Navigating Employment:

The Impact of UK Immigration and Labour Laws on Refugees' Employment Experiences Post-Asylum Seeking

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Table of Contents

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Introduction/Aims of the Research

The process of asylum seeking and its effects on asylum seekers during the system's process is one that is well documented and researched. This socio-legal project aims to investigate the period after that: to analyse the impact of UK immigration law and labour law on the employment experiences of refugees once they have acquired their refugee status.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the employment experiences of refugees post-asylum seeking and to examine their potential vulnerability to exploitation in employment even after gaining refugee status. This is important as analysing the legal framework's practical operation in relation to refugees' employment experiences will help to identify areas of weakness within the law. It is my hope that further research in this area can facilitate improvements that positively affect refugees' working lives.

I investigated this area through qualitative empirical research consisting of interviewing refugees about their employment experiences following their acquisition of refugee status. This was supplemented by doctrinal research and research based on secondary sources, including books, journal articles and empirical studies to support the conclusions reached in the paper.

I was inspired to undertake this research project due to hearing firsthand accounts of refugees within my local community who had struggled with negative experiences within their employment, and even in some cases exploitation, after gaining refugee status. This suggested to me that the current laws surrounding this area do not adequately protect refugees or ensure equal treatment in employment in contrast to their British counterparts.

In section 1, this paper first explores the political and social context behind the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. This is to situate the firsthand accounts offered by refugees in the qualitative interviews within the broader social and political discourse surrounding refugees and asylum seekers in the UK in recent years. This is also to offer an enhanced understanding of what the underlying reasons behind certain issues refugees face may be, such as what factors can affect the degree to which refugees suffer discrimination from the public whilst working.

Section 2 contains an explanation of the methodology I employed to conduct the qualitative interviews with refugees in employment.

This paper will then explore my findings in section 3, looking at what interview responses were given.

Section 4 is an evaluation of the findings, drawing conclusions using support from the existing literature.

Lastly, I will reflect on my research project as a whole, consider what challenges I had to overcome, and convey what I learnt overall in my conclusion.

1. Political/Social Context

The UK's approach to refugee and migrant integration over the past decades has culminated in a challenging environment for such individuals. The increasingly stringent legislation surrounding border control and the rights that refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are afforded highlights an underlying political and social context. Characterised by a critical view of refugees and migrants, this perspective is driven by the pursuit of protecting 'Fortress Britain', and an overt effort to discourage asylum seekers' entry to the UK. The unifying concept behind the various challenges that refugees face, both to integration in employment and into wider society, is Bridget Anderson's notion of a 'community of value', wherein inclusion depends more on sharing principles and one's economic/social value than one's legal status.[1] Thus, where these principles and the conception of value are predicated upon racist and xenophobic ideals, refugees face inherent challenges in integration, and one of the key ways this manifests itself is in employment.

A clear example of this is Brexit. Brexit was fuelled by a rejection of the EU migration regime, spurred by increasing animosity towards large-scale immigration following the

[1] Bridget Anderson, 'Us & Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control' (2015) OUP

EU enlargement of 2004 and, later, the moral panic regarding the 'refugee crisis'.[2] As demonstrated by D'Angelo et al, this hostility was not merely framed in terms of xenophobia, but rather as 'welfare chauvinism': the notion that welfare benefits should be restricted to the natives of a country as opposed to immigrants, with some being more deserving than others. Dennison et al recorded how a lot of the anti-EU rhetoric emerging from the Leave campaign was channelled through an anti-migrant discourse which fluctuated between, on the one hand, portrayals of foreigners as exploiting the country's welfare system and, on the other, as migrants stealing jobs.[3] Calo et al noted how very similar caricatures were developed more specifically in relation to refugees,[4] where often a prominent feature of the trope is contesting the legitimacy of asylum requests, thus framing asylum seekers not only as an economic burden but also as potential security threats. This not only reinforces Anderson's 'community of value' thesis in that refugees are perceived to have lower 'value' because of their inability to significantly contribute to Britain's economy, but also has legitimate implications for the employment experience of refugees.[5] For example, these caricatures can influence how members of the public treat refugees that operate in customer-facing roles, leading to a greater potential for discrimination whilst at work.

