

New UK underclass

Demelza Jones

People seeking asylum in the UK are at great risk of social exclusion but successive government asylum policies have aggravated rather than alleviated this problem.

Over the last decade, the UK government has identified tackling social exclusion as a central objective, setting up a Social Exclusion Unit and in 2003 launching the National Action Plan (for Social Inclusion). A 2004 report by the Unit identified people seeking asylum in the UK as amongst those most at risk of social exclusion¹ and a joint study by Oxfam and the Refugee Council in 2002 concluded that “asylum seekers are forced to live at a level of poverty that is unacceptable in a civilised society.”² Asylum seekers with an ongoing claim are entitled to a weekly amount of benefit which falls below the UK poverty line. The result is hunger, and inability to buy clothes or shoes, pay fares to attend appointments, or make phone calls to stay in touch with friends and solicitors.

In 2006 I interviewed four asylum seekers and one person who had been granted refugee status. Grace from Zimbabwe was anxious about paying for transport. The timing of her compulsory reporting sessions with the Immigration Directorate requires her to travel on public transport at peak times, costing around £5 a week: “£5 sounds like nothing, but when you have [only] a small amount to start with, it is a lot.” In order to obtain cash for transport, Patrice from Côte D’Ivoire is forced to sell the vouchers which are his only entitlement, sometimes to unscrupulous neighbours for significantly less than their value: “Sometimes I get desperate – but if I don’t report to the Immigration office, I am breaking the law.”

Those falling foul of the asylum legislation commonly end up unsupported and destitute, either sleeping rough or staying illegally with other asylum seekers in often overcrowded accommodation, reliant on handouts from friends or charities. The level of social exclusion caused by destitution can lead to severe exploitation. A 2006 Amnesty International report found that some interviewees had turned to prostitution, and that “young girls were possibly given floor space in exchange for sexual favours”³, whilst Edem, a very vulnerable young man from Sierra Leone, indicated that he had

entered into an exploitative relationship with an older man, exchanging sex for food and clothing. Vulnerability to highly exploitative illegal employment in the informal sector is another issue of concern.

A contributing factor to social exclusion amongst asylum seekers is the denial of the right to work, causing severe implications for them, both materially and in terms of their participation in UK society. Lack of access to the workplace makes it difficult for adult asylum seekers to interact with the general population, leaving them socially isolated and aggravating feelings of marginalisation and exclusion. It also leaves those who do achieve refugee status ill-prepared for participation in society through the employment market, as has been the case for Sami from Kurdistan. During our discussion he bemoaned his lack of success with job hunting, blaming his two-year absence from the workplace whilst he was seeking asylum: “At home I did the same job for years. Here it is different, with long forms and interviews. If I had got involved with this when I arrived, then fine – but now I am starting from scratch.” Yolanda, a highly qualified medical professional from Cameroon, shares his frustration: “To not be able to share your skills is depressing. Maybe if we were allowed to show our skills, people would not despise us.”

In addition to these material forms of exclusion, the portrayal of asylum seekers in the UK media is overwhelmingly negative, consistently portraying people seeking asylum as ‘cheats’, ‘liars’ and ‘scroungers’. And far from challenging media misrepresentation, successive British politicians have even led and legitimated public hostility.

Short of deportation, the most extreme form of exclusion from society is imprisonment. Indeed, around 14% of asylum seekers in the UK are detained in Immigration Removal Centres at some stage during their claim. These centres, while officially not prisons, are indistinguishable in practice, as

reflected in Sami’s description: “I felt like I was in a prison – all these procedures...taking finger prints, photos...” This equation between detention and criminality is keenly felt by many detained asylum seekers who cannot understand what crime they have committed to warrant their detention.

Another practice more commonly associated with criminals was experienced by Grace, who was fitted with an electronic ankle tag on arrival in the UK. Immigration officials did not explain to Grace why she was being tagged, and she spent her first weeks in the UK wondering what crime she had committed. She described feeling humiliated and stigmatised by the tag, which was clearly visible and provoked curiosity and animosity amongst both other asylum seekers and members of the host community. “The only things I had brought to wear were skirts so everybody could see it... People were staring in the street. Even the other women in the building were asking me ‘what did you do wrong?’.”

The experiences of social exclusion described by Patrice, Grace, Yolanda, Edem and Sami are far from unusual. Exclusion results from negative views of asylum seekers as a threatening and burdensome ‘other’ by the media and politicians, and as a consequence of government asylum policies which create hardship and which limit social inclusion through enforced poverty, equation with criminality, and denial of the right to work and contribute meaningfully to the host society.

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1. www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/upload/assets/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/publications_1997_to_2006/tackling.pdf

2. Penrose, Jan, 2002 *Poverty and Asylum in the UK*. London: The Refugee Council and Oxfam. p4

3. Amnesty International, 2006 *Down and Out in London: The Road to Destitution for Rejected Asylum Seekers*, p15: www.amnesty.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=10682