

Refugee Women and Employment: Barriers to Integration

Integration allows for the economic, social, legal and political participation in society. Employment is crucial for the successful integration of refugees because it facilitates economic and social participation. Moreover, employment provides self-esteem, facilitates contact with members from outside the immediate community, and can offer the opportunity to learn and / or practice English. Employment also offers a means for some refugees to provide support for their extended family. In general, refugees who are working are economically independent and adjust more easily to life in exile than those who are unemployed or dependent on benefits for long periods of time.

However refugees, in particular refugee women, experience higher rates of unemployment than others. This high rate of unemployment and the under-employment and low pay of the minority who are working has negative consequences not only for the individual but for society as a whole. For the individual low levels of economic participation and under-employment can result in de-skilling and can erode self-esteem. For society low levels of employment and low pay impact on economic growth and result in wider social exclusion. A recent report by the government has noted the economic and social costs of high rates of unemployment and under-employment among ethnic minorities as a whole (Cabinet Office, 2003: Ethnic Minorities and the Labour Market).

Refugee women are not a homogenous group. Causes of flight, education, social class, education, age, employment status, household composition, cultural norms and religious beliefs all contribute to the diversity of refugee women and their varying experiences in exile. In addition, structural barriers such as the removal of the employment concession for asylum seekers in July 2002 affect longer term labour market participation. Though refugee women are diverse, there is a certain amount of uniformity in their labour market experiences which comprises of low levels of economic participation, and, for the minority who are working, poor terms and conditions of employment and low pay.

Research carried out for the Department for Work and Pensions that included 200 interviews with refugee women from Iraq, Somali regions, Turkey, Kosova and Sri Lanka, in five localities in England found 16 per cent were in paid employment (Alice Bloch, 2002: Refugees' Opportunities and Barriers to Employment and Training. Leeds: Department for Work and Pensions). Those who were working were most likely to be fluent in English, have obtained a qualification in the UK, were less than 35 years old and had been living in the UK for five years or more. More women from Sri Lanka were working (28 per cent) than those from Turkey (23 per cent), the Somali regions (18 per cent), Kosova (8 per cent) and Iraq (3 per cent).

Among those who were working, the terms and conditions of employment were generally poor and included unsocial hours - that is before 8.30am and after 6.30pm - and working two weekends or more a month (42 per cent). Levels of pay were low as well with refugee women, on average, earning only 84 per cent of that earned by ethnic minority women in general and 70 per cent of the hourly rate earned on average by all women. There was also little variation in the type of work

women were doing. More than half of those who were working were working in administration, as interpreters or translators or as advisors. Other work carried out included shop assistant and cashier work, catering and factory work.

The work that refugee women were doing did not reflect the skills that some brought with them on arrival to the UK. Before coming to the UK, 28 per cent had been working. In addition, 20 per cent had been students and 18 per cent arrived in the UK with a higher degree, a degree or a professional qualification. Only five of those who had worked before coming to the UK were doing comparable jobs. For the most part there was occupational down-grading. For example teachers were working in administration or as interpreters. What is clear is that women with professional qualifications such as teachers, doctors and nurses are not using their skills. This was also found by skills audit of refugee women in the teaching, nursing and medical professions carried out by RWA in 2002 for the Greater London Authority (Greater London Authority: Missed Opportunities, December 2002).

Some women experience barriers to the labour market and to accessing English language classes and training that might act as a stepping stone to labour market participation. While two-thirds of refugee women had participated in English language classes, there was still a core group with language needs that were not accessing classes. Though some research has found that lone parents find it more difficult to access services, the DWP study found access was not the problem but course completion was. Some lone parent women had difficulties completing language classes due to child care or family commitments.

Training is known to be an important route through which unemployed people gain access to the labour market. However, take-up of training among refugees is low, especially take-up of statutory schemes. There was a demand for training as 60 per cent said they would like to participate; however, a lack of information about entitlements and availability acted as a barrier to participation as did a lack of child care and wanting to learn English first. Those who wanted training were, for the most part wanting training in either information technology or dress making.

Not all refugee women want to work. In the DWP study 23 per cent of those not working were looking for paid work while the rest were not. The reasons for not looking for paid work varied but mentioned most often were child care and family commitments (53 per cent), studying (16 per cent), wanting to learn English first or a lack of English language (15 per cent) and health (14 per cent). The important thing is to try and remove some of the barriers for those who want to work and to enable those with skills and qualifications to use them in the UK.

Only 14 per cent of those who arrived in the UK with a qualification had tried to get their qualification recognised. Not having documents, not having the language skills and not knowing about the system all affected the ability of refugee women to transfer their qualifications. This also translated into low employment aspirations. Those who were looking for work were most likely to be looking for work in factories, shops or 'anything'. The barriers to work mentioned most often were English language and literacy skills and a lack of UK experience but also a lack of child care and a lack of information were important barriers as well.

Refugee women experience a combination of structural, community and individual factors that affect labour market participation. However the low levels of participation among refugee women and their deskilling will have a longer term impact not only on economic integration but also on social inclusion. Though there is diversity among refugee women there is definitely an overwhelming need to work towards providing more opportunities for this group of women to access some basic services such as training and language classes on arrival to the UK. The longer people are excluded from the labour market the less likely they will become economically active. On a societal level this means a waste in terms of possible contributions to the economy. For the individual refugee woman it means deskilling, low income or benefits and a loss of self-esteem.

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© Refugee Women's News, Issue 27, March & April 2004.