

**Women asylum seekers and refugees in West  
Yorkshire: opportunities, constraints and the role of  
agency**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit  
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## **Preface and acknowledgements**

I first became interested in asylum issues, particularly the development and implications of asylum policy, while studying social policy at Central Lancashire. Coming to Leeds to do a PhD therefore offered me an exciting opportunity to contribute to knowledge in this field and in particular to pursue the rather neglected topic of women asylum seekers and refugees. My own background has inevitably influenced the development of this study. Coming from a working class family, my most recent employment had been at a shipping office at Heysham port. My approach to the study of social policy had always been grounded in practical concerns, rather than high theory. It was therefore a bit of a 'culture shock' in becoming a postgraduate at Leeds and encountering an environment where more theoretically informed work sometimes appeared to take precedence. I found myself impatient with some of the rather wordy theorising, not least because it felt to me that the vocabularies and preoccupations sometimes diverted my attention away from my focus on day-to-day problems and practical issues.

With this in mind, I would like to thank my supervisors Malcolm Harrison and Fiona Williams. They helped me confront some of these problems, and I hope that I have achieved a reasonable integration of selected useful theory concerns, and empirical investigation linked to my interest in policies. Some heavy burdens have inevitably fallen upon Malcolm, as my lead supervisor, and to whom I am especially grateful. He has given me a great deal of his time and has helped me through the most difficult periods when all I wanted to do was get myself back to the comfort of the shipping office. Discussions with him helped me gain confidence in making a constructive engagement with selected theory perceptions and issues that did not involve abandoning my scepticism about the relevance of some theory to people in the 'real world'.

I would like to say thanks for all the help that has been given to me out in the field, by service providers, intermediaries and – above all – women asylum seekers and refugees themselves. I hope that in this thesis, I have been able to express something of the concerns and issues that matter most to the women who were interviewed, as well as those working at the grass roots.

In addition, I would like to thank the University of Leeds for the financial support which actually enabled me to undertake this research in the first place, and also the AL Charitable Trust, who provided me with an award to pay for interpreters and facilitators.

Last, but by no means least, I would like to thank my Mum and Dad. Without their support I would not have finished this study. I love them very much and hope they will be proud of what I have achieved.

## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is to add to the knowledge about asylum seekers and refugees in the UK by looking specifically at the experiences of women, who have often been overlooked. The thesis is underpinned by a concern with structure and agency, and the interplay between them. Thus, it explores women's actions and practices in a particular context.

Firstly, it considers the structural context by looking at the constraints asylum seekers and refugees face as a result of government policy more generally, but also specifically in terms of their dispersal to West Yorkshire. As well as focusing upon the constraining aspects of policy and practice, however, it also considers the supportive structures in place in West Yorkshire that assist people's settlement in an area. Within this discussion is a consideration of the practices of service providers who are often caught up in a contradictory role of care and control. Thus while they are able to offer support, at the same time they have to work within the bounds of government policy.

Secondly, while the context in which women find themselves can present a number of barriers, this thesis looks at their actions and practices at an individual and collective level. It illustrates that the women are able to draw on the resources available to them, and many are engaged in activities that assist their own settlement in the host society, as well as considering the needs of their children, other family members or the wider community. In addition, it is evident that some of the women, through their actions and practices, were changing the context for future arrivals of asylum seekers and refugees.



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# Chapter One

## Introduction

Over the last decade the issue of asylum has become a major concern, not just in the UK, but across the whole of Western Europe. With regards to government policy, as the number of applicants has increased, the response has been one of a 'dual approach' of restricting entry to the UK, or restricting access to social and economic rights for those who do enter (Bloch, 2000a). Successive governments have imposed visa restrictions, introduced Carriers Liability, fingerprinting of asylum seekers, increased powers of detention, as well as adopting a host of other measures aimed at curtailing the number of people allowed entry to the UK. For those who do make it past the border, rights to employment have been removed, entitlement to financial support has been restricted, and accommodation is offered on a 'no choice' basis. In terms of public perception, newspapers regularly carry negative stories about asylum seekers that portray them as 'bogus'<sup>1</sup>, 'welfare scroungers'<sup>2</sup>, 'criminals'<sup>3</sup>, and more recently, 'terrorists'<sup>4</sup>. There was even a campaign in *The Sun* newspaper where readers were asked to sign a petition calling for government to 'end this asylum madness now' (*The Sun*, 22/1/03). Politicians and the media have questioned people's reasons for coming to this country, and instead of looking at the increase in conflict around the globe, have often formulated the opinion that many are 'economic migrants' abusing the welfare system, or using the asylum route to gain access for employment. This imagery portrays asylum applicants<sup>5</sup> in such a manner that any harsh treatment towards them, in policy terms, can appear justifiable, in light of their apparent misdemeanours. In some

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<sup>1</sup> 'Bogus asylum seekers are draining millions from the NHS', *Daily Express*, 26/11/02

<sup>2</sup> 'Asylum family sought benefits in two countries', *Daily Mail*, 23/8/02

<sup>3</sup> 'Losing the war on asylum crime', *Daily Mail*, 26/11/03; 'Asylum seekers eat swans', *Evening Standard*, 4/7/03. This latter story portrays them as having characteristics that are 'different' or even 'uncivilised'.

<sup>4</sup> 'Osama poison gang funded by DSS', *The Sun*, 9/1/03. This article was about two asylum seekers who were arrested as suspected al-Qa'ida terrorists and had allegedly turned their flat into a 'poison making factory'. They were also accused of 'fiddling' extra Income Support.

<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this study, the terms 'asylum applicant', 'asylum seeker', and 'people seeking asylum' are used to describe those who have made an application for asylum and are awaiting the outcome of the application. The term 'refugee' is reserved for those who have received a positive decision on their asylum application and have been granted permission to stay in the UK. It is hoped that meanings are generally clear to the reader, whichever term is used. The range of terms reflects not only those encountered in the field, but also my awareness that from some points of view there are preferential terms to that of 'asylum seeker'.

respects, it has been argued that asylum seekers have come to represent a new ‘moral panic’<sup>6</sup> (Stanley Cohen<sup>7</sup>, 2002). A distinction is now made between what are regarded as ‘genuine’ refugees, who are deemed worthy of public sympathy and support, and ‘bogus’ asylum seekers for whom:

“...the overall narrative is a single, virtually uninterrupted message of hostility and rejection...[and] successive British governments have not only led and legitimated public hostility, but spoken with a voice indistinguishable from the tabloid press” (Stanley Cohen, 2002, p.xix)

It is against this backcloth of media disdain and restrictive policy that a growing body of literature has begun to focus upon the experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum at an international, European, national and local level. The aim of my study is to add something to this knowledge, with a particular commitment to providing perspectives from women asylum seekers and refugees, whose experiences have sometimes been overlooked, or whose role is regarded as ‘secondary’ or ‘dependent’ (Bloch *et al.* 2000). In contrast to such ideas, I will focus upon their experiences with a view to understanding how they cope in the situation in which they find themselves, and the strategies they adopt. In other words, my study emphasises their *agency*. The analytical framework involves focusing upon the practical constraints and opportunities that women face in the host society, in terms of access to basic rights, services and resources, whilst also looking at how they are not simply imprisoned by constraints but have the capacity to act at a number of different levels in the exile setting. The specific research questions that are prioritised (see p.17) thus emerge from a concern with both *agency* and *structure*, and the interplay between them. My emphasis through much of the thesis reflects a background in, and commitment to, the study of social policy, with a concern for matters of inequality and disadvantage, access to basic rights and services, and the role of the government and welfare state institutions in mediating this.

It is suggested that much research has focused on the insights of professionals working for refugees and asylum seekers (Dwyer and Brown, 2004a). Thus, at the heart of this

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<sup>6</sup> This term was introduced by Stanley Cohen (1972) to describe the media inspired over-reaction of the general public to a situation or event. Cohen introduced it with reference to the emerging youth cultures (namely the ‘Mods’ and the ‘Rockers’) although ‘drug users’, ‘welfare cheats’, and ‘single mothers’ have all been objects of moral panic at one time or another. Hall *et al.* (1978) also use the example of ‘mugging’, and how British society reacted to this, as illustrating a moral panic.

<sup>7</sup> When referring to Stanley Cohen and Steve Cohen in this thesis, their full names are used to avoid confusion between the two.



research was a commitment to give as equal a voice to the ‘experts’ on the experiences of the asylum process<sup>8</sup>: women asylum seekers and refugees themselves. The emphasis on the women’s accounts is not to suggest that the views of service providers are unimportant. Indeed interviews were also carried out with key informants from voluntary and statutory agencies working at the grass roots level. The addition of service providers offered an informed background on the mechanisms of provision in West Yorkshire, and related problems, complementing the accounts of the women. It also introduced issues relating to the agency of service providers and their roles.

Between September 2002 and August 2003, 42 interviews were carried out; 21 with women asylum seekers and refugees from various countries, and 21 with service providers. These were semi-structured and in-depth qualitative interviews. In addition, from 2001 to 2004, background information was gathered (national and regional) on policy developments and welfare implications, and a variety of additional less formal meetings with representatives from various organisations took place in pursuit of information. A decision was also made to concentrate on a particular locality: West Yorkshire. As Dwyer and Brown (2004a) suggest, much research into forced migration has been carried out in London and the South East. A northern regional focus thus has potential value, and the likely benefits are reinforced because of the government’s policy of dispersing asylum seekers to regions around the UK, and the implications this has in terms of support at a local level. I also feel that it allows more depth than perhaps a national study would (and is easier to manage given the constraints of time and resources).

In order to explain the theoretical background further, this chapter briefly looks at some of the debates around the issue of structure and agency, with reference to social policy contexts. It then considers the implications and directions for my study by outlining the specific research foci, and the key research questions prioritised in this research. While the thesis is informed by this theoretical perspective, it remains firmly rooted in emphasising the importance of the empirical data. As highlighted in the comments in the preface, I am sceptical about the use of complicated terminologies or categorisations, unless they appear to bring clear benefits for empirical work or for an

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<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of this study, the ‘asylum process’ refers not just to the legal aspect in terms of the asylum application, but also refers to experiences in the exile setting; for example with regards to dispersal, and access to financial support or accommodation.

understanding of practical issues. On the other hand, reviewing ideas from theory may help when formulating key questions, and thinking about the assumptions that underpin the study. Thus, there are specific ideas within the writings about the interplay between individuals and their environment that I have drawn upon, and that inform the analysis of the empirical material on asylum seekers and refugees in this study.

## 1.1 The basic structure/agency framework

In sociological theory, looking at the relationship between structure and agency has long been a central concern (Lister, 2004). According to Giddens (1984), *structure* denotes rules and resources, which are “implicated in the production and reproduction of social systems” (p.23). This refers to the environments of opportunities and constraints in which we find ourselves, and which influence our actions. The term is frequently associated with the constraining nature of institutional structures such as government policy or economic factors.

It is important to note that structure can be both constraining *and* enabling (Giddens, 1984) as it provides both restrictive and supportive conditions for human actions. From this kind of perspective, it very much depends on the individual and their particular social position, and also time and place, as to whether an environment is likely to be enabling or constraining. In one situation, economic, social resources and personal resources may be enabling, yet in another situation they may act as a constraint. Furthermore, as Archer (1995) points out, if “agents extricate themselves from one structurally moulded situation, it is only to enter another” (Archer, 1995, p.201). This is an idea that could be applied to the situation of asylum seekers who are granted refugee status. They may have been removed from one situation, yet they have entered another context affected by a slightly different set of structural influences, which will entail different ‘rules’ (perhaps relating to access to the welfare state) and different ‘resources’.

What is important to note is that the context in which people are situated *conditions*, rather than *determines* what they can and cannot do. This idea leads into an examination of the role of *agency*. As Archer (1995) points out:



“...agents possess their own irreducible emergent powers (p.90)...[and] are capable of resisting, repudiating, suspending or circumventing structural and cultural tendencies” (p.195).

Agency thus refers to people’s capacity to act (Williams and Popay, 1999) to improve or change their situation, or to influence that of others. Indeed Giddens (1984) uses a dictionary definition of an agent as “one who exerts power or produces an effect” (p.9).

It has been argued that it is too simplistic to make a rigid distinction between structure and agency, or context and action. Giddens’ theory of *structuration*, for instance, looks at how the two are intrinsically linked or ‘mutually implicated’. It is the conduct of actors, who draw upon rules and resources, which reproduces structural properties (Giddens, 1984). Research carried out by Finch and Mason (1993), for example, focusing upon family responsibilities, suggests that “there is a potential for past actions and negotiations to become the *context* of future choices” (p.95, emphasis in original). Thus, the responsibilities that are created as a product of human agency, in a sense, become structural features, in that they constrain or facilitate future actions. Simply put, structures *shape* human action, but in turn are *shaped by* such action.

Archer (1995) and Carter (2000) look at the relationship between structure and agency in terms of a ‘morphogenetic cycle’<sup>9</sup>, which has three phases:

- (1) Agents encounter structural conditions.
- (2) Within these conditions, actors pursue their interests.
- (3) What results from these actions is the elaboration or modification of the original structural conditions.

They argue that structure and agency can be ‘analytically distinct’, and talk in terms of a *dualism*<sup>10</sup> which acknowledges their ‘distinctive properties’ and their ‘irreducibility’ to

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<sup>9</sup> The dictionary definition of the term ‘morphogenetic’ is ‘the development of the form of an organism during its growth to maturity’. Drawing upon Archer’s work, Carter (2000) applies the ‘morphogenetic cycle’ to a specific time period (post-war) in order to explain the development of a more restrictive immigration regime.

<sup>10</sup> This ‘dualism’ refers to how agency and structure have distinctive properties, as opposed to Giddens’ ‘duality’ of structure, which sees the two being mutually implicated. The distinction, however, may not be very clear cut as both writers refer to structure and agency as being linked. In my study, while it is recognised that structure and agency are interconnected, for presentation purposes the two are separated. The important point in this research is to highlight the importance of the environments in which actions develop, and people’s capacity to act in a

each other (Carter, 2000). According to Archer (1995), this ‘non-conflation’ of structure and agency rests upon two ideas: the first is that structure pre-dates the actions that transform it; and, the second is that structural elaboration [or change] post-dates the actions that give rise to it. Thus, in the morphogenetic cycle, agency does not necessarily *create* structure, but rather *reproduces* or *transforms* it in a given generation. Time is important in this analysis and there is a pre-existence of structures, or a ‘structural inheritance’, which leaves people ‘involuntarily’ situated (Archer, 1995). In this inherited situation, there is an interaction between the individual and their environment, which results in the transformation of the original conditions. This transformed structural situation is then encountered by another ‘generation’ of agents. Each new generation of agents thus reproduces or transforms its ‘structural inheritance’, while the situation they inherit conditions their ability to do this and the resources they can draw upon (Archer, 2000). These ideas about changes over time and the transformative power of agents are important for my research, which offers examples of how some of the women, through their actions, have (modestly) changed the context for future arrivals of asylum seekers and refugees. The same point is relevant to the roles played by service providers and intermediaries.

## 1.2 Structure and agency in social policy debates

Much of the structure and agency debate in social policy has been applied in the context of analyses of poverty, and as Lister (2004) suggests, the ‘pendulum’ has swung at different times between emphasising one over the other. Thus, in relation to ‘the poor’, in past accounts it seems that they have usually featured in one of two main ways: the *structuralist* versus the *individualist* approach. In summary terms, the structuralist approach regards poverty as being associated with a person’s place within the social structure, and it is ‘the system’ that is to blame for inequality. This approach has been criticised as it apparently sees people as passive ‘victims’ rather than as having an adequately acknowledged measure of choice, or being regarded as agents of change<sup>11</sup> (Deacon and Mann, 1999; Williams *et al.* 1999).

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specific situation. Nonetheless, the effects of actions and environments upon each other are also considered in specific ways.

<sup>11</sup> Scholars have also been seen as misrepresenting minority ethnic groups in terms of a ‘deprivationist paradigm’ that views them as ‘victims’ and under-rates agency (see Ballard, 1992, 1998). Ballard suggests that their cultural strengths and positive trajectories have been under-acknowledged in such debates.



The *individualist* approach, on the other hand, has focused upon ‘blaming the victims’ for their own poverty. Proponents of this approach hold the idea that provision of welfare encourages people to seek support rather than being self-sufficient (see for example, Murray, 1984, 1990, or Marsland, 1996). Such assertions are not new; indeed they underpinned the changes that occurred to early poor relief. The architects of the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834), for instance, emphasised the ‘perverse incentives’ of welfare:

“...can we wonder if the uneducated are seduced into approving a system which...offers marriage to the young, security to the anxious, ease to the lazy, and impunity to the profligate?” (Poor Law Commission, 1834, p.264).

They sought to change the system to one that would compel people to alter their behaviour, and thus introduced a series of workhouses that would hopefully distinguish “the really destitute from the crowd of indolent impostors” (Poor Law Commission, 1834, p.271). With reference to asylum seekers and refugees, there seem to be similar debates, as will be shown later, about the ‘perverse incentives’ of welfare. From this perspective, it is felt that access to support is a ‘pull’ factor attracting people to the UK when they have no legitimate claim for asylum. In line with such interpretations, governments have attempted to reduce support to a level that makes this country no longer ‘attractive’ as a destination for people seeking asylum.

In order to overcome the dichotomy between the individual and the structural, there have been calls for a ‘new paradigm’ of welfare research (Titterton, 1992; Williams *et al.* 1999). Titterton (1992), for example, suggests that people should no longer be seen as ‘passive recipients’ of welfare, but rather as ‘active agents’ with the ability to shape their own lives. He focuses upon how people respond differentially to threats to well being, suggesting the existence of “diverse social groups, meeting a range of crises, and responding with a rich and varied repertoire of coping styles and strategies” (p.3).

Drawing on these ideas, Williams *et al.* (1999) suggest that there should be three elements to the new paradigm for analysing welfare: an understanding of the relationship between personal history and the social and material world; an expansion of the study of ‘mediating structures’ beyond formal welfare provision to include people’s own psychological and social strategies; and, an expansion of the focus to those people



who survive threats (who Titterton describes as the ‘invulnerables’), rather than focusing primarily upon those who cannot cope. The thrust of these preoccupations is towards some of the concerns of this thesis, particularly with regards to the importance of refugees’ and asylum seekers’ own strategies, and the focus upon those who ‘survive’ despite difficult circumstances.

A key theme in the approach of these writers is that there is a ‘creative welfare subject’ operating within social structures, and they indicate important factors influencing this relationship; for example, *discourse* and *identity* (Williams *et al.* 1999). The concept of *discourse*<sup>12</sup> refers to ways of thinking or talking about issues or topics, and an analysis via discourses helps provide an understanding of how people’s welfare needs are ‘constructed’ in particular ways (Williams and Popay, 1999). Discourse about ‘lone mothers’ or ‘the poor’, for instance, may constitute them as separate from society, and sometimes in terms of a supposed ‘underclass’ (see, for example, Murray, 1984, 1990). Williams (2000) describes the position people are placed in by such discourse as their ‘subject position’, which is largely externally constituted. What is important, however, is that a person’s own perception of their position may differ from that in which such discourse ‘places’ them. Lone mothers, for instance, may not be weighing up particular costs or benefits as a hostile discourse might imply (for example, having a baby to get a flat as Peter Lilley once implied), but rather their decisions represent the opinion that looking after their children is the proper thing for a mother to do (see Duncan and Edwards, 1996)<sup>13</sup>. Thus, as Taylor (1998) suggests, “*ascribed* moral characteristics are frequently the opposite of those *subscribed to*” (p.347, emphases added). In terms of looking at the concept of *identity*, certain welfare practices are held to construct identities for individuals or categorise them in particular ways; for instance, as ‘lone mothers’ (to use the above example again), yet people have their own identity or sense of self<sup>14</sup>. In my study, identity is not something that has been prioritised for analysis;

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<sup>12</sup> It may be that to some extent the term discourse has displaced the older word ideology in writings on social policy, although the distinction between the two is not always absolutely clear, and writers who are alert to the importance of dominant ideas about welfare systems may use either. Bloch (2000a), for instance, refers to “welfare ideology” in a paper discussing asylum policy in the UK (p.30), and Clarke and Newman (1997) use both terms when looking at changes in the delivery of welfare.

<sup>13</sup> Duncan and Edwards (1996) introduced the concept of ‘gendered moral rationalities’ to explain how lone mothers made decisions around employment and child care responsibilities.

<sup>14</sup> Identity is a concept that has been given importance in some social policy debates. The key issues seem to be that individuals are placed or categorised through ‘external’ forces, but also may place themselves in accordance with their own sense of self. In disability debates, identity has been discussed in terms of how people may ‘internalise’ the ‘external’. Plainly put,

however, as will be shown in some of the women's accounts, people do resist externally imposed categorisation, and their actions are influenced by their own strategies, commitments and sense of self.

Finally, within debates about structure and agency, and within academic social policy generally, recognition of 'difference' is also highlighted as an important factor. People bring different histories, affiliations, and experiences into the decision-making arena, which influence their actions. In addition, 'difference' is not just an expression of choice or personal attributes, but is also something that is constituted through structural conditions (as the comments in footnote 14 suggest, with reference to disability). As Harrison (2001) indicates, it may be "something defined from within a group or projected on to a group, or both" (p.8). This is particularly pertinent for asylum seekers and refugees, who have such a diversity of needs and experiences that must be taken into account, but, at the same time, have their 'difference' in terms of status projected onto them by officials and others, and are regulated, and to a degree defined, by laws and policy. Yet, as my study aims to show, people are able to reject what is projected on to them and demonstrate their agency.

### **1.2.1 Classifications of agency in social policy**

Following on from the above, the term agency has been used to refer to people in their roles as *individual* and *collective* actors (Williams *et al.* 1999). Individual agency can be about self-esteem, personal empowerment and individuals pursuing their 'interests'. Collective agency on the other hand may mean different processes. This may involve people coming together to mobilise collectively for a particular cause; for example, campaigning for more adequate resources, or the recognition of an unfair system. The work of the Southall Black Sisters is offered by Mirza (2003) as an example of such action. This group has been successful in campaigning against the deportation of

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negative perceptions and assumptions can affect the way people think about themselves. The 'medical model' of disability can be self-perpetuating; for instance, it can be 'internalised' by people who may then come to see themselves as recipients of 'care' or as dependent. Chadwick (1996), for instance, suggests that the medical approach can "become part of the disabled person" (p.34). There is also the ability, however, to draw upon this identity as something enabling and people do have the capacity to resist. Some people may draw strength from their ascribed (and possibly negative) category; for example those who come together as 'asylum seekers'. It is felt that action itself, in a variety of contexts, may be one way in which identities are formed, confirmed or reshaped (Archer, 2000).



migrant women whose marriages break down as a result of domestic violence. Mirza (2003) suggests that despite differences, the women in this group have combined their skills and resources, and have been able to become 'collective transformative agents'.

One aspect of the 'new paradigm' of welfare research is to focus upon the different *dimensions* of agency in order to offer a way of explaining the sometimes multi-faceted nature of people's actions (see Williams, 2000). As well as acknowledging individual and collective agency, there has been a focus upon the 'relational' dimension contributing to agency. The concept of relational agency focuses upon the influences of people's relationships with others (see Mason, 2000a, 2000b). People are not seen to act simply out of self-interest, but rather as 'moral agents' whose actions may be influenced by kinship networks, perceived obligations and responsibilities, and negotiations with others. Putting this in practical terms, it is felt that there is a need to consider people's responsibility and commitment to others, particularly (although not exclusively) family members, and how this may motivate their action. Research carried out by Mason (2000b) on the factors influencing people's decisions on where to live suggests that decisions are made:

"...through interactions with other people, and those interactions shape what they do, what they can and cannot do, and how they reason. It is this interactive element, more than any individual assessment of risk, or any individual strategy or life plan, which characterises people's decisions about where to live" (p.12)

In a sense, it is useful to look at both *individual* and *collective* agency; however, human agency also operates *relationally* and there is a need to consider people's actions as grounded in relationships and connections with others (Mason, 2000b).

Although these three notions about agency are helpful, in my thesis it is felt that agency is likely to be more fluid than these classifications would suggest. In reality there could well be overlap between individual, collective and relational issues, as people can demonstrate all three in their actions. Also, with reference to the addition of relational issues, while they are important in certain contexts, as Williams (2000) points out "I am not convinced that relationalism applies so thoroughly to all subjects in all positions" (p.11). Furthermore, as these interactions are seen to shape what people can and cannot do, it is conceivable to regard them as part of the environment of resources and constraints in which people take action, and thus relational considerations could be seen as part of the structural context.

### 1.3 Following agency/structure through into the study

Phizacklea (2000) argues that “The interplay between the agency of the individual actor and the structural context within which that actor manoeuvres is at the heart of most studies of migration” (p.119). With reference to women in particular, the role of agency is seen as being vital for a gendered account because it is often assumed too readily that a woman’s role is ‘reactive’ rather than ‘proactive’ (Kofman *et al.* 2000). If the dynamic between the individual and the context in which they find themselves is at the heart of migration studies, it can also be important in analysing the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, writers such as Richmond (1988) have incorporated this ‘interplay’ into their analysis of population movements, arguing that some occur in a ‘state of panic’, while in others, choices are based on a consideration of factors such as material rewards. In between these two extremes, there are varying degrees of ‘autonomy’ that actors exhibit with regards to movement from one country to another (see Chapter Two for a discussion of Richmond). For the purpose of this study, however, it is not the intention to look at this with regards to how it influences population movements, but rather, as mentioned previously, to look at action in the context of the exile setting. The focus is primarily on structural factors in concrete terms, and on specific actions taken by the women, and their practical implications<sup>15</sup>. What the chapter will do now is look specifically at how structure and agency are conceptualised for this thesis, by focusing upon some different dimensions and manifestations of the two, and how they relate to this particular study.

#### 1.3.1 Structure

One key task is to consider the environments of opportunities and constraints that refugees and asylum seekers encounter. Structure therefore needs to be looked at in terms of its manifestations in institutional factors, government policy being the most obvious of these. As will be shown in subsequent chapters, successive legislation has

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting, however, that there are examples where overt mobilisation may not always be essential for agents to have an effect. Harrison (2001) refers to those whose ‘less visible’ agency (or indeed their mere presence) can have an effect. He refers to the example of the ‘better-off’, who may not even need to take action for their housing concerns to be responded to by politicians.



created a system that leaves asylum applicants as arguably one of the most restricted groups in the UK, in terms of access to basic rights and services. Such institutional factors thus have a very strong influence on what resources people are able to draw upon, and consequently their capacity to act.

Alongside considering the policy and legal framework, a decision was also made to treat the discourses associated with welfare (or welfare ideology) as an element of the structural dimension in terms of the impact that the social construction of certain groups can have, and how people are 'represented' in popular debates. Established ideas have ongoing effects on people's agency. This means that the discourse surrounding certain groups of people may sometimes be equally as important as the constraints of material resources or institutional structures. The construction of certain groups as a 'social problem' is a persistent barrier to inclusion. In many ways, it is such discourse that legitimates the development or maintenance of institutional structures that can act as a constraint on people. Discourses through which 'racialisation' or inferiorisation of asylum seekers are confirmed or encouraged are therefore important to the policy background of this thesis, along with more particular ideas about asylum seekers as women, and also about 'community' (that is, the assumption that people from the same country or culture will form a 'community'). With regards to women asylum seekers and refugees, for example, there is the issue that asylum applicants are often perceived primarily as male, thus the specificity of their needs and experiences as women can be overlooked.

As has already been suggested in the previous discussion, although assumptions may have been made about certain groups and their needs, such positioning does not necessarily reflect the reality for asylum seekers and refugees, or their wishes. Environments of opportunities and constraints are therefore not necessarily perceived in the same ways. As will be shown in this study, the creation of 'communities', as constructed by policy makers, in reality can operate differently at the grass roots level. There are also practices and beliefs that run in opposition to the dominant discourse of 'scrounging' and 'bogusness' as portrayed by politicians and the media. People working at the grass roots, for example, draw upon what they see in their day-to-day work with regards to the women's skills and qualifications, and desire to work and be self sufficient, and the women themselves talk in terms of their previous status as, for example, 'dentist', 'midwife' or 'teacher'. Certainly there are some strong continuities



over time in official discussions about immigration, and asylum seekers and refugees. Nonetheless, social construction does not necessarily ‘bind’ individuals, as this study will demonstrate, and people can challenge categorisation or a lack of rights.

### 1.3.2 Agency

With reference to agency, the focus of this study is on actions that help improve people’s lives in a given situation, namely the exile setting. Although it is important to review women’s experiences in their home countries and during flight (because these experiences shape who they are today), the focus is upon the manifestations of women’s agency in the host society. This is viewed in terms of their engagement in everyday practices and actions, or involvement in more complex strategies. It is not just about contributing through paid employment, indeed (as will be shown in subsequent chapters), government policy dictates that for some asylum seekers this is not an option<sup>16</sup>. Thus, in this study, agency is evident in a number of different practices ranging from buying a car (consumption practices), attending support groups (social practices), through to voluntary or paid employment, and involvement in organisations at a regional and national level (work practices). Each ‘act’, however small, represents the women’s ability to improve their situation. Despite the constraints discussed above (in terms of institutions and discourses) women are able to make changes to their lives, and manoeuvre in a given context. It may be the case that asylum seekers are not permitted to enter paid employment, for instance, but they will carry out voluntary work or attend college courses that can equip them with transferable skills.

The practices of the women in this thesis are discussed in terms of *individual* and *collective* agency; however, ideas relating to the *relational* aspects of people’s action also feature, and collective agency is inevitably relational in terms of how it focuses upon relationships with others. In this study, it is felt that there can be overlap between these different dimensions, and the fluidity of the approach taken can be demonstrated by using the example of a woman who is working for a refugee organisation. At a *collective* level, she comes together with other people from different backgrounds and

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<sup>16</sup> Dwyer (2004) offers an important criticism of the concepts of ‘agency’ and ‘dependency’ as used in contemporary debates about welfare reform. He points out that they are based on “limited notions of socially valuable contribution and agency” (p.149) which is tied to the paid labour market. This undervalues, for instance, unpaid caring roles or, as could be applied to this study, the actions of asylum seekers who are not permitted to enter the paid labour market.

experiences as ‘refugees’, and is doing advocacy work as a ‘refugee’. At an *individual* level, she takes action and may be financially rewarded or, if working voluntarily, is aware of the skills, experience and references it can provide her that may help future employment. With reference to *relational* issues, her employment, and the material and emotional rewards it brings, are necessary for the survival of her family, particularly if she has come to this country on her own with her children and is effectively ‘head of household’ (as was the case for a number of the women in this study). As mentioned earlier, however, such responsibilities and obligations can also be seen as part of both the relational and the structural context in which people find themselves, and thus influence what people can and cannot do.

The likely diversity of experiences was recognised for the research and it was taken into account that while some women might be very ‘active’ in exile, for others, the norms and values of their ethnicity and culture might define or restrict their role in terms of what is regarded as ‘proper’ behaviour<sup>17</sup>. Cultural norms and practices are seen as potentially both constraining and enabling. It was also anticipated that there might be those who did not act in their own or others’ interests, and thus displayed ‘negative capacities’ (Hoggett, 2001).

While there is clearly a need to focus upon agency, it is important not to lose sight of the ‘old’ concerns of inequality and structural constraint, which limit people’s opportunities and choices. Indeed, as Lister (2004) suggests, drawing upon the example of people in poverty:

“We need to pay more attention to the positive exercise of agency by people in poverty...This cannot, though, be divorced from their severely disadvantaged structural position or from the exercise of agency by more powerful actors, which help to perpetuate that structural position” (p.178).

In parallel, Hunter (2003) argues that there is a need to focus upon the capacity of professionals to act, and not just upon the welfare user. A similar type of concern helped shape my decision to interview welfare professionals and those working for

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<sup>17</sup> In this study, although there was some reference to culture, ethnicity or religion, this was relatively low key in comparison with other resources. When I visited one of the support groups where there were a large number of Kurdish women, there was evidence of people drawing upon ethnicity for support. Some of the service providers also referred to it as acting as a constraint. Yet across my study as a whole, spontaneous discussion rarely raised ethnicity or religious values as a crucial variable.



refugee organisations. Welfare professionals have often been seen as operating to subordinate users, yet, as Hunter (2003) argues, they are not simply the 'enemy within' but rather may be caught up in a contradictory relationship of care and control. Exploring social control is a part of my study, particularly through considering how far the system aims to 'manage' certain groups, whilst at the same time offering some degree of assistance. This connects with the accounts in social policy that have looked at control, once again in the context of analysing poverty, and which focus on how it is regulated, and how 'the poor' are 'disciplined' by the state (see for instance Jones and Novak, 1999). The roles of actors within organisations can be seen to have both positive and disciplinary potential.

Thus the role of agency is not confined to a discussion of women asylum seekers and refugees, but is also explored (although in much less depth, given the constraints of fieldwork time) with regards to the practices of key actors in formal organisations working at the grass roots level. Like the asylum seekers and refugees, service providers themselves also experience both constraints and opportunities. This is particularly applicable to local government 'gatekeepers' and advisors, where the implementation of dispersal has seen changes in their roles. They must follow the guidelines laid out for them by central government, and are also now expected to take on an increasing 'policing' role, in terms of reporting illegal employment or those who are suspected to be in the country illegally. Steve Cohen (2002) suggests that local government has been transformed into an 'arm' of the Home Office. In some respects, other local organisations have also been transformed into an 'arm' of the immigration service. Yet, at the same time, personnel are able to offer support that helps asylum seekers and refugees in terms of reception and resettlement. The idea that actors within the institutional apparatus may have contested roles and practices forms part of a wider set of issues about the dual nature of the welfare state, and the care/control dichotomy.

A final point to consider with regards to looking at agency is the fact that it cannot necessarily always be assumed to have anti-oppressive or emancipatory effects. As mentioned above, Hoggett (2001), for example, highlights a need to examine those who assert forms of agency that are destructive as people may exhibit 'non-reflexive' action, and in some instances act impulsively or without using judgement. Also, agents can maintain social divisions in an exclusionary manner. Perhaps, for asylum seekers, this could apply to powerful actors in the media or politics. Giddens (1984) refers to the

fact that “All human beings are knowledgeable agents” (p.281), yet perhaps, as Archer (1995) claims, “agents have differential knowledgeability according to social position; and some agents have defective, deficient and distorted knowledge” (p.252). Hate crimes against asylum seekers, for instance, may develop from a ‘distorted’ understanding about people, and asylum seekers themselves may have ‘deficient’ knowledge with regards to rules and entitlements in this country.

#### **1.4 A summary of the main understandings and assumptions that inform the approach adopted in the thesis**

This section will now summarise briefly four interrelated key points about the position reached through considering the social policy theory debate about agency and structure, and through reflecting on how the issues might be related to asylum seekers and refugees.

First, in considering structural factors there is a need to focus both upon the impact of institutions and rules, and on the effects of discourses. Each may help to shape the environment for action in terms of constraints and opportunities. In considering structure in this way there is a need to be aware of processes of social construction, potentially manifested in policies, and the way that asylum seekers’ and refugees’ status, interactions and prospects may be affected by this. Some ideas hold more weight than others and we need to be aware of the powerful actors who are popularising particular ideas (although the political processes and power relationships were beyond the scope of my empirical study).

Second, whilst influenced by context, adopting a strongly deterministic approach to the effects of structure on asylum seekers and refugees would be misleading for two reasons. To begin with, institutional power is transmitted or mediated through the agency of individual actors, such as ‘gatekeepers’ holding particular paid positions, who may have their own influence on outcomes for service users and others. In addition, asylum seekers and refugees themselves can sometimes influence services, or resist categorisation and how others construct them. They may not perceive matters in the same way as policy-makers, and there may be some scope for the environment for action being interpreted and ‘filtered’ to some extent by individuals, rather than simply being ‘given’ from outside.



Thirdly, actors will usually retain some degree of autonomy despite constraints. They may draw upon a variety of resources, and may enter into differing roles depending on circumstances, time, place, strategy, and so forth. It is useful to look at manifestations of agency in particular instances. Action may be influenced by a variety of factors; for some women asylum seekers and refugees, for example, links with children provide crucial motivations. Furthermore, as noted above, asylum seekers and refugees may resist attempts to categorise and control them, and it is important to look at the possible effects of this.

Fourthly, the thesis concerns itself with the role that service providers working for organisations at the ‘grass roots’ may have, and their practices in interpreting, softening or modifying the effects of structural factors. Equally, refugees and asylum seekers themselves can also modify structural conditions, albeit in modest ways.

## **1.5 Key questions**

Based on the issues that are raised in earlier sections, and bearing in mind the understandings summarised above, five central empirical questions were identified:

1. What have been the women’s experiences of settlement<sup>18</sup> and interaction?
2. What do these experiences tell us about the strategies they use, their capacity to act and their everyday practices in the host country?
3. How are these shaped by the constraints and opportunities the women encounter?
4. What are the perceptions of those who work with asylum applicants and refugees at the grass roots level, and how do they contribute to our understanding of the situation women find themselves in?
5. Working as actors engaged in ‘managing’ asylum, are there ways in which their practices might be important?

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<sup>18</sup> This thesis treats ‘settlement’ primarily in terms of practical features of daily life, including feelings of being at home; interactions, and contacts. I am aware, however, that there are broader debates relevant to settlement including conceptualisations of assimilation and integration (see for example Reinsch, 2001).



To amplify, this study aims to look at the experiences of women asylum seekers and refugees in the exile setting, placing the analysis within a structure and agency framework. As has been illustrated, there are a number of different factors to be considered when looking at the actions of people in this particular context. Firstly, there are *the women's own personal histories and experiences*. Each person brings different histories and experiences into the asylum arena; for example, relating to previous education or profession, language, family situation, and experiences of persecution and 'flight' to the country of asylum. These may influence people's actions in the host society, and can in themselves become constraining or enabling. Secondly, the influence of structure is considered in terms of *the constraints posed by institutions and 'official practices'* (for example, through government policies) and *the constraints posed by discourses and discursive practices* (of say, the 'host' community or the media), which can act as a persistent barrier for asylum seekers irrespective of their gender, as well as distinctly for women. In this analysis of structure, however, the *enabling as well as the constraining capacities* are examined, particularly in terms of the positive support that is provided at a local level, the resources they may draw upon. Thirdly, *the role of service providers* is considered (albeit in a limited way), in terms of their contested practices of care/control. Finally, *the actions of the women* themselves are explored, particularly in terms of their everyday practices and the strategies they adopt within situations of constraint.

## **1.6 The plan for subsequent chapters**

This chapter has outlined briefly how ideas about structure and agency underpin this study. The following chapters explore specific issues in greater detail. They begin by looking at asylum in general terms. *Chapter Two* highlights what literature is already available relating to the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees. It outlines the issues raised in other research, before turning to the focus of the study by looking at how women have sometimes been neglected. *Chapter Three* then focuses specifically upon policy and its implications for asylum seekers and refugees, outlining a history of immigration controls and suggested reasons for restrictive policy<sup>19</sup>. While it is vital to

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<sup>19</sup> The analysis and outline chronology in Chapter Three have been used elsewhere, in Hunt, L. (forthcoming) 'Refugees and people seeking asylum: history and context', in M. Harrison, D. Phillips, K. Chalal, L. Hunt and J. Perry (eds) *Housing, 'race' and community cohesion*, Coventry: Chartered Institute of Housing.

provide a context for the study by looking at the issue at a national level, the main focus of the thesis is the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in West Yorkshire. As mentioned previously, this focus allows more depth than would a national analysis. More and more areas are now affected by the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees, and this has implications in terms of the need for support at a local level that is adequate to meet a diversity of needs. Some previous research has focused on particular localities, including Yorkshire and Humberside (Wilson, 2001; Carter & El-Hassan, 2003; Dwyer and Brown, 2004a, 2004b), and has looked at service provision and barriers to access. Although there is some overlap between this study and previous ones, it differs in its specific focus on women.

*Chapter Four* describes the methodology developed for this study. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the problems and limitations of such research, with particular reference to issues of trust, and the use of interpreters/facilitators in the fieldwork. The latter point raises a number of considerations particularly with regards to bringing a ‘third party’ into the interview situation<sup>20</sup>, although there is perhaps no easy way to resolve methodological issues of this kind.

*Chapters Five, Six and Seven* focus on the findings of the fieldwork. *Chapters Five and Six* highlight the structural constraints affecting women asylum seekers and refugees in West Yorkshire, with some emphasis on discourses as well as institutional constraints. Structure, however, also refers to opportunities and resources, thus *Chapter Six* also focuses upon the positive support that is available for asylum seekers and refugees at a local level, and the practices of actors within particular organisations. *Chapter Seven* then focuses on the actions of the women, illustrating how they are not simply imprisoned by such constraints but are able to draw upon the resources available to them.

*Chapter Eight* concludes the thesis by revisiting the main issues that have been raised and summarising the findings.

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<sup>20</sup> The use of interpreters was only possible due to an award offered by the Al Charitable Trust, which proved invaluable to the study. This, however, does raise another issue inherent in such research: the limits posed by restricted resources.

## Chapter Two

### Key trends and issues: lessons from the literature

#### 2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine the growing body of literature devoted to refugees and asylum seekers, in order to summarise key approaches, themes and issues relevant to the present study. Research has been carried out on various aspects of forced migration, ranging from experiences of persecution, human trafficking and life in refugee camps, to looking at the determination process, and asylum and resettlement policy in receiving states. The issue of asylum policy, however, is referred to only briefly in this chapter, as Chapter Three continues the literature review with a specific focus on policy developments.

The current chapter will look at the main issues raised in the literature with particular reference to those writings that look at access to welfare and the constraints asylum seekers face. The focus is mainly upon more recent UK literature, although reference is made to earlier research or selected studies that have been carried out elsewhere in the world when it is relevant to this specific study. The chapter will consider how far the literature has addressed the concerns that are important for this thesis: the experiences of women asylum seekers and refugees in exile, with a specific focus on opportunities and constraints, and their capacity for action in the host society. Included in this is a focus on women's practices in the exile setting, particularly with reference to the provision of support for their families and the community. In order to construct a picture of what is occurring in relation to the issue of asylum, however, it is important to place it within the context of international population movements more generally. The chapter will therefore begin by looking at some theories of migration, before focusing on where, and how, asylum seeker and refugee movements fit into these.



## 2.2 Theories of migration

Phizacklea (1998) points to two main accounts that have been used to explain international population movements: the '*orthodox*' model and the '*structural*' model. The orthodox model is the traditional model of migration, and is based on neo-classical economics and the idea that population movements can be explained by a combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors. Push factors are those that impel people to leave their country of origin; for instance, economic hardship, population growth and political repression, while pull factors, such as demand for labour and economic opportunities, attract people to certain countries. In this model, migration is based on a rational comparison of the costs and benefits of remaining in the area of origin or moving to various alternative destinations. It therefore stresses the role of 'human agency' by focusing on the individual decision to migrate, albeit in a rather economic determinist manner.

The orthodox model has often been criticised for its individualistic and simplistic nature. Indeed Castles and Miller (1998) believe it to be "so far from historical reality that it has little explanatory value" (p.22). It is not necessarily able to explain, for example, why certain groups of migrants go to certain countries, or why it is not always the poorest people from the least developed countries who decide to migrate. Brettell and Hollifield (2000) also suggest that the focus on the *individual* decision to migrate is unrealistic as decisions are seldom made in a 'vacuum', but rather are made at the level of the household or family unit. This makes *relational* issues relevant as well (see Chapter One). Another major criticism focuses on the fact that the orthodox model does not consider the structural social relations and institutionalised constraints, which are beyond the control of individuals, yet affect their decisions (Phizacklea, 1998). In particular, it is felt that the role of the state, and its immigration policies, are underplayed. According to Phizacklea (1998):

"These factors to a large degree determine the migratory decision. It is, for instance, such laws and rules which determine the 'legal' or 'illegal' status of the migrant, not the individual migrant" (p.25)

A second model – the '*structural*' model – was developed as an alternative to this neo-classical economic approach, known as the *historical structural* approach. This model has its origins in Marxist political economy, with its focus on the unequal distribution of

economic and political power in the world economy (Castles and Miller, 1998). Migration is seen as a way of mobilising labour for the needs of capital, and, when combined with immigration policy, this unequal distribution of power acts as a constraint on migrant choices. This model is also criticised, however, because its focus on capital leaves little space for the role of human agency (Phizacklea, 1998).

As was highlighted in Chapter One, Phizacklea (2000) suggests that the relationship between the individual and their context is at the heart of most studies of migration. Both of these models, however, are regarded as being too one-sided in their approach to explaining migration. It is felt that no single cause is sufficient to explain the movement of people from one country to another (Anwar, 1979; Castles and Miller, 1998), therefore a third approach to studying migration has been developed: *migration systems theory*. According to Castles and Miller (1998), this theory “emphasises international relations, political economy, collective action and institutional factors” (p.23). It looks at population movements in terms of interacting ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ structures. Macro structures refer to the world market, interstate relationships and the laws and structures of sending and receiving countries. Micro structures, on the other hand, refer to the informal networks that migrants themselves establish such as family, friendship and community ties. This theory therefore incorporates the interplay between structure on the one hand, and human agency on the other. Indeed Wright (1995) refers to this theory as the ‘structuration model of migration’ based on Giddens’s theory of ‘structuration’ (see Chapter One).

In their analysis, Castles and Miller (1998) suggest that migration usually arises from the existence of *links* between sending and receiving countries; for example, through colonial ties, trade and investment, or political influence. Similarly, Anwar (1979) and Brettell (2000) also highlight the importance of these links, focusing specifically on social networks. They suggest that each act of migration creates a social structure needed to maintain it, and that this social structure facilitates subsequent migration. This process has been seen as involving ‘chain migration’ (Anwar, 1979), or more recently, ‘social capital’, which in this context refers to “the capacity of individuals to command scarce resources by virtue of their membership in social networks or broader social structures” (Schmitter Heisler, 2000, p.83). Interestingly, Brettell (2000) suggests that it is often women who are at the heart of this process by facilitating and maintaining these networks.



Castles and Miller (1998) also identified five tendencies, which they predicted would play a major role over the next 20 years:

- The *globalisation of migration*: more diversity of country of origin and more countries being affected by population movements
- The *acceleration of migration*: growth in volume of all types of migration
- The *differentiation of migration*: countries experience different types of immigration simultaneously; for example, labour migration, permanent settlement and arrival of asylum seekers and refugees
- The *feminisation of migration*: women playing an increasing role in all types of migration
- The *politicisation of migration*: domestic politics and national security policies increasingly being affected by migration

Included in these five tendencies is the growth of all types of migration, including the movement of asylum seekers and refugees, but also the increasing role of women in migration. What follows now is a look at where it is suggested that refugees fit into the theories, before focusing specifically upon what has been written about women in this context.

### **2.3 The ‘asylum-migration’ nexus<sup>21</sup>**

As has already been highlighted, no single cause can explain migrants’ decisions to leave their country of origin and move to another. Comprehensive theories therefore need to incorporate different types of migration; for example, labour migration, permanent settlement and the movement of refugees and asylum seekers. It is also too simplified to assume that people move either for economic or protection reasons, when the distinction between a ‘refugee’ and an ‘economic migrant’ can in fact be blurred.

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<sup>21</sup> This term is taken from Castles (2003) and is used to discuss the difficulty of distinguishing between migration motivated by economic factors and that which occurs for human rights reasons. The dictionary definition of a ‘nexus’ is a link or a connection.



Indeed, as Steve Cohen (2001) asks, “Were the Jews who escaped from Germany when there was a boycott on Jewish shops and Jewish labour political refugees or economic migrants?” (p.117)

Castles and Miller (1998) have attempted to incorporate the movement of asylum seekers and refugees into their analysis by emphasising the role of globalisation and the integration of the world economy. They point out that although different types of migrants can have different motivations, what they have in common is that:

“...all these types of population movement are symptomatic of modernisation and globalisation. Colonisation, industrialisation and integration into the world economy destroy traditional forms of production and social relations, and lead to reshaping of nations and states. Such fundamental societal changes lead both to economically motivated migration and to politically motivated flight” (p.29).

According to Castles (2003), globalisation is “a system of selective inclusion and exclusion” (p.16), which causes growth in some areas and decline in others, and in turn leads to social inequality. This analysis can be used to help explain forced migration, which includes refugee movements, as well as internal and development-induced displacement. To illustrate, Castles points out:

“Failed economies generally also mean weak states, predatory ruling cliques and human rights abuses. This leads to the notion of the ‘asylum-migration nexus’: many migrants and asylum seekers have multiple reasons for mobility and it is impossible to completely separate economic and human rights motivations – which is a challenge to the neat categories that bureaucracies seek to impose” (p.17).

With reference to these ‘multiple reasons for mobility’, Papademetriou (2003) suggests some of the causes and processes as follows: relationships between sending and receiving countries; economic benefits; already established communities; conflict; deteriorating ecosystems; and, ‘man-made disasters’. Looking at this list, it is likely that there is no profile of a ‘typical’ migrant as there are many different factors, both ‘push’ and ‘pull’ which operate simultaneously.

Phizacklea (1998, 2000) also argues that it is necessary to analyse diverse forms of, and reasons for, migration. She illustrates the complexity using the example of female migrants. Thus, a woman may move to another country as a labour migrant, but factors such as social constraint or marital discord may have also contributed to the decision to migrate. As Phizacklea (1998) points out:

“...it is also important to understand migration as an escape route for women who find themselves locked in what they consider to be oppressive patriarchal social structures with rigid notions of what constitutes ‘proper’ behaviour” (p.28).

The idea of an ‘asylum-migration nexus’ is also highlighted by Anderson (2000, 2001), with reference to the increasing number of female domestic workers who came to the UK during the Gulf War. In this situation, although they may have been defined as labour migrants, it could have been the case that they simply took whatever ‘escape route’ was available to them under the stress of war.

In order to offer another paradigm with which to analyse the diverse forms of migration, Phizacklea (2000) points to the work of Richmond (1988). Like Castles, Richmond argues that it is not realistic to view refugee movements as being independent of the global economy. Indeed, he suggests that economic underdevelopment and political repression often go hand-in-hand. It is therefore too simplistic to distinguish between ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ migration, but rather, Richmond suggests:

“It would be more appropriate to recognize a continuum at one end of which individuals are *proactive* and at the other *reactive*. Under certain conditions, the decision to move may be made after due consideration of all relevant information, rationally calculated to maximise net advantage, including both material and symbolic rewards. At the other extreme, the decision to move may be made in a state of panic facing a crisis situation which leaves few alternatives but escape from intolerable threats (p.17) ... Between these two extremes, a large proportion of the people crossing boundaries...[are] responding to economic, social and political pressures over which they have little choice, but exercising a limited degree of choice in the selection of destinations and the timing of their movements” (p.20).

This model is useful as it incorporates both structure and agency into the analysis. Thus, Richmond indicates that while all human action is constrained, the extent of that constraint varies and people have differing degrees of autonomy. What it also illustrates is the heterogeneity of people’s experiences, which is an important feature of this thesis. The emphasis on diversity in the literature is also a useful corrective to the crude stereotypes in the policy fields. If asylum seekers are seen as one homogenous group, and no account is taken of the different histories, experiences and skills that people bring into the arena, this may have implications in terms of provision of support. Individual needs can be overlooked when the system is focusing on the needs of a uniformly defined group. This is particularly pertinent for women, as it is generally assumed that most asylum seekers are male.



This chapter will now turn to some of the studies that have focused specifically upon refugees and people seeking asylum.

## **2.4 Studies on asylum seekers and refugees**

Studies have been carried out which highlight a number of issues relating to the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in the host society. Robinson (1993) Robinson *et al.* (2003), Robinson and Hale (1989), Somerset (1983), Jones (1983) and Dines (1973) have all focused on the reception and resettlement of refugee populations; for example, the Ugandan Asians and the Vietnamese. Robinson (2003b), in particular, has noted the use of dispersal, and has compared its previous use with the current UK programme. These issues, however, will be looked at in greater detail in Chapter Three. There are also writers who have focused on the restrictive nature of asylum and immigration policy, and its effects in terms of welfare and citizenship (Bloch, 2000a; Steve Cohen, 2001; Hansen and King, 2000; Hayter, 2000). Again these issues will be discussed in Chapter Three.

