

Older refugees and asylum seekers in the UK: the challenges of accessing education and employment

1. Introduction

This briefing paper aims to highlight the specific challenges facing older refugees and asylum seekers in accessing education and employment. It does not claim to cover all the issues but is intended as a starting point for providers of adult learning and/or advice. For a general overview of challenges facing adult refugees and asylum seekers please refer to our briefing sheet entitled “Refugees and asylum seekers in the UK: The challenges of accessing education, training and employment”.

This sheet focuses particularly on older refugees and asylum seekers, as they are an invisible section of society, and there has been little information collected about them. It starts with a definition of an older person and then discusses some areas of concern.

"Older refugees have been invisible for too long."
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata (1999).

2. Definitions

Older person

Who falls into the category of an “older person” amongst refugees and asylum seekers is complex requiring many factors to be taken into consideration. Some people come from countries where a date of birth is not considered important in their culture, others will not have confirming documentation. In some countries age is defined by status, grandparenthood etc.

This is made clear by the UNHCR who state that “there is no fixed age to define an older refugee as older, largely because life expectancy differs among groups, and the process of ageing is affected by a number of factors, such as an individual’s physical and psychological health, along with family and social support, cultural background, living conditions and economic situation.” *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook, Division of International Protection.* Geneva.

In the UK older people are often defined as those receiving the “state retirement pension” but even this classification is imprecise. NIACE uses the age of 50+, and welcomes those who wish to be included in this cohort.

3. Portrait

Older refugees and asylum seekers will not have the same needs, requirements or aspirations as younger people, or migrants who have grown older in this country. They will have some things in common, but are not a homogenous group and circumstances will differ between individuals. What they will have in common is their previous experiences, which will affect the rest of their lives.

They may have hidden traumas, fears and nightmares, which can distress refugees of all ages, but may be more pronounced in older people. There could also be a sense of guilt that they have survived or in some way they have, in the recent or distant past, contributed to their own current situation. They may have taken a “side” that is now perceived to be the wrong one, which may be questioned by the younger members of their own community. Also a change in status may occur if the older persons’ traditional sources of power, such as community respect, control over land and property, or a leadership role in resolving disputes, are undermined. This can also contribute to a loss of status and consequently a loss of social networks and a feeling of isolation.

*The Elderly in Exile*¹ describes the situation faced by older refugees and asylum seekers as the triple task of ageing:

- Firstly, they are just like others as they have to deal with the loss of relatives and physical functions that ageing can involve. Like everybody else, they also have to fit their past into their present life.
- Secondly, just like older migrants, they have to find their way in a culturally unfamiliar environment that ascribes different meanings to the concept of old age and in which older people are treated differently than they are used to
- Thirdly, they have to find a way to come to terms with the often traumatic experiences they have endured before and during the flight, and sometimes during the asylum procedure as well - traumas which will often only be revealed later in life.

Contribution

In 2000... the Standing Committee of UNHCR approved its Policy on Older Refugees. Based on the 1991 United Nations Principles for Older Persons, the policy stresses that older refugees should not be seen solely as passive recipients of assistance; on the contrary, they should be seen as a valuable resource with much to offer. These are people with a wealth of accumulated experience and knowledge, and they are well able to participate in decisions and activities that affect their own lives and those of their families and communities...

Older refugees often serve as formal and informal leaders of communities. They provide guidance and advice, and they transmit traditions, skills and crafts to other generations, thus preserving the culture of the dispossessed and displaced. They make active contributions to the well-being of their family members, and only become totally dependent in the final stages of frailty, disability and illness...²

4. Education

Asylum seekers and refugees are entitled to study any course at any level, as long as they are able to satisfy the entry requirements and can pay the course fees. The fees they have to pay, and the support they are eligible for, will depend on their immigration status and how long they have been in the UK, for further information see the briefing sheet, “Refugees and asylum seekers in the UK...”.

¹BMP and ECRE. *The elderly in exile. Some findings regarding the situation of older refugees in the Netherlands. Good Practice in the Reception & Integration of Refugees.*

²The United Nations Department of Public Information.

a) Language acquisition

The ability to communicate in English enables older refugees to avoid dependence on younger family members and to be more self-confident in accessing learning opportunities, public services, transport and community activities. It also reduces isolation as interaction with other people, such as neighbours, becomes easier.

b) ESOL for older refugees and asylum seekers

Gaining an ability to use English is fundamental in enabling a refugee or asylum seeker to operate independently and to begin to integrate into UK society. Older asylum seekers and refugees may lack enough basic English language to even discuss their situation with providers, request the help they need, or understand the information provided for them. So gaining an ability to use English is fundamental in enabling them to operate independently and to begin to integrate into UK society. Younger refugees and asylum seekers often develop basic English skills from attendance at ESOL classes and go on to improve upon these skills by practising their English language in the workplace, or through everyday contact with the host community. Older refugees and asylum seekers can access basic ESOL lessons but may have far fewer opportunities to practise their English skills.

