The Refugee Women’s Strategy Group is a group of refugee and asylum seeking women supported by Scottish Refugee Council and funded by Comic Relief whose aim is to ensure that the voices of refugee women are heard. We work together to represent the views of refugee and asylum seeking women in Scotland to key decision makers and service providers to influence the policy and practices that affect our lives.

Our group’s overarching aims are working to develop a sense of belonging within communities and Scotland, tackling issues such as racism and lack of understanding of refugees and asylum seekers and removing barriers to integration. Our current priorities are working to achieve a more gender sensitive asylum process, housing which meets need and for improved and equal access, by refugee and asylum seeking women, to education, training and employment.

Between June and November, 2013, we engaged with over 100 refugee and asylum seeking women to find out if there were any other key issues which our group should be tackling. This engagement highlighted that refugee women continue to experience significant barriers to employment. Our engagement report – 1 “Speak for Yourself” details our recommendations to address the barriers that refugee women face on their journey to employment in Scotland.

In addition, we developed, with the Scottish Refugee Council and Glasgow ESOL Forum, a pilot confidence building and employability course for asylum seeking and refugee women. Our report – 2 ‘One Step Closer’ provides key lessons on tackling the barriers to employment and has been widely distributed and presented to the Department of Work and Pension and to the range of education stakeholders within the 3 Scottish Government plan to support the integration of refugees in Scotland.

We therefore welcome the opportunity to present our written evidence to the Equal Opportunities Committee Inquiry into Race, Ethnicity and Employment and our continued commitment to supporting the inquiry, including through providing oral evidence should such an opportunity arise.

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1 Speak for Yourself: Report from our engagement with 100 refugee and asylum seeking women between June and November, 2013. April. 2014 (RWSG) http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/search?q=Speak+for+yourself


Overview

Employment is a key issue for refugee women in Scotland. We know that ethnic minority women face additional barriers to employment and it is our view that refugee women are even further disadvantaged in the labour market, experiencing multiple barriers to accessing employment. "This stems from inter alia linguistic and cultural barriers to the job market, stigma and discrimination, existing physical and mental health issues due to experiences as asylum seekers and lack of support networks, including in terms of childcare."

Only 7% of refugees who accessed the Holistic Integration Service succeeded in gaining work, with men being more likely than women to start employment. These figures reflect the multiple barriers refugees are facing.

Employment is a core element of the integration process. We believe that employment and the ability to access the labour market is essential to women’s mental and physical wellbeing, to their children’s mental and physical wellbeing and to their ability to integrate and to play a full role in Scottish society.

Employment support and advice

What provisions are in place to help people from ethnic minorities to access employment support and advice?

We are aware that the Scottish Refugee Council’s Holistic Integration Service does provide support for new refugees. However, our understanding is that the service does not support every new refugee nor does it support refugees and that it does not who have been long term unemployed.

Refugee women have told us that there is a lack of specific and appropriate services for refugee women and a lack of information available on employability services and how they can help; lack of information on training and courses and benefit entitlements and a lack of information on how the labour market in the UK works. Existing provision in terms of careers advice, employment advice, preparation for employment, employment rights do not effectively target the needs of refugee women.

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5 Insight into Integration Pathways, New Scots & The Holistic Integration Service, A report drawing on year two of the Holistic Integration Service http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/9731/HIS_Year_2_FINAL.pdf
It is our view that the Scottish Government should increase its funding for specialist services for refugee women and provide more support for refugee women to get into employment.

**What provisions are in place to recognise and address the lower employment rates among some ethnic minority groups compared to others?**

It is our view that many refugee women need gender specific, specialist employability services to enable them to build confidence, understand the labour market and to be able to articulate their skills and competencies.

We ask the Scottish Government to provide resources to enable gender specific employability services, which understand and respond to the needs of refugee women. Our One Step Closer report highlights the importance of providing a supportive environment, incorporating ESOL skills, having a flexible and responsive approach ensuring an emphasis on confidence building and removing barriers to participation, such as childcare and travel.