We can see how this concept of the dangerous asylum seeker/refugee has persisted in the social consciousness of certain communities in the UK today, from the recent riots and violence following the Southport stabbing attack on 29th July 2024. The prevailing notion behind these riots, which culminated in clashes with police, immigrants and asylum seekers, was that asylum seekers and migrants are dangerous and threaten the lives of British nationals. Thus, a form of securitisation of migration emerged. Despite the Labour Government's stark condemnation of the riots as 'far-right thuggery', there is minority political support for the racism and hostility that the riots embodied. One day before the riots began, Nigel Farage (MP for Clacton and leader of UKIP) issued a statement, questioning why police have not treated the situation as a terror-related one, and why the "truth is being withheld from us".[6] Farage's statement was condemned by multiple MPs and political actors for playing a role in inciting the riots and for "demonising communities" (SNP leader Humza Yousaf).[7] With the riots being so recent and there remaining ongoing tensions, it is unclear how this resistance to the perceived threat of asylum seekers and refugees may continue to manifest. These riots, however,

[2] D'Angelo, Alessio, 'The fortress and the garden: borders and civic stratification in Europe and Britain' (2023) Discover Society: New Series 3 (2)
[3] Dennison and Geddes, 'Brexit and the perils of 'Europeanised' migration'(2018) Journal of European Public Policy, 25(8), 1137–1153
[4] Francesca Calo and Simone Baglioni, 'Immigrant and Asylum Seekers Labour Market Integration upon Arrival: NowHereLand' (2023) Springer Cham
[5] Bridget Anderson, 'Us & Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control' (2015) OUP
[6] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nigel-farage-southport-stabbings-riots-b2588657.html
[7] ibid

demonstrate the still pervasive concept of the dangerous immigrant and this can negatively influence how refugees are perceived by the public, colleagues and employers in the context of employment through overtly excluding them from the 'community of value'.

In recent years, an important feature of political and social discourse that affects refugees' working lives is the narrative of deservingness, which directly aligns with Anderson's thesis.[8] Under this narrative, migrants should only be allowed to settle in the UK if they 'deserve' it. This notion of deservingness is predicated upon migrants' capacity to contribute to economic growth, and thus they are judged upon their economic self-reliance. This 'community of value' who are 'deserving' is composed of 'good citizens' who are "law-abiding and hardworking members of stable and respectable families". The key issue with this as illustrated by Calo et al (2022) is that this 'deservingness' narrative, and its stigmatisation of the unemployed paired with its idea of individuals being responsible for their own employment, is divorced from the policymaking and real-life conditions that refugees encounter when entering the labour market.[9] The current policy architecture, as will be explored further in this paper, does not necessarily support refugees to make themselves employable for the UK labour market: refugees often find themselves in a landscape of overwhelmingly little guidance, that is fragmented and can oftentimes lead to precarious and low paying jobs.[10] Thus, policy prevents refugees from being part of the 'community of value', heightening barriers to integration and channelling them into the lower end of the workforce.

An important illustration of the UK's capacity to weaponise policy against groups of immigrants is the UK's hostile environment policy. This was first introduced in 2012 by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and is a series of measures that make it difficult for people without the right to remain in the country to stay, such as through compulsory immigration checks to access public services. Although intended to deter illegal immigration, the wider negative consequences of this policy on legal citizens are apparent. A research report from the House of Lords Library noted that the policy has had negative impacts on the lives of people with the right to live in the UK – many Commonwealth migrants from the 'Windrush Generation' have reported being denied access to public services and receiving letters threatening deportation due to an inability to provide adequate documentation.[11]The hostile environment policy not only encapsulates the xenophobia of UK politics, but also demonstrates how a policy

[8] Bridget Anderson, 'Us & Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control' (2015) OUP
[9] Francesca Calo, Tom Montgomery and Simon Baglioni, "'You have to work…but you can't!": Contradictions of the Active Labour Market Policies for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK' (2022) Journal of Social Policy
[10] ibid
[11] House of Lords Library, 'Impact of "Hostile Environment" Policy' (Debate on 14 June 2018)

framework predicated upon xenophobia can have tangible consequences on the lives of migrants living in Britain legally, including refugees.