The following three sections now focus upon relevant studies which inform the background of this thesis. Firstly there is a discussion of some key texts that focus specifically upon the welfare needs of asylum seekers and refugees. Secondly, the analysis focuses upon how asylum seekers and refugees have been constructed, in particular by the media and politicians. After looking at these more general issues, in the third section, attention then turns to issues pertinent to women asylum seekers and refugees.

### **2.4.1 Welfare needs, material resources and institutional structures**

Some of the research that has been carried out focuses on the welfare requirements of asylum seekers and refugees deemed important for settlement; for example, health care (British Medical Association, BMA, 2002); housing (Garvie, 2001; Zetter and Pearl, 1999, Pearl and Zetter, 2002); benefits (Bloch, 2000a); employment and training opportunities (Duke, 1996; Bloch, 1999a, 2000b); community groups (Carey-Wood, 1997; Zetter and Pearl, 2000) or all of these issues combined (Bloch and Levy, 1999).



## *Health care and housing*

The British Medical Association (BMA) (2002) report on meeting the health needs of asylum seekers is an example of a study which highlights the specific health problems facing asylum seekers and refugees. As would be expected, these relate not only to physical health problems resulting from torture and poor conditions during travel, and the psychological effects of such experiences, but also issues regarding access to services. Asylum applicants often face barriers to accessing adequate health care because of language; a lack of understanding of what is available; and also a lack of cultural understanding by some health care professionals<sup>22</sup>. Tomlins *et al.* (2001) point to a similar desire for cultural understanding with reference to Vietnamese refugees who wanted their housing provided by Vietnamese-controlled housing associations. With reference to women specifically, a report by Ahmad and Sodhi (2000) highlights gaps in provision of support for women with diverse needs, particularly those from minority ethnic groups. Again, they suggest a need for more cultural sensitivity, and more responsiveness to their diversity, although perhaps cultural competence amongst professionals dealing with asylum seekers and refugees might be hard to achieve when clients come from such a large range of groups.

At a local level, a report by Wilson (2002) for the Northern and Yorkshire Public Health Observatories has similar findings to the BMA report, and makes recommendations relating to a need for more translated material, and more information about the services available. This need for more information, however, is not just in terms of asylum seekers' awareness of entitlements, it also relates to the lack of demographic data available *about* asylum seekers. This is an issue that has been raised by other researchers (see Bloch, 1999b and Robinson, 1998), and is referred to later on in this chapter and also in Chapter Four of this study with regards to methodological issues. The implication is that if providers do not know who is in the area, they will be unable to provide adequate services tailored for specific needs. Again, other writers have referred to this issue in a non-asylum context. Ahmad and Sodhi (2000), for instance,

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<sup>22</sup> This point parallels the general issue of cultural sensitivity and cultural competence referred to in ethnic relations contexts more generally. Davis *et al.* (1996) for instance, in a study of homelessness amongst young black and minority ethnic people, indicate the need for more black-led organisations to provide accommodation, or accommodation that is run by people from their particular communities.

suggests that lack of knowledge amongst providers acted as a barrier for women accessing supported housing.

With reference to housing, Zetter and Pearl (1999) write about its importance for the reception and resettlement of asylum seekers and refugees. Indeed, as they point out:

“The security, shelter and personal space which housing provides are vital elements in the process of regaining the dignity and independence often denied to them through persecution, incarceration and torture in their countries of origin” (Zetter and Pearl, 1999, p.2).

They feel that there are variable standards of performance by housing providers, and a lack of provision tailored specifically for the needs of asylum seekers and refugees. Permanent housing is suggested to be significant for inclusion into the host society as it “underpins other social, political and economic requirements, and influences health, education and employment” (Zetter and Pearl, 1999, p.48). This is a point that is also raised by Hendessi (1987), who makes references to the problems associated with the use of ‘temporary arrangements’ such as hostels and bed and breakfast accommodation. In such accommodation, conditions can be poor and overcrowded. It can also be inappropriate for certain individuals; for example, vulnerable women in mixed hostels, or people from warring countries being housed together. It is also often the case that asylum seekers are placed in ‘low demand’ housing (Chahal, 2002). Indeed, a report by Garvie (2001) indicates that asylum applicants are being placed in accommodation that is both unsuitable and sub-standard, sometimes to the point of being dangerous. Furthermore, in a later article, Pearl and Zetter (2002) suggest that access to housing is used as a method of ‘control’ over where asylum seekers live and what type of accommodation they are entitled to. The issue of social control is looked at in Chapters Five and Six of this thesis, which touch upon control over residence and access to financial support.

### ***Employment and benefits***

The importance of employment is something that is discussed in greater detail later in this study. As will be shown in Chapter Three, policy now states that asylum seekers are no longer allowed to work before they have refugee or Humanitarian Protection status. This is coupled with the fact that the level of financial assistance available for asylum seekers remains at 70% of Income Support (IS) level. Research by Dwyer and



Brown (2004a, 2004b) looks at the 'tiering of entitlement' in terms of people having differential access to benefits depending on their legal status in this country. Thus, there are those (for example 'failed asylum seekers') who are no longer eligible for financial support and therefore left destitute. At a more general level, Bloch (1993) highlights how the benefits system can be complicated, particularly for minority ethnic groups, who can sometimes lack understanding of the process of claiming, or do not have adequate information about what benefits are available. Access to financial support and the new rules of entitlement are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, with regards to the policy context, and also Chapter Five, which looks at instances of destitution and homelessness as highlighted by key informants in this research.

With reference to the issue of employment, some researchers have carried out studies that focus specifically on its importance for refugees and asylum applicants (Phillips, 1989; Bloch, 1999a; Duke, 1996). Bloch (1999a), for instance, indicates that those who work are more likely to regard the UK as their home, and Duke (1996) points out that entering the labour market provides refugees with valuable opportunities to practice language skills, and make contacts in the wider community.

The skills and qualifications that asylum seekers and refugees have gained in their country of origin are also referred to. Indeed Sargeant and Forna (2001) and Dumper (2002a), suggest that the UK is 'wasting talent', particularly when there are skills shortages in this country. It is often the case that refugees are unable to get jobs commensurate with their previous positions, which can lead to deskilling and a loss of status. With reference to migrants in general, Glover *et al.* (2001) point out that they are more likely to be unemployed than members of the indigenous population, although experiences vary as some groups of migrants have high activity rates.

Some of the barriers to employment relate once again to language, although the attitudes of employers or their fears about a person's status also act as constraints. The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux (NACAB) (2000), for example, carried out a survey that indicated that employers may be inclined to 'err on the side of caution' with regards to hiring people, for fear of fines or legal action being taken against them if an employee is discovered to be in the country illegally. As Sargeant and Forna (2001) argue, "The onus is on employers to demonstrate that an employee has legal status to work; so the amount of bureaucracy involved can deter potential employers" (p.11).



Some employers, however, will regard asylum seekers as a form of ‘cheap labour’, and will exploit the precariousness of their position in this country, as was illustrated by the tragic death of 21 Chinese ‘cockle pickers’ in Morecambe Bay in February 2004 (see also Chapter Six). In such cases, inadequate financial support, and the rules regarding employment force people into exploitative, and potentially dangerous work practices. As will be noted in Chapter Six, for some women this can mean prostitution or ‘sex work’.

To summarise, what has been shown is that there are a number of barriers to accessing welfare rights and services. Lack of recognition of the diversity of the asylum seeking and refugee populations can make it difficult for mainstream health, housing, education and welfare services to fully cater for the needs of these populations (Carey-Wood, 1997), particularly if there is limited demographic information available to them about the refugee population in their area. This is where the role of refugee community organisations (RCOs), social networks and other voluntary associations is felt to be most beneficial, filling the gaps in statutory local support.

### ***Community and voluntary groups***

As was noted earlier, the role of support networks in the community is important in the decision to migrate. It is also a vital aspect of reception and resettlement, and is something that is encouraged by the government. Indeed, as Carey-Wood (1997) points out, the support for community self help “is a central theme in recent government policy emphasising the role of the voluntary sector, volunteering and active citizenship” (p.5). The Labour government has promoted a ‘mixed economy of welfare’, and devolving responsibility to a local level has been a feature of social policy for the past twenty years (see Clarke *et al*, 1994; Horton and Farnham, 1999; Clarke and Newman, 1997). Local authorities are now key actors in the provision of support for people seeking asylum, but there is also an emphasis on the role of the voluntary sector. The importance of RCOs is something that is particularly espoused, as refugees are encouraged to take responsibility for the support of their own communities.

There are potentially enormous benefits from the development of RCOs, particularly in terms of empowering refugees to engage in, and take control of, services for refugees

(Carey-Wood, 1997). RCOs are clearly the experts with regards to the experience of seeking asylum, and will know what support is needed to help people through the process. It appears that the information sharing that comes with developing support networks also plays a vital role in assisting adaptation. Drawing on Rex *et al.*, Kelly (2003) notes four main functions that community associations serve: overcoming isolation; providing material assistance; defending the interests of the community; and promoting community culture. They help to give a collective 'voice' to individuals (Zetter and Pearl, 2000); however, access to funding and resources are highlighted as a major concern for such groups. Indeed Zetter and Pearl (2000) suggest that "RCOs, like the communities they serve, will remain on the margins" (p.676). The government may be supportive of the development of such groups, but are perhaps less happy to be seen to be supporting them financially, particularly in light of the media and public perception of asylum seekers as 'scroungers', an issue that is discussed in greater detail below.

Differential needs and experiences are again something referred to in this context, and it is suggested that RCOs may not always be able to cater for the needs of certain groups. Carey-Wood (1997), for example, argues that lone parents, women and elderly asylum seekers and refugees in particular may be marginalized. Kelly (2003) on the other hand questions the entire notion of 'community', arguing that policy is underpinned by the assumption that groups of migrants or refugees constitute a community, and that through leaders, the needs of a group can be transmitted. This assumption is seen to 'obscure differences' that occur within the group, based on class, politics, religion (Kelly, 2003) or gender. Based on research carried out with Bosnian refugees, Kelly suggests that community associations did not exist in their country of origin; therefore formal associations reflect the expectations of British society rather than the reality of the refugees (an issue that is referred to in Chapter Seven of this thesis). She suggests that it is more appropriate to use the term 'contingent communities' which describes:

"...a group who will, to some extent, conform to the expectations of the host society in order to gain the advantages of a formal community association whilst the private face of the group remains unconstituted as a community" (p.35).

Kelly concludes by arguing that associations exist primarily as a result of the benefits that can be obtained through them. This, however, is a possible assumption to make



about the development of many associations, whose main concern is the welfare of members.

Recent research by Griffiths *et al.* (2004) suggests that the role of RCOs has changed from one of aiding integration to a more defensive role of protecting basic rights and advocacy work. The model of the RCO as envisaged by the government is thus not necessarily what is occurring at the local level where more informal networks seem to dominate and can be powerful agents of support. Griffiths *et al.* point to the example of Somalis living in Birmingham and London who have come together to set up joint businesses, thus aiding economic integration. As well as noting the disparity between rhetoric and reality with regards to ideas about 'community', their study illustrates how people are able to mobilise in a situation of constraint, thus highlighting an interaction between structure and agency.

Phizacklea (1998) refers to another instance of such 'mobilisation' with reference to migrants in general: the *Commission for Filipino Migrant Workers*, which was set up in 1979, and the subsequent formation of *Kalayaan*, an organisation that fights for the rights of domestic workers from overseas<sup>23</sup>. There are also examples of groups, in and around London, formed by asylum seekers and refugees, for example *Harambe* (for women from Eastern Africa and the Great Lakes region); *Kenya Women's Association*; and, the *Kurdish Cultural Centre* (Women's Asylum News, 2000).

Although there are concerns that outside the South East the opportunities for development are much more limited (Zetter and Pearl, 2000), the fieldwork carried out in the present study shows that community associations have developed in West Yorkshire<sup>24</sup>. It is reasonable to assume that other dispersal sites are also experiencing similar developments<sup>25</sup>. Whether these communities are distinctly 'contingent' or not is unclear; what is apparent, however, is that they do provide much needed additional support for asylum seekers and refugees (Zetter and Pearl, 2000), which is particularly pertinent in the absence of adequate formal government support.

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<sup>23</sup> See <http://www.ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/kalayaan/home.htm> for more information about this group.

<sup>24</sup> There is a mixture of informal support networks as well established formal groups such as *The Bradford Great Lakes Community Association* and the *South Sudanese Women's Group* in Leeds.

<sup>25</sup> An Internet search shows the development of RCOs in Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester and Nottingham (see Refugee Action website: <http://www.refugee-action.org/>).



## 2.4.2 The influence of ideas and discourse

Chapter One noted that as part of the focus on structure, this study takes account of how the construction of asylum seekers as a ‘problem’ captures public interest, anxiety and concern. The negative discourse surrounding debates about asylum seekers is seen as another constraint that they face. It is deployed and drawn upon by politicians, and often manifests itself in the policy response towards this group. Some commentators have focused in particular on the role of the media in the negative portrayal of asylum seekers. Kaye (1998), for instance, looks at language, including terms such as ‘bogus’ or ‘economic migrants’ that are often used in media reports. This language casts doubt over people’s legitimacy, giving credence to the idea that they are a problem. It also suggests a lack of awareness or understanding of the complexity of causes and processes involved in the movement of refugees and other migrants. According to Lynn and Lea (2003), ‘the media’ is one of the principal institutions responsible for transmitting ‘ways of thinking and behaving’ which become regarded as ‘common knowledge’. In everyday language, for instance, it is perhaps the case that the term ‘asylum seeker’ has become synonymous with the term ‘bogus’. Indeed, as Lynn and Lea (2003) suggest:

“The concept of the ‘bogus’ refugee or asylum seeker is seamlessly entered into the argumentative process, without explanation or qualification. Bogusness no longer needs to be explained – *it just is*” (p.433, emphasis in original).

There are those, however, who do attempt to ensure positive and accurate portrayal by the media; for example, the *Refugees, Asylum Seekers and the Media (RAM) Project*<sup>26</sup> whose aim is ‘Promoting best practice in media representation of refugee and asylum issues’. Their website contains articles that emphasise the human rights abuses that people have suffered, and the positive contributions of asylum seekers and refugees, as well as guidelines on how to report certain issues. Coole (2002) also highlights the sympathetic coverage that followed the murder of an asylum seeker on a Glasgow estate. Previous negative coverage, which was largely blamed for inciting trouble in the first place, refocused its negativity onto the host community, who were depicted as racist and hostile.

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<sup>26</sup> For more information see <http://www.ramproject.org.uk/>

Another important point raised in the literature is the link between politics and the media. Kaye (1998), for example, believes that in its role as ‘disseminator of information’, ‘the media’ is a key political actor. Statham (2003) argues that restrictionist public debates come from ‘top-down’, and that people take their cues from political elites when making reference to asylum and immigration issues:

“...it is national political discourse that makes immigration and immigrants the scapegoats for social problems such as unemployment and the crisis of the welfare state (p.168-169)...It encourages anti-asylum mobilisation and provides the public with cues for seeing problems in a distorted and exaggerated way. Such entrenched political pathologies become difficult to reverse, with the result that it becomes hard for governments to legitimate even subsistence levels of welfare rights for asylum seekers” (p.175).

In many ways it could be interpreted as a ‘vicious circle’ that results in the continual tightening up of the system. Political discourse about asylum seekers filters (‘top-down’) through the media to the general public. The public reacts to such negative portrayals in a xenophobic way, and may even vote for those who will be toughest on the issue, thus fuelling the commitment of political parties to the restriction of support and welfare rights.

### **2.4.3 Women asylum seekers and refugees**

Earlier, this chapter looked at some of the main theories of migration, and attempted to place asylum seeker and refugee movement within these theories. According to Kofman and Sales (1992), however, “much of the literature on migration has implicitly assumed a male model” (p.29). The experiences of women have remained largely ‘invisible’ from studies (DeLaet, 1999) and although the ‘feminisation of migration’ is acknowledged, it is felt that women have been simply ‘fitted’ into models that are created to understand male migration (Kofman *et al.* 2000). As has already been discussed, although economic motivations may form part of the decision to migrate, for some women there are also non-economic factors specific to them as women. Kofman *et al.* (2000), for example, argue that “Agency in these accounts was never viewed within the context of resisting oppressive and exploitative structures” (p.23). They point out that there is an assumption that women simply ‘follow’ men, and that their role in the migration process is reactive rather than proactive. Drawing on research on African women’s migration, however, Wright (1995) notes that women fled unwanted prospective husbands; the oppression of male control; violent and miserly husbands; the



competitiveness of polygamy; and also sometimes the stigma associated with abandonment by their husband or childlessness. She suggests that this evidence of independent female migration counterbalances the accounts that have previously emphasised women's role as dependent in migration situations.

With reference to refugees and people seeking asylum, despite the growing body of research devoted to this subject, and the often-quoted fact that 80% of the world's refugee population are women with dependent children, the lack of research on refugee women is regarded as especially acute (DeLaet, 1999). It is felt that there has been a bias towards the experiences of male refugees (Kay, 1989), or that there has been a 'gender neutrality', which neglects the specific problems and resources of refugee women (Camus-Jaques, 1989). Indeed, Camus-Jaques points out that, "In the past refugee policy makers believed that it made no difference whether one was male or female once one was a refugee" (1989, p.142). The fact that asylum seekers and refugees can be perceived as one homogenous group has been referred to previously. It is important to look at the different histories and experiences that people bring into the exile setting, which naturally lead to differential needs. This is a point that is reiterated by Bloch *et al.* (2000) who point out that:

"...the categories asylum-seeker and refugee are problematic in that they imply a homogeneity which can obscure the complex reasons for refugee movements and subsequent experiences in exile. Such categorization can mean that the needs and experiences of men and women as refugees and asylum-seekers remain undifferentiated. Moreover, even the category refugee women implies a commonality among women and thereby fails to take into account age, class, ethnicity and other differentiating factors" (p.170).

In more recent years, studies have focused specifically on women as asylum seekers and refugees. Some of the available literature, however, focuses largely on women's experiences of persecution, and their unequal access to the determination process<sup>27</sup>. There is less on the experiences of women in the exile setting, referring to the structures that act as barriers to integration, and on their adaptation to the host society and roles in the provision of welfare.

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<sup>27</sup> For the purpose of this study, this term refers to the application and interview process.



## *Experiences of persecution*

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (1990) points out that: “A woman who has a well founded fear of persecution is just as much a refugee as her male counterpart” (paragraph 15). Yet, according to Crawley (2001) “women are less likely than men to be granted refugee status” (p.4). Many commentators suggest that this situation can be traced back to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees<sup>28</sup>, the Convention on which international law relating to the protection of refugees was based. In this Convention, the key criteria for refugee status are primarily drawn from involvement in what are regarded as ‘public sphere’ activities, such as politics, which is mainly dominated by men, with little focus on the ‘private sphere’, which is often regarded as the domain of women’s persecution (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, ECRE, 1997; Bhabha, 1996; Crawley, 2001; Refugee Women’s Legal Group, RWLG, 1998). The writers point out that the Convention places such emphasis on formal, government-orientated participation that women’s political activities can be overlooked, particularly when these occur in more subtle ways, such as providing food, clothing and medical care, passing messages, and hiding people. Indeed, as the RWLG (1998) point out:

“The archetypical image of a political refugee as someone who is fleeing persecution for direct involvement in conventional political activity, does not always correspond with the reality of many women’s experiences” (p.13)

Although the kinds of activities women are involved in are regarded as ‘low level’, according to the ECRE (1997) such activity is essential for the existence of political activity, and the knowledge that women are privy to, because of this involvement, puts them at risk of persecution. In some instances women can face more severe penalties than their male counterparts because their activities are perceived to breach certain social and cultural norms (Crawley, 2001; RWLG, 1998).

In international protection terms, some writers argue that less significance has been attached to women’s roles and activities, despite the efforts to prioritise the protection needs of women and children, for example, through the UNHCR Guidelines for the

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<sup>28</sup> The Convention’s definition of a refugee is ‘any person who, owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [his/her] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [him/herself] of the protection of that country’.

Protection of Refugee Women (1991) (Weiss Fagan, 2003), and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) which called for governments to assess the gender impact of all new legislation (Dumper, 2002b).

The literature illustrates the fact that some women's experiences are regarded as *discriminatory* rather than *persecutory* (Crawley, 2001, emphases added). Again this relates to instances of 'private' behaviour, which according to Bhabha (1996) "have traditionally been disregarded as relatively trivial and frivolous in contrast to the classic grounds of persecution" (p.4-5). For instance, two Pakistani women who feared being stoned to death for adultery, a state-approved policy, had their asylum claims refused. Jack Straw, the then Home Secretary, responded to such incidents of persecution with the statement that:

"I am concerned about women in fear of domestic violence in Pakistan, but there is no way it can be realistically argued that that was in contemplation when the convention was put in place" (cited in Hayter, 2003, p.13).

The literature also makes reference to some of the different forms of persecution that women can experience; for example, they may be related to those who are active in politics and are thus substituted for their relatives. They may suffer persecution for not conforming to certain social norms and moral standards, in many cases suffering at the hands of their own families for breaching such norms. Honour killings, 'dowry deaths', 'bride burning' and female genital mutilation (FGM) can be seen as examples of this, or allied forms of persecution. Political and ideological systems impact on the rights of women, as with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which prohibited women from participating in education and employment (Bloch *et al.* 2000). Women can also suffer because of their reproductive role<sup>29</sup>. An attack on a woman can be seen to represent an attack on her ethnic group because women, as biological reproducers, are viewed as the embodiment of the identity and future of that group (ECRE, 1997). An example of this is during the Bosnian war where mass rape was used as part of the 'ethnic cleansing' process.

What is suggested by the writers is that, although women suffer the same forms of torture and abuse as men, they also suffer abuse specific to their gender; for instance



rape, FGM and forced abortion. Whilst it is true that men suffer rape and sexual abuse, it is more likely to be women who are subject to this form of persecution. It can also happen at different stages of displacement; for example, as a method of war, in refugee camps, or even via sexual harassment in hostels or detention centres in the host society<sup>30</sup>. Rape carries with it traumatic repercussions, not just in terms of the psychological distress or the fear of pregnancy, AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections. There are also the social repercussions in terms of the victims' possible rejection, ostracisation or punishment by their families or the community (RWLG, 1998; Immigration Law Practitioners' Association, ILPA, 2001; Crawley, 2001). In some instances women are forced to marry their attacker (RWLG, 1998) and "Being subject to sexual violence is often perceived as a failure on the part of the woman to preserve her virginity or marital dignity" (ILPA, 2001, p.45). The Refugee Women's Resource Project (RWRP) (2003) also suggests that in some cases this form of abuse takes place in front of other family members.

It is felt that with regards to women, there is often a failure to recognise the 'political' nature of private acts, as Callamard (1999) points out:

"When sexual violence is organized or condoned by the authorities, or indeed when these latter turn a 'blind eye' to incidents of rape, such incidents should be considered as part of the political structure" (p.208).

A 'private' individual may have carried out the act of persecution, but the state should be seen as failing due to its lack of protection, and the inability to discipline such acts (ECRE, 1997). In short, it is argued that at the level of principle there is no difference between the sexual violence often used against women, and the other forms of abuse inflicted on men. Both constitute 'serious harm' and as such, protection should be provided. Steps have been made to begin to ensure that women's persecution is recognised, but progress has been relatively slow. In 1985, the Executive Committee of the UNHCR indicated that states would be able to grant refugee status to women on the grounds of them belonging to a 'particular social group'. It wasn't until 1998 that rape

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<sup>29</sup> Bhabha (1996), for instance, argues that the birth control programme in China offers an illustration of this in that it is an example of where "The individual woman's body was considered a legitimate site of state control" (p.22).

<sup>30</sup> 'Asylum seekers suffer sex abuse', BBC News, 8/4/03. This article reported that asylum seekers were suffering sexual harassment in detention centres. Indeed, it was reported 12% of the detainees in Campsfield House detention centre complained of such abuse. *Internet reference: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/england/oxfordshire/2926127.stm>*.

was recognised as a war crime (Bloch *et al.* 2000). It also appears that women are offered protection on a more temporary basis than men; for example, being granted Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR) which is usually for a period of three or four years, rather than refugee status, which is permanent. As Bloch *et al.* (2000) point out, this simply:

“...reflects and reinforces the view that women and issues of gender persecution are less deserving of refugee status than persecution which is experienced by their male counterparts” (p.175).

### *The determination process*

There have been calls for gender guidelines to ensure that women have equal treatment with regards to the asylum determination process (see Crawley, 2001; RWLG, 1998; UNHCR, 1990). Some commentators point out that this issue is particularly pertinent for women who arrive with their husbands. Women are not always interviewed on their own, and, in some cases, they are not interviewed at all. This is despite the fact that “a woman’s claim to refugee status may in some cases be as strong, if not stronger, than that of her husband” (Crawley, 2001, p.200). Often, in the initial application process, women can be interviewed not only in front of husbands and other family members, but also by a male interviewer. It is not surprising to learn that abuse may often go undocumented (Crawley, 2001). Furthermore, as has already been pointed out, women can be ostracised by their families if abuse of a sexual nature is revealed. In the literature, it is felt that women need to be made aware that they can have separate interviews and the use of female interviewers should be standard procedure. As Forbes-Martin (1991) suggests:

“The very delicate and personal issues arising from sexual abuse require officials who are trained and sensitive to the needs of refugee women...it requires female staff members” (p.26).

The RWRP (2003) carried out a survey of women asylum seekers in the UK, which uncovered a lack of gender-sensitive approaches amongst Home Office decision makers. They point out that women’s asylum claims were usually complex and often based on more than one ground under the 1951 Convention, yet, it was felt that women were being failed by the UK determination process and procedural problems. The report highlights that some of the women in the study had their claims discredited as



their activities were regarded as 'low level', reiterating the points that were raised in the previous section. Reference was made once again to female interviewers and interpreters not being available, but there was also a lack of basic provision such as childcare, which creates barriers for women accessing the asylum process.

It needs to be taken into consideration, however, that cultural and social norms may dictate that women are not permitted to speak in certain settings. Bloch *et al.* (2000) argue that in the UK, women are invited to make an independent claim, but that many choose not to do so, and instead become dependent on their husband's application. Such dependency can place women in a vulnerable position. Some of the literature, for example, illustrates how it leads to dependence on men for financial and material support (Phizacklea, 1998; ECRE, 1997). Further to this, women's legal status in the country is dependent on their partner; therefore, in some cases women are 'tied' to violent marriages, in order to maintain their legal right of residence (Kofman and Sales, 1992).

### ***Women in exile***

Like the literature that focuses on asylum seekers and refugees generally, that which looks at the experiences of women in exile highlights similar issues relating to access to welfare, employment, and loss of status (Bloch *et al.* 2000; Duke *et al.* 1999; Dumper, 2002a, 2002b; Kofman *et al.* 2000; Sargeant *et al.* 1999). The literature about women also focuses upon issues specific to them such as maternity care. The final part of this chapter will therefore look at what has been written about women's experiences in exile, focusing on the issues indicated above, but also making reference to research that highlights women's changing roles and responsibilities, and their ability to settle in a new environment. It will finish by summarising pointers for the present study raised in the writing and research.

A number of writers have focused on the barriers that women face in the host society, which relate to language; structural factors manifested in policy features; or discrimination due to 'race' or gender (or both). There are also constraints caused by their partners, who can limit their access to education or employment (Kofman and Sales, 1992) or whose needs can sometimes overshadow their own (Kofman *et al.* 2000). Dumper (2002b) carried out a piece of research for Refugee Action that focused

on the impact of domestic policies on women asylum seekers and refugees in the UK. To begin with, Dumper's research once again notes a problem common to many who have studied asylum seekers and refugees: access to accurate figures. Figures available from the Home Office, however, show that in 2004, 23,650 applications for asylum were made by men, and 10,310 applications were made by women (Home Office, 2004).

The fact that there are lower numbers of women entering the UK, according to Dumper (2002b):

“...often results in their particular experiences being over looked in the process of shaping and implementing policy. Their needs are often marginalised and their voices not heard” (p.4)

The report raises a number of issues about women's experiences as asylum seekers and refugees, many of which, as mentioned before, would be pertinent to all asylum seekers; for example, language barriers, inadequate housing, and the issues of safety, particularly with reference to the fear of harassment or racist attack. As was noted earlier, however, safety is also a specific issue for women living in mixed accommodation, particularly when cultural norms deem it unacceptable to be in the company of men, unless they are husbands or family members. Isolation was also seen to affect women more than men, a situation exacerbated by the government's policy of dispersing people around the country on a no-choice basis (which will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters).

With reference to health care, access to ante- and post-natal care was something referred to specifically in Dumper's report. Although the dispersal of pregnant women was problematic (see Chapter Seven) it was felt that, on the whole, respondents were satisfied with the level of care. Other writers, however, have illustrated problems relating to maternity and the care of pregnant refugees. Kennedy and Murphy-Lawless (2003), for example, in their study in Ireland, point out that women require very specific care as they may have experienced very poor health care prior to departure, added to which, there are possible psychological and physical problems resulting from rape and torture which have to be taken into consideration. These issues “add even greater urgency to the development of sensitised support services during pregnancy and following childbirth” (p.43).



A report by the Maternity Alliance (2002) also felt that the special needs of pregnant asylum seekers were largely ignored by the support system that was in place. The financial support available was inadequate to buy baby food or formula milk, and generally support infant health, and there were concerns about the conditions in the hostels where some pregnant women were housed<sup>31</sup>. Two other important points were also raised in these studies, one relating to the attitudes of some health care professionals and, linking in with this, the general lack of control that asylum seekers retain over their own lives. Indeed, as the Maternity Alliance (2002) highlight: “In one case...a decision was made, without an interpreter present, to perform a C-section on a woman who did not speak English” (p.2). As noted earlier, this issue of a lack of control is something that will be explored further.

In addition to this, the loss of the extended family network was sometimes problematic, as this might ordinarily play a huge role in helping a new mother. As Bloch *et al.* (2000) point out, “Exile removes from women the support structure of social networks based on family and friends” (p.178). Women miss mothers and other female relatives during childbirth and the post-natal period. This, however, can depend on which country a woman has come from, and interviews carried out in the present study suggest that African women in particular often rely heavily on these forms of support networks. This links in with the general issue of childcare, which as mentioned previously, can create a barrier to all stages of the asylum process. Childcare responsibility can also leave women excluded from other activities that are important to integration; for instance, it can make it difficult to access language classes and other training, or employment, and can generally confine women to the domestic sphere (Bloch *et al.* 2000).

This may be particularly pertinent for single women with dependent children, of whom there are many. Indeed, although it is argued that women are often dependent on men, some of the research shows that there are many women who are effectively single (Dumper, 2002b; RWRP, 2003). A number of women have made claims for asylum in their own right, and are therefore the principal applicants. This potentially runs counter to the assumption that women have a secondary or dependent role. While the literature

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<sup>31</sup> For a specific example of this from my study see Michelle’s account (p. 133).

shows that displacement can, and does, create obstacles for women, it can also create opportunities for their empowerment, as the UNHCR (2001) points out:

“Every day, they overcome traditional roles that inhibit their participation in economic and political life, challenging customs and traditions out of sheer necessity, in order to provide for themselves and their families” (paragraph 16).

Some commentators argue that women play a pivotal role not only in the provision of welfare for themselves, but for the community as well (Camus-Jaques, 1989), a role that has arguably become more important in light of inadequate government assistance, and the dispersal of asylum seekers to areas that do not always have the necessary support structures in place.

Bloch *et al.* (2000) make reference to a ‘redefinition of roles’ in exile, which can bring both negative and positive experiences for women. It must be acknowledged that women, like men, are often unable to fulfil their past roles. In the case of women, this can refer to their loss of status in terms of previous profession, but can also relate to their role within the family and kinship network, which can be just as difficult to fulfil in the new society. Kay (1989) illustrates this in a study of Chilean refugee women, highlighting that their previous apparently privileged position, as ‘mother’, was not the same once in exile:

“...women not only found mothering more burdensome in exile, but they also experienced a social devaluation of motherhood...[they] experienced an erosion of their power base in exile and a fall in status for their traditional roles. They had lost the ‘women’s world’ in which they had felt they were respected and valued members of society” (p.112)

For some Chilean women, however, there were positive changes in the host society, and it was felt that, despite constraints, they generally coped better than men with the disparity between past and present roles. Indeed, as Eastmond (1993) points out in a similar study:

“...women’s social worlds expanded in the new society, as they gained a broader repertoire of roles, including a greater participation in economic and other public spheres” (p.48).

There are other writers who have focused upon the economic and social responsibilities that women undertake, which can then come to form the basis of their increasing



importance. Ui (1991), for example, carried out a study of Cambodian refugee women in Stockton, California and found: “female leadership in a community with limited resources and in enclaves where one would expect traditional values to be strong” (p.175). Ui discovered that one of their ‘strategies of survival’ was to use their traditional roles of providing food and making clothing as a means of generating income for the family. This is illustrated in the following quotation:

“Mora and her daughter buy various fruits and fish in big packages in a weekly market down town and bring them home; they then go around the neighbourhood to sell the fish and fruit piece by piece. Keo, in her fifties, makes traditional sweets at home and sells them door-to-door, a dollar a package...Keo never sold her food before coming to Stockton. Now she earns up to \$50 a day from her sales, while her husband, formerly a farmer, has no job” (pp.166-167).

The use of these traditional skills can contribute to changes outside the home as women gain confidence and begin accessing education. The interplay between structure and agency is very important in Ui’s account, as it focuses not only on the women as active agents, but also on the institutional arrangements that are in place in Stockton, namely the social service programmes and the ways in which these may enable women to exercise greater control of their lives. The creation of programmes designed specifically to support Cambodian refugees, for instance, has created job opportunities in the social services, positions that are primarily filled by women. These paid roles give women prestige in the community and can propel them into leadership positions, whereby women become ‘mediators’ between the family and the ‘outside world’. Thus, as Ui points out:

“Whether they work in the informal economy of the Cambodian community or in social service jobs in the paid labor force, women become the primary breadwinners in Cambodian families” (p.171).

With reference to an earlier example of the importance of refugee women, Berghahn (1995) looks at the significance of Jewish women fleeing Nazi Germany in the survival of their families. Women’s ability to adapt to a loss of status, while men often ‘succumbed to feelings of depression’, is something that is referred to:

“...women proved to be more adaptable than men...On the whole women were more flexible and ready to grasp whatever opportunity offered itself to boost the meagre family income. It mattered less to them that most jobs were badly paid and in many cases illegal” (p.76).

In many cases the Jewish women came from middle class backgrounds, but were willing to ‘swallow their pride’ and take on paid domestic roles, where previously it would have been them who employed cooks and maids. This relates to the ideas raised in Chapter One about people acting relationally. In this case, the women were acting in the interests of their husbands and families. Berghahn also highlights the role women played in developing support networks, which were vital for helping refugees re-establish their communities, and enabled them to forge personal and business connections. The importance of support networks is something that has been raised previously, along with the pivotal role of women in this process. Indeed Muller and Plantenga (1990) argue that “Women build up intense informal relations with each other and thus create as much space and stability as they can in the environment they live in” (p.12).

The idea that women ‘fare’ better in the exile setting, and their flexibility with regards to employment and income generation are also discussed by Franz (2003), with reference to Bosnian refugees. Franz found that Bosnian women were often able to hold on to their role of carer, in the tradition of their country, whilst at the same time “engaging in the socioeconomic challenges of the host societies” (p.89). Like the men in Berghahn’s study, many Bosnian men were unable to adapt to the loss of social status, whereas women were more concerned with their families’ futures, and ways of advancing their situation in the new society:

“Women were relatively nonselective and willing to take any available job...[they] behaved more ‘pragmatically’ than Bosnian men during the time of adaptation in the host society” (p.92).

Franz also argues that some of the women would take menial jobs to support their husband’s re-qualification, a particular facet of commitment to the support of their families.

## **2.5 Concluding remarks and pointers for the present study**

What has been shown in this discussion is that research would suggest that women are not simply ‘secondary’ in the asylum process. They are able to adopt flexible strategies for securing income and social rights (Kofman *et al.* 2000) and as subsequent chapters will explore, such ‘strategies’ are increasingly important given the inadequacy of the



government support available. Women are therefore playing key roles in exile, yet one of the problems with some research is the tendency to portray them as ‘victims’, and present them as poor, powerless and vulnerable (Crawley, 2001). This is not to suggest that women are not victims in some senses. Indeed, as has been illustrated, they have suffered some of the worst types of human rights abuses imaginable. What it is important to note, however, is the fact that women cannot be ignored as a resource for their relatives as well as others (Forbes Martin, 1991), and do not necessarily identify themselves solely as victims (Reed, 2003).

There are many similarities between the experiences of men and women, but there are also considerable differences. It is difficult to make generalisations about asylum seekers and refugees because of the multiplicity of their experiences. There are single women who are *forced* into leadership roles through necessity, there are those who *choose* to be active in the host society, and there are also those who continue with their traditional role as carer, which is often undervalued in this country. Whatever the situation, the literature suggests that it would be useful to know more about the practices of women who may be trying, to some extent, to determine their daily lives, and act in ways that improve their current situation.

What is felt to be absent from the literature is a focus on these aspects of the refugee and asylum experience in the UK, involving specifically a focus on particular localities. With the (re) introduction of dispersal (discussed in Chapter Three), more and more people’s lives are now touched by the presence of asylum seekers, but more importantly, the asylum applicants and refugees themselves have to adapt to life in places of which they have never heard, sometimes without adequate services to meet their specific needs. Bloch *et al.* (2000) suggest that women can be more isolated and excluded from the host society than men, yet there are clearly examples of women who do not fit this convention. As Essed (1995) points out:

“Alongside men, women have worked in organisations to further the aims and defend the rights of their people, to facilitate integration into the receiving society” (p.57).

It is not just work practices, however, that are important. Activities such as learning the language or opening a bank account can also be significant actions, which mediate between the individual and their context. These issues can be looked at in the light of

the interplay between structure and agency. This will help to focus on how structures can create obstacles for women, yet at the same time they can find strength and power even in oppressive conditions (Morokvasic, 1991). Further to this, there is a need to look at how structure is enabling as well as constraining in that it can create opportunities for education and employment, like those available to the women of Stockton.



# Chapter Three

## The policy context

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has reviewed the growing body of literature that explores the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees specifically, as well as highlighting some main points relating to the focus of this study: women asylum seekers and refugees. What this chapter aims to do is provide a picture of the policy response towards asylum seekers and refugees. It will chart the major pieces of legislation from the Aliens Act of 1905 to the most recent policy developments. What it will show is that the idea of restricting entry to the UK to those deemed undesirable is not a recent phenomenon resulting from the arrival of so-called ‘bogus’ asylum seekers, but in fact began over a century ago, if not before<sup>32</sup>. The chapter will be divided into three main concerns to correspond with what are often regarded as the three ‘phases’ of controls (Steve Cohen, 2001, 2003; Hayter, 2000). The first mainly concerns the restriction of Jewish refugees, which started at the beginning of the twentieth century. The second phase concerns controls against Black and Asian immigration, which started with the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962) and is regarded as the era when immigration became more firmly ‘racialised’. Finally, the third phase of controls is that which we are in now. This began towards the end of the 1980s, gained impetus during the 1990s and has continued into this century. This latter phase of controls has been aimed primarily at the ‘new wave’ of immigration: the arrival of ‘spontaneous’ refugees.

Included at the end of each ‘phase’ is a chronology of the major pieces of legislation. This aims to provide a convenient reference to the main policy developments, and what they entail. The chronology includes significant European and international developments. It also includes a list of some of the world events. Although this list is

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<sup>32</sup> Schuster (2002) for example, makes reference to the Aliens Bill (1793) whereby ships’ masters were required to give details of all foreigners on board their vessels or they would face fines. This is arguably an early version of Carriers Liability, which is discussed later on in this chapter (see p. 65, and chronology p.74). Foreigners were also questioned by customs officials and were required to register on arrival. Schuster argues that this Act was passed in response to the French Revolution and Britain’s desire to “protect itself against dangerous French subversives” (p.47).

by no means exhaustive, it helps to illustrate some of the reasons why people have been forced to seek refuge in other countries.

In the final section, the chapter looks in greater detail at one particular aspect of government policy, dispersal, which is important to this study given its regional focus. It outlines examples of the dispersal policy in action that raise questions about its suitability, and looks at how the current policy compares with these, drawing on other regional research.

Before turning the reader's attention to the three phases, the chapter begins by outlining the reasons put forward to justify the use of immigration controls and restrictive legislation that emerged from the literature. What is evident in the three phases is that the arrival of immigrants (of almost any description) appears to be followed by "a growth of irrational prejudice against outsiders" (Hayter, 2000, p.6) and unsubstantiated fears about being 'swamped'. There are two main reasons offered for such a response and the implementation of restrictive legislation, which subsequently applied to the rest of the chapter.

### **3.1.1 Defending the benefits of nationals**

The first reason relates to the idea of *defending the benefits of nationals*, often in terms of defending access to welfare, particularly at times when, as will be illustrated, welfare reforms were occurring. This can also be seen in terms of the perceived need to protect domestic workers. In the early phase of controls, Trade Unions (TUs) were apparently influential in the call for restricting immigration. As Ballard (1998) points out, there is a tendency towards the marginalisation of minority ethnic groups "whenever they find themselves in direct competition with members of the indigenous majority for access to the same set of scarce resources" (p.19)<sup>33</sup>. Thus, as will be shown in all three phases of controls, there are contradictory arguments relating to immigrants 'taking British people's jobs', whilst at the same time 'living off welfare' that they have made no contribution to (Brown, 1995).

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<sup>33</sup> With reference to asylum applicants, this idea of the need to defend the benefits of nationals can be seen in media debates today, as the following headlines illustrate: 'Refugees given health priority', *Sunday Times*, 19/1/03; 'Red Cross abandons care homes to pay for asylum seekers', *Mail on Sunday*, 9/6/02; 'Patients lose GPs' surgery to asylum seekers', *Daily Mail*, 5/9/02; 'Asylum seekers' summer fun with your £1m', *Daily Mail*, 27/7/02.



### 3.1.2 Nationalism and the 'British way of life'

The second reason for the call for immigration controls has been the perceived need to *defend the British way of life* and the importance of *nationalism*. Immigration and the resultant ethnic diversity are seen to threaten the sense of solidarity and shared history which belonging to a nation is supposed to provide. As will be illustrated in this chapter (Phase Two), the arrival of Commonwealth immigrants during the 1960s is often regarded as the era when immigration became 'racialised', yet, as Solomos *et al.* (1982) argue, 'racist' practices within the British state, dominant classes, and the working class run deep, and are linked to the development of colonial societies, which generated a specific type of 'nationalism'. The end of the nineteenth century in particular is regarded as a time when the politics of nationhood became a central feature (Lynch, 1999). During this high point of Imperialism, there was talk of a supposed moral and cultural superiority of the British 'race'. This was also an era that saw the development of the Eugenics movement, which believed that policies such as birth control, sterilisation and segregation could improve 'race quality' by preventing what were regarded as 'inferior' human beings. Although such ideas were aimed mainly at the 'residuum'<sup>34</sup> or the 'undeserving poor', certain other social groups, for example immigrants, were also regarded as more likely to exhibit these so-called 'inferior' characteristics; thus it was feared that an increase in their numbers would signify "nothing less than national degeneration" (Searle, 1976, p.27).

As Hall (1978) points out: "There have been many significantly different *racisms* – each historically specific and articulated in a different way with the societies in which they appear" (cited in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, CCCS, 1982, p.14). They will have common features, particularly in terms of the construction of immigrants as 'outsiders'; the fear of 'swamping'; the perceived need to 'defend the British way of life'; and the justification that controls will defend welfare and labour market opportunities of the indigenous population. Yet racism "always assumes specific forms which arise out of the present – not the past – conditions and organisation of society" (Hall, 1978 as cited above, p.14). At different times it will thus be directed at different

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<sup>34</sup> This was a term used to describe a so-called 'degenerate' group of people who had abandoned the values and aspirations of the rest of society (see Stedman-Jones, 1971 for a discussion of the 'residuum' in Victorian London). In some ways the ideas are similar to contemporary debates about the existence of an 'underclass'.

groups; for example, as the three phases illustrate, there has been discrimination against Jewish refugees, Commonwealth immigrants, and 'spontaneous' refugees. Each has forms specific to a particular time, and the conditions and organisation of society during that time. This also illustrates that racisms are not necessarily always about 'colour'. Steve Cohen (2003), for instance, points to the earlier exclusion of Jewish refugees, as well as the more recent restriction of asylum seekers fleeing Eastern Europe as an illustration of how 'white' people can also be targeted<sup>35</sup>.

### 3.1.3 'Fortress Europe'

A third reason for increased restriction, however, can be added with reference to the most recent phase of immigration controls, and this is the need to place the UK response within the context of Europe as a whole. There have been calls over the past decade for a 'harmonisation' of European policy in order to manage the so-called asylum crisis, by the formation of an EU-wide system.

The *Schengen Agreement*, in particular, signed in 1985 by Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, aimed to remove internal borders, whilst tightening security on the common external border (Moraes, 2003). The UK opted out of this agreement "on the grounds that it wanted to maintain independent checks" (R. Cohen, 1994, p.185). The *Dublin Convention*, however, was signed by all member states (except Denmark) in 1990<sup>36</sup>. This introduced the concept of 'first country of asylum', which aimed to put an end to people making multiple applications in different countries. Robin Cohen (1994) highlights the reasoning behind this principle. On the one hand it would stop 'asylum shopping', the so-called 'device' used by asylum seekers to exploit the weakest or most appropriate legislation. On the other hand, by allowing just one application, unsympathetic regimes would be stopped from passing asylum seekers on to their neighbours without taking responsibility. The emphasis is now on 'burden-sharing' and the need to redistribute uneven impacts (Koser, 1996; Moraes, 2003). As Moraes (2003) suggests, however, this emphasis on stopping asylum shopping ignores the other factors that influence a person's choice of destination, including asylum

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<sup>35</sup> For today's debate about asylum seekers and refugees, colour on its own may be seen as less relevant. Indeed, as R. Cohen (1994) suggests, "The reception and treatment of asylum seekers in Britain has long superseded any simple notion of white versus black" (p.212).

<sup>36</sup> This did not come into effect until 1997.



seekers' desire to join established refugee communities. This illustrates a point raised in Chapter Two about the importance of networks in population movements.

The process of harmonisation was taken another stage further in 1997 with the *Amsterdam Treaty*. This called for a common list of third countries whose nationals would require visas before entering the EU, and looked at criteria and measures for standardising the handling of asylum applications (Levy, 1999). Following this Treaty, there was the Tampere European Council meeting in October 1999, which explicitly called for the EU to work formally towards a common migration policy (Moraes, 2003). An agreement was reached in Tampere to establish four common principles: developing a partnership with countries of origin to address causes and push factors; a common EU asylum system; management of migration; and, a focus upon integration (Dwyer and Brown, 2004b; Duvell and Jordan, 2002; Moraes, 2003).

With regards to the second principle – the development of a common EU asylum system – there have been a number of EU Regulations and Directives, which have implications for asylum seekers in terms of access to basic rights and services. Council Directive 2003/9/EC, for example, sets out minimum standards for reception of asylum seekers, emphasising rights to work, welfare and training (Dwyer and Brown, 2004b). Article 11 of this Directive gives permission to work for asylum seekers if a decision is not made on their case within twelve months (but only when the delay is due to institutional failure). In addition, EU member states have agreed powers to withdraw support from those who are deemed to be 'abusing' the system. Directive COM (2000) 578 expands the definition of 'unfounded cases' to include those arriving with false documents, and subjects them to removal to a 'safe third country'.

There have been some attempts, following Tampere, to make progress on positive aspects of the agreement, for instance, with regards to integration, and also a common definition of 'refugee', which includes those persecuted by non-state agents (Dwyer and Brown, 2004b). Much of the emphasis, however, has focused on 'illegal immigration', particularly smuggling and trafficking. The enlargement of the EU as a result of the inclusion of the accession countries has also increased the perceived need to police external borders more strongly. As European states continue to separate out and reduce the social rights of forced migrants, it might be still accurate to argue, as earlier commentators have, that this so-called 'harmonisation' is simply an attempt to

“uniformly increase restriction” (Joly, 1997, p.22) and that the result is a trend towards ‘lowest common denominator strategies’ (Boswell, 2000; Hayter, 2000; Ireland, 1995) as traditionally more liberal states point to their restrictive neighbours in order to justify a change of heart. The boundaries between Europe and the rest of the world have been strengthened to keep out the ‘alien flood’. As Phillips (1997) points out, however, “the logical consequence of these restrictions is a ripple effect which could exclude refugees from wider and wider areas” (cited in Joly, 1997, p.3). Also, as Dwyer and Brown (2004b) suggest, deferring responsibility sideways onto other nation states is clearly part of the future of a common EU policy.

### **3.2 Phase One**

For most of the nineteenth century, the UK had little use for immigration controls. According to Schuster (2002), Britain was experiencing large scale emigration to the US and the colonies. This, combined with the demands of the Industrial Revolution, meant that the granting of asylum was welcomed as it met the need for labour, as well as being in keeping with the liberalism of the time. This *laissez faire* attitude to immigration changed at the beginning of the twentieth century with the arrival of increasing numbers of Jewish immigrants, mainly from Eastern Europe. Persecution and economic restriction had brought them to Britain’s shores, but once here, they were blamed for problems such as ill health, poor hygiene, criminality and overcrowding, particularly in the large conurbations.

In 1903, a Royal Commission on Alien Immigration was set up to investigate the aforementioned claims. No real evidence was found, however, to support these accusations, and in fact, according to Hayter (2000) it was discovered that the numbers entering the UK were lower than other European countries. The government nevertheless opted to recommend the use of stringent controls, the legislative result being the 1905 Aliens Act. One of the major issues was apparently that the Jewish refugees were arriving at a time of economic decline, and as Castles and Miller (1998) point out: “People whose conditions of life are already changing in an unpredictable way often see the newcomers as the cause of insecurity” (p.13). Thus, defending the benefits of nationals was clearly important; however, as highlighted previously, there was also an underlying ‘inferiorisation’ of immigrants based on the supposed moral and cultural superiority of the British ‘race’.



The basic premise of this Act was that vessels carrying twenty or more steerage passengers would be forced to stop at designated ports, and immigration officers were given powers to refuse entry to 'undesirable' immigrants, a term which was used to denote those unable to support themselves, or those regarded as a 'detriment to the public'. Refugees were not mentioned specifically, but a distinction was made between immigrants, and those who were seeking entry to avoid religious or political persecution. According to Schuster (2002), however, the granting of asylum in this country has always been "an *ex gratia* act" (p.51), which means that permission to enter is left to the discretion of the Home Office, and is made out of a sense of moral rather than legal obligation.

In some ways, the thrust of this legislation is strikingly familiar for anyone looking at welfare, employment and immigration debates today. It signified the first time a link was made between immigration and welfare, with the idea of 'no recourse to public funds' forming a central tenet of this Act. According to Williams (1989) defending the benefits of nationals became the basis for Trade Union (TU) support for immigration controls, particularly at a time when reforms to unemployment benefit and pensions were occurring. Indeed it is suggested that these first controls coincide with the development of the framework for modern welfare provision (Steve Cohen, 2001; Geddes, 2003, Williams, 1989, 1995). People were reluctant to share "with non-nationals who had not been engaged in the struggle for expanded socio-economic benefits" (Boswell, 2000, p.545). There were also concerns about protecting domestic workers, particularly at a time when industry was being undermined by cheaper imports from abroad; therefore, as mentioned previously, there were contradictory arguments about Jewish refugees taking British workers jobs *and* living off welfare.

The outbreak of the First World War saw the passing of further legislation. During the time of the national emergency, it seemed justifiable to remove or detain non-British nationals, and give the government the authority "to assume powers that were hitherto considered to be too authoritarian" (Shah, 2000, p.44). The 1914 Aliens Restriction Act prohibited entry to all 'aliens' and resulted in the removal of an estimated 28,774 'enemy aliens' (Holmes, 1991), and the internment of 32,000 other 'non-British' nationals (Brown, 1995). This Act was intended to apply for the duration of the war; however, it was to be extended and made a permanent fixture in its aftermath with the

passing of the 1919 Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act. This stated that any ‘aliens’ could be refused entry at the discretion of an immigration officer, and that deportation could occur if the Home Secretary considered it to be ‘conducive to the public good’.

