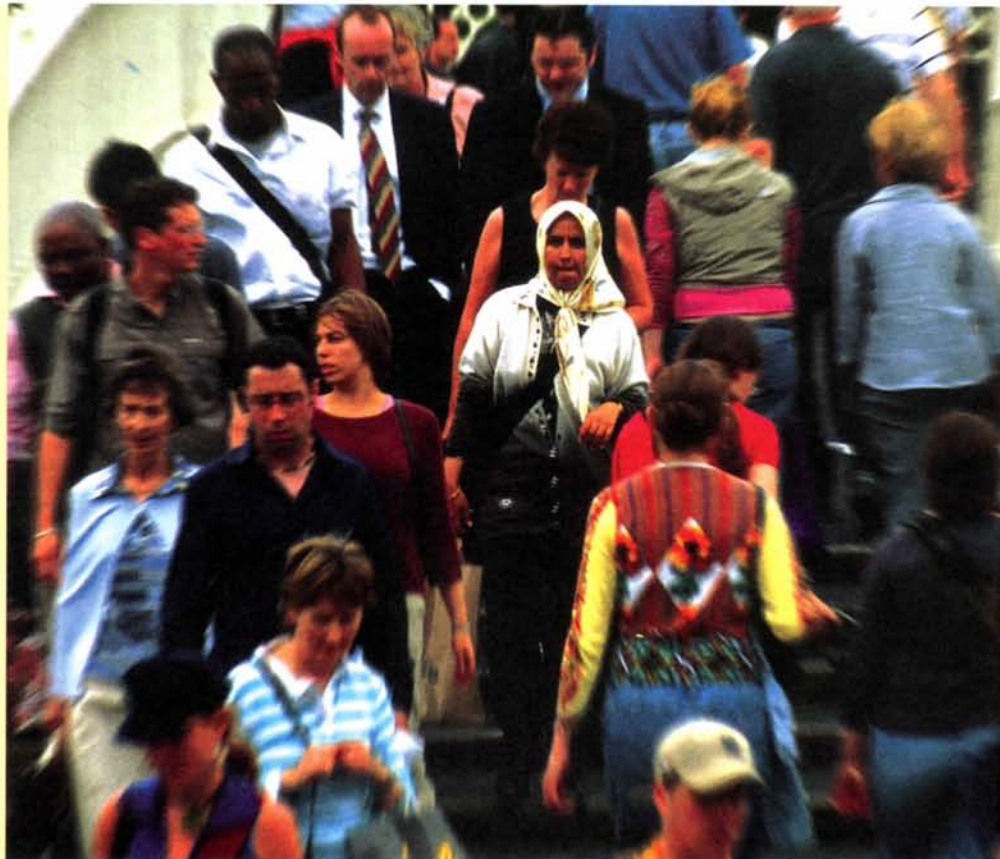


Against all odds: refugee

It is already difficult enough for refugees not only to find employment in the UK, but also to find employment that matches their skills and qualifications gained in their home country. For refugee women, there are additional challenges. **Corinna Ditscheid**, Editor of the Refugee Women's Association's *Refugee Women's News*, explains.



Sophie is a refugee woman from Somalia. Sophie had managed to secure work as a sales ledger in London, but when her mother fell very ill, she left her job to care for her until she passed away. Since then, Sophie has found it very difficult to find new work. She recently got part-time work for two days a week dealing with invoices for a meat distributor, but the work is not challenging to her, and she needs to find full-time employment.

Leila is also a refugee woman from Somalia. She was separated from her family when the war started, but managed to join them in the UK in 2001. Leila applied for permission to work and a national insurance number as soon as she arrived in the UK. She has always wanted to work, but she too has encountered many difficulties. After more than a year of being unemployed, she has recently found work as a legal secretary. The post was meant to be for one month only. While she has already been there for three months, the ongoing uncertainty about the length of her employment leaves her feeling vulnerable and uncertain about the future.

Sophie's and Leila's stories are not unique. The Department of Work and Pensions recently published a report about refugees and work, which indicates that a quarter of

"When I walk into a job centre now, I can see people look at me as though they already knew they have no work for 'someone like me'."

employed refugees in the UK are working in temporary jobs, like Leila (HR Gateway review of the report at: www.hrgateway.co.uk). 35% of refugees surveyed for the report were, like Sophie, working part-time, with more than half of those working part-time, not out of choice, but because they could not find full-time employment. While gender-aggregated data is much more difficult to come by, evidence suggests that of the 70% of refugees who are unemployed, the majority are women. (See Roya Jahanbin's article, *Refugee Women and Employment*, in the August and September issue of *Refugee Women's News* published by the Refugee Women's Association.)

Barriers to work

There are many obstacles that refugee and asylum-seeking women face when they try to get their feet into the UK labour market. One of the most frequently cited barriers to finding work is the lack of English language skills.