A more targeted example of this in relation to refugees is the dispersal policy. The UK's dispersal policy for asylum seekers is a government policy that moves asylum seekers to different councils across the country. The policy's goal is to prevent any one area from being overburdened by the responsibility of supporting asylum seekers. A comparative analysis from Whole-COMM in 2023 which compared dispersal policies across various European countries found that dispersing asylum seekers to smaller communities posed particular challenges to integration, including fewer employment opportunities, smaller support structures, and more limited infrastructure compared to large cities.[12] This was compounded by the fact that there was sometimes a lack of alignment between newcomers' backgrounds and local opportunities; for example, their previous work experience might not align with the jobs available locally.[13]As a result, the dispersal policy can be a limiting factor in refugees providing 'value' to Britain by making it harder to find meaningful employment and contribute to the workforce.

Further to this, the emphasis placed on employability that has shaped the discourse surrounding the employment relationship in Britain, and a key indicator of whether a minority group has provided 'value' to their community, has in turn shifted the focus from broader societal and structural barriers that may prevent access to employment to instead more intangible factors such as the appropriateness of one's attitude and demonstrating behaviour to attract potential employers.[14]The result of this is that the discourse has been mobilised against certain groups in society entering UK labour markets as demonstrated by Macdonald et al 2013 who found that the British political notion of 'intergenerational cultures of worklessness' – taught attitudes and behaviours that were claimed to inculcate 'welfare dependency' – was a 'zombie argument', resistant to evidence and lacking legitimate support from social science research.[15]

For all the reasons discussed above, the political and social landscape surrounding the refugee employment experience is both challenging and, in many ways, hostile. This environment imposes unachievable ideals for refugee integration, with policies preventing them from meeting the requirements to enter the 'community of value.' The themes, narratives, and discourses explored in this section are closely intertwined with

[12] Leila Hadj Abdou, Caitlin Katsiaficas, 'Comparative paper: attitudes, intergroup relations, and migrant integration experiences' (2023) WholeCOMM

[13] ICMPD, (2023) https://www.icmpd.org/blog/2023/asylum-seeker-dispersal-policies-setting-the-stage-for-successful-integration

[14] Clarke, M. and Patrickson, M. (2008), "The new covenant of employability", Employee Relations, Vol. 30 No. 2, pp. 121-141

[15] Macdonald, R., Shildrick, T., & Furlong, A. (2014). In search of 'intergenerational cultures of worklessness': Hunting the Yeti and shooting zombies. Critical Social Policy, 34(2), 199-220

the legislation affecting refugees, providing crucial context for the conclusions drawn from my qualitative interviews.

2. Methodology

Data Collection

My empirical research utilised qualitative methods to gather in-depth insights through semi-structured interviews. Eight interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 15 minutes and were centred on the participants' experiences in their respective jobs, including challenges and opportunities they encountered. The interviews were conducted in a private room in a local business in London.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical measures were taken to ensure the safety, comfort, and informed consent of the participants. A safety measure that was taken was having the office owner or a staff member familiar with the research project be present outside the interview room during the interviews.

Prior to each interview, participants were given an information sheet and consent form to read and had the contents explained to them. I ensured I took time to answer any questions to ensure participants were fully informed about the study and their role in it before giving their consent to participate.

Participants chose a pseudonym to protect their identity. In doing this, I offered pseudonyms from various cultures, allowing participants to choose a name that resonated with them personally. This approach helped ensure that participants felt represented and respected during the research process.

All interviews were conducted smoothly, with participants openly and honestly sharing their experiences. There were no significant issues during the interviews, and participants expressed willingness and satisfaction in contributing to the research.

Challenges

The data collection process was not without its challenges, many of which required acute adaptation and problem-solving skills.

