

Supporting refugees into work:

What can we do better?

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In 2021, 84,000,000 people were displaced across the world because of conflict and natural disasters and of those 26,000,000 have been granted refugee status in various host countries (UNHCR, 2022). The current conflict in Ukraine is creating thousands more refugees. The launch of schemes in the UK such as Homes for Ukraine will help to provide accommodation; in the longer-term economic independence and early engagement with work is key to the welfare of refugee communities (UNHCR, 2018). The [Home Office, in its Indicators of Integration](#), also stresses the need to consider employment as a key to integration. Evidence shows that the employment rate of refugees is also lower than native born citizens (Compass, 2019) and that refugees commonly earn less than average, and particularly women refugees (IMF, 2016). With such a tight labour market, many unfilled vacancies, and the many talents refugees bring, how can current employment support and employers better help refugees who can and want to work to reach their full potential? This briefing draws on two research studies (Gloster et al, 2020) and [Wimalasiri in partnership with Plymouth City Council \(2021\)](#) with refugee communities carried out in England, to suggest what we can do better.

Work challenges faced by refugee populations

Refugees face specific challenges when looking for work (Gloster et al, 2020). Furthermore, when they enter work, they can experience challenges to progressing. These challenges include:

- **Having qualifications and work experience from another country, that are not recognised by some employers:** Refugees are not able to work while seeking asylum, which extends time out of the labour market and can create disadvantages such as gaps on CVs which are unattractive to employers. Lack of UK-based work

experience adds to the challenges of finding work. As a result, refugees work in roles well below their qualification and prior occupational levels.

- **Lacking knowledge of local job seeking practices and social support:** Many jobs in the UK are found by word of mouth through friends and family, and refugees may not have these networks. Employer recruitment processes such as CVs, application forms, and job interviews, and understanding of what employers are looking for can differ from the ways of finding work they are used to.
- **Clashes between a work-first welfare system and a need to learn English.** Recent refugees can be better supported in the longer-term if they are able to spend time learning, becoming fluent in English, and gaining work experience relevant to their aspiration and previous experience. There is a need for human capital development. This has also been evidenced in other countries. For example, in Denmark there have been negative findings on work quality found as a result of work-first policy, and positive labour market effects of language training for unemployed refugees in Germany (eg Arendt, 2020; Lang, 2021). Once in work, refugees can find they lack time to engage in English classes (ESOL), and alongside the lack of in-work progression opportunities found across many entry level roles in the UK labour market, tend to find themselves stuck in low paid work.

How can employment support organisations provide for refugees?

There are systemic challenges faced by organisations helping refugee communities to find work. Projects often have short-range time horizons and are frequently funded based on the number of jobs achieved, with no requirement for impact measurements to indicate whether these are sustained beyond the projects. Commissioners of employment support do not always value or measure whether these jobs are well-aligned to refugees' ambitions or experience, or to value the other steps towards work that might be achieved.

Nonetheless, in common with effective employment support services for other groups, personalised models are important, with varying pace and intensity of support to meet individual contexts and circumstances. Similarly, having the same adviser over time to work with and gain support to overcome issues is crucial alongside access to training and mentoring to develop skills and confidence, and to become accredited with relevant professional bodies (where appropriate).

To support refugee communities into work it is important to work with employers who are open to recruiting refugees and to understand their motivations and business drivers for recruitment. This could be to fill skills shortage vacancies, to increase diversity within the organisation, or to meet corporate social responsibility priorities. Methods of employer engagement successfully used to support other groups into work can also be effective when working with refugees, such as communicating with employers to explain the qualifications and experience of refugees and supporting employers to adapt their recruitment processes to ensure fair consideration of refugees' skills. Work experience, and returner placements, such as those offered through [Transitions London](#), can offer a valuable steppingstone into sustained work.

How can employers support refugees into work?

Employers could consider:

- Making efforts to understand the prior qualifications and experience of refugees and how this translates to the roles they offer, as well as their legal status and eligibility to work ([LWI, 2019](#)).
- Providing work experience and work tasters can give both employers and refugees an opportunity to assess suitability for a role. Refugees gain valuable work experience in a new country which enhances their CVs.
- Training tailored to work preferences. For example, work-focused training specific to the occupations can enable individuals to understand and use the type of language and vocabulary that is specific to that work-context or sector. For example, [ODILS learning Foundation](#) in Plymouth delivers specialist English courses designed to assist learners with specific types of work-focused certification (e.g. Food Hygiene certification).

Why take action on employment and give special attention to the needs of women refugees?

The benefits of resettlement strategy that includes support for refugees to gain work are likely to generate longer-term benefits for both the UK's employers and refugee communities. Around the world, resettlement initiatives focus on men when it comes to employment to keep case-loads manageable, creating equalities in resettlement strategies in relation to work. Many Ukrainian refugees are women with children. The economic independence that comes from paid work enables female refugees to look after themselves and their families better, and enjoy the social aspects of work (DFID, 2010). Refugee women are often caring for children therefore, empowering them through economic means is likely to have a multiplying effect on their immediate and social environment and for society. Economic independence enables women refugees to plan for the future and engage in their host community, providing opportunity to develop language skills, restoring self-esteem, and encouraging self-reliance (Bloch and Levy 1999, Tomlinson and Egan 2002, Home Office, 2019). The benefits of employment include giving structure to refugees' time, socialisation opportunities, a sense of purpose, status, and opportunities to engage in activity which can serve multiple aims of the Home Office integration framework and have long-term benefits for refugees as well as host communities, a key aim of the [UN's Global Compact on Refugees \(GCR\)](#). The example below highlights some of the findings of good practice from a case study in the South West of England.

