

“I could use these skills to do something”

Refugee women and the voluntary sector on Merseyside

By Lynne Walker
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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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.'¹

¹ www.changeupmerseyside.org.uk

Aims

In undertaking this project, Refugee Action aimed to

- **Build the capacity of refugee women currently active within the sector**
Refugee Action ran an intensive development course for 8 refugee women with the desire and potential to take on key roles (whether as staff, trustees or volunteers) within the refugee led or mainstream voluntary sector.
- **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 an informative guide 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

This report contains information about the research and the participants. It contains the research findings and recommendations for the voluntary sector. The research had three components

1. What skills had refugee women brought to Merseyside that could be used locally?
2. What was the 'hidden' activity of refugee women within their own or local communities? Furthermore would this, like the perception of women's activity more generally, be recognised as work or considered as a caring or gender-specific activity?
3. How did refugee women engage with the voluntary sector? Or 'what was working well, what could be improved and how?'

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.²

² For further information, visit www.unhcr.org

Methodology

Recruitment

The project aimed to interview fifty refugee women. Over 70 individuals were invited to participate. This included women visibly active within communities and women who did not appear to be engaged in community activity.

Women who were visibly active in communities were contacted through refugee-led organisations, such as refugee communities and other refugee-centred organisations. There was considerable interest in the research topic, but despite a variety of approaches it proved hard to turn this interest into participation.

The second group of women included women who had recently arrived in the UK and women who had lived in the UK for a significant period of time but who remained isolated from local communities and services. Contact with this group was made by displaying information about the research in services they may visit and by asking staff from Refugee Action and other appropriate projects to talk to potential participants about it on a one-to-one basis.

In total 26 women were interviewed, this was equally divided between one-to-one interviews and small focus groups.

Methods

All participants completed a questionnaire with the interviewer. The questionnaire was divided into sections pertaining to particular aspects of life. These sections were in two parts; the first regarding life in the UK and the second regarding life prior to the UK. This replication allowed a straight comparison of the resources available to refugee women and the type of community activity they were engaged in before and after exile.

Participants subsequently participated in a semi-structured interview, often picking up on experiences or contrasts arising from the questionnaire. All interviews included discussion around the structure of the 'voluntary sector' in the UK as compared to other countries, how participants had become involved in any current community activity, what concerns participants had regarding the formal sector and what they wished to do in the future.

An interpreter was employed for one participant who felt her English was not sufficient to express her views and experiences. Due to the lack of interpreters in this language, a male interpreter was the only regional option. The participant agreed to his employment and although the interview yielded useful information it felt very different to other interviews. Using interpreters in a one-off situation like this can change the dynamic between organisation and participant. This point is important, as there is sometimes a misconception that provision of interpretation is the sole requirement for effective communication.

Engagement

Many factors influence successful engagement with refugee and other groups termed, 'hard to reach'. Services and organisations need to consider whether existing strategies for engagement are sufficient and appropriate to appeal to people from diverse circumstances. There are specific considerations to think about when attempting to recruit refugee women, many of which apply to women generally, to speakers of other languages, to migrant communities and to refugees.

This project aimed to get information to refugee women and to invite them to participate. This required methods for contacting women who were engaged with Refugee Action and for those who were not directly engaged. Recruitment was pro-active; Refugee Action invited refugee women to participate rather than simply advertising the project. Over seventy potential participants were identified; one third of whom actually participated.

Reasons for successful recruitment

- Participants knew individual project workers – Most participants had an established relationship with project workers. This included long established working relationships, particularly within community development work
- Personal connection - Several participants learnt or were contacted by friends who work or volunteer at Refugee Action
- Participants were comfortable with the agency – Some participants had used Refugee Action services directly and felt confident to engage in something new
- Opportunity to contribute – Some participants had not previously been asked to contribute to something they felt was valuable. Some participants wanted to give their time as a way of thanking the agency.
- Opportunity to talk about issues – One participant said, *'Thank you, thank you, for asking me about myself. No one ever asked me about my skills or what I wanted to do in the UK and I didn't think they ever would!'* Many had left commitments to political or social movements and wanted this opportunity to politicise their experiences as women in exile in the UK

Barriers to participation

- Consultative exhaustion – many high profile refugee women on Merseyside are frequently and repeatedly consulted by different organisations for their opinions as refugee women
- Recent negative experience of participating in research – several women had recently taken part in research conducted elsewhere but felt their contribution had not generated impact or improvement. Two women said that contact with researchers ceased as soon as they were interviewed and this led to feeling used
- Limited time – some of the women who expressed interest in the research simply did not have time to take part within our schedule. Many high profile women juggled paid work with voluntary work and families
- Women who were still in the flux of the asylum process often could not predict or control demands made upon them by their circumstances
- Lack of clarity on the intentions of the research – defining 'voluntary sector' or 'community activity' was complicated by the absence of a clear translation in words or meaning. The voluntary sector does not exist in some countries or exists in a form very different to that in the UK. Initial engagement of participants was affected by the absence of clear understanding
- Lack of familiarity with Refugee Action – participants invited to Refugee Action who had not previously visited were less likely to come. Equally, women who were not familiar with the researcher were unlikely to invite her to their home or feel comfortable meeting elsewhere
- There was existing engagement between Refugee Action project workers and some refugee women but it was not sufficient to simply hand over contacts between project workers. New engagements needed time to develop but this was outside the scope of the short-term project

Ethics

All participants and potential participants received a statement regarding the purpose and use of the research. This informed participants of who would see the completed report and how it aimed to influence opportunities presented to refugee women. In addition, all received a detailed statement of how we would carry out the research. This focused particularly on confidentiality and the control of the participant over the content and duration of the interview. The most frequent concerns of participants were around names and identities. Participants were informed in advance that they would not be asked to discuss anything relating to the events that led them to leave their countries. All participants gave their written consent to take part before the interview took place. However, it appeared that participants decided whether or not to take part mainly on their perception of Refugee Action and of the researcher.