Firstly, the occurrence of racist riots in the week that I began my interviews led to fewer refugees and immigrants being present in public spaces, which limited the pool of

potential participants. Those who were present were often apprehensive about speaking to a stranger, particularly due to fears of being identified as a refugee or asylum seeker and being targeted for this. This fear also stemmed from a general mistrust of the public and government, with many refugees concerned that I might be affiliated with the Home Office or another official body.

Initially, this mistrust posed a significant barrier to participation. However, as I spent more time at the office, and as interviewed participants began to vouch for my legitimacy as a student researcher, trust was gradually established. This led to a slow but steady increase in participation as the project progressed.

Selection Criteria

The selection criteria for this study were refugees who are in employment. Participants were recruited through the gatekeeper (the business owner who had a lot of contact with refugees), and through snowballing by asking interviewees to recommend anyone who fits the selection criteria to participate.

Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Length of time in the UK	Country of Origin	Occupation
Abdel	3 years	Sudan	Food delivery driver (previously a waiter at a restaurant)
Mustafa	6 years	Algeria	Factory worker
Amir	2 years	Egypt	Painter
Hassan	4 years	Iran	Food delivery driver
Yousef	3 years	Kuwait	Food delivery driver
Ahmad	2 years	Iraq	Carer for mental health patients
Anthony	4 years	Albania	Car wash employee
Bruno	3 years	European country (chose to not disclose country)	Kebab shop employee

All the participants were male. They were all of African, Middle Eastern and European origin. They all occupied low-income jobs and had no prior qualifications, except Abdel who partially completed a degree level qualification in IT and Technology. All the participants were employed in and were interviewed in London.

3. Findings

A key issue that forms part of the refugee experience in employment is that all eight of the interviewees claimed that they were receiving no support from the government or charities, despite having challenging living circumstances that one would expect would warrant such support.

All the refugees worked long hours in low-income occupations. Details of this included Anthony having to work 12 hours a day washing cars, which has caused him chronic back pain resulting in an increasing concern for him and his financial security. Another interviewee, Bruno, stated that he works extra shifts and late nights at a kebab shop to pay for his essentials, explaining that "[he] must do it [the long shifts] to be able to pay rent, buy food, pay for groceries", and that he is the only employee to work such long hours. Mustafa, who had been in the UK the longest out of all the refugees interviewed, detailed how although he does not have to work long hours now, his initial period after gaining refugee status was "very, very hard" and that "[he] had to work all the time" to afford life and establish himself in the country. Yousef explained that although he feared for his safety during the racist riots and consequently moved out of the refugee hostel he was staying in out of fear that it would be targeted, he still had to work long hours and late nights as a food delivery driver to be able to sustain his living and not suffer from homelessness.

All the interviewees claimed to have received no support from the Government or charities. Six out of the eight claimed they had never been contacted for any support they may be eligible for by any charities or the Government. The two participants who were contacted, Yousef and Bruno, reported a similar story of communicating with a charity regarding support for housing only to be told they were only eligible for advice and not to be put on the housing register as they did not satisfy the criteria of someone with priority need. Thus, they did not seek any further support from charities or the Government as both felt that there was not much that charities could genuinely offer them to support their circumstances.

Six of the eight participants claimed they had experienced discrimination in some form. One interviewee, Abdel, detailed how he faced social exclusion based upon him being from a different demographic to the majority of his colleagues in his previous role as a waiter. This not only created a more challenging work environment for Abdel, but also had tangible effects on his working conditions, primarily being assigned extra shifts outside of the agreed hours of his contract. He also faced discrimination from his employer, with him being paid below the national minimum wage for over a year before being made aware of this by his friend. When he attempted to contact solicitors to take legal action,

he was told by his employers that if he took legal action, they would fire him. The two participants who claimed to have not experienced discrimination in any form were Anthony and Bruno.

All the participants interviewed claimed that they have never had their employer explain their rights to them. When asked about specific rights that are typically laid out in a contract such as their eligibility for sick pay or minimum wage, their responses were either "No I am not eligible" or "I do not know".

Five of the eight participants were employed under zero-hour contracts.