**What provisions are in place to recognise and address the lower employment rates among some ethnic minority groups compared to others?**

Our Struggle to Contribute report identifies that “refugee women experience racism and discrimination in employment” and that there is a need to address the lack of knowledge of employers about “immigration status and the documentation surrounding permission to work as a reason for reluctance to employ refugee women.” In order to address discrimination, employers need to be trained in work-related immigration regulations and refugee women need to have better access to information about their rights enshrined in the Equality Act 2010, so that they know what to do or where to go for advice if they experience discrimination.

It is our view that the Scottish Government, working with other key partners, should raise awareness with employers about refugees and ensure that discrimination in employment is tackled.

**Are there any innovative approaches being taken to address the challenges some people from ethnic minorities may experience in trying to access employment advice and support?**

Our One Step Closer: confidence building and employability skills for refugee and asylum seeking women pilot course, which was designed by refugee women for refugee women, created a safe, supportive, sensitive and responsive women only

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6 The Struggle to Contribute: a Report identifying the barriers encountered by refugee women on their journey to employment in Scotland: November, 2011 (RWSG)
http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/search?q=the+Struggle+to+contribute
space to build the confidence and employability skills of refugee and asylum seeking women.

Evaluation of the course highlighted key lessons which should inform approaches to employability support for refugee women, including understanding and responding to the needs of refugee women, creating a supportive environment, incorporating ESOL skills, flexible and responsive approach, emphasis on confidence building removing barriers, access to IT training and recognition of such courses as ‘job preparation’. One participant stated “It is a good opportunity for me as I learned how to apply for a job and what language I have to use.”

Impacts of the course included effective targeting of resources through responding to identified needs; development of confidence of refugee and asylum seeking women through creating a supportive, safe and responsive environment; developing skills of refugee women through responding to diverse individual skills levels, increasing motivation to apply for jobs through developing understanding of the world of work in Scotland, broadening horizons through effective signposting; and recognition of learning through evaluation and feedback and through awarding certificates to participants.

Recruitment, retention and promotion

What evidence is there that discrimination in recruitment, retention and promotion is an issue in Scottish workplaces
Our engagement with refugee and asylum seeking women (Speak for Yourself) highlighted that refugee women experience discrimination in employment, both at the application process and at interview stage.

It is our view that the skills, qualifications and experience of refugee women are not recognised and that refugee women are pressurised into taking cleaning jobs. Recent evaluation of the Holistic Integration Service highlighted that half of the new refugees work in either catering (34%) or cleaning (16%).

We would recommend that the Scottish Government, working with other key partners, should implement a scheme that would enable the recognition of the qualifications and skills of asylum seekers and refugees for the purpose of furthering their education and employment in Scotland

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7 Speak for Yourself: Report from our engagement with 100 refugee and asylum seeking women between June and November, 2013. April. 2014 (RWSG)
8 Insight into Integration Pathways, New Scots & The Holistic Integration Service, A report drawing on year two of the Holistic Integration Service
http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/9731/HIS_Year_2_FINAL.pdf
Recommendations
1. Scottish Government should increase its funding for specialist services for refugee women and provide more support for refugee women to get into employment; gender specific employability services, which understand and respond to the needs of refugee women.
2. Employability support for refugee women should respond to the needs of refugee women and build on the key lessons from the One Step Closer pilot confidence building and employability course
3. Scottish Government, working with other key partners, should raise awareness with employers about refugees and ensure that discrimination in employment is tackled.
4. Scottish Government, working with other key partners, should implement a scheme that would enable the recognition of the qualifications and skills of asylum seekers and refugees for the purpose of furthering their education and employment in Scotland.

Conclusion
We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Equal Opportunities Committee for the opportunity to ensure that refugee women’s voices are heard on the issue of the barriers to employment for women in Scotland’s communities and reiterate our willingness to participate further in the inquiry in any way we can.

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The Refugee Women’s Strategy Group
29 June 2015