

Refugees' Experiences and Views of Poverty in Scotland

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About the Scottish Poverty Information Unit

The Scottish Poverty Information Unit (SPIU) believes that poverty is caused by the unequal distribution of opportunities and resources rather than the lack of resources in society. SPIU aims to assist those committed to eradicating poverty in Scotland through robust policy analysis, quality research and widespread dissemination of poverty information. SPIU seeks to work in partnership with others towards the goal of reducing poverty and extending social justice in 21st Century Scotland

About the Scottish Refugee Council

The Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) is an independent charity dedicated to providing advice, information and assistance to asylum seekers and refugees living in Scotland. SRC also provide specialist services in areas such as housing and welfare, women's issues, community development, the media and the arts. In addition, SRC play a leading role in policy development and campaign on refugee issues to ensure that Scotland plays a full role in meeting the UK's legal and humanitarian obligations under the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees.

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List of Abbreviations

GHA	Glasgow Housing Association
NAM	New Asylum Model
NASS	National Asylum Support Service
RIES	Refugee Integration and Employment Service
SPIU	Scottish Poverty Information Unit
SRC	Scottish Refugee Council
UKBA	United Kingdom Border Agency
YMCA	Young Mens' Christian Association

1. Background and Context

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

While the terms ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’ are often used interchangeably, both are legal terms which bring different sets of entitlements. In the UK, an asylum seeker is someone who has made a formal application for asylum and is waiting for a decision on their application. The UK Border Agency takes a decision on whether or not that person qualifies for protection under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or human rights legislation. Article 1 of the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees¹ defines a refugee as a person who:

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

The UK government therefore has a clear set of obligations to refugees under the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention which outlines who can be considered to be a refugee, what their rights are in terms of seeking asylum and the obligations of states to offer protection. However, in the last two decades the issue of asylum has become increasingly political which in turn has had an impact on the perceptions of those who arrive in the UK to seek asylum and on their experiences in the areas to which they are dispersed for the duration of their asylum claim (Sim 2009).

Policy Responses

The main Scottish specific policy change in terms of asylum seekers and refugees followed the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 which led to the dispersal of asylum seekers from London and the South East of England. From April 2000 those seeking asylum were dispersed to regional centres where they were to remain while their claim was processed. The National Asylum Support Service (NASS)³ was created to centrally control accommodation and benefits for dispersed asylum seekers (Sim 2009). This moved the implementation of asylum and refugee policy from central to local areas while maintaining central control of policy and resources. The policy focus on dispersing asylum seekers altered the entire framework of asylum seeker and refugee support placing emphasis on the temporary nature of residence within the UK. The punitive nature of asylum policy

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

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

³ NASS now forms part of the UK Border Agency

means that resources tend to be taken up with meeting the immediate survival needs of asylum seekers rather than being available for the longer term integration support needs of those who become refugees (Zetter *et al* 2005; Sim 2009). In addition, restrictions on taking paid employment were introduced in July 2002. In being prevented from taking employment asylum seekers are forced to rely on benefits but are entitled to only 70% of Income Support in the UK. Until recently the shortfall was paid once a positive decision was received. However, this entitlement has now been removed and the main option available to refugees is an Integration Loan which they have to fulfil certain criteria to access.

In 2006 the Home Office was reported to have a backlog of approximately 450,000 unresolved claims for asylum across the UK and the Case Resolution Directorate was created to deal with what became known as 'legacy' cases (Sim 2009). The difficulties in processing claims efficiently led to the development of the New Asylum Model (NAM) which had the aim of resolving the majority of claims for asylum within six months of the first application. Through the legacy process a large number of people who had been in the asylum system for up to six years were given indefinite leave to remain in the UK but without refugee status, giving them a different set of rights and entitlements to those who receive a positive decision under NAM. Refugee support organisations are concerned not only that many 'legacy' cases have taken too long to resolve, several years in some cases (Sales 2007), but also that the shorter timescales involved under NAM makes it difficult for asylum seekers to access appropriate legal advice and support and gives asylum seekers less time to orientate themselves and create local links (Scottish Refugee Council 2007; Sim 2009).

The situation is made more complex for asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland by the nature of the devolution settlement between the UK and Scotland. Whilst the services that provide support to asylum seekers and refugees such as education, health and social services, are devolved, immigration policy; equalities and human rights, and social security are reserved matters. Therefore, conflicts can arise between the central control of resources and the provision of support at a local level (Zetter *et al* 2005; Mulvey 2009a; Sim 2009). However, the declining population in Scotland led to the development of the Fresh Talent initiative designed to attract skilled migrant workers to Scotland. This initiative fostered the development of a more inclusive attitude in Scotland towards refugees (Wren 2007) and also marked a real difference between the Scottish policy context and that of Westminster.

Housing policy is reserved to Westminster in terms of supplying accommodation to asylum seekers. However, it becomes a devolved matter once a positive decision has been received, which adds to the complexity of the transition to refugee status. The quality, location and size of available housing for refugees in Glasgow were viewed as impacting on refugees' experiences of poverty in Scotland. During the asylum process different services are offered by the three main providers; Glasgow Housing Association (GHA); Angel and YMCA. Asylum seekers housed in GHA accommodation are more likely to be able to stay in the property they have been living in until appropriate permanent accommodation can be secured. However, where the accommodation is provided by Angel or the YMCA, refugees have 28 days to find suitable accommodation once they have been granted leave to remain.

The properties supplied to asylum seekers and subsequently to refugees are often of poor quality and in areas where the housing stock is being replaced or refurbished. This is largely due to the dispersal initially being housing led and to the particular situation with

social housing in Glasgow at the time the initial dispersal activities took place (Go Well 2009; Netto & Fraser 2009).