4. Discussion

4.1 Lack of support being claimed

According to the Department for Work and Pensions under the UK Government, once someone is granted refugee status, they become eligible for any social security benefits they satisfy the conditions for such as Universal Credit.[16] Despite almost all the refugees that were interviewed claiming that they struggle financially, with seven out of the eight highlighting low income as a key issue for them that characterises their experience in employment, none had claimed to be receiving any support from the Government or charities. With situations such as those detailed in the interviews, it is clear that many if not all these interviewees would be eligible for some level of welfare support, particularly universal credit which assists those in low-income jobs such as those occupied by the participants.

The next question we must ask, therefore, is why these refugees were not claiming this support. The majority of participants not being informed of support suggests that despite charities and the Government offering useful support that could help refugees struggling with long working hours due to low incomes, there is a clear gap between the availability of support and the dissemination of information about it. Further, once this support is communicated, the experiences of Yousef and Bruno, suggest that charities and Governments should take a more proactive and individualised approach in encouraging and supporting refugees to claim various types of support they may be eligible for, rather than providing a mere explanation of the guidelines regarding one area of welfare benefits. This is because refugees may dismiss future/alternative opportunities with charities or the Government on the mistaken basis that there is no other welfare support that they may be eligible for, resulting in a cycle of disengagement.

[16] Government website https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/claiming-universal-credit-and-other-benefits-if-you-are-a-refugee/refugee-guide-urgent-things-you-need-to-do

One potential reason for the lack of support being claimed by refugees is that the process of applying for benefits can be difficult for refugees to navigate alone. The process requires refugees to open a bank account, complete benefit assessments, and fill out applications - challenges that are compounded by language barriers and potentially limited access to technology.

The Government initiative in 2018, funded by the Controlling Migration Fund, of introducing Local Authority Asylum Support Liaison Officers (LAASLOs) to work with newly recognised refugees to support with their transition from asylum support to mainstream society, employment and/or benefits was a positive step in mitigating this problem.[17] The evaluation of this initiative indicated it was successful in many ways such as meeting the project's objectives in relation to: supporting refugees at risk of homelessness in finding accommodation, referring refugees to access welfare support tailored to their individual needs, and linking refugees to training and employment opportunities.[18]Whilst this is a promising initiative, the weaknesses outlined in the evaluation report coincide with the experiences detailed by Yousef and Bruno as well as highlighting wider policy limitations. A concern outlined by participants in the report was with the quality of the telephone support provided by the charity Migrant Help, arguing it may have led to some complex issues not being recognised (such as when safeguarding referrals should be made). It was also noted that some refugees may not have understood the information and instructions provided (particularly due to the language barrier). LAASLOs also identified the 28-day window to source accommodation (the period in which a refugee must find accommodation before existing asylum support is stopped) as too short a period to address housing needs, even when refugees were being supported. This is because the process of opening a bank account and being assessed for benefits is time-consuming, and LAASLOs felt a longer window could help to resolve this. These two concerns reinforce the notion that even when support is communicated to refugees by charities or the Government, this support may not be adequate in enabling meaningful help to reach such individuals, and that the policy framework such as the 28-day window to source accommodation can exacerbate this. This is because it was identified to be too short even when refugees are accessing support, indicating that this causes significant implications for most refugees who are not accessing support and face challenges such as the language barrier.

4.2 Difficulty Integrating into the Workplace

[17] LAASLO job description: https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/171123%20LAASLO%20job%20description_FINAL.pdf

[18] Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Controlling Migration Fund Evaluation: Project-Level Evaluation Report, Local Authority Asylum Support Officer (LAASLO) Pilot Project (2022)

Another key challenge that characterises the refugee experience in employment is the difficulty many refugees experience in integrating into the workplace environment. There are two elements to this that were explored in the interviews: the difficulty integrating socially/culturally and the difficulty of acclimatising to work life amidst a challenging policy framework.