One-to-one participants were informed that interviews could take place at Refugee Action or in another location of their choice. As a way of repaying participants and to encourage their development in the fields of discussion, the researcher agreed to send information, contacts or resources as required.

Prior to publication, all participants were sent copies of the report to check if they felt the information revealed their identity or misrepresented their contribution. In addition, a number of refugee women who had not participated in the research were asked for their comments to ensure the research represented the views of a broader group.

Participants

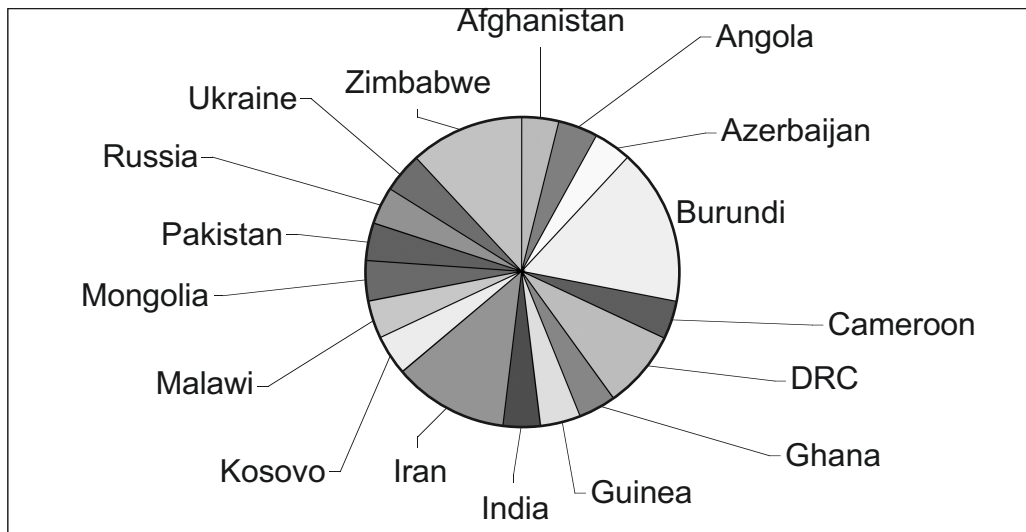
Most participants were asylum seekers or refugees (42% asylum seekers, 42% refugees) the remainder held British citizenship or other immigration status.

Life in UK

The length of time participants had lived in the UK ranged significantly: from seven months to twenty-six years. Most participants had not lived anywhere in the UK outside Liverpool. Over half the participants (58%) were in the UK with their husband/partner, though some had arrived alone to join family later. Most women with husbands/partners had children (86%). A quarter of participants were single parents, the remainder were women without children, though some held caring responsibilities for parents or younger siblings. Overall most participants (67%) had children in the UK; some had been separated from their children by the conflict they fled.

Nationality

Participants originated from seventeen different countries. Women from six out of the top ten asylum applicant producing countries were represented. Women from Somalia and China are most obviously absent from the research, the reasons for which are unclear.



Income and standard of living

Most participants were living in the UK on very low incomes. Over half (56%) received statutory support from NASS, Social Services or in the form of income-related benefits. Due to immigration status, some participants (16%) did not have access to any statutory provision and were solely reliant upon their husbands for financial support. Of those in paid employment (28%), four were in full time employment, two participants in casual or temporary employment and one in part-time work. Many participants wanted to work in the UK but cited denial of work permission, language difficulties, lack of accessible employment and information, and childcare and as the main barriers to doing so.

Most participants said they had a much lower standard of living than at home. Many felt shocked at suddenly dropping to a very low income and social class. Most participants (62%) said their standard of living had been comfortable or very comfortable, though some had described a quick decline during war or conflict, and several participants (10%) said they had been extremely affluent.

Childcare

All women with children, including those with partners and single parents, said that the lack of childcare, or appropriate childcare, severely restricted them. Many participants said they had relied on family and friends at home and so the absence of relatives tremendously affected them. This led to both an absence of childcare provision and increased concern about the kind of childcare available to them.

Participants cited finding childcare from the following sources: husband/partner (50%); friends (28%); crèche (22%); older siblings (11%) and neighbours (11%). In addition, one third of participants looked after someone else; this included friends' children, other relatives, and neighbours. For some participants, friends replaced the roles of family in the UK and community members replaced friends. Schools were frequently cited as the way in which initial contacts with British people had been made. Some participants (28%), including women with a husband/partner, said they did not have anyone at all with whom they could leave their children.

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Prior to arriving in the UK, almost all participants with children said they had very little problem finding childcare. Children were left with husband/partner, parents, parents-in-law, grandparents, aunts, nieces, cousins, other siblings, church members, older community members, friends, school and paid staff. Most participants said they also provided care or assistance for these people (several included orphaned children). None of the participants had used crèches or after-school clubs, as these had simply not existed. Leaving children with strangers was a great source of stress for some participants in the UK. Refugee Action provided a crèche during the intensive support course for refugee women but chose to close this facility, as it was unsuitable for both the children and mothers of the children. Some children had not previously been left in a crèche or with people outside their community. After internal negotiations Refugee Action was able to provide a cash allowance to the carer selected by the participant.

Community activity on Merseyside

Most participants (77%) were involved in community activity; this reflects a self-selecting group and includes representation from women not engaged with formal organisations.