Poverty in Scotland

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

Some groups are at greater risk of being in poverty. For example:

- single people with no dependent children who make up almost a third of those in the bottom tenth of income distribution (Scottish Government, 2010)
- women are at a slightly higher risk of being in poverty than men overall and they are more likely to be low paid, particularly those in part-time work – women account for two thirds of those paid less than £7 an hour in 2009 (The Poverty Site, 2010b)
- disabled people are less likely to be in employment and for those in employment have a median equivalent net income that is 30 per cent lower than that for other working age adults (Hills et al, 2010: 238)
- nearly all minority ethnic groups are less likely to be in paid employment than White British men and women (Hills et al, 2010)

Refugee Poverty

There is a body of research across the UK that provides evidence of the experiences of poverty amongst asylum seekers (for example, see Mulvey 2009a; Hamilton and Harris, 2009; Doyle, 2008; Malfait, 2008). However, the situation of refugees is much more difficult to glean from existing research, so much so that, in their report on economic inequality in the UK, Hills et al could say little about refugee poverty, except to anticipate on the basis of qualitative studies that some asylum seekers and refugees “may be highly disadvantaged” (2010: 5). The ‘invisibility’ of refugees in administrative data collection systems arises in part because attainment of refugee status brings with it the status of ‘ordinary resident’. This means that individuals are not obliged to declare their refugee status (Aspinall and Watters, 2010: 134). However, under NAM refugees have leave to remain which will be reviewed after five years. This could lead to employers being less likely to employ refugees as they may be expected to return to their country of origin if UKBA consider the situation to have improved sufficiently in the five years since they were initially given leave to remain. The impact of this policy is not yet understood as the first review is being carried out in 2010. Evidence does suggest that refugees face poverty and disadvantage in ways that are similar to other marginalised groups in society (Mulvey 2009b). These include; low income, problems with access to services, (lack of) access to well paid employment; and challenging attitudes to those living on a low income. However, refugees have additional challenges that further compound these more general problems:

- Asylum seekers receive lower levels of benefits than the general population and are dependent on the provision of housing and energy costs through UKBA and do not

pay rent. Once they have leave to remain new refugees have 28 days in which to access mainstream services including securing appropriate housing, accessing mainstream benefits and other relevant services. This period is a particularly vulnerable time for new refugees as they have to make the transition from complete dependency upon UKBA, to being responsible for negotiating the complex housing, health and benefits system in the UK and paying for energy costs.

- Restrictions on employment for asylum seekers are seen as contributing to the risk of poverty on gaining refugee status. Changes to the asylum system in 2002 mean that asylum seekers are not permitted to take paid employment whilst their claim is being processed, which significantly increases their risk of poverty.

Once a person's claim for protection is recognised by the UK Government, and they have leave to remain and all have rights under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, the restrictions on employment are lifted and the majority of refugees are keen to re-start their lives which for many means entering the labour market. However, they face a range of barriers to employment. In addition to the loss of skills and self confidence, the recognition of qualifications of refugees has also been recognised as a barrier for refugees as is providing proof of qualifications (Mulvey 2009b; Sim 2009). The Scottish Government is currently exploring the way forward in terms of improving recognition of skills and qualifications (Guest & Vecchia 2010). The lack of recognised skills and qualifications means that refugees are likely to be restricted to low paid low status jobs which leads to a greater risk of in-work poverty.

The majority of refugees in Scotland are located in Glasgow which is the only dispersal area for asylum seekers in Scotland which has resulted in around 10,000 asylum seekers being dispersed to Glasgow since 2002 (Mulvey, 2009b). This research was therefore designed to explore the experiences of refugees living in poverty in Scotland.

These issues informed the development of this research. The remainder of this report provides:

- a summary of the research aims and methods in Section 2;
- an outline of the views of key informants involved in refugee support in Section 3;
- a discussion of refugees experiences and views about poverty in section 4; and
- Section 5 discusses conclusions and provides recommendations from the research.

2. About this research

This research project was designed to inform ongoing SRC work in relation to refugee integration in Scotland. It will make an important contribution to the activities in Scotland relating to the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion by: helping to raise awareness of poverty and exclusion as experienced by refugees in Scotland; and raising the profile of issues from the research through inclusion of the research report in the Scottish strand of the EU programme.

Therefore, there are several reasons why the Scottish Refugee Council commissioned this research:

- to find out more about the experience of poverty for refugees making the transition towards integration in Scottish society;
- to ensure services better understand poverty as experienced by refugees;
- to help services meet the needs of refugees living in Scotland;
- to help services develop policy and practice that is appropriately designed and directed toward reducing the risk of poverty for this group;
- to raise awareness amongst policy makers of the impact of poverty on refugees to inform their decision making and priority setting; and
- to learn about the effects of poverty on integration and contribute to future work on refugee integration by the Scottish Refugee Council.

Methods Used

There were two stages to the research project:

Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews with staff from voluntary and statutory organisations working with refugees formed the first stage of research. We undertook six interviews which were designed to provide a picture of local and national issues which may be impacting on the lives of refugees in Glasgow and provide evidence or testimony concerning the nature and extent of poverty amongst refugees. The findings from these interviews informed the development of the second stage of research. The interviews were carried out by telephone or face-to-face depending on the respondent's preference. This resulted in two telephone and four face-to-face interviews conducted at a time and location that best suited respondents' work pattern. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were held with a total of 12 refugees; three of whom had received status through the legacy process and nine who had received status under the New Asylum Model (NAM). Focus group research was, in this instance, an ideal tool to explore diversity of opinion and experience and an excellent forum for generating discussion about public policy issues concerning poverty. We developed a core topic guide following initial analysis of the key informant interviews. This guide provided us with a flexible tool for investigating issues of both personal and public relevance.

Focus group participants were recruited from existing groups known to the Scottish Refugee Council. This was necessary due to the tight timescale for the research. Participants included five men and seven women. One focus group was organised for women only. Participants' countries of origin were: Zimbabwe; Gambia; Eritrea; Pakistan; Sudan; Afghanistan; Cameroon; Democratic Republic of Congo; Lebanon. Participants had been in the UK between six months and nine years and therefore encompassed the whole time period in which people seeking asylum have been dispersed to Glasgow. Due to the small sample size, the findings from the research are indicative of the experiences of those who took part rather than representative of those of the refugee population in general.