Regarding the discrimination he faced from his colleagues and employers in his previous role, Abdel stated that "when you are a refugee, they [employers] think you are a machine", highlighting a perception of employee welfare as less relevant for refugee workers as well as a culture of labour exploitation amongst employers. This culture of exploitation may be motivated by employers' perception of refugees as less intellectually 'valuable' than British nationals, and an awareness of the desperation of many refugees in finding job security. In line with Anderson's 'community of value', such employers are also complicit in exacerbating the exclusion of refugees, and the lack of a framework to enable refugees to enter the 'community of value'.[19] With most of the interviewees, like Abdel, noting integration as a key difficulty, the findings indicate that current legislation permits refugees to enter the workforce but does not promote integration.

This is reinforced by a more specific aspect of the refugee challenge in integration: the residual poor mental health refugees experience following the asylum-seeking process. This is because asylum seekers are prevented from working whilst their claim is being processed. This, combined with these individuals' past experiences and the stress of awaiting approval for one's application means the asylum process can lead to lasting detrimental impacts on the mental health of refugees once they are permitted to enter the workforce. An interviewee, Ahmad, spoke of this in detail, explaining how he experienced symptoms of depression and found the inability to work as an asylum seeker central to this, because "[he] was stuck in the same cycle everyday: eat, sleep and pray". This was so much so that his current line of work is in supporting mental health patients, after having experienced mental health challenges himself when he began looking for a job after gaining refugee status. The notion of work as a critical factor in promoting integration and independence is a recognised one, as demonstrated in a 2023 report on migrant integration from the Welsh Government who considered employment as key to providing social status, social connections and a sense of purpose.[20] Thus, the current policy framework that refuses asylum seekers the opportunity to work is contrary to an expectation of integration once those asylum seekers are allowed to work upon the acceptance of their refugee status.

[19] Bridget Anderson, 'Us & Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control' (2015) OUP
[20] Welsh Government, Migrant Integration Framework: Framework to Help Welsh Organisations Understand Whether Migrants and Host Communities Are Well-Integrated (First published 18 December 2023, last updated 12 July 2024)

4.3 Lack of awareness of Employee Rights

A key finding was that there was a lack of understanding on behalf of the refugees as to what their employee rights consisted of, and what they should be eligible for under employment legislation.

One potential reason for this is that five of the eight participants were employed under zero-hour contracts and so the difficulty with identifying which employee rights they are eligible for may be due to statutory complication. This is because under employment legislation in the UK, employment rights depend on whether one is classified as an employee (which gets the most protection, such as from unfair dismissal), a worker (who only has some legal rights such as protection from discrimination) or self-employed (which enjoys none of these rights). The distinction between these groups is unclear, and in theory a zero-hour contract worker could fit into any of the three categories, leading to the lack of clarity regarding what rights they are eligible for. In a 2015 policy paper, the CIPD (the professional body for HR and Development) reported that 67% of employers of zero-hour contract workers classify them as employees, whereas 15% describe them as workers, and 5% classify them as self-employed.[21] This, in addition to 7% of the employers either having not classified their status or claiming that they don't know, illustrates the confusion that surrounds the employment status of zero-hour contract workers and thus the rights that should be derived from it. As has been demonstrated, this confusion affects both employers and zero-hour workers and may explain why refugees who are often employed on such contracts may not understand what rights they are eligible for.

Although the interview data does not represent refugees who may be employed in more regulated industries such as office jobs, a key question to ask is why many refugees are channelled into low-income and often precarious work sectors. has been explored in the literature as well as the interviews and various recurring concepts have emerged as potential explanations. A relevant explanation is practical limitations such as the language barrier and lack of familiarity with the UK job market, particularly within office jobs. A report in 2019 reinforced this, with a reported 84% of refugees lacking sufficient English language ability to get a job (footnote to Refugees and the UK Labour Market Report).[22] The lack of familiarity with the UK job market was highlighted in the interviews, with all the participants claiming they had little to no knowledge of the UK job market before arriving. This was paired with seven out of the eight participants claiming they were only able to enter the job market and get their first job as a refugee through other migrants rather than formal application processes, which are typical of office roles. When asked about this, Abdel explained that he applied for IT roles using his education in data and technology however was never able to proceed past interview stage. After feeling