The acquisition of the English language is now a prerequisite to gaining British citizenship so the ability to communicate in English has even greater significance for those who gain refugee status. Participation in volunteering, social groups, clubs and societies provide valuable opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to practise their English language, however it can be difficult for older people to gain the confidence to approach and participate in these activities without initial support.

The new restriction on all asylum seekers preventing them from accessing ESOL prior to them being in the UK for 6 months will hinder their early development of English language skills. This may subsequently deter people from taking ESOL as they will become accustomed to living in the UK without speaking English, a particular concern for older people.

c) Challenges

If we wish to encourage more, older refugees and asylum seekers, to participate in learning, there has to be a greater awareness of the obstacles to learning experienced by different groups. There needs to be a determined effort to overcome the barriers, including an acknowledgement that talking with potential learners over their needs, dreams, fears and aspirations is a vital element of achieving greater involvement from this cohort.

For older people from different communities with different culture, faith, language and backgrounds there can be the additional barriers of the lack of literacy in their first language, gender stereotyping and insensitivity.

Some further barriers to learning faced by older refugees and asylum seekers:

- the cost of fees, materials and transport
- lack of knowledge of entitlement
- irrelevance and narrowness of curriculum with too much emphasis on vocational and accredited learning
- restricted mobility and inaccessibility of provision
- domestic caring responsibilities
- not enough confidence in one's own ability to engage
- insufficient confidence to attend classes with younger learners.

Mind Your Language

As an attempt to address some of these barriers, in 2000/01, NIACE collected and sound taped testimonies to the benefits of learning, from older people in their own language. The first sound tape compilation, consisting of 14 testimonies in 13 different languages. Over a thousand tapes were distributed among education providers, funders, community groups and policy makers to raise awareness. The languages included were Somalian, Gujarati, Cantonese, Malayalam, Pushto, Filipino, Tamil, Turkish, Urdu, Arabic, Bengali, Hindi and Punjabi. By collecting testimonies in mother tongues NIACE was drawing attention to excluded and forgotten people, and making the communities aware of the benefits of learning.

4. Employment

Asylum seekers are not normally allowed to work in the UK while their asylum applications are being considered, except in very limited circumstances. If an asylum seeker has waited longer than 12 months for an initial decision on their asylum application, they may request permission to work. Currently, most new asylum applications receive a decision within 30 days. If permission to work is given, asylum seekers are not allowed to become self-employed or to do certain types of work. For more detailed information see:

<http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/asylum/support/employment/>

Older people seeking work in this country often face prejudice because of their age, so it is even harder for refugees arriving in Europe to find employment. These refugees often struggle with the language, a lack of understandable information and differences in working practices. Even if they do manage to find meaningful employment they are unlikely to be able to collect enough insurance contribution years to be entitled to a pension.³ Some further employment barriers faced by older refugees:

- the “psychology of being a refugee”
- age discrimination and racism
- high skills which are not recognised or mismatched in relation to the labour market
- qualifications gained in their country of origin may be outdated or not recognised in this country
- older refugee women face even higher barriers to suitable employment than men as they tend to work in the informal economy, hold low skilled jobs and have caring responsibilities.

Age discrimination

Age discrimination prevents people of all ages from realising their full potential in society. In October 2006 the UK government introduced the Employment Equality (Age) Legislation, which has the aim of ensuring that people are no longer denied jobs or vocational training because of their age. It also protects against age related victimisation and harassment. Workers of all ages should now have an equal chance of training and promotion.

The Age Regulations provide a default retirement age, which allows employers to retire employees at or over 65 years of age. If however an employer and employee agree that the employee can keep working beyond the default retirement age, or the employer’s normal retirement age, they can then agree a fixed term of at least six months for the extension of employment.

³Bloch, A. *Female, older and younger refugees, and asylum seekers dispersed to regional areas are most vulnerable to unemployment.*

Examples of specialist services for older refugees

Holocaust Survivors & Refugees

The Holocaust Survivors' Centre is a social centre for Jewish survivors of Nazi atrocity in Europe during World War II, or who came to this country as refugees after November 1938 and on the Kindertransporte. They also work with more recent trauma experienced by refugees from former Yugoslavia. Email: hsc@jcare.org Tel: 020 8202 9844.