Intended impact

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

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

Developing a clearer understanding of refugee experiences of poverty and exclusion in Scotland will also help to identify gaps in and the potential future direction of research in an area that has had insufficient attention in the past and, as a result, is not sufficiently well understood at present.

3. Refugee Support

The following section reports on the findings from the interviews with key informants working in agencies supporting refugees. These interviews were designed to provide background and context for the research with the refugees. The information gathered was used to underpin the development of the topic guide for the focus groups with refugees. The interviews explored:

- the main reasons for refugee poverty;
- the links between refugee poverty and integration; and
- policies that are working well and those that need to improve.

Key informants had a good understanding of the possible reasons for refugee poverty. There were suggestions that mainstream service providers and members of the public in general, lack awareness and understanding of the refugee situation, which has led to misconceptions of the reasons for refugees being in the UK. Respondents felt that some attitudinal and policy differences exist between Scotland and England at community, local authority and government level. Specific areas mentioned included access to adult education/English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and free secondary healthcare from arrival until a person leaves the UK which is not the case in England:

‘At UK level well I suppose the one good thing about Scotland in comparison is that the government here will say that we try to promote integration from the day of arrival as an asylum seeker so from the first day we will resource you to try and work towards integrating into Scottish society.’

This highlighted the confusion that exists with regards to reserved and devolved responsibilities. Immigration policy is controlled by Westminster policy makers but the consequences of the actions of the UKBA may have to be dealt with at local level. UKBA does not provide services to refugees but provides resources to support organisations that can subsequently signpost refugees to the appropriate existing service in the local area. There was a general view that services required by refugees, such as housing and mental health services, are already overstretched making it difficult to ensure that new refugees receive the right type of support on gaining status. The nature of the asylum process, which is underpinned by UKBA policy, was considered to have a negative impact on the experiences of refugees particularly in terms of housing and mental health.

There was also some concern over the length of the asylum process. Prior to the Case Resolution process in 2006 a large number of refugees had been in the asylum system for up to six years which was considered to be too long:

‘We had groups of people stuck in the asylum system for 6 or 7 years - which must just have been the most disempowering experience - because you’re not in control of where you live - you’re not allowed to work - you’re not allowed to travel out with the country - you’re living in fear of being sent home every day - living in a kind of stateless limbo.’

However, under the new system, in some cases the time in the asylum system prior to receiving refugee status was cited as being as short as two weeks, which was not considered by respondents to be enough time for people to orientate themselves, improve their English language skills and access the appropriate support services. Respondents also expressed concerns that refugee and asylum seeker issues appear to have been integrated with Black and Minority Ethnic and economic migrant issues in Scotland and in Glasgow. One consequence of this is that the experiences of refugees and their consequently diverse needs can get overlooked and add to their invisibility, meaning that policies and services are not adequately designed to meet those needs.

The transition period from being an asylum seeker to having refugee status was viewed as a key issue in terms of vulnerability to poverty for refugees. Each of the issues discussed by respondents were intensified during the transition period, particularly in relation to housing and benefits. Once leave to remain has been obtained new refugees have 28 days to vacate UKBA funded accommodation and access mainstream benefits and services. A further difficulty is caused by the fact that during the period in UKBA accommodation heating and lighting bills are part of the support package for asylum seekers, and when refugees move to permanent accommodation there is no understanding of the cost of energy which coupled with a low income, leads to almost immediate financial difficulty for some refugees.

Interview respondents felt that there is a belief among asylum seekers that getting refugee status will lead to an improvement in their quality of life. Therefore, there is a degree of tolerance of poor quality of life, discrimination and challenging circumstances whilst seeking asylum, in expectation that status will lead to improvement. The reality of having leave to remain in the UK was seen as being quite different, however, with refugees facing general marginalisation as well as barriers to work and education, highlighting that *'getting refugee status is not necessarily going to be a happy ending in it's own right'*.

Some key informants suggested that, at present, community organisations and community members plug the gaps in refugee support, in effect providing an alternative welfare system to support destitute asylum seekers and refugees by providing them with food, shelter and, where possible, money. Community organisations also have an important role in terms of supporting integration of refugees:

'I think it would be good if there was a bit more value given to some of the more informal stuff that happens in communities because that's what people in poverty I think really value... it's maybe just in terms of (improving)their mental health as well as in terms of their pocket ...'

The restrictions on paid employment for asylum seekers for the duration of their asylum application were considered by key informants to be the policy with the greatest impact upon refugee poverty. This was seen, particularly by one key informant who was also a refugee, as having a huge impact on the employability of refugees in terms of skills atrophy and self confidence, particularly for the legacy refugees, some of whom had been in the asylum system for years.

'I had to wait 8 years before I was permitted to work, not that I didn't have the skills and experience to be able to work but ... I wouldn't be able to work ... I did a lot of voluntary work but I think it has an impact in terms of people's self esteem. It has an impact on people's ability to keep their mind off the real issues, the traumatic experiences they encountered in their country, because they feel that their hands are tied.'

In addition to skills atrophy, key informants highlighted problems around the recognition of qualifications held by refugees. They gave examples of highly skilled, highly qualified individuals working in low paid, low status jobs. There was an awareness of work being done by the Scottish Government to address the recognition and conversion of qualifications held by refugees and migrant workers who must:

'... live off benefits when they've been a highly skilled professional in their own country and for some reason or another they're not allowed to practice here. For instance, doctors or vets, you have to be in the country for 2 or 3 years before they can practice. They also have to sit English exams and other exams before we'd let them take up a reasonable job. We've some of these people working in cafes and care homes. I mean, what a waste.'