Vida, a refugee musician from Iran, came to the UK in 1985, when the situation in her home country became increasingly threatening for women. Vida did not speak English when she first arrived. The prospect of having to find work opportunities in a new country without any language skills was at first incredibly daunting to her.

For asylum-seeking and refugee women who do not speak English, this obstacle is compounded by gender-based discrimination in the home country and the UK. Women's social role is still too often perceived to be in the home, resulting in women being denied access to education in some countries. Being illiterate in their mother tongue makes it more difficult for women to learn English, and it can take at least seven years before they are ready to enter the job-market with up-to-date job-search skills. However, in the UK as well, refugee women have traditionally experienced unequal access to English classes due to a lack of political will to address their gender-specific needs.

women and employment

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Left: © 2002 Howard Davies / Exile Images

Indeed, a further barrier that women face is that they are still primarily responsible for the care of children and other dependants at home, as Sophie's story above illustrates. This is an obstacle that refugee and asylum-seeking women share with all women, and a reflection of the wider power structures of British society as a whole. For refugee and asylum-seeking women, this problem is especially acute. Indeed, some refugee women report that in the context of having lost everything from their previous lives, their families expect them to embody everything that is reminiscent of their home country. Women are expected to stay at home, speak the 'mother' tongue and make husbands and children feel 'at home'. This can stand in the way of women's integration into their new society, and foster isolation and dependency.

Generally, refugee and asylum-seeking women are more isolated than their male counterparts, and much less visible in UK society, which in turn compounds their unequal access to English classes, training, and advice and guidance opportunities. Once in the UK, women have also lost all the support systems that they traditionally received from family and friends back home. Hildegard Dumper, a researcher and consultant in refugee issues, has argued that some women may not want to mix with

their communities if these are male-dominated, because "often it's gender issues and conflict with male society that has led them to seek asylum in the first place." (*Community Care* magazine, 10-16 July 2003, *Long Walk to Freedom*, page 30.)

Another obstacle to employment for refugee women is a lack of work experience they have in this country. Most UK employers want to see that applicants have work experience in this country and that they can provide a UK-based reference. Leila has first-hand experience of this. She applied for many jobs, but found that people did not even want to see her qualifications from back home. Refugee agencies such as the Employability Forum are pressing for employers to be more flexible and to acknowledge diversity in skills and experience. Yet some employers, particularly in the private sector, don't easily change already engrained working practices.

Professional women re-qualifying

The lengthy and costly re-qualification process that is required before women can practice their professions in this country proves to be another hurdle for women to negotiate.

Nadia is a refugee woman from Iraq who applied for asylum in the UK in the 1980s. Nadia studied medicine for six years in Baghdad, obtained an M.B. Ch.B from Baghdad University in 1980, and is a qualified doctor with several years of work experience. Nadia has tried very hard to find work in her profession in this country, but she has found it very difficult. Despite the acute shortage of doctors in the UK, the re-qualification process for 'foreign' doctors is so complex and expensive that many in the end simply give up.

Refugee doctors with qualifications gained outside the UK must pass three exams to gain registration from the General Medical Council, the body that is responsible for issues of professional standards in medicine in the UK. These exams are the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Professional and Linguistic Assessment Board (PLAB 1 and PLAB 2) test. The fees for these exams range from £145 to £430, but refugees are exempt from paying fees for PLAB 1 on their first two attempts. Many people fail both PLAB

and IELTS on the first attempt, as the tests are very difficult. This means that refugees should take preparation courses before they attempt the tests, but fees for these courses can range from £630 to £1,000. The preparation courses are offered in major cities only, which can mean added expenses for travel and accommodation. Refugee doctors must also find a clinical attachment and then register with the British Medical Council.

The Department of Health, which has overall responsibility for the health and well-being of people in England, has recommended that refugees should be offered free clinical attachments, but women might also have childcare costs to cover while on attachment. Tanya, who came to the UK as an asylum seeker from the Ukraine in 1997, and who worked as a specialist obstetrician gynecologist in her home country, reports that her re-qualification costs added up to £4,015. This included course and exams fees, transport, childcare, stationary, and books. This is a fortune for an asylum seeker who may only be entitled to less than £40 a week to live on.

In this context, it is not surprising that many refugees and asylum seekers (if they are still allowed to work) are unable to work in their professions, and end up taking up low skill level employment. Nadia eventually found work as a medical administrator in a private medical office, where she was responsible for liaising between doctors, hospital staff and patients.

Xenophobia at work

Negative attitudes towards refugee women can also make it more difficult to access employment. Discrimination can also contribute significantly to the fact that many refugees end up in jobs, which they are overqualified for.

"[Leila] applied for many jobs, but found that people did not even want to see her qualifications from back home."

Sophie has first-hand experience of such discrimination. Before Sophie left her job to care for her ill mother, she was a Muslim woman who did not think much about religion or dress code: "When my mother died, I started feeling differently about my faith, and it became very important to me to wear a scarf. Now, I never leave the house without my scarf, and it has made it so much more difficult to find work. I am not blind, and I can see very clearly the looks on people's faces. When I walk into a job centre now, I can see people look at me as though they already know they have no work for 'someone like me'."