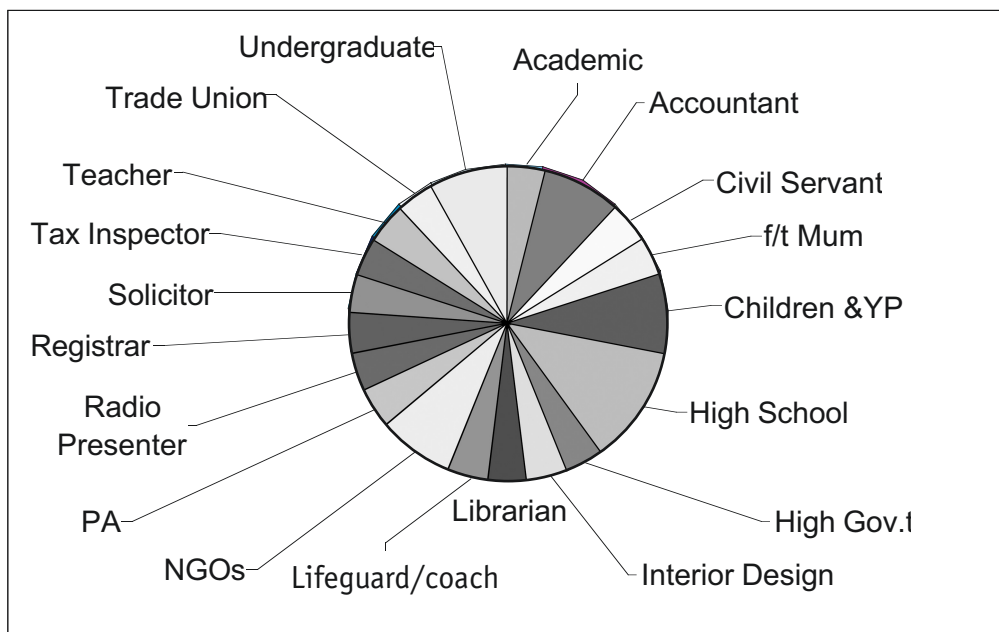
Over a quarter of all community-based activity was within women-only groups. On Merseyside, seventeen refugee women are generating thirty-five community-based activities, most of which (91%) is on a voluntary basis, including all those who held leadership roles (14%). The focus of this activity is primarily refugee based (58%) or faith based (27%), though two women volunteered in mainstream services.

Almost all (95%) of participants had been involved in community activity at home. The type of community involvement included religion (27%), political (18%), children and young people (18%), health (5%) and some (2%) were involved in sport, art, citizenship advocacy or with non-governmental organisations. A significant number of these activities (18%) were within women-only groups. A third of participants said such activity had been the reason, or part of the reason, they had to leave their countries.

Other participant information

Many participants said they felt disempowered by living in an often hostile and confusing environment, primarily in economically deprived areas of Liverpool. Participants identified many of their day-to-day difficulties as resulting from being an asylum seeker or refugee in the UK. However, alongside these difficulties and disadvantages were skills, opportunity and ambition.

Previous occupation



The range and depth of skills of participants was astounding. Many participants had not been able to utilise their professional skills in the UK. They had not had an opportunity to practice existing skills or use such skills transferably. Most participants felt their skills were not valid or valued here and few had shared their experience or ambitions with anyone.

The range and depth of skills of participants
was astounding

Research findings

'Voluntary' sector?

With one exception, participants expressed confusion, and on occasion surprise, at what the phrase 'voluntary sector' actually meant. A similar problem was had with the concept of 'community activity', which led to questions about whether community activity could or should be institutionalised or even funded by the state. *'In [country] the 'voluntary sector' primarily gives practical help to needy from churches – such as food, hospital visiting, cleaning for elderly people, clothing, shelter and occasionally small amounts of money. I did know of international NGOs³. I recognised Oxfam in Liverpool but had no idea they were based here.'* The aims of the voluntary sector in the UK often embrace far more than charitable support.

In countries where the voluntary sector is institutional, its definition differs to the UK and there is little direct comparison. *'In my country, the voluntary sector did not depend on government funds ... they would campaign against government policy and they would try to do things that the government never did.'* In some countries the voluntary sector is an antidote to the malpractices of government. The ability to speak English fuelled one participant's embracing of the sector, *'Ideas on democracy, human rights and community development were only available in English, they weren't published in my language.'*

In the experience of one participant, local people did not direct the sector. *'In my country there were big projects but always managed by foreigners. They were really good but they didn't have that kind of information about the society and country that local people had.'*

On Merseyside, 17 refugee women are
generating 35 community-based activities.

Local knowledge

Participants expressed little knowledge of the city as a whole but had detailed knowledge of the familiar routes, such as from home to the Home Office, shops or places of worship. Asylum seekers and refugees often do not have the confidence or knowledge to explore the city as a visitor would, and often do not have the money to make unnecessary journeys. *'I'm very limited where I go ... I go where I know.'*

Participants identified that even essential journeys were difficult to navigate. *'I didn't know Liverpool. I knew I had to go to Refugee Action but it took me three weeks to get there.'* This participant would have taken longer to reach Refugee Action without the assistance of a fellow bus passenger. *'It was very intimidating and I speak English!'*

³ Non-governmental organisation (NGO)

Travel on foot around the city made some participants feel vulnerable. One participant described how she curtailed daily visits to the library to weekly visits in case anyone was watching her and knew the route she was taking. In her case, the fear of being spotted by local people was reminiscent to her home situation, where she feared retaliation for her political involvement but at home she had more resources, *'I had a company car so I had access to going around safely in the evening.'* Another participant described a similar existence in the UK to life under the oppressive regime she escaped. *'In the time before leaving most of time spent at home. Forbidden to go out at night even during day without a male escort.'*

For many, finding essential services is often difficult so they may not seek services that are not essential to their well-being. Asylum seekers and refugees are therefore unlikely to develop a good knowledge of opportunities open to them that are not asylum related. This does not mean they would not like such opportunities. Organisations who wish to offer employment, opportunities or services to people on Merseyside therefore need to be visible in communities or places that refugee women are likely to visit.