[21] CIPD, 'Zero-hours contracts: myth and reality' 2013

[22] Zovanga Kone, Isabel Ruiz, Carlos Vargas-Silva, 'Refugees and the UK Labour Market' (2019) COMPAS

demoralised because of this, Abdel decided to pursue more current employment that he felt he could achieve, instead becoming a waiter. Abdel's situation aligns with reports from refugee charities such as Breaking Barriers, who reported that 45% of the clients they worked with were educated to degree level or above, and 77% had at least three years' work experience.[23] This suggests underemployment exists amongst the refugee population in the UK, and a possible reason for this is that there is a more general lack of recognition of refugees' qualifications as legitimate. The compounding effects of this are apparent: a confusion surrounding what employment rights they are eligible for due to being in more precarious occupations and overworking to account for low incomes in such jobs. The interview data indicates that refugees have created an informal support system for themselves to navigate these difficulties in employment, through assisting each other in finding employment despite this often being in low-income roles.

4.4 Discrimination

The last key finding was regarding discrimination. Upon examination of the interview data, it was found that the refugee experience of discrimination in employment is not homogenous; there are various levels which are influenced by different factors. One important factor was whether the refugee was employed in a customer-facing role, as this had the potential to increase discrimination experienced from members of the public. Abdel from Sudan detailed how during his previous role as a restaurant waiter he experienced discrimination from members of the public, stating that "there are people who believe they can take advantage of refugees providing a service". Abdel felt that this was a major downside of being in a customer-facing role, and even switched to working as a food delivery driver instead as he would not have to interact with customers as much. This is reinforced by the fact that another interviewee, Mustafa who worked in a factory, claimed that he had not experienced any overt discrimination (however he still experienced microaggressions from his employers), further suggesting that refugees in customer-facing roles are more vulnerable to discrimination in their employment.

Another important factor influencing discrimination was whether the refugee adhered to European/Western modes of identity and displayed a European phenotype. This is because of all the participants, the two who had not experienced discrimination of any kind, whether overt or subtle, were Anthony and Bruno who both came from European countries. Despite both working in customer-facing roles - Anthony in a car wash and Bruno in a kebab shop – both had not experienced discrimination like their non-European counterparts had. The potential reasoning behind this may be that despite having refugee status, Anthony and Bruno may not fit the political and social depiction of a refugee that

[23] Breaking Barriers impact report 2022-23: https://breaking-barriers.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Breaking-Barriers-Impact-Report-2022-23.pdf

has surfaced in recent years and so are more likely to be accepted and assimilate into the workplace and society more generally. In a 2020 study, Cooper et al examined British journalism relating to refugees to examine what terms were most used with refugees from various geographical backgrounds.[24] The study found that migrants originating from Middle Eastern and African countries such as Syria or Somalia were significantly more likely to be labelled refugees than those originating from Europe. This reinforces the discrepancy in which geographical regions British society considers to 'look like a refugee', and which ones less so.

Evidence for this lies in the difference in treatment of refugees from Middle Eastern and African countries compared to Ukrainian refugees. A 2023 study by Moise et al found that there was an overwhelmingly positive and depoliticised welcome of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 across Europe. [25]This was done by assessing support for the acceptance of refugees from Ukraine, Afghanistan and Somalia across various European countries, with the findings demonstrating a significantly higher level of support for Ukrainian refugees as opposed to their Afghan and Somali counterparts. When postulating potential reasons for this, Moise et al suggested that it has to do with their identity and make-up.[26] In contrast with other refugee groups, Ukrainians are white and Christian, rather than Muslim. The majority of Ukrainian refugees are women and children, in contrast to higher proportions of young adult males in other refugee populations. Furthermore, Europeans share a sense of identity with Ukrainians due to their cultural similarity, geographical proximity and shared history, meaning the political far right may therefore perceive them as less culturally threatening. As a result, this study reinforces the discrepancy outlined in the interview data; refugees who adhere to European/Western modes of identity are indeed more likely to be accepted and less likely to experience discrimination, including in their employment, than other non-European refugee populations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this research project reveal significant challenges faced by refugees in the UK labour market, compounded by a lack of support, difficulties integrating into the workplace, and a limited understanding of their employee rights. Despite being eligible for social security benefits such as Universal Credit, the interviewees reported receiving little to no guidance from either the Government or charities, highlighting a gap in communication and dissemination of crucial information.