In the inter-war years, a prime concern became the rising unemployment resulting from severe economic depression; thus, the continued exodus of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe was not greeted favourably. Even when Jewish refugees fleeing the rise of Nazism began to arrive in Britain, entry was granted to those who promised that they intended to settle permanently elsewhere, or to those who were ‘distinguished’. This illustrates how a distinction is made between immigration that is deemed ‘undesirable’ and that which is encouraged<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, with reference to this latter group, the British cabinet stated that the UK should:

“...try to secure for this country prominent Jews who were being expelled from Germany and who had achieved distinction whether in pure science, applied science, such as medicine or technical industry, music or art. This would not only obtain...the advantage of their knowledge and experience, but would also create a favourable impression in the world” (1933, cited in Quack, 1995, p.75).

Dummett and Nicol, however, suggest that between 1919 and 1938, no distinction was made between those seeking asylum and other ‘aliens’ (cited in Schuster, 2002). It was again left to the discretion of the Home Office to decide who was allowed entry, and the official position on the granting of asylum is illustrated by the following extract from a Home Office memorandum:

“An individual has no claim as of right to be admitted on the ground that he is a political or religious refugee. The so-called right of asylum...is not the right of a foreigner to admission. But the right of the State, if it thinks fit, to receive a foreigner fleeing persecution” (1934, cited in Shah, 2000, p.46).

During the Second World War, Britain suffered severe losses and the primary concern, in its aftermath, became the urgent need for labour for the government’s reconstruction programme. The war had also left massive numbers of displaced persons (DPs) in camps around Europe, and this was seen as an opportunity to fill some of the labour shortage. Through the use of state sponsored schemes, which fell outside the provisions

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<sup>37</sup> The idea of simultaneously restricting *and* recruiting is evident in the current Labour government’s Highly Skilled Migrant Programme, or recent proposals for a ‘point system’, which allows entry to those who can fill certain positions in the labour market, whilst at the same time there is control and removal of asylum seekers.



of the earlier restrictive legislation, the government were again able to recruit those who in some way would benefit society, whilst simultaneously continuing to control entry of 'undesirable' immigrants. In this case, acceptance was granted to thousands of DPs, mainly from Poland and other Eastern European countries, and the government renamed them European Voluntary Workers (EVW). Britain was particularly keen to recruit healthy able-bodied men; however, no right was to be given to family reunion, not only because this indicated an intention of settling, but also because the state had no desire to bear the cost of any dependants. Despite any nationalist and racist sentiment that had developed during the two wars, according to Castles and Miller (1998) economic considerations dominated. Thus, once these camps had been emptied of viable workers, British employers began to realise that the Caribbean and Indian sub-continent also offered an abundance of labour.

**Table 1 – Phase One: Outline of the main legislation and events**

<b>Important Dates/Legislation</b>	<b>Measures introduced</b>	<b>World events</b>
1905 Aliens Act	First piece of modern immigration legislation restricting entry to UK. It established an immigration control bureaucracy with the power of expulsion, and declared that ‘undesirable immigrants’ be refused entry, and those who, owing to disease or infirmity may become a detriment to the public. Refugees were given exception from being refused to land, although this was left to the discretion of the Home Secretary. Individuals could be detained, and vessels carrying more than 20 ‘steerage’ passengers would be subject to examination	For a number of years, persecution and economic restriction was attacking the basis of Jewish life in Eastern Europe
1904 – 1906	Gypsies began arriving in Britain from Germany. In order to tackle the ‘problem’ of the gypsies, in 1906, the Home Office reduced the number of steerage passengers that determined an ‘immigrant ship’ from 20 to 2. It was primarily aimed at ships carrying gypsies, and introduced an early form of Carriers Liability <sup>38</sup> . It resulted in their deportation	

<sup>38</sup> The basic premise was to put the onus on the masters of ships to provide correct information on aliens. Failure to do so could result in fines or even “a penalty of imprisonment with hard labour for three months” (Steve Cohen, 2001,p.36).



<p><b>1914 Aliens Restriction Act</b></p>	<p>Comprehensive restrictions on the freedom of internal movement, and requirement to register with the police. It prohibited aliens from landing, and imposed conditions or restrictions on their stay. It concerned all aliens, not just 'enemy aliens'</p>	<p>The beginning of the First World War</p>
<p><b>1914 British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act</b></p>	<p>It affirmed that all inhabitants of the UK and the colonies were 'British subjects', owing to their allegiance to the crown. It also covered the transmitting of nationality<sup>39</sup></p>	
<p><b>1919 Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act</b></p>	<p>All former 'enemy aliens' could be deported, unless an advisory committee deemed them exempt. For a 5-year period, no former 'enemy alien' was allowed to enter the UK and their rights to sit on juries, or work for the government were removed. It also abolished the right to appeal, along with any provision permitting refugees to land</p> <p>The government authorised 'out of work' donations to those unemployed after war-work, but did not extend this measure to include aliens</p>	
<p><b>1920 Aliens Order</b></p>	<p>Part of the Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act. It included regulations for landing ships, supervision of aliens by a system of registration, and deportation by the Home Office on 'conducive to public good grounds'</p>	
<p><b>1928 Imperial Fascist League</b></p>	<p>Established. They 'scapegoated' Jewish immigrants, and favoured sterilisation and expulsion</p>	

<sup>39</sup> Lewis (1998) points out that, in this Act, women were denied the ability to transmit British nationality to children and they also 'lost' this nationality on marriage to an 'alien' man. British men, however, could continue to transmit their nationality, even if married to an 'alien' woman.

<p><b>1933 The High Commissioner for Refugees (Jewish and Others) from Germany (International)</b></p>	<p>Established. International organisations were concerned to tackle the 'problem' of refugees in Europe</p>	
<p>1935</p>		<p><b>Nuremberg Law</b> passed in Germany and imposed legal and economic pressure on Jews. Continuous exodus of Jews</p>
<p>1938</p>	<p>Lobbying by pro-refugee groups in the UK</p>	<p>Germany occupied Austria and Sudetenland. Kristallnacht. Continued flight of Jews</p>
<p>1939</p>		<p>Second World War breaks out. As well as Jews being persecuted, there was also persecution of the Roma</p>
<p><b>1947 International Refugee Organisation (IRO) (International)</b></p>	<p>Established.</p>	<p>Second World War had left massive numbers of displaced persons in camps on the European continent</p>
<p><b>1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (International)</b></p>	<p>Contained Article 14, whereby, everyone has the right to <i>seek and to enjoy</i> in other countries asylum from persecution. However, no right is given to an individual to <i>demand</i> or indeed <i>obtain</i> asylum</p>	
<p><b>1949 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (International)</b></p>	<p>This was set up to replace IRO. It was to be an autonomous body, and its function would be to provide protection, and seek a permanent solution, for refugees</p>	



<p><b>1950 Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (International)</b></p>	<p>Contained definition of the term 'refugee', which would later be adopted by the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol</p>	
<p><b>1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (International)</b></p>	<p>Aimed to provide minimum guarantee for all refugees, wherever they came from, and prescribed minimum standards, which were to be applied by contracting states, with regard to right to work, education and basic protection<sup>40</sup>. It also introduced the principle of <i>non-refoulement</i><sup>41</sup>. The Convention was initially for those who became refugees as a result of events occurring before 1<sup>st</sup> January 1951, and contained an optional geographic limitation i.e. Europe or Europe and elsewhere</p>	

<sup>40</sup> However, it never introduced enforced obligations on states.

<sup>41</sup> Article 33: 'no Contracting State shall expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers or territories where [his/her] life or freedom would be threatened on account of [his/her] race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion' (cited in ECRE, 1993, p.18).

<p><b>1951 International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (International)</b></p>	<p>Established. Not solely concerned with refugees, but played a role in their resettlement</p>	
<p>1956</p>		<p>Hungarian crisis. Around 180,000 refugees left for Austria, and 20,000 left for Yugoslavia<sup>42</sup>. Several thousand also entered the UK</p>

<sup>42</sup> The UNHCR held that this crisis was a result of political events relating to Second World War; thus, they believed that it should come into the scope of the 1951 Convention, despite flight occurring after deadline.



### 3.3 Phase Two

This second phase of controls began in the 1960s with the restriction of Commonwealth immigrants. Employers began recruiting workers from the Commonwealth, due to their 'cheapness' in comparison to other foreign workers. According to Williams (1995), although formally they had rights to citizenship and settlement, "In reality they were treated as units of labour rather than individuals with welfare needs" (p.139). With their arrival came a protectionist response, once again from TUs and the white working class, who were fearful of the possible competition for jobs, housing and welfare. Following an outbreak of racist violence at the end of the 1950s, the reaction of policy makers, according to Williams (1989), was to:

“...identify the *numbers* of Black immigrants along with their characteristics – their culture, language and so on – as the social problem requiring action” (p.90).

Even liberals were apparently being won round to the idea that good 'race' relations were dependent upon cutting down on the number of non-white immigrants. Many commentators identify this as the time when the issue of immigration became more strongly 'racialised', a process by which a social group becomes constructed as 'other' on the basis of supposed 'racial', ethnic or cultural difference (Williams, 1995). According to Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) "Race is one way by which the boundary is to be constructed between those who can and those who cannot belong" (p.2).

Some believe that the views of Enoch Powell, in particular, were instrumental "in fostering a climate in which ethnic minorities were seen as a problem" (Lynch, 1999, p.43). Powell sought to end immigration, and backed repatriation, believing that minority ethnic groups could not be integrated, and would therefore remain an 'alien wedge' that undermined social cohesion. This can also be seen in the context of the perceived threat to British nationhood that dominated some debates. Consequently, there was a succession of measures, beginning with the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962), which gradually eroded the right to enter, and curtailed citizenship rights once people were in the UK. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1968) further eroded these rights by subjecting all holders of UK passports to immigration controls, unless they, or their parents or grandparents had been naturalised in the UK. This is significant because it resulted in the exclusion of East African Asians who had previously been

given assurance that they would be able to retain UK citizenship on independence of Kenya and Uganda.

In 1971, the government passed the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which aimed to halt primary migration from the Commonwealth by differentiating between those British citizens whose passport had been issued in this country, and those who received them outside the UK. It therefore “mainly served to exclude those Black British citizens who were part of the colonized rather than the colonizers” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992, p.48). This Act was not operative until 1973; however, this was when Britain’s move towards Europe was beginning (Spencer, 1997); thus, while the Act excluded black Commonwealth citizens, at the same time, the door was being opened to millions of mainly white people as Britain entered the European Economic Community (EEC) (Steve Cohen, 2001).

According to Bloch (2000a), the result of this succession of legislation was to limit entry to the UK to family reunion, or the entry of asylum seekers and refugees. With regards to the position of refugees, the arrival in 1972 of 29,000 Ugandan Asian refugees, expelled by President Amin, met a mixed reaction. Race and immigration policies had become vote-winning issues, and while on the one hand the government felt a sense of moral obligation towards the Ugandan Asians, at the same time it had to consider its ‘domestic constituency’ (Robinson, 2003b). Thus, although public opinion had lined up against Amin’s regime, there was opposition to their arrival in the UK, illustrating how “supporting an attack on an authoritarian government...did not guarantee refugees from that country a tolerant welcome” (Holmes, 1991, p.12)<sup>43</sup>. This is a fact that becomes even more evident in the latter phase of controls.

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<sup>43</sup> The recent war in Iraq could also offer an illustration of this.



**Table 2 – Phase Two: Outline of the main legislation and events**

Important dates/legislation	Measures introduced	World events
1958	'Anti-black' riots in Nottingham and Notting Hill put Commonwealth immigration on the national political agenda and fuelled its media interest	
1960 <b>British National Party (BNP)</b>	Established by the merging of the <b>White Defence League</b> and the <b>National Labour Party</b>	
1962 <b>Commonwealth Immigrants Act</b>	First post-war immigration legislation. It aimed to control entry of 'non-white' Commonwealth citizens, by the operation of a three-tiered work voucher system <sup>44</sup>	
1965 <b>Race Relations Act</b>	Made it unlawful to discriminate on racial grounds, penalised incitement to 'racial hatred'. Created the Race Relations Board	
1966 <b>Supplementary Benefit Act</b>	Contained document called 'Code A' which related specifically to aliens and immigrants. Again people would be admitted on the specific understanding that they would not become a charge on public funds	
1967 <b>Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (International)</b>	Extension of the 1951 Convention. Due to the geographic and time limitation being inadequate, the deadline was abolished, although the geographical limitation could be maintained, if desired, by those who had previously used it	
1968 <b>Commonwealth Immigrants Act</b>	Subjected all holders of UK passports to immigration controls unless they, a parent or a grandparent, were born, adopted or naturalised in	

<sup>44</sup> This involved (A) having a job to come to, (B) possessing skills which were in short supply, or (C) being part of a large undifferentiated group whose numbers would be set according to the needs of the UK economy (Spencer, 1997). According to Spencer, this Act was significant in making a multi-racial Britain, particularly as its slow implementation resulted in a 'beat-the-ban' rush.

	the UK	
<b>1968 Race Relations Act</b>	Extended scope of 1968 Act. Created Community Relations Commission	
<b>1971 Immigration Act</b>	Cornerstone of UK immigration law. Aimed to bring primary migration from Indian sub-continent, the Caribbean and Africa to a halt. It also gave the Home Secretary and immigration authorities unrestrained power to detain asylum seekers <sup>45</sup>	
<b>1972 European Convention on Social Security (EU)</b>	4 <sup>th</sup> paragraph affirmed "equality of treatment for nationals of the Contracting Parties, refugees and stateless persons" <sup>46</sup> . This provision was supposedly applicable to refugees and their families	27,000 Ugandan Asian refugees arrived in UK after being expelled by President Amin. They were 'dispersed' throughout the UK
1973		Chile – Military overthrow of the first democratically elected President. Three thousand 'quota' refugees entered the UK
1975		Angola granted independence from Portugal. Political and economic upheaval followed, plus numerous conflicts between rival groups
<b>1976 Race Relations Act</b>	Central plank of 'race relations' policy in the UK, targeting employment, housing, education and the provision of goods and services <sup>47</sup> . Dealt with limitations of earlier legislation. Established Commission for Racial Equality	

<sup>45</sup> It was originally intended for would-be visitors who were refused entry at a port; however, these controls would increasingly be used against asylum seekers (Levy, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Cited in ECRE, 1993, p.63.

<sup>47</sup> It specified that there were two forms of discrimination: direct discrimination, and indirect discrimination. The two previous pieces of legislation were seen as 'timid and diluted' in comparison (Penketh and Ali, 1997).

1978	Margaret Thatcher refers to Britain as being 'swamped' by immigrants from the New Commonwealth and Pakistan	
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### **3.4 Phase Three**

Despite an increase in armed conflict, political and religious oppression, and growing polarisation between rich and poor nations, the arrival of ‘spontaneous’ refugees has become a major concern for governments. During this phase, it has been argued that asylum movements have now assumed three characteristics: they are increasingly ‘developing world’ in origin; participants have less in common culturally with Europeans than previous arrivals; and, some arrive illegally, often through the use of false documentation (Hansen and King, 2000). The use of agents, ‘smugglers’ and trafficking networks can also be added to this last characteristic. The issue of asylum has been placed high on the agenda, and a new threat has been identified in the shape of the ‘undeserving’ or ‘bogus’ asylum seeker. As will be shown in this section, they are no longer to be regarded as ‘genuine’ refugees, but disguised ‘economic migrants’ whose claims for asylum “are simply a tissue of lies” (Home Office, 1998, Paragraph 1.14).

#### **3.4.1 The Conservative response**

This restrictive phase began under the Conservative administration during the 1980s with the introduction of visa requirements for certain countries, and the passing of the Carriers Liability Act in 1987. This put the onus on airlines and shipping companies who would be fined for transporting people who did not possess the appropriate documentation. Although the government argued that such measures were not aimed directly at asylum seekers, according to Joly (1997), it was clear that they would be the ones most severely affected, “as it is more difficult for many of them to obtain valid passports and visas” (p.19). Indeed, it would be very difficult for them to request a visa from the very authorities from which they may be fleeing<sup>48</sup>.

In 1993, the government introduced its Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act, the first piece of legislation dealing specifically with the issue of asylum. This included measures such as: the extension of Carriers Liability; the introduction of fingerprinting of asylum seekers; the curtailment of rights to social housing; and a declaration that

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<sup>48</sup> As Schuster and Solomos (1999) point out, in some countries, actually visiting the British embassy to obtain a visa may in itself be seen as a subversive act. As a result of this, asylum seekers are often pushed into a reliance on the use of agents or trafficking networks.

those whose claims had been turned down would have only 48 hours in which to lodge an appeal.

Just three years later, in 1996, the Conservative government then introduced the Asylum and Immigration Act. This Act adopted a 'dual approach', or what Webber (1996) describes as a "twin track onslaught" (p.79). The first strand focused on controlling entry to the UK and included measures such as the 'White List'<sup>49</sup>; criminal sanctions for those found helping asylum seekers into the UK; and, increased police powers in immigration offences. The second strand related to social security provision and employment opportunities for those who managed to get to this country. As Kibreab (1999) suggests:

"It is not only by closing their borders that states shield their territories and their nationals...but also by adopting reception and resettlement strategies which prevent those who have already entered from being incorporated into host societies" (p.388).

In relation to welfare provision, this Act attempted to create two categories: those who applied at 'port of entry', who were regarded as 'genuine', and were thus entitled to benefits<sup>50</sup>, and those who applied 'in country', or those appealing a negative decision. 'In country' applicants were likely to be deemed 'bogus', and would be entitled to nothing. Responsibility for them would fall onto local authorities under Section 21 of the 1948 National Assistance Act<sup>51</sup>. The basis of the argument was that 'genuine' asylum seekers would declare themselves as soon as they reached the UK, whereas those who had no claims would apply once they were within the country<sup>52</sup>.

In relation to employment, asylum seekers were refused a work permit until they had been a resident in the country for six months. There was also a clause in this Act (Section 8) adding that employers found hiring people without appropriate

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<sup>49</sup> This was a list of seven countries, which were considered 'safe'. Any applicants from these countries could be automatically excluded, and their claims deemed unfounded.

<sup>50</sup> This was set at 90% of Income Support (IS) level.

<sup>51</sup> For single people this provides 'residential accommodation for persons aged eighteen or over who by reason of age, infirmity or any other circumstances are in need of care and attention which is not otherwise available to them' (cited in Means and Sangster, 1998). Families and unaccompanied minors came under the 1989 Children's Act and received 'in kind' support such as food vouchers.

<sup>52</sup> As will be shown in Chapter Five, there are reasons why a person may not present themselves on arrival to the UK; for example, fear of people in authority, or not knowing how the system works.



documentation would be subject to fines of up to £5000. It was feared, however, that such a move would have clear 'racial' implications, possibly deterring employers from hiring anyone of minority ethnic background. As highlighted in Chapter Two, a report published by the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux (NACAB) (2000) appeared to substantiate such fears, pointing out that employers had been carrying out checks on employees by appearance and accent. In some cases, they discovered that people who were British or long settled in the UK were being asked for passports or other forms of proof that they have a right to work, even after many years of working. Sargeant and Forna (2001) also highlighted how the amount of bureaucracy, and the extra burden of checking documentation, affected the propensity of employers to take on those asylum seekers and refugees who were legally allowed to work.

What is evident from the literature is that the aim of this 'twin-track' approach was, on the one hand, to restrict access to the UK as a country of asylum, and on the other hand, to reduce the social citizenship rights of those who managed to get into the UK. The government justified these measures by claiming that they sought to make Britain a less attractive destination for 'economic migrants'. This strategy, however, was not just about reducing public expenditure by clamping down on 'fraudsters', or 'defending the benefits of nationals'. As Lynch (1999) points out, although the Conservatives accepted diversity, and were committed to equality of opportunity, they continued the trend of viewing 'excessive' immigration as a threat to the British way of life. They therefore made emotive claims about Britain being 'swamped' or 'flooded' by asylum seekers<sup>53</sup>.

### **3.4.2 The approach of New Labour**

The Asylum and Immigration Act (1996) came under a great deal of scrutiny, not least from the Labour Party. According to Bloch (2000a), however, New Labour's opposition to this act was in fact quite moderate to ensure that they could not be accused of being 'soft' on the issue of immigration. It was clearly an area that was gaining popularity with the electorate; therefore, Labour wanted to show that they too would be committed to tackling 'bogus' claims. Once in power, it became evident that New

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<sup>53</sup> Despite reference to Britain being 'flooded', according to the World Refugee Survey (1995), at that time, like the beginning of the twentieth century with the arrival of Jewish refugees, the UK had less asylum seekers in relation to its population size than many other European countries. The figure for the UK was 3431 residents to every asylum seeker, compared to a



Labour would in fact build on earlier legislation rather than change it. They had taken on board the arguments put forward by their predecessors, as the following quotation from their 1998 White Paper *Firmer, Faster, Fairer – A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum*, illustrates: “There is no doubt that the asylum system is being abused by those seeking to migrate for purely economic reasons” (Paragraph 1.14).

In this White Paper, they made reference to the increasing cost to the taxpayer, and continued the trend of demonising so-called ‘bogus’ claimants by pointing out that they were ‘clogging up the system’ for those genuinely seeking asylum. In relation to welfare provision, it was felt that the system should be the provider of the last resort, thus operating according to the principle of *subsidiarity*<sup>54</sup>. With these arguments in mind, they passed the Immigration and Asylum Act (1999), which had the stated objective of “establishing a system that discourages and rigorously tests asylum claims” (Pearl and Zetter, 2002, p.231). Although it introduced measures to speed up the determination process, and abolished the ‘White List’, a list of ‘designated safe countries of origin’ replaced the latter<sup>55</sup>. Carriers Liability was extended to include trucking companies and trains, and new visa restrictions were imposed. For the purpose of this study, however, the elements that are most significant are New Labour’s approach to social security provision, and the (re)introduction of ‘dispersal’, which, given the regional focus of this study, will be addressed in greater detail later on. This Act saw the formation of the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), which would now have the responsibility of deciding who was eligible for support, administering such support, and dispersing asylum seekers. This meant that asylum seekers were now to be increasingly separated from the mainstream system.

With reference to social security provision, the government apparently felt that cash benefits were operating as too much of a ‘pull’ factor. Asylum seekers were therefore to receive vouchers, at 70% Income Support (IS) level. These could only be spent at designated supermarkets where no change was given and so-called ‘luxury’ items could

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ratio of 1:633, 1:972, and 1:509 in Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands respectively (cited in Bloch 2000b).

<sup>54</sup> This principle is commonly associated with the German welfare system, whereby the family, first and foremost, is the provider of welfare, followed by the community, the church and voluntary organisations. Only if these are inadequate should the state intervene (see Esping-Anderson, 1990).

<sup>55</sup> As the Refugee Council (2002a) points out, applicants from these countries could still be rejected.

not be purchased. The introduction of such a system managed to reduce the already low level of support available to asylum seekers, whilst simultaneously increasing the stigma associated with claiming assistance, as the use of vouchers clearly set them apart from other UK residents. The government wanted to ensure that social security departments did not have to shoulder the 'burden' of looking after 'healthy and able-bodied asylum seekers' (Home Office, 1998). Some commentators suggest, however, that this so-called 'burden' was one that the government had themselves created by continuing to deny asylum seekers access to employment for the first six months, and also by depriving them of cash benefits, which were arguably cheaper to administer (Hayter, 2000).

### 3.4.3 Bringing the debate up to date

Like their predecessors, the Labour government appear to favour following the argument that the full benefits of the state should be reserved for native inhabitants. They have continued the 'twin track' approach of restricting entry to the UK, whilst simultaneously reducing the social citizenship rights of those who manage to enter the country, and in some ways they have introduced more draconian measures than the previous administration. With reference to employment, for example, in July 2002, it was announced that the right to work after 6 months would be withdrawn, and that asylum seekers would now have to wait until they had been granted refugee status<sup>56</sup>.

Following the 2002 White Paper: *Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain*, the government passed the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act. Some of the measures introduced included: a commitment to phase out the voucher scheme and reintroduce the use of cash payments, although these would remain at 70% of IS level; the return of the 'White List'; the introduction of the Application Registration Card (ARC)<sup>57</sup>; and, the setting up of a confidential 'immigration hotline', to enable members of the public to report suspected immigration offenders. The White Paper also stated the commitment to maintaining the policy of dispersal. Another proposal was to build Accommodation Centres in rural areas, which would provide everything under one roof for asylum seekers, including education for

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<sup>56</sup> As will become evident from some of the interviews carried out in this study, some people have to wait years for a decision on their asylum case.

<sup>57</sup> This card contains a photo, fingerprints and employment status. It can be used to claim NASS benefits and register with a doctor.



their children. This was criticised, however, for the fact that it would further segregate asylum seekers from mainstream services, and was not seen as being conducive to integration. The White Paper also included the introduction of ‘citizenship tests’ whereby those with refugee status would be taught about certain aspects of the British system, as well as being made aware of their rights and obligations as British citizens<sup>58</sup>.

Echoing the earlier attempt by the Conservative administration in 1996, the element of the 2002 Act that received most criticism, however, was the decision to withdraw support for ‘in country’ applicants. Under Section 55 of this Act, asylum applicants only receive NASS support if: they can prove they have applied for asylum; they meet the criteria for destitution; and, they apply for asylum ‘as soon as reasonably practicable’ after arrival in the UK<sup>59</sup>. Section 55 came under review in 2004 following a ruling from the Court of Appeal, which found it in breach of human rights. The government has indicated its intention to challenge the ruling (Refugee Council, 2004a). Whatever the outcome, however, the implication of such restrictions (as will be shown in Chapter Five) has been an increase in destitution amongst asylum seekers, particularly when combined with restrictions on the right to work.

At the time of writing, the most recent major piece of legislation introduced into Parliament is the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Act (2004)<sup>60</sup>. Some of the provisions include: restricting asylum seekers’ rights of appeal and access to higher courts; creating new penalties for people arriving without documentation; increasing removals to ‘safe’ third countries; and increasing the powers of immigration officers to arrest and detain. One of the measures that has come under particular

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<sup>58</sup> This included a pledge of allegiance: “I (swear by Almighty God) (do solemnly and sincerely affirm) that, from this time forward, I will give my loyalty and allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second Her Heirs and Successors and to the United Kingdom. I will respect the rights and freedoms of the United Kingdom. I will uphold its democratic values. I will observe its laws faithfully and fulfil my duties and obligations as a British citizen” (Home Office, 2002, p.111).

<sup>59</sup> This measure came into force in January 2003.

<sup>60</sup> A decision was made to use this piece of legislation as the ‘cut-off’ point for my review of government policy. It is worth noting, however, that in the run up to the general election in May 2005, the Labour government announced a ‘Five year strategy for asylum and immigration’. The aim of this strategy is to ‘agree’ immigration that is in the public interest, and prevent that which isn’t. The proposals include a new ‘points system’ for migrants based on qualifications, work experience and income, as well as the phasing out of the ‘low skilled quota’ in favour of workers from the EU accession countries. With regards to asylum, the government intends to speed up the process with a single tier of appeal. They will also grant refugee status on a temporary rather than permanent basis.



scrutiny is the removal of access to NASS support for families who are at the end of the asylum process. Previous policy dictated that this withdrawal of support would apply to single asylum seekers without dependants, but now it appears to be across the board. According to the Refugee Children's Consortium (2003) and the Refugee Council (2004b), this could lead to children being taken away from their families and placed into care.

Thus, not only do immigration controls divide families on a global scale, this legislation could now lead to the separation of families in the UK, as attempts are made to control those who have come to the end of the asylum process. Williams (2004) points out that children have become central subjects of New Labour's social policy, with particular reference to their 2003 Green Paper: *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003). This Green paper highlights the issue of 'unaccompanied' asylum seeking children and their vulnerability, yet makes no mention of the children of asylum seekers (Williams, 2004). It also refers to 'protective factors' that are supposed to foster resilience against disadvantage, and included in these factors is "Strong relationships with parents, family and other significant adults" (DfES, 2003, paragraph 1.13). It is ironic then that the government would wish to promote strong relationships in one instance and be prepared to separate children from their parents in another.

It would appear that this restrictive response could continue well into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as the government introduces increasingly punitive techniques to discourage asylum seekers from coming to the UK. As has been illustrated in this chapter, limiting access to basic rights and services is one way of trying to deter claimants; however, attention appears to be also focusing upon more radical methods of restricting entry in the first place. Technological advances are seen as instrumental in this 'clampdown'; for example, passports containing 'iris scans' or fingerprints (BBC News, 5/5/03), as is the idea of implementing 'offshore' policies. According to one Australian newspaper, Tony Blair was hoping to emulate the 'Pacific Solution', whereby asylum seekers hoping to enter Australia have their applications processed on islands in Papua New Guinea (*The Australian*, 27/2/04). In the UK, there were suggestions of setting up Regional Protection Areas (RPAs) where asylum seekers could stay while the position in their home country stabilised. Those in need of longer-term protection would be resettled in Britain and other European countries under a burden-sharing quota scheme. There were also proposals to set up Transit Processing Centres (TPCs) at the external borders of the

EU. Albania was one place suggested for such a scheme (*Daily Telegraph*, 9/3/03)<sup>61</sup>. According to Amnesty International (2003), however, such measures contravene the whole intent and purpose of the 'right to seek and enjoy asylum' as set out in the 1951 Convention.

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<sup>61</sup> This seems an unusual choice given that Albania is apparently a key route for the trafficking of women for prostitution and the sex industry.



**Table 3 – Phase Three: Outline of the main legislation and events**

Important dates/legislation	Measures introduced	World events
1979		<p>Iran – Islamic Revolution</p> <p>Soviet Union invades Afghanistan. The conflict results in the death and displacement of millions of Afghans</p>
1980	<p>Britain obliged Iranian citizens to obtain visas before their arrival in the UK</p> <p>Britain agreed to the idea of accepting a ‘quota’ of Vietnamese refugees</p>	Beginning of Iran – Iraq Conflict
1981 <b>British Nationality Act</b>	<p>Made it more difficult for individuals to acquire citizenship. It was to be given to those who passed ‘Loyalty Tests’. Aimed to bring nationality and immigration legislation in line. It abolished <i>jus soli</i>, whereby anyone born on British soil is a citizen, and replaced it with <i>jus sanguinis</i> where only those with ‘British blood’ and British parents could settle in Britain. This would exclude children born in Britain to Commonwealth immigrants</p>	By this time, over 2 million refugees had fled Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia following the Vietnam War
1982		War in the Falklands

1983			Conflict in Sri Lanka <sup>62</sup> Sudan – start of civil war that has killed and displaced millions of Sudanese people
1984		Overseas students were excluded from Housing Benefit (HB)	
1985	<b>Schengen Agreement<sup>63</sup> (EU)</b>	Called for abolition of checks at common borders and free movement without internal frontiers. The emphasis was to be on external borders and the monitoring of non-EU citizens. The UK opted out of this agreement as it wanted to maintain independent checks  Britain obliged Sri Lankan citizens to obtain visas before their arrival in the UK	
1986	<b>The Single European Act (EU)</b>	Aimed to establish internal market, with free movement of goods, persons, services and capital within Member States. Also raised the question of the need to co-ordinate rules on the granting of asylum	
1987	<b>Immigration (Carriers Liability) Act</b>	Penalised airlines and shipping companies for carrying passengers without appropriate documentation <sup>64</sup>  List of 50 countries whose nationals needed visas to enter the EU was agreed	Tens of thousands of Kurds killed on Saddam Hussein's orders. Displacement of at least a million of Iraq's 3.5 million Kurdish population

<sup>62</sup> There was a brief cease-fire in 1995; however, it broke down only months later and fighting resumed (Whitakers Almanack, 1998)

<sup>63</sup> Full title: *Agreement between the Governments of the States of the Benelux Economic Union, the Federal Republic of Germany and the French Republic on the Gradual Abolition of the Checks at their Common Borders.*

<p>1988 <b>Immigration Act</b> (UK)</p>	<p>This introduced restrictions on right of appeal against deportation, and made it easier for authorities to deal with 'overstayers' and illegal immigrants. It also removed the right of Commonwealth citizens who settled before 1973 to be joined by their dependents</p>	<p>End of Iran – Iraq Conflict  Civil war broke out in Somalia between the government and the opposition Somali National Movement (SNM). Over 600,000 people were forced to flee their homes</p>
<p>1989</p>	<p>Turkish citizens required to obtain a visa before their arrival in the UK</p>	
<p>1990 <b>Dublin Convention</b><sup>65</sup> (EU)</p>	<p>Introduced concept of 'first country of asylum', which aimed to stop multiple applications, and stop unsympathetic regimes passing asylum seekers to other Member States without taking responsibility. Signed by the UK</p>	<p>Iraq invades Kuwait – Gulf War</p>
<p>1991</p>		<p>Sierra Leone – government forces fight the RUF, who want to force all foreigners out<sup>66</sup>  Conflict in Yugoslavia</p>
<p>1992 <b>Treaty on European Union</b> (Maastricht) (EU)</p>	<p>Co-ordination of asylum policy among Member States received formal recognition  UK orders that refugees get visas via consulates in Bosnia<sup>67</sup></p>	<p>Conflict in Algeria – campaign against the military regime in favour of an Islamic state. The military killed and detained thousands</p>

<sup>64</sup> Germany, Belgium and Denmark also introduced similar legislation in the same year to increase the responsibility placed on carriers. In the UK, this Act has been amended a number of times to include other forms of transportation and increase the fines.

<sup>65</sup> Full title: *Convention Determining the State Responsible for Examining Applications for Asylum Lodged in one of the Member States of the European Communities.*

<sup>66</sup> There was a cease-fire in May 1996; however the conflict had resulted in the displacement of more than half of the population (Whitakers Almanack, 1998)

<sup>67</sup> According to Levy (1999), however, they did not have such a service functioning in the country.



		<p>Fighting breaks out in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Tens of thousands of Bosnian women raped, and many people lost their homes due to 'ethnic cleansing' by Serbian authorities</p> <p>Angola – conflict between ruling party and rebel group</p>
<b>1993 Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act</b>	<p>First piece of primary UK legislation dealing specifically with asylum. Measures included: the extension of Carriers Liability, and fingerprinting of asylum seekers. It also made it more difficult to acquire refugee status as only 48 hours would be given to appeal against a negative decision</p> <p>The statutory duty of local authorities to provide social housing for asylum seekers was curtailed</p>	
<b>1994</b>		<p>Rwanda – Genocidal killing</p> <p>Civil war in Yemen</p>
<b>1996 Asylum and Immigration Act</b>	<p>Measures included: the introduction of the 'White List'; increased police powers in immigration offences; an employment clause (Section 8). 'No recourse to public funds' was made a condition of entry. Proposed creation of two categories: 'port of entry' applicants, who were eligible for 90% Income Support (IS) level, and 'in country' applicants, who were excluded from provision, responsibility for them would now fall upon local authorities. Access to IS, HB, Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), Council Tax Benefit would only be granted to those whose country was deemed 'unsafe'</p>	<p>Amnesty International Report documented 50 pages of human rights abuses experienced by Czech Roma</p> <p>Afghanistan – Taliban seize control of Kabul. Strict Sharia Law is imposed which includes banning women from work and education</p>
<b>Housing Act</b>	<p>Asylum seekers defined as non-qualifying for the purpose of the</p>	

	housing register	
<b>1997 Amsterdam Treaty (EU)</b>	<p>This continued the attempt towards a harmonisation of policy, with reference to common visa rules and common list of non-member countries requiring visas. It placed further restrictions on rights of asylum seekers</p> <p>UK Home Office Minister reduces period of application for asylum seekers from 28 days to 5 days following the arrival of Czech Roma</p>	
<b>1998 White Paper: <i>Fairer, faster, firmer: A modern approach to immigration and asylum</i></b>	<p>Outlined the proposals that were introduced in the Act below</p>	<p>Congo – conflict between ruling party and rebel forces</p> <p>Angola – renewed fighting between ruling party and rebel group</p>
<b>1999</b>	<p>Britain opted into certain Schengen provisions, for example participation in the Schengen information system (SIS) which provides a comprehensive database on immigrants, asylum seekers and illegal immigrants</p> <p>The measures introduced included: abolishing the ‘White List’; introducing measures to speed up determination process; extending Carriers Liability to include trains and trucking companies; new visa restrictions; compulsory dispersal to cluster regions providing housing on a ‘no choice’ basis. Asylum seekers were effectively taken out of the social security system with the introduction of the voucher system, to which was added a £10 cash component</p>	<p>Serbian authorities violate human rights of ethnic Albanians in the province of Kosovo</p>
<b>2000 Race Relations (Amendment) Act</b>	Strengthened and extended scope of 1976 Act. Public services given	

	duty to promote equal opportunities. Exceptions are security service, judicial proceedings and immigration and nationality functions where in some instances it is lawful to discriminate on grounds of nationality or ethnic group, but not colour or 'race'		
2001			Liberia – conflict between army and rebel groups  War in Afghanistan following the September 11 <sup>th</sup> attacks in the US
2002	<b>White Paper: Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain</b>	<p>Outlined proposals for new asylum and immigration legislation. Measures include: introduction of Application Registration Card (ARC) to replace Standard Application Letters (SAL), Section 55, an 'immigration hotline', and the introduction of 'citizenship classes'. Proposed phasing out of the voucher system. Proposed Accommodation Centres to provide health care, education and language classes. ARC will be used to prove entitlement to benefits</p> <p>It was announced in July that asylum applicants would no longer be permitted to work or undertake vocational training until they received a positive decision</p> <p>It was announced in November that Exceptional Leave to Remain was to be replaced by 'humanitarian protection' or 'discretionary leave'</p> <p>This introduced the measures outlined in the above <i>White Paper</i></p>	Angola – Ceasefire ends a 27 year conflict between ruling party and rebel forces that has killed as many as a million people
	<b>Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act</b>		
2003		It was announced in January that asylum seekers who make an application 'in country' rather than at port of entry would no longer be automatically entitled to NASS support (Section 55)	War in Iraq



<b>2004 Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc) Act</b>	Measures include: removal of support from unsuccessful asylum seeking families; restricting rights to appeal and access to higher courts; greater scope given to the White List; and penalties for arriving in the UK without documentation	
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## 3.5 Dispersal

Given the regional focus of the present study, this chapter will now look in greater detail at the policy of dispersal, implemented under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act. Arrangements for dispersing asylum seekers to designated regions across the UK began in April 2000. Unlike previous dispersal programmes, which will be discussed below, this one would operate on a ‘no choice’ basis<sup>68</sup>. Asylum seekers who are unable to support themselves consequently face a compulsory move to another region. The intention of this programme is to alleviate the ‘burden’ of refugee assistance in areas of high demand, such as London and the South East, where, according to Robinson (2003a), the ‘spatial concentration’ of asylum seekers was regarded as a ‘problem’. Ten regional consortia<sup>69</sup> were contracted to provide services and support for asylum seekers, including providing accommodation. The private sector and registered social landlords would be contracted to provide the rest of the housing<sup>70</sup>. Each regional consortium was also given the responsibility of making provision for the long-term integration of those who went on to receive a positive decision (Robinson, 2003b). When dispersing asylum seekers, the Home Office is supposed to take into account factors such as whether there are existing multicultural communities, and the scope to develop voluntary and community support. Each area also has agreed language clusters based on their existing populations and the languages that they can apparently cater for.

### 3.5.1 Previous dispersal programmes

The ‘spatial concentration’ of minority ethnic groups is an issue that has been raised many times in the past. Indeed there are early examples of dispersal, some of which do not relate to the distribution of refugee populations, but are targeted at other immigrants. As Robinson (2003b) points out, for example, during the 1960s, the era as previously highlighted when the issue of immigration became ‘racialised’, there were debates about the residential concentration of Black and South Asian immigrants, with particular

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<sup>68</sup> Robinson (2003b) makes reference to local authority inspired dispersals that were attempted in 1998 and 1999 and were encouraged by the Home Secretary. In 1999, for example, an Asylum Seekers Voluntary Dispersal scheme was set up; however, this programme proved unsuccessful due to a lack of accommodation, particularly for families, and few people were actually dispersed.

<sup>69</sup> The ten consortia are: North West; North East; Yorkshire and Humberside; East Midlands; West Midlands; South West, South Central England; East Anglia; Scotland and Wales.

reference to the implications this had for local schools. The Minister for Education, Edward Boyle, made claims that it was desirable for schools to have no more than 30% of their pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds<sup>71</sup>. Dispersal was favoured for the following reasons:

“...residential dispersal of minorities, by reducing the strain on social services in city-centre areas and by allowing encounters between black and white to take place in a context free from the friction endemic in such areas, will greatly accelerate the dispersal in education and thereby slow down the growing trend towards ‘ghetto schools’” (Deakin and Cohen, 1975, cited in Robinson *et al.* 2003, p.106)

Early proposals for dispersal were made on the basis that it would be a voluntary measure. Smith (1989), however, does highlight an example of compulsory dispersal, whereby, between 1969 and 1975, Birmingham City Council Housing Department prevented new West Indian council tenants from being housed any closer than five houses to black tenants that were already resident in an area. This method, however, was later deemed illegal.

With reference to refugee populations, there are previous examples of the dispersal policy in action that raise questions about the success of its use, and highlight the need for substantial forward planning in the designated areas. Robinson (2003b) makes reference to six past attempts made by British governments to disperse refugees since the Second World War: the Polish resettlement programme; the Ugandan Asian programme; Chilean refugees; Vietnamese refugees; Bosnian refugees; and, the Kosovan programme. What is different about these programmes and the present one is that these groups were ‘quota’ rather than ‘spontaneous’ refugees. This meant that the government agreed upon the number of refugees allowed entry to the UK, and consequently had more control over entry and settlement. In order to highlight some of the issues arising from dispersal, this chapter will now focus briefly on two of the aforementioned examples.

### ***The Ugandan Asians***

Ugandan Asian refugees arrived in the UK in 1972 after the ‘Africanisation’ policies and the resultant expulsion by President Amin. As they were British citizens, the UK

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<sup>70</sup> Disparities between the standard of housing, and the level of support, provided by local authorities and private providers are noted in Chapter Six.



had a moral obligation towards the plight of the Ugandan Asians; 'colour', however, was still a contentious issue and the government wanted to ensure that there would be relatively prompt integration (Robinson, 2003b). The aim was to persuade those who had recently arrived to go elsewhere, rather than settling in the so-called 'red areas' – the congested cities – which had the most social and housing stress. There were fears that providing homes in these areas would create racist tension from the local population. Voluntary and charitable organisations were expected to play a key role in resettlement, and local authorities were asked to volunteer available accommodation. What invariably happened, however, was that the local authorities that did respond to requests for housing were those in areas from which the indigenous population had moved due to a shortage of employment opportunities (Dines, 1973). As a result, the refugees, many of whom were professionals in Uganda, were settled inappropriately in areas where they were not only isolated from members of their own community, but also had limited opportunities. Despite this initial isolation, however, Robinson (2003b) makes reference to longitudinal studies that suggest that Ugandan Asians have often been more successful in terms of socio-economic progress than other black or Asian minorities in the UK.

### *Vietnamese refugees*

A number of commentators also point to the example of the Vietnamese 'Boat People' who arrived in the UK towards the end of the 1970s (see R. Cohen, 1994, Joly, 1988, 1997, Robinson and Hale, 1989, Robinson, 1993). Again, the premise was to resettle refugee families throughout the UK, this time with an agreement by the government that no more than ten and no less than four families should be housed in the same district (Joly, 1997). What became evident, however, was that despite the objectives of the dispersal scheme, what invariably happened was a process of 'secondary migration'. In this case, the Vietnamese refugees chose to regroup in a few large cities; for example, London, Birmingham and Manchester, where there were already established communities and more opportunities available. This demonstrated how decision makers needed to take into account the wishes of refugee populations to establish their own viable communities. What also required further consideration was the varying quality and level of assistance in different localities, and the training of support staff whose role it was to introduce people to the 'British way of life', and assist with access to benefits

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<sup>71</sup> This became known as 'Boyle's Law'.

and other services (Robinson, 1993). Again, there was an emphasis on the need for voluntary and charitable groups to take a leading role.

With reference to the Vietnamese refugees, Robinson and Hale (1989), who carried out a study of dispersal and secondary migration, concluded their research with the suggestion that:

“...any future policy for resettlement of refugees needs to be more carefully considered and more actively funded by central government. It is clear that many Vietnamese people have found dispersal in small groups unsatisfactory. Over half [of] all households have responded by voluntarily moving into areas of nascent concentration...If dispersal is to be considered beneficial to refugees...then any future programme would have to address the issues of social isolation, absence of community facilities, and provision of services *in advance*, and it would have to be recognised that dispersal inherently requires greater financial resources and greater central government involvement” (p.25-25, emphasis in original)

### **3.5.2 Dispersal in the present day**

The proposal to disperse asylum seekers under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act did come under a great deal of scrutiny. With reference to the previous attempts at dispersal that were outlined above, it was felt that people who were sent to distant parts of the country would face social isolation and heavy levels of unemployment (Shah, 2000). Indeed, Pearl and Zetter (2002) highlight that, in the UK today, each area identified for cluster region status “contains a high representation of the most deprived areas in the Social Exclusion Unit’s catalogue” (p.238). Sending asylum seekers to these deprived areas may therefore only serve to exacerbate the problems of an already disadvantaged group. There were concerns that asylum seekers would be victims of racist abuse and violence<sup>72</sup>, and fears that they would be placed in substandard accommodation<sup>73</sup>. There were also fears that as asylum seekers often have particular health needs resulting from experiences of rape and torture, some areas would be ill equipped to deal with such issues.

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<sup>72</sup> In some areas, these fears have been substantiated; for example, with the murder of a Turkish asylum seeker in Glasgow in 2001. In my research, some of the service providers made reference to racist attacks, one of which had involved the stabbing of an asylum seeker, and the women asylum seekers and refugees talk about incidents where local people had shouted at them or had thrown objects at their houses.

<sup>73</sup> These concerns are also substantiated by the interviews carried out in this study.



The intention was to introduce the new system in April 2000. NASS, however, had failed to secure adequate accommodation in the dispersal sites, therefore it was decided that there would be interim arrangements so the policy could be phased in gradually (Robinson, 2003b). Once the new provision was up and running, the Audit Commission (2000) carried out an evaluation of the policy by visiting a number of sites around the country. In their report, they highlighted the following issues:

“For local agencies with little knowledge of the cultural needs of asylum seekers, or the problems that new arrivals often face in using services, dispersal will represent an immense challenge. Local government and its partners need to learn fast and plan well if they are to meet the needs of this vulnerable group. Failure to do so could escalate community tensions...An inadequate response will also cause severe distress to asylum seekers and constrain the long term opportunities of those allowed to stay in this country. Without effective support, asylum seekers could easily become locked in a cycle of exclusion and dependency in their new community. Alternatively, they could simply ‘vote with their feet’ and return to London” (p.4).

There have also been evaluations of the policy at a regional level; for example Stansfield (2001) carried out a study of asylum seekers in Nottingham, and Emms (2003) prepared a report for Stoke-on-Trent City Council. With reference to Nottingham, the report highlighted that there was sometimes a failure of NASS to share information pertaining to family composition of the asylum seekers that they would receive. There were also issues that had been mentioned in previous studies relating to standards of accommodation, and the fact that some services were overwhelmed. With reference to the Stoke-on-Trent report, the following issues were raised: the need for a NASS regional office<sup>74</sup>; the need for more interaction between asylum seekers and the local population; the skills shortages in the area that could be filled by asylum seekers; and, finally, the pressure on the health services, particularly the inability to meet specific needs of victims of torture.

With reference to West Yorkshire, the focus of the present study, a similar evaluation was carried out by Wilson (2001). This involved 65 interviews with professionals and community representatives, who were asked to highlight areas of good practice, and prioritise areas in need of improvement, and 27 interviews with asylum seekers (25 men, 5 women) who talked about their experiences of dispersal. The report highlighted

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<sup>74</sup> This was again something suggested by some of the service providers I interviewed, who felt that a regional office in Leeds would alleviate some of the problems with the current centralised system.



a number of positive findings, particularly in terms of the response of local organisations to the arrival of asylum seekers. There were, however, a number of 'areas of development' that were identified; for example, there was a general lack of resources, variations in quality of services or reluctance of services to take on asylum seekers; racist harassment issues; and, as mentioned above by the Stoke report, a lack of specialist services for victims of torture. Wilson also highlighted that very few organisations in West Yorkshire "engaged asylum seekers and refugee groups in planning and carrying out activities" (p.39).

More recently, further research has been carried out in this region; for example, in Leeds (Dwyer and Brown, 2004a, 2004b) and Wakefield (Craig *et al.* 2004), or Yorkshire and Humberside more generally (Carter and El-Hassan, 2003). What is clear from the local reports is that some of the areas are already diverse in terms of having existing multicultural populations, and some local authorities have prior experience of supporting asylum seekers because of their involvement in the reception of Kosovan refugees from the evacuation programme in 1999. For those with little or no experience of providing support for asylum seekers and refugees, however, dispersal represents a significant challenge, particularly for organisations working at the grass roots level, who may be unable to adequately meet the needs of such a diverse population. According to Robinson (2003b) Britain has developed and progressively refined policies of reception and resettlement, and he illustrates this with a review of the six main attempts at dispersal. As mentioned earlier, what differs between the present policy and previous exercises is the compulsory aspect. It is evident that almost every region in the UK is now affected by the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees. Local services and the local population therefore need to adapt to this change, particularly as many asylum seekers are choosing to stay in their dispersal site once they receive a positive decision<sup>75</sup>. The chapters that follow show how certain aspects of policy, including dispersal, create a particular context for the experiences of women asylum seekers and refugees in West Yorkshire, as well as highlighting the positive developments that have occurred, and the women's actions within this context.

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<sup>75</sup> With reference to Leeds, for example, it was highlighted at the Leeds Refugee and Asylum Service Refugee Integration Consultation, in June 2004, that approximately 50% of asylum applicants settle in Leeds once they have a positive decision. It was also highlighted that although secondary migration does occur, it is not necessarily to London, as some refugees migrate within Yorkshire.

# Chapter Four

## Setting the scene for the fieldwork

### 4.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have provided a background in terms of what is known about the experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum (Chapter Two) and the policy developments that have occurred, including looking specifically at dispersal (Chapter Three). The aim of the present chapter is now to focus specifically upon the fieldwork and the methods employed in this research. It discusses the pilot and the main study, looking at issues such as sampling and access, highlighting any ethical concerns or limitations of the methodology, and looking at the methods of analysis that were used on the data. This chapter also includes some background information about the women who were interviewed in terms of country of origin, age, and family composition. More substantial information about each woman is included in Appendix Two in the form of 'pen portraits'. Appendix Three also contains a full transcript of one of the women's interviews, as an example.

### 4.2 Methodology

As has been noted previously in Chapter One, a range of data sources have been used. The first data generation technique involved a literature and document analysis that was ongoing throughout the study. This included the use of Home Office documents; publications by national and regional organisations; newspaper and magazine articles; and books and journals. The use of such sources enabled me to follow policies and events in a continually changing scene, as well as providing background information to the study. With secondary data collection of this type, the researcher is a step removed from the collection process (Blaikie, 2000); however, it can be useful when there is a synthesis of secondary data and primary qualitative data, as collected in the present study.

This research therefore also draws on qualitative data generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. As was indicated in Chapter One, a decision was made to carry



out qualitative interviews with two different types of respondents: women asylum seekers and refugees, who are regarded as 'experts' in the experiences that are being discussed; and 'service providers', who provide an important overview of provision in the chosen localities and complement the women's accounts. Qualitative interview techniques were chosen to give depth and potential complexity of information. They were favoured over self-completion questionnaires that generally provide only "broad surface patterns" (Mason, 1996, p.41), and also, despite covering larger numbers, can have a lower response rate than face-to-face interviews (Bloch, 1999b). Interviews were also favoured over the use of focus groups, which were deemed less appropriate when looking at sensitive issues such as the personal experiences of asylum seekers and refugees, or the views of individuals in particular organisational settings. There was, however, one interview in this study that involved talking to two service providers at the same time. This was not an ideal situation, but an exception was made because both had expressed an interest in taking part in the research but could not spare the time to be interviewed separately. When conducting the study, flexibility was required in order to ensure that the respondents' wishes were adhered to, an issue that is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

#### **4.2.1 The pilot study**

Through telephone calls, correspondence and the Internet, an initial list of contacts was compiled consisting primarily of organisations that work with asylum seekers and refugees in West Yorkshire. Between May and September 2002, there were initial meetings with individual contacts within these organisations. In one case the researcher helped the staff during visits by making phone calls or typing letters<sup>76</sup>. From these initial contacts, four interviews were secured for the pilot study: one with a health worker, and three with women who were at different stages of the asylum process. These women were from Angola, Kosovo and Liberia. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, and each interview was tape recorded with the respondent's permission. It was explained to interviewees that the use of recording equipment was to help the researcher maintain full attention focused on the participant, rather than being distracted by having to take notes during the conversation. Assurances of anonymity

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<sup>76</sup> In the months to come these visits also included invited participation in day-trips that were organised to York, Bridlington and Scarborough. During these day-trips the researcher was able to make contact with service providers and women asylum seekers (see reference to 'snowball sampling' later in this chapter).



were given and the researcher changed people's names after the interviews. None of the respondents chose not to be recorded.