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Living in isolation

Participants noted that a lack of knowledge about the local area and little family or community support leads to problems with mental and physical well being. Support from family and friends back home is both costly and dangerous. *'I had no life basically, I felt like I had no life. You can't afford to call home all the time and you can't talk freely because you don't know if the phone's been tampered with or what's going on.'*

Additionally, some participants described feeling stripped of their identity or control over their daily actions. *'When you're sitting doing nothing you start to feel like nothing. When you've got a purpose to do something you start to feel like something.'* One participant described her first two years in the UK as being lost and excluded from systems, developing a lack of independence. *'Only slowly, slowly we knew what to do.'* This is enhanced by the stress of the asylum process and uncertainty of the future. *'If you are just sitting in the house waiting for a letter to drop through the door, it's bad, then you think about what will happen at court and think how it's stressful and the letter might not even be coming.'*

One participant charted her own decline through isolation, *'I worked hard to help people ... and now I'm useless. I'm completely useless here.'* This increased the number of barriers to meeting people and making friends, *'I feel shy. I can't get close with English girls, I have a barrier around me. I feel shy.'*

Many participants identified the need for a place to go in order to build their confidence, *'I need a place to go on a daily basis, a place to make friends.'* Furthermore, they needed a purpose to build structure and activity into daily life. *'You need to be busy to reduce stress and depression and not think about back home or what is going to happen to you or stuff like that.'*

Living with hostility

All participants could give examples of times when they have felt unwelcome or unsafe in the local community. The extent of hostility varied from ostracism, *'some people on the bus look at me strangely, very strangely actually ... I just ignore it'* to the fear of harm, *'People try to harass us and disturb us ... because we were different from them.'*

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One participant said she anticipated some difficulties. *'It was my first time to travel outside my country in my life. I didn't expect to be 100% welcome in this country. Real support often comes from communities where people share language or nationality or ethnicity, sometimes members of the community will also share the experience of arriving in the UK as a refugee. The fear or actual experience of hostility is widely shared amongst those who understand. The hostility felt by one individual can have a far-reaching effect. I have a friend who works in a supermarket. And her colleagues make racist things ... sometimes she calls me up crying.'*

Several participants believed they had no choice but to reveal their immigration status, *'everyone can ask you but you can't tell everyone'*, as they had been repeatedly and publicly asked by British people from Immigration Officers to shop assistants. There was common understanding of the stigma attached to being a refugee or asylum seeker and that it was easier to make friends if they do not know your background. *'You need courage to tell people you are asylum seeker.'*

This belief may be accurate, one participant recalled a conversation with a member of staff from a local organisation, *'I was talking to a service provider about recruiting volunteers to work but they were not comfortable doing so. She said, "I think they're strange, they make me feel uncomfortable."'*

Many women reported having never experienced racism prior to arriving in the UK and did not have the resources or knowledge to withstand or fight it. *'In my country, you don't have to prove you're the best person. You don't have to prove anything. Whereas here, there is a need for positive action. I am a citizen in my country, I am a citizen. I've really had to struggle with racial issues you know. We don't need things on race relations, here racial issues are everywhere.'*

Permission to work

All asylum seekers have to ask for permission to work from the Home Office before they can undertake paid work. Some asylum seekers will have been granted such permission but many others will not. Permission to work is subject to the regulations at the time of arrival or on application. In the last few years it has been difficult for asylum seekers to obtain but changes in regulations in 2005 allows some people to apply. Refugees are awarded the same rights as other nationals and so have no restrictions to employment. However refugees frequently face barriers to employment that other nationals do not.

'I couldn't not work. I found that really frustrating.'

Restrictions from working had a deep impact upon participants. For many, the idea of statutory support was brand-new and not in keeping with their culture. *'We don't have that system that you have of giving people money. If I don't work for it I don't get paid. I was the main source of income in my household.'*

Many participants wished they could have worked from arriving in the UK. By the time they were able to work they had lost their sense of identity and often their respect and been forced into dependency upon the state. *'I couldn't not work. I found that really frustrating.'* Some participants stressed the importance of working whilst their application was being considered, not even simply for future professional development but to keep their past alive; to feel that their identity and dignity was intact. *'I had a very good life in [country]. I had a good relationship with others. But when I came here everything is changed. I couldn't get a job. I couldn't have a relationship with people. I have financial problems. I have a very, very cheap life.'*

Some had experienced such denial of opportunity before; several participants said they had been refused access to statutory positions or even to medical school because of their family's political beliefs. *'In my country you can't get a job in government or statutory agencies ... you could if you had a relative ... they have no application process, they just appoint people. [In the UK] the voluntary sector advertises and you can apply.'*

Confidence

Given the restrictions and stress that asylum seekers live with, it is easy to understand how confidence can be undermined. *'All the time I think, "I can't, I can't". I'm a little scared about getting a job because I feel shy about speaking to people.'*

However, many participants identified themselves as very confident and able women. Many would not have made it to the UK without their self-belief and ability to overcome challenge. They felt their achievements in the UK were significant given their circumstances. Participants said they lacked confidence; not in themselves but in unfamiliar environments. Most participants said they needed practical and 'ready-made' information to help them in unfamiliar environments, few believed they were

inherently incapable. One participant explained that, *'Running the group [as Chair] has given me confidence to make everything proper'*. She was not concerned that she would fail to perform in a job or an activity, *'so long as the organisation makes sure I am familiar with how it is run – their systems and procedures. This is a fear – that they won't do this.'*

Women only activities

Over a quarter of participants active in communities were within women-only environments. For some participants, women-only groups had been a part of their previous professional and community activity and they sought the same environment in the UK.

Two participants had been members of a women-only group within their place of work. *'Once per week women in the team would meet to discuss work related problems and to discuss anything that was affecting them in life.'* Her office provided space and resources for them to meet. It was part of her managerial responsibility to run the group. Another participant said that her Ladies Office Club supported women employees, *'The best man for the job is a woman! You needed to prove you could do the job very, very well. Ladies met to support each other and we also had sessions on hair and make-up.'*

Many participants identified themselves as very confident and able women.

