

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

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Research Aims

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.

- To analyse the impact of UK immigration law and labour law on the employment experiences of refugees once they have acquired their refugee status, and
- Investigate this area through qualitative empirical research consisting of interviewing refugees about their employment experiences following their acquisition of refugee status, supplemented by doctrinal research and research based on secondary sources.

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 entitlements that refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are afforded has highlighted an underlying political and social perspective.

This perspective, characterised by a critical view of refugees and migrants, is driven by the pursuit of protecting 'Fortress Britain', and an overt effort to discourage asylum seekers' entry to the UK. The view formulated in this paper is that there is racism and xenophobia in the social consciousness of Britain, and this has negative implications for the experiences of refugees in employment.

Lack of awareness of Employee Rights

A key finding was that the participants had little knowledge of their employee rights, with all the participants interviewed claiming that they have never had their employer explain their rights to them. What was clear 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.

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. This 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.

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.

Methodology

Data Collection

- Empirical research utilising qualitative methods
- Semi-structured interviews centred on their experiences (employment, challenges, opportunities encountered)
- 8 interviews conducted, each approximately 15 minutes
- Conducted in a private room in a local business

Ethical Considerations

- Office staff present outside interview room
- Information sheet and consent form provided
- Content explained to participants prior to signing form
- Culturally diverse pseudonyms offered to protect their identities and ensure representation and respect

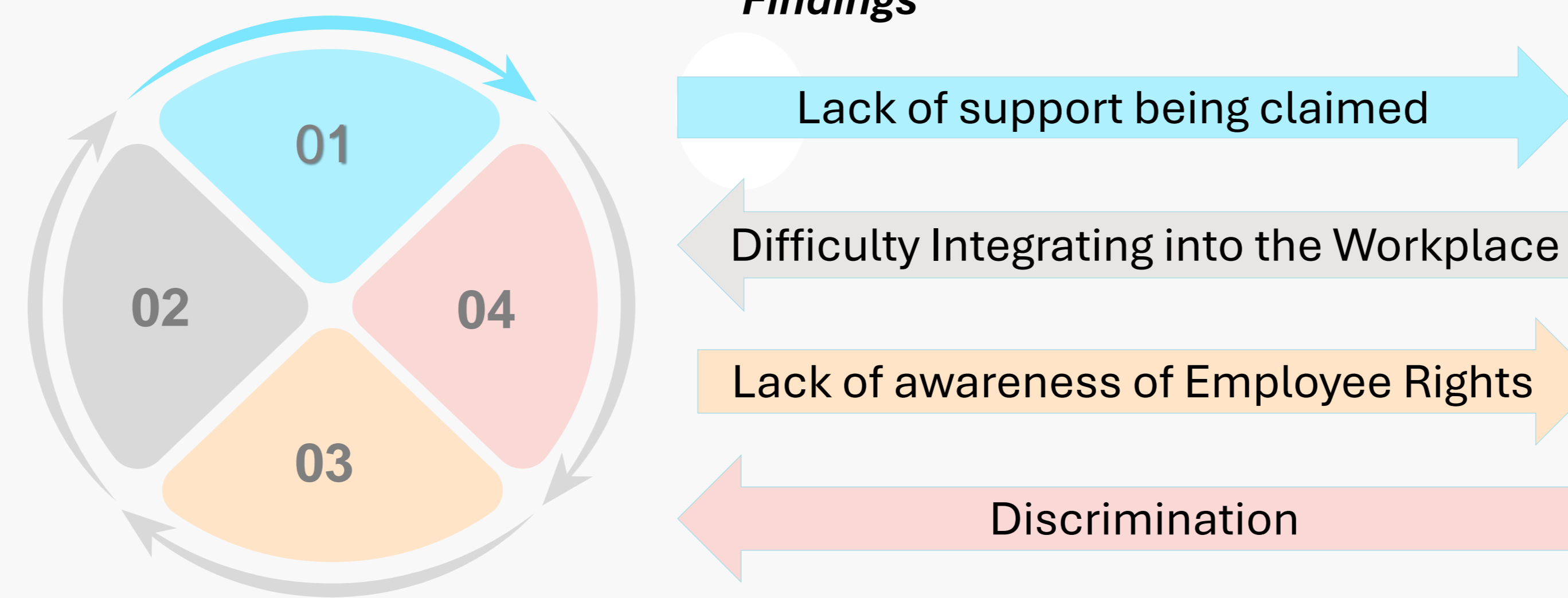
Challenges of the data collection process

- Limited pool of potential participants due to UK race riots deterring refugees from being out in public.
- Apprehension and fear of being identified as a refugee/asylum seeker and being targeted, stemming from public mistrust.

Selection Criteria

- Refugees who are in employment
- Participants were recruited through the gatekeeper, and through snowballing by asking interviewees to recommend anyone who fits the selection criteria to participate.

Findings



Lack of support being claimed

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.

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.

Difficulty Integrating into the Workplace

The research 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.

A key aspect of the refugee challenge in integration is the residual poor mental health refugees experience following the asylum-seeking process as asylum seekers are prevented from working whilst their claim is being processed. This, combined with 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.

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. 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.

Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Length of time in the UK	Country of Origin	Occupation
Abdel	3 years	Sudan	Food delivery driver (previously a waiter)
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	Undisclosed European country	Kebab shop employee

x 8



* All participants were male. 8 participants in total.

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.

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. 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 and improving communication—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. 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.