[24] Cooper, G., Blumell, L., & Bunce, M. (2021). 'Beyond the 'refugee crisis': How the UK news media represent asylum seekers across national boundaries' International Communication Gazette, 83(3), 195-216

[25] Moise, A. D., Dennison, J., & Kriesi, H. (2023). 'European attitudes to refugees after the Russian invasion of Ukraine' West European Politics, 47(2), 356–381

[26] Moise et al (2023): https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2023/11/17/what-makes-ukrainian-refugees-different-from-other-refugees-in-the-eyes-of-europeans/#comment-1051574

Refugees are often trapped in low-income and precarious jobs, forced to work long hours to meet basic needs, a situation exacerbated by language barriers and unfamiliarity with the UK job market. Additionally, the unclear distinction between employee classifications further contributes to the confusion regarding their rights.

The research also uncovers a broader issue of workplace integration, with social exclusion and residual mental health challenges hindering the successful assimilation of refugees into the workforce. Many refugees, particularly those from non-European backgrounds, experience discrimination that further complicates their employment journey, a reflection of broader societal biases.

It is worth noting that the sample for the interviews was an all-male sample, meaning the data is not suited to a gendered analysis - the unique experiences of female refugees is an interesting area that should be explored in future research. These findings, however, underscore the need for more proactive government and charity involvement in providing tailored, accessible support to refugees. Initiatives like LAASLOs show promise, but further refinements—such as extending the 28-day housing window, improving communication and enabling asylum seekers to work while their claim is being processed—are essential. Without meaningful change, refugees will continue to face unnecessary hardships in employment as they seek to rebuild their lives in the UK.

Reflections

Working on this research project has been both rewarding and challenging, providing me with invaluable experiences that have developed my intellectual, organisational, and leadership skills. One of the initial challenges was the inconsistency in the data collection period, with some days yielding multiple interviews and others none. This required me to spend long hours at the office, ensuring I was available whenever participants could meet. Managing this unpredictable schedule demanded strong organisational skills and the ability to adapt, but it also reinforced my commitment to the project.

Navigating the ethics approval process was a valuable learning experience, particularly around privacy and ethical considerations. Given the nature of refugee employment, I had to ensure informed consent, participant anonymity, and secure data storage, all while complying with data privacy regulations. Crafting interview questions that respected participants' dignity without making them feel vulnerable was crucial. I also became more aware of the ethical responsibility researchers have in accurately representing participants' voices, especially within marginalised communities. Overall, this process deepened my understanding of ethical research practices and the importance of safeguarding participants' rights.

One of my key achievements in this project was securing an affordable venue for the interviews. Initially, I reached out to several refugee charities and clinics, but these efforts were unsuccessful. I also enquired about renting a space at a mosque, but the cost was beyond my budget. Eventually, I connected with a local business and successfully negotiated the use of one of their rooms within my project funds. This experience taught me the value of persistence and creative problem-solving when faced with logistical challenges.

Conducting the interviews themselves was another learning curve. At the start, my interviewing skills were less refined, but as the project progressed, I improved significantly in asking follow-up questions that drew out more detailed and nuanced responses. This taught me the importance of persistence and continual self-improvement. I also became more attuned to participants' body language, which helped me assess when to explore certain topics further, ultimately enhancing the depth of the data collected.

Beyond the practical skills developed, this project strengthened my intellectual capabilities and independent agency. I often had to locate and understand complex empirical studies and academic literature from various disciplines including law, sociology, politics and social science. Understanding how my data fits within the existing literature and drawing conclusions from this was also a new skill I developed.

Overall, this experience has been immensely fulfilling, offering not only intellectual growth but also practical skills in managing complex tasks and leading myself through the various stages of the research process. I am incredibly grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation for facilitating this project and to my supervisors Dr Niamh Connolly and Jack Beadsworth for their ongoing support.