One participant had been part of a women only community group that shared cash dividends on a monthly basis, *'A group of women in the community would give money each month and one person would receive all the money ... People knew each other, it was a small, close community. We were all at the same church, our children in the same school. It was about helping each other with their needs in the community, their personal needs. It was like a savings club. Most women would be part of something like this.'*

Some participants felt they could discuss and learn better in women-only space, *'I met with other women on a weekly basis to discuss Islam and to learn more about the way of religious life, this took place in their homes. The older women were more knowledgeable and could explain to others their interpretation of the teachings.'* Other participants led women's groups in order to share information and impart practical advice. *'In the church group we would impart knowledge to women on lower incomes, how to make ice-cream and how to make juices.'*

All groups provided peer support and some participants found role models, *'I was working for a company run by women in [country]. It's something I wanted to carry on doing because it's very effective.'*

These participants have become members or created groups for women in the UK but felt these groups could benefit from a broader refugee women's organisation in Merseyside. *'Refugee women belong to different groups, it depends on where they're from. There isn't, to my knowledge, one group that includes just refugee women and I think if there was one maybe it would be very effective because there is a lack of communication on what is available to women.'* A women-only environment was important to one participant who felt, *'talk with other women, it's very useful I think, it helps me get my confidence.'*

One member of the intensive support course felt the women-only environment, *'actually made what I was thinking much more a reality than a dream.'*

Volunteering

For many participants, the concept of volunteering was as unfamiliar as the voluntary sector itself. *'At home you wouldn't think about looking for voluntary work, you might get involved in something through the church that is charitable.'* There was a better comprehension of charitable support and some participants were involved with charitable, often faith based groups, in Merseyside.

The striking and often repeated advice from participants was that voluntary sector organisations had to be proactive in offering opportunities to asylum seekers and refugees. *'It's really, really hard for people from my background to just wake up and say I'm going to do some voluntary work – no. I've done voluntary work because I was offered to and if it was offered to many people I am sure you would get many volunteers.'*

Participants who had become active in the voluntary sector identified what brought them into the arena. One participant explained that to become a volunteer was not her choice but a result of her isolation, *'I did it because I was left alone.'* For many others there were real incentives, often information and resources, *'They had computers with internet and it was free for volunteers.'* Voluntary sector services have to consider how to approach specific groups, *'It's not attractive [to refugee women] to be treated like babies. They will be attracted where they can receive clothing or money or something. For research it is no challenge, it won't be attractive.'*

'I've done voluntary work because I was offered to and if it was offered to many people I am sure you would get many volunteers.'

Across participants' diverse experience and opinion, recommendations on this matter remained the same, that the voluntary sector should understand this and use it to offer volunteer opportunities based on an understanding of asylum seekers and refugees' experience. *'For people to volunteer you need to show them what they will get out of it.'* This may include demonstrating how the opportunity could be positive for potential recruits. *'For people who've been through this experience they might not even think about doing voluntary work because they've got other things on their mind like their asylum case and appeal and stuff like that. You can offer them voluntary work as a way to keep busy, to occupy their mind.'* One participant reflected that asylum seekers do not know what they will need in the future, as the process of becoming settled in the UK is not known until they are at that point. *'People think, "I will when I've got my status ..." but [voluntary work] helps before. It's useful on application forms for paid jobs, and they should explain this so asylum seekers see how it will benefit in the future, and it's very hard for refugees to get references.'*

In two research focus group no one knew they could work as a volunteer, *'given the chance to do so I would love to.'* Following our discussion, many of these participants then asked how they could get started. As so many participants requested opportunities, Refugee Action sought the assistance of local voluntary agencies to provide a broad range of opportunities.

For NASS⁴ supported asylum seeking participants, there was a clear understanding that paid or unpaid work can lead to losing support. Home Office documentation says that asylum seekers cannot undertake 'paid or unpaid work'. Organisations within the voluntary sector sought clarification from the Home Office on their meaning, as it strongly gave the impression that applicants should not undertake voluntary work. NASS defined unpaid work as work for which someone received a material benefit, such as working in a restaurant in exchange for food or accommodation. However, this clarification had little impact upon people in their system. In addition, there is no direct translation for 'voluntary' in some languages where the concept is not part of normal life.

Two participants were informed by NASS that they could not volunteer or to be careful where they volunteered. In one case the participant asked visiting NASS officers what she should do with her time, *'I said, it's very strange just sitting here, what can I do? And they said you can do voluntary work for Refugee Action ... I asked them, I know down the road there is a community centre and I said that looks not bad, they said no, you can only do voluntary work for Refugee Action.'* This participant declined an opportunity proffered by another organisation explaining she could only volunteer for Refugee Action.

⁴ National Asylum Support Service (NASS), statutory provision for otherwise destitute adult asylum applicants and their dependents

Participants recommended that it should be actively promoted that asylum seekers can undertake voluntary work. *'Government should let companies and organisations know that asylum seekers can volunteer and should tell them that they can make very good contributions if they are allowed to.'* Furthermore, that voluntary sector services should equip themselves with accurate and up-to-date information on this matter and, wherever necessary, explain it to potential volunteers. *'Asylum seekers may be stopped from doing something they can by an organisation because they are not informed enough about their rights. Asylum seekers want to help, not just get paid. These places have to be prepared to find out what is possible.'*

One voluntary sector employee suggested the following. *'When I'm trying to recruit volunteers I have to explain to asylum seekers that they can do volunteer work,'* this can mean explaining the concept as well as the regulations. *'The instructions about working are so confusing on the letters you get they say you are not allowed to do paid or unpaid work so it is very confusing. People might think it will mess up everything.'*

Finding the right opportunity

It is difficult for refugee women to find opportunities they would like to or could take. Opportunities outside of asylum related services seem hard to locate. One participant wished only to share her skills of soft furnishings and home decoration but instead had taken the only opportunities offered, as an interpreter and volunteer in a parenting group.

Additionally, organisations recruiting volunteers should listen to the concerns of the potential volunteer and be prepared to support them. *'When I was in [Refugee Action] I saw a poster about the project. I was two minded about it ... because they wanted asylum seekers and there is a stigma attached to that.'* This participant was able to talk to the project worker the same day and felt comfortable raising her concerns.

In order to be successful opportunities need to be well promoted and desirable. A participant of our core group applied for her place on the course because the advert explicitly stated childcare was available, though she did not need this it made her believe that those offering the course were serious about giving real opportunities to women.

