tries to bring issues before the authorities, I think they ease a lot of things that are taking place, things that are likely to change because of what the group has put forward. I want to help to be a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves, to stand in the gap between the women and decision-makers. I used to be really scared of the Home Office, I used to shut down. Two members of RWSG helped me to get rid of some of the fear that was in me about the Home office. The group is capable of helping the whole nation, not just Scotland. They want to see change not only for themselves but for all the women. I am beginning to gain confidence, so I can speak with women outside the group. I can help them and give them advice.

(Current Member, RWSG)

¹⁶ Scottish Government, Scottish Refugee Council and COSLA (2013) *New Scots: Integrating Refugees in Scotland's Communities 2014-17*, http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0000/7439/FINAL_VERSION_-_NEW_SCOTS_REFUGEES_IN_SCOTLAND_S_COMMUNITIES_-_3_DECEMBER_.pdf

¹⁷ Refugee Women's Strategy Group (2014) *One Step Closer: Confidence building and employability skills for refugee & asylum seeking women*, http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0000/9251/One_Step_Closer_FINAL.pdf



RWSG members meet with the Minister for External Affairs to discuss the asylum process and accommodation ahead of the referendum on Scottish independence, Jul 2014

Integration

RWSG played a key role in the Scottish Government's review of refugee integration, and the development of a new strategy, *New Scots: integrating refugees in Scotland's communities 2014-17*, published by the Government, Scottish Refugee Council and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) in December 2013. RWSG has been a core partner in the development and delivery of the strategy from the outset and continues to be represented on its core and thematic implementation groups.

Information provision

Three current members of the group highlighted this area of work in the interviews, with one describing the importance of women in the community having access to information both about the work of RWSG, as well as about their rights and sources of support:

A lot of people know what we are doing through leaflets and through word of mouth... We are planning to do a leaflet with all the important numbers, organisations, support, home office and solicitors; this can be helpful for people.

Actions that the group has taken to tackle a lack of specific information for women include supporting the development of a women's page on Scottish Refugee Council's website, working with Glasgow City Council to ensure women are aware of their entitlements to school clothing grants, and developing a rights leaflet for women claiming asylum.

Gender based violence

On gender based violence, the group has been represented on the Glasgow Violence Against Women Partnership WAIR Working Group since 2011; it has responded to consultations on the Scottish Government's violence against women strategy, Equally Safe; and has contributed to actions such as drafting leaflets for women on domestic abuse and sexual violence, and participating in work to tackle and prevent female genital mutilation.

3.2 Benefits to members

In addition to the development of a strong voice for refugee women and the identification of policy impact in particular areas, interviewees also identified a range of benefits that RWSG and the work of the women's project has brought to refugee and asylum seeking women in Scotland. The benefits described are both personal to individual members of RWSG, but many also lead to wider benefits for the community.

One of the strongest findings articulated by interviewees was around leadership. A founding member of the group captured this sense that many former and current members of RWSG have become leaders in their communities:

Women who became members of RWSG are now leading other women's groups across Glasgow. They became engines to inspire other women to get engaged and to fight for their rights.

Others spoke of their experience with RWSG *'qualifying'* them to take on other roles in the community. As one member said, RWSG *'led me to take on a leadership role with a women-led refugee organisation of which I [am] now chair.'* Another founding member spoke of the skills and knowledge she gained with RWSG enabling her to become a committee member of Scottish Refugee Policy Forum:

Through RWSG, I learned about Scottish Refugee Policy Forum and I was a board member for three years. RWSG helped me to network. I have gained confidence and gained experience in different topics.