One aim of the pilot study was to gain some initial insight into the problems that might arise when trying to interview members of a population (in this case asylum seekers and refugees) who could prove difficult to locate (Bloch, 1999b), and who might have concerns about trust (due to the reasons that they are in this country in the first place) (Robinson, 2002; Hynes, 2003). These are issues that are referred to below. It also gave me the opportunity to 'test out' the interview schedules for both sets of respondents in terms of looking at useful prompts and how sensitive certain issues might be. Finally, the pilot study enabled me to consider what Sampson (2004) refers to as 'researcher risks'. This basically meant looking at what is feasible given time and resource constraints. In addition, however, it also included considering any possible 'risks' in terms of my own personal safety during the fieldwork as it involved travelling alone around West Yorkshire for meetings and interviews, and visiting places that I was unfamiliar with<sup>77</sup>.

An initial analysis followed the pilot interviews (see pp. 103-104 for methods of analysis), and minor revisions were then made to the women's interview schedule in order to encourage them to focus more on their actions in the host society (see Appendix One for interview schedules). A decision was made, however, to include the pilot interviews in the analysis for the main study, given their success. In the case of the service provider this was justified because the interview schedule remained more or less unchanged. For the women who were interviewed, it was felt that because they had divulged very personal (and harrowing) information, it would be wrong to treat their accounts as merely a 'trial run'<sup>78</sup>.

There were a number of issues that were raised by the pilot study relating to sampling and access (particularly with reference to the use of research 'gatekeepers'); ethics;

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<sup>77</sup> I felt that I had to be careful when arranging meetings as during the pilot stages of my research one housing provider made sexual advances towards me.

<sup>78</sup> I came into contact with two of these women again during the course of the fieldwork, so supplementary information was available to 'up-date' their interviews. The third woman unfortunately had her application refused, and I discovered that she had 'disappeared' to avoid deportation. This 'tactic', however, could be seen as a manifestation of her agency as she was taking whatever action was necessary in order to ensure she remained in the UK.

trust; and language barriers. With regards to the latter issue, a decision was made from the outset that interviews would be carried out with those who did not speak English. What the pilot interviews highlighted, however, was that even though the three women did communicate in English, two of them might have benefited by having some kind of ‘facilitator’ present. All of these issues will now be discussed with regards to the main study, and some comments will be made on the limitations of the methods employed.

#### **4.2.2 The main study**

##### ***Background information about the respondents***

As previously noted, the study consisted of 42 interviews; 21 with women<sup>79</sup> asylum seekers and refugees and 21 with service providers. The women in the study were aged between 18 and 55, with most respondents falling in the range of 26-45 years of age (see Table 4). The countries the women came from were: Albania; Angola; Burundi; Iran; Iraq; Kosovo; Lebanon; Liberia; Pakistan; Sudan and Zimbabwe (see Table 5). As will be discussed further on in this chapter, refugees and asylum seekers are often difficult to locate. It was therefore difficult to make fully pre-planned choices about whom to interview. With reference to country of origin, however, the aim was to interview women from a range of countries to illustrate and reflect the diversity of the population of refugees and asylum seekers. Some of the countries feature on the list of the top ten asylum producing countries, these being: Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Sudan and Zimbabwe (*Asylum Newsletter*, Issue 23, January/February 2005). The other countries have documented human rights violations (see Amnesty International: <http://www.amnesty.org/>).

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<sup>79</sup> A possible ‘control group’ of men was not included in this study for reasons of time and resources. It was also felt, however, that including men would have diverted the project from its key aims, and could also have posed some ‘interaction difficulties’ for myself as a female researcher.

**Table 4 - Age distribution**

	Number
18-25	2
26-35	8
36-45	8
46-55	3
	21

**Table 5 - Country of origin**

	Number
Albania	2
Angola	1
Burundi	1
Iran	5
Iraq	1
Kosovo	1
Lebanon	1
Liberia	1
Pakistan	2
Sudan	2
Zimbabwe	4
	21

The women had come from a variety of different backgrounds and situations in terms of previous occupation/professions (see Table 6), household composition (Table 7), age (Table 4), and reasons for coming to the UK (see Chapter Seven). Seventeen of the women who were interviewed had dependent children, either with them in the UK or waiting to join them. This was felt to be important given the interest in access to services and complexities of pathways in the host society, but also because of the ideas around relational issues, as highlighted in Chapter One.



**Table 6 - Previous profession/occupation**

	Number
Dentist	1
Factory worker	1
Hairdresser	1
Homemaker	2
Nursing/midwifery	3
Own business	2
Student	5
Tailor	1
Teacher	2
Telecommunications	1
Unknown	2
	21

**Table 7 - Household composition**

	Number
Single	2
Single (waiting for child/children to join them)	2
Single parent (1 child)	8
Single parent (2 children)	2
Single parent (3 or more children)	1
With husband (no children)	1
With husband and 1 child	1
With husband and 2 children	2
With husband and 3 or more children	1
With parents and siblings	1
	21

Most of the women had been in the UK for about a year, although there were exceptions (and the length of time that the women had been here actually varied from six months to ten years). From some points of view, there would have been benefits from having more interviews with people who had received refugee status and had been in the country for longer periods. They can be more difficult to locate, however, than people who are still awaiting confirmation of status. As British citizens, they may not be accessing the same type of support as new arrivals, and have no constraints in terms of freedom of movement<sup>80</sup>. On the other hand, the preferred main focus was on relatively new arrivals, with longer established cases providing additional insights.

In terms of legal status, eleven women were asylum seekers at various stages of their applications, ranging from initial interview to final appeal; seven women had refugee

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<sup>80</sup> The recent Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc.) Act (2004) has introduced new rules of 'local connection', which curtail the capacity for refugees to secure social housing or homeless support in locations other than their dispersal area.

status; two women were here under family reunification rules and had come to the UK after their husbands had been granted refugee status; and one woman had *Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR)*<sup>81</sup>, which was due for review in 18 months time. Nineteen of the 21 women had been ‘dispersed’. The two who had not been were those who had been in the UK the longest and were ex-students who had claimed asylum after finishing their studies. Despite their distinctive characteristics, it was felt that their experiences were still very useful for the study, and helped me achieve a good overall range of different types of circumstances. With regards to language, six of the women were interviewed in the presence of an interpreter who helped with the whole interview or simply acted as a facilitator in some instances (see pp. 101-103). Six of the interviews were carried out in Leeds, six in Wakefield, five in Calderdale, three in Kirklees, and one in Bradford. These numbers, however, are not a reflection of the population of asylum seekers in these areas, but are essentially about being able to access asylum seekers and refugees through the sampling techniques described below, and also reflect the help of research ‘gatekeepers’ in certain areas.

With regards to the service providers, key informants were interviewed from a range of organisations across West Yorkshire, including local authority asylum teams, voluntary organisations, and other agencies that worked specifically with health, education or employment issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees (see table of key informants below). Five interviews were carried out in Bradford, five in Kirklees, six in Leeds, two in Calderdale, and finally, three interviews took place in Wakefield. Although, as with the women’s sample, selection was partly about whom the researcher could get access to, it did reasonably reflect the provision of services in West Yorkshire. Calderdale and Wakefield had less provision than Leeds, Bradford and Kirklees, all of which appeared to have well developed services for asylum seekers and refugees.

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<sup>81</sup> This is when an asylum seeker is granted leave to remain for a temporary period, usually for humanitarian reasons. After this period, their leave will be reviewed and they will either be returned to their home country or granted permission to stay.



**Table 8 – Key informants**

Community worker 1	Wakefield local authority asylum team
Education and employment worker 1	Leeds voluntary organisation
Education and employment worker 2	Kirklees local authority
Education and employment worker 3	Wakefield local authority asylum team
Health worker 1	Leeds health centre
Health worker 2	Kirklees health centre
Support worker 1	Kirklees local authority asylum team
Support worker 2	Calderdale local authority asylum team
Support worker 3	Kirklees local authority asylum team
Support worker 4	Leeds local authority asylum team
Support worker 5	Bradford local authority asylum team
Support worker 6	Bradford local authority asylum team
Support worker 7	Wakefield local authority asylum team
Voluntary worker 1	Bradford voluntary organisation
Voluntary worker 2	Leeds voluntary organisation
Voluntary worker 3	Calderdale voluntary organisation
Voluntary worker 4	Bradford voluntary organisation
Voluntary worker 5	Bradford voluntary organisation
Voluntary worker 6	Leeds voluntary organisation
Voluntary worker 7	Leeds voluntary organisation
Voluntary worker 8	Kirklees voluntary organisation

### *Sampling and access*

There was a certain degree of ‘research fatigue’<sup>82</sup> being felt in some areas (and indeed, in some organisations) as a number of students, and also other agencies, were carrying out research with refugees and asylum seekers (see Robinson, 2002). Given this situation, it was necessary to talk to people who were willing to be interviewed rather than trying for an ‘ideal’ sample. This was particularly true when interviewing asylum seekers and refugees because this population can be very difficult to identify. In addition, as Bloch (1999b) points out:

“There is no reliable source of information concerning the geographical distribution and socio-demographic characteristics of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK” (p.368).

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<sup>82</sup> At the time of this study, there were at least two other PhD candidates carrying out research with asylum seekers and refugees locally, as well as a number of undergraduates and MA students who contacted me for information about asylum seekers and refugees. In an attempt to minimise the ‘fatigue’ that people in some agencies were feeling, regular meetings occurred with these other PhD students to ensure the same contacts were not being approached all the time. A number of my interviews were carried out in Kirklees, Calderdale and Wakefield, partly because very little research had been done in these localities. It also seemed beneficial to secure interviews in different towns or cities in order to ensure that there were different networks and experiences (see reference to limitations of ‘snowball sampling’).



Thus, for this study the selection process was not concerned with representativeness in any statistical sense, and a mix of 'purposive' and 'snowball' sampling was used. It was felt, however, that a good coverage of variables was achieved in this research, despite the sampling and access constraints.

Purposive sampling involved selecting individuals on the basis of their relevance to the research questions (Mason, 1996). A judgement was made to interview people working at the 'grass roots' with asylum seekers and refugees, particularly those who focus on the needs of women. With reference to the women themselves, a decision was made to interview women from a reasonable range of countries (see above), and ensure that the sample included people with differing legal status, and different family situations. The aim was to draw on a diversity of backgrounds/experiences, which asylum seekers and refugees bring into the exile arena.

Snowball sampling involved making initial contact with service providers (as indicated on p. 94) and from this point I was put in touch with other organisations that supported asylum seekers and refugees in the chosen localities. Through this technique, 25 organisations were contacted which consisted of a mix of voluntary and statutory agencies as well as RCOs. In some of these organisations, interviews were carried out with key informants, and, in others, informal meetings took place where the researcher was provided with background information about provision in the area. A number of these organisations, and individuals working for them, helped the researcher to find women asylum seekers and refugees who were willing to be interviewed. Also, through one of the women, another interview was secured. The use of 'snowball' sampling is regarded as one of the best methods of accessing vulnerable or hidden populations in the absence of a sampling frame, and seems to be potentially the only effective method of gaining access to asylum seekers and refugees (Bloch, 1999b).

When researching 'hidden populations', and also 'sensitive topics', a project can often be contingent upon the use of 'gatekeepers' (Bergen, 1993). Indeed, Bloch (1999b) and Robinson (2002), with reference to their own research, indicate that refugees would have been difficult to locate without the use of intermediaries. In some circumstances, 'gatekeepers' are able to encourage participation of potential respondents who might not have been willing to take part without that recommendation (Bloch, 1999b); but even

with the help of such intermediaries, this type of research can still be difficult. Robinson (2002), for example, talks about how it took five months to arrange twenty interviews with refugees, and that was with the help of various organisations *and* access to a Home Office database. The research 'gatekeepers' in the present study were absolutely essential, and through them, introductions were made between the researcher and the women, and interviews were arranged. This did have implications, however, in terms of its potential effects upon the sample (see section on problems and limitations below).

### *Conducting the interviews*

All of the interviews were carried out at locations suitable for the respondents. For the service providers this was primarily at their place of work, usually in a private room, although two of the service providers did prefer the more informal setting of a coffee shop. For the women who took part in the study, most of the interviews were carried out in their own homes, unless they specified another location. I felt this to be more convenient for them, in terms of not having to travel, but, more importantly, it was felt to be perhaps more comfortable for them at home. On every occasion when the women were interviewed they offered refreshments such as tea or coffee, and three of the women prepared a meal for after the interview<sup>83</sup>. A small number of women did opt to be interviewed at voluntary organisations, particularly those who were currently working at these agencies, either in a voluntary or paid capacity. All the women were told that they could stop the interview at any time if they no longer wanted to participate. Three of the women became distressed and cried when talking about their experiences, and in these cases, the interviews were stopped and only continued if the women wanted to. All three of them chose to continue after having time to compose themselves.

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<sup>83</sup> Some feminist research literature talks about the need for more involvement with participants and the importance of women's shared position. Oakley (1981), for instance refers to the fact that her research went beyond question and answer sessions, and Bergen (1993) felt that interviewing women in their own homes was better as the respondents retained control over the situation. Although I did not specifically follow a feminist research methods perspective, I felt that some of these issues were pertinent in my own research. I could see that as I am a woman they were perhaps more inclined to open up about their experiences and often the interaction did go beyond question and answer; however, there was so much more that we did not 'share', which I feel meant that the women would never see me as holding a shared position with them.



Both types of interviews, on average, lasted for about one hour, and the shortest interview was 20 minutes. The longest interview lasted two hours and this was with an asylum seeker. With both sets of respondents, in a number of cases there were prior meetings and conversations as well as some ‘follow on’ contact<sup>84</sup>. The interview schedules were designed to follow certain themes, beginning with background information about the person or organisation, looking at perceptions of services and support in a particular locality, and any related problems, and, finally, focusing on the actions of individuals or organisations in that setting.

The schedules contained a number of practical questions relating to the services, and any gaps that were identified, as it was envisaged that this study would not only be an ‘academic’ piece of work. An aim was to also produce a summary report that would be sent to organisations and individuals who took part in the research, as well as any other interested parties, in the hope that it would raise awareness about the experiences of women asylum seekers and refugees<sup>85</sup>. Knowing that it was not purely a piece of academic work was also an incentive for organisations getting involved in the research, thus overcoming their ‘research fatigue’.

The study adhered to the principle of ‘informed consent’, which involves the researcher (either directly or through the use of an interpreter/facilitator) explaining:

“...as fully as possible, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used” (British Sociological Association, BSA, 2002)

It was explained to the respondents that confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Service providers, for instance, are referred to in later chapters simply as ‘health worker’ or ‘voluntary worker’, and the women were asked to choose another name for themselves. For those who did not provide a changed name, the researcher chose a name for them. In both sets of interviews, with permission, the interviews were tape recorded, and from this, fully transcribed. A copy of the interview transcript was then offered to each participant to enable them to reflect on what was said and make

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<sup>84</sup> As will be noted later, the women were given gifts after the interviews took place. This was a way of saying thanks but also gave me an opportunity to speak to some of the women again, and talk about what had happened to them since the interview. In some cases, however, friends or intermediaries passed on the gifts.

<sup>85</sup> This report is currently in production.



additional comments if desired. This was also done to ensure that people's responses had not been misinterpreted. There were no additional comments made by any of the respondents at that stage, and some of the women who were interviewed expressed no interest in having a copy of the interview transcript<sup>86</sup>.

### *Possible problems, limitations and ethical considerations*

Mason (1996) suggests that ethics is an issue that must be considered from the beginning of the research right through to the end, and is therefore an ongoing process. Perhaps this is particularly true of research with asylum seekers and refugees, and there are issues specific to this kind of research that should be considered at all times. What follows is a look at the problems and limitations of carrying out research of this kind, some of which relate to this study in particular. There is then a discussion specifically on the use of interpreters, and the implications this method had for the research.

Commentators have highlighted some of the issues that should be taken into consideration when carrying out research with refugees and asylum seekers (see Bloch, 1999b; Robinson, 2002; Hynes, 2003)<sup>87</sup>. Access is clearly an issue, as has been illustrated above; however, the issue of trust is also an important consideration. Asylum seekers and refugees may have experienced violence, torture, rape and sexual abuse, as well as the loss of relatives and friends. "People with such experiences have every right to be suspicious of strangers and their motives, and to be fearful of interviews" (Robinson, 2002, p.63). It may be difficult for them to bestow trust; indeed, mistrust may be a survival strategy (Hynes, 2003)<sup>88</sup>. The issue of power also links in with this. Robinson (2002), for instance, notes that asylum seekers may have survived by doing what they are told. This form of 'coping strategy' could spill over into the interview situation in terms of people perhaps telling the interviewer what they think she or he might want to hear, or being fearful of speaking negatively about their situation. Robinson (2002) makes reference to research he carried out, where respondents

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<sup>86</sup> One woman who had been quite upset during the interview felt it quite painful to go over her experiences again, let alone have a 'hard copy' of what she had experienced. This was despite my efforts to make the interviews as non-invasive as possible, and prior advice that the discussion could be halted at any point if they were uncomfortable with any questions.

<sup>87</sup> An ESRC seminar group is also producing a set of guidelines on Eliciting the Views of Refugees and Asylum Seekers. The aim is to assist researchers by outlining good practice when carrying out such research.

<sup>88</sup> In her article, Hynes discusses how the refugee experience creates mistrust at a number of different levels.

appeared to consider it wise to praise government policy since they were still awaiting the outcome of their asylum applications. The use of research 'gatekeepers' is also relevant to the issue of power, and, as indicated previously, in some instances they were effectively in control of who was being interviewed. This could have two implications: one relates to them choosing women with particular experiences that *they* regard as suitable for the study, the other relates to a possible reluctance of some women to speak negatively about the support they received in certain localities because of their relationship with the 'gatekeeper'. It was felt that in this study, however, most the women were being very open about their experiences. Indeed, the fact that many of the women were forthcoming about the difficulties they encountered was perhaps an indication of their trust towards me. My familiarity with the service provision in West Yorkshire meant that if at any point during an interview a woman disclosed that she would like some form of counselling, I was able to refer them to the appropriate services (although this situation did not arise during my fieldwork). In terms of my own strategy for dealing with the often harrowing accounts I was given, on my frequent visits to one women's organisation I was able to talk to the volunteers who made me realise that I was in some respects helping the women by 'bearing witness' to their experiences. Being a female researcher was influential in engendering trust in the interviews. However, there are factors, other than gender of the researcher, that could be important – for example, wanting an opportunity to be able to talk about their experiences, as noted above, or being used to telling their 'stories' because of what is expected of them in asylum interviews – that may have had a bearing on their behaviour in the interview situation.

Another possible limitation relates to the use of snowball sampling. A problem of this method is that it might produce only one network of contacts, and a subsequent bias could occur whereby only people with similar experiences are interviewed. In order to try to overcome this potential bias, I used a number of different starting points to the 'chain'. Because of the issues surrounding access, what this study was unable to do was interview people who did not engage at all with service providers and organisations in the chosen localities. As Bloch (1999b) points out, however, the resources required to locate isolated members of the community are considerable, and they were therefore beyond the scope of this research. Although some of the service providers did introduce me to women that *they* regarded as isolated, there was no way to overcome the problem of being unable to speak to women who were not in contact with the services around



them, or those heavily dependent on decision-making by other family members (for example husbands). This omission was felt to be a limitation because it was possible that their experiences of exile may have been different from those of people who sought out various forms of support.

### *The use of interpreters*

Accounts from women whose command of English was not very proficient were felt to be potentially important to this study, as this would be a possible factor influencing their actions in the exile setting. Six interviews were therefore carried out with the help of an interpreter. People's levels of English varied and the interpreters were either necessary for the entire interview, or acted as 'facilitators' for those whose language skills were reasonable but still needed help with certain words or phrases. As noted in Chapter One, the use of interpreters was made possible by a grant of £600 that was awarded to the researcher by the Al Charitable Trust. The Trust were offering small grants to assist PhD students who were carrying out research with refugees and asylum seekers, and in this case the money was used to pay for the interpreters and their expenses. What was left of this money after the fieldwork was finished was used, with approval of the Trust, to buy gifts for the women who took part in the study, and to cover some of the travelling expenses of the researcher.

The interviews were carried out using Albanian, Arabic and Farsi. Initial introductions to the women were made with a 'facilitator' present who explained the purpose of the research. The exception was an initial meeting with an Albanian woman where no interpreter had been available at the time, but an abstract had been translated for her. She did speak some English and an interview was arranged; however, this was not an ideal method of introduction<sup>89</sup>.

With regards to the actual interview situation, some of the literature recommends that the use of trained interpreters and professionals is most suitable (Temple and Edwards, 2002). In this study, however, a mix of 'formal' and 'informal' interpreters was used<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>89</sup> An abstract was also translated into Kurdish and taken to a women's group that was visited regularly. This method unfortunately did not generate any active interest from the group.

<sup>90</sup> These terms are used simply to differentiate between interpreters who are employed professionally; for example, by the local authorities or private sector language services ('formal'), and those who use their language skills voluntarily ('informal').



It is also recommended that people should be matched with someone of the same gender (for a critique see Edwards, 1998). For this study, the researcher favoured using the interpreter (where applicable) who was requested by the respondent. In three cases, these interpreters were in fact male, but this was the choice of the women themselves, as they were familiar with certain interpreters who had visited them upon arrival, and helped them in other situations. Although the potential implications of using a male interpreter have to be kept in mind, it was felt that the wishes of the women should be foremost in the research, and during the interviews the women appeared to be perfectly at ease with the interpreter, as far as could be ascertained.

The informal interpreters came from voluntary organisations visited during the course of the fieldwork. The first was a man who helped run a voluntary group for asylum seekers and refugees, the second was a woman who was herself interviewed in this study, and was currently working for an organisation where her language skills were often being utilised. Both were paid the same hourly rate and expenses that the three professional interpreters were paid.

One method of carrying out cross-language research is to train an interpreter to carry out the interview and pay them to transcribe it into English as well. There were not enough resources available to employ this method so the traditional approach of respondent/researcher/interpreter all being present was used. When using this method, it is necessary to reflect not only on the division between the researcher and the researched and how it impacts upon interpersonal relations of the fieldwork (Temple and Edwards, 2002), but also the fact that: "The presence of an interpreter adds a third dimension to what, typically, is a one-to-one interview relationship" (Edwards, 1998, p.201). Temple and Edwards (2002) refer to this as 'triple subjectivity' because: "Like researchers, interpreters bring their own assumptions and concerns to the interview and research process" (p.11). In this study three of the five interpreters, including two of those working professionally, were refugees or asylum seekers and, as such, had their own experiences of, and opinions about, the asylum process. They could therefore not be regarded as 'neutral'. Temple and Edwards also discuss situations where the interpreter can 'act independently' in the interview, leaving the researcher implicitly positioned as an 'outsider'. This was an issue that did arise in two of the interviews that

were carried out, where conversations began that were not directly related to the interview and the researcher had to ask what the conversation was about<sup>91</sup>.

Finally, there is an abundance of different words that can be used to convey meanings, and some words may not have the same meaning once translated into a different language. As Temple and Edwards (2002) point out, language “speaks of a particular social reality that may not necessarily have a conceptual equivalence in the language into which it is to be translated” (p.5). In order to overcome such issues, these authors recommended having some form of induction session with the interpreter, to discuss the research and perceptions of the issues. In this study, the researcher did have such a discussion with each interpreter; however, upon reflection a more substantial introduction perhaps might have helped the relationship in the interview setting, and given a better understanding of the issues that formed the basis of the research.

In more general terms, when reflecting upon the fieldwork, it seemed that the most successful interviews (with or without an interpreter present) were those where there was some form of conversation before and after the interview, and the woman asked questions to, and about, the researcher. Some wanted to know more about the research and its aims, whereas others were more interested in finding out about me; for example, my age, whether or not I was married, or if I had children. In some respects, I felt that knowing a little bit of personal information about me made the situation less formal and more like a reciprocal relationship, where information was being shared<sup>92</sup>. Again, this could also be about the need to build up trust with the respondents. Also, as Edwards (1993) points out, “self-disclosure on the part of the researcher helps elicit more information from the subject” (p. 186).

### *Methods of analysis and handling of data*

As noted previously, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was read through and key themes were identified and noted in the margins of the text. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest that coding ideas can be created prior to reading the data –

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<sup>91</sup> One of these was an interview with an Albanian woman who wanted to talk to the interpreter about how they had managed to learn English. She was also in an area where there were very few Albanians and was keen to have a conversation with someone who spoke her ‘mother tongue’.

<sup>92</sup> Oakley (1981) refers to this as ‘no intimacy without reciprocity’.

for example, based on research questions – or that key themes can be discovered and drawn out of the data. For the present study, both of these methods applied. The analysis was influenced by the ideas and concepts relating to structure and agency, and the key research questions. Thus, themes such as ‘barriers/constraints’ and ‘supportive structures’, were highlighted throughout the transcripts (see examples of thematic tables in Appendix Four). Spencer *et al.* (2003) describe this as a ‘cross-sectional code and retrieve method’, whereby the themes or categories are applied across the whole data set, and are used in searching and retrieving the data. Although I was aware of the software packages available for qualitative research analysis, my personal preference was the use of a card system, which proved effective for the manual storage, retrieval and analysis of data based on the key themes and issues that emerged. This system involved writing out chunks of data relating to particular themes or issues onto separate cards. This method enabled me to work out the frequency with which particular issues were raised (again see Appendix Four), whilst at the same time ensuring that voices were not marginalised (for example, if a respondent was the only person to mention a specific point, it was still noted on a card and deemed important).

‘Pen portraits’ of each respondent were also constructed (see Appendix Two), which assisted with familiarisation of the data (but may also provide a useful reference point for the reader). The same method of analysis was applied both to the women’s interviews and to those with key informants from organisations in West Yorkshire. The following three chapters focus upon the issues that emerged from my analysis of the data.



## **Chapter Five**

### **The structural context: employment, financial support, accommodation, and responses to women**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter and the next is to examine the context in which refugees and asylum seekers find themselves and how this affects them. The present chapter brings out what emerged from the fieldwork, with regards to three specific aspects of the environment, where constraints or negative factors are emphasised by informants. These are employment constraints, restrictions on financial support and accommodation, and specific responses to women asylum seekers and refugees. It is important to remember, however, that both constraints *and* opportunities can be manifestations of structure and context, and while the present chapter does emphasise the negative aspects of the asylum system (as raised by the informants), there are also positive supportive structures in place. Chapter Six therefore continues the analysis by looking at the ‘dual’ nature of the system. With particular reference to the policy of dispersal, it focuses upon the fact that despite ‘controlling’ the asylum seeking population, those working at the grass roots are able to provide support that gives people the opportunity to begin rebuilding their lives. As will be shown, at a local level there are a number of positive initiatives that have developed; for example, around health care, education and training, and also specifically for women.

It is also important to remember, when looking at policy and practice, and people’s experiences of this, how the ‘construction’ of asylum seekers influences this. The negative discourse that seems to go hand-in-hand with debates about asylum can be presented as ‘underpinning’ the negative policy and practice experienced by the women, or highlighted by the service providers. As noted previously, the perception of asylum seekers as ‘bogus’ or ‘scroungers’, or the view that many are ‘economic migrants’, can fit with the development of policies that aim to control or categorise this group of people. Thus, before looking at specific aspects of policy and practice as raised in the interviews, the present chapter will begin by briefly illustrating the local impact that policy and media discourses have upon the construction of asylum seekers, as seen by

informants in this study. It was evident that features recorded nationally were certainly found in this region.

## 5.2 The impact of perception

*“If I could change the way people think about refugees and asylum seekers that would be something... Perception is everything... asylum seekers are being demonised more and more... I think the ordinary person on the street now has this fear of strangers”* (Voluntary worker<sup>93</sup> 4).

The above comment illustrates this informant’s awareness of the negative construction of asylum seekers. It was felt that the term ‘asylum seeker’ conjured up negative images that equate with illegality, as another service provider highlighted:

*“...I think asylum seeker is a dirty word and it sort of equals illegal immigrant... whereas maybe if people were referred to as refugees”* (Voluntary worker 6).

In some cases, the women themselves were aware of the debates about the issue of asylum, and the negative portrayal. Indeed, Savannah referred to her reluctance to tell anyone, even her friends, that she was an asylum seeker because she was worried about their response:

*“...I wouldn’t tell them that I was seeking asylum because I know it’s got, even the word alone, it’s got a negative connotation”* (Savannah, Sudan).

Alice also referred to her dislike of the term ‘asylum seeker’ because of the image it portrayed:

*“...I hate that word ‘asylum seeker’, I don’t like to beg to the government because financially I was very strong in my country”* (Alice<sup>94</sup>, Pakistan).

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<sup>93</sup> There are five different categories of service provider referred to in this study. ‘Support worker’ (those working for the local authority asylum team providing support on all aspects of the asylum process) and ‘voluntary worker’ (those working for a voluntary organisation, but like support workers offering advice on a number of different areas). There are then those who have specific areas of expertise: ‘health worker’, ‘education and employment worker’, and ‘community worker’.

<sup>94</sup> Alice is a Christian and this name was chosen to reflect this.

With reference to this idea that many people are ‘economic migrants’, Samina’s account illustrated how the issue is more complicated. For example, she talked about being persecuted on religious grounds, but also how this made it difficult for her family economically because she was unable to find a job, or keep one, once her affiliation was known.

The implications of the negative portrayal of asylum seekers could be seen at the local level in the interviews, when reference was made to the alleged racist reactions of the host population in some of the dispersal areas. One of the service providers, for example, talked about incidents of racist violence. This included the stabbing of one asylum seeker, and how, after this had occurred, the reception centre had received emails claiming to be from the British National Party (BNP), telling them that this tension was a direct result of the reception centre ‘harbouring’ asylum seekers. Iran and Shabnan also discussed living in what they felt was a racist area. Iran described the ‘anti-social’ behaviour of local youths, who had thrown eggs and stones at her house. Her youngest son had also been beaten up at the local school, an attack that she believed was due to him being an asylum seeker. Shabnan highlighted how a teenage girl had made some comments to her daughter that had initially made her scared to go outside:

*“...they told something to my little girl...and when I asked her ‘why you are not going out and play because the weather is very good, very nice, you can go outside’ she said ‘because she told me “I want to kill you because you are Iranian, I want to kill your father, your mother””” (Shabnan, Iran).*

Beatrice talked about her initial fear of talking to her neighbours because she did not know “whether they were the right person to talk to”, and Aida made reference to the following experience:

*“...I was crying in the street, really I was so upset, and somebody from the window said ‘Kosovan, go back to your country’. That made me more bad” (Aida, Kosovo).*

It was felt that the general public were reacting to the negative imagery and the *myths* fuelled by politicians and the media, which bore little resemblance to the *real* experience of those who were forced to leave their country of origin. As this community worker suggests:



*“...there just seems to be a complete contradiction between what we see in our daily work and all the things that are going on in the media and the [House of] Commons” (Community worker 1).*

The idea that asylum seekers might be taking what it was felt they were not entitled to appeared to be a feature of the debate. One support worker, for example, made reference to an article in a local newspaper:

*“...I read a piece in the [newspaper] a few weeks ago and I was appalled by the ignorance of Joe Public, and I know it's propaganda but they made comments about 'if these people are coming into our country, these asylum seekers, why don't they bring their own money?' I had this image of all these asylum seekers rushing to the bank before they were fleeing persecution to get their life savings out” (Support worker 3).*

Many of the service providers felt that there was a general distrust of asylum seekers in terms of their reasons for coming to this country, and more importantly, it was felt that ‘the system’ was now supporting this idea. The context that people found themselves in as ‘asylum seekers’ had implications for their entitlement to welfare and their general access to services. It was believed that as the issue became more and more electorally popular, the trend of demonising asylum seekers would continue, and in turn, the knock on effect would be a continual tightening up of the system<sup>95</sup>. Even from this small-scale study, we can see that negative ideas, given strong support nationally, may be having some tangible impacts locally. They are manifested in the sometimes racist reaction of the local population, and can influence the feelings of asylum seekers about how they are perceived. They can also affect local institutional activities (as in the case of the newspaper noted above).

We now turn to three specific issues that were raised by the respondents in this study. The first section focuses on the removal of the right to employment, and the effects this has had in terms of lost potential, and its direct impact on the women who were interviewed. The second looks at changes in terms of entitlement to NASS financial support and accommodation, and how these have led to an increase in destitution and

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<sup>95</sup> Geddes (2003) analyses the link between migration and welfare state regimes, suggesting that there is now increasing pressure on states “to demarcate more tightly a community of legitimate receivers of welfare state benefits, along with heightened pressure to place outside of this community those forms of migration deemed bogus or abusive while including those seen as making a contribution” (p.150).

homelessness amongst asylum seekers. The third looks at specific responses to women asylum seekers and refugees.

### 5.3 Employment policy

When looking at both sets of interviews, what emerged as one of the biggest constraints that the women faced in their current situation was the legislation around employment which did not permit asylum seekers to work until they had received a positive decision on their case. Previous policy had only granted asylum seekers eligibility to apply for permission to work after six months of being in the UK, but since July 2002 this right had been removed altogether. According to the Refugee Council (2002b) the government justified the policy on the basis that most decisions would be made in less than six months anyway; however, the Refugee Council felt it was more about 'political expediency' than anything else<sup>96</sup>.

In fact, as is shown by the length of time that some of the interviewees in this study had been waiting for a decision on their case, the asylum process is sometimes a lengthy one. Therefore, the removal of the right to work ultimately means that asylum seekers are being forced into dependence on NASS financial assistance for longer periods, as well as being unable to utilise their skills and qualifications. This policy also forces people into illegal work practices that leave them in vulnerable or exploitative situations, as the tragedy of the Morecambe Bay 'cockle pickers' illustrates<sup>97</sup>. In that instance, it was reported that up to 30 people had been forced to live in one property, and that they had to work very long hours with little financial reward<sup>98</sup>. In addition to these issues, there were also barriers for those women who did have permission to work, when it came to actually being able to move into paid employment, thus demonstrating

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<sup>96</sup> The perception that many asylum seekers are 'disguised economic migrants' had arguably influenced the removal of their right to work. The opportunity to work was felt to be too much of a 'pull' factor, so that by removing this right, the UK would be a less attractive destination. As the Refugee Council (2002b) argue, however, "There is no evidence that giving asylum seekers who are awaiting decision permission to work encourages more asylum applications".

<sup>97</sup> In February 2004, 19 Chinese cockle pickers drowned in Morecambe Bay. After this horrific incident, the UK Chinese rights organisation Min Quan stated that they felt that they had died as 'a direct result of the government's inhumane immigration and asylum policies' (Min Quan Press Release, 10/2/04, *Internet reference: <http://www.monitoring-group.co.uk/TMG%20services/minquan>*).

<sup>98</sup> 'Desperate and vulnerable, they scratched a living working back-breaking nine-hour shifts for £1', 'Police raid house which was home to more than 30', *The Lancaster and Morecambe Visitor*, 11/2/04.



how, as suggested in Chapter One, removal from one context places people into another with perhaps a different set of constraints (or opportunities).

It is worth noting why informants deemed it vital for refugees and asylum seekers to be able to work (a point that was touched upon in Chapter Two). It was not just the economic and material benefits of work that were important. The service providers in this study, for example, felt that any form of employment, whether paid or voluntary, had a number of positive benefits, as the following comments illustrate:

*“...it really builds their self confidence up; it makes them more assertive, it sort of improves on their English; it gives them some work experience, how to work in a team, how to work on your own; it equips them with work skills and sort of gives them an understanding of the job culture in this country; it provides them with references and training as well”* (Education and employment worker 2).

*“...they feel as though they are contributing to society. It also helps them just to make links with the local community and I think it shows people that a lot of them are here to, you know, they want to help, they want to play a part in society...It gives them an idea how organisations work and what sort of things people engage in here, so it’s a learning experience for them, and their English improves, and they make contact with people and make friends”* (Voluntary worker 4).

As well as the practical experience that work provided, there were also issues around giving people the opportunity to be able to contribute and play a role in society, as well as reciprocate for the help that they had received, an issue that was very important to the women who took part in this study. Consequently, being deprived of paid work possibilities was a constraint with a range of potential negative effects. Furthermore, it was felt that employment was vital in terms of helping asylum seekers and refugees integrate into society. Indeed, some of the service providers believed that it was one of the key ways for the women to become part of the wider community, as this voluntary worker points out:

*“It is essential for their self esteem and their sense of integration into society. I mean it’s no different than any other women. I believe gaining employment is a real crux to playing a role in society, being integrated and having a voice, to some degree, in the way in which services are developed, because you’re actually playing an active part in it...it will be absolutely crucial for women to earn their own money, it is for all women, but for this community, you know, for women to be able to earn their own money is absolutely essential”* (Voluntary worker 8).



The informant here made clear that the benefits for female asylum applicants and refugees sometimes went beyond those for women in general. Work was also seen as important in terms of people's mental health and well being, and one health worker highlighted how much stress was caused to her patients by not being able to work, and not having that sense of self worth that working provides. The loss of social status that asylum seekers felt (see Chapter Seven for a more detailed discussion of this), when combined with being forced to wait for long periods of time for a decision on their case, was in some cases seen to be leading to an increase in anxiety and depression. The added barrier of not being able to work was said to exacerbate this situation.

On a positive note, as will be discussed in Chapter Seven, some of the women, such as Pranvera and Beatrice, were trying to overcome this problem by undertaking some form of voluntary employment, often working to help other asylum seekers and refugees. What is illustrated by their experiences is that employment is not just important for asylum seekers and refugees themselves. It is also important for the agencies for whom they work, who can benefit from the skills they bring, including language skills, and for the wider community as they can act as a 'bridge' between the organisation and the client, as this health worker points out:

*"...it's building a bridge because quite often there's a bit of a barrier because a lot of the countries that they've come from, people that work for government are seen as being driven, you know, 'puppets' of government, and could have been the reason why they had to leave, you know, there's not a lot of trust there. I think it helps with building up that trust and mutual respect" (Health worker 2).*

This idea of 'mediating' between the community and the services available is discussed further in Chapter Seven in relation to women's agency.

Despite this clearly positive potential, restrictions have been placed on opportunities to paid employment. Thus for the women themselves, the effects were very clear. The asylum seekers who were interviewed, for example, had many skills and qualifications from their countries of origin. There were dentists, midwives, nurses, teachers, factory workers, hairdressers, and some had run their own businesses. What was also evident was that, despite the fact that, as will be discussed further on, women are often seen as carers, or dependent on male members of the household, most of the women who were

interviewed, including those with families, had been used to working and had previously had their own income. It was difficult, in some cases, therefore, for them to accept that they would now face a barrier to being able to continue with their careers. As Savannah points out:

*“...I waited for about a year before I got my exceptional leave to remain and the whole year I was waiting of course I couldn't work so life was very difficult...and after, you know, having started a career in Africa, then suddenly you have to become so dependent on everything, it wasn't easy for me at all”* (Savannah, Sudan).

There seemed to be an irony in the fact that the policy of not allowing them to work was effectively ‘enforcing’ their dependence on the welfare system, yet at the same time, the government was debating the problem of *too* much reliance on benefits and people being drawn to this country because of access to financial assistance.

This ‘enforced dependence’ was the situation that Layla, Pranvera, Shiva and Mitra were currently faced with, as they had yet to be given a decision on their asylum applications. Pranvera had managed to find voluntary work at a local organisation that was supporting asylum seekers and refugees, but after two years in the UK without a decision on her case she was becoming increasingly frustrated at not being able to undertake paid employment, particularly as the last 22 years of her life had been spent working for a telecommunications company. What emerged from the interviews was the real sense that their skills were being wasted<sup>99</sup>. Layla, a dentist from Iraq, had previously run her own practice and also felt frustrated at not being able to use her skills:

*“...[I'm] upset in a way that [I] was a professional there and [I'm] not putting [my] professionalism to good use in this country...[I'm] hoping that [I] will get back into [my] profession as soon as possible. [I] feel like [I'm] being wasted here, you know, the talent [I've] got is not being put to good use”* (Layla, Iraq, interviewed with an interpreter).

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<sup>99</sup> There are also examples of this ‘wasting’ of talent in the media: ‘Untapped pool of refugee nurses’, BBC News, 6/5/03, Internet reference: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/health/2987837.stm>. ‘I have things to give this country but I am not allowed to’, *The Times Higher*, 20/8/04. This latter article refers to the rise in the number of refugee academics coming to the UK who are finding it difficult to get positions in British universities. This shows some oppositional ideas to those often found in the media, but such articles seem few in number.



The fact that she could not practice dentistry seemed to be even more of a 'waste of talent' when the service providers talked about a shortage of dentists in that dispersal area. This situation was worsened by the fact that the women had to rely on the financial support that the government provided, and the stigma that went with that dependence, which left them feeling, as Savannah points out, "stripped of any decisions that you have".

The service providers also felt very strongly about the issue of employment, indeed the general consensus was that asylum seekers should be allowed to work while their applications were being processed. It was argued that the asylum system was frustrating enough for people, without the added problem of having very little to do to occupy their time, particularly if, like Pranvera they were waiting for a substantial period. Again 'wasted talent' was highlighted, and the service providers talked about how the women they came across in their work had a variety of skills and qualifications. The idea of "replacing benefit with a wage" was suggested by one support worker, and it was felt that if jobs were available and the women had the required skills, then they should be permitted to take them. Two of the service providers, for instance, made reference to the shortage of health care professionals in this country, using the nursing profession as a specific example. They argued that there were people in this country (like Iran who is a qualified nurse, or Samantha and Yvonne who both have refugee status and want to study nursing) that would be suitable to fill these positions rather than recruiting from overseas, as the following comments illustrate:

*"I'm working with somebody at the moment [who] I would employ immediately, who's an asylum seeker, who's educated [and] is very frustrated because they haven't got refugee status...if I worked in a hospital and I was a senior manager or something, I would employ this woman immediately. She's got such good skills, and not only has she got the skills in Russian, she speaks the same words in English...and I think, what a waste of a resource. The country's screaming out for nurses and here we have a qualified, good, caring person, that'd be a great nurse, who speaks brilliant English, and she can't do it, and she's wasted, for want of a better word"* (Support worker 3).

*"Certainly from a nursing point of view, it seems absolutely farcical that the government pays thousands out for members of the Department of Health to go over to other third world countries and take their nurses when we have nurses, people who can care, with training, right on our ruddy doorstep"* (Health worker 1).



The fact that the government was recruiting from overseas, and not just for the nursing profession, illustrates that it is clearly not *all* immigration that is perceived as a problem. It seemed clear to some informants that skilled migrants, who have been invited to this country to fill certain positions, are welcomed, yet those who come through the asylum route, whether skilled or unskilled, are seemingly to be classified as one homogenous (and ‘bogus’) group. Until it is proven otherwise by their asylum case, it would appear that they are to be regarded as undeserving of the rights that are shared by other people living in the UK today. Unfortunately, the employment situation was not necessarily much more favourable for those who *did* have permission to work, and there were constraints that women in this situation experienced.

### **5.3.1 Women with permission to work: attempts to get back into employment**

Research by Duke (1996) indicates how it can be difficult for refugees to find employment at levels commensurate with their pre-flight position due a variety of factors; for example, language barriers, non-recognition of foreign qualifications, no proof of qualifications, and no references. This kind of problem was evident for the women in the present study. This can be seen to offer an illustration of Archer’s ideas (as referred to in Chapter One) of how people can be removed from one ‘structurally moulded situation’ only to enter another with perhaps different constraints (or opportunities). Ruth, for example, had been granted refugee status and wanted to return to her previous profession of teaching:

*“...it’s now about a year and I cannot find a job...when you go to the Job Centre, they tell you ‘you are not qualified to teach here”* (Ruth, Zimbabwe).

Ruth felt that public perception and attitude was a major feature of her problem. In particular, she believed that the unhelpful attitude of Job Centre staff had acted as a barrier to her returning to teaching. Indeed, she highlighted an alleged incident where she was told that she should try moving to London in order to find employment because there are more ‘mixed people’, and she would therefore have a better chance of finding work. It was unclear in this interview as to why a Job Centre employee would make such a comment. Evidently, it was not just the perception of the public in terms of the everyday person on the street that was creating constraints for asylum seekers and refugees. They also had to contend with the possible misconceptions or prejudices of

those that worked at some of the agencies that they visited. Comments suggested that this sometimes applied not just with regards to employment agencies but also benefit agencies and other services as well. One support worker offered this as a possible explanation:

*“...services see refugees perhaps as more complicated and more problematic for them to deal with, and may be more reticent to work with them because of that”* (Support worker 4).

In contrast to this, however, it was interesting to note that one of the women who was interviewed made reference to the difficulties refugees sometimes faced when agencies *did* treat them the same as British people:

*“...when you go to the benefit office or one of these welfare offices, what they do, they treat you just like any other British here without knowing that the system is complicated. Somebody who is coming from our side may not have enough knowledge dealing with this”* (Margaret, Sudan).

Communication and access to information was clearly important for asylum seekers<sup>100</sup>.

With reference to attempting to return to previous professions, one employment worker highlighted their experience of helping people with this, and some of the problems she faced in her work:

*“For asylum seekers who’ve got permission to work there needs to be a lot of work done, working with employers, and I think agencies and organisations need to pull their finger out as well...they’re just taking loads and loads of time and wasting people’s time and it’s awful because at the end of the day, people get de-motivated”* (Education and employment worker 2).

To some degree, this was the situation currently facing Shabnan and Maryam who were both waiting to register with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), with a view to returning to their previous profession as midwives. In both cases, however, they had been waiting for over a year. In the meantime they had enrolled at college and were undertaking the required language course (IELTS – International English Language

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<sup>100</sup> As noted in Chapter Two, Bloch (1993) suggests that the process of claiming is complicated. People from minority ethnic backgrounds can sometimes lack understanding of the system and what is available, and thus need help filling out forms and advisors who speak different languages.



Testing System). Shabnan had tried to find other jobs, but had so far been unsuccessful<sup>101</sup>. In both Shabnan and Maryam's accounts it was obvious that they were beginning to feel frustration at their current situation. Shabnan in particular had experienced a loss of confidence at not being able to find paid employment of any description, even that which was well below the professional level that she had held in Iran. In her interview, she states:

*"I don't like to be Jobseeker and look when the cheque is coming. I like to do something because during my last period of life I was working. I was independent...I have ten years experience and five years education, so I think it could be useful to this country, but it is difficult to get every job. When you start from good job, it is difficult if you can get lower job. But I try to do, really I try to do. If I show you how many agencies I went and I have registered there, but I couldn't get any job"* (Shabnan, Iran).

Shabnan raised a number of pertinent issues here. To begin with, there was the fact that she found it a difficult transition from a self-reliant, professional woman, to someone who was now dependent on others for financial support. Despite her skills and qualifications, however, she accepted that she might have to take a job that was of lower status than her previous profession, in order to support herself and her family in the meantime.

Another important point that emerged from the interviews was that for the women who were used to working (and that was the majority of them) there was a real sense that they needed to be able to reciprocate for some of the help that they had received. They did not want something for nothing and felt that using their skills, working, and paying tax was a way to 'pay back' this support. This is in clear contrast to the way that asylum seekers are perceived or constructed as 'scroungers'. Indeed, as this support worker points out:

*"Contrary to all popular misconceptions, they're not scroungers, they are desperate to contribute and they're not allowed to"* (Support worker 3).

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<sup>101</sup> It is relevant to note here that research carried out by Sargeant *et al.* (1999) with refugee women in London looks at the problem of spending long periods of time without employment. The authors suggest that it can lead to a 'benefits trap' whereby: "people receiving benefits become 'locked in' to the benefits system and find that the way it works does not encourage them to seek employment...people who remain on benefits for periods of two years or more lose the confidence and discipline to work. They describe a loss of dignity and tend to feel vulnerable" (Sargeant *et al.* 1999, p.17).

As mentioned earlier, the women were aware of the stigma attached to dependency. This could explain why Samina, for example, was keen to highlight that she was no longer in receipt of NASS support:

*“...I’m working now and that’s why I’m not taking any benefit now. From six months, because I started from six months my job, and I’m not taking any benefit. I just informed them that I’m working now, and they have stopped my benefit. So, I’m not taking any benefits, I’m paying every tax”* (Samina, Pakistan).

She clearly spoke in terms that contrasted with the dominant discourse around ‘scrounging’. Although the material in this study is very much specific to the informants that were contacted, it shows how national policies and approaches restrict opportunities, and may conflict with the hopes and practical pathways people could follow (and that could often benefit the host society).

#### **5.4 Access to financial support and accommodation**

As has been discussed previously, successive governments have sought to reduce the level of support available, and place restrictions on entitlement. With reference to financial assistance, the policy measures that have been introduced have already been outlined in Chapter Three. Although the government has phased out the use of vouchers, they have implemented other changes to the system that have proven equally controversial. One of the legislative changes that is referred to frequently in the interviews is Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002). Section 55 was implemented in January 2003, and the basic premise was that people who did not make their claim for asylum ‘as soon as reasonably practicable’ would be denied NASS accommodation and financial support. The aim was to put a stop to ‘in country’ applications, as it was assumed that any ‘genuine’ asylum seeker would make a claim as soon as they arrived at port of entry. As these support workers point out, however:

*“There is no reason to believe that someone claiming ‘in port’ is any more genuine than one claiming ‘in country’”* (Support worker 4).

*“...there’s all sorts of reasons why somebody might end up ‘in country’ or making late claims”* (Support worker 2).



If someone has suffered persecution at the hands of the authorities in their country of origin, it is understandable that they might not wish to present themselves to uniformed officials on arrival in the UK. It may also be the case that many people, contrary to popular belief, simply do not actually know how the asylum system works in this country. This was the case with Alice, who, for her first six months in the UK, lived off money she had made by selling her jewellery, plus support from a local church, before she realised that there was a system in place for people fleeing persecution. The fact that there was a delay in her application, however, was cited as a reason to refuse her case, and at the time of interview, she was appealing against a negative decision.

The implications of this legislation were a real concern to the service providers who took part in this study. They highlighted how it had led to an increase in destitution and homelessness. It was also causing an increase in what is described as ‘hidden’ homelessness, whereby people were not actually ‘sleeping rough’ but were living at friends’ and relatives’ houses<sup>102</sup>. As one education and employment worker points out:

*“...there’s people out there on the street, living in parks, living on benches, no food, no nothing. There’s some who are relying on friends, but how long can they cope with that as well, you know, putting pressure on other people”*  
(Education and employment worker 2).

At the time of writing, Section 55 was under review after a ruling in the Court of Appeal, which found that human rights were being breached (Refugee Council, 2004a). However, the issue of destitution still remains pertinent for people seeking asylum (Dwyer and Brown, 2004a, 2004b). A point that was raised by the service providers, for example, was the termination of support and accommodation for those who have exhausted all appeals and have received a final negative decision on their case. In this situation, except for the option of applying for Hard Case support, people are left

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<sup>102</sup> Research carried out by Dwyer and Brown (2005b), with forced migrants in Leeds, showed that 16 of the 23 people who took part in their study had at some time had to rely on other forced migrants for food, clothes or accommodation. Research by the Greater London Authority (2004) also reiterates the issue of destitution resulting from this legislation, and estimates that “On balance, assuming that total asylum applications continue at roughly the rate seen for 2003, it is reasonable to expect that around 14,000 UK asylum applicants could be subject annually to the effect of Section 55, and that a large majority of them will find no way out of destitution” (pp.33-34).

without assistance until they are removed from the country<sup>103</sup>. One of the service providers interviewed in the present study had the following to say about this situation:

*“...the government is increasing the number of homeless people, you know, like for example the Kurds, if they get a negative decision they get their house taken away from them, we, as a local authority cannot support them anymore, if they come through us they don't get any NASS support anymore, they're not entitled to benefits, nothing...The thing is, if immigration are taking responsibility of giving them their negative decisions then they have a responsibility of taking them back to their own countries, and if they cannot do that, if there isn't a safe route, then maybe they should reconsider the decisions until there is a safe route”* (Education and employment worker 2).