Securing sustainable employment was therefore seen as a key issue for refugees. Some respondents felt that refugees should be supported to find quality, sustainable employment and be supported while in that employment where required. However there was some concern about the difficulties refugees find when using mainstream employment services:

'With the Job Centre if you have no knowledge of how the system works you are not able to also find your way through it at all - only to follow the instructions as given to you and you know I think there is a knowledge gap in terms of people understanding the functions of the Job Centre.'

There was a recognition that support structures such as the MORT (Moving on Response Team) team within Job Centre Plus in Argyll Street and the Refugee Support Team within the homelessness support structures in Glasgow City Council do exist. There was a concern however that some refugees are not aware that the services were available to them and some suggestions that increased resources for targeting refugees would be useful for combating this were put forward.

Key informants also considered the complexity of the process for gaining UK citizenship to be a poverty issue for refugees. Once leave to remain has been obtained many refugees want the security of becoming a UK citizen. However, the cost is high and the process complex. The complexity of the system means that people can pay several hundred pounds for a citizenship application only to be informed that they are ineligible, with a proportion of the fee being refunded.

The majority of refugees have family in their country of origin and the cost of bringing a family member from there is often prohibitive. Refugees with leave to remain under the NAM system are eligible for support to enable family members to join them in the UK. However, those with ILR under the Case Resolution process, are not eligible for support. This means that refugees in this situation face considerable extra costs if they wish to be reunited with family members in the UK. Connell et al (2010), highlight that according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2000) and the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (2005) reuniting family members as soon as possible has a positive impact upon the integration process.

In addition to attempting to meet the costs of reuniting with family members, key informants highlighted that many refugees are sending money back to family in their

country of origin. This can exacerbate the problems of managing on a low income and deepen the poverty that refugees living in Scotland experience:

'... so even if they're on a very low income, they'll be taking a slice off that to send back to the family.'

Key informants argued that mainstream services should be inclusive and accessible to refugees and asylum seekers so that there was less need for specialist services. For example, there was a feeling that mainstream advice services should engage more effectively with refugees. It was acknowledged that a lot of the issues refugees have to deal with are experienced by the general population and improvements in service provision would benefit all service users and not just refugees:

'Rather than having niche services that refugees turn to I would quite like to see a situation where refugees can access any service and the workers within that service know about the kind of issues that refugees face and I think if we could reach that position it would be great.'

However, one key exception to the general preference for mainstream provision relates to mental health services where it was argued that specific services are required to address the experiences of trauma among refugees and mainstream mental health services may not have sufficient or appropriate skills to support refugees towards positive mental health:

'Ideally I think that mental health services in Glasgow would be expanded to deal with refugees ... I think the health services in Scotland for asylum seekers and refugees at the moment are better than they are elsewhere. But I know ...they really kind of struggle to meet the needs and that's one thing that maybe you do need specialist support for, because... it's a particular kind of trauma.'

Respondents also linked the mental health of refugees to their experiences of poverty. They believed that experiences of trauma are impacted upon by the punitive nature of the asylum process and symptoms often manifest themselves once status has been gained. There was a view that mental health should be recognised as an aspect of sanctuary:

'It's all about looking at refugees as human beings and beginning to assert their mental health and wellbeing as part of the whole process because sanctuary is one aspect but it's not all about the person - it's needed for that person to be seen in totality and whatever support they need could be given in an all inclusive approach.'

The reasons for refugee poverty in Scotland put forward by key informants were therefore varied and interlinked. Despite the existence of good practice in Glasgow it was evident that UK asylum policy has an impact upon the experiences of refugees at Scottish level. The interviews served to provide an overview of the refugee support structure in Scotland and in Glasgow in particular. The findings informed the development of the focus group research conducted with refugees which is outlined in the next section.

4. Refugees' Views of living in poverty in Scotland

This section reports on the data gathered during the four focus groups. All of the refugees we spoke to in the focus groups felt that refugees lived in poverty in Scotland and had a range of opinions on the reasons for this. The following quote sums up what the refugees who participated in the research feel about living in poverty in Scotland:

'When somebody is poor I don't think that he can feel like he is happy, he is sad, this is what people are feeling, inside they have the sadness somewhere, they don't say that 'I am poor I am proud to be poor', sometimes we are ashamed.'

In general there was a feeling that refugees had to set their expectations at a low level in terms of employment and housing in particular.

A dignified life in Scotland

The right to live a dignified life is recognised in the work carried out as part of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion will highlight the rights people have to live a dignified life⁴. Drawing on this concept, the researchers created a list of things that could be considered essential for living a dignified life. The list was short and provided at the beginning of the focus groups (Appendix 1) in order to provide a framework for the discussion on what it means to live in poverty. Participants were asked to highlight the things they considered to be necessary for living a dignified life. Their responses, in order of the importance placed upon them are outlined below:

- **A warm home and two meals a day** were considered to be the most necessary. The importance placed on having a warm home and adequate food highlighted the importance of addressing low income and fuel poverty for refugees as both need to be provided from their limited income. Despite living on a low income most participants spoke of sharing food with other refugees and asylum seekers.
- **Access to the Internet** was seen as essential for keeping up-to-date with news in their country of origin, having access to information and knowledge and to support learning for children and adults.
- Parents thought **school trips** were essential for their children since they could not afford to take their children on holiday or on day trips. Their lack of knowledge of Glasgow and the surrounding areas also prevented participants from taking children on trips.
- **Being able to replace or repair broken household goods** was also seen as important by participants. There is often little or no support available to refugees setting up home after leaving UKBA funded accommodation. This means goods are more likely to be second hand or of poor quality and so they need replaced or repaired more quickly, which is another cost to be met from a low income.

Participants considered the following to be of least importance for living a dignified life:

- toys for children;

⁴ <http://2010againstopoverty.eu/news/news/news31.html?langid=en>

- new, not second hand, clothes for all the family; and
- having a TV.