<http://www.jewishcare.org/what-we-do/holocaust-survivors-and-refugees/>

Shalvata Therapy Centre

This therapy service, for older people, uses qualified specialist workers who offer a range of services to address the difficulties that memories of traumatic events from the past can have. They also provide practical assistance to cope with the present. In conjunction with World Jewish Relief, Shalvata also works with a group of Bosnian refugees. Email: hsc@jcare.org Tel: 020 8203 9033

5. Recommendations for the Future

As well as the more general 'Recommendations for the Future' listed in the briefing sheet "Refugees and asylum seekers in the UK...", these specific recommendations should be added for older refugees and asylum seekers.

- 1 The valuable contributions made by older refugees and asylum seekers should be recognised and celebrated.
- 2 The specific needs of this group of older people should be addressed and supported. It is suggested that one of the most effective ways of identifying and reaching older refugees would be through support of grassroots approaches by community organisations working with specific ethnic communities.
- 3 As argued previously, access to education and employment should be improved.
- 4 Community services should be supported as they provide a contrast with the 'authority' of some services. This can be very important to those fearful or wary of authority because of their previous experiences.
- 5 The voluntary sector could offer opportunities to established older refugees to volunteer. This could form the basis of a strategy for promoting social involvement of more recent older refugees.

⁴ Age Concern. *Report of a Survey conducted with Community Organisation and Refugee Community Organisations*

6 Access to public services could be improved by:

- consultation, sharing information and collaborating
- making ESOL courses more relevant and accessible
- linking Information and Guidance (IAG) to Link Age Plus
- approaching IAG and care packages holistically
- encouraging peer support
- promoting intergenerational collaboration
- supporting the use of arts as a form of expression
- being aware of the possible need for trauma counseling
- using older people as role models
- collecting examples of good practice, testimonies and supporting data.

6. References

¹BMP and ECRE. (2002). *The elderly in exile. Some findings regarding the situation of older refugees in the Netherlands. Good Practice in the Reception & Integration of Refugees.* <http://www.ecre.org/files/eldgpg.pdf>

² *The United Nations Department of Public Information.* (2002). <http://www.un.org>

³Bloch, A. (2004). *Female, older and younger refugees, and asylum seekers dispersed to regional areas are most vulnerable to unemployment.* IPPR.

⁴ Age Concern. (2006). *Report of a Survey conducted with Community Organisation and Refugee Community Organisations from London, West Midlands, Yorkshire and Humber. Older Refugees Programme – Promoting the interests of older refugees and asylum seekers.*

7. Further Reading

UNHCR. (2007). *Asylum levels and trends in industrialised countries 2006.*

Roberts, K. and Harris, J. (2002).

JRF. *Disabled people in refugee and asylum-seeking communities in Britain.* Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Ref 962.

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=470>

Hassan., J. (2003). *A House Next Door to Trauma: Learning from Holocaust Survivors how to respond to atrocity.* Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

<http://www.jkp.com/catalogue/book.php/isbn/9781853028670>

Connolly, N. , Forsythe, L .A. et. al. (2008). *Older refugees in the UK: A literature review and interviews with refugees.* Age Concern.

Connolly, N. , Forsythe, L .A. et. al. (2006). *Older refugees in the UK; A literature review: A Refugee Council working paper for the Older Refugees Programme.* Age Concern.

Sanchez-Chiara, J. and Thorndike, H. (2007). *Report of listening events in West Midlands (April 2007) and Yorkshire & Humber (July 2007) : older refugees programme : promoting the interests of older refugees and asylum seekers*. Age Concern England.

United Nations High Commission for Refugees. (1997). *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook, Division of International Protection*. Geneva.

8. Contacts

There are many regional and local initiatives and this list is not exhaustive.

Age Concern www.ace.org.uk

Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA) www.academic-refugees.org

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) www.ecre.org

Help the Aged www.helptheaged.org.uk

NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) www.niace.org.uk

The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK www.icar.org.uk

Praxis - The place for people displaced www.praxis.org.uk

Refugee Action www.refugee-action.org.uk

Refugee Assessment & Guidance Unit (RAGU), London Metropolitan University
www.londonmet.ac.uk/ragu

Refugee Council www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

Refugee Women's Association (RWA) www.refugeewomen.org

UK Border Agency (BIA) www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk

This series of briefing sheets aims to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues for older people. Other titles are available.

Requests for briefing sheets in other formats, such as large print are welcomed, we will be pleased to consider your request. Copies of this and other sheets are available from NIACE:

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Briefing sheets are also available on the website at:

<http://www.niace.org.uk/services/information-services/briefing-sheets>

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties, or insufficient resources. Registered charity number 1002775; Company registration number 2603322.