What also emerged from this particular account is something that is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, and that is the sense of conflict that some of the service providers felt between what they would *like* to do and what they *have* to do in order to work within the bounds of government policy. In any event, it appeared that changes in the rules of entitlement were, at best, forcing people to sleep on friends' and relatives' floors, therefore making them reliant on others whose own situation was not entirely favourable, and at worst, forcing them onto the streets, or for some women, forcing them into vulnerable situations, such as the one described by this voluntary worker:

*“...they become forced into prostitution, sex work of some description, and there are a number of women I know in that position. And that will even be by their husbands in this country because of course, that's their resource”* (Voluntary worker 8)<sup>104</sup>.

Thus, what is being raised again is the idea that policy forces people into vulnerable and exploitative situations (as was noted previously in relation to the tragedy at Morecambe Bay).

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<sup>103</sup> A report by Stoke-on-Trent Citizens Advice Bureau (2003), has shown that what has been happening recently, particularly with people from countries such as Iraq and Zimbabwe, is that although they are refused status in this country, the unstable situation in those countries means that, at present, there is no possibility of return. These people are effectively 'stateless', but not only that, they are left to fend for themselves. Some of the examples given in the Stoke-on-Trent report highlighted cases where people with mental health problems, and pregnant women were left homeless and without financial support as a result of this policy.

<sup>104</sup> Interestingly, however, it has been suggested that women are not necessarily always 'forced' into such work, and that there can be an element of 'choice' (although in a bounded sense). Westwood and Phizacklea express the point that 'sex work' is another possible resource that some women rely upon to support and shelter themselves and families. On some interpretations, this might be taken to illustrate a point raised in Chapter One about people's 'negative capabilities' (Hoggett, 2001) and the idea that agency is not necessarily always manifested in ways deemed positive by outsiders.



The link between this section and the previous one relating to employment is very clear. What is evident is that, on the one hand the erosion of entitlement to support can force people into homelessness and destitution, yet at the same time they are still not permitted to work and support themselves. Subsequently, in some cases, an already vulnerable group of people are being forced into forms of employment that are unregulated, and therefore leave them open to abuse and exploitation.

## **5.5 Responses to women refugees and asylum applicants**

So far, this chapter has highlighted two key examples of policy restrictions and has looked at the implications of these for asylum seekers and refugees, with particular reference to the women who took part in this study. However, these have been issues that in general terms can just as readily apply for both men and women in the exile context. This chapter now turns to another important issue that has a focus in the interviews; the situation of women themselves within the asylum process. As has already been noted, in some instances asylum seekers may be perceived as one homogenous group, while in others constructed as primarily male. Meanwhile, there are circumstances where women seem to occupy distinctly inferior positions. In any event, it was felt by many of the service providers who took part in this study that there was a lack of consideration for the needs of women with regards to legislative changes, and they referred to a general need for a more ‘women-centred’ policy that would offer greater protection to women. Indeed, when asked about the needs of women asylum seekers and refugees, one support worker had the following comments to make:

*“...I don’t think the people who make the policy take that into account...I think they see an asylum seeker as a generic person, you know. It doesn’t matter what gender, what culture, what age – they’re an asylum seeker. These are the constraints that you work within, and I don’t think any consideration is given to anything else” (Support worker 7).*

As will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, it was felt by some of the service providers that asylum seekers were being treated like ‘numbers on a page’ rather than human beings, and that no consideration was given to individual needs. This was seen to have particular implications for some of the women that they came across in their day-to-day work, as the following examples illustrate. One employment worker,

for instance, raised an issue that she had come across quite frequently, and that was the situation of young African women who came from remote villages, where they had been under the protection of other members of their community. She highlighted how, on arrival in the UK, the women were then dispersed to mixed hostels around the country, and could find themselves in vulnerable situations which often resulted in pregnancy within weeks of their arrival.

Another situation that was referred to was that of access to Hard Case support. This form of support is available to those who have come to the end of their asylum application and may be taking it to further appeal, but are no longer in receipt of NASS financial support or accommodation. In this case, they can apply for Hard Case support, whereby full board accommodation is provided, usually in a hostel. This form of support, however, was not always deemed appropriate for women asylum seekers, particularly if they have young children. Furthermore it can be difficult to get places for women in the hostels, which tend to be dominated by men.

There were two main issues, however, that were causing particular concern for some of the service providers in this study. The first issue relates to the 'enforced dependence'<sup>105</sup> on other family members that can occur for some women in the asylum setting, particularly if it is their husbands who have made the application (as noted in Chapter Two). One health worker makes reference to this problem:

*"...if they came with their partner then I think they encounter some difficulties because I think they are just a named person on their partner's asylum application...they feel very secondary, not a person in their own right"* (Health worker 2).

Effectively, for the women who find themselves in this situation, their stay in this country is dependent on another person, and that person may also have control over the financial support that the family receives<sup>106</sup>.

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<sup>105</sup> This can be compared to the earlier comments about 'enforced dependence' on welfare benefits.

<sup>106</sup> The ECRE (1997) describe the problems that can occur in situations where women are dependent upon the principal applicant. As they point out, "He may directly receive and retain control over any financial or other material assistance that is provided. This can create an extra level of dependence" (paragraph 46).



Shabnan refers to having to live, for three months, without any support because her husband left the family home. He had been granted refugee status, and she and the children were reunited with him after this. Unfortunately they then had difficulties in their relationship and he left for the three months. She was told that she would no longer be eligible for Income Support and it was not until her husband returned that she began receiving payments again. Shabnan's case illustrates clearly the problem of dependency on the man; however, it also shows how women asylum seekers and refugees may be reduced to the status of 'second-class' citizens, as the same rules do not apply to British women. As Phizacklea (1998) points out, for women like Shabnan "who enter under family reunion regulations, immigration laws act to reproduce a very traditional notion of women's dependency within a male-regulated sphere" (p.29).

The second issue that was raised related to domestic violence. It was felt by some of the service providers that there needed to be more systems in place to protect women asylum seekers who were suffering this form of abuse, and that current procedures were, to some extent, too intrusive. Again, possibly because of negative perceptions, there seemed to be a lack of trust by officials when it came to asylum seekers. The service providers were critical of what they felt was the differential treatment between women asylum seekers and British citizens, when it came to dealing with reported incidents. As one voluntary worker points out:

*"I'm not entirely happy with the process that needs to be undergone for those women because it's different from any other women. We're looking for kind of evidence, so then you have to have a police statement or a GP report or a hospital report of some kind. So it enforces that that woman has to access some other professional before they're allowed access to a refuge, to prove that they have been victims of domestic violence, and as a women's centre, we wouldn't necessarily require that. If a woman voices the fact that she wants to access a refuge and is experiencing domestic violence that's all we need to act on normally to access a refuge. So it means there's an inequality in the systems that you're offering"* (Voluntary worker 8).

Again this reiterates the point that was raised above about reducing women to the status of second-class citizens. It was felt by the service providers that there were far more instances of domestic violence amongst asylum seekers than were formally reported. If correct, this could be explained not only by the possible fear of their partner, but also because of the added anxiety of having to report it to NASS, and concern about how it might affect their status in this country if they are dependent on their husband's

application. In some respects there is clearly a likely link between the issue of domestic violence and the previous one of dependence on the male applicant, as this voluntary worker highlights:

*“...if, for example she is leaving a NASS provided accommodation because of abuse and is afraid to report it, then she therefore is dis-benefited. She has no money, she has no recourse to public funds. So you see that whole element of dependence...she'd have to report it to the police and then they'd have to assess this, NASS would have to assess this, so what does she do? There are no other options, so she, well, she just stays” (Voluntary worker 1).*

This voluntary worker felt that it would be better to “err on the side of caution” in situations of suspected domestic abuse. If a woman made a claim, was placed in a hostel, and it was subsequently proven to be unfounded, she felt that this was better than leaving an innocent woman to suffer further.

What were evident from the interviews were the inequalities that existed not only between male and female asylum seekers, but also between women asylum seekers and British women. In some cases, such inequalities were clearly having negative effects, with regards to access to services and support. An interesting point that emerged from the interviews, however, was the different perceptions amongst the service providers of how women experienced the asylum system. Some felt that women were treated differently, and it was this that was causing inequalities in terms of the support they received, while others felt that it was the fact that the system treated asylum seekers as one homogenous group that was causing inequalities. Both perspectives seemed valid, depending on the specific matters being considered. Either way, it was felt that more needed to be done to support women asylum seekers and refugees, and that this could only be done by taking individuals' needs into account.

There were also further contrasting views, however, as some spoke in very positive terms about the situation for women asylum seekers, suggesting that there was more available for women, in terms of help and support, than for men. One support worker felt that the perception of asylum seekers as male actually worked to the benefit of women, and made reference to the experience of working in a reception centre, and being often ‘drawn’ to the women, simply because they were fewer in number. This informant felt that because the images that were seen in the media in relation to ‘bogus’



asylum seekers primarily focused on male asylum seekers, there was, at times, a different attitude towards women:

*“I think there’s more compassion for women, because I’ve seen it. I don’t know what goes on in other services, but I think there’s a tendency, because there’s less of them, because there’s so many men that come through and because all the propaganda on the television is around men, so I guess attitude is based on what you see. If you see a group of asylum seeker men walking through town centre, people are more inclined to make a comment, but if it was women I think people wouldn’t be as inclined...and I guess that’s just human nature, you know, because why women have fled is quite different to why men have fled, and I guess there’s more compassion to those issues”* (Support worker 3).

This positive perspective contrasts sharply, however, with the accounts from some of the women who experienced racist abuse upon arrival in their dispersal area (see Shabnan and Aida’s accounts, as discussed on p. 104)

Although it was intimated that there were clearly positive shifts with regards to a growing awareness of the needs of women asylum seekers and refugees, it was felt that, on the whole, there was still a long way to go in order to overcome their ‘invisibility’. As one voluntary worker suggests:

*“...we need more women focused policies that specifically pull on the needs of women and that actually consult with women around these issues”* (Voluntary worker 8).

## **5.6 Conclusions**

This chapter has drawn on fieldwork material to explore the implications of negative perceptions, policy measures and implementation practices. The construction of asylum seekers as ‘bogus’, ‘scroungers’, ‘criminals’ and via other disparaging descriptions has informed punitive practices and local hostilities that do little to aid settlement in a new country. The examples given in this chapter – albeit from small-scale research – bear out some of the critical claims made about the removal of the right to work and the limiting of entitlement to NASS financial support and accommodation.

The result of these measures has been, on the one hand, to render people dependent on support for longer periods of time, and on the other hand, to remove support from those who do not meet certain criteria, thus leaving increasing numbers of people homeless

and destitute. In many instances, asylum applicants' frustration at not being able to use their skills and qualifications, and their loss of social status have increased anxiety and depression. Combined with the added factor of inadequate financial support, not being entitled to enter paid employment can also force people into situations of illegal work, which leave them vulnerable to exploitation.

In addition, my fieldwork material reinforces some concerns about how women in particular are perceived. Asylum seekers and refugees can often be defined mainly in terms of them being male, with women's specific needs being overlooked. Previous literature and also informants from this study indicate that women have at times been relegated to a secondary role, which can leave them dependent on men in terms of access to financial support or even their stay in this country. The need for more women-centred policy has therefore been noted. As is shown by the experiences of the women in this study, however, many of whom have travelled to the UK on their own, it is inaccurate to describe their real roles as necessarily secondary or dependent (indeed 17 of the 21 women interviewed in this study had made a claim for asylum in their own right). There are clearly barriers for these women, but as will be shown in Chapter Seven, in this context of constraint they often find ways to overcome some of the barriers and begin rebuilding their lives. At the same time, it is possible that local responses to women are sometimes relatively positive when compared with reactions to men, although this is something on which further research would be required to enable any clear conclusion. In any event, the distinctive environments women encounter do contain opportunities and support as well as constraints, an issue that will be covered in greater detail in the chapter that now follows.



## Chapter Six

### The structural context: focusing specifically on dispersal

#### 6.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to continue looking at the context in which refugees and asylum applicants find themselves, and how this acts as a constraint or provides resources upon which they can draw. Chapter Five focused particularly upon specific material constraints and noted the influence of the ‘construction’ of asylum seekers. The examples that came out of the interviews related especially to: the removal of the right to work, the rules around entitlement to financial assistance and accommodation, and perceptions of women. The implications of recent legislation for the women who took part in this study were very clear, and some experienced segregation from other UK residents in terms of access to basic rights and services.

The present chapter now aims to focus on certain policies that act as a form of direct social control. With reference to the immigration and asylum system in more general terms, Robin Cohen (1994) argues that:

“The increased capacity of the state to arrest, detain and deport aliens and asylum seekers led to a subtle but definite relationship between immigration control and other forms of social control” (p.126).

He highlights not only the increase in discretionary powers of immigration officers over the years, but how other agencies have become more involved in the supervision of ‘aliens’. Using the example of the Immigration (Carriers Liability) Act (1987), he points out that “employees of the carriers have, in effect, been turned into extension workers for the immigration service” (p.83). It is his belief that there has been a subsequent shift from “external to internal control, from on-entry to post-entry supervision” (p.129)<sup>107</sup>.

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<sup>107</sup> Further examples of ‘post-entry supervision’ can be seen in Scotland, for example, where there were proposals for a new scheme involving the electronic tagging of asylum seekers, who could be tracked by the use of satellite technology (*BBC News*, 8/7/04). There were also reports that immigration officers were stopping people on the London Underground if they looked or sounded ‘foreign’, and asking them to prove their right to British residence (*Evening Standard*, 9/8/04). The development towards ‘internal’ control, however, is not a new phenomenon.

It is this ‘internal control’ that is the main theme of this chapter which looks specifically at dispersal, and the implications this has not only for the women who took part in this study, but also for the organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees at the grass roots. This chapter also looks at the positive supportive structures that have arisen as a result of dispersal, in terms of the support provided at a local level. It will focus in particular on health care; education and training; multi-agency work and general support; and, the role of voluntary groups and refugee community organisations (RCOs). Ultimately, what is shown is the dual nature of ‘the system’. Thus, although there are constraints on asylum seekers and refugees, and local organisations have, to some extent, been transformed into ‘an arm’ of the Home Office, nevertheless those working at a grass roots level provide support that the women can draw upon, and provide opportunities for them to begin rebuilding their lives.

## **6.2 Dispersal**

As has already been discussed in Chapter Three, the basic premise of the dispersal policy is to relieve the so-called ‘burden’ of support for London and the South East by sending asylum seekers on a no-choice basis, to cluster regions around the UK. For those interviewed in this study, this policy raised a number of important issues relating to assumptions about ‘community’, as well as ‘inappropriate’ dispersal, whereby a lack of consideration is given to people’s legal status, medical history, social networks, or the ‘conditions’ in the area to which they are being sent. Each of these issues will be discussed in greater detail below.

### **6.2.1 Assumptions about ‘community’ and the use of language clusters**

The service providers I interviewed, both statutory and voluntary, made reference to how the system of dispersal was initially designed to work. Each area was supposed to take certain language clusters, which were based on the existing populations, and also on the languages that an area could cater for in terms of the available translation and interpreting services. The intention was for new arrivals to be able to make contact with people who had a similar background to themselves, or who were from their country, in

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Indeed Williams (1989) points to other examples during the twentieth century when welfare agencies have been expected to police immigrants.



the hope that they would be able to form their own support networks and community groups. From a government point of view, this spreads 'the burden' not only geographically, but also in terms of using private resources to supplement public support. One support worker, however, points to instances where potentially serious mistakes were made:

*“NASS are expected to disperse people according to either culture, nationality or language. That was the original intention so that they would have access to people of a similar background. But it doesn't always work like that. We've had strange anomalies, people who [were] actually at war with each other living in the same properties. Afghans and Russians in a hostel” (Voluntary worker 5).*

What was evident from the interviews was that despite the rhetoric, the reality in many cases was very different. Whatever the stated intention, in practice the idea of using language clusters was not always working<sup>108</sup>.

Some of the service providers who took part in this study talked about people who spoke 'isolated' languages. Reference was made to the isolation suffered by a Spanish-speaking family and a French-speaking African woman. In both cases, they were the only asylum seekers who spoke their language in the dispersal area that they had been sent to. Problems seemed particularly acute with asylum applicants housed by private providers who did not adhere to the recommended language groups. In addition, the private providers were also using Homes in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) whereby unrelated people were being housed together in the same property<sup>109</sup>. The problem with this arrangement is illustrated by the following health worker:

*“...we get women housed together in private accommodation from different countries, the only common thing is that they are women...they would never have chosen to live with one another, yet they're expected to live together in harmony. I mean, even if they're from the same country they can be from very different backgrounds” (Health worker 2).*

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<sup>108</sup> A similar point was raised in the report by Wilson (2001), as referred to in Chapter Three, who states that: “NASS needs to review or observe agreed language clusters: the arrival of people speaking languages not part of the agreed cluster creates additional challenges for service providers including language services, and results in some asylum seekers being particularly isolated” (p.19).

<sup>109</sup> Based on his research carried out with asylum applicants in Hull, Dawson (2002) recommends ending the practice of contracting out to private providers because of the 'bad practices' of some providers. He felt that attempts at 'network building' were being undermined by the private provider's lack of consideration for language clusters.

Using HMOs also raised issues of privacy, and had implications for the women's ability to feel comfortable and secure in their new surroundings.

Given that situations like this were occurring, then perhaps the talk of language clusters and community was partly a way of legitimating dispersal, and making it appear less harsh. Some of the service providers felt that in reality it was driven more by the availability of accommodation in an area, than by any desire to make new arrivals feel comfortable by being surrounded by people who spoke their language or were from their country of origin. Even if they were housed with people from a similar background, however, it did not necessarily follow that asylum applicants would want to associate with each other, as this service provider points out:

*"...of course you've got the other side of it where people don't want anything to do with their community and that's another difficult side of it really, because obviously the Home Office will house people close to their own community or close to people who speak the same language, and they don't want that"* (Voluntary worker 7).

Again issues of trust were relevant here. This service provider indicated that a person's experiences sometimes made them suspicious of other people from their home country.

Despite some of the problems that were highlighted, however, many of the service providers working at the grass roots level did appear to agree with the idea of trying to create communities, and felt that it was vital for settlement in an area. They talked about how, when finding accommodation for their clients, they would purposely choose an area by looking at who was already living there, and would place people who spoke the same language, or were from the same country in that area. One support worker talked about her role in 'creating' a community that had now evolved into an RCO:

*"...quite a few of the committee for that group are our clients...that was a little community that we created in [West Yorkshire], putting people from a similar background together, and that's worked really well"* (Support worker 5).

This illustrates the service providers control over where people live, and effectively it involved making assumptions about the kind of community that asylum seekers want, and the kind of people that they would want to live with. Although this intervention had



in some ways helped the development of a successful RCO, it does not always follow that service providers' assumptions will necessarily coincide with what asylum applicants themselves actually want (see Kelly, 2003, as referred to in Chapter Two). From talking to both sets of informants, however, it became apparent that in many cases the women were managing very successfully to form friendships and support networks with people who, under normal circumstances, they would not necessarily have associated with. This is an issue that will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, which focuses upon the women's ability to draw upon different forms of support.

### **6.2.2 Inappropriate dispersal**

*“Some of the people that we get in [West Yorkshire] have only been in the country a few days and they're straight up to [West Yorkshire]. There's supposed to be some assessment of their health to see that they're fit for dispersal. Some people come here in very late stages of pregnancy or with health problems, mental health problems or physical health problems, that I think should not have been dispersed...It also seems harsh when people are moved to different parts of the country when they've got relatives and friends, and with a bit of care and attention people could still be dispersed, but dispersed to be near somebody that they know. There's a lot of isolation because of the dispersal policy which does nothing for people's mental health and well-being when they're in a difficult time in their life anyway”* (Health worker 2).

This quotation illustrates another pertinent issue that emerged from the data, that will be described here as 'inappropriate' dispersal. This is an umbrella term chosen to describe the problems arising for asylum seekers when a lack of consideration is given to one or more of the following factors: their legal status; their 'bodily circumstances', physical or mental health, and pre-dispersal situation; and finally, the 'conditions' in the area in which they are located. Each of these issues is discussed below.

#### ***Legal status***

What came out of the interviews was the feeling that dispersal was driven by numbers rather than looking at individual cases. Interestingly, however, it was indicated that this could sometimes be just as detrimental to the aims of government policy (in terms of targets for 'removals') as it was for those being dispersed. One support worker, for example, highlighted the fact that their team had received people who were at the end of

the asylum process and had actually been given a removal date. In such cases, it may be human nature for that person to simply 'disappear' rather than face deportation, an option that is perhaps made easier for them to take when they are being dispersed around the country. This clearly goes against the government's desire to 'clamp down' on 'overstayers' and illegal immigrants.

Another issue that was raised was the lack of legal services, regionally, that specialised in asylum and immigration law, and it was believed that the expertise was still mainly around London and the South East. Often people retained the services of a solicitor in London, but this was problematic in terms of having to travel for appointments, and also, according to one support worker, in terms of the quality of the service that was provided to that client once they had left the capital:

*"...there's lots of evidence that London solicitors, once people have left their area, that [the solicitors] don't really do a very good job, and if people are ringing for interviews they won't get them. It's like gentle cohesion, gentle pressure to change your solicitor to one in the region"* (Support worker 2).

### ***Lack of consideration for 'bodily circumstances', medical condition and pre-dispersal situation***

One particular problem that was referred to was the issue of women being dispersed at the late stages of pregnancy, as this support worker points out:

*"...we've had women that have come here and have been within days of giving birth. I mean how inappropriate is that?...fancy sending a woman who's not eight months pregnant, but nine months pregnant, within days, 200 miles on a bus...if they'd just looked at the woman and looked at her medical history"* (Support worker 6).

This was the situation that Regine had faced. She had been living in London with her relatives until she discovered that she was pregnant, and it became apparent that she would have to find somewhere else to live. When she applied for NASS accommodation, despite the fact that she had requested to be near her relatives, she was given notice that she was to be sent to a hostel in Manchester, and from there she would then be dispersed to West Yorkshire. As she points out:



*“...in their notice they say that if you don't, that means there's no more support...the journey started at 10.30 and I arrived in Manchester at 3.30. All that period of time, eight months pregnant...suppose I had to give birth in that situation?”* (Regine, Zimbabwe).

Regine argues that even if she had wanted to appeal to her solicitor for help, there was no time because she was only given one days notice that she was to be dispersed. Her only options, therefore, were to spend five hours on a coach whilst eight months pregnant, and subsequently to confront an unknown local environment, or to face living without NASS accommodation and financial support. In her case, there was also allegedly a lack of communication about her pregnancy between NASS and her housing provider:

*“...when I arrived at Manchester I found a woman waiting for me from the (Name) accommodation, and she was surprised to see me pregnant. She says that they were not told that I am pregnant and am expecting very soon. I only learned after that she even thought of just leaving me (laughs) in the coach station, pretend she didn't see me, because NASS has done that for quite a long time to them and it was an inconvenience for them. She actually said it to me, said 'no, the day I saw you and I found you were pregnant I thought of just leaving you and pretend I didn't see you, but I just felt pity that you were pregnant and you seemed to be very tired, then I just had to take you to the hostel”* (Regine, Zimbabwe).

At a more general level, this lack of communication between NASS and local organisations was also highlighted by some of the service providers who pointed out that the quick succession of changes to policy in particular made it difficult to keep up with new developments, and at times did not always filter down to them locally. One support worker highlighted how this can be a problem for people working at the grass roots level, and the example given here related to maternity:

*“...they change policy all the time, but that doesn't feed down to us. To give you an example, if an asylum seeker gave birth to a baby and they're supported by NASS then they're entitled to a £300 maternity grant. Originally it was the case that you had to send the full birth certificate and the original copy to NASS to be able to access that, which meant that the baby had to be registered, they had to pay £3.50 for the full birth certificate, then hand that ID over to someone who would post it to NASS...We decided that this was above and beyond, and that we should be able to send a fax copy, and that was agreed...I made exactly the same application last week and I got a letter back saying that they weren't entitled to this money. When I rang up it was because I hadn't sent the original, and I sort of said 'well, we don't have to send the original', 'well yes, you do now, we've decided*

*that you do now'. So, until somebody tells us, until somebody makes a query about it, it doesn't filter down"* (Support worker 7).

It was hoped, however, that the setting up of a regional NASS office in Leeds would solve some of the communication problems.

With reference to Regine's case, there was not only the physical discomfort of her journey at such a late stage of her pregnancy, a discomfort that she said lasted for a week after her arrival in Manchester, but there was the added factor that she had been separated from her relatives in London who would have provided a vital support network for her, particularly as a lone parent. This situation was worsened by the fact that she had managed to make friends during her stay at the hostel in Manchester, but then had to leave them as well. At the time of the interview, she was feeling very isolated, not only because she was living alone, but because she had been housed quite far from the town centre as well, which made it difficult for her to access the services she required. As mentioned before, because of the way that the system operates, Regine had to accept being sent away from her friends and relatives, or she would not be entitled to any assistance, in terms of accommodation and financial support. One support worker made reference to cases similar to Regine's that she had come across:

*"...[NASS] disperse people on a no choice basis...they might have family in London and get dispersed up here. We've come across the most bizarre, for no apparent reason where, you know, people, single parent women with children that have very close connection with people in London [or] people that have been at university for two years, getting dispersed to [West Yorkshire] and bizarre things like that"* (Support worker 5).

This illustrates the controlling and insensitive nature of the system because people have to go where they are told by NASS, regardless of their current circumstances, and are not permitted to move to another area until a decision has been made on their case.

Shiva and Iran faced a similar situation to Regine in that they were separated from friends and relatives because of their dependence on support. Iran expressed her lack of self-determination in terms of feeling like a 'prisoner of the support' that she was receiving, as she points out:

*"...[I] feel that [I am] like a prisoner because [I have] no choice...[I] thought that when [I] came to a free country, [I am] free to choose, but now [I have] no right to choose because [I] need the support. So [I] become a*



*prisoner of the support and has to stay in a town [I] don't like"* (Iran, Iran, interviewed with an interpreter).

Despite the fact that her eldest son, who had come to the UK ahead of her, was currently living in London, Iran had been dispersed to West Yorkshire, after a brief stay in Bristol. She had not seen her eldest son for a few months now and was feeling very isolated. She believed that it would be better for them if the family were all living in the same area. Iran's experience was made worse by the fact that, as mentioned in Chapter Five, she had experienced 'anti-social' behaviour from some of the local youths, and her youngest son, who was living with her, had been beaten up at the local school. Iran pointed out that if she could not be with her eldest son, then she would prefer to return to Bristol because she felt that it offered more for asylum seekers in terms of specific support.

For Shiva and her husband, after living in London for a while, her husband became ill and they were no longer able to support themselves. They requested the assistance of NASS and asked if they would be able to stay in London because of his medical condition, as Shiva points out:

*"...with his stroke and his physical, you know, medical situation, [we] told the authority [we] would prefer to stay in London, because all his medical treatment, everything, was there"* (Shiva, Iran, interviewed with an interpreter).

They also had a number of good friends that they had made during their stay, yet they were told that they were to be sent somewhere else in the country. Again, like Regine and Iran, Shiva and her family were dependent on the support provided by NASS and therefore had no choice but to go where they were told. In West Yorkshire, Shiva points out that she found herself in a situation where she was having to start from scratch in terms of making friends and building up a new support network. At the time of the interview, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven, Shiva had managed to adapt very well to her new surroundings and was enrolled at the local college and participating in the weekly social event for asylum seekers and refugees. For her husband, however, who spent most of his days confined to the house, it was apparently a very isolating experience, particularly as prior to his stroke, he had been working and supporting the family. Because of this, they had decided that once a decision was made on their asylum application, they would return to London to be with their friends once again. A follow up meeting with the asylum team in Shiva's area

showed that Shiva and her family, upon receiving a positive decision on their case, did indeed return to London. The cases of Iran, Regine and Shiva illustrate the secondary migration that could occur for some asylum seekers once they had legal status in this country. What it also shows is the importance of people's relationships with others, and how these influence their actions and choices (see reference to relational issues in Chapter One).

The interviews with the women indicated that many of them, on top of their initial journey to this country, then had to face further upheaval and separation when they were moved to West Yorkshire. Some of them had been moved two or three times before being settled in their present location and the feelings of loss and separation that they experienced in fleeing their country of origin were therefore being exacerbated by further separation from family and friends in this country. Pranvera, for example, not only felt anxious about her parents who had been left behind in Albania, but also described how she had been separated from her husband and eldest son in the initial stages of her asylum process:

*“...I came and I had not any English, I didn't know where shops and where nothing in [West Yorkshire]. Even when I came here in [West Yorkshire], I came just with my younger son because my husband and my older son they had been separated from me...they dispersed me and my younger son in [West Yorkshire] and my husband and my older son they kept in detention centre in Oxford, and they kept them for nearly two months” (Pranvera, Albania).*

Despite controls, however, there were those who did maintain some degree of freedom of movement. Beatrice, for instance, made reference to a number of people that she had met in the reception centre who would apparently collect their weekly support and then go and stay with their friends and relatives in another area, in order to combat the loneliness and isolation that they felt. This shows that despite controls, some people do want to be able to maintain a certain element of independence, and will therefore, at times, circumvent the rules.

#### ***‘Conditions’ in the dispersal area***

Some of the service providers indicated that the use of ‘low demand’ housing was common when asylum seekers were being moved into an area. This confirms research by Garvie (2001) and Chahal (2002) (see Chapter Two). Furthermore, the conditions in some of the hostels and reception centres were also a concern, particularly for some of



the women who were interviewed: again something also revealed in the literature review. Tina went as far as to describe the hostel she and her son had stayed in as “the hostel from hell”, and Michelle blamed the reception centre where she had stayed for the illness that her youngest daughter had contracted. She was pregnant when she arrived in the UK with her two other children, her third child was born while she was still in the reception centre, and the first few months of the child’s life were spent there. Michelle talked about what she felt were the unhygienic conditions in the hostel, where many people were forced to share bathrooms and other facilities. She believed that these conditions were to blame for the infection that her daughter picked up, and the resulting liver problems that she now had.

Shiva and her husband were concerned about what they felt were the poor conditions in the house in which they were now living. As her husband points out:

*“...as an asylum seeker or refugee, I don’t expect to be given a castle, but at least somewhere decent. The ceiling was leaking three times last year and the water was coming down the bedroom”* (discussion after the interview with Shiva, while the interpreter was still present).

Shiva pointed out that the damp was aggravating her arthritis, and she was sometimes in a great deal of pain because of this. Samina’s house also had water leaking into one of the bedrooms. In both of these interviews, the researcher was shown the damage that had been caused by damp.

Another point that was raised related to women, like Regine, who were being housed away from the town or city centre. This had implications for access to services and support, as this voluntary worker points out:

*“...women are being housed further and further outside the town centre and that’s clearly an issue for many reasons, but particularly around women being the primary providers of parenting support to children, and getting access to their vouchers, to the Post Office, all the localised services that are essential”* (Voluntary worker 8).

Another more general aspect relating to the appropriateness of the area, which contributed to people’s feelings of isolation or anxiety, was the fact that asylum applicants were being sent to places that they had never even heard of. This was an issue raised in both sets of interviews. As one health worker points out:

*“I think the fact that they’re being dispersed to somewhere that they’ve never ever heard of, a small town in the north of England, also makes them even more isolated”* (Health worker 2).

Layla and Pranvera reiterated this point, when they talked about their experiences of dispersal:

*“When [my daughters and I] first heard about [West Yorkshire] [we] were panicking, very anxious, frightened. [We] kept searching to find where it is on the map and they couldn’t find it...[we] were asking people ‘where is [West Yorkshire]? Do you know where [West Yorkshire] is?’ Nobody knew. After three days, somebody said to [us] ‘oh I found where it is on the map’ told them ‘it is somewhere near Leeds”* (Layla, Iraq, interviewed with an interpreter).

*“...I haven’t never heard about [West Yorkshire]...because you see, in my school time, I’ve learnt geography, but we just learnt map and just big cities; London, Birmingham, Leeds, Newcastle, but not about [West Yorkshire] (laughs)”* (Pranvera, Albania).

For those who had heard of the area that they were being sent to, it was not always in a favourable light, as Beatrice points out when she learnt of where she was to be sent:

*“...the first impression of the place was very bad...so, when you say I’m being taken to [West Yorkshire], you’re like ‘oh my God, that place has riots, that place has racists”*.

### **6.2.3 Focusing upon the positive aspects of dispersal**

Despite the negative effects of the dispersal policy, there were positive developments in terms of the support that was being provided at a local level. Although the policy appeared to be about control and regulation of a particular population, there were institutionalised structures in place that were designed to help asylum applicants and refugees. As mentioned previously, opportunities *and* constraints are both present in the environments in which people find themselves. One interesting issue is how the service providers manage this duality. Many of those interviewed in this study were effectively employees of government, and therefore had to work within the guidelines laid out for them by NASS. This clearly had implications for the level of support that they could provide. In a sense, they could be classed as part of the controlling mechanisms or as agents of the state, but it is not as simple as this because it emerged from the interviews that many also took on the role of support and advocacy. In this respect, there was sometimes a sense of conflict in the interviews with the service providers between what they wanted to do and what was expected of them. Their role



appeared to be continually changing with each successive piece of legislation, and as more asylum applicants came into an area, they were being pulled in two directions, as they took on a greater supportive role, while at the same time being expected to 'police' asylum seekers to a certain extent. As one support worker points out:

*"...you just have to help people get through as best you can, but the job is going to become more and more difficult, and the way it's going, the Home Office expect us to police a lot of them. So, there's a duty on local authorities to inform Home Office if someone seems to be unlawfully in their area or in the UK. How do you take that responsibility on your shoulders, for somebody's life, to say whether they're here illegally or not? We're not immigration officers"* (Support worker 2).

For the workers of the voluntary and charitable organisations, unless funded by central government, there was not always the same sort of conflict. Although their work was obviously affected by changes in legislation, they were not accountable, for day-to-day operations, to central government, and in a sense could concentrate more on the welfare of those people who came to their organisations, rather than worrying so immediately about having to follow rules and procedures.

According to the service providers who took part in this study, there had been a number of very positive developments as far as local responses were concerned, and it was felt that the services had evolved a great deal since the dispersal policy began in April 2000. As would be expected, some areas were better prepared than others for the arrival of asylum applicants, particularly those with already established refugee populations. As discussed in Chapter Four, a number of different organisations were visited in this study and that gave a clear picture of the type, and level, of support that was being provided in West Yorkshire. In each dispersal area there was a local authority team who had the specific role of welcoming new arrivals to the area, and making sure that they had access to all the relevant services and support. It was their job to do an initial assessment of people's needs, find them appropriate accommodation, and then link them up with local GPs, dentists, counselling and legal services, as well as the local colleges if they were wanting to learn English or enrol on any other courses. What follows now is a look at some of the practices that were in place to support asylum seekers and refugees.

### ***Multi-agency work***

There was a great deal of multi-agency work going on in most, but not all, of the areas in the region. This involved communication between the various organisations about their clients, and any problems that were occurring. It also involved meetings at a regional level as well. The subsequent sharing of information enabled service providers to find out the issues arising out of dispersal, and how other agencies were addressing any problems that emerged. There were also multi-agency ‘drop-in’ sessions, whereby representatives from the different organisations would meet in one location, and asylum applicants could come along on a certain day and discuss problems relating to housing, health, education, or financial support. Although this was clearly beneficial, there were some criticisms in terms of the location of the ‘drop-in’, or the fact that it only ran once a week. Iran, for example, compared the ‘drop-in’ she now visited with the service that was provided in Bristol, where she had previously been living:

*“...in Bristol, four times a week, four days in week, the asylum seekers unit team they have services, and when you go there it was very quiet and private room...[West Yorkshire] they have just one time per week, and every person regardless of their situation, for housing, for education, for health, everyone has to come to that drop-in, and it was so noisy, there is no private room...I can find out what is her problem, she can find out what is my problem, there is no privacy” (Iran, Iran, interviewed with an interpreter).*

### ***Health care initiatives***

There were initiatives around health care that were set up specifically for asylum seekers and refugees who it was felt may have difficulty accessing local mainstream services because of language barriers, or simply through the fact that they had trouble understanding a system that is often alien to them. These health projects also focused upon people’s mental health, and could offer a certain amount of counselling. The lack of counselling services for victims of rape and torture, however, was flagged up a number of times in the interviews with service providers, and it was felt that, like the legal services, the expertise was still mainly found around London and the South East.



### ***Education and training initiatives***

There were many organisations, and individual workers, whose remit was to focus specifically on the education and training needs of asylum seekers and refugees in West Yorkshire. Their work covered a number of different aspects of education and training, including helping people to access language classes or other college courses; helping people with refugee status to find employment or helping them to return to their previous profession; and, helping families find school places for their children. Many of the women themselves talked in positive terms about the education system. They had all, at some point, attended a college course, and many of those with children talked about how much their child was enjoying going to school and the progress their children were making. Further to this, however, having a child of school age could also be beneficial for the mother as well (with the exception of those who had suffered harassment) as it often acted as a way of meeting people and forming friendships. Michelle had made friends with one of the other mothers who was English, and their children played together. As well as the good friendship that was forged, in this situation Michelle was able to practice her language skills as well. There was also the support that teachers provided, not just for the children, but for the women themselves. Aida, for instance, talks about how her children's teacher had given her a television in order to help her to learn English, while teachers at Pranvera's son's school had written a letter to David Blunkett in support of her family:

*“...I have plenty of friends and they always supporting me...plenty of individual people from education service and from my son's school...all teachers from head teacher to common teacher in school, they like my son, I've got plenty support from them. I've got support from, even they've written to Blunkett in Braille to support” (Pranvera, Albania).*

### ***The role of voluntary groups, RCOs and more general support***

When asylum applicants arrived in an area, the local authority support workers put them in contact with any local voluntary organisations, RCOs, or church groups that offered support. These organisations fulfilled a number of different roles, which included liaising with NASS about problems in terms of housing and financial support; offering befriending schemes and orientation; doing advocacy and campaigning work; as well as the various social events that they organised, including day trips. One church in Calderdale, for example, ran a weekly event where asylum applicants and refugees

could come along and take it in turns to cook a meal for the rest of the people in attendance. This group was visited a number of times during the research and appeared to be popular, and also successful in terms of providing a space for people to socialise. There were also a number of groups specifically for women asylum seekers and refugees. In many areas, such services had developed simply because agencies were listening to what was being demanded, as this voluntary worker points out:

*“It’s no good getting things that you think they want because they won’t want it. You’ve got to go by what people are saying they want, you’ve to listen to people and find out what they want and try to do it. That’s the way we’ve always worked here. That’s why we have the ‘immediate needs’ store, and why we do everything else”* (Voluntary worker 3).

The ‘immediate needs’ store referred to here was set up to provide asylum seekers with items that they cannot always afford to buy themselves, such as furniture, bedding, prams and baby clothes. It developed because asylum applicants were coming to the organisation and asking where they could get such items. It had also become apparent in some areas that there was a clear need for women-only groups and spaces because of culture, in terms of some women not being permitted to attend mixed groups, or just a preference to be with other women. These women’s groups provided a space for people to socialise, as well as having voluntary workers in attendance who could offer advice on any problems relating to the asylum process. Some of the groups had crèche facilities, and offered other services such as a ‘clothes exchange’. There were also volunteer programmes running in a few of the organisations, which provided the opportunity for the women to participate in the running of the group.

As mentioned previously, one support worker made reference to a group of people that they had accommodated who had then come together to form an RCO<sup>110</sup>. This group had initially formed so that people could come together socially, but had developed to such a level that it now had charitable status, and not only organised social events for African asylum seekers and refugees, but was also doing similar work to some of the other organisations in the area, in terms of helping with NASS-related problems. Again, the importance of community groups was raised by the service providers, and the fact that both formal and informal networks had developed as a result of people

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<sup>110</sup> Beatrice was one of the founder members of this group and her role will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.



being housed in a certain area. With reference to informal networks in particular, one support worker points out:

*“...they make friends, share experiences, visit each other’s houses, they can help each other taking the children to school, going to appointments, shopping, things like that, so I think they’ve got strength for each other and they’re willing to help each other”* (Support worker 1).

In some cases, therefore, networks were indeed forming in a specific sense from the grass roots up, and in some areas seemed to be a vital part of the support structure.

The women did talk in more general terms about the positive support they had received from the asylum teams and the various organisations, and on the whole they appeared relatively satisfied with the level of support in the area. What was clear from the interviews with the service providers was that although people had certain areas of expertise – for example, health or education – they would often find themselves taking on other supportive roles that involved helping with any aspect of the asylum process. One education and training officer, for instance, talked about how she spent a great deal of time finding accommodation for people who had been made homeless by Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002), and also indicated that she attended many of the local social events on a regular basis. She highlighted how it was often the case that when she helped someone with one aspect of the asylum process, that individual would return to her for help with other things:

*“...they will often come back to us for help with everything, you know, they find someone who’s friendly, they’ll be like ‘how do I get a house? How do I do this?’ And that’s OK, it’s obvious that we’re a point of contact with the outside world”* (Education and employment worker 1).

Many of the service providers who were interviewed or visited on an informal basis during the course of this research demonstrated a commitment that went well beyond their remit. One voluntary worker, for example, was apparently working approximately 80 hours a week to help asylum applicants, but was actually only being paid for 20 hours work. They were also finding it increasingly difficult to separate their work and their private life, particularly when faced with growing numbers of homeless and destitute people, and this worker sometimes had people staying at her house. The service providers were often disparaging about the direction of government policy, and as will be shown in the next chapter, sometimes spoke in language that was opposite to

that of politicians and the media. This was based on their experiences of working at the grass roots and seeing the reality of life for asylum seekers and refugees. Underfunding remained a serious barrier to their work, a problem that was exacerbated by the sheer number of people that were now accessing services and support in the area (the worker referred to above had a record of more than 300 asylum applicants visiting her in one month).

### 6.3 Conclusions

As this chapter has confirmed, there are a number of positive structures in place that offer vital support for asylum applicants and refugees, particularly around health care, education and social care, as well as the many social events that were being organised locally. There were also a number of new initiatives being developed at the time the research was carried out<sup>111</sup>. Some of the service providers felt that there was sometimes a danger in providing separate services for asylum applicants. It was believed that to aid integration, they should be encouraged to access mainstream provision wherever possible. Linking in with previous comments in this thesis about the negative discourse surrounding asylum seekers, and the idea that they were taking resources away from other UK residents, there was the fear that separate provision would not be looked upon favourably by the host population<sup>112</sup>. One support worker, for example, talks about this with reference to a new health initiative that had been set up in their area:

*“...I think it will be a good thing, it means that they can access health services immediately. I think it might be a double edged thing in that residents of [West Yorkshire] might see it as a specialist service that they are getting, something else that they are getting”* (Support worker 7).

The women who were interviewed, despite certain problems, on the whole were satisfied with the support that they had received, although it did appear to be the case that they generally had one organisation, or indeed, one individual to whom they would

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<sup>111</sup> These included the setting up of a NASS regional office in Leeds; a new initiative for women asylum seekers and refugees in Kirklees; a proposed multi-agency drop-in that would run five days a week in Bradford; and a branch of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture in Leeds that would be able to provide specialist counselling.

<sup>112</sup> Harrison (2004b) suggests a similar situation with regards to disabled people, and the possible hostile feelings that may be generated by the additional support they might receive. As he points out: “the benefit of disabled people having housing adaptations and improvements or financial support could be undermined if these attract jealous hostility from other people locally” (p.703).



go initially, and then return to for help and advice on every aspect of the asylum process. This could also be related to the issue of trust referred to in Chapter Four. In most cases, this was welcomed by the service providers, who seemed to accept that they would sometimes have to fulfil a role that went above and beyond what was expected of them.

There were concerns, however, from some of the local authority workers that the women could become too reliant on them, and there was a sense of conflict about wanting to help as much as they could, while at the same time recognising the need for independence, and worrying about the implications of supporting people *too* much. As these support workers point out:

*“...part of our responsibility as well is to promote independence. So, if people are tending to lean on us a lot then we discuss it in team briefings and review it, and then try and push them away a little bit so that gradually they will, you know, they can do it for themselves and they’re not dependent on us, because you’ve got to think, if they had a decision, within a few weeks they’ve got to be as independent as possible”* (Support worker 2).

*“...sometimes I think we do them a disservice by supporting them to the level that we do because then they become reliant on it and not self-sufficient, and less likely to go out and do it for themselves. So I feel as if sometimes I’m between a rock and a hard place, you know, its awful to see people struggling, but sometimes to get there at the end, they need to struggle. I just think that we need to be there as a safety net”* (Support worker 7).

What is interesting about their desire to promote independence, however, is the fact that it appears to be in conflict with the effects, intended or unintended, of the asylum system. Central government has arguably designed a system that actually limits the capacity for independence in one way or another. Asylum seekers are controlled in terms of where they live, their future hinges on a decision made by an anonymous person at the Home Office, and, as was discussed in the previous chapter, they are not permitted to work, so are dependent on financial assistance and accommodation provided by NASS. Yet, despite this, some support workers are still trying to ensure that people are as self-sufficient as possible. They are aware that once a decision is made on their client’s case, that client will then be expected to adapt to the mainstream system, and become independent within a matter of weeks, or even days, despite the fact that he or she may have been waiting months, or even years, to be given legal status in this country.

There were also differences between the work of the voluntary organisations, who in a sense were freer to concentrate on helping their clients, and the support workers from the local authorities, who were accountable to NASS and now also had a more 'policing' role. In many ways the latter were giving a 'positive face' to the dispersal system, and sometimes softened the effects of harsh arrangements. There was indeed an element of conflict in their role as they also acted in the interests of asylum seekers and refugees, and expressed views that were contrary to those of central government. With regards to the various voluntary organisations, it was felt that they were increasingly being called upon to offer support for the growing number of homeless, destitute and dis-benefitted asylum seekers, often taking on those who had perhaps been turned away from statutory support. For both voluntary and statutory workers, the supportive role was apparently becoming more and more difficult to maintain, particularly as legislative changes placed further restrictions on what asylum applicants were actually able to do.

One of the government's aims of dispersal was for it to be a means of solving a growing 'problem', namely the fact that services in London and the southeast were finding it difficult to cope with the increasing demand created by the number of arrivals. In reality, however, it creates its own set of new problems, not just for the asylum applicants who are being sent to various places around the country, but for the service providers as well. The setting up of NASS and subsequent dispersal of asylum applicants could be regarded as part of the trend of reorganisation of the delivery of welfare in Britain, that has occurred over the last 20 years, and has been described in terms of 'decentralization', 'devolution', and the growing importance of a 'mixed economy of welfare' (Clarke *et al*, 1994)<sup>113</sup>. The dispersal of asylum seekers represents a 'dispersal' of responsibility to the local level, whilst at the same time there remains a lack of power and resources at that level, and the actions of organisations are defined by the rules set out by central government. Even those organisations that are outside state

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<sup>113</sup> Clarke and Newman (1997) refer to 'dispersal' in more general terms as a "political strategy for reconstructing both the state itself and the coordination of its welfare functions" (p.29). In discussions about the delivery of welfare, reference is also made to the use of 'New Public Management' (NPM) in the social services. Cope (1999) for instance, highlights how this strategy "centralises the policy making strategy, especially policy goals and budgets...[but] decentralises the delivery of public policy to a plethora of agencies, local authorities, quangos and private contractors, that exercise managerial and operational discretion within the limits of policy strategy set by the centre" (pp.55-56).



provision, for example in the 'informal sector', are increasingly subject to state scrutiny (Clarke and Newman, 1997).

It was felt by many of the service providers that the policy was less about the welfare of asylum seekers and more about them being a category to be measured, classified and controlled. Indeed, some felt that the system operated in terms of 'numbers', as this support worker points out:

*"...in terms of the Home Office, it's run on numbers and batch numbers, they're not looking at people and individuals. It's just a number of people that need to be dispersed and that's it"* (Support worker 5).

Regine's account in particular provides evidence of this, but there is also the fact that, according to one support worker, in telephone conversations NASS referred to people by number rather than by name. Craig *et al.* (2004) suggest that dispersal is more about avoiding political protest at the concentration of migrants than concerns with service provision, while Steve Cohen (2001) compares asylum seekers with other compulsorily moved groups; for example, criminals, mental health patients, and people in the care system. He concludes by commenting that: "All these groups have one factor in common: they are effectively regarded as being outside society" (p.214). The arrival of asylum applicants has come to be regarded as a problem, and control is seen as the solution, be it control over access to employment, control over the resources of the welfare state, control over families, or control over freedom of movement.

## Chapter Seven

### Focusing upon the women's actions and experiences

#### 7.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters have looked at mechanisms, practices and assumptions through which asylum seekers' and refugees' lives are influenced. They focused not only on the controlling aspects of institutional structures, but also on the discourse surrounding asylum seekers and refugees, as this can have widespread effects on freedom of action as well. What was also evident from the interviews was how the duality of the system worked. Thus, there were not only restricting conditions, but also supportive structures in place as well, which were providing opportunities for the women to progress in the host society, and in some instances had liberating effects.

The present chapter aims to focus on the women's practices as *individual* or *collective* actors in the asylum setting. It will look at the experiences of the women who were interviewed in West Yorkshire in order to gain an understanding of their actions in exile, and how they cope with such an upheaval. The aim is to analyse their experiences in terms of two themes. The first is *responding to change*, and this focuses upon their feelings of loss and separation, before looking at change and settlement in the host society. The second section focuses specifically upon their practices and actions as *manifestations of agency*, evident in what achievements they had made; and what aspirations they had for the future. By focusing on these specific issues, this chapter shows that ultimately, despite constraining structures, some of the women show that they are not necessarily imprisoned by constraints and are acting in ways that challenge negative perceptions.

As would be expected, there is no 'typical' case. Each woman is unique in her experience, whether that concerns persecution, loss, previous profession or education, or her experience in the asylum setting. Although there are some commonalities between the interviews, the aim is not to make generalisations in this chapter about the overall position of women, but rather to provide an insight into the lives of those who were interviewed, and look at some of the processes at work when women are displaced to another country. The chapter focuses primarily on the accounts of the women asylum



seekers and refugees who were interviewed. Views from the service providers, however, are added at the end of the chapter to complement the women's accounts, and provide another perspective on some of the issues that have been raised.

## **7.2 Responding to change**

It is evident that people bring diverse histories and resources into the asylum arena, thus, it is important when looking at the women's actions, and how they cope in the exile setting, to include a discussion of their past experiences, as these may shape their present courses of action in this country. When looking at general feelings of loss and separation, this section will include a discussion about people's reasons for leaving and journeys to the UK, as well as looking briefly at their life back home in terms of socio-economic status and the people that they supported, or were supported by. The aim is to put their present experiences into context by building up an outline picture of what their lives were like before they came to this country, and what they had been forced to leave behind.

### **7.2.1 Loss and separation**

*"...it is better if you start a new life willingly"* (Samantha, Zimbabwe).

This remark made by Samantha during her interview summed up how many of the women felt about their current situation. Whether they had to leave because of the actions of their husbands, sons or other family members, or whether they had fled because of their own actions, what was apparent was that there was usually a loss of control of their own lives. Unlike other migrants who choose (at the very least to some degree) to leave their home country and move to another, these women experienced a lack of choice in their decision to move. Some of the women may have *chosen* to come to the UK, in the sense that they paid smugglers to take them to a certain destination, but there was still something that had forced them, or their families, to make that decision in the first place.

The reasons that people leave their home country and move to another are well documented and this was not an area covered in great detail in the interviews, as the primary concern was to focus on events within the UK. Nonetheless, to take account of

the context, the women were given the choice of talking about their experiences and most of them were happy to say something about their reason for leaving. What follows are some of the comments that were made by the women about their own or their families' experiences of persecution:

*“There were security men coming in the middle of the night, early hours of the morning, knocking on the door, waking [us] up. [My] husband was arrested...There's lots of people who went into prisons, they imprisoned [me] as well, and that's when [our] whole family decided to leave”* (Layla, Iraq, interviewed with an interpreter).