In addition to the list provided, participants also considered the following to be essential for living a dignified life:

- trips for adults;
- support with English language skills; and
- social events to bring people together.

As most participants originally resided in countries which would be considered to be poor in relation to the UK, participants were asked to comment on whether this list would be the same in their country of origin. Suggestions included:

- a cold rather than warm home was viewed as essential in their country of origin;
- access to internet would be a problem because of the lack of infrastructure – however it can be accessed in the library. There was a feeling that in the UK children need the Internet to do their homework; and
- expensive toys were not considered to be important as they were not likely to be available in their country of origin so children do not ask for them.

When asked how they considered themselves **in comparison with other groups in Scotland** participants made two types of comparison:

‘People who have lived here for a long time have better jobs than we do.’

‘Refugees are better off than asylum seekers because they have leave to remain.’

There were some concerns therefore about how refugees are viewed by other groups in Scotland and a sense that they felt misunderstood:

‘If they knew what it was like to be a refugee they would not think that refugees have it easy and are better off by being in this country.’

There was no indication that participants felt different from other refugees, just that they felt different from non-refugees.

Living on a low income/Financial Exclusion

Despite income not being considered in the list of necessities it emerged as a key reason for refugee poverty in Scotland. Benefit levels were considered to be too low to provide even the basics. One man spoke of living on £88 per week for him and his wife. It was clear that participants did not expect to receive increased benefits as refugees, and were more interested in finding a job to increase their income. That said, those who were in employment tended to be working in low paid sectors of the economy. There was a sense that some participants felt that refugees who stayed on benefits are *‘lazy’*. However they also acknowledged the demotivating effect of the restrictions on asylum seekers taking paid employment.

It was evident that participants struggled to manage on their limited income and difficulties making ends meet were more to do with low income levels than poor money management. Participants who had been involved with money advice services found that the support had helped them to manage their money but had not increased their income:

'I've been referred to people like Money Matters who have tried to juggle my payslip and they laughed halfway through - but you've all gone - your income - and I was like - try to balance it - that's why I'm here'

One participant had found it difficult when her son went to secondary school as he wanted money to have lunch with friends rather than have free school meals. Another spoke of not being able to buy winter clothing for his wife when she was reunited with him from Africa. He suggested making a small loan available to refugees to cover unexpected expenses such as this when a family member arrives in the UK.

Most participants had also experienced difficulties providing the types of proof of identification requested by the banks. A basic bank account or a Post Office Card Account appeared to be the only options for some participants despite the fact that they were in employment. One participant who was a customer of a particular bank was refused a student account which would have provided her with a Student Travel Card. The reason given for the refusal was that she did not have a UK passport. There was also a perception among participants that people from certain countries are not allowed to open bank accounts in the UK despite a bank account being required to receive benefits or wages.

Most participants made an effort to send money to family in their country of origin despite having very little themselves. Sometimes as much as £100 each month was being sent to family by refugees living on benefits. One participant made the point that attitudes towards family are very different in Europe than in Africa:

'Also, when we live here, the problem for us is we have a different culture from the native people in Europe - the family is only a dad a mum and children, but in Africa it's all the family. Too many people who live in Europe here they have to send money back home for the rest of the family so they sacrifice themselves sometimes. I can't spend every day £3 for transport ... they prefer to walk to save the money because they need maybe £100 a month to send to the rest of the family.'

Another spoke of making sacrifices and being supported by friends so that she could send money to her children in her country of origin:

'When I was on benefits every two weeks I used to say that's £28 and the £100 had to go to the kids and I lived on handouts from my friends who used to say 'you better keep that £2.80 for the bus'. One would buy me meat, one would buy me a bottle of milk, or I would just say no don't worry this week, just let me buy this... but it was hard... it's very difficult.'

Fuel Poverty

Despite being able to manage on a low income participants did have some difficulties with utility bills which were often related more to a lack of knowledge around the cost of fuel in the UK than with poor money management skills. It was not surprising that, with a warm home being seen as the most essential item for living a dignified life, being able to pay

fuel costs was viewed as a priority by all participants particularly where their accommodation was damp.

Everyone had a good understanding of how to access advice on dealing with fuel suppliers. Those experiencing difficulties with their fuel bills had sought advice and had most had been supported by money advice services to arrange suitable payment terms with utility companies. One participant for example, had an outstanding bill for £500 which he was paying back at £5 per week from benefits of £88 for him and his wife, amounting to approximately 6% of their weekly income. Another, however, was confused as to the status of his bill, and did not know whether it had been settled or not: he had been informed that it was resolved, but then had received a letter from a debt collector demanding payment of the amount he thought he had settled.

This was the key negative aspect of the transition from asylum seeker to refugee status, from having utility bills covered by the UKBA support package to having responsibility for utility bills almost immediately. Most respondents felt that there could be more support during this time to help people to understand that their fuel bills would be a significant part of their expenditure.

Employment

All refugees we spoke to saw paid employment as the main route out of poverty for them. There was no sense that anyone thought that they would be worse off in work. All participants wanted to take paid employment regardless of their circumstances, whether they related to family responsibilities, health issues or language problems. Participants also spoke of making a contribution to the country through employment. However, everyone spoke of having difficulty in finding work although a number were in work and one was self-employed having obtained a Private Hire Licence to allow him to operate as a taxi driver. There was some recognition that employment opportunities are limited at the moment, due to the economic climate in the UK, but this was compounded by a feeling that refugees would not get the available jobs. A few participants were of the opinion that *'doors are closed to refugees'*. Some participants felt that the label 'refugee' creates negative perceptions among employers because of lack of knowledge and understanding of the situation of refugees.