One participant found her way into the voluntary sector by chance, *'I never was a religious person ... but my Dad and Mum took me [to St Anne's Church] in case they didn't understand English. They wanted to go to church but I didn't want to go to church. When I went I realised it was an organisation.'* She subsequently volunteered there, after having initial support from her family, *'I wouldn't have gone without my sister because it was really crowded and I felt not good around so many people ... at least we could speak to each other.'*

Opportunities that do not consider the individual recipient and their needs are not only likely to fail but to leave the recipient with negative feelings. *'I was given placement but it was not going anywhere – I felt it was a placement just for the sake of it.'* Similarly, the limitations of the role should be clearly explained at the

beginning, so participants choose whether or not they wish to take part. One participant found that her voluntary placement in local radio was limited by her accent, *'I could do everything but I could never go on the mike because people wouldn't understand me and the manager said it would be easier to get someone locally.'*

'Be consistent, be around and known in communities. Word of mouth is still the most effective.'

Voluntary sector services need to become a part of refugee communities in order to bring women from those communities to the voluntary sector. *'Be consistent, be around and known in communities. Word of mouth is still the most effective.'* Reaching into communities means organisations are more likely to reach refugee women. *'[Refugee women] are not really offered a choice. You will find most people just within their own communities. E.g. if you are member of women's group in Somali community what about becoming member of other women's group. How are they going to know about opportunity if they've never been out?'* One participant advised, 'go to where meetings are, keep close contact, don't just go once or because you want something.'

Word of mouth is the most effective way of convincing asylum seekers and refugees that they can access a service and of offering them a chance to put their skills into practice. Word of mouth is not, however, restricted to refugee community members. Participants had heard of Refugee Action from NASS, accommodation providers and independent refugee organisations. People also learned about opportunities when they had attended services as, or with, clients. Furthermore, opportunities available to all people are more likely to be considered by refugees and asylum seekers if it clearly states that they are welcome to apply. *'Refugee Action says "refugee" so I thought it would be ok.'* Participants in one focus group mused over whether or not they could apply for a voluntary position in charity shop. This group decided they would have applied if it suggested asylum seekers and refugees could apply or even people learning English.

Managing home, work and other commitments

The capacity to take on many different roles was not new to many participants, most of whom had been active within communities at home. However, at home they had far greater resources available to them than in the UK. *'Because of my position I could fix my hours. If [son] finished at 1:00pm, I would pick him up, take him home to my maid and then go back to work. If I had an evening meeting I could drop him at my Mum's.'* This was echoed by women from many different backgrounds. *'I had one month maternity leave after my first child. There was someone who looked after her, my family were around.'*

Concern around leaving children was new to some participants, yet we found it was the greatest factor limiting the participation of refugee mothers. *'In [country] I didn't have to worry, before war, about childcare. Simply enough relatives to leave children with, including older children. I was confident they would be looked after as well as if you were there. If you needed to leave them with someone you just asked or called round until you found someone, which you would.'*

Concern around leaving children was new to some participants, yet we found it was the greatest factor limiting the participation of refugee mothers.

Having family nearby meant this participant could develop professionally. *'It was very easy. I lived two roads from where my parents lived. At 07:30 I took my daughter to my parent's house and about half two I collected her from there. When I went to university, I went twice a week ... she would be there until 8pm. My Mum looked after her better than me and she loves my Mum better than me! Sometimes she would stay overnight with them.'*

Coping in the UK proved very different to coping in the country of origin. *'There is no comparison [between home and UK]. There are a couple of women in my street, different nationalities, we manage to get a long with childcare and translation and going to the shop. It is not easy. It's not easy but it's a bonus.'* Having left or lost families, participants find they are reliant upon the same, small number of people. *'It's very challenging. That's one of the reasons I couldn't start properly. The only person I can ask for help is my husband and I can't ask him all the time. I'm always trying to balance.'*

One participant who had not become involved with the local community or any voluntary sector service explained she simply could not get involved, whether she wanted to or not, as a single parent with three children. Another felt she could not commit to something, regardless of her ambitions, not only as a mother with childcare difficulties but as her family was often called to the Home Office or solicitor at very short notice. *'I would like to go to college but expect timetable would be disrupted by all the appointments I attend about asylum application. I talked to my husband about this and he said those obstacles can be overcome.'*

Transferring skills into the voluntary sector

Participants consistently said they were never asked about the skills or experience they had brought to the UK. This lack of interest led participants to believe their skills and experiences were not valid in the UK, *'My degree is not accepted in this country so I can't use it. I have to go back to university again.'* Furthermore, most participants felt the lack of interest demonstrated very low expectations of refugee women and that their former identities were not valuable in a new country.

However, once discussion began upon this topic many participants were proud to talk about their success, such as accelerated promotion and achievements in their previous occupation and their achievements before they arrived in the UK. *'In [colleagues'] experience, they had never seen a person promoted so quickly.'*

'I could transfer all my IT and Finance skills to the UK. I need to increase my knowledge by using them in the UK.'

The voluntary sector on Merseyside has already benefited from these skills, such as one former lawyer's ability to challenge breeches of human rights. It could also benefit from refugee women who gained skills in quite different fields, *'I could transfer all my IT and Finance skills to the UK. I need to increase my knowledge by using them in the UK. I could use these skills to do something entirely different.'*

One participant who was new to volunteering had developed a commitment to the voluntary sector, *'If I could do this and if I could get paid for doing it, it is something I would do for the long-term.'* Another wished to remain in the sector simply, *'because the voluntary sector has the most interesting work to do.'*

Those who had experience within the voluntary sector felt this was the field that they would remain in. *'I think I want to stay in the voluntary sector because first I know I have skills for that and second because there are people from diverse communities and that gives me confidence. Maybe in the future I would like to manage a project again.'*

