

## **Written evidence from Ms Ketch Adeeko (Doctoral Researcher at University of Nottingham) [EAP0006]**

Ketch Adeeko is a doctoral researcher at Nottingham University Business School. Her current research interests include gender, entrepreneurship and refugees. She is sharing findings from her research as evidence to inform the inquiry.

### **1. Introduction**

The evidence presented is based on a qualitative study of refugee women entrepreneurs in the UK. The original study focused on the identity work undertaken by this group of refugees. It highlighted the impact of a lengthy asylum process on the mental health of the women and explored their experiences of discrimination from the time of seeking asylum through to the present as refugee business owners (Adeeko and Treanor, 2021).

### **2. Background /Context of the study**

- 2.1. Literature suggests that women who have been forcibly displaced are disadvantaged due to gender-based violence and fragmentation of the family structure (Pittaway and Bartolomie, 2001; Zannettino et. al., 2013; Canning, 2014). Many become either the sole or primary earner within the family, thus assuming a dramatic shift in responsibility for the family (Lennette, Brough and Cox, 2012; Al-Dajai et al., 2015).
- 2.2. Having left their home countries in search of sanctuary from various persecutions including political persecutions and the effects of war, many women face further discrimination on account of other categories of difference such as gender, race, class, disability, age and sexuality. The asylum process contributes to defining the identities of asylum seekers and refugees. In so doing, it also exposes them to additional discrimination and abuse that has a negative effect on their well-being and their ability to rebuild their lives in the host country (Canning, 2017).
- 2.3. The study was based on five in-depth case studies of women who had experience of the asylum process. The countries of origin for the women included Syria, Iran, Cameroon and Zimbabwe. Those fleeing from the Middle East had arrived in the United Kingdom within the last five years, whilst the experiences of those arriving from African countries are based on their entry into the UK in early 2000. Four of the women fled their home countries due to political persecution from the state and other groups, another as a result of the Syrian war.

### **3. The asylum process and women: Unsafe and unfair**

- 3.1. The lengthy asylum process had a damaging effect upon the mental health of many of the women. All spoke of experiencing depression and anxiety during the process,

with one of the participants being subjected to such severe mental health effects that she was hospitalised.

- 3.2. This study revealed that women asylum seekers face intimidating and traumatic interrogation processes which makes them feel criminalised and vulnerable, particularly given their limited English language skills when they first arrive in the host country. This experience also serves to alienate the women further from formal institutions and fosters a mistrust of those in positions of authority, providing additional integration issues once asylum had been granted.
- 3.3. In some of the cases, forcible displacement from the home country also required being separated from their families who were left behind. The trauma of being forced to leave children behind meant that the women felt deprived of a significant part of their maternal identity. The paucity of financial support offered to asylum seekers in the absence of being able to access the labour market, is inadequate to cover additional costs such as long-distance phone calls to children and other family members who had been left in the home country. For those who are accompanied by young children, the necessary supplies needed for babies are additional costs not covered by the allowance.
- 3.4. Those arriving as lone women were vulnerable to sexual abuse and harassment. This highlighted the significant imbalance of power as single women go through the asylum process where they may be dependent on host country male advocates who take advantage of their positions of power.
- 3.5. Many of the women felt that their previous experiences were not recognised by the authorities as they entered the asylum process. Consequently, for some, their previous positions of being entrepreneurs, their professional work status and higher-level education were ignored.
- 3.6. During the asylum process, some of the participants were housed in areas and in specific properties that singled them out as asylum seekers making them more vulnerable to abuse on account of their race and ethnic minority status.
- 3.7. For those among the sample who had not arrived via the Syrian Resettlement Programme, destitution was a common issue. This tended to occur when asylum had been refused and individuals were attempting to reapply for asylum. Destitution served to increase the vulnerability of the women, leaving them open to further abuse based on their gender or race (Crawley, Hemmings and Price, 2011).
- 3.8. Women within the sample who had been taken to Immigration Removal Centres either on arrival, or after rejected applications, spoke of feeling criminalised and 'dehumanised'. One woman's recollection of the experience of being detained: '*You know you're treated like a statistic. You are not treated like a human being*'. For those who were detained with their children, this presented additional trauma to

the women due to the conditions in the centres and the ways in which they were apprehended, sometimes in the middle of the night.

- 3.9. These findings suggest that the asylum process compounds the discrimination experienced by women asylum seekers based on multiple characteristics that place them at a disadvantage.

#### **4. Post asylum experience: Challenges due to protected characteristics**

- 4.1. Asylum seekers continue to be confronted with the narrative that refugees are a drain on society. However, this research showed that refugees can be active contributors to society through their involvement in venture creation, social enterprises and community building. They are making a positive contribution to society and to their local communities through the creation of jobs and the provision of services.
- 4.2. Many of the women continued to be subjected to racial discrimination after asylum had been granted. Participants shared accounts of being denied premises to rent because of their ethnicity. One respondent felt the need to rebrand her business so that it had an anglicised name, thus making it more acceptable within the host country. Another chose to use a white associate when trying to secure contracts from white-led retailers, particularly, the more established retail chains. In so doing, they are having to deny aspects of their identity in order to avoid discrimination.
- 4.3. Refugee women risk being treated as second-class citizens not only due to race but also because of their status as refugees. The stigma associated with the refugee label is difficult to challenge although this group attempted to use entrepreneurship to resist this discrimination.
- 4.4. Despite attempting to overcome discrimination, as the women engaged in entrepreneurial activities, they reported experiencing difficulties in accessing bank financing. This was consistent with findings that suggest that women and minority ethnic groups face additional challenges in acquiring start-up funding and later, finance for growth (Leitch, Welter and Henry, 2018). The temporary nature of refugee women's 'right to stay' status, increases perceptions that they are a risky group to provide funding to and therefore, limits funding options for refugee women.
- 4.5. Additional discrimination and exclusion are experienced as many of the women felt unable to access mainstream business support opportunities due to feeling 'excluded' and 'othered' on account of their gender, race and disability status. Although refugee support groups provide a valuable means by which refugees can access general support, this is fragmented throughout the country and does not always extend effectively to business support for protected groups.

## 5. Opportunities to challenge discrimination in the asylum processes

- 5.1. Current business support for those granted the right to remain is limited to a handful of private providers. Although the government recently provided funding for a pilot business support programme for refugees (Richey *et al.*, 2021), there is scope for initial capability building to commence earlier during the asylum-seeking stage. This would strengthen the language skills, education and well-being of asylum seekers within the host country context, preparing them for the labour market or self-employment in the event that asylum is granted. It would also help to limit the precarity of the asylum process. Government support of educational workshops, technical training and financial support for asylum seekers and refugees would help to strengthen the position of vulnerable groups confronted by discrimination. It would also encourage a consistent and comprehensive support programme across the nation.
- 5.2. A review of the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' policy, or a review of the allowance currently offered is needed to help provide the necessary financial support required by women, particularly those with sole responsibility for their families.
- 5.3. Additional support during the asylum process is required, particularly for those who have additional vulnerabilities such as disabilities. Furthermore, the asylum process and those that work within the system need to be reflective of the diversity found within British society, thus, those with protected characteristics will be reassured that they are subjected to a system that acknowledges and respects difference.

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