Difficulties in finding employment were mainly linked to lack of recognition of skills and experience by employers. Participants also found the focus on work experience in Scotland frustrating. They were puzzled as to why the experience they have from their country of origin was not enough, or was not even considered, and wondered how they can get experience without first having a job. One participant, who had managerial experience in his country of origin, had applied for cleaning jobs only to be told he needed to have experience. Attempts to get into the security industry also proved to be difficult as applicants were expected to provide character references from people who had known them for five years, despite having only been in the UK for three years.

In addition, recognition of qualifications emerged as a significant issue for refugees when seeking work. One refugee thought that: *'in the UK you have to be an engineer to be a mechanic'*. Participants suggested that the Scottish Government should provide courses in practical skills designed to help refugees to convert their qualifications or to gain qualifications in jobs where they held practical skills but had no certificates, for example, in carpentry and mechanics. Volunteering, which some participants were involved in, was seen as a way to get relevant work experience although there was some concern that, if the work was there, people should be paid for it:

'Volunteering is a problem. People from my country don't understand volunteering. Why would they volunteer? They are looking for money for their skills. They are looking to improve themselves.'

English language skills, whilst important in all aspects of life, were mainly discussed in terms of employment. Although everyone had been involved in some English language skills classes, there was frustration at not being able to access ESOL classes with participants having been on waiting lists for around two years. There was also frustration that existing ESOL classes are not flexible around work:

'when you finally get accepted you cannot go to the class because you are at work'

One participant also felt that there were many jobs that did not require good English skills that refugees could do. He felt that language was sometimes used as an excuse by employers not to employ refugees. He gave the example of Polish workers having very basic English language skills and getting jobs faster than refugees. Participants believed that some refugees need literacy skills in general as they do not have them in their first language. One participant had not been to school before coming to the UK. She felt that she had benefited from learning literacy skills in English and that this should be available to all refugees who had little or no literacy skills.

There was also a feeling amongst participants that the restrictions on employment for asylum seekers had a negative impact on the skills and confidence of those who went on to gain refugee status. Most felt that it had a demotivating effect on the person and their sense of being in the country on a temporary basis. They also felt that skills and confidence were lost during that time and that this could be addressed by enabling asylum seekers to take part in training during the period of their claim so that they would be ready to move into employment as soon as they got status. It appeared that participants were resigned to the restrictions on employment for asylum seekers remaining in place.

In terms of support to find employment, participants felt that the Jobcentre should do more to help refugees. The IT and telephone based system caused some frustration. One participant was concerned that refugees with little or no IT skills would not be able to negotiate the terminals and did not feel able to ask Jobcentre staff for support. This finding slightly contradicts evidence from other research projects which have highlighted the good practice that exists in the Job Centre in Glasgow (Netto & Fraser 2009), with the Argyll Street branch being mentioned specifically.

Housing

Housing and accommodation issues were clearly of high importance to participants and significantly impacted upon their experiences of poverty in Scotland. Accessing suitable accommodation was viewed as particularly problematic by the refugees involved in the focus groups who thought that accessing suitable accommodation was difficult and the system was confusing. They felt that it would be useful to have someone to make the telephone call for them and that this would be more successful as they would not immediately be identified as refugees. This suggestion highlighted the general feelings of discrimination that our respondents felt in terms of access to housing. There was also a view that, when refugees are offered permanent accommodation, little consideration is given to the fact that they may have created a connection the local area and community. In addition, children are often removed from schools they have been settled in since

arrival in Glasgow because the travel distance and costs are too great for low income families to bear once they have been moved to a different area within the city.

Most socially rented properties in Glasgow have two bedrooms and refugees often have larger families, so need larger houses of three bedrooms or more. At the other end of the scale there is a relative lack of accommodation suitable for single people who make up a significant proportion of the refugee population. Amongst the participants, there was an awareness of the rights of refugees (and others) to adequate housing but there was also an understanding that there is not enough social housing available. The size of available homes and the standard of accommodation was a recurring concern:

- One participant was due to be re-housed into a two-bedroom flat prior to her son being reunited with her, at which point their requirements changed. As three-bedroom flats are in short supply in Glasgow, she was currently living in a one bedroom flat with her 16-year old son and her four year old daughter. She and her daughter share the bedroom while her son sleeps in the living room;
- one focus group participant was living in a hostel for single men which he found to be a particularly distressing. He doesn't drink alcohol or take illegal drugs both of which he stated were commonplace in the hostel. Following an initial period in the hostel he had been living with friends but had to return to the hostel when their situation changed. He had no sense of when the situation would be resolved despite having been homeless for a considerable time; and
- another participant lived in a property that suffered considerably from dampness. She had made several complaints to the Housing Association but had not been successful in being moved to another property or in having the dampness dealt with. She brought pictures to the group to highlight the nature of the problem. The dampness was having a negative impact on the health of both her and her children and on the quality of their family life as they were only able to use one of the two bedrooms in the flat.

Not being settled in permanent accommodation also had implications for finding employment with participants believing that it was difficult to secure a job when you do not know where you will be living. Participants thought that social housing was the only option available to them in terms of cost. The option of renting privately was discounted because of cost, although one participant felt he may have no option because of the harassment his wife experienced in their present home, while he was at work.

Health

Participants were largely satisfied with the health services they received. Everyone knew how to access health services and where to go for medical help when they needed it. The physical health problems discussed tended to be related to housing. For example, one participant lived in a damp home which she believed to be the cause of health problems, such as sore throats and skin rashes, for herself and for her children. The stress of living in overcrowded conditions and coping with the effects of dampness was also highlighted by other participants. Difficulties with accommodation were a major source of stress and not knowing when the situation would improve increased the stress.

However, mental health as an issue for refugees was threaded throughout the discussions about almost all other issues. Social isolation and the lack of social support were viewed as problematic for the mental health for refugees. Participants talked of knowing refugees

who have become withdrawn and depressed due to being isolated in their community. One participant reported having invited women into her home specifically to try to address some of the isolation she noticed in her community. Thus some refugees were proactive in attempting to overcome perceived problems in their communities. Employment was viewed as being good for mental health since having no work meant having: *'too much time to think about things'*. There did not appear to be any recognition that being in employment may be detrimental to health or that it may be merely a sticking plaster covering a range of mental health issues.