Entering a new organisation

Many participants explained that entering new environments, particularly those frequented by many local people, brought both fear and excitement. Sometimes this fear was based on the fear of rejection by new colleagues or worries that they would not understand discussions. However, lack of comprehension is not always due to a lack of fluency in English, it may be due to a lack of fluency in Scouse or because colleagues keep conversation around topics that participants had no knowledge of. *'Sometimes when I talk with English people - friends, they talk very fast and with a very strong accent I can't understand.'*

One participant felt belittled by colleagues in a new environment by the way they reacted to her use of English. She felt their opinion of her was low because she was not fluent in the language; that a smaller vocabulary indicated a limited ability. After some time she tackled them directly as no one else seemed concerned for her welfare, *'I had no choice, do it myself.'* She asked her colleagues to help her learn English by correcting her, rather than making fun, as she was learning and this would help her rather than make her feel small. She explained she spoke several languages, which they did not, and that she would welcome their assistance. Many people may not have chosen to tackle such behaviour directly and so it is important that people who

are overcoming language barriers are supported. Her colleagues became much more constructive and supportive after this, perhaps due to her intervention.

Participants who said they felt part of a team said they sometimes felt isolated and different when with British colleagues. *'They are very nice but when we are together and socialising they talk about things they all know and I don't know and that makes me feel sad because I like them very much and they forget to include me because they think I'm just like them.'* Some participants said that learning about a new culture took a long time but felt uncomfortable to be constantly asking for clarification.

Participants said they were much more confident in an environment where they could see diversity amongst the service providers and users. *'My first appointment was with an asylum seeker and he was so nice to people and I thought I could be nice to people.'* Diversity and understanding of asylum seekers and refugees can be achieved in different ways. For example, one participant explained why she felt comfortable in Refugee Action, even though she had not previously visited. *'I feel happy here, can talk openly about problems in my life.'* [Points to UNHCR⁵ posters displaying the word 'COURAGE'.]

The stigma associated with asylum seekers and refugees, often perpetuated by the media, brought grave concerns to several participants. *'It is difficult for them to trust us as asylum seekers. You want to volunteer but you don't want to tell them you are asylum seeker.'* There was a shared fear that revealing ones immigration status could make one more vulnerable than they felt already. *'If you don't tell them and they find out you don't know what the reaction would be. They might accuse you of something.'* This participant suggested that if she could control who she revealed her immigration status to, she would feel more confident. *'I would start with manager of organisation. They would want to know if I am asylum seeker.'* This participant would not want colleagues to know until she trusted they would not reject her because of her immigration status.

Learning new skills ...

Most of the participants in employment had not previously worked in the voluntary section prior to arriving in the UK. Reasons for transferring to the voluntary sector were manifold but primarily because of familiarity with the service, commitment to communities or particular groups and the barriers in having qualifications and even experience from home understood in the UK.

Volunteers within the sector also stated they had brand new experiences and were surprised by their own capabilities. One participant on public speaking, *'I'd never done that sort of thing in my life ... My job was in an office ... I didn't feel I could bring anything to it but I could get a lot of out of it.'* Another found she could bring people together and motivate young women, *'I could see young women being very shy,*

⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

they didn't like approaching anyone and so I found myself saying, 'come on, join in' and then I found myself volunteering and volunteer training.'

The lack of confidence again, arising from uncertainty around the environment rather than from self-belief. *'I have learnt new skills but I've always been good! I've surprised myself and a few other people.'*

...and realising new ambitions

Some participants felt the voluntary sector was the place in British society that had the greatest impact on people who needed assistance. As recipients of services or in finding support in their desire to pioneer new activities, they felt the voluntary sector held the power to make a difference. *'There wasn't the opportunity at home that there is here to make a change to people's lives.'* For some of these participants, this kind of activity at home had been dangerous and beyond reach.

One participant revealed how her experience in the voluntary sector had changed the course of her ambition. *'I could never think of doing media work here. If I think about doing media work it's when I go back home... here I just think I can do something better.'* This realisation came when she felt part of something and realised her skills were beneficial to other people. *'I didn't see myself as a community worker at all. Back home my shows were really popular, I was entertaining people, it was really nice. But then here I get involved with people directly. I got involved with the Youth & Community Project. There were staff and people from the community and young people and they got along so well together, I felt like this is what I want to do, this is what I need to do, I got involved as a volunteer within 2 months!'*

Why refugees work with refugees

Most participants (77%) were involved with community activity on Merseyside. Over half (58%) of this activity was based around working with or for refugees. This was a significant change from the kind of community activity in home countries and the reasons refugees become involved in refugee work in the UK are clear.

Many participants reflected that having been through the process of becoming a refugee or asylum seeker; they were in the best position to provide real help and support. This often related to compassion for those newly arrived who were not aware of the struggles that would follow in the UK. One participant introduces new people she meets in her community to colleges and other groups. Not only is this helpful to community members, she is confident about what to do and about how useful it will be for them.

For one participant, the experience of danger and survival has made her want to offer support to others who have been through the same experience. *'It's so hard to get out. I know how hard it is. I was trying for three years. I know how expensive it is. How it is hard to leave people that you love behind. I know how hard it is just to stay there waiting to be killed and going through a camp ... to be confined to such a small space and to live there and eat there. A refugee camp is not safe.'*

Many of the experiences related to becoming a refugee can only be understood by other refugees. *'I met 15 parents from different countries, it was very comfortable for me to chat with them because they have exactly the same position like me, they are refugee.'* This understanding can provide a safe environment, one not often found by asylum seekers and refugees in the local community. One participant created a group for refugee women with children; most mothers are women she knows who speak one of several languages found in a particular region. The group also appeals to women from that region who are not refugees. This participant believes that without this group the women would stay at home as they are unlikely to join other groups. Their current venue belongs to a friend of a group member, who understands the difficulties they have had in finding a regular meeting place. Without this support they would struggle to continue.

