



working with refugees to build new lives

# *I could use these skills to do something*

Refugee women and  
the Voluntary Sector  
On Merseyside

## *Executive Summary*

A report by Refugee Action

The full report can be downloaded from  
[www.refugee-action.org.uk/information/documents/Liverpoolwomenreport.pdf](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/information/documents/Liverpoolwomenreport.pdf)

# Introduction

*'I want to give back to the community in whatever way I can manage and to be involved in community work properly.'*

Refugee Action recognises that becoming a refugee brings enormous change to people's lives and that the experience of women refugees in the UK is not broadly known or understood. In our experience, refugee women use their skills, experience and initiative to rebuild their lives in the UK and to help others around them do so. The aim of the research was to look at the range of skills refugee women have, the difference that they have made in their country of origin and the contribution that they could, or already do, make here in Merseyside. This information will help to ascertain what would make it easier for refugee women to get more involved in their communities

Funding was sought for this project from ChangeUp Merseyside, the Home Office funding stream for voluntary and community sector infrastructure. ChangeUp aims to assist the voluntary sector by providing, 'support which is available nationwide, structured for maximum efficiency, offering excellent provision which is accessible to all while reflecting and promoting diversity, and is sustainably funded.'

## Aims

In undertaking this project, Refugee Action aimed to

- **Build the capacity of refugee women currently active within the sector** Refugee Action produced an intensive support course for 8 refugee women who with the desire and potential to develop key roles in the voluntary sector (refugee led or mainstream, as staff, volunteers or trustees)
- **Research the skills and experiences of refugee women in Merseyside** This included researching the significant roles that refugee women held in their countries of origin, the experience that would be beneficial to the Merseyside voluntary sector, the barriers to their full participation and contribution and proposals for overcoming those barriers
- **Produce guidelines for voluntary sector organisations** Information gathered from research, experience and observation combined to provide a practical resource to the voluntary sector directly from refugee women

# The Intensive Support Course

8 refugee women with a wide range of experience were recruited onto a course covering topics from assertiveness through jobseeking to managing an organisation. Alongside the training input there was considerable community development support. Appropriate childcare was provided.

Members of the intensive support course said the course assisted their personal and professional development. Course evaluation found members' key ambitions were to find employment or undertake training in self-employment/social enterprise. Members said the course had been powerful in forging relationships and gaining confidence. *'I have actually gathered so much confidence from the course. I have realised that ... change of location does not mean loss of personality, confidence and knowledge.'*

Members said they applied for the course because there were clear incentives. Members believed the course would help them find employment, meet other women and make contacts locally. The course appeared accessible to them because it stipulated the course was open to *refugee* women, included childcare, included a clothing allowance and listed the course content. Additionally, the course was planned during school hours and within term time.

Members found the course practical and fun, *'I enjoyed meeting women from different backgrounds and being able to identify what organisations in Liverpool could assist me one day when I will need [to set up own group] advice, guidance, financial support and so on.'*

## Outcomes

Members have subsequently put the confidence and information gained from the course to good use. In the few months since the course ended, one participant has found employment, one has spoken publicly to 750 people, one is starting a business, one has received an award for her community work and one is starting an international women's group, which all members of the course have decided to join.

Refugee Action are still in contact with this group and are confident that this list of achievements will grow significantly. As an investment, the course proved be money extremely well spent.

# Research Summary

For the purposes of the research, 'refugee' was defined as someone who had entered the UK as it was not safe for them to remain in their country of origin. This allowed the inclusion of a wider range of participants than those who qualify under the tight, technical definition of the 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees. Research participants include refugees who had become British citizens and women who had experienced persecution but been able to reside in the UK as a spouse, worker or with other immigration status.<sup>1</sup>

Refugee women on Merseyside are already active, committed and creative participants in the voluntary, community and faith sectors. Their participation ranges from working for traditional 'refugee community organisations', which represent only one nationality, to taking part in less formal, more flexible organisations and networks which are often for women only.

Most refugee women interviewed in this research had significant experience of community activity at home but very few had been able to transfer this to the formal voluntary sector in the UK. Overwhelmingly, participants related community activity to community cohesion and expressed desire to contribute locally, yet very few knew how. Those who were involved had developed strong local connections and some had embarked on new careers in the sector. Everyone interviewed wanted information on opportunities.

Contrary to some accepted models of integration, this research found that refugee women did not progress from 'country specific' community groups to groups in the wider community. Some participants were involved in such groups but they were also members of other organisations in which they had common areas of interest. Refugee women may therefore engage with the voluntary and other sectors in a variety of ways. They may not feel primarily defined as 'refugee women'.

Barriers between refugee women and the UK voluntary sector mean that refugee women miss the opportunity to valuably contribute to and shape the local community. This lose/lose situation deprives all parties of valuable resources and development. Through taking positive action and engagement with refugee women, organisations and services in Merseyside can create an environment that benefits the sector, refugee women and the local community.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information, visit [www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)

## Recommendations

- **State the right to volunteer** Home Office documentation informs asylum seekers that they are unable to take 'paid or unpaid work'. This leads many asylum seekers, some voluntary sector agencies and even Home Office staff to believe that asylum seekers are prevented from volunteering. This is not the case and documentation should be changed to make clear a right to volunteer.

*The remaining recommendations are for voluntary sector agencies. Those that affect the sector as a whole are for the consideration of Merseyside Change Up consortium among others.*

- **Acknowledge** Refugee women on Merseyside are often unaware of the formal 'voluntary sector'. This is not simply because of a lack of knowledge, but is also due to the fact that many cultures do not possess the concept of 'voluntary work'. There is a need for the sector to actively promote itself within refugee communities, and particularly to raise awareness of the roles that refugee women could take.
- **Include** Agencies seeking to include refugee women as staff, trustees or volunteers should make it very clear that refugees and asylum seekers would be welcome, and consider how they can directly approach refugee women to offer them such opportunities.
- **Anticipate** Refugee women in may well have skills you did not expect and these will be only be revealed if you seek them. Agencies should consciously ask about what else they can do, and be prepared to be impressed. Resources spent on helping refugee women transfer their skills may well turn out to be resources well spent.
- **Provide** The lack of flexible and culturally appropriate childcare impacts on every mother in this study. If refugee women are to participate fully in the wider voluntary sector, then agencies must address the need for childcare. At the moment refugee women with professional qualifications are unable to volunteer for many agencies in the VCS as arrangements for childcare are non existent or unsuitable.
- **Support development** Given that many of the women in this study participate in informal networks and small flexible groups, which are chronically under-funded, funding and advice on fundraising and infrastructure support in general should target these groups.
- **Spread initiative** Much in the broader Change Up agenda applies to refugee women. Initiatives on workforce development, access to finance, governance, volunteering, ICT and performance improvement could all have a positive impact on refugee women, but only if they are consciously and appropriately included.

# About Refugee Action

Refugee Action is an independent, national charity working to enable refugees to build new lives in the UK. We provide practical emergency support for newly arrived asylum seekers and long-term commitment to their settlement, and received 36,000 visits from asylum seekers last year. As one of the country's leading agencies in the field, Refugee Action has 25 years' experience in pioneering innovative work in partnership with refugees.

Refugee Action in Liverpool provides both advice and community development support to asylum seekers and refugees. In addition, our projects provide specialized and direct support to specific groups such as parents, young people and new refugees. In keeping with our national remit we research, campaign and advocate on refugee and asylum issues at a local level. Capacity building for local services is available through guidance and training. Our services seek to raise refugee voices and enhance local services for refugees and asylum seekers through partnership.

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