Although the focus groups were not designed to explore traumatic experiences of participants there was some evidence that these experiences have an impact on the day-to-day lives of the refugees.

'I have no peace, no..., no peace.'

Furthermore, there was some indication that refugees often find it difficult or even impossible to disclose their most traumatic experiences and that mental health issues can take time to emerge. They believed that once a person has gained refugee status, and felt relatively safe, they begin to think about their traumatic experiences and of the people they have left behind and this has a negative impact on their mental health. There was a sense, therefore, that life was on hold throughout the uncertainty of the asylum process but that once a positive decision has been received and threat of being refused protection has been lifted, the effects of traumatic experiences can emerge. In addition, they highlighted that, in some cultures, traumatic experiences are not discussed outside of the close family.

Refugee Integration

Refugee Community Organisations were recognised as being important in terms of providing support and advocacy for refugees with the social aspect of their role being particularly valued in terms of creating new social networks. All participants had made an effort to make connections with people and to build relationships. The importance of social events which encouraged different cultures to come together to get to know each other and learn about their respective cultures was stressed by all participants. Being able to meet with people from their own culture was also viewed as being important in order to help them to remember their country of origin and their shared histories.

The women in one focus group felt that it was particularly important that women took time to ensure that other women were not becoming isolated within their communities. It is important to note however, that the women who took part in this focus group were part of the Women's Strategy Group and therefore had a good awareness of the support available to refugees and were articulate about their experiences and those of other refugee women. Their opinions therefore can not be considered as typical of all refugee women in Glasgow.

Other participants discussed the difficulties of having no family or friends in this country.

'I mean I'm not happy, I am alone, I have no friends.'

'you miss your job, you miss your family, you miss your friends, a lot of people.'

There was a perception amongst participants that refugees were restricted to living in poorer areas where children do not want to go to school. One participant stated:

'it's a poor area... it's like it's your fate to live in poverty'.

Some participants reported feeling safe in their house but they were less sure about being safe within their community as they did not leave their homes after 6pm. A number of them had experienced verbal and physical threats that they believed to be racially motivated and had feared for their safety. One man had been chased by a gang of young men who he feared had a knife. Another reported feeling safer now than when he arrived in Scotland when *'too many people were victims of assault'* but he now believes that *'if they assaulted me they would assault me even if I was Scottish'*.

Two participants talked of not being able to allow their children to play at the local park as they had experienced harassment. The children therefore had to play indoors which caused family tension and stress. In the cases where the families had suffered racial harassment, participants felt that neither the Housing Association nor the police took the situation seriously. One participant thought his situation would be more tolerable and safer if his family lived in an area where there were more refugees and they would therefore be less visible.

Refugee Support

Scottish Refugee Council was the first port of call for most people when they need support and participants thought that the staff there treated them with dignity and compassion and there was no reason why staff in other organisations could not do the same.

'I think I feel that if we had people like this, people that work for the SRC, you know the places we go to ... we would have the burden off our shoulders, but it's not like that ...'

'They make us feel part of the society.'

'I think they have the same skills, it's just the interest they give you and the help they give you. That's the most important thing, but I think anyway I'm glad to find them.'

The Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) was mentioned in a positive way by NAM participants who had been supported by project staff. It was evident that RIES project staff recognised that, for a person to sustain employment, all their other issues need to be sorted out first. Support from the RIES project is not available to legacy refugees meaning that it can be more difficult for them to secure and sustain employment whilst addressing housing and health issues with limited support.

The focus groups with refugees therefore highlighted a broad range of issues related to living in poverty in Scotland. There was some recognition among participants that many of these issues were faced by the population in general and were not specific to refugees. However, the experiences of those who took part in the research highlighted that there were added challenges to refugees which were brought about by the asylum system and the nature of support available to refugees living in Scotland.

5. Discussion & Conclusions

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

The refugees participating in this research showed that they are not passive recipients of what society offers them: they are resourceful and creative in seeking solutions to the barriers they face. In addition, the general opinion amongst participants was that refugees' needs should not be prioritised over those of other disadvantaged groups, and that improvements in service provision and anti-poverty measures would benefit all members of society. All participants did, however, consider themselves to be living in poverty. The routes out of poverty for refugees would therefore appear to be the same as routes out for other disadvantaged groups but the avenues open to refugees are narrower.

According to Phillimore & Goodson (2010) the UK now takes a bilateral approach to asylum policy. Policy focus is on deterring asylum seekers entering the UK through controlling the borders and restricting access to social and welfare services for those who do arrive. Simultaneously, there is an expectation that once people become refugees they will integrate in to UK society. In terms of integration the focus tends to be on practical rather than cultural issues with a strong emphasis on securing housing, paid employment, education and accessing health services. In addition, the manner by which the dispersal policy has been implemented has served to divide resources between those who are seeking asylum and those who have leave to remain in the UK (Zetter et al 2005). Asylum policy therefore has a negative impact upon the experiences of poverty of those who become refugees in the UK and in Scotland.

Refugees' experiences of poverty in Scotland

Whilst participants in the research highlighted that their experiences of poverty are multidimensional, they also recognised that increasing their income would be a key factor in their moving out of poverty. Employment was clearly viewed as the main route out of poverty, yet those in work tended to be in low paid unstable jobs. It is interesting to note that no participants spoke of saving for the future, only about coping day-to-day. This inability to prepare for the future has long term implications for refugees in the same way as it has for other disadvantaged groups. However, the situation for refugees, for example in terms of pension contributions, is exacerbated by the restrictions on taking employment whilst seeking asylum. Where refugees spent years in the asylum process they have limited opportunities to make up their contribution and are likely to be further disadvantaged once they are of retirement age (Green 2007).