Some participants became involved with refugee based community activity because they needed information for themselves. *'At the beginning I didn't want to work with asylum seekers and refugees. Because I have to accept I am an asylum seeker, I have to know things about that and I have to get involved.'* Others became involved because they felt the only valid experience they held in the UK was the experience of being an asylum seeker or refugee and that they could build only upon this. *'People ask for experience but the experience I have in my country doesn't count here. If I start from scratch maybe it can be better.'*

Two participants found opportunities in refugee based community activity that changed how they felt about themselves. *'If you are working in the community, helping other people you feel like you have done something rather than just sitting around.'* One felt her progress in this area was useful to others but also a real achievement, *'When I was asked what I was most proud of in all my life it was my progress from service user to volunteer to project worker.'*

Why refugees want to work with the local community

None of the participants wanted to exclusively restrict their contribution in communities to refugees. Many reflected that their involvement with refugees was because the communities they felt part of were made up of refugees. *'Feeling that I can contribute, and that helping is part of what members of any community do for each other – this is what I have grown up with.'* Although activity was refugee based it was an extension of the past involvement. *'I like to improve communities. Everything I've done, even at home, is working hard for community.'*

Most participants felt they could and wanted to support their local communities, *'...because I come from [country] and came to Britain I feel that I must include British people, that's the society I'm living in. If I only take opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees I'm closing myself off. Because I think my area is important, and the women in my area.'* This participant felt strongly that she had more in common with the other women in her area than with other people in the asylum process.

However, participants identified that it was difficult to begin working within the local community when they had such difficulty entering the community. *'It took my son three days to make friends, it took me a lot longer.'* Several participants observed how difficult it was to get beyond just greeting neighbours. Some were not sure how English people got to know each other. However, participants with children found they had more avenues into the local community. *'School has so far been a very positive resource for all family.'* Some having made friends with parents through their children's school friends or at the school gates.

Getting to know other people and becoming part of the local community has developed a strong connection to the city for one participant. *'I hated Liverpool. I wanted to get as close to my family as I could. Now I know people and my son is in school, he's settled. Now I've got a connection with other people I'm much more settled and I would never want to leave Liverpool.'*

Hopes for working in the community

All participants were asked what kind of community activity they would like to do in Merseyside. The responses were diverse and reflected belonging to both refugee and local communities. *'I want to help children and older women. Children need lots of protection and older women need help, especially if they are sick. I did lots of this in [country] for anyone who needed help.'* Participants were motivated by their experiences both at home and in the UK. *'I want to help young refugees, help unaccompanied minors to integrate. I've been through the process and really understand. I would like to help children by getting them to talk.'*

Several participants wanted to create groups or organisations. *'I want to set up a charity for single women with difficult children.'* These participants felt there was an unmet need in the wider community and that they were able to fill this gap. *'If I could start something to work within community it would be practical advice on how to learn English for speakers of other languages – they would not have to be Africans or from refugee background – any people.'*

One participant would take the skills and experience she has acquired in the voluntary sector in Merseyside to refugee camps, to help children living in difficult conditions. *'I would work for a NGO in Africa but not in my country because I can't return there. The kids fight and play with pretend guns. I would run a group like Get Connected and do something useful while they're waiting for things to settle down. So long as I can come back here ... get married ... have kids.'*

Two participants wanted to establish women-only spaces for all women in the locality. This would be an, *'office for women where the venue is not a problem. One place with many offices that provide information on housing, benefit and orientation.'* Staff there would be female too, she has used many services with male staff and volunteers but even where this was good she felt, *'you can't say everything to a man. It could have rooms that smaller groups like mine can use as a venue.'*

One participant had a clear vision on what she needed to reach her goal. *'I want to set up women's support groups, discussion groups ... I need more training myself in order to provide counselling, self-confidence training and giving seminars. We need to do research, home to home, asking questions like you've asked me. I would include men with us in order to work with us but the objective of working for women should be met ... I'm finding it very difficult to get women to take part ... they say it's a very good idea but they're too busy. It's a problem getting the commitment, I'm looking for women to get involved.'*

The future

All participants were asked where they hoped to be in five years time. Many responses reveal the participants wish to be able to utilise opportunities but most of all to be independent. *'Would like to be allowed to settle, to work and be able to use all services that asylum seekers can't use.'* The experience of being controlled as an asylum seeker or refugee will be part of their past, not their present or future. *'I will have stopped moving around and be settled. No more of my children in one school for two months and then somewhere else for two months and them always being disturbed. Would like a good job, to be able to look after my children properly.'*

Many participants, focused upon their children. *'I hope to be a British citizen. In a work environment. Owning my own home and being able to provide for my son.'* The following response could have come from any young woman, not only an asylum seeker or refugee. *'In 5 years I would like to be working as a manager in business environment and I would like to get married. I would have been to University too.'*

Some participants wanted to return to their previous occupations, *'perhaps go back to previous job of lifeguard and swimming coach'*. One participant hoped to become a great influence upon the world's impoverished, *'I want to be Mother Theresa!'* Many participants expressed hope to return home, *'I want to go home but I don't feel safe. Yet.'*

One participant wants to work professionally within communities. *'I want to be a community worker.'* This participant wants to achieve her vision of working for women within the community. *'I really want to see the women's organisation set up, working full time and seeing the organisation meet its goals. Working with women, including them, improving their lifestyle in this community. Working with women for women and getting a voice, saying outside what's inside.'*

Real support + real opportunities = real development

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.'*

Members have subsequently put the confidence and information gained from the course to good use. 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.

Summary and recommendations

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

Summary of findings

Refugee women on Merseyside are already active, committed and creative participants in the voluntary, community and faith sectors. Their participation ranges from involvement in the mainstream voluntary sector (often related to refugee support) to 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 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.

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 Merseyside may well have skills you did not expect and these will 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 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 the sector consciously and specifically includes refugee women in its plans, programmes and strategies.

Refugee women and the voluntary sector in Liverpool

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. This research uncovers 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.

This project continues Refugee Action's work with and for refugee women but does not conclude it. Your ideas, questions, commitment and actions are the foundations to building greater communities and providing real, desirable and sustainable opportunities for refugee women. Further information on this research and on working with refugee women is available from Refugee Action.

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