Another member said her role with RWSG had opened up other opportunities for her that were personal, but that also had a wider impact and benefit for her community: *'The group enabled me to shadow in the Scottish parliament. I learned about what I want to achieve and about my rights. I achieved a lot of things, it is good for me and it is good for the community.'*

This sense of individual members gaining skills and particularly, confidence, from their work with RWSG came through very strongly in interviews. A wide range of skills were mentioned by current and former members including, *'computer skills', 'communication skills', 'English language', 'teamwork', 'analytical skills', 'campaigning skills', and 'public speaking'*. One member talked about how RWSG had helped her to develop her confidence and to feel supported and safe to speak out:

I think I have gained so much confidence from working with the group. I am no longer shy to have my voice heard like public speaking, for example. I feel safe, when I've got a problem now, I raise it with RWSG and I know it will be taken up and something will be done about it. I feel at home, I feel supported.

Members spoke in detail about the difference that involvement with RWSG had made to their own lives. One current member described this poignantly:

I was very new and I didn't know many people. At the time, I was very depressed because of the asylum process. I am a single mum of three children. I also did not speak much English at the time. Those were the reasons why I joined RWSG in the beginning... I felt very hopeless and isolated before I joined. I could not tell [the Home Office or lawyers] what I was thinking. When I joined the group I gained more awareness and confidence. Then I could tell the lawyers, this is my right. I could tell them what is right and wrong. I felt that I had been heard; all together we make a voice... This group has given me a voice of strength. We are never frightened anymore. We say what we want to say.

Members also spoke about the positive benefit and impact of

having knowledge of your rights, and how RWSG had helped them to speak out:

I didn't know about my rights, that you are free to speak out for yourself; I never used to do that. I was just scared. I thought maybe because I am an asylum seeker I am not allowed. But then being with RWSG... now we know our rights. Now we are free to speak out. We do not have that stigma, but other asylum seeking women still have this stigma, they are still scared. Since I have been involved with RWSG, I feel free. I feel I can do anything.

Interviewees also spoke about the benefits that engagement with stakeholders had brought to them, for example, a greater knowledge of their rights and the opportunity to ask decision makers directly about a particular concern. This was also identified as a good opportunity to practice their English: *'the communication with people improves English and your voice gets heard by others'*, said one current RWSG member.

Reducing isolation among women and combatting the negative impact on women's mental health of the asylum process was another benefit identified by interviewees. One member talked about *'looking forward to meet with other women. It is so important when you don't have anything to do, you just sit at home. It is like a day out. You break out from your usual routine, from staying at home.'* Another member reiterated this: *'It helped me very much to find*



something useful to do with my time and improve my skills.'
Another spoke of her work with the group restoring her hope and sense of purpose:

When I came to the group I didn't have hope anymore. When I go out there and speak, they believe me, they don't judge me because of my colour or my accent, no, they see me as the person who wants to bring about the changes in the community.

Another elaborated on the positive impact on her mental health of her work with RWSG:

I was depressed because I was isolated, I didn't know people much...I was shy to approach them, because of the depression as well I had a gap to be with others, it was a very difficult situation. Now that I am with RWSG, I do a lot of things. I always advise everyone that they need to communicate... The most comforting thing about the group is sometimes when you sit at home and you go through asylum, you think, "Oh my God, I am alone", but ...from (RWSG) you learn that you are not alone whatever you are going through.

3.3 Challenges

Notwithstanding the significant success that RWSG has

achieved over the years in developing and sustaining an influential voice for refugee women, the group and the women's project have faced a number of challenges, which were also described by interviewees.

Members reflected on the challenge of getting heard by stakeholders and affecting concrete policy change in a difficult and politicised area:

The doors are not always open for us. We are fed up with hearing that they will take things into consideration. We want to see changes on the ground....we need actions.

Other current members reiterated this point, talking about the challenge of the negative media rhetoric and public 'mentality' around asylum seekers and refugees; and noting the fluctuating nature of influencing in this area:

There is some change in services, although it is not really what we want. In some services it changes and at a later stage it goes back. It keeps going back and forth.