Employment was clearly valued by everyone we spoke to since, regardless of their circumstances, everyone wanted to be in work. It was evident that, while it was not included on our list of necessities required for a dignified life, being in work was strongly linked to living a dignified life. Work was also presented as the main route out of poverty

and as the best way to become integrated into the local community (Bloch 2002). The restrictions on work for asylum seekers were considered, by everyone involved in the research, to be a main contributor to the difficulties refugees can have in securing employment. Although there has been some consideration given to the recognition of skills and work experience (Charlaff et al 2004) both remain as key barriers faced by refugees when seeking employment.

It would appear that, despite examples of good practice, such as the changes implemented in Job Centre Plus across Glasgow⁵, there are gaps in support to find employment for refugees. The example given was of the IT and telephone based system in the Jobcentre which places refugees with limited English language skills at a disadvantage. A person with a disability, for example with a visual impairment, would not be expected to access the same terminal as an able bodied person without adequate adaptations. Therefore, in terms of equalities the terminals could be adapted to address the needs of refugees seeking work.

It was clear therefore that more ESOL provision is required. Participants talked of waiting up to two years for a place on an ESOL course. There was a belief among focus group participants that with adequate language skills refugees could sort things out for themselves in all areas of their lives. In essence, being able to speak English in the UK is empowering and gives refugees more control and autonomy in their lives as well as building on their existing skills for employment (Netto & Fraser 2009).

Housing was evidently a big issue for participants with all bar one participant having faced some difficulty with accessing appropriate housing. In addition, most asylum seekers and subsequently refugees tend to be housed in areas of social deprivation and in high rise properties in areas that are undergoing physical regeneration (Glasgow Centre for Population Health 2007; Wren 2007). The research illustrated the frustrations of participants in terms of accessing housing in better off areas. According to Philips (2006) it can be difficult for refugees to access the wider housing market, particularly those who are not considered to be in priority need. There was evidence that this was true for the participants in the research. Private rented accommodation was considered to be too expensive, competition for suitable properties was high and participants felt they needed support to secure accommodation through the housing allocation system.

The difficulties with housing contributed to physical and mental health problems for participants and it is clear that creative ways of supporting refugees to access appropriate housing in terms of size, location and quality must be developed. Not having permanent housing makes it difficult to secure sustainable employment and adds to transport costs if relocated to an area further from work, school and community.

Refugee Integration and Poverty

Research participants, particularly the women, had developed strong social networks in their local community. There was some evidence therefore, that social bonds, bridges and links (Ager & Strang 2004) were being created and maintained. In terms of links, for example, all participants were engaged with the Scottish Refugee Council, again

⁵ Forty staff members in Job Centre Plus offices and benefits processing teams across Glasgow were provided with training outlining issues affecting refugees following the Case Resolution process. The scheme was extended to include NAM refugees in 2008. (Netto & Fraser 2009)

highlighting that we cannot extrapolate our findings across the whole range of refugee experiences since our respondents were all to some degree 'engaged'. In addition, some participants spoke of being involved in their church and with their ethnic community within Glasgow, highlighting the existence of the social bonds considered necessary for effective integration. However, there was less evidence of bridges between participants and members of different communities, perhaps with the exception of one woman who invited other women into her home. There was a feeling that resources should be directed towards creating opportunities for communities to organise events that bring people of all nationalities together.

In 2005 the UK government launched *Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration* which detailed the needs of refugees for effective integration. These included: adequate information; access to appropriate services; achievement of potential and community participation (Sim 2009). Zetter et al (2005) argued that the impact of dispersal on refugee community organisations (RCOs) has led to a recognition that mainstream advice services are not always able to provide the type and degree of support that is required by refugees. They went on to say that RCOs have picked up the slack in some cases with little or no funding from the centrally controlled resources which can result in gaps emerging in refugee support because RCOs now have to meet the more pressing needs of asylum seekers rather than focus on their longer term needs of refugees (Phillimore & Goodson 2010).

For Phillimore & Goodson (2010), full integration requires commitment from both the host community and those who are settling there. However, in reality this tends to mean that refugees have to accept the main values of the wider society into which they are being integrated. This needs to be backed up with a commitment from mainstream service providers to meet the needs of the diverse groups living in a multicultural society. Where integration does occur, refugees risk being integrated into a society that both creates and endures significant inequalities, which refugees are then subject to experiencing on top of their particular experiences as refugees. Their specific needs have to be taken into consideration when inequalities are considered by policymakers: while refugees want to access mainstream services that are equipped to meet their needs, some specialist support is needed, particularly from mental health services.

Recommendations

The following key recommendations and policy suggestions emerged from the research. Although small scale, the study provided an important insight into the experiences of refugees living in poverty in Scotland and highlighted some areas where further research could be carried out. The approach to further research amongst refugees in Scotland may need action in two different directions. Hills et al (2010) highlighted the lack of sources of quantitative information on the position of asylum-seekers or refugees across the UK, as this is not a status which the surveys generally ask about. They argued that this is a problem that needs to be addressed if we are to gain a better understanding about inequality and poverty amongst this group of the population.

However, while some quantitative data would be helpful, the lack of knowledge about the experience of poverty amongst refugees calls for qualitative participatory approaches. If possible this should include, an element of longitudinal research that will be important to gaining a clear understanding of the particular issues and needs of refugees and how they changes over time in the process of integration. This approach is likely to produce data that can inform agendas for service providers, policy makers and agencies responsible for addressing issues concerning inequality and discrimination. In addition, some gender

differences emerged in the research that suggests that women and men have different strategies for dealing with the isolation and approaches to integration. These highlight the need for services and support organisations to take account of gender differences and to be sensitive to their different requirements and for better understanding of the importance of such differences over time.

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

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

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

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

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Appendix 1: List of necessities

A warm home

Two meals a day

School trips for children

Being able to repair or replace broken household goods

Toys for children

A TV

Access to the Internet

New, not second hand clothes for all the family