Not entitled to work

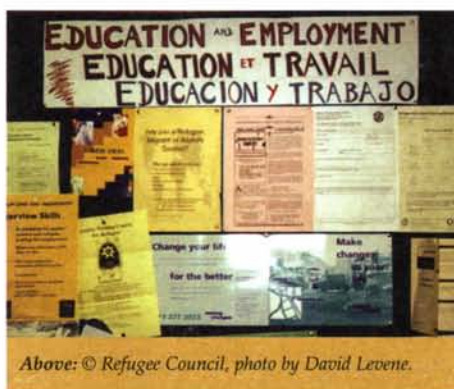
On top of the already mentioned barriers that refugee women face when accessing the UK labour market, the Government withdrew the right to work concession for asylum applicants in July last year.

Until that date, asylum seekers could apply to have their work restriction lifted after six months from the date of their application. The Government withdrew this concession without consulting any refugees or refugee agencies. The Government argued that it was working towards bringing down the time it takes to resolve asylum cases to six months, which would make the concession redundant. The Refugee Council found, however, that the average time to get an initial decision was still 13 months with a further 26 weeks for an appeal decision. Asylum seekers are now deprived of self-earned income for much longer periods of time.

Losing the right to work has also affected asylum seekers' access to pre-vocational training, and recent European Union European Social Fund (ESF) funding guidelines (set out in the *European Union ESF Action Note Changes to Eligibility Rules for Asylum Seekers*, June 2003) clearly state that "[u]ntil decisions on refugee status have been made, asylum seekers do not have access to the labour market and it is therefore important that their participation in ESF [funded] projects must not involve activities leading to access to the British labour market". This means that by the time refugees are able to begin to receive guidance and training on accessing the UK labour market, their skills and confidence may have been lost. As a result, they are unlikely to be able to find work equivalent to the skills level they were able to carry out in their home country.

Changes underway?

Despite the numerous obstacles refugee women face when trying to get into the UK employment market, changes are



Above: © Refugee Council, photo by David Levente.

"...a quarter of employed refugees in the UK are working in temporary jobs..."

happening which have significantly improved help available for women. For one, funders increasingly allocate portions of their grants to projects for women. The Refugee Women's Association, for example, has been able to run free training courses for women as well as cover women's travel costs.

Its mentoring programme, for example, is proving to be very popular with refugee women. The programme trains employed refugee women to become mentors for unemployed refugee women. This gives refugee women a chance to get advice from women who themselves are refugees and who share many of their experiences. Sophie has taken part in the mentoring programme, which she has found both supportive and encouraging: "I enjoy these meetings very much. I meet my mentor every week and I can tell her everything I have been doing in the past week in terms of trying to find full-time work. She will listen to me and give me practical advice."

More funds are also available that cover childcare costs allowing more women with small children to attend training and advice sessions. There are also a number of re-qualification support programmes women can access, such as the ones run by the Refugee Education Training and Advisory Service at Education Action International (formerly the World University Service).

Yet the fact remains that refugee women continue to face severe discrimination trying to gain employment, compounded by the consistently hostile anti-asylum climate in the UK. The Government, in fact, feeds this hostility by devising ever more restrictive policies such as withdrawing the work concession from asylum seekers, when it should be promoting better understanding about what difficulties asylum seekers and refugees actually face.

Government policies effectively punish asylum seekers for having become victims of human rights abuses in their own country. They also force refugee support groups to distinguish between 'refugees', who have permission to stay and are entitled to support and 'asylum seekers' who are not. As the ESF guidelines (see above) illustrate, agencies have to refuse vocational training and advice on how to access the employment market to clients who have no permission to work. Otherwise they risk losing vital funds. Yet employment remains key to successful integration for both groups. Refugee agencies should therefore continue to campaign for vocational training and permission to work to be restored for asylum seekers.

Volunteering

Volunteering is an option open to asylum-seeking women who do not have permission to work as well as refugee women. It is one that more and more women indeed rely on to get out of their isolation, to build up their skills and to gain better employment. Asylum-seeking women who cannot work very often find that volunteering helps them to escape the looming depression that comes from not being allowed to work.

Isabel is an asylum-seeking woman from Columbia and not allowed to work. She works as a volunteer for a community organisation in London. This, she enjoys very much, as it allows her to meet people, learn English, and make a valuable contribution to the community.

Even in the face of the many obstacles they face, refugee women are resilient and determined to work. As Simin Azimin, Director of the Refugee Women's Association, says: "Women will take any opportunity that is made available to them or they will make their own." ■■

Article by Corinna Ditscheid of the Refugee Women's Association.

With special thanks to the women who have contributed their stories. Some names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Leila's story was published in the August and September 2003 issue of Refugee Women's News published by the Refugee Women's Association.

Vida's story was first published in the August and September 2002 issue of Refugee Women's News published by the Refugee Women's Association.