Case study from Plymouth, Devon: Women refugees and work in resettlement

Varuni Wimalasiri, University of Sussex in partnership with Plymouth City Council, Devon (2021)

A two-year research project was carried out to understand barriers to employment for women refugees and how to improve their access to work in the Southwest region of England. The project was a collaboration between The University of Sussex and Plymouth City Council (with Bournemouth University, 2018-2019). The project involved local government organisations, non-governmental organisations, several community organisations in the Plymouth area and members from the refugee community. The project mapped local resources and explored intersections that influence women refugees' engagement with work, barriers and successes. Interviews and focus groups with various stakeholders including governmental and non-governmental bodies and volunteers in the Plymouth community that assist refugees into work were also undertaken to inform understanding of the current picture in relation to employment and women refugees in the Plymouth area.

The research showed that there are systemic factors that give rise to barriers to sustainable employment for refugees, and identified good practice and suggestions for improvements:

- Government funded provision for **English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)** was too short in duration to meet the needs of most of the refugee women in the Plymouth area. This is also likely to reflect other regions in the country. Community organisations sought to overcome this by **raising alternate funds** to supplement the provision and by creating roles in their organisations dedicated to women's work needs, though this was **not sustainable solely on local funds**.
- Refugees faced prejudices by employers who are anxious about employing them due to negative media messages. To address this, individual job coaches in community and public employment services took their own initiative to assist refugees into work. They championed job applications, and held discussions with employers to change these negative attitudes to help high potential candidates. To take a similar approach, training could be provided for employment support advisers working in areas where there is a high concentration of refugees, to inform them about the different work needs of women from different parts of the world.
- **Poor awareness of healthcare provisions and the impact of the asylum process** had **long term impact** on a women refugees' ability to engage with work and sustain employment. For example, there are cultural stigmas in countries of origin about speaking openly about mental health and for seeking medical help, which could be addressed more openly within the integration system. While volunteers and religious organisations tended to serve the community to assist, in relation to work, it was found that a **more structured and systematic approach is needed** which needed funding.
- **Cultural predispositions and attitudes to paid work, lack of control over family planning, stemming from poor access to healthcare during asylum, and having to prioritise childcare in early resettlement, all restrict engagement with work-related support and training during integration.** There are few provisions in place to accommodate these needs under a 'work first' approach. In Plymouth, local organisations working with women prioritised creche facilities in interventions focused on preparation for work. Support organisations showing best practice in the region, took a **longer-term focus to career planning for women refugees** and created **additional provisions to support women**. (e.g. taking into account child rearing preferences, creating creche facilities; coaching people

into flexible work depending on age of children; a network of community organisations wider support needs to support women into work).

The research captured the extraordinary effort led by local communities and stakeholders (including those who gave their own time to this project) to overcome the barriers faced by refugee women, which was compassionate in ethos and provided an exemplary network of support. However, these efforts were constrained by the lack of mainstream funding for the holistic support needed to enable work engagement.

Project insights and recommendations to improve access to work for women refugees from the project have been taken forward by Plymouth City Council and other project stakeholders through numerous projects and are ongoing.

Our research highlights ways to improve integration and to support the work transitions of refugees for employment support organisations, government, and employers. As we welcome more refugees to the UK, including those from Ukraine, this briefing provides important information on how we can optimise support to ensure their integration into our communities and employment. Mobilising support through employment support services will be a crucial factor. This support should consider the specific needs of refugee communities, and specifically the development of language skills. Time needs to be taken to understand the prior work experience, skills, and work preferences of refugees to maximise opportunities for their successful and sustained integration in the long-term, one which makes the most of their skills and talents.

Further information

After the completion of the project, a seminar entitled: 'Rethinking resettlement and work, with women refugees in mind' was hosted in partnership between The University of Sussex and Plymouth City Council on the 28th of September 2021. Speakers included University of Sussex, UNHCR, Plymouth City Council, Department of Work and Pensions, ODILS Learning Foundation (Plymouth) and Institute of Employment Studies. The workshop was attended by a select group including academics, women from the refugee community from various regions in the UK, members from various government and non-government organisations.

- Dr Linda Morrice, School of Education and Social Work (Sussex University): *Framing refugee integration- critical reflections on conceptual, policy and practice principles.*
- Sasha Ali, UNHCR: *Prioritising women in resettlement (ensuring their safety and wellbeing).*
- Dr Varuni Wimalasiri, School of Psychology (Sussex University) and Jessica Dann (Plymouth City Council): *Why we need to consider the impact of displacement on a person in the resettlement equation and a summary of findings from a project from the southwest region.*
- Jessica Dann (Plymouth City Council), Cassie Roberts, ODILS Learning Foundation, Nicky Keast, Department of Work and Pensions (PCC and local partners): *Employment and women refugees in Plymouth.*
- Rosie Gloster (Institute of Employment Studies): *Supporting refugees into work.*

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