Another interviewee spoke of the difficulties posed by working across devolved and reserved competencies when seeking to affect change for refugee and asylum seeking women, saying that, *'the problem is that the Scottish parliament does not have the power [for immigration]. I think if they had the power [to change it] things would not be like they are right now'.*

A particular challenge for a refugee-led group is that external influences can have a significant impact both on individual members, and on their families and communities. Women in the asylum process often face precarious circumstances in a phase of their lives characterised by instability. As their circumstances change, they might move on, either to another part of the country through dispersal or by choice; or onto work or study, if granted leave to remain. The asylum process itself puts incredible pressure on those women who are waiting for a decision. As one stakeholder highlighted: *'The membership can fluctuate; when you hear that someone moved on, you think, that is a real miss, but that is the nature of these things and you have to accept that.'*

While many interviewees highlighted women's ability to put their personal situations aside, with one member making the point that, *'already they are doing a great job coming to the meetings despite difficulties'*; the fact that group members do bring their own direct experience of what can be an incredibly challenging period in their lives can impact on their ability to see the bigger picture, as one partner commented, *'occasionally, individuals are more personal and anecdotal in policy discussions'*.

A current group member also perceived this challenge, and elaborated:

Sometimes [members] get distracted by their own personal experience. It is quite understandable, if this has happened to me this week and I don't have anybody to talk to, and I go to a meeting, this is my comfort

zone, even if it's got nothing to do with the meeting but if I feel strongly about it, I want to raise it and try to get help. It is not a weakness per se, but I think it is one of the distractions during the meeting.

The urge to affect change and have an impact on a policy area that is very personal to them can affect the process of identifying realistic goals. One external stakeholder commented on this:

Passion sometimes takes over and we start talking about fundamental changes of the overall asylum process; a couple of times I had to say that we are probably not being realistic about what we can and cannot impact on.

There are other practical and logistical barriers to women's participation in the group. For example, members highlighted *'problems with childcare'* and said that *'we still face some barriers, like childcare and funding'*. One member highlighted the impact of these challenges, both practical and personal: *'Attendance can be an issue, getting...people to the meetings is difficult sometimes'*.

Another challenge that was highlighted by a number of members was that of sustaining the broad representativeness of RWSG:

Usually [we work on] things that we have experienced, which is helpful, but more



research is needed, like interviewing other people and organisations. That way we have proof or evidence when we present issues to the authorities.

Two members noted a particular gap in RWSG's representation: *'The Chinese community is the one that is missing; we don't have anyone representing them'*. The fact that RWSG members past and present are able to clearly identify such challenges to their work demonstrates a critical perspective and reflection that is key to the success of their work and fundamental to the community development process. The continuous questioning and reappraisal of the context and the conditions in which the group is working, is what enables it to develop and sustain its impact.

3.4 The impact of Community Development support

All of the RWSG members interviewed highlighted the importance of community development support and its contribution to enabling them to work towards their aims collectively as a group: *'What is special about RWSG is that we have the community development support from Scottish Refugee Council. We would not be taking steps forward without them'*. The skilled interventions of the community development workers enable the group to identify and address the challenges outlined by group members above.

Interviewees expressed specific gratitude for the support the group has received through the women's project, both

financial support and that of the community development workers at Scottish Refugee Council. Several current RWSG members specifically emphasised the role of the community development workers:

Their experience and their support gives us motivation.

Without them we would not have grown, we would not be where we are, we would not have achieved what we have. They have played a really important role. They have supported us in everything we do. Without them, we wouldn't have come that far.

We gain a lot from them. They have done an amazing job in our group. We learned a lot from them, now...we become an independent group and we will put into practice what we have learned from them. Before I could not chair the meeting, but now I have the confidence to speak. I want the people to hear my voice. We couldn't do it by ourselves. They have done an amazing job to teach people like me in this group. They made us understand what they are talking about, you can always ask them. They never judge us, they never laugh at us.

Because of community development support, we built the confidence to speak in front of powers like the House of Commons.

One founding member of RWSG conveyed in a very simple way the impact of the community development approach, which sets out to help people to understand and analyse the power dynamics that shape their lives, enabling them to begin to collectively challenge this reality:

...when you are in RWSG, you start asking questions, many questions, questions about yourself, your children, about human rights.