*“...[my] first son who was active in politics and he had to leave the country. After he left the country, the authority find out they could not arrest him so they started to make problem for [our] family, especially for [me]...[I] decided to leave the country”* (Iran, Iran, interviewed with an interpreter).

*“I've been in my country, member of my Democratic Party...when you are in opposition with someone who is in power, always you are pursued and persecuted...I've been threatened in my house, I've been threatened by letters, I've been threatened by phone calls...my sons' life was threatened as well. So I left because I needed to have a safe place for them”* (Pranvera, Albania).

*“I didn't come because I wanted to come, but because of the situation back home...I was tortured back home...the whole body I was having bruises, and many problems of being tortured...even I developed a kidney problem”* (Samantha, Zimbabwe).

These examples illustrate the range of different experiences that cause a person to leave their country of origin. Some of the women had fled because of the actions of family members. Some were forced to leave because of their own involvement. Pranvera, for example, was a member of the opposition party in Albania. Unfortunately, she now suffered feelings of guilt as she felt that her family's lives had been disrupted because of her actions. She was particularly upset for her sons, because not only had they left all their friends behind, her eldest son was enrolled at university in Albania before they had to flee, but was unable to continue his studies in this country due to a lack of legal status.

Some of the women made reference to severe sexual assaults or incidents of torture that had taken place in their home country; one of them was kept prisoner in her own home during the ordeal. Rose discovered when she came to the UK that she was pregnant as a result of rape, and decided to have an abortion. These experiences of rape and torture clearly had not just physical, but also psychological effects for the women; for example,



Samantha made reference to how difficult the first few months in this country were, and how visiting a counsellor had helped her to begin coming to terms with her experiences.

Samantha, Tina and Aida made reference to the actual journey itself. Tina had travelled with her son by boat from Albania to Italy, and then by lorry to England. Samantha talked about being put on a flight by her uncle, and not even knowing where she was going until she spoke to someone else who was on the same flight, and, although Aida had paid money to come to the UK, she made reference to a similar situation of not knowing where she was going during her journey<sup>114</sup>:

*“...I didn't know where I am, Italy? Germany? I don't know, I just paid a lot of money, I sold what I had to, to save my life and to look after my son and my daughter's life” (Aida, Kosovo).*

What was evident from the interviews was that many of the women had come from some form of traumatic situation involving themselves or other family members. Richmond's 'continuum' (Richmond, 1988, see also Chapter One), can certainly be applied to the women in this study who show differing degrees of autonomy in their experiences of moving from one country to another. Some had made decisions 'in a state of panic', whereas others had exercised a measure of choice at least in their destination and time of travel.

Many had been separated from loved ones, including Samantha, Ruth and Alice, who were forced to leave their children behind<sup>115</sup>. Some had witnessed the death of family members, or learnt of their deaths while in the UK. The following comments highlight the sense of loss felt by the women, but also the fear that they might not see family and friends again:

*“...we left our family. Our parents they are old, who knows that we will see [them] again or not...we left our friends, close friends, we left everything” (Pranvera, Albania).*

*“You think of your family who are alive, think about people who you are separated with. You don't know whether you'll meet them or not” (Beatrice, Burundi).*

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<sup>114</sup> Although she did not say directly in her interview, it was likely that she had paid money to 'smugglers' to get to the UK.

<sup>115</sup> As was shown in Chapter Six, however, with reference to the lack of consideration given to the pre-dispersal situation, separation from family and friends can also occur in this country.

*“...suddenly you miss your friends, you miss your colleagues, you miss your family, so it was extremely hard, you know, I was completely isolated in my flat, and the fact that we were not even allowed, as an asylum seeker of course you are not allowed to work...suddenly I’m on my own, coming from a very large extended family. My father was married to ten wives and you can imagine how big is the family, with over 60 brothers and sisters, and then suddenly you are on your own” (Margaret, Sudan).*

Margaret’s account raises a number of pertinent issues relating to people’s initial experiences in exile. Again there is the loss of, or separation from, family and friends. This is particularly acute when people are used to an extended support network, and can be even more problematic for women who are alone with their children. Cultural and ethnic factors in people’s backgrounds may be a source of potential strength, but there may also be a disorientating disjunction with the host society experience, and people can feel isolated when initially trying to adapt to life in a foreign country. Finally, Margaret makes reference to an issue raised in Chapter Five, and that is the fact that such feelings of loss and isolation are exacerbated by not being permitted to work, or having nothing to do to occupy the time.

The experience for Yvonne, Shabnan and Maryam was different again, as they faced an initial separation from their husbands who came to the UK ahead of them, before being reunited once their husbands had been granted refugee status. This meant that there was a period of a few months where they were left in the country of origin<sup>116</sup>. Despite the differences in their experience, however, they still had similar feelings to the other women in terms of adjusting to a new way of life, and trying to overcome barriers such as language.

Feelings of loss do not just relate to the loss of friends and loved ones, but also to loss of social status in terms of previous profession or standing in the community. For many of the women who were interviewed, their ‘sense of self’ appeared to be linked to their previous roles and experiences; therefore, they described themselves as ‘midwife’, ‘nurse’, ‘shop owner’, ‘teacher’, etc, or made reference to the qualifications they had, for example, if they had been to university. It was evident that the interviewees were a highly skilled group of people, and that these skills and qualifications could be a

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<sup>116</sup> How they felt about being left by their husbands in the country of origin was not something that was explored in the interviews. This situation illustrates how women can be forced by circumstances into playing a key role in the welfare of the family and could be worth further investigation.



positive attribute to this country. It also seemed important for some of the women to talk about how good their lives had been previously, in terms of economic status, social networks, and material possessions, as the following comments illustrate:

*“I am a qualified midwife. I have a degree from Iran...I worked in Iran and then I was happy because I had a good job, good family, good house, everything” (Maryam, Iran).*

*“I am nurse...I worked in children’s hospital...I have car, everything. I have good family, I have good house, big house, good job before” (Iran, Iran).*

*“I am qualified...I had a good situation in my country because my job was good and my husband had a good job as well. So we had many things...I am midwife” (Shabnan, Iran).*

*“I didn’t need to come because I had very good job, my husband had very good job, we had our own house, we had our whole house furnished and beautiful...I’ve worked in my country for telecom company for 22 years” (Pranvera, Albania).*

What was apparent was that a loss of socio-economic status was difficult for some women to come to terms with. This loss of social status was particularly hard for those women with professional qualifications, who, to a certain extent, were used to being self-reliant and independent. For some women, there was also the added burden of taking on a more domestic role than that which they were used to<sup>117</sup>. Pranvera, for example, highlights how her husband’s parents had taken on a lot of the responsibility of looking after her children, and preparing meals, while she and her husband were at work. In the UK, however, without this support, Pranvera now had to take on most of this responsibility herself:

*“I’m not used to staying just at home like housewife and watching TV, or cleaning or cooking...I have my parents-in-law, they were looking after my children since the children been born...when I came here I didn’t know how to cook” (Pranvera, Albania).*

Some of the women also made reference to the loss of material possessions such as houses and cars. Again, this can be linked to social status; however, owning a house

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<sup>117</sup> Kay (1989) makes reference to similar findings in a study with Chilean refugees in the UK. Kay found that many Chilean women who had been active in the ‘public sphere’ found the UK to be more oppressive in terms of gender differentiation, and found themselves ‘forced’ back into the home.

(which is seen as a home) can also be regarded as an important part of a person's sense of belonging.

As was discussed in Chapter Five, the women had had to adjust to the all-encompassing identity of 'asylum seeker', and with this came restrictions in terms of financial support and access to employment opportunities. Their new status also had negative connotations in terms of how they were perceived by the general public. This could help explain why some women were keen to point out that their previous financial situation was very good, and that it was reasons other than economic ones that had led them to this country. They were thus articulating their lack of 'fit' with assumptions in the UK, and in a sense resisting categorisation and a prescribed identity.

Margaret and Savannah had slightly different experiences in terms of the fact that both initially came to the UK from Sudan as postgraduate students. Once they had finished their studies, however, events in their home country meant that it was too hazardous for them to return, so they opted to seek asylum. Like many of the other women, as asylum applicants, they felt as though they were no longer in control of their lives, and talked about the difficulty of living with their new status:

*"...living in campus it's a different life...suddenly I have to experience the other side of it and it was extremely hard...it's like you are not in control of your life...I remember when I handed over my passport, I cried, you know, it's like I asked myself 'who am I now?' It's like you are nobody, that identity is gone and you are just a refugee, you are just a figure"* (Margaret, Sudan).

*"...I'm in the fast student life, you've got friends and then suddenly you have to assume new status if you like...you just feel like you're stripped of any decisions that you have"* (Savannah, Sudan).

This idea of not being able to plan for the future featured in a number of the interviews and related back to a lack of legal status in this country. This often left people in what some of the service providers described as 'a state of limbo'. The women had therefore effectively lost their previous status when displaced, but now also had to wait for a decision to see if they could remain in this country, sometimes waiting for long periods of time, like Michelle, who had waited three and a half years for leave to remain in the UK. The following comments illustrate how the women's lives can be put 'on hold' while they wait for a decision on their case:



*“...everything has just sort of come to a full stop, you can't continue with college, you don't even know if you're allowed to continue to do any course here and you don't even know if your application will be accepted” (Regine, Zimbabwe).*

*“...in these two years [I've] been here, there's no news about [my] stay and everything is just really awful...there is no future, there is no answer” (Mitra, Iran, interviewed with an interpreter).*

*“...it's the hardest time because you don't know what to do, you don't know whether you're going to get refugee status or not...you can't decide, you can't plan” (Margaret, Sudan).*

Some of the women had chosen to occupy their time by doing some form of voluntary work, discussed below.

When talking about their lives back home, the women were able to reflect upon their feelings about what was going on in their country of origin. There was sometimes a sense of conflict, in terms of feeling relieved that they were now in what they regarded as a safe environment, but at the same time feeling divided because they could not forget what was going on back home, and whom they had left behind. Constance, for example, talked about this in terms of feelings of guilt:

*“...I feel guilty as well, maybe I shouldn't come at all, I should stay and fight for my belief, or what I had before I came to England, what I had in my country, and I feel guilt...I have left the home, my family, and maybe, I don't, I don't know, no one knows, only God knows, I could be with my family” (Constance, Angola).*

In some of the interviews, there was still optimism that eventually people might be able to return to what they still regarded as their home:

*“You are divided, you are still hopeful that maybe things will get better, you know, and I will go home” (Margaret, Sudan).*

*“It's very sad because your home is your home no matter how poor it may be...I still feel that one day there should be a solution to this, we'll go back to our country” (Regine, Zimbabwe).*

*“...if you ask most people, including myself, I will see myself wanting to go back home” (Savannah, Sudan).*

The fact that this was still the case for women such as Margaret and Savannah, who had lived in the UK for a number of years, and had built lives for themselves in terms of children and careers, shows that it is possible for people to occupy more than one position simultaneously<sup>118</sup>. Indeed Castles (2003) makes reference to ‘multiple affiliations’, whereby people maintain links with country of origin whilst at the same time building a community in the place of residence. A specific role or action perhaps might re-activate a particular sense of identity, or give it priority. As was noted in Chapter One, identity may be seen especially in terms of roles and actions in particular contexts. Margaret and Savannah’s home orientation, for instance, seemed stronger in the context of their work for the Sudanese community groups.

To summarise, it was evident from the interviews that the whole experience represented a tremendous upheaval for the women. There are so many issues that need to be taken into consideration; for example, their initial reason for leaving, which is often traumatic enough in itself; their journey to this country; the fact that they have had to leave family and friends behind, or may have witnessed the death of loved ones; and finally, the fact that they have been forced to leave comfortable lives in terms of jobs and a general standard of living. On arrival in this country, as has been highlighted in Chapter Five, they then have to adjust to a new status that bestows little in terms of rights, or as Fraser (2000)<sup>119</sup> refers to it, little in terms of ‘recognition’. They are not only devalued in terms of the negative public perception of them, but they are also prevented from participating equally in social life, due to their legal identity as an asylum seeker and the subordination of rights that goes with this, and this can amplify their sense of loss. What will become evident as this chapter progresses, however, is that despite the clearly traumatising experiences and the barriers that the women face, they do not always appear to identify themselves as ‘victims’, as sometimes happens in the literature about

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<sup>118</sup> A ‘myth of return’ can be common, even amongst migrants who have been settled here for many years. Anwar (1979), for example, carried out a study with Pakistani immigrants in Britain and discovered that although many were still very home orientated, and felt that they were here to work, save and one day return home to their kin, it was often the case that settlement became permanent.

<sup>119</sup> Fraser talks about groups of people being ‘devalued’, not just in terms of other people’s attitudes towards them but also in terms of them being: “denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence of institutionalised patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem” (p.113-114). She uses the example of social welfare policies that stigmatise single mothers, marriage laws that exclude same sex partnerships, and policing practices that use ‘racial profiling’. This idea of being denied as an equal partner in social interaction seems to fit the current treatment of asylum seekers and refugees.



asylum seekers and refugees, but instead talk in positive terms about previous accomplishments and present actions. Indeed, it has already been noted, with regards to how they refer to their past lives, that they may resist pressures to ‘internalise’ the external negative constructions.

### **7.2.2 Coping with a new environment**

The aim of this section is to examine the women’s transition from their initial experience of living in the UK to their present situation. Again each account is different, but there appear to be commonalities: in terms of the initial feelings of isolation and bewilderment that come from being in an environment that is alien to them; not knowing anything about the area they were being dispersed to; and not knowing anyone in this country. All of the women, except Margaret and Savannah, had lived in another region before being dispersed to West Yorkshire. They had been sent from various different places including London, Bristol, Dover, Cambridge, Nottingham and Grimsby. As was discussed in Chapter Six, their dependence on government financial support and accommodation left them without control over where they could live, and some were unhappy about being relocated, particularly if they had relatives or friends in other areas. This seemed to exacerbate the feelings of loss and separation that they had already suffered by being displaced in the first place.

Some of the women also talked about their initial experiences in terms of the reaction of local people to their arrival at a specific dispersal site. As was highlighted in Chapter Five, political and media debates can affect the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees at a local level, particularly when the portrayals are primarily negative. The women were well aware of such negative imagery, and some of them made reference to particular incidents of what they felt was racist abuse and ‘anti-social’ behaviour from local people (see Chapter Five). Some informants, on the other hand, had very positive things to say about the reaction of local people. Pranvera, for example, praised the support of a local voluntary group who had helped her a great deal on arrival and continued to support her throughout the asylum process. Samantha talked about how her neighbours had been very kind to her when she first moved to her dispersal site:

*“...they didn’t know us but they brought us some presents and some flowers, just really nice. I felt home, you know, although they didn’t know us, they knew we were asylum seekers, but they were friendly...We got some*

*Christmas cards, some chocolates and some flowers. It was a lovely Christmas” (Samantha, Zimbabwe).*

One of the most important issues for some of the women on arrival in the UK was the acquisition of language. It was evident that lack of English acted as a major barrier when it came to accessing initial support, but also in terms of carrying out taken-for-granted everyday tasks, as in the following:

*“...once I had to go to London to meet my solicitor, and I went to the train station and I had written on a piece of paper, ok, I need a return ticket, going this time and come back this time, so I went up and read ‘OK, I need a return ticket to London, going at that time and coming at this time’, and she asked me two things that wasn’t on my paper, I felt like, what is she saying? She was waiting and there was a big crowd, queue, after me, they were all waiting for me...so that situation make me feel like, no, no, you have to learn the language” (Constance, Angola).*

*“...when you come to another country it’s very hard because first of all it’s language, because if you don’t know about language you can’t contact people” (Maryam, Iran).*

*“...when I came here I can’t speak English...to communicate with the local authority to explain my problems is a main problem” (Iran, Iran, interviewed with an interpreter).*

Most of the women who did not speak English on arrival in the UK, however, had attended language classes to overcome this potential barrier, but had also taught themselves by watching television, reading newspapers and magazines, and mixing with people who spoke English.

To complement material so far, we now set out some of the comments that the women made when reflecting on the situation in their home country, their initial experiences in the UK, and how they feel now. What is apparent is that although, as highlighted in the previous two chapters, there are constraints that limit their freedom in this country, in some cases these seem to be less important to the women in this study than having a general sense of safety and security. Many of the women were grateful to leave behind bad experiences and come to a place where they believed there was freedom and opportunity. Indeed, despite the constraining context, the women still talked positively about the opportunities that were available. Being able to attend college, in particular, was regarded by many of the women as a great opportunity:



*“...there are lots of opportunities of being able to go to college and do something” (Ruth, Zimbabwe).*

*“...if you want to develop yourself, you can develop yourself, there are no restrictions...you are free to do anything that you want to do in your life” (Yvonne, Zimbabwe).*

*“It’s a big difference that we are free mentally. So I am not stressed, I am not [in] fear, I don’t have any threat...here in this country I am free” (Samina, Pakistan).*

*“[We] feel comfortable here...it’s like finding the thing [I] was always looking for and one of them is freedom” (Mitra, Iran, interviewed with an interpreter).*

Despite feelings of frustration about a lack of status, or being unable to work, some of the women were beginning to feel a sense of belonging, particularly if they had lived in the same place for a number of months. For several women, there seemed to be a period of adjustment where, after initial feelings of isolation, people would come to feel relatively settled. Acquisition of language was a contributing factor, but not for everyone.

The ability to establish good support networks, however, was paramount in aiding settlement in an area. These support networks could consist of family, friends or members of organisations that worked with the asylum seeking and refugee population, and it was also not necessarily in a formal group setting that these were formed. Many of the women had been able to forge links not only with other asylum applicants and refugees, but also with members of the local population. In some instances the women felt it was important to have English friends, as this would enable them to ‘practice’ their language skills. As mentioned previously, in some cases the fact that they had children who attended the local schools enabled them to build up such networks. Some of the women, for example, had made friends with other mothers, or were involved in activities, because of their children.

In some cases there appeared to be a process of transition for the women as Aida, Samina and Layla illustrate:

*“In start was very difficult for me...two children...I couldn’t speak English and the temperature was very low...nobody interpret and nobody looked after me. I said ‘oh my god, what did I do’, but slowly, slowly, I think I was born in that area, slowly, slowly...now I can speak, now I can understand, I*

*know where to go, I know what to do, I feel sure in myself, I feel different one hundred percent...And now I am so active, I feel so active. My children going school everyday, they are good in English” (Aida, Kosovo).*

*“...gradually my mum and dad came and then it was OK. Now, because now our family is complete that’s why I don’t feel it too much...then we went to college and we took admission and everything is slowly, slowly, it’s ok. Now it’s our city” (Samina, Pakistan).*

*“...when [I] first heard about [West Yorkshire] [I was] panicking...but once we got here and settled here, the people are very friendly, very nice people, it’s a secure environment, it’s a beautiful town, people are very helpful here. Now we’ve got used to it we hate to go to London, we don’t like to leave” (Layla, Iraq, interviewed with an interpreter).*

Several issues can be noted from the comments above. Relationships with others, for example, are important, particularly the responsibility to children and other family members. The building of contacts and networks also enhances possibilities of roles and interactions that can be very positive for the women. Finally, their choice of descriptive terms (albeit sometimes translated) could be quite striking in pointing to a sense of local attachment (as for example, above, in “it’s our city” or “I think I was born in that area”).

### **7.2.3 Summary**

This first section has briefly outlined two main issues: the feelings of loss and separation that occur as a result of forced displacement, and the process of transition and change that occurs as a person tries to cope in their changed context. It has noted that many of the women have suffered trauma at varying levels, and all have experienced loss of, or separation from, close family and friends. Further to this, they also experience a loss of socio-economic status in terms of leaving their previous profession and standard of living.

In this country, asylum applicants are forced to adjust to a new formal identity, one that carries negative connotations, accords limited rights, and may be racialised. Added to this is often a lengthy period of time waiting to find out if they will be granted legal status. What this section has tried to convey, however, is that the women do not necessarily allow such factors to act as a barrier, and that they can be successful in ‘settling in’ to a new environment. They reveal a transition from their initial experience to their current actions. The acquisition of language is important to this adaptation, but



what seems to be especially useful is the ability to build up formal and informal support networks over time.

Of course each account is different, and there were some women who were not happy with their situation in terms of where they were dispersed to, and the support they had received. However, what seemed to override these issues in some cases, was the fact that it was deemed more important to have a feeling of relative safety and security, than to worry about the level of financial support, or whether they could register with a GP.

### **7.3 Manifestations of agency**

We now take the analysis of women's experiences a stage further by looking at their actions. It must be taken into account when looking at women's agency that some are lone parents, and therefore have the added pressure of childcare responsibilities, as well as all the other commitments they have with reference to their pending asylum cases, such as attending immigration interviews or solicitors appointments. What is clear from the interviews is that most of the women are in some way or another engaged in some form of activity that improves their situation in this country, whether it be paid work or attending the local social events.

As mentioned earlier, there is no typical case, and each woman is at a different stage in the process of settlement. This can be dependent on factors already noted, such as legal status, previous experiences, language, or length of time in the UK, but it can also be very much dependent on the individual and their ability to motivate themselves. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that, as noted in Chapter One, debates about agency cannot just be equated with emancipatory effects. Some people may be surrounded by constraints and demands that cannot simply be turned into liberating resources, and people may act against what seems to be their better interests. Two of the women who were interviewed, for example, appeared to be engaged in very little that was beneficial to their adaptation, and despite having very little English, had chosen to drop out of the language classes. They were now relying upon their children to translate for them, but when their children were at school they were mainly confined to the house. It was difficult to explain why this was the situation for these two women,

although one of them appeared to be in the shadow of a younger male relative. In this situation it was possible that ethnicity or cultural heritage was acting as a constraint<sup>120</sup>.

The section below is divided into two parts: *present actions* and *future aspirations*, and again focuses primarily on the women's accounts, and points to some of the diverse activities that the women are engaged in.

### 7.3.1 Present actions

#### *Education*

It was clear from the interviews that most of the women were attending, or had at some point attended, college. Because of the language barriers that many of the women faced, it was predominantly English classes that were taken, but, some of the women were also enrolled in other classes such as IT, hairdressing and maths. Samantha had recently completed the Home Office 'citizenship' course for those who have received refugee status. In some cases it appeared that the women were keen to do as much as possible, as Samina points out:

*"...I think approximately thirteen courses I've taken there...GCSE maths, key skills English, communication skills, three teaching classes...ESOL, numeracy and literacy, and four computer courses, word process...I want to carry on my studies in [West Yorkshire] university in speech therapy"*  
(Samina, Pakistan).

There appeared to be a real sense of determination to make the most of the opportunities available to them in this country. It was almost as though they had been given a second chance, and in some respects now had freedoms that had not been afforded them in the past. As Yvonne highlights:

*"...I'm going to college, everything is nice, it's just good, you know, you can do things on your own. If you want to develop yourself, there are no restrictions, you are free to do anything that you want to do in your life"*  
(Yvonne, Zimbabwe).

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<sup>120</sup> In a follow-up meeting some months after the original interview it was discovered that one of these women had been diagnosed with Munchhausen's Syndrome after she repeatedly visited the doctor and no illness could be found. Her family had apparently taken her back to her country of origin.



As mentioned previously, being able to attend college was regarded as a major resource, and provided many benefits other than the obvious educational ones. It enabled them to meet other people and build up networks, whether with other asylum seekers or members of the 'host' community. In addition to this, attending college was also a way of keeping occupied, for those who were not permitted to work and were still awaiting the outcome of their asylum application..

### ***Building up formal and informal networks***

As was highlighted in the previous section, the women's social practices and ability to form support networks was vital to their adaptation to the new setting. Many of the women made reference to the fact that they were currently attending some form of weekly event or 'drop-in' centre that was set up specifically for asylum applicants and refugees. Iran and Layla, for example, were attending one of the multi-agency 'drop-in' centres that were referred to in Chapter Six. These visits had two functions: firstly, they were able to get advice and support on issues around housing, education, benefits and employment. Secondly, a visit also acted as a social event where people would meet their friends.

Michelle, Pranvera and Regine were all attending the same women-only group, which again was set up specifically to meet the needs of asylum seekers and refugees, but recognised the need for women-only spaces. As noted in Chapter Six, this group was visited regularly by the researcher throughout this study and appeared to act primarily as a place where people could meet on a social level; however, there were still volunteers in attendance who could offer advice and support if required. It also offered a 'clothes exchange' which Pranvera and Michelle helped to run. It was evident that most of the women who went to this group were regular visitors, although it was predominantly Kurdish women who attended that tended to communicate in their mother tongue. Regine made reference to feeling isolated from the rest of the group because she relied on English. This highlights the fact that just because people are all classified as asylum seekers does not necessarily mean that they will have an affiliation with each other.

Tina, Samina and Shiva were also attending a similar social event that met in a local church hall, but was attended by women and men. There was also usually a representative of the local asylum support team in attendance in case people had any

pressing concerns. Samina and Shiva both helped to cook at this event as each week people would take it in turns to prepare a popular dish from their country of origin. Groups such as this and the one mentioned above provided the opportunity to mix with people from very different backgrounds. Indeed, as Samina points out:

*“When we go to the church [hall] then we sit together, and the people they are from different countries and we come to know about their culture, their food, their mentality, their thinking, customs, everything. We discuss their culture, our culture, that’s why I think they are really very good friends, and it’s a strong relationship between us because we are all asylum seekers”* (Samina, Pakistan).

Contrasting with Regine, Samina thus felt that being an ‘asylum seeker’ was something that created a bond between people despite their different backgrounds, and in this case provided a resource from which they could draw in a multi-cultural context. Once again, each experience is different, as some women make friends with people from many different backgrounds, while others choose to forge links primarily with those who speak their language or share their culture. Despite Regine’s negative experience, what was evident from attending the social events was that there was generally a great deal of mixing between women of different backgrounds, and they appeared to be a good way to bring people together. Once friendships were formed the women would then not necessarily need the formal setting to meet. Also, as has been indicated in Chapter Six, what policy makers, or indeed people working at the grass roots, perceive as ‘community’ does not always correspond with how asylum seekers themselves build up networks. For many women, their support networks operate on a far more informal level, and people will just help each other out, in terms of looking after other people’s children, doing shopping, or taking children to school, because that is what they believe they should do for others without question, and without the need for a formal group to be set up to initiate such support. Furthermore, as has been noted previously, relational issues are important as specific roles, interactions and commitments shape people’s actions as individual and collective agents.

### ***Work practices***

At the time of interview, eight of the women were undertaking some form of work, either in a voluntary or paid capacity. They had a range of different roles, but interestingly all of them were doing something that was caring in nature, whether it was



supporting other asylum seekers and refugees, or helping people generally. What follows is a closer look at the nature of the work they were involved in.

### *Voluntary work*

Samina was still awaiting a decision on her case, but had been given a work permit before the new rules on employment were implemented in July 2002. She had a degree, and a writing certificate from Pakistan, and expressed a desire to be able to use her skills and education in this country. Initially Samina began doing voluntary work at a local community centre, where she taught English, and worked as an interpreter for Pakistani women who came to the UK after they had been married. As she points out:

*“...I am teaching ESOL and working as an interpreter and translator as well...I can speak Persian and Arabic as well, that’s why I am working...I think it’s a big service for the community because they are learning English and I can help them to learn English, these women, because it’s really important to learn English. When you come in the country, the first priority is language” (Samina, Pakistan).*

In addition to her voluntary work, Samina had also been offered a paid role, tutoring part time at the local college. As noted in Chapter Five, Samina was very keen to point out that she was no longer in receipt of benefit and was now paying tax (see also below, in relation to reciprocity).

Pranvera, Beatrice and Alice were also offering their time on a voluntary basis. Alice had become involved in the activities of her local church. She spent a great deal of time helping with the charity shop, befriending people, and teaching bible studies. It seemed that her religious affiliation was an important resource (and this fits with the idea of culture and ethnicity being drawn upon by asylum seekers). In Pakistan, she had done many different jobs, including running a school for girls, social work, and community work, as well as running her own business. Alice’s involvement in so many different arenas had ultimately contributed to her flight to the UK, but now she found it difficult to cope with being unable to support herself:

*“...they told me ‘if you take asylum and then they will give you a house and everything’...I said ‘why should I? Why should government help me and give me residence? This is my duty’” (Alice, Pakistan).*

Voluntary work thus enabled her to reconcile the conflict she had about taking support as it offered her the chance to reciprocate. This matter was raised in Chapter Five, and is a key issue in some of the women's accounts. Many of them do not appear to want 'something for nothing', particularly when they are used to working and supporting themselves. Reliance on state support strips them of their independence so that in the absence of permission to work, some will choose to 'pay back' by doing voluntary work. There are also other reasons for carrying out voluntary work that have been referred to before; for example, it is a method of keeping occupied while they wait for a decision, and it provides work experience and references, as well as giving people the opportunity to practice their language skills. Pranvera and Beatrice were volunteering for organisations that worked specifically to address the needs of the asylum seeking and refugee community. Like most of the women, Pranvera felt that she had many skills that would be an attribute to this country; she was therefore working full time in an unpaid role at a family unit, which offered women-only support with crèche facilities. On arrival at her dispersal area, as mentioned previously, she had received a great deal of support from this organisation, so again, felt as though she wanted to be able to reciprocate<sup>121</sup>.

Pranvera helped people with a range of issues relating to the asylum process, for example, NASS-related problems, education, and solicitors, as well as dealing with incidents of domestic violence. Because she had built up a substantial network of contacts in the area, she was able to liaise with other organisations and refer people to the appropriate services. She also used her language skills with the clients. Thus, not only was reciprocity an issue, but Pranvera also felt that her knowledge of the system and experience as an asylum seeker gave her an advantage in such a role:

*"...I'm working here now because I've gone through all the problems. So other asylum seekers maybe will go through my problems that I've gone through and I will be able to help...I think it's helping women because it's encouraging that you've got on with your life...I've got my own problems, so I'm getting on"* (Pranvera, Albania).

Although she was here with her two sons, childcare responsibilities were not as pertinent for her as they were for some of the other women, because she had her

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<sup>121</sup> Finch and Mason (1993) refer to this as 'generalised reciprocity' suggesting that: "there are instances where people feel an obligation to 'pay back' the support which they have received themselves, by giving the *same* kind of help to a third party" (p.51, emphasis in original).



husband with her for support, and her sons were older, and to a certain extent, more independent. Her work at the voluntary organisation, however, did ‘spill over’ into her personal life and she made reference to the time that she looked after an unaccompanied minor:

*“...we had one unaccompanied child here...I kept him for six months in my house, I support him”* (Pranvera, Albania).

This is similar to a blurring of public and private life that some of the service providers referred to.

Beatrice, on the other hand, had to come to the UK on her own with her young son. She was doing similar work to Pranvera in terms of helping with aspects of the asylum process, but was working for an RCO that she had been instrumental in establishing. This was a group that was set up to meet the needs of asylum seekers and refugees from Africa, therefore it was slightly different from Pranvera’s work in that there was also a focus on maintaining links with people from their country or culture. Like Pranvera, Beatrice had established a wide support network, including people from the other organisations in the area whom she interacted with on a professional *and* personal level. As well as covering asylum-related issues they were keen to encourage social events that would bring members together. Beatrice emphasised the fact that each of the volunteers brought different skills and experiences to the group, which meant that they could cover a range of issues. Language was of particular importance:

*“...we talk different languages...I speak French, there’s Swahili...its easy for someone to come and we can translate for them...I speak even eight, you’d be shocked. People come here, some of them don’t speak English at all, so when they come here it’s even hard for them to see a solicitor, so they need to get an interpreter. When somebody comes here and it’s a problem, we know how to help. What we are trying to do now is maybe get in touch with solicitors in [West Yorkshire], introduce ourselves to them in case they need a translator”* (Beatrice, Burundi).

At a more general level, according to Kofman *et al.* (2000), the reduction of entitlement and in the provision of support has led to an increase in provision of welfare by migrant groups for their own communities<sup>122</sup>. The women in this study were clearly fulfilling

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<sup>122</sup> This support ranges from: “family networks that support relatives when they arrive in a new country, for example with finding accommodation; to broader community networks that help members find employment and housing; through to formal organisations that provide a range of

some of the roles indicated by Kofman *et al.* Furthermore, the idea of ‘bridge building’ is something that was mentioned briefly in Chapter Five. In their role as interpreter or voluntary worker they were operating as a ‘bridge’ between the statutory and voluntary agencies, and members of the asylum seeker and refugee community, as well as between their families and the wider community. This interpretation is supported by Ui (1991) who, as noted in Chapter Two, carried out research with Cambodian refugee women in California. Ui expected traditional norms and values to be present in the exile setting, but found that the women had assumed leadership roles through their economic activities and acted as a bridge between their families and the ‘outside world’<sup>123</sup>.

As has been indicated previously, however, the setting up of support groups sometimes could “be more a reflection of British society than of immigrant inclinations” (Kelly, 2003, p.39)<sup>124</sup>. When looking at Beatrice’s account, we might feel that it was expedient for Beatrice and her colleagues to form this group as they recognised that they are more likely to get their voices heard by this method of collective action. Such activity, however, opened up positive new roles for Beatrice. Since its initial inception, the group had contacted the local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS), and had secured some funding which meant that they were able to run an office.

However, it was also clear in the interview that there were motives, other than just assisting their members, behind such work. Beatrice hoped that it would enable her to make a good impression, not only in the local community, but at a higher level as well, in terms of helping with her asylum application. She was therefore acting collectively and individually. She was working as an ‘asylum seeker’ for ‘asylum seekers’, however, she was also aware that making a contribution, and being seen to have roots in

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services to the community...they also provide advice and information to their communities and act as a bridge to the wider society” (Kofman *et al.* 2000, p.158).

<sup>123</sup> Ui also suggests that: “Whether they work in the informal economy of the Cambodian community or in the social service jobs in the paid labor force, women become the primary breadwinners in Cambodian families...[and] these women come to serve as mediators between the family and the outside world” (p.171).

<sup>124</sup> As noted in Chapter Two, Kelly argues that in British society there is recognition of group needs rather than individual needs. The Bosnian refugees in her study thus formed what she described as ‘contingent communities’, which conformed to the expectations of the host society. Such formal community associations may not have existed in their country of origin, where people may have relied upon extended family networks for support.



an area, might look favourable to someone who has to make a decision on her case, as she points out:

*“...and then they’ll say ‘these people are really trying to help themselves’...Home Office see you are really trying to help yourself” (Beatrice, Burundi).*

Samina also raised a similar point during a follow-up visit six months after her original interview. In an informal chat, she talked about how she had received a final negative decision on her case, but was taking her case to tribunal and hoping that she would be able to stay on the grounds of her work at the local college and voluntary work at the community centre<sup>125</sup>.

### *Paid employment*

The women who were undertaking paid employment, except for Samina, all had leave to remain in the UK. Yvonne and Samantha were both working as care assistants at local nursing homes in their dispersal area. Samantha was employed full time, and although she had worked in Zimbabwe, she felt that in this country she was faced with new responsibilities that perhaps she would not have had if she was still in her home country, as she illustrates:

*“...I’m staying alone, I’m paying my bills, my electric, gas, rent, telephone bills...its really changed because I’ve never done it before” (Samantha, Zimbabwe).*

Yvonne was working part time because she had childcare responsibilities, and was enrolled at the local college as well.

Savannah and Margaret were very similar to each other in terms of their experiences. Both were from Sudan, and as mentioned previously, had come to the UK to do postgraduate study and then decided to claim asylum. Savannah studied Community Development, and Margaret, Development Studies. They had also both been in the country for a substantial amount of time, and were able to talk about the transition from their initial experience to the position that they held now. What follows below is a

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<sup>125</sup> In a more recent meeting with a support worker, I discovered that Samina was still unsure about her status and was forced to give up her job after a period in detention.

closer look at these two women's accounts, beginning with an extract from Margaret's interview, which shows her progression from voluntary to paid work:

*"...I decided that, OK, I'm not going to sit there, even if I'm not allowed to, I'm not permitted to work in this country, I'm going to do something...So I decided to go to the nearest church...I said 'can you put me in touch with my MP', so I managed to find who was my MP and so on, and I said 'OK, I want to volunteer with my time' and that was arranged by MP, you know, sent a note to [a West Yorkshire] City Council, so a job placement was arranged for me which we coordinated together according to what I'm interested to do, but also bearing in mind my own experience...so that is how I overcame first few months...it was very hard to get a job, so then I said 'OK, I'm not just going to give up and sit there', so I was determined that I would make a difference, you know. I know it's hard, everything's very different here, the culture of work, everything, I was determined (laughs)"* (Margaret, Sudan).

She then talks about the different roles she had after this voluntary work, before talking about the position that she held at the time of the interview:

*"... I was working as a part time consultant, self-employed. So, on issues, I gave presentations on issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees, whether they are mental health issues or personal experiences, and then I was involved in the community organisations...I was also working as a programmes coordinator for a very small refugee organisation which deals with raising awareness on some negative cultural practices...At present I work as an advice and information worker. My job is to mainly give advice and information to asylum seekers who wish to return to their country of origin"* (Margaret, Sudan).

Although she states that she had chosen to 'limit her activities' because of childcare commitments, at the time of the interview she was still involved in awareness raising sessions for local practitioners, particularly around issues such as FGM, or domestic violence. She was also a member of the management committee at her current place of work. It took a great deal of determination to overcome the barriers in place, and get to the position that she held today; however, she felt that because of the efforts of refugees like herself, services in the area had improved substantially. In an informal discussion that took place before the interview, she stated that she had been "compelled by the environment and society in the UK to get involved". By this, she was referring not only to the fact that back in her home country, male relatives had looked after her rights, while in this country she had only herself to take on this role, but also the fact that services were not as well developed when she had claimed asylum. In terms of the



debates raised in Chapter One, her actions (and the actions of other women who do similar work; for instance Pranvera and Beatrice) had led to further developments in the support available for asylum seekers and refugees in West Yorkshire. In effect through their work they had played a role in changing the structural context for future arrivals.

Like Pranvera, Margaret also felt that being a refugee herself placed her in a better position to help other asylum seekers and refugees:

*“...having gone through the same kind of experience as any other asylum seekers, whatever problems, difficulties, obstacles...I will have a better picture of what it is all about, all the emotions involved”* (Margaret, Sudan).

This was a point that was reiterated by Savannah who was currently involved in the work of two different organisations. One project focused on reproductive and sexual health among minority ethnic groups, and on this she worked mainly with women asylum seekers and refugees. As she highlights:

*“...it’s easier to talk to somebody who’s been through that process...most of my clients tend to move towards me because I’ve got first hand experience of going through the system”* (Savannah, Sudan).

The other project she worked on was for a local women’s organisation and her role was to try to get women who had dropped out of education, for whatever reason, back into some form of education or training. Like Margaret, she had started off by doing voluntary work in the local community before being offered a paid position.

Both women were also active members of a Sudanese community group, Savannah being a member at a national, as well as local level:

*“I’m also on the committee for an organisation that was set up, the head office is in London...it’s trying to bring together all the Sudanese that are in Europe, well abroad really, America and Europe, to like to talk about the peace process at home, just to be involved in the peace process and see that if peace eventually comes then how people will go back and settle, how people will cope with a new change”* (Savannah, Sudan).

This illustrates once again the idea of ‘multiple affiliations’, because although she had settled into her new life in the UK, she was still maintaining links to her home country. Both accounts also illustrate the women’s ability to occupy different positions; for

example, they made reference to being ‘Sudanese’, ‘refugee’, ‘mother’ and ‘worker’, each of which brings its own responsibilities and is dependent upon which context they are in.

Finally, to return to a point raised in Chapter Five, there was a willingness by some women to accept a lower status than that which was previously held. Looking specifically at Shabnan’s situation, despite her skills and qualifications, she was prepared to accept any job that came along in order to support herself and her family. Although this was difficult for her, particularly after many years of education and training, she believed that this was something that she would have to do in order to progress in this country, and eventually return to midwifery. This idea of accepting a lower social status in order to respond to the demands of life in a different country is something that has come out of previous research with women asylum seekers and refugees. As previously noted, Franz (2003) suggests, with reference to Bosnian refugee women, that even when women were highly educated they would take menial jobs in order to support their families, and behaved more pragmatically than men, when adapting to the host society. She felt that they recognised the need for ‘personal sacrifice’, and that rather than dwelling on the loss of social status “women focused more on their families’ future and on compromises that could advance their social and economic acculturation” (p.97). Similarly, Berghahn (1995) refers to the ‘flexibility’ of women refugees drawing on the example of Jewish women fleeing Nazi Germany. These women were seen to “grasp whatever opportunity offered itself to boost the meagre family income [and] It mattered less to them that most jobs were badly paid” (p.76). Parallel findings may be seen with reference to migrants at a more general level<sup>126</sup>.

Relating these ideas to the present study, we can note that Samantha, for example, was working as a care assistant in a local nursing home and had taken this job very soon after receiving refugee status. In Zimbabwe, however, she had trained as a hairdresser, but had now taken whatever job came along because she was unable to continue with her chosen career:

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<sup>126</sup> Research with Asian elders, for example, shows similar sacrifices by women who want to enable the family to progress. According to Patel and Patel (2002): “In many cases women had laid the foundations for future generations by working extremely hard both within and outside the home” (p.201).



*“...we’ve got English, so they know we can find jobs, though we can’t find exactly what we want to do. But I can find cleaning, maybe industrial, you know, but that’s not my qualification. I’m just doing it because I can’t find a job with my qualification”* (Samantha, Zimbabwe).

Duke *et al.* (1999) have referred to such situations in terms of women having a greater ability to preserve ‘continuity’ in exile, and also being more flexible in the type of employment they will undertake, either paid or unpaid.

### **7.3.2 Future aspirations**

So far, this chapter has given an indication of the exile experiences of some women asylum applicants and refugees. It has explored their life back home in order to put their present situation into context, and has looked at the transition that they have gone through in this country. We have focused specifically on the ways in which women have been playing an active role in supporting themselves, their families and the wider community. The chapter now takes a brief look at their hopes for the future.

As has already been established, the women varied in terms of their education, qualifications, family situation and general experiences in country of origin and in the asylum setting. Thus they had many different hopes for the future, and different priorities in terms of what they regarded as important goals. What did feature prominently, however, was again the desire to be able to work. Shabnan, Iran, Maryam, Ruth, Layla, Shiva and Regine all wanted to return to the career that they had begun in their country of origin. Margaret, Pranvera and Beatrice wanted to continue their work with asylum seekers and refugees. As mentioned in the previous section, they felt they had the benefit of experience. They also expressed a desire to help those whom they felt were at a disadvantage:

*“...I like to work with people who are less, who have less advantage in accessing services...I think being in such an organisation...will give me that advantage of saying something which perhaps represents women more”* (Margaret, Sudan).

*“...I like to work with refugee organisation...I want to work with people who are weak, who has, they have no support, with vulnerable people”* (Pranvera, Albania).

*“I just want to continue with community work, whatever it will be, whether it is for African asylum seekers or any other” (Beatrice, Burundi).*

Yvonne, Michelle, Samantha and Aida all wished to embark upon a new career in this country. For Yvonne, Samantha and Aida this new career was nursing, and they had already taken initial steps towards this by enrolling at college. For Michelle, it was social work that she wanted to pursue, but she was having difficulty because of childcare responsibilities, and the fact that her youngest daughter was ill. Some of the other women also intended furthering their education and qualifications; for example, Shabnan and Samina wanted to return to university, Shabnan to do a Masters in Midwifery and Samina to study speech therapy.

For others, the acquisition of language was still an important priority, as was legal status in this country; people’s goals reflected the stage they were at in the asylum process, and not all ambitions related to the pursuit of education and employment. As mentioned previously, some of the women talked about the future in terms of returning to their home country. There were also those who wanted to move to other parts of the UK, particularly if they had friends and relatives in another area, thus illustrating that secondary migration could be a manifestation of agency, in terms of people acting in ways that improve their situation.

For Layla, Regine and Pranvera, the relational aspect of their experience was prominent, and securing a future for their children was a priority. This was expressed in a desire for the children to make the most of the opportunities presented to them in this country, particularly in terms of education, as Pranvera points out:

*“...trying to help support my children, their education, this is my main aim because I need my sons to be educated...I will encourage them to do more and more” (Pranvera, Albania).*

On the other hand, however, some women were concerned about their children’s future, in terms of them growing up in a country with different rules and customs. Layla, for example, was concerned about what she felt was a culture of alcohol and drugs that existed in this country.

Finally, Samantha and Tina made reference to their hopes of being reunited with family members. For Samantha, this was her 12-year-old son who had been left in the care of



his grandparents in Zimbabwe when his father was killed and she had fled to the UK<sup>127</sup>. For Tina, it was her husband who had been left behind in Albania whom she was hoping would join her and her son.

To summarise, as would be expected from such a diverse group of women, there were a range of different hopes and aspirations for the future. As well as trying to make advances in their careers, or furthering their education and qualifications, the women also made reference to issues such as family reunification, return to country of origin, and travel, as well as wanting to secure a future for their children. As asylum seekers and refugees, they are subject to constraints that can make it difficult for them to plan for the future, yet, it was clear from the interviews, most of the women were making positive steps towards building a future for themselves, and almost all of them clearly prioritised the future of their families.

## **7.4 Views from the service providers**

So far, this chapter has focused heavily on the accounts of the women themselves. Below, we complement these, or in some instances show a different perspective on some of the issues raised, by focusing specifically on comments made by the service providers. These are a useful addition to this chapter because those working at the grass roots can sometimes offer a broader picture as they are able to draw upon their experiences of working with a range of different people. Like the previous section, this one also focuses on the themes of responding to change and manifestations of agency. Again, the experiences referred to are diverse, and no attempt is made to generalise the position of women in terms of some overall ‘model’.

### **7.4.1 Responding to change**

Like the women themselves, the service providers made reference to people's experiences of persecution, journeys to the UK, and general feelings of loss and separation. In many cases there was a real sense of respect for the fact that, after a traumatic experience, the women were able to get to the UK in the first place. They had

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<sup>127</sup> Samantha's son has since come to join her in the UK and is now attending one of the local schools.

particular admiration for the women that came alone, or travelled on their own with young children:

*“...when you hear stories, kind of stuff that has happened to them, it just blows you away...because I just think how did you get here? How do you physically get here with a baby and a four-year-old?”* (Voluntary worker 2).

*“It never fails to amaze me how women on their own can come over here with 3, 4, 5, 6 children...all often young children”* (Support worker 4).

They talked specifically about the sense of loss that comes with displacement. Many felt that this issue was particularly acute for women who were on their own with young children, and had lost the support networks that they previously relied upon. This health worker refers to African women specifically:

*“There’s also in the African communities a whole sense of loss, the social support network is much bigger than ours and particularly women that are pregnant find it really difficult because the pregnancy, the birth, and the aftercare was shared and the woman is supported by other female members, might be mum, grandma, other female members in the local community, and that’s completely obliterated when the person flees”* (Health worker 1).

It was highlighted by another service provider (and referred to in Chapter Five) that women who have come from such a situation, where they are often sheltered and protected by other members of the community, can feel very isolated on arrival in this country, and in some cases can find themselves in vulnerable situations, particularly if they are not used to mixing with men.

In terms of loss, the service providers reiterated the idea that loss also included loss of status, as well as family and friends. They felt that many of the women that they had come into contact with had been professionals with a good standard of living in their home countries. Indeed, some of the service providers talked in terms of people lowering their standard of living when coming to this country, as the following illustrate:

*“...her life here is very, very different to her life when she was in Syria. The standard of living and everything is a lot worse”* (Health worker 2, referring to a woman whom she has worked with).

*“...you can’t underestimate what women have been before and that was a real steep learning curve for me I think, you know, you can get into the*



*position where actually everybody's a victim... We all make assumptions and you see a woman who's living in [West Yorkshire] in a crappy house, with barely anything... she actually has a degree and her husband has a degree, they had good jobs and they had a wonderful house, you know, and they were professionals, and they had a circle of friends... how must it feel if that happened to us? Suddenly someone came in the night and took everything, and then you had to flee, you know, from our really comfortable lifestyle to having nothing” (Voluntary worker 2).*

When reviewing how the women responded to such change, whether that be lower standard of living, or the new responsibilities of life alone in a foreign country, the service providers had similar accounts to the women in terms of talking about an initial ‘culture shock’, and the language barriers and isolation that people faced. They focused specifically on the mental health issues that resulted from the women’s previous experiences, and placed some emphasis on the sexual abuse that women often suffered during conflict. Indeed one voluntary worker noted how:

*“...on the whole, almost every woman that I work with had some experience of brutalisation on that level” (Voluntary worker 8).*

They referred to cases, like Rose, where women had become pregnant as a result of rape, or had contracted HIV and AIDS. Depression was regarded as a normal reaction to such circumstances and they felt that these were issues that needed to be dealt with early on in the asylum process, by counsellors who had the appropriate area of expertise, or they could cause greater anxiety and distress in the future.

Despite such issues, however, some of the service providers felt that, in this country, the women often attempted to maintain their strength and hold on to some sense of stability, if not for themselves, for the welfare of their families. It was felt that the women effectively had conflicting feelings in the sense that, on the one hand they were ‘victims’, in terms of the persecution they had suffered, but at the same time they often had the responsibility of looking after other family members. The service providers highlighted how the women move on from their initial experiences, and in some ways are able to reconcile their conflicting roles and begin to settle into their new life in this country:

*“...all of a sudden they are, some of them, they are head of household... they've lost everything that is stable to them... so we've got huge mental health issues for some of them, dealing with loss and*

*bereavement, but having to be strong, having to be head of the household. They have gone through such a lot and they are coping. A lot are coping admirably, I just don't know how they do it sometimes. They have the responsibility of looking after themselves in a world where they've never had to look after themselves, they've got to deal with men when they don't normally deal with men, they have to approach people in authority that they've never had to do. So, in a way I think it's very, very demanding on them and I think it does have its repercussions, but I think it is quite character building” (Support worker 7).*

*“...there's quite a few women who have accelerated in their language learning and actually, as a result, they may be the key person in the family who speaks English, who can communicate, who can integrate and who is in paid employment, they may be the only person. And that certainly would be a role reversal from their traditional roles. I mean, many of the women work in their own countries but perhaps didn't earn more than their husbands...so, there is a shift, and that, I think, has caused issues for women within their sense of self and also within their sense of family role. It's caused tension between husband and wife...Their freedom is certainly greater it seems here than it has been in some ways before...certainly the opportunities to work, the opportunities to get an education are freedoms that may not have been afforded to them in the past” (Voluntary worker 8).*

*“...when I think of some of the women that came to the first session, the mix of women who were asylum seekers...and just how nervous they were that first time, and now just how, just thriving they are, they're participating in the decision making about what the group wants to do...it's about slowly people finding their feet isn't it? And their needs then change, because now, for some of those women it's about their personal development and looking at training and what they'd like to do, and what skills they can take back, now, because they are sort of saying 'if I do go back home', you know, we've moved on from that 'I can't go home, I can't go home', to 'if I ever could go home I can take back these skills” (Voluntary worker 2).*

These accounts illustrate some sense of conflict, but also the way challenges can effect positive changes, in terms of the women playing key roles in exile. Furthermore they show the transition that occurs in terms of people's needs changing from initial survival to focusing upon developing their skills and looking to building a future whether here in the UK or back in their country of origin.

#### **7.4.2 Manifestations of agency**

In this section there is some overlap between what was said about the women's actions, and the previous section that focused on change and adaptation. As the comments above illustrate, participation was important in helping the women's settlement in this country. Like the women themselves, the service providers made reference to the



activities that women were involved in; for example voluntary work, paid employment, education and training, and childcare commitments. Further to this, there are also all the responsibilities that are part of the asylum process, such as attending interviews, meeting with solicitors, and 'signing' at the immigration office. Again, the issue of reciprocity featured, and it was felt that the women often welcomed involvement, and did not like to be dependent on government support:

*"...a lot of people want to put something back into a system that they've benefited from"* (Voluntary worker 5).

*"...we have women who have been volunteers at the Refugee Council, they've lived here and I've thought, you know, this person speaks very good English and another language...so, I've referred them to the Refugee Council to do voluntary work and I know quite a few people who have been working as volunteers for a long time with the Refugee Council, and they've come back to help us with interpretation...it's really nice to see those people who have been our clients, now coming back and working with us"* (Support worker 4).

*"...you see somebody who's been here a few months and they've had to be quite helped, and then a couple of months later they can help somebody else. I think that's a really important part of them feeling like they're settled here if you can help someone else because you know a little better"* (Education and employment worker 1).

