

CEN Times

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Life and livelihood: reclaiming the future

On arrival in the UK, refugees still have a long and arduous journey ahead: the challenge to find a life and a place in UK society. The enormity of this task even after gaining status becomes more apparent when you consider the barriers faced by asylum seekers and refugees. External factors such as the punitive support system, tough work restrictions, media hostility and negative public opinion conspire with the feelings of dislocation and loss of identity symptomatic of forced exile to very effectively exclude refugees from our society. Despite all this, over the course of history refugees have made their indelible mark on the UK, contributing to our economy, and to our cultural and political life.

For Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, the greatest obstacle facing refugees today remains public and media hostility: 'It's worse now than ever – this idea that refugees are either pathetic helpless creatures or else they are wicked in some way. These images have a disastrous affect on refugees themselves and on public perceptions. It is

assumed that people get in here by lying, that they have no will, no ambition, and that they deserve only minimal handouts from the state, like dogs in a kennel.'

In addition, 'this country expects you, as a refugee, to be eternally grateful for being in the UK. There is a callous disregard for the history that has brought people here.'

Goldmine of talent

For most refugees, employment is a crucial factor in feeling part of life in the UK. Refugees bring energy and determination to succeed, along with much-needed talents and skills. Many are highly educated people who have been persecuted for speaking out in their own countries. The Home Office's survey, *The settlement of refugees in Britain* (1995) found that 'the majority were highly qualified ... often coming from professional backgrounds.' The Home Office also found that overall, 'the skills level of these refugees in fact exceeds that of the general British population.'

The UK and other EU countries have slowly been waking up to the fact that ageing populations will in time lead to a massive skills shortage, and that refugees and migrant workers could be key in meeting the shortfall. Yet recent research shows that unemployment amongst refugees in the UK is dismally high, at the rate of seventy per cent or above. Lifting work restrictions is vital in order to begin to ease the situation. If refugees and asylum seekers are to fully participate in life here, however, further measures are needed to make sure that the goldmine of talent, hope, and skills that they bring does not go to waste.

Integration and exclusion

In November 2000, the Home Office Refugee Integration Section, based at NASS, produced *Full and equal citizens: a strategy for the integration of refugees into the United Kingdom*. While this initiative is a positive move, the strategy provides few concrete solutions. According to Alison Fenney of the Refugee Council's National Development and Policy Team, one of the strategy's major omissions is that it only deals with integration for those with refugee status. 'For refugees, the process of getting used to life in the UK does not start once they have received refugee status or ELR.'

The strategy ignores the negative impact that living within the harsh NASS regime will have on an individual's health, mental well-being, social interaction, learning English, readiness for employment, and orientation to UK culture.'

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown contrasts the UK approach to that of Canada, where a booklet was produced for asylum seekers and refugees, initially with the title, 'Welcome to our home'. Yasmin marvels at the fact that 'after carefully considering the effects this phrase would have on the reader, they changed it to "Welcome to your home".' Orientation courses are envisaged as part of the Home Office's Integration Strategy, but, as Yasmin points out, the UK lags far behind Canada's positive approach.

It can be very difficult for refugees to feel confident and entitled to carve out a space in UK life. Yasmin believes that 'people never really "get over" the experience of exile. Finding a voice, a place in this culture can be wonderful, but it is also very hard to lay claim to that place. It is very hard, for example, to feel that you have a right to speak on behalf of this country.'

Arguments about the contributions of refugees sometimes focus exclusively on the outstanding achievements of a minority. Yet many refugees lead ordinary lives and have a less obvious impact on our society. Not every refugee manages to break through to employment and for some people the pressures of exile can stand in the way of fully regaining confidence and rebuilding their lives.