External stakeholders also identified the importance of the approach adopted by the women's project, recognising the uniqueness and effectiveness of the model:

They have a bigger capacity through community development. This demonstrates how much capacity you need to put into these groups to make them work...They use the link between community development and policy development in a strategic way and it gives them the opportunity to tailor their work... It is unusual for a group affected by asylum to work so closely with a large NGO.

One member spoke of the importance of funding that has

enabled them to participate in and develop the work of the group:

Comic Relief has helped us a lot. Thanks to them we always had childcare and travel expenses for our meetings. In my point of view, it is a very big support. Because of lack of funding, we have seen other groups being incapable of doing what they want to do. They do not move forward.

Founding members of RWSG also highlighted the importance of community development, saying that it *'is a strength of the group'* and that *'if the community development support was not there, the group would have disappeared a long time ago'*. Another former member reiterated this:

Scottish Refugee Council has been a strong leader in the development of community groups and especially RWSG. They have been great help. I couldn't be where I am today if I didn't have their support from day one. Back then, the community development worker was a role model for me.





4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As our findings demonstrate, RWSG has been extremely successful, both in identifying the needs and common concerns of refugee women, and in representing these in different policy arenas to a range of decision makers. As a representative group, RWSG is in a unique position to enable a diverse range of refugee women's voices to be heard. With support from community development workers and the policy officer, the group has been able to turn concerns and aspirations from the wider community into a common agenda; to plan and develop strategies for taking action and to engage with decision makers around improving the quality of life for refugee and asylum seeking women in Scotland.

Nevertheless, as a representative group, RWSG represents the views of a number of grassroots refugee led organisations, many of which are struggling to survive in the current economic and political climate. The existence of grassroots independent organisations is critical to representative groups like RWSG as their key purpose is to represent those views and to develop a common agenda in order to influence policy and practice. There is therefore an ongoing challenge

for RWSG around how to continue to engage with the wider community of refugee and asylum seeking women in order to represent their views.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the difficulties and barriers that can prevent refugee women from being able to participate at all in the decisions that affect them. RWSG has been successful in getting a seat at the table in a range of fora and in raising the views of refugee and asylum seeking women, but their voices are not always valued, nor are the barriers to participation truly understood. If we are to genuinely enable women's voices to be heard it is essential to work both with and alongside refugee communities and be willing to listen, support and do things differently if necessary. It is also critical that they have the necessary support to enable real and meaningful participation and to remove any barriers to participation for women.

On 30 May 2015 Refugee Women's Strategy Group constituted as an independent group at a vibrant Inaugural General Meeting in Glasgow, attended by 68 women representing a range of refugee community organisations. The meeting approved a new constitution for the group and elected a committee of 14 women to lead RWSG on its next stage of development. At its first Committee Meeting in June, office bearers were appointed, including a Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary and Treasurer. As RWSG embarks on this next stage of its journey as an independent organisation, community development support will be ever more critical as office bearers take on administrative and governance roles, and the group seeks to both consolidate its sustainability for the future

whilst continuing to raise refugee women's voices on the issues that matter to them most.

As the external political climate becomes more challenging, and characterised by cuts to services and support organisations, a strong and representative voice advocating for the rights of refugee and asylum seeking women is ever more crucial in the debate. It will be essential for RWSG and other groups like it, to seek and secure funding to enable them to access the support they need to develop as a group, and to continue to have an impact on the lives of women in their communities.

Recommendations

- Scottish Refugee Council, Refugee Women's Strategy Group and Comic Relief should share the good practice developed through the women's project model of combining community development and policy influencing, and seek to further develop this model of working.
- Funders, including government, should continue to invest in providing long term skilled community development support to refugee led organisations, including representative groups such as RWSG and other grassroots organisations.
- Decision makers should consider and implement methods of working that enable equal and meaningful partnerships with refugee communities and to address barriers to participation, including the provision of support to enable participation.



Newly elected RWSG Committee members and participants at the group's Inaugural General Meeting, May 2015