As well as the voluntary work that people were involved in, the service providers also talked about support at a more informal level and referred to how the women supported other members of the local community and built up networks with other asylum seekers that offered mutual support. Again this was regarded as a vital part of coping with life in a different country:

*"...they will get together and like share responsibilities for their children and for cooking and immediately develop like a little cooperative community"* (Support worker 4).

To summarise the main points noted in this section, it can be seen that the service providers complemented the women's accounts by raising similar issues, particularly with reference to feelings of loss and separation, initial feelings of isolation, and a process of transition where women begin to feel settled in an area, build up networks, and in some cases move into education or employment. As was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, people bring diverse histories and resources into the asylum arena, which help shape their present course of action. This issue was reiterated by the

service providers who made reference to how people's background in terms of experiences of persecution, skills and qualifications, status within their community, and family situation could affect settlement in this country. Women who were highly qualified, for example, were seen to be more likely to be involved in some form of voluntary work in order to take the first steps towards employment, but also as a means of keeping occupied. Those who had suffered very severe trauma had psychological issues that needed to be dealt with before anything else.

There were some contrasting perspectives, however, and the service providers sometimes appeared to view the women in terms of them being victims, or described them more as dependents with traditional roles. This does not correspond with many of the accounts of the women that were interviewed for this study. Through their work, however, the service providers come into contact with a broader spectrum of women, from highly qualified women to those who perhaps had very little education and were used to the protection of other members of their community. It was felt that in some cases, the latter group of women were the ones that needed to access the support of the service providers more often, and were therefore the people that they came into contact with the most.

As has been mentioned previously, because asylum applicants and refugees are such a heterogeneous group of people, it is difficult to make generalisations about the experiences of women. What appeared to come out of the interviews with the service providers was that, although the women were subject to a number of constraints, many were managing to cope in this country, whether in terms of establishing themselves as leading members of key organisations, or by building up a network of friends who could offer mutual support. Many of the service providers felt that women had a great deal of strength and tenacity, particularly with reference to being able to look after themselves and their families, in a country that is alien to them, after experiencing, in some instances, the most horrific forms of abuse and torture, or witnessing the death of close family and friends.

## **7.5 Conclusions**

This chapter has offered some tentative observations at the more general level while discussing the experiences of individuals. In particular, there may be roles and



pathways, which present opportunities for women to establish themselves, confirm positive identities through actions, and develop formal or informal collective activity. However potent the effect may be from the negative perception of asylum seekers and refugees, and whatever views government may take of settlement and 'community', women carve out their own spaces as best they can, both individually and collectively. This is in line with their own needs, as well as with regards to their relationships with others, particularly commitments to children and other family members.

As was shown, people can occupy more than one position, and each has different implications in terms of obligations, roles, ability to draw upon services or support, and capacity to act. Some of the women in this study took on a number of different roles at different times; for example, that of a mother having childcare responsibilities, with their position as a volunteer or in some cases as a spokesperson for members of their community. They also had to find ways to come to terms with loss and separation, as well as the trauma they may have experienced in their home country, while at the same time attempting to maintain some stability in their new environment. They showed a will to resist categorisation into the status of mere 'asylum seeker' in the way that they referred to the past, as well as in handling their present and future options. Referring back to the theoretical issues raised in Chapter One, we can see that some women, through their actions, were changing the context for future generations of asylum applicants and refugees, even if only in relatively modest ways.

# Chapter Eight

## Conclusions

### 8.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to contribute to the knowledge about refugees and asylum applicants in the UK, with a specific focus upon the experiences of women, who have often been overlooked in previous studies. The thesis is concerned to understand women as constrained by the circumstances in which they find themselves, as well as having the capacity to act. Thus it explores people's actions in a particular context, focusing upon the practical opportunities and constraints that the women faced, as well as their actions and practices at an individual and collective level. This chapter begins by revisiting the literature review and policy context, before looking specifically at the findings from the fieldwork (as highlighted in Chapters Five, Six and Seven). Finally, it reflects on some of the theoretical debates, as introduced in Chapter One, in light of the empirical data collected during the fieldwork.

### 8.2 Lessons from the literature

Chapter Two examined some key trends and issues from the literature on migration theories, but also on asylum seekers and refugees, with a specific focus upon women. It noted the problem of trying to categorise neatly between 'refugees' and 'economic migrants', drawing on Castles' (2003) idea of the 'asylum-migration nexus' (see pp. 23-26). Political repression is often part and parcel of economic underdevelopment, thus there are complex, multiple reasons for people's mobility. At one end of the spectrum, there are those who can choose a destination on the basis of the benefits migration will bring, while at the other extreme there are those who move in a state of panic (Richmond, 1988). Between these polarities, there are differential degrees of freedom and autonomy with regards to when and where people move. Some of the women chose the UK as a destination, some came to join their husbands, and some had no idea where they were going and were at the mercy of relatives, friends or, in some cases, smugglers.



The importance of this diversity of experiences has been acknowledged in this study, particularly when domestic policy appears to be targeted at 'asylum seekers' as a homogeneously defined group: with the image of a male refugee fleeing political persecution. As Chapter Two illustrated, this does not always correspond to the reality for many women who flee their country of origin. There are of course those who have fled because of political involvement; for example, Alice and Pranvera. However, in several of the cases in this study, persecution occurred because of their association with others. Thus, they were substituted for their relatives, and sometimes faced unimaginable human rights violations, some of which were the same as apply to men, and some specific to their gender. Once in the UK, they assumed an 'all encompassing' identity of 'asylum seeker' which did not always take into account the diversity of their needs, or the different backgrounds, or the skills that people brought into the exile arena, and which helped shape their experiences in this country. There are of course certain things that are seen as vital for settlement for *all* asylum seekers, and these are access to adequate health care (both mental and physical health), financial support, housing, employment, education and training, and the ability to build up networks in the community. What appears to have been the case, however, is an erosion of statutory support for asylum seekers and refugees and an increase in the emphasis on the role of the voluntary and private sector, as well as refugee community organisations (RCOs). Such erosion of support can be seen as having connections back to the trend of restriction that began well over a century ago when a link was first forged between immigration and welfare.

As Chapter Three highlighted, since the beginning of the twentieth century, with the arrival of Jewish refugees, immigration policy has aimed at restricting entry of 'undesirable' immigrants who would apparently be a detriment to the public in terms of their possible reliance on the state. Such restrictive legislation was legitimated in terms of the need to defend the benefits of nationals. Included in the justifications were arguments about protecting domestic workers. There was also another reason for immigration legislation, and that was the desire to defend the British way of life, which is seen to be threatened by ethnic diversity. Lessons from history show different types of 'racisms' appearing in different contexts and being articulated in different ways (Hall, 1978). For example; xenophobia against the Jewish refugees, hostility to Commonwealth immigrants, and more recently the often hostile reaction to the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees (Steve Cohen, 2001; Hayter, 2000). One thing all of

these may have in common is the fear of outsiders, and justifications made on the strength of the need to defend the welfare of the indigenous population. Different kinds of immigrants have been targeted at different times, and the boundaries have shifted between who can belong and who cannot. The restrictive stance taken by governments towards recent arrivals, however, also has to be placed within the context of Europe as a whole. There has been an ongoing process of 'harmonisation' of European policy to stop the so-called 'asylum shopping', whereby people are seen to 'choose' the most generous countries. The aim is apparently 'burden sharing' between European member states, but what has happened is an increase in restriction as countries fall in line with the more punitive regimes (Boswell, 2000; Dwyer and Brown, 2004b; Moraes, 2003).

With reference to domestic policy in the UK, since 1993, there have been five major pieces of legislation focusing specifically upon the issue of asylum and immigration (see chronology in Chapter Three). The Conservative governments in 1993 and 1996 introduced, amongst other things, fingerprinting of asylum seekers, increased police powers, and curtailed rights to social housing and social security provision. The Labour government, although critical while in opposition, continued this trend in 1999, 2002 and 2004, with a host of different measures, including the use of the voucher system (which has now been phased out), restrictions on rights to employment, removal of support for 'in country' applicants (which at the time of writing is under review), and the (re) introduction of dispersal. With reference to this latter development, previous research (for example with Ugandan Asian and Vietnamese refugees), raised questions about its use, particularly with regards to issues of isolation, limited opportunities and facilities at a local level, and secondary migration back to London and other larger cities where there were already established refugee populations.

With reference to more recent dispersal, this study reviewed some of the research that has looked at its effects in certain regions, cities or towns. Research in Wales, Glasgow, Nottingham, Stoke-on-Trent and Yorkshire and Humberside (Carter and El Hassan, 2003; Craig *et al.*, 2004; Robinson, 1999), for example, has shown varying standards of accommodation, services being overwhelmed, lack of specialist health care facilities, general lack of resources, limited engagement by service providers with asylum seekers and refugees, and racist harassment in most areas. Although there is clearly some overlap between these studies and this present one, the thesis differs in its specific focus upon the experiences of women asylum seekers and refugees, and also in the space



given for women to talk about their actions alongside more traditional concerns with structural constraints.

It is hoped that this thesis will be seen as a distinctive contribution to knowledge, especially as I drew together women's voices in what is difficult research territory. At the same time, this thesis has also explored the role of service 'gatekeepers' and how the images of asylum seekers and refugees in popular debates do not match the reality of life for those in exile.

### **8.3 Understanding women asylum seekers and refugees**

This study has shown that there are a number of different factors to take into consideration when looking at the experiences of women asylum seekers and refugees. Firstly, people brought different experiences and resources into the exile arena, which influenced their actions in the host society and formed part of the environment of constraints or opportunities. There was loss and separation, and different experiences of persecution, with regards to abuse of a sexual nature or threats due to political involvement. There was the loss of status, and also removal from extended family networks, which previously provided support. The sense of self was often linked to previous actions and lives: the women referred to themselves, for example, as 'midwife', or 'teacher', thus showing their unwillingness to be categorised according to their current situation, and articulating their lack of fit to UK assumptions. Their present situation with regards to their asylum case was also important, as many were in a state of 'suspension' whilst waiting to find out the outcome of their application, and in such circumstances planning for the future was difficult. There were also concerns about family members left behind and guilt about this.

Despite these issues, these women did not appear to identify themselves as victims, as was evident in the way they described themselves. As would be expected, there was a process of transition from initial culture shock, and possible difficulties relating to language or isolation, to beginning to feel more settled. Establishing some form of support network was vital for this process, whether that be formal support group or informal network. Most engaged in some form of activity that was assisting in this transition. The women were of course at different stages in the process and thus their needs differed. Some were focusing upon initial survival; for example access to health

care, financial support and accommodation. Others' needs had changed to that of developing their skills; for example, by enrolling on college courses. It was clear that their identity, to a degree, was context specific, as they often talked about themselves in terms of being 'asylum seeker', 'mother', 'teacher', 'Zimbabwean', etc. depending upon the situation they were referring to.

Those who appeared to be most 'settled' were engaged in employment practices, either in a paid or voluntary capacity; for example, teaching, advocacy work, or care work. What is evident in these actions is a combination of individual and collective agency. Paid employment did not always result from an individual's pursuit of work or money, as some were engaged in employment with refugee organisations aimed at helping other asylum seekers and refugees. They were thus acting *collectively*, drawing upon their status as refugee or asylum seeker. In addition, their actions were also based on the consideration of their obligations to kin. *Relational* issues thus emerged from some of the interviews as women had to consider the needs of their children or other family members. As suggested in Chapter One, such requirements could be seen as arising from the structural context or environment for action in which people find themselves, because of the influence of these relationships and interactions on what actions people can or cannot take.

For those women who were working in a supportive capacity, they felt that they were the 'experts', having themselves been through the system. They also acted as a 'bridge' between agencies and their clients, particularly when trust was an issue. The idea of reciprocating in return for help, however, was also important. Indeed, as highlighted above, people do not want to be the net receivers of support and there are instances of what Finch and Mason (1993) refer to as 'generalised reciprocity' whereby people 'pay back' the support they have received by giving the same kind of support to a third party. It was clear that the women were drawing upon the resources available to them to better their situation in the host society. Their employment practices, however, were sometimes about helping others in a similar situation.

When looking in terms of the interplay between structure and agency, it can be seen that the women were in some ways changing or elaborating the structural conditions that others would encounter, even if in modest ways. Drawing on the work of Archer (1995, 2000) and Carter (2000), as referred to in Chapter One, we may say that people are



‘involuntarily situated’. In an inherited situation, agents nonetheless pursue their interests, and this results in the transformation or reproduction of the structural situation inherited by the next generation. Put in practical terms, women like Pranvera, Margaret or Beatrice, entered a particular structural situation, perhaps, as in the case of Margaret, one in which there was very little support *by* refugees *for* refugees. Within this situation, Margaret’s actions, or indeed, those of Pranvera, Beatrice, Samina and others, had transformed the structural conditions that will be experienced by another ‘generation’ of asylum seekers. People who are dispersed to West Yorkshire now are able to draw upon Pranvera or Beatrice’s interpretation skills, or Margaret’s cultural sensitivity, not to mention their experiences and knowledge of the system, as well as local knowledge. One service provider also highlighted the belief that some of the ‘run down’ estates in Leeds were now being rejuvenated because of the arrival of asylum applicants and their subsequent settlement in these areas.

In theoretical terms, the women’s actions have thus in some respects become part of the context for future asylum applicants. They have entered a structurally inherited situation and changed the conditions (albeit in small ways) for the next generation. Simply put, their actions have improved the situation for future arrivals (as well as their friends and dependants). Looking at it in these terms, the relationship between structure and agency could be seen as a continual cycle, with the actions of those who are involved now, at whatever level, altering the conditions for the next generation. Service providers at the grass roots are also involved in this process, as they attempt to reconcile their conflicting roles of care and control, and themselves become involved in developing services that will alter conditions for future asylum seekers and refugees. This perspective presents things in a way that is more positive than might be the case with a model of authoritarian social control, despite the weight of negative experiences and restrictive governmental policies. Above all, it places all agents (asylum applicants, refugees and grass roots workers) as potentially having some independent effects, rather than as pliant victims or implementers of oppression.

## **8.4 Practical findings and recommendations**

This study has suggested a general lack of consideration for the needs of women. Some service providers suggested that policy develops either in a ‘gender neutral’ way with asylum seekers being seen in generic terms, or it develops around the assumption that

most asylum seekers are male. Approximately two-thirds of asylum seekers in the UK are male (Home Office, 2004), but one third of a group is quite a large number of people to be overlooked. This seems even more of an omission when this, and previous research, has shown that women's roles are often vital in the exile setting for maintaining stability, as well as in provision of welfare for the family and the community. In some cases it was identified in this study that there was a need for policy makers to take into account the specific requirements of women, as well as acknowledging diversity more generally. Women who had come to the UK from isolated villages, for example, were often apparently potentially vulnerable in mixed accommodation, and one service provider talked about the high pregnancy rate amongst new arrivals. The use of 'Hard Case' support was also not always appropriate, particularly for women with children. More consideration was needed for each individual case in order to take into account people's backgrounds and current situations (this will be talked about further below with reference to dispersal).

Dependency was problematic, in terms of a woman's sometimes 'forced dependency' on her husband if he was the main applicant, or if she had come over to join her husband in this country under family reunification rules (as Shabnan, Maryam and Yvonne had done). For some women, this can leave them not only feeling 'secondary', but also can mean that their husband has control over financial resources and other forms of support. Shabnan's account indeed illustrated such dependence, when her husband left the family home for a few months and she was left without support.

A further issue raised was around domestic violence. It was suggested violence towards women was sometimes compounded by the possibly traumatic move to another country, the loss in status that men often felt, and – following on from this – the possible conflict between men and women, if women became active (in employment terms) in exile while their husbands remained without work. Service providers also suggested that domestic violence often went under-reported because of the fear that it could affect the asylum case, or that by leaving their husband women might be at risk of being deported. There were alleged inequalities between the support offered to women asylum seekers and that which was available to other women resident in this country. For women asylum seekers, the 'burden of proof' fell upon them, and they were apparently expected to access a GP or maybe even the police before they could access a refuge or ask to be placed in different accommodation.



There were of course contrasting views amongst service providers on the position of women asylum seekers and refugees. Nonetheless, what this research has shown is the need to consider that women are not just 'care givers', but have other skills and qualifications of their own that can make a positive contribution. However, the social value of informal caring roles should never be underestimated. Also, women are not necessarily to be looked at only in terms of being 'victims', and indeed, in the way they talk about their backgrounds and experiences, they often do not identify themselves in that way. There were also positive things to be drawn out of the fact that they were women, and fewer in number, as sometimes it was felt that they received more help, and perhaps more sympathy than did male asylum seekers, who were usually the feature of the more negative stereotypes. One service provider, for example, made reference to the negative reaction to men who were seen to 'hang around in large groups', while another highlighted the perception that men were in the UK 'for the women and the night clubs'.

Following on from the above point about negative perceptions, as was indicated in Chapter One, this study aimed to focus upon the influence of structure in terms not only of the constraints of material resources, but also the role that discourses had on asylum seekers and refugees. It was shown that these were deployed, and drawn upon, by politicians, and that people took their cues from such debates when talking about the issue of asylum. There is something of a 'vicious cycle' whereby ideas coming from the 'top down' stimulated public opinion, often coinciding with or responding to media reporting (Statham, 2003). This leads to calls for more restriction by government. From the outset, fieldwork contacts indicated that there were oppositional discourses from those who worked at the grass roots and saw, first hand, the reality of life for asylum seekers and refugees, but these did not seem to hold much weight against the more dominant ideas about why people were coming to this country, and reference to 'bogusness', 'scrounging', 'criminality', and (since September 11<sup>th</sup>), 'terrorism'. In order to change the current negative perception of asylum seekers and refugees that many people seem to hold, the government and 'the media' would need to begin portraying a less one-sided view of the experiences and impact of refugees and people seeking asylum. What was felt by several informants in this study was that 'perception was everything', and until this began to change asylum applicants would face racist

harassment in dispersal areas, and increasingly harsh treatment in terms of access to basic rights and services.

In earlier chapters, two particular examples were drawn upon that exemplify how negative perceptions and misinformation about why people are coming to this country may have helped inform changes in legislation. These concerned the two issues that came out of the interviews most frequently: access to financial support and access to employment. It was suggested that the view that some asylum seekers were simply 'economic migrants' attracted to the UK by the opportunity to work, or by the supposedly generous nature of the welfare system, had informed some of the changes in the entitlement to financial support and employment over the last decade (Bloch, 2000a; Bloch and Schuster, 2002). The two are of course very much interlinked, because removal of access to one makes access to the other even more important.

The government's decision to remove the right to paid employment for those who had not yet received a positive decision was causing particular problems for the women in this study, and was regarded as one of the biggest barriers to successful settlement and integration. The fact that the government chooses, at the same time, to allow entry to 'skilled' migrants shows that there is clearly a deserving/undeserving dichotomy, illustrated in the differential treatment that these different groups have. Some of the women in this study would eventually receive a positive decision on their asylum case, yet, in the meantime they were faced with long periods of dependence, which was not only problematic in terms of trying to 'make ends meet', but also because of the stigma of this dependence and the fact that it does little to dispel the myth that asylum seekers are a 'burden' on the state.

In addition to this, asylum seekers have many skills and qualifications from their countries of origin that are effectively being 'wasted' in this country (Bloch, 1999; Dumper, 2002a). Their loss of status could be frustrating for the women, and long periods without using their skills could have a knock-on effect on their mental health, at a time when they were perhaps already at their most vulnerable. Many were used to working and earning their own money, and thus found dependence difficult to adapt to. They did not want 'something for nothing', and as was shown, wished to be able to reciprocate for the help they had received. People may not want to be the 'net receiver'



of support, and thus might wish to ‘pay back’ the support they have received by contributing in some way (see reference to the issue of reciprocity above).

What has also been suggested is that work does have a number of benefits: in terms of helping to improve English; providing experience and references; and helping integration and socialisation. It is not just asylum seekers themselves who benefit positively, but agencies that employ asylum seekers and refugees, either in paid or voluntary roles, comment on the skills and qualifications they bring. With reference to those who were working in some capacity to help other asylum seekers and refugees, the service providers talked about the language skills they brought, but also something of far greater value: their experience as an asylum seeker, which helps to break down the barriers that can exist between the agencies and those who come to them for support. As indicated above, there is some discourse that is oppositional to the view that asylum seekers are in some way abusing the system, yet it often remains hidden, and little public discussion, particularly in the media, focuses on the contribution that refugees, or even migrants generally, make to this country. Yet, as one Home Office report suggests, “migrants contribute more in taxes and National Insurance than they consume in benefits and other public services” (Glover *et al.* 2001, p.44). This report also highlights the economic and social contribution of refugees, making reference to the Huguenots, the Jews and the Ugandan Asians as examples<sup>128</sup>. With reference to migrants more generally, Spencer (2003) suggests that the health service in the UK would ‘collapse’ without the overseas doctors and nurses who make up a third of its staff.

What also emerged from the thesis was that even for those who do have permission to work, there can be barriers that prevent their satisfactory transition into the labour market; for example, language; non-recognition of qualifications; lack of references; and also discrimination by employers and recruitment agencies. Some women found it difficult to find employment commensurate with their previous position. Linking this into the theoretical debates, as was noted in Chapter One with reference to the work of Archer (1995), agents may be removed from one ‘structurally moulded situation’ only to enter another. Thus, those who have been given a positive decision may have

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<sup>128</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the contribution that refugees have made, see Refugee Council, 2002c.

permission to work, yet enter a situation where there is a different set of structural constraints.

The issue of being unable to work was compounded by the level of financial support that was received and changes to the rules of entitlement. Section 55 of the 2002 Act was something that was troubling many of the service providers who, in their daily work, were seeing increases in homelessness and destitution. It was sometimes the case that people would have to rely upon other asylum seekers whose own situation was far from comfortable. A need was also perceived to rethink the removal of support from those who had received a negative decision, but could not be returned to their home country because the situation was still unstable.

Although, at the time of writing, Section 55 is under review, destitution still remains an issue (Dwyer and Brown, 2004a), and when combined with restriction on the right to work, can push people into vulnerable and exploitative work practices, which are unregulated. The tragedy of the Morecambe Bay 'cockle pickers' is an illustration of this, but also the women who use prostitution or sex work as a resource. These issues of destitution, vulnerability and exploitation, however, are issues that can clearly affect both men and women in the exile setting.

Looking at the controlling nature of the system was also one of the things that this study aimed to do. As was highlighted in previous chapters, there are many ways that the government has sought to control asylum seekers. The recent removal of support from families with dependent children is one example, and could lead to the separation of children from their families, as the only support option is to place them in care. There is an irony here, given the government's Green Paper: *Every child Matters* (DfES, 2003) which, amongst other things aims to promote a strong relationship between children and parents, yet government would separate them in this instance. At a local level, some service providers felt that their roles had become more 'policing' or more like that of an immigration officer, particularly when they had to check on suspected illegal working, or even if somebody bought a car (which it was deemed suspicious for an asylum seeker to do). More generally, there has also been an increase in the use of detention, as well as the introduction of new technology, such as 'iris scans', in order to keep track of asylum seekers.



For the purpose of the thesis, the use of compulsory dispersal was seen to represent a key example of control over where people live and what they have access to, and with its implementation, there have been some problems. A range of issues was raised in relation to West Yorkshire. Dispersal was supposed to occur on the basis of 'language clusters'; however, it was felt that these had now broken down, and that many private providers in particular would take people from any countries, even if there was no one else that spoke their language, thus leading to isolation in some cases. Sometimes mistakes were being made and people from possibly conflicting countries were being placed in the same accommodation. It was also envisaged that people would build up community groups in the areas that they were sent to, yet the rhetoric does not always match the reality for asylum seekers and refugees. Some people do not want to mix with people from their own country or culture. People came together on a much more informal basis to offer each other support, and as Dwyer and Brown (2004b) illustrate, collaboration is not always altruistic in nature as some people will support others for a financial reward. Also, as Kelly (2003) suggests, the formation of community groups can be to some extent more about the expectations of this country than the wishes of asylum seekers themselves. Such associations perhaps would not have existed in their country of origin. People like Beatrice may come together because they understand that collective voices hold more weight in this country, and also that there are other possible advantages of setting up such a group, relating to the perception people will have of those who are willing to help themselves and others. The conclusions about 'community' (albeit from a small sample of informants) indicated that government's discourse on the matter did not necessarily fit with grass roots perceptions, and that specific actions and contexts can be important in the development of roles and affiliations.

This research suggests that there were instances of 'inappropriate dispersal', a concept used in this study to reflect a lack of consideration for a number of factors; for example, bodily circumstances, legal status, previous situation in terms of support, and appropriateness of the area to which they were being sent. Regine, for instance, had been dispersed in the very late stages of her pregnancy, and added to this she had been separated from relatives and friends. In line with previous research, some women in this study also made reference to incidents of racist abuse and anti-social behaviour, the use of low demand housing, poor conditions, and a lack of adequate facilities locally, not just in terms of service provision but regarding affordable leisure activities as well.

More generally, the accounts given in this research showed that people were often unhappy about the lack of self-determination they had with regards to where they could live, particularly if they had spent many weeks or months in another region and then faced another upheaval. Indeed, Aida described her move to West Yorkshire as a 'second migration'. There was seen to be little consideration of the fact that people had friends and family in other parts of the country, and service providers felt that NASS saw asylum seekers simply as 'numbers', with little regard to their history or current circumstances. It was felt that if a little more time was taken to consider people's personal circumstances, then dispersal could be much less problematic for asylum seekers *and* service providers.

Previous research has pointed to a lack of success with dispersal in the past, highlighting a number of problems relating to isolation, varying quality of assistance, and secondary migration of refugees (Dines, 1973; Jones, 1983; Robinson and Hale, 1989). With reference to dispersal to West Yorkshire, it can be seen that similar problems were occurring. Many of the agencies were not prepared for the kinds of issues that the new arrivals would have, particularly in terms of supporting those who were victims of rape and torture, and who were traumatised as a result of experiences in their home country. Although many of the informants from the service providers could understand the need for dispersal, they felt that, in some ways, it could hinder people's ability to settle in a new country, particularly if little consideration was given to individual needs. They feared that as the number of dispersals increased, they would no longer be able adequately to meet the needs of the asylum population. Indeed, at the time of the interviews one health worker was already making reference to a 'dilution' of some of the services in their area. As she points out:

*"...the other issue is the numbers, when they send 120 [people] a month it's really hard to deal with them"* (Health worker 2).

It was thus a problem that as numbers increased, the level of resources available did not increase in line with this, and some services were finding it difficult to meet demand. Secondary migration, however, appeared to be less of an issue than in previous years, as many people apparently were opting to stay in their dispersal region (Leeds Refugee and Asylum Service (2004), possibly because of support networks they had built up but also because the development of services was making settlement more viable.



Relating to this latter point, although there were clearly issues that needed resolving where practices would probably take years to improve, as was indicated earlier, this thesis also aimed to look at structure in terms of resources that people can draw upon, and in terms of the possibly caring nature of the system. Thus, there were many positive developments and initiatives in West Yorkshire that were helping the women to settle, and providing opportunities to rebuild their lives. Included in this was the role of the service providers who sometimes voiced frustration at wanting to be able to help as much as possible, but at the same time being bound by the rules laid down by central government policy. Many of the voluntary and charitable organisations were to some extent less accountable to NASS; however, their day-to-day work was still influenced by changes in policy.

With reference to health care, although it was felt that there was a lack of specialist services for victims of torture, many areas were now developing services aimed specifically at asylum seekers who for whatever reason had trouble accessing mainstream services. The use of separate services, however, was sometimes regarded as a 'double edged sword'. It clearly had benefits, but in terms of public reaction to separate services, there were fears of hostility if the indigenous population felt that asylum applicants were receiving special treatment. This again links to the dominant discourse that portrays asylum seekers as taking advantage of the system.

There were education and training opportunities in every geographical area. Many of the women were attending, or had attended English classes, as well as other courses. Some of the agencies were trying to help people get back into previous professions, although as touched on above there were sometimes problems with this. With reference to schools for children, this was one area that seemed to be praised very highly. People seemed happy with the progress of their children in local schools, but also with the support that they themselves had sometimes received from teachers. This also appeared to be a very good way for people to build up support networks and become more involved or engaged locally, as their children became friends with other children and there was a sharing of responsibility for taking children to school or collecting them. The needs of their children were indeed paramount to the women who wanted them to use every available opportunity to better themselves, particularly through the education system.

Many agencies were aware of the need to provide services that asylum seekers were actually requesting, rather than what the service providers themselves think people need; thus, in one organisation, when it became apparent that the women wanted a 'woman only' space, one was created, which also had crèche facilities as childcare was clearly an issue that created a barrier for many women. Indeed, it can sometimes be the case that women who are used to working and being in the 'public sphere' have to take on more domestic roles in the UK as they are without the networks upon which they would have previously relied.

It seems that over the last few years, service provision in West Yorkshire has come a long way. There is now a great deal of multi-agency work; for example, the use of multi-agency drop in centres, which linked people up with representatives from many different agencies under one roof. Multi-agency work was also felt important for enabling service providers to discuss different issues and talk about best practice. In many cases, however, it appeared to be the case that service providers had to take on multiple roles, not just in terms of care/control, but in terms of advising and supporting around issues that perhaps were not part of their original remit. Although an asylum seeker or refugee may have visited service provider staff in their capacity as 'education officer', or 'employment worker', once trust was built up, the client would return to that individual for help on other matters; for example, housing or benefits. As mentioned in Chapter Four, building up trust was clearly vital when people came from traumatic situations.

An interesting point was raised, however, with regards to the idea that people can in some way become *too* reliant, or in a sense 'institutionalised', particularly if they have received a great deal of support from one organisation or one individual within that organisation. Given the way that NASS operates, asylum seekers are expected to enter the mainstream system very quickly upon receiving a positive decision, and this transition can apparently be more difficult when someone has been helped on a number of occasions<sup>129</sup>. It was therefore suggested that greater support was needed for those who receive a positive decision, including an advice service being available specifically for people in this situation.

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<sup>129</sup> This supports research by Dwyer and Brown (2004a) who also refer to the 'institutionalising effect' of the asylum system, suggesting that it does not always prepare people for life 'at the sharp end' of the welfare system.



Although at times service providers themselves had difficulty with regards to how their actions were constrained by the structures in place, it was indicated that in many ways they were managing to ‘soften’ the effects of policy at a local level, often providing support that helped people to begin rebuilding their lives. The various different service providers also talked in terms that counterbalanced the portrayals by politicians and the media, which is clearly a positive step towards changing the negative perceptions and misrepresentation that so often accompanies debates about asylum seekers and refugees.

Finally, it is important to highlight that, despite the numerous problems created by dispersal, the evidence showed that it also had a positive side in that it enhanced the agency of some of the women interviewed in this study. In particular, it had led to the development of diverse social networks, as the women were housed in areas, or visited organisations, where there were people from a variety of different backgrounds. This included forming friendships with people from the UK, which to many women was seen as an important resource, not just in terms of feeling settled in an area, but also because of the opportunity it provided for people to improve their language skills. In some respects it was an impetus for learning English.

It was also evident that there were positive impacts for women with children, particularly those with school-age children. These women not only expressed satisfaction with the progress their children had made, they also indicated that this was a vital pathway for them to develop social networks. It is possible that for some women, this placed them in a better position than men, who perhaps did not have such avenues to friendship and support.

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# Appendix One

## Interview schedules

### Service providers

#### Background information about the organisation

*Can you tell me a little about the organisation?*

- *Main aims/functions*
- *How many people?*
- *When set up?*
- *Your specific role?*

#### *The people you represent/provide services for*

*What types of asylum seekers do you offer support to?*

- *Age*
- *Gender,*
- *Nationality,*
- *Family situation*

*On the whole, what is the main group that you provide services for?*

*Is that specific to this location?*

*Have there been any changes in the groups that you represent over the last few years?*

- *More/less families*
- *Single asylum seekers*

### Policy

*Do national developments have an impact on your work, or the work of this organisation?*



- *If yes - Can you refer to anything specifically?*

*What is your overall view of the changes that have occurred in policy, particularly over the past decade?*

### **Services**

*What have you found to be the general experience of access to services in .....?*

*Prompts – health care, housing, benefits, legal advice, counselling, language classes/education.*

*Is there anything in particular that has worked well or been useful?*

*What do you feel are the main problems or constraints that asylum seekers encounter with reference to these services?*

### **Local connections**

*Are there any other organisations that represent or support asylum seekers and refugees in this area?*

*Do you have a network of organisations that you consult with?*

### **Refugees role**

*Do refugees or asylum seekers themselves participate in the work of your organisation?*

- *if yes – what do they do?*

*Do you think there are a lot of opportunities for asylum seekers to play an active role in .....?*

*What do you believe are the main obstacles to their participation?*

*What is your view of participation?*

## **Women**

*Do you have women coming to this organisation?*

*What kinds of things do you help them with?*

*Are there any specific needs that women have?*

- *Medical needs*
- *Child services*
- *Counselling*

*Are there any areas where you feel women's needs are not being met?*

*Do they have specific problems in relation to accessing welfare services?*

*Do you think that women are treated differently by service providers, immigration service, or other organisations?*

*Do you think that changes in policy impact women specifically? (can you tell me a bit more about this)*

*Overall, what do you feel are the main constraints that women face?*

*Do they have any particular channels they can use or places they can go in .... if they have problems?*

- *If yes – Where?*
- *What do they help with?*

*What other forms of support do women use?*

- *Other asylum seekers*
- *Local people*

*How useful do you think this support is for the women?*



*What commitments do the women have?*

*Do you know of any women asylum seekers who are active in any organisations in .....?*

- *If yes – What benefit do you think this has?*
- *Who benefits – family, friends, community*

*Do you think there are barriers to women's participation?*

- *if yes – What?*

*From your knowledge, what do you think are the main strengths that women asylum seekers have? (Can you give any examples)*

### **Ways forward**

*Do you think there are important gaps in the services for women?*

*Is there anything that you think could be done to improve the situation for women asylum seekers or asylum seekers generally either nationally or locally?*

*Have you anything else you would like to add about your experiences of women asylum seekers and refugees?*

### **Closure**

*Thank you for your time.*

## **Women asylum seekers and refugees**

### **Background information**

*I'm going to start with a little background information; for example, your name, and where you're from?*

*What is the main language used at home?*

*Who did you come to the UK with?*

*How long have you been in the UK?*

*What is your current situation?*

*Prompts – Refugee, ELR, awaiting decision, other*

*What do you think of the UK?*

*Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself, for example, what situation you've come from and how you are feeling now?*

### **Local area**

*As an asylum seeker, what was/has been your initial experience of living in .....?*

*Are things different for you now?*

### **Services**

*Over the time you've been here, what services have you used?*

*What do you think of them?*

*When you first arrived, how did you find out about the services?*



*From your knowledge of ....., what do you think of the services for asylum seekers generally?*

*Is there anything that you think is missing?*

## **Networks**

*I am asking everybody to talk a little bit about the friendship and personal contacts they had previously, and those that they have now in the UK. Can you tell me about these networks?*

*What networks did you have at home?*

*Can you tell me about the networks/support you have here?*

- *Who?*
- *How did you meet?*
- *Have they been helpful to you?*
- *Which contacts have been most useful?*
- *Do you think you have been helpful to them?*
- *Was it/has it been difficult to make friends?*

*(If have no networks – ask if they would like to have them?)*

*Do/did you have somewhere to go to talk about any problems you were having?*

## **Actions/responsibilities**

*What are you doing at the moment? (Please give as much detail as you can)*

*Do you have any other commitments? (for example family, friends, community)*

*Is this a change from your life at home?*

- *if yes – How?*

*Do you think what has happened to you has caused any other changes?*

*- if yes – Can you tell me a little bit more about the changes in your life?*

### **Ways forward**

*How do you think things could be made better for women asylum seekers in.....?*

*Do you think there are important gaps in the services for women in .....?*

*What would you like to do in the future?*

*Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences here or at home?*

### **Closure**

*Thank you for your time*



## Appendix Two

### Pen portraits

#### Aida

*Her name is Aida, and she is from Kosovo. She is a lone mother with two children; a son and a daughter. At the time of the interview she had been in the UK for 2 years, and had just received a positive decision.*

*In Kosovo Aida lived with her husband. She also had a close family; for example, her children used to play with her brother-in-law's children. Her husband's family and another family had been feuding for more than 60 years, and her husband was killed. She found this a difficult situation because her husband was not to blame for what other generations have done in the past. In her country the marriages are arranged, but she loved her husband greatly and she didn't want anyone else. Her family had not been happy about the match, but she insisted that she wanted to be with him. They finally agreed, but warned her that she would suffer in her life. Aida believes that it was as if her family knew that something bad would happen.*

*She loves her country and found it difficult to leave, but she had to do what was best for the lives of her children, as well as herself. She sold many of her belongings and paid a lot of money to get to the UK. She didn't really know which route she travelled, although she knows she came through Italy. England was the only place she wanted to go because she believed it to be a 'human' country.*

*Her first impression of the UK was that it was very cold. She spent one month in London before being sent to West Yorkshire, and she cried because it was like a second migration for her. When she first arrived in West Yorkshire she found it very hard. All of her neighbours were Pakistani and she found them quite racist towards her. She wouldn't let her son play with their children because they used to make comments to him about her being Muslim but looking like an English woman. The children would also throw eggs at her windows. At times she wanted to move house, however, she would remind herself that she had already moved country, so she is not going to move*

*house. She does not blame the children, as she believes that they are just responding to something their parents have said.*

*She believes that learning the language has been a big stress, on top of everything else. She started learning on her own by watching TV and using her dictionary to look up words that she did not understand. She then met some Albanian boys who told her where she could go to learn English. Her children's school has been very good and teachers are helpful. One of them gave her a TV. They also arranged appointments with interpreters. Her children have learnt very quickly and sometimes come home with certificates for their work.*

*She believes that her GP has not been very helpful. She was getting migraines and was given some tablets to take, but they made her sleepy, which she says is no good when she has two children to look after. She went to the doctors three times and took the medication prescribed each time but it always had bad side effects. She was also seeing a psychiatric nurse because of the problems she had in her country. The nurse told her to stop taking the tablets and gave her some that have helped her.*

*She has had support from one of the local voluntary organisations, which has helped her with her accommodation, and also her recent move to mainstream benefits. They have also been helping her with enrolling at the local college to study nursing. She has made a number of friends in West Yorkshire; however, she points out that if you are not active in school or work it is hard to make friends. Aida has helped some other Albanians by showing them round the city. Sometimes strangers would come to her house because they had been told that she would be able to help them.*

*After two years, Aida says she feels 100 percent different. She feels safe and knows the area. She can understand people, she is active, her children are at school, and they speak good English as well. Her neighbours are also nice to her now. She feels like she was born in this area, she has adapted to the place and does not want to move. She thinks she is more independent now and points out that she can now wear things that she would not have been able to in her country. She says that she wasn't even allowed to wear lipstick before because she was a widow. She was expected to wear a black scarf and just focus on bringing up the children.*



*Despite feeling good, Aida often cries about the past, and wonders what it would have been like if nothing had happened. She just tries to force herself to remain active and keep learning. Aida wants her children to continue to learn as much as they can. She would like to do nursing and is now finding out what qualifications she needs. She hopes things will change when she is working as she will no longer have time to think about the past.*

## **Alice**

*Her name is Alice, and she is from Pakistan. She came to the UK on her own in 2001. At the time of interview she was still an asylum seeker in her first appeal stage. She claimed asylum on religious grounds because she is a Christian and was persecuted because of it. She has three children who she had to leave behind with her mother.*

*In Pakistan, after she finished her studies as a young girl she returned home to find that Christians had very few rights so she decided to work to help the Christian community. She set up a nursery when she came out of education and also began helping people with serious problems, such as girls who have been kidnapped and forced to marry, or have been raped. Around this time her husband converted to Islam and began treating her very badly. She decided to leave with her children but being on her own meant that she was not accepted in the community and people used to throw stones at her.*

*In Pakistan she ran a couple of successful businesses including a beauty parlour and had a very good life financially. She was also a member of the Red Cross. In 1992 she became involved in trying to save a YMCA and things took a turn for the worse. She was being threatened by those who wanted to sell it and in the end had to go to the British high commission and get a visa to leave the country. She came to the UK but did not stay very long because she didn't like it here and wanted to be able to return home. For a while she managed to keep a low profile whilst still helping the community.*

*In 1998, a terrorist group killed a close friend of hers, and her association with him proved very bad for her. She was given protection but began receiving threats. She decided to leave the city for a year and went to Islamabad. She returned in 2000 to start a new business. There was another incident involving the police and the rangers*

*at her house, and later 25 terrorists came to her house and beat her and her family up. They decided to leave again and went to Lahore for three months. At this point she was beginning to despair and decided that they had to leave then country. She returned to her house to prepare to leave but there were five terrorists waiting for her. She was kept prisoner in her own home for three days, naked and without food. She was raped, her sixteen-year-old son was also raped and he was made to smoke heroin. After this she was taken to hospital and they made the decision to leave. Because of 9/11 however they could not go to America which was where all their relatives were living, so her children begged her to go to the UK then she could arrange for them to leave as well.*

*She doesn't want to be in the UK and feels upset because she has met some asylum seekers who say they are here for the jobs, the women and the clubs. She didn't apply for asylum until after six months in the country because she was feeling terrified and didn't know what to do about her children. However this delay went against her case. She had brought some money and jewellery but this ran out she had to go to NASS who sent her to West Yorkshire.*

*She has been taking English classes and computer classes. Most of her time, however, is taken up by church activities. For example, she helps out at the charity shop and also the 'healing room', where people can come and talk about their problems. She is involved with church activities four days a week. She is happy with the services in West Yorkshire and feels that if you want to do something it is available for you. The biggest support to her has been the church. She has recently started taking bible studies. She is also writing a report which details the treatment of Christians in Pakistan, and talks about the abuse of women because she wants to raise awareness of a problem which she believes is overlooked.*

*She would like to go to college and do a childcare course. She also wants to continue with her bible studies because she gets a lot of happiness from teaching other people about the bible. She doesn't know whether she will stay in this country and has thought about going to Australia.*



## **Beatrice**

*Her name is Beatrice and she is from Burundi. She came to the UK in late 2000 with her young son. Government officials killed her parents because her father was head of the region's opposition party. She believes it is particularly difficult for women because although the men are fighting, the women are the ones who are left behind with all the children and no money or means of living. She says that if a woman has found a way to escape then she will have been through a rough time because most people cannot even make it to the border.*

*Beatrice lived in Bristol before being dispersed to West Yorkshire in 2001. At the time of the interview she was still an asylum seeker and was in her first appeal stage; however, she has since learnt that she has been given leave to remain.*

*She didn't have any complaints about the UK except for the Home Office being harsh towards asylum seekers, and the fact that often solicitors made mistakes with peoples cases or delayed sending the relevant documents, which would often reflect badly on the asylum seeker rather than their solicitor. She believes it is very hard when you are fighting for your status.*

*She feels very different in the UK because previously she was studying, but mainly she was married and had a child to look after. Now, however she has to be really responsible because she is on her own without the help of her family. She has to make all her own decisions, and there are different beliefs about male and female roles.*

*It was awful for her when she first came to West Yorkshire because she had never heard of it, and only knew that it was in the North of England. She was nervous because she had heard about riots and racist tension. She was initially taken to a reception centre, and found it hard to interact with people because it was quite an isolated area. She said that many people who were placed in the reception centre would opt to get their weekly voucher and then go and visit friends in London for the rest of the week to escape the loneliness and isolation.*

*After three weeks in the hostel she given a house and things began to improve for her. Initially she was accommodated in three bed-roomed house, however her brother-in-*

*law left and her and her son were moved to a two bed roomed house. She was placed near a few other people who were also asylum seekers from the same areas as her and they became friends. She now feels much happier about living in West Yorkshire because of her friends and contacts that she has made. Her son is also doing well and is at school where he has friends that he plays with.*

*She is currently working voluntarily at an RCO, which she and a few others established. The group was set up in 2000, and there were about nine of them who originally met up, all with different experiences and qualifications. They didn't have an office at first, it was just about forming a club where people could come together as friends. The RCO was officially set up in 2002 and a constitution was drafted. In September they approached the CVS for help and became members. The main objective of the group is to help asylum seekers and refugees by trying to remove the stress, poverty and isolation. They help with all sorts of problems for example housing, finding solicitors, signposting to services. They also organise social events with African music, food and dance and are happy for anyone to attend. They have network of contacts that they can approach if one of their members needs help with any of the above issues. These networks are vital to her because as asylum seekers, they are still limited in what they can do to help. These contacts are also people that she can ring up and talk to on a personal level as well. She speaks around eight different languages, which include Swahili, the main language of Burundi, English and French, as well as a number of local dialects from her country. This enables her to communicate with other asylum seekers that come to her for help. The group is also looking at offering their interpretation services to the local solicitors.*

*The group is useful because she knows what people are going through because she has experienced the same frustrations, she also says that by working as a group it is easier to solve problems. It is also useful to other organisations because they raise awareness of what is available and where to go for help. On a personal level, she likes to be able to feel that she has achieved something at the end of the day, and believes that if the Home Office see that they are working voluntarily to help their own people then they may look favourably upon them. It is also giving her experience that would be able to help her get another job at a later date. She also feels it is helpful for other women to see her working there so then they know that it is not just an organisation to be attended by men.*



*She has no real complaints about any of the services or support she received in West Yorkshire. She was registered with a GP who is very good, although there is often a long wait for test results and appointments, but she believes that this is the same for everyone and not just asylum seekers. She was given a choice of schools to send her son, and as she wanted him to quickly adapt to the language.*

*She believes that it is hard to make ends meet on the financial support they are given, especially when you have to travel to appointments or go and sign very week at the immigration office in West Yorkshire. She was given financial assistance to buy a uniform for her son, but it was not enough to buy all the items at once.*

*She has had no problem with her accommodation because she was housed by the council and believes that they do a very good job of settling people in. She was assigned a social worker who showed her round, got her registered with a GP, and made sure she was settled into her new home. She feels that there is a need for more women-only English classes because language is a big barrier, and also a need for more information about what is available. However, she believes that the first step is to get the women out of their houses and remove the isolation that they feel because they have a lot of talents that we don't know about.*

*At the time of the interview she was praying that she would get her status in this country. After that she wanted to continue working for the community and ensure that this group was well established before she thought about moving on anywhere. Despite the fact that she has a work permit, she would rather continue with the voluntary work because it makes her happy, and she hopes that maybe paid work will come later. She is not sure about where she will live in the future although she has made friends here. She is glad to be in the UK but will never forget what is going on at home, she will always be thinking about her family and friends that have been left behind or fled in other directions.*

## **Constance**

*Her name is Constance and she is from Angola. She came to England with her brother and has been in the UK for one year and five months. She has had her asylum*

*application refused two times. She is now waiting to see if the Home Office will consider her application again, otherwise she will be sent back to Angola. She speaks Portuguese and English.*

*Constance and her brother spent one month in London and a short time in Coventry being sent to West Yorkshire. Two months later they sent her brother to a different town to her and she now only sees her him once a week. She likes West Yorkshire, especially the people and feels safe. She thinks of West Yorkshire as the home she was looking for, which makes the threat of return even worse for her. She has already left one home and does not want to have to leave another.*

*She believes that it is very hard when English is your second language. She started to teach herself by watching TV and listening to the radio. She would also read a newspaper out loud even if she didn't understand it. She then found out about a community centre, which offered English classes, and in one year she could ask for basic things. Although her English is very good, she says that she still sometimes has to ask people two or three times when she doesn't understand what they have said.*

*There has been a lot of trouble with her case. The Home Office was questioning whether she was from Angola, luckily the judge agreed or she would have been sent to Somalia. Her case was refused and she believes that her solicitor did not fight enough. After her second refusal, her solicitor told her that she could no longer help she would need to find someone else. She went to one of the local voluntary organisations and they have tried to help her with her case. Unfortunately she has no money to pay for representation and because things are quiet in Angola her case has weakened. She receives £29 per week; however, as she has been refused twice she is worried that she may lose her support. She is not allowed to work, so cannot afford to pay for a new solicitor herself because it would cost £2000 to go to court, or £500 just to write a letter.*

*She is at college studying health and science. The subject is hard and some days she feels as though she is not learning anything. The teachers speak clearly but she sometimes has trouble understanding the other students. She started thinking she wanted to quit but an adviser told her that it was good that she was doing something, but sometimes she finds it hard to concentrate. She has made friends who are English,*



*Ugandan, Pakistani and Afghani. She likes to know people from different cultures, not just people from her country or in her situation. Her friends have helped her by encouraging her to get out of the house and making her forget about her problems for a while.*

*She hoped it would be a new beginning for her in the UK and that she would be able to forget everything that happened before. But she thinks things are even worse and feels more lost here than she did in her Angola. When she found out that she had been refused for a second time, she didn't know what to do and describes feeling as if she was in a big room, in the dark, with no one around. She is frightened that they can come in at any time and ask her to leave. She now has to sign every week so the authorities know where she is if they want to send her back. She's scared when people come knocking at her door.*

*She does feel more responsible now and has to do things for herself rather than relying on her father as she did before. Now she can only spend her money on what is really needed. She is confident that she can take care of herself. She has also helped other asylum seekers at a voluntary organisation by encouraging them to go to college and learn the language. She feels that by helping others she is helping herself. She may have her own problems, but by encouraging other asylum seekers she can start to feel bold herself. She feels that there should be more voluntary organisations like the one she visits because there are problems that you just can't deal with and need someone else's guidance.*

## **Iran**

*Her name is Iran, and she is from Iran. She came to the UK in 2001 with her teenage son. She also has another son who came to the UK prior to them and now lives elsewhere in the country. At the time of interview she was still an asylum seeker.*

*Her eldest son was involved in politics in Iran, which was why he had to leave the country. After he left the authorities started making trouble for her so she decided to leave as well. Her husband is dead. She used to be a nurse at a children's hospital in Iran and says that she had a very good life and didn't need anything.*

*She spent one month in Bristol with her eldest son before he moved and she was dispersed to West Yorkshire. There were many challenges for her when she arrived because she couldn't speak English and found it hard to communicate with the local authorities. She didn't want to be dispersed because she wanted to live with her son, and some of the local children have thrown eggs and stones at her house and she often felt scared, although things have improved slightly for her as time has gone on.*

*She is happy with the social worker and the interpreter that they provide, and has no problem with the GP. She's not happy with the housing service, however, because her central heating has been broken for three months and her washing machine is not working so she is washing everything by hand. She has a couple of Iranian friends who help her because their English is better and they knew their way round, and she uses the local drop-in centre for asylum seekers although she feels that it is inadequate. In Bristol there was a voluntary organisation that was open four days a week, whereas in her dispersal site there is no such organisation and the council-run drop-in is only for a couple of hours a week.*

*She is attending the local college at the moment. Three days a week she goes to English classes, and twice a week she has computer classes. She is learning English because in the future, if she gets leave to remain she would like to be able to work in a hospital again. She would also like to move to be near her son because she believes that the family should be together. At the moment she feels like she is a prisoner to the support system and that government policy is wrong to separate families.*

## **Layla**

*Her name is Layla and she is from Iraq. She came to the UK with five of her children. Her other children are currently living with her husband. At the time of the interview she was an asylum seeker awaiting a decision on her case.*

*Both her and her husband were dentists in Baghdad. They had a good life and all of their children were in education as well. They had links with people who joined the uprising against Saddam's regime. She was imprisoned and suffered sexual attacks. After she was released the family decided to leave the country.*



*On arrival in the UK she was accommodated in Dover before they were dispersed to West Yorkshire. When they learnt they were to be dispersed they were very anxious because they didn't know where it was. Now they feel settled and think it is a secure environment, the people are nice and they would not like to go anywhere else. She feels very safe here and says that there is the kind of safety that you could only dream about in Iraq.*

*At present she is attending English class at the local community centre and she is doing an IT course. She recently also helped out an Iranian woman who was going into hospital to have a baby and needed someone to look after her children.*

*She is very happy with all the services she has used, for example, education, social services, and GP, and also been helped a lot by other asylum seekers and refugees, and her English friends who she can rely on the way she would have relied on her relatives back home. The only problem she has encountered is trying to get her children into education because there is a lack of information about what they are entitled to do, and some of her children have been sent to schools that are very far from where they live. There are also not many Arabic-speaking Iraqis in her dispersal area as most are Kurdish, but she has managed to make friends with a Somalian family who speak Arabic.*

*She would like to continue to practice dentistry and she is frustrated at the moment at not being able to put her qualifications to use. She feels like she's wasting her talent. She thought about going back to Iraq when the war is over and things have settled down but her daughters do not want to leave the UK. She would just like to build a future for her and her children, although she does sometimes worry about the negative influences in this country, such as drugs and alcohol, which she feels are not really a problem in Iraq.*

## **Margaret**

*Her name is Margaret, and she is from the Sudan. She originally came to the UK on her own as a student. In the Sudan her father is chief of one of the tribes, and she has always been brought up to have an interest in politics, as he was responsible for the welfare of the tribe. When she left the Sudan the civil war had already been going on*

*for a few years but worsened while she was in the UK. She decided to apply for asylum, and after three years was granted refugee status. She has a brother and sister-in-law who live elsewhere in the UK.*

*As she was a student her initial experience in the UK was living on campus with the other students; however, once her studies were finished she had move into accommodation on her own. It was very hard for her and she felt very isolated in her flat, particularly as she was used to a large extended family back home. Her father had ten wives and she had over sixty brothers and sisters. There was a local Sudanese community but most of the members were at least ten years older than her. It was also hard for her because for the first six months of her application she was not permitted to work.*

*Despite this, she said that she was determined to do something so first of all she went to her local church for help and the priest put her in touch with a family who she believes became like an adopted family for her. They put her in touch with her local MP who wrote to the council asking if a voluntary placement could be arranged for her. They arranged for her to begin working with young mothers. During this time she was also offered a job overseas working for UNICEF, unfortunately she was still awaiting a decision on her case at this time and didn't have the correct travel documents so therefore was unable to take the job. She felt that because of this she was not in control of her own life and that she could not make any plans until her status was secured.*

*After her council placement she began working for herself as a part time consultant giving presentations on issues relating to refugees and asylum seekers. She would go to other organisations and raise awareness on issues such as mental health. She then began doing a similar job as a programmes co-ordinator for a small refugee organisation, which was about raising awareness of negative cultural practices such as FGM, but the commuting became too much for her because she is a single parent. She feels that childcare is a big problem in this country, particularly for her who is used to the support of the extended family.*

*She says that things were different for her because it was during the 1990s and she feels that today things have progressed and that there is much more provision for asylum seekers and refugees. There is more awareness of the issues that they face and*



*voluntary organisations have been set up to help. When she was going through the process she had to rely almost 100% on her community who would help with advice about her application but also with practical things like furniture for her flat. The welfare officer at the student union also helped when it came to her application, but other than that there were no other organisations. There was also no separate system with regards to benefits and when she used to go to the welfare office they would treat her as if she was the same as everyone else without realising that to some people the system is very complicated. She also feels that is difficult for people to find work that reflects the level of qualifications they have.*

*She is now working as an advice and information worker for a national refugee organisation. She gives advice and information to people who have come to the end of their asylum process and have to return home. She feels that as a refugee she is in a good position to help people because she has been through the asylum process and knows the problems that people face. She says that she is also very culturally aware and can pick up on things that may be missed by other people. She has tried to limit her other activities to concentrate on this project although she still does some awareness raising presentations; for example, her most recent was about domestic violence from a refugee perspective. She is also a member of a management committee.*

*She would like to continue working on issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees, and would also like to continue with her awareness raising. She also hopes that maybe one day when things have settled down she will be able to go home and pursue her original ambition of using her education to help her own community back home in Sudan.*

## **Maryam**

*Her name is Maryam, and she is from Iran. Her husband came to the UK to seek asylum, and once he was granted refugee status she was able to join him. She has been in the UK for about 18 months. She is a qualified midwife with a degree from Iran.*

*She says it was very strange for her initially in the UK because it is really different, the weather and everything, but now she feels happy here and likes living in West Yorkshire. She is feeling frustrated because she is waiting to hear whether or not she*

*can work as a midwife again. She has sent all her documents and certificates off to register with the nursing and midwifery board; however, she has now been waiting a year and has still heard nothing. In Iran she had a good job and nothing to worry about but now everything has changed and she sometimes feels disappointed with her situation.*

*As well as waiting for a decision on re-entering midwifery, she is also going to language classes at the local college. At the time of the interview she was also pregnant with her first child. She says she has used the GP, the dentist and the hospital. She believes that they are doing their best and she is happy with them. The only problem she talks about is with reference to their previous accommodation, which was very cold. The one thing that she feels is needed is more support for women because when they have children it is difficult for them to have free time to go to college and other places.*

*When she arrived in the UK her husband that told her about the system and gave her help finding things. She also got help from friends, particularly English friends who she prefers to spend her time with because she likes to learn about their culture. It also helps her to develop her language skills. She says that it is very difficult when you come to this country and you can't speak English because even simple things like shopping are very difficult to do.*

*In the future she would like to be able to continue her career as a midwife. She has even spoken to people who work at the hospital who have said they would love to have her working for them, yet at the moment she still has not heard. She says that feels quite useless because she worked very hard at school and university to get that job, and now she feel like she is nothing here. She doesn't want to get a different job because this is what she is qualified in, and this is what she loves doing, she doesn't know anything else.*

## **Michelle**

*Her name is Michelle, and she is from Lebanon. She came to the UK in 1999 with her two daughters. She was also pregnant at the time. She has refugee status, which took three and a half years.*



*She was married to a Palestinian man who was a refugee himself. He worked to help victims of war. She ran a clothes shop. She says they had a good life and her family was very financially secure. The situation became very bad for Palestinians, there was no education, and her husband couldn't even buy a house. There was an incident where she was followed and had to go into hiding. She decided to leave the country. Her husband couldn't come with her because of all the checkpoints.*

*She feels that she suffered a lot in the UK initially. She lived for seven months in a hostel, where her third daughter was born. It was very dirty and her daughter picked up an infection and now has a lot of problems with her liver. It was hard because they had to share facilities, but it was also difficult because there were lots of different cultures and languages living together, and she spoke Arabic and French. Her doctor had tried to find her somewhere to live but couldn't so he had her moved to a hostel in West Yorkshire where she lived for a month. She felt very bad because she didn't know anybody, but then an interpreter came and told her that it was a good place to live, and the next day she was moved into her house.*

*After a few years in the UK she feels completely different. She can speak English and she has friends, although she says that you never forget your family back home. She also talks a lot about the other asylum seekers she has met who she believes are lying about their problems. She thinks the system in this country is flawed because some people get leave to remain when they only here of economic reasons*

*She is in the process of moving because she has a positive decision. She is looking after her children at the moment, especially her youngest daughter who needs a lot of care because she is ill. She did some voluntary work at an organisation but again it was difficult because of her daughter, and the lack of crèche facilities. She has taught herself English because she has been unable to attend any English classes. She goes to all the weekly meetings for asylum seekers and refugees, and at one of the she helps out with the clothes exchange. The voluntary organisations have been very helpful although she doesn't really like to ask for help.*

*She would like to stay in West Yorkshire because she has friends here and it is hard to start from scratch somewhere else. She would like to be able to do some voluntary work but it is difficult with her daughter being ill.*

## **Mitra**

*Her name is Mitra, and she is from Iran. She has been in the UK for two years. She came here on her own, but now lives with her daughter who came to join her later. At the time of interview she was still an asylum seeker.*

*When talking about Iran, she said that despite the fact that it is a very advanced country, there is a lot of pressure on the people because of the Islamic rule and that this pressure was unbearable for the women. She felt that both her, and her daughter were comfortable in the UK, and that they had freedom. They had the opportunity to do what they wanted, and there was equality for women. Despite these feelings, however, she was frustrated because she had heard nothing about her asylum application. She felt that the Home Office needed to understand that people were not coming here for economic reasons, and that for a woman to leave their dependants and also the people that support them, there must be a good reason for doing so.*

*She was initially living in Nottingham before being dispersed to West Yorkshire. She said that she finds it very boring although the people on the whole are very nice. The only problem she has had is in the area she is living which is a predominantly Pakistani Muslim area. She has had some comments from the people who live in her area who have made comments about her clothes and the fact that she does not cover her hair.*

*At the moment she is attending English classes at the local college and her daughter is studying at the local college as well. She is happy with most of the support she has had, especially the asylum team who have helped her the way her family and friends would have back home. She has also made friends with a man who sometimes comes round to visit and takes them on days out. She is not happy with the medical service in this country, and feels that it is not as good as the one she had in Iran. She has a stomach problem and has found it difficult to get appointments to see a specialist. Financially she also says it is sometimes a struggle especially as she has a teenage daughter who wants to be fashionable and neither of them have permission to work. The biggest problem as far as she is concerned, however, is her lack of legal status and the fact that because of this she feels she cannot continue with her life. She believes that her future all depends on the Home Office decision, but if she is granted leave to remain she would*



*first of all like to concentrate on improving her English. She doesn't know what kind of work she will do because she is very weak.*

*She worries about her daughter's future because although she is studying at college she wants her to have more ambition, but again she says that it depends upon the outcome of their case. She does not want to stay in West Yorkshire, and would ideally like to live in London where there is more going on. She says that she also likes America.*

## **Regine**

*Her name is Regine, and she is from Zimbabwe. She came to the UK on her own in 2001. At the time of interview she was still an asylum seeker in her first appeal stage. She has a baby boy.*

*She used to be a temporary teacher in Zimbabwe and was registered to do her studies at college; however, the situation became bad for her and she had to leave. She has since learnt that her father is dead and she does not know where her mother is. She still loves her country and it is very painful for her to hear bad news from home.*

*She was initially staying with relatives elsewhere in the UK until she became pregnant and needed her own place. She went to NASS for help and they sent her to a townhouse. In 2002 she was moved to a hostel and then a month later she was sent to another one, but she was only there a week before she was told that she was to be sent to a hostel in Manchester. She did not have any time to prepare because she was told on the Monday that she would be travelling the next day. She found it very difficult to manage with all her luggage on her own, plus she was eight months pregnant and had to spend five hours on a coach.*

*When she arrived in Manchester she was taken to the hostel. The person who came to meet her had not been informed that she was pregnant. She was in the hostel for a month and then went into hospital to have her baby. From the hospital she was sent straight to her new house in West Yorkshire. She feels very sad about her treatment. She had requested to stay near her relatives so they could help with the baby but they ignored it. She had also managed to make friends with some African people in the*

*hostel in Manchester who could have helped her with the baby but again she was moved away on her own.*

*She is registered with a GP and dentist. Her only complaint is that there isn't enough information and advice; for example, she didn't know what she was entitled to do in terms of college courses, or what was available to her as a mother. She is in private accommodation and doesn't have a caseworker; the only people that come round are the landlord and the health visitor for her son. The house is very far away from town and there have been some problems with her support going to the wrong address. She feels that when they disperse women they should look for the environment that will best support them. She visits one of the voluntary organisations because she was told that she would be able to make friends there; however as yet she has been unable to because she speaks English and most of the women there are Kurdish.*

*At the moment she says her son takes up most of her time and she is very happy to have him. She has done a computer course, which focused on using the Internet although she says it was only shallow knowledge. She feels very lonely at the moment. She is sad because she has had to put her life on hold. She has left everything behind and now doesn't know if she is allowed to go to college and continue with her studies. She would like to be to go to college and then perhaps do teaching or maybe work in a nursery. If she gets a positive decision she would like to move back to where her relatives are so they can help her with her baby. She also talks about the possibility of going home if things improve in her country.*

## **Rose**

*Her name is Rose, and she is from Liberia. She has been in the UK for about 6 months. She has put in an application for asylum but has not yet been called for her interview. She came to the UK alone.*

*The rebels in her country treated her very badly. One day, they came to her house and asked her father for money, he said he had none and they cut his throat and put a bomb in the house. She was taken by the rebels and kept by them for three months during which she was repeatedly sexually abused. She was not alone in this place and she and the others were constantly in fear that they would be killed. Someone came to the place*



*where they were being kept and the rebels fled. She was then taken to the city where she met a friend of her father's who thought all of her family were dead. He gave her some money to get transport out of the country. She has not seen any of her family since the day the rebels came to her house.*

*At the airport in the UK she meets a man who says he knows her and her family, and tells her to come and stay with him and the woman he has travelled with, but she has a lot of health problems. She was bleeding for seven days and had trouble with her back. She asks the people she is living with to take her to the doctor.*

*She is then dispersed to West Yorkshire where she has been for three months. Her health problems continued and she was taken to hospital for a scan and told that she would need an operation. She has not had her period for maybe three months. She is not sleeping and has bad dreams; often waking up crying thinking that someone wants to kill her. She also has headaches that the doctor believes is caused by stress.*

*She would prefer to live in London as she had friends there and in West Yorkshire she has to live on her own. She finds that African food is too expensive and it is difficult to survive on the money she is given. She has received support from a voluntary organisation and says that the women have been very helpful, bringing her food, taking her to hospital, getting her medicine and visiting her at home. She would like to go to school and start making friends there. She wants to study, and then hopefully do business like her father did. She feels safe in the UK and wants to be able to stay.*

*(About half an hour after the interview she was very sick and had to be taken home. I get a phone call later that night from the 'research gatekeeper' telling me that Rose had been taken to hospital. She was pregnant as a result of rape and decided to have a termination. She was kept in hospital for a week).*

## **Ruth**

*Her name is Ruth and she is from Zimbabwe. She came to the UK on her own in late 2001. She was granted refugee status in 2002. In 2002 her young son joined her in the UK.*

*In Zimbabwe she went to college and became a primary school teacher. She had family and friends that she used to rely on support. The problems in Zimbabwe caused her to seek asylum in the UK*

*She found it difficult initially in West Yorkshire, particularly living in a mainly white area. It was hard to make friends and her neighbours did not speak to her. She had to start from scratch, but now has friends and a boyfriend.*

*She has accessed a number of services and feels that on the whole they have been good, particularly the local authority team. She attended a computer course at college but felt that she was being treated differently and didn't learn very much. She wants to return to teaching and has applied to the council, but after a year has still not heard anything. She feels very frustrated about this. The Job Centre has not been very helpful, and she feels that they just give you your Jobseekers allowance without helping you to find a job.*

*In the future she would like to be able to teach again. She thinks that she will stay in West Yorkshire because of the friends she has made. She would also like to eventually own her own car.*

## **Samina**

*Her name is Samina, and she is from Pakistan. She came to the UK two and a half years ago with her younger brother. Her parent came to join them later on. She also has an older brother who lives elsewhere in the UK.. At the time of interview she was still an asylum seeker in her second appeal stage.*

*She applied for asylum on the basis of religious persecution because although she is Muslim, she is from a minority group who face a lot of problems in Pakistan. She had many years of education in Pakistan. She did a BSc in Education, and she also had a certificate from a writing association. When she was at university she was beaten up by a group of people, and she was forced to leave a job that she was doing. The family decided to move to a different town; however, the trouble continued and some people tried to set fire to her house and threatened her family. After that incident her parents gave some money to 'agents', and Samina and her brother were sent to England. She*



*feels that this country is a blessing for women, especially Pakistani women because back home she feels that women are treated like animals. In the UK she believes women are equal.*

*She had lived in another part of England for seven months before being dispersed to West Yorkshire. It was really strange for her at first because she didn't expect there to be so many Pakistani people. Gradually it has become easier for them, especially now her parents are here and the family is complete.*

*She has taken and passed around 13 courses at the local college including GCSE maths, English, communication skills, three teaching courses, ESOL, numeracy and literacy, and four computer courses and word processing. She was very keen to get back into education because she had wanted to do so much in her country but had been unable to.*

*Last year she was volunteering at a local community centre for six months and then she got her work permit, and in 2002 began working at the local college as a tutor. She is also working in a community centre teaching English and working as an interpreter and translator for women who have come over from Pakistan after their marriage. She feels that it is very important for them to learn English as soon as possible. She can speak Persian and Arabic as well.*

*She attends the weekly meeting for asylum seekers and refugees, and helps out with the food preparation. She has recently started some new courses at the college; for example, she is doing word processing level two. When she has any free time she likes to write stories about real life things; for example what it is like for Pakistani women, what happens when they marry and are brought to the UK. Her teacher has read them and offered to edit them for her.*

*She is happy with the services that she has used. The asylum team have been very supportive and introduced her to everything she needed when they arrived. Her teacher has also been a great support to her and the college has been one of the most important things for her.*

*The only problems she mentions were a small problem of a leak in her house which was sorted by the asylum team, and a problem getting a national insurance number when*

*she wanted to start work. She went to the CAB about this and they helped her out. She is no longer in receipt of NASS support because she informed them that she is working. She is currently supporting the family financially.*

*In the future she would like to go to university and study speech therapy. She would also like to continue her part time tutoring work. More importantly, however, she is praying that her case will be settled so she can stay in the UK. It is hard for them to live in their country, they are very poor and do not have the same opportunities as other people. She is just waiting and trying to get on with her life.*

## **Samantha**

*Her name is Samantha, and she is from Zimbabwe. She came to the UK on her own on in 2002. She was granted refugee status in late 2002. She has a son who at present is still in Zimbabwe with his grandparents as his father was shot dead. She had been separated from her son's father for around seven years. She speaks four languages: English, Shona, Dibella and Sitswana.*

*She was a hairdresser in Botswana for five years before returning to Zimbabwe and working as a shop assistant. The problems started for her when she returned to Zimbabwe as the authorities are suspicious about people who have been living away, and think that they are members of the MDC. She was tortured and ended up very badly bruised and also had developed a kidney problem. When the trouble started for her she began hiding out. One night her uncle came and took her to Harare. She didn't understand what was going on but he gave her some new clothes and a plane ticket. He then told her to go with a man that had travelled with them. She didn't know this man but he took her through immigration and onto the plane. He was also going to the UK and it wasn't until they got to the airport that she found out where she was going. He told her that when she got to the UK she should explain to the authorities that she is running away from war and they will look after her. On arrival at Gatwick she did as the man had said, and was interviewed for a long time about her situation. The following day she was taken to a hostel. Initially it was very scary for her and she was very confused. She was also still in pain because of her torture. She was scared that she might be sent back to Zimbabwe where she would have been killed.*



*She was in the hostel for three weeks before being dispersed to West Yorkshire in 2002. She was still feeling distressed because of her experiences. Her housing provider introduced her to the local drop-in centre and from there she was referred to a counsellor. The counsellor was able to relieve some of her stress and she began talking. She even felt able to begin phoning home because previously she had been too scared to. She was also introduced to a voluntary organisation that really supported her and that is when she began making friends. She says that there are a lot of nice people. She has made friends with other asylum seekers who she feels are like family to her, she also talks about the support of her neighbours who bought her flowers and Christmas presents to welcome her to the area. Now she feels happy that she is here, she feels that she is in a safe place. It has given her more responsibility because she is on her own and has to pay her bills and do things without the support of her family. Her only complaint about this country is that people find it difficult to use their skills and qualifications when they are looking for work.*

*At present she is working as a care assistant full time at a local nursing home. She had never done that kind of work before because they do not have nursing homes in Zimbabwe, but she is enjoying it. She has also recently taken the citizenship course at college. She feels it is important for women to learn English and that more effort should be made to help them. She says she has met a lot of people who struggle to communicate and that even to do cleaning jobs they need to be able to talk to people.*

*In the future she would like to go to University to study nursing. She has looked into the courses and is now on the waiting list. She would like to be able to help other people because of the help that she received. She's also waiting for her son to come and join her. She mentions that she would like to be able to drive but she collapsed a few weeks ago due to stress and her doctors have told her that she cant drive for two years. She also hopes that one day she will be able to return home. She loves her country, and if things improved she would like to go home. She feels that no matter where you go, your home is always best.*

## **Savannah**

*Her name is Savannah, and she comes from south Sudan. She came to the UK in 1998 as a student. After her studies she claimed asylum. She has been in the UK five years*

*and has exceptional leave to remain, which runs out in a year and a half. She has a young son.*

*In 1989 she left the Sudan and went to Egypt where she stayed with a friend of her father's. They moved so she moved in with some friends. She was taking some courses at this time. She got a scholarship to go to university in Nairobi and study Community Development, which she did for four years. After that she applied to stay in Kenya because things were still unstable at home. The authorities offered her a place in the refugee camp but she didn't want to live there because she had just got her degree and wanted to be able to use it so she got a work permit and found a job with Save the Children, Sweden. After one year she got a contract with Oxfam UK, and then a scholarship to study in the UK. When she had finished this, she was due to return to Kenya to continue working but the authorities would not let her back and she was told that she would probably be deported to Sudan. She decided that the best option would be to claim asylum. She waited one year before she received a decision.*

*She thinks that the media portrayal of asylum seekers and refugees is very detrimental to their treatment in this country. It does not take into account that people are human beings and that they have come here for a good reason. She feels that it is hard when you have left a traumatic experience to come to the UK, and then face new challenges. She believes that the experience has helped her to become more independent.*

*She had already been living in West Yorkshire for a year before claiming asylum; however, once she became an asylum seeker it was difficult because while waiting for a decision she couldn't get a job. She also met somebody and had her little boy. It was hard for her because she went from being a student to having a new status. She didn't tell her friends that she was now seeking asylum because of the stigma attached to it. It was difficult for her after a career and independence to suddenly be so dependent on the state. She used the Sudanese community for emotional support, as she didn't know anything about the asylum system; for example, she knew nothing about NASS. She was living on some savings that she had from her scholarship; however, when that ran out she began to find out what she was entitled to. She was moved to a hostel, then a house, and she was given NASS support.*



*She decided that she wanted to do some voluntary work after she had her son and began working with a refugee organisation, working with African asylum seekers and helping to organise activities. She was also taking some computer courses to keep herself busy. During this time two job opportunities came up and she applied for them and got the jobs. At one organisation she is a development worker and works on a project that gives advice and information about reproductive health among minority ethnic women. She gives advice about where they can go if they have problems. She finds that clients who are asylum seekers will come to her because she has first hand experience of the system. At the other organisation she is working on a pilot project that is about first step learning for women. The aim is to encourage women who have dropped out of education to get back into it. She is also involved in the Sudanese community, and is on the committee of an organisation based in London that is trying to bring together all the Sudanese in Europe and abroad to talk about the peace process.*

*She thinks things have improved for asylum seekers and refugees over the last three years. There is more awareness of their needs; however, she feels that there will always be gaps, as you can never fully address the needs of someone who is not from this country. Women in particular need more support because when they have children, it often limits what they can do. She feels that more information is needed because people don't always understand the system, and she also thinks that the whole process should be speeded up.*

*She says that it is hard to plan ahead, but she would like to go home if things improved. She will wait and see what happens when her leave to remain runs out. She wanted to use her education in a developing country, and although she is using some of the skills she has acquired, she feels that it would be more beneficial somewhere else.*

## **Shabnan**

*Her name is Shabnan, and she is from Iran. Her husband came to the UK to seek asylum, and after he was granted leave to remain she came to join him bringing their two children with her. She has a degree from Iran, and has done five years education. She worked for ten years as a midwife before coming to the UK. Her husband also had a good job in Iran.*

*She has been living in the UK for 14 months. On arrival in the UK she stayed in a hostel for one month before moving into her house. She says that she likes West Yorkshire, and that she has no problem with the environment or the people, but the weather is very cold. She feels there is freedom for different groups of people, and that they have the opportunity to achieve their ambitions; however, she feels that it is not always easy when you are from another country and that you have to fight to achieve things.*

*When she first arrived, her husband was the one who helped her with access to services. However, he had problems with her financial support because her husband left her in 2002 for a period of three months. Because he was her sponsor she was told that she was not entitled to income support, so for the whole three months she was without any support. She was trying to appeal but they only stated to give her money again once he came back.*

*At the moment she is studying at the local college attending English classes and computers. She has managed to secure a place for herself at university but has to pass the ELITS exam first so she has been studying towards that. She has also sent off an application to the Nursing and Midwifery Board and has been waiting over seven months to hear from them. She has joined employment agency and has tried to get other jobs, for example, at a bakery and warehouse but has been unsuccessful. She also offered to volunteer at the hospital three times but was told that she would be unable to.*

*She feels that women need more support because of their childcare responsibilities. She herself initially had trouble finding a nursery for her children when she needed to go to English classes. The crèche she has found, however, is very good and they have helped her children to develop their language skills. She has a lot of friends that help her, including Iranian and English friends. Her neighbours have been very supportive and sometimes look after her children. She just feels that there are not enough leisure facilities for the family and that the library is not sufficient for her needs.*

*In the future she would like to pass her ELITS and then take up her place at university to do a Masters in Midwifery. She says she would also be interested in doing a PhD as she has a lot of ambition. She says that she might consider moving in the future, although she does not know where she would move to.*



## Shiva

*Her name is Shiva, and she is from Iran. She initially came to the UK with her husband for IVF treatment because they had been trying to conceive for twenty years. After successful IVF, they returned to Iran for five years but then the problems started in their country and they decided to leave and come back to the UK. Initially they did not want to claim asylum and supported themselves for five years whilst living elsewhere in the UK. Unfortunately her husband had two mild strokes and could no longer work to support her and her son. It became too much financially and they could not return to Iran so they decided to claim asylum. They have been waiting nearly two years for a decision. They have a school-age son.*

*In Iran they had a good life because her husband had worked for a telecommunications company and had retired and they were living off his retirement. She had married when she was sixteen and hadn't worked but had been studying at school, and then done a hairdressing course.*

*Once they had claimed for asylum, they were taken to a hostel in London where they stayed for one month. After that they were given a choice of living in West Yorkshire or Scotland. Because of her husband's medical condition they had requested to stay where they were but were told to make a choice so they chose to come to West Yorkshire because it was the nearer of the two.*

*On arrival in West Yorkshire they were taken to a flat before being moved to the house they are living in now. It was very difficult for her because she didn't know anybody. She had made a lot of friends over the five years and now felt as though she had to start from scratch. Her husband felt that there was nothing positive about their experience in West Yorkshire, although she says that her son is happy and that makes her happy. Her son is at high school and they are very happy with his school and the teachers. He has made a lot of new friends.*

*She is currently taking four courses at the local college: English class, IT, maths, and hairdressing. She is very busy with her studies and says that she usually leaves the house with her son when he leaves for school. At the college she has had a problem with one of the tutors who she feels treated her differently to the other students. This*

*situation had to be resolved by the head of department because it became quite upsetting for her. Financially it is difficult for them especially with a school-age son. They sometimes have to buy things that they can't really afford. The housing has also been a problem for them, and the house they are living in at the moment is very damp and the ceiling was leaking. This affects her arthritis and can make it very painful for her. It was very dirty when they first moved in and her husband finds the stairs difficult. They think that things should be tailored to people's individual needs.*

*More than anything she would like to improve her English. She would also like to finish her three-year hairdressing course and then get a job if her health will allow it. If they get a positive decision they would like to move back to where they were living before because that is where their friends are.*

## **Tina**

*Her name is Tina, and she is from Albania. In Albania she had worked in a factory for ten years. She has been in the UK for two and a half years and has refugee status, which was granted after one year. She came here with her teenage son who was present at the interview.*

*(From the outset, her son seemed to be talking down to her and this got worse as the interview went on. He told me that the reason they had fled Albania was because his father was a politician who had got into trouble with some government officials. He and his mother had travelled from southern Albania to Italy by boat, and then from there they travelled by lorry to the UK)*

*On arrival in the UK they were kept in a detention centre for eight days where they were interviewed about their situation. They were then sent elsewhere for three days before being dispersed to West Yorkshire. Compared to the other places she was sent she says that she much prefers to be in West Yorkshire.*

*She says that she would like to thank the manager of the local authority asylum team because they have given her a lot of support, particularly when it came to their accommodation. Because she is a refugee she has moved to mainstream support so she is in receipt of housing benefit and income support. She also had to move out of her*



*NASS accommodation to another area, but unfortunately she has left friends in that area and now feels very isolated. Since she moved to her new accommodation she has found it difficult to make friends because her block of flats is full of young men.*

*She attends the weekly asylum seeker and refugee meeting at the local church. There are other people there who speak Albanian that she always sits with, and there is always a cooked meal. She would like it if there was somewhere for women to go and meet each other because at the moment it is just a mixed group. She says that she is doing the usual work that women do: looking after her son, housework, shopping, and cooking.*

*She is trying to teach herself English at home by reading books and watching TV. She did go to English classes but found it very hard, and also was ill so stopped going. She says that her son gets annoyed with her when she gets things wrong (this is demonstrated in the interview situation when she tries to speak English).*

*In the future she would like to be able to have her husband here in the UK, and they hope that he will be able to join them as soon as possible. She thinks it will be much better for her and her son. She would like to continue trying to learn English at college, and then she will think about doing another course, although she doesn't know what she would like to do. She said that she wasn't bothered about working.*

## **Yvonne**

*Her name is Yvonne, and she is from Zimbabwe. She is married and has three boys. She has been in the UK for seven months. She came to the UK with her three children to join her husband. She has refugee status. She said she used to be a tailor and also did voluntary work in her country. She speaks two languages, English and Shona.*

*She felt that it was good being in this country because you can do many things on your own, and there are no restrictions. For example, if you want to develop yourself at college, you are free to do it.*

*When they first arrived they lived elsewhere in the UK for three days before being moved to a hostel in West Yorkshire. From there, they were then moved to council*

*accommodation. Initially it was very hard for her because she didn't know anyone. She spent a lot of time in the house on her own because her husband is an electrician working for the council. She feels much happier now, however, and she knows her way round the area. She feels that it is a good environment for her family.*

*She is happy with the support she received in West Yorkshire, and has not had any problems because her husband came to the UK ahead of her and helped her find the things she needed. She mentions that the family is registered with a doctor and that two of her boys are at school.*

*At present, she is working full time as a care assistant at a nursing home. Although there are people at work that she talks to and shares a joke with, she has not made many friends, and says that this is something she would like to do. She is also doing a part-time IT course at the local college three hours per week. She describes her three commitments as her children, her job as a carer and her college work.*

*In the future she hopes to be a nurse, and has applied for a three year nursing course that will either start in September or January if she is successful. She would like to continue living in West Yorkshire.*



## Appendix Three

### Sample interview transcript

#### Interview with Pranvera, 7/2/03

Lisa: *OK, I just wanted a bit of background information from you, like your name, where you're from, how long you've been here, who you came with, that kind of thing*

Pranvera: *yeah, my name is Pranvera and I'm from Albania, I came here, over here 2 years ago with my family, my husband and two sons. So we here in [West Yorkshire] since July 2001.*

L: *how old are your sons?*

P: *my older son is now 21 and the youngest is 16.*

L: *OK. What's your current status?*

P: *Erm, I've been through whole process for asylum seekers here, I've got a refusal from Home Office, and, erm, I've got right to appeal against the refusal so I've been in court with my husband, so the judge has given us the right decision, full status, but we are still waiting because Home office as right as well to appeal against the judge decision, so our case now is in tribunal but we don't know yet, are we going to another trial or that's it, we can have straight away our full refugee status, so just now I'm waiting and I'm anxious, the pressure (unsure) because you are in this stage that you have gained something that you dreamed all the time and you had problem, you dreamed here, I didn't dream before when I came here to have right to have decision and stay and work, get on with my life, now I've got this life, but still I don't know*

L: *you don't know whether you can stay or not?*

P: *yeah*

L: *do you want to tell me a bit about the situation you left?*

P: right, I will tell you little bits, briefly I mean. I've been, in my country, er, member of my Democratic Party. The Democratic Party is against, in opposition with The Socialist Party who is in power now, erm, the Socialist Party has been in power for half century in our country, and, in our country the Democratic came from the end of 1990, the start of 1991, anyway, erm, it lasted until 1997 and in 1997 the Democratic Party which was in power collapsed, then again the Socialist party's in power and it's not any different, it's just a little bit different from a dictatorship, communist style, so everything is (pause) the crime, the contraband (p) and the, when you are in opposite with someone who is in power, always you are pursued and persecuted, even if eminent person, because, for example I have been in a lot of demonstrations against what they are doing now, erm, since 1997 and now they have done nothing for their own people, they have just done for themselves, nothing for the people. And, so I needed to leave, to flee my country and find somewhere, some place for my children and for my family because I've been threatened so many times, and even I've been threatened in my house, I've been threatened by letters, I've been threatened by phone calls, I've been threatened and now I'm frightened, even because my name is in newspaper and everywhere, so (p) er, I fled, I fled because I needed a safe place, I didn't need anything else, I was working, my husband was working, my son's were going to school, even, I think I disrupt, I destroyed their lives and I feel, sometimes I feel very bad for them because my older son also had to (unsure) university, I (Pranvera becomes upset when talking)

L: I'm sorry

P: erm, and, er, my younger as well was going high school and continuing with his education, but when you are in trouble you don't think that what's going to happen for the future, you just want to flee, to escape this trouble, so you don't know what's going to happen in your future, I just wanted to escape from my trouble and I came over here and now, OK for younger son it's good because he's continuing in the high school here, but my older son cant go in university because he hasn't; got refugee status, if he hasn't got refugee status is not entitled to go to university, so he's not allowed to work, he's not allowed to go to university, so what can he do? Anyway, so, I didn't need to come because I had very good job, my husband had very good job, we had our own house, we had whole house furnished and beautiful with (Pranvera is crying) I'm sorry



L: *no, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry*

P: *(p) so we came here and it was a different life for us, it was different life. Let me get a tissue*

L: *sorry lets stop (we stop and get some tissues)*

P: *when you think what you left, and when you compare what you find here.*

L: *is it different to what you thought it would be?*

P: *yeah, yeah, but as I say before, you think, when you are in trouble, you think how can you escape from this trouble now, you don't think for the future what's going to happen, or it's better to say that I couldn't believe that it's going to happen like this, I thought maybe I would find someone who can trust me, and giving all my evidence, and all my things and evidence in writing and things, you (unsure) not one, but two, you (unsure) but still fighting for two years. I escape because I needed to escape, I was, my life was threatened, my son's life was threatened as well, so I left because I needed to have a safe place for them, peace, I needed for myself peace and to get on with my life, but, I don't know sometimes work good, sometimes not, so it's the destiny of people it's not (p)*

L: *what do you think of the UK, what's your initial experience of living here?*

P: *in what sense?*

L: *when you and your family first arrived here in [West Yorkshire] what was it like for you?*

P: *I find very good people here, I have not any problem with people, I had not any problem with neighbour, I had no problem with no one here in [West Yorkshire]. Might be it's me, because I haven't caused a problem, but if I cause problems, or if someone cause a problem it would be trouble, but maybe it's me (p) anyway, I find very good people since I came and I had not any English, I didn't know where shops and where nothing in [West Yorkshire], even when I came here in [West Yorkshire], I came just*

*with my younger son because my husband and my older son they'd been separated from me from Home Office. Home Office had split us in this time, and when I came here, erm, they dispersed me and my younger son in [West Yorkshire] and husband and my older son they kept in detention, detention centre in Oxford, and they kept them for nearly two months, then, er, there's one organisation is bail detainees immigration, something like, I didn't know, but someone from Kosovo helped, I didn't know anything I even, I didn't know, I thought what's going on with me? What's wrong? So then they were in this organisation, this small organisation and there were barristers so they helped, and [voluntary organisation] helped as well, and my husband and my son both came after two months, they were released and they came over here (p) But, to be honest I haven't had any problem with people, just I have problem with government (laughs)*

*L: (laughs)*

*P: I escaped from my trouble, I escaped from my trouble from government in my country, I'm fighting again trouble with government but in a different way. So, I had no problem with people here, everywhere they've been nice, they've been very compassionate and when I told them my problems I think they've been very kind and helpful with me, especially [voluntary organisation] which is the reason why I'm working now here, because I've gone through all the problems, so other asylum seekers maybe will go through my problems that I've gone through and I will be able to help, how to cope and, from my experience, so, and the other reason is because I'm not used to staying just at home like housewife and watching TV, or cleaning or cooking, I'm used to always go out and keeping myself busy because I have my parents-in-law, they were looking after my children since the children been born, and, er, so I've been free all the time, even when I came here I didn't know how to cook because it was my mother-in-law always cooking, so I needed to face now and to look after them, to cook for them, for everything, in ways that (unsure) duty now. So other reason why I'm working here is I need to keep myself busy and when you keep yourself busy and you see the other problems from, others problems, other asylum seekers problems, so you might forget yours, you keep your mind busy with others and you cant remind yours, and the other thing is just I wanted, the whole help [voluntary organisation] has given to me, to pay back something, to help them in some, when I know because I've got a lot of skills from my country, so I could use here and, so, that's the reason why I'm working.*



L: *how long have you worked here?*

P: *erm, one and half years.*

L: *is it like, you do volunteering?*

P: *volunteer, yes*

L: *how many hours do you do?*

P: *everyday, ten till five everyday*

L: *so what kinds of things do you help the women with here?*

P: *women here with all sorts of problems, with their benefit, with (p) what sort of problems, they need or they have got problems, some mistakes, for example, from their solicitors, they need contact with their solicitors, they need to arrange an appointment with their solicitor, they need to arrange appointment with hospitals, or they need, er, to inform NASS for change in address, and Home Office are changing your address because they disperse you, and from my experience I've got from my experience is, they disperse you here but again they need to be informed because they, maybe they, someone hasn't got recorded, changes recorded, so, and problems with their benefit because sometimes they make mistakes with benefit, I mean NASS support (unsure) asylum seekers, and we need to know, to listen, to listen to the client and then you can decide, we need to be very careful because maybe sometimes they lie and we don't, from my point of view I don't want to be in front, or face someone and sound like stupid, like I was stupid and I didn't realise that it was (unsure) say to her or to him, so (p) and the, when, after you listen the problem, you need to decide what to do, what procedure to do. Sometimes you need to go through the solicitor if there is problem with the solicitor, or with their case, you need to go (unsure) for example yesterday, before yesterday I've been dealing with one woman from Cameroon, and her NASS support was stopped, and was something like mistake, but when I spoke with her solicitor he said that her case is ongoing, but when I spoke with duty officer in NASS, she say we haven't got her appeal for, so, that's why her case has failed, so I don't know now who*

*is the mistake, so then I spoke, when I spoke with duty officer and asked what do you want me to do? And she said we need to fill, to photocopy the form of appeal and fax it to us, then this form was to her solicitor, and I rang again the solicitor and said please, these are the numbers, fax numbers, phone numbers, contact with them because she's in trouble, and since yesterday, day before yesterday, it was not finished because you need to go so many times, talk with someone and then you get passed to someone else and you get passed to someone else, you need to go and get solicitor, so, a lot of like this problem, but main problem is with NASS support. We have no problem with the solicitor, we can get through straight away with them and leave it with, or tell them the problem or (unsure) and they can sort out, but the problem is with NASS (p) We work in here because we have classroom for women, we have crèche and we need to look after them and see, like observation (laughs)*

*L: (laughs) when you and your family first arrived in [West Yorkshire], how did you find the access to the services, the GPs and the language classes and stuff like that? How was that for you?*

*P: Er, yeah, was very, for myself, for my point of view, for my experience, for me it's been very easy because, it's funny when I say to someone else, but I've been brought here in [voluntary organisation] by one Syrian, and even just he tried to explain to me by body language because I didn't know anything, and he said 'I will send you, I will take you to a refugee organisation that can help you', then I said 'I don't know where I am now, even I don't know where to go, and which road to choose', just I had Pakistani shop where I used to buy things there, shop there, and he say 'OK, I'll come into your house, and I'll pick you up and we will go round', and he did and so I found it easy because I found [voluntary organisation], that, everything was for me easy because they arranged everything, GP, classes and everything I needed, for example, faxes, to fax things NASS, Home Office, solicitor, even they advise me for a solicitor because I didn't; know that I needed solicitor (laughs) It was so stupid, when I think now, I think oh my God, how could I have been so, I can't believe. So for me, it was so easy for me after that. But, I'd been here more than one month like I was died, I didn't know where I was until I met by chance this Syrian man, I will say man because he was older than 40 years old. And so I was dead, I didn't know, I couldn't speak any English, I don't know where I was, I haven't never heard about [West Yorkshire] (laughs) Because if you see,*



*in my school time I've learnt geography but we learnt map and just the big cities. London, Birmingham, Leeds, Newcastle, but not about [West Yorkshire] (laughs)*

*L: (laughs) how long did it take you to learn English?*

*P: Er, still I'm learning, still I'm learning, I'm teaching myself everyday, I'm trying to teach myself, keep myself busy and if I find something that I can't understand, I write it down quickly and straight away I'll open my dictionary and find out what does it mean, every day I find new words and keep going, learning.*

*L: from your knowledge of [West Yorkshire], what do you think the services are like for asylum seekers?*

*P: Brilliant, wonderful, I can't, because I've been through myself, from my experience and other experience I have got, because every day I'm in contact with all services, I'm in contact with Technical College, I'm in contact with GPs, I'm in contact with all services in [West Yorkshire], even with Job Centre, Clare House, everything, so from my point of view they are going very well, very helpful and very kind and, yeah, very good.*

*L: do you think that there's anything missing, any services that are missing for asylum seekers?*

*P: Er (p) by working with them you can find out that, oh, maybe this one, we need to focus on this one (unsure) for example we've been working with [college] so then they decided to open the cooking classes here as you have seen last Tuesday, and then they decided to open every Tuesday for six or seven sessions, so this is particularly for single male who want to come, they can go and learn how to cook, but I mean, by working with people or working with asylum seekers or by working with refugees you can understand that something is missing here, so you need to fill it. So, when we, when I came here for first time [voluntary organisation], I don't really know where is the [voluntary organisation]? Down there, just one room with no window, just one door and was so small, and was so small office with one small sitting room, and now, by working with asylum seekers and the asylum seekers we increase and increase every day, so then was the demand that we need a big space, and the big space came, and*

after the big space came, we say that we need space for women, just for women, because mainly Kurdish people then they are Muslim, then they have like rule that women can't be in front of men, there is like a rule, so we needed a space just for women here, and created the space here just for women, and like sitting room for chatting and when they've got any problems. For example, last week we had problems with a woman, came, she had domestic violence and she fainted here and, oh my God, when paramedics came I said I need treatment now myself because I was gone pale, and I couldn't move, I was just by myself, yeah, I couldn't move her, even I couldn't move her leg because she was so fat, and, er, and just I, someone by chance came here, someone who needed help for herself here, she wanted to fill the form for NASS 35, and NASS 35 is when they've got decision and like splitting the asylum seekers, splitting the client between NASS and job centre, Jobseeker's Allowance, so she needed to fill this form, and I said please (Name) go upstairs and see if (Director) there. She came and (Director) is not there, go upstairs and say (Co-worker) please come downstairs, because I was dealing with her and couldn't ring the paramedics. (Co-worker) came down here and he helped, he rang ambulance and ambulance came in twelve minutes, so, I was relieved a bit. But one thing, you can understand and realise is we needed classes just for women here so we had, we are in partnership with [college], so they've got class here downstairs, just for women, and upstairs is just for men or is mixed because African women can go, and so, we needed crèche because they've got children, so we have crèche. We need kitchen because we need to make cup of coffee or tea, to feel themselves like in their home, in their house, so we furnished and we made like house here so that women would come and have got any problem and they would feel warm here like in their house, not like office, like you are going like official things, but it is like warm and make them feel relieved that (p) erm, women that has got small baby, they've got access here to feed, breast feeding their child, their children. So, and I think we need now more to deal with the garden, for summer, and we have plan to do some projects with children in summer, and we have projects to do with parents, with parents with small babies, how they are coping with the children, and how they can educate, how is their experience and things, and so next week (date) of February we've got a project with early project is setting up a childcare partnership so, erm. Now by chance because she is (gesturing towards a woman that has come downstairs) the solicitor, by working with asylum seekers, so that we need, [solicitor] is doing surgery twice a week in [voluntary organisation] helping their clients when they've got any urgent problems,



*if they can't go and make an appointment straight away in their office, they can come here and they can meet the solicitor here.*

*L: do you think it helps the women that you work here as well, you know, to see you working here?*

*P: Er, yeah, I think it's helping women because it is encouraging that you've got on with your life. You can't stay just at home and live like weak person, and I've got my own problem, so I'm getting on, so I need to go on with my problem, help other people's, forget mine. So I have not time to think about mine. If I could stay home, what would I do? Just work for two hours, clean, cook and then think and drive crazy (laughs) I think it helps. So, it's encouraging, for example, 'I'm in your situation, I know how you're feeling, I know your experience, I've been through same'. It seems that I have compassion, I'm not saying the British have not here, I'm not saying at all, even I, I'm very happy, but in their eyes they will see that I'm asylum seeker myself so I've been through. They will get advice from me, what I've been through and I would say from my point of view, from my experience, I would say do like this, and this is right, this is wrong. So, this is life.*

*L: have you made a lot of friends or support networks while you have been here?*

*P: yeah, I've got plenty of friends now. I've got friends not just in [voluntary organisation], I've got friends in [women's group], I've got friends, where? In education service, I've got friends [reception centre], I've got every, now I can't remember, but I've got very good friends and they always supporting me, helping me now to get on with my work here [voluntary organisation], my work here in family unit. Because I can understand everything, but sometimes you have no courage, you need to make sure yourself is this right or not, and can go on, so I've got this support, the support of everyone here in [voluntary organisation] from the Director of [voluntary organisation] who, she has got very good experience, she's got diploma in counselling, diploma teacher, she's got very good experience working with asylum seekers and refugees more than three years, and she's gone through all the procedure and all the rules for asylum seekers and refugees since the refugees and asylum seekers came here in [West Yorkshire], so I've got, I'm lucky that I've got her support every day (laughs)*

*and from [women's group], I've got support from [women's group worker] and from [women's group director] do you know [women's group director]?*

*L: no*

*P: she's director manager for [women's group], yeah. Plenty of individual people that I know, from education service and from my son's school. There is good support even, they like my son because thank God I've brought up very good children. They don't put me in trouble, I've been the one that has put them in trouble, but I didn't mean to put them in trouble anyway, so they like, all teachers from head teacher to the common teacher in school, they like my son, I've got plenty support from them, I've got support even they've written to Blunkett in brail to support my son. So I've been amazed, and in this town I've been very, very lucky to be honest, and, I mean, I'm, as I say before, maybe it was my son that attracted them to support him in some way, but in the other side I will thank them for it, because it doesn't matter if you are good behaviour or good manner or, they don't mind, but my son being in right path they have helped him, so, they have helped him so much, even when he came here he hasn't any English, so now he is fluently, so he is learning English, Spanish and very good in Italian, so he can speak now Italian, Spanish and English as well.*

*L: how many languages do you speak?*

*P: er, I can understand Italian but I never spoke, so that's why, because in my country we used to have Italian channels, I had satellite in my country so I could get, I could watch all Italian channels so I can understand but I never spoke, so that's why I cant, I can understand but I cant speak and, but the thing is that I can speak and I can understand Kosovan, because it's completely different, different from Albanian. Kosovan, North Albanian, middle Albanian, they've got different dialects and it's very difficult for one word, for one name, they have got, each dialect have got their own name. So, for example, Kazoo's got their own dialect, they've got plenty words completely different from Albanian, and north has got different from south*

*L: but you can understand all the different//*



P: *yeah, I can understand, I can speak. Er, we had one unaccompanied child here, he was from north of Albania and when he came here, and I kept him for six months in my house, I support him, and he, for the first time he couldn't understand my son and my son couldn't understand him, so I needed to be a translator and interpreter between them sometimes, and when I asked him, for Christmastime we had turkey and he asked me 'what is this meat?', and I say 'turkey', and he say 'no, I don't understand that', then I say to him in north of Albania name, in middle, in south, in Kosovan, four names, he say 'no, I'm sorry, I don't know', this is because he was from the remote village in north of Albania so maybe they don't know about turkey. So, and my son was amazed, 'mum, four names for turkey, four names just for turkey?' Completely different names (laughs)*

L: *(laughs) for turkey*

P: *just for turkey (laughs)*

L: *(p) what would you like to do in the future?*

P: *what I would like, as soon as I would get my decision, I will start working, I will get on by working and I will work full time, I do not want to work part time, to work all day long, I do not want to be stupid in my house and staying home. Work and getting on with my life here, trying to help support my children, their education. This is my main aim because I need my sons to be educated, good education, to have their (unsure) education, university, have as much as they can, and I will encourage them to do it even if they (unsure) but I will encourage them to do more and more. And I will help as much as I can people, not just asylum seekers, but who has got, who I know that they need help and I can give help. I'm not saving my help.*

L: *what kind of work would you like to do?*

P: *Er, main thing I like to work with refugee organisation, for my experience, actually I have been working in my country, I've worked in my country for telecom company for 22 years, 22 years, and I've done in telecom company different jobs so I've got experience in different, I've been working in office, I've finished high school, economic school, high economic school, so I've been working in like counter in company, I've*

*been working like supervisor, with twenty, twenty-one, twenty-one reception, so I've done very different jobs there and (p) but main thing that I'm thinking now what just I need a decision, as soon as I will get decision I think that I just want to work in refugee, I want to work with people who are weak, who have, they have not support, with vulnerable people. I want to work with them, just to help, help everyone, not just, British who, if I can help them I will not say no.*

*L: so, from you initial experience of living in [West Yorkshire], how do you feel now?*

*P: I feel that I'm from [West Yorkshire] (laughs) one year and I feel (unsure) I feel that I'm from [West Yorkshire] and I belong here, and even, I've heard here so many asylum seekers they get a decision and they go somewhere else, they like to go in London, or the big cities, but I don't like to go anywhere, I do like to stay here. I do not want to lose, I do not want to lose no one here, even if small child, if I know, I do not want to lose it (laughs) Even you, I don't like to lose you, I would like to see you in future maybe sometime*

*L: yeah, you will (laughs) (p) For women asylum seekers, how do you think things could be made better for them?*

*P: in what terms for example?*

*L: kind of like in the services or the support available, do you think there's anything that can be improved for women?*

*P: (p) I, maybe like they need, because here in [West Yorkshire] they haven't got the Kurdish community, and I think would be better, but anyway, all Kurdish, all women refugees and asylum seekers they have access to [women's group] every Friday, meet each other Friday, talk in their language and have a coffee and a chat with each other, sharing their problems, it's every Friday, but if they want to come for example during the week, they can come here, a group of women they can come here, but now, because most of them are attending the schools, English classes, so (p) really they haven't got plenty time to go every day, for example, but once a week they have access to [women's group] and talk and share their problems, share their experiences and talk even with [women's group] person who are workers who are there in charge, erm, discuss about*



their problems, or, erm, domestic violence (p) I think they've got access to go to GP, access to go in hospital, they've access to go in education, they've got access to send their children at school, so they've got everything, I don't know what's missing here. So, I mean here in [West Yorkshire], I don't know about other cities, but here in [West Yorkshire] I think all women are lucky women, they are lucky, they've got here a lot. They've got [voluntary organisation] here for support for their problems, it's like support group, support organisations just to support them, they have access. Their husband can come upstairs, they can come downstairs here, so, if, as far as they've got support, for their case, for their problem, so I think it's good, and even here in [voluntary organisation], they've got their solicitor because most of the asylum seekers are their client, [solicitor's] client, so that's why [solicitor] decided to have surgery here in [voluntary organisation] twice a week, and once a well in [reception centre], because there are some asylum seekers that are living there in the hostel and they are [solicitor's] clients. So, when they've got problem with solicitor, with their case, they've got access twice a week here, once a week [reception centre] which is not far away from here, it's just five minutes, and if they need an appointment, interpreter, they will provide straight away, we can provide here interpreter Kurdish, Iranian. All our volunteers here, they work as volunteers and if they to interpret with solicitor, they will do for free. So, even, we, other, er, example was last, two weeks ago, when woman who was single mother from Sierra Leone, she had, er, court in Leeds and she was suffering from mental, and someone from mental service rang up and asked me how can they deal because they need someone to accompany because she doesn't know where is the court how to get there, but then we provided, we got a volunteer here that, I asked her was she willing, and she took her to Leeds and waited until she finished the court and then she came back. So, to be honest if they, someone asking or demanding our support, we will do the best to help them for everything, even, we are not responsible to take them to court for example and bring back, there are particular occasions when we need to help, and even we arrange for her crèche for her child because the child was 2 years old, everything, so really all our team is working very hard, very honestly, to help, giving advice and things. Other problem was yesterday came other woman was from Zimbabwe and she was frightened because Home Office sent a letter asking her to go weekly in Leeds and report, she said oh my 'God, what is this? Is there anything that is wrong with me?', and we say no, it's not, but then she asked 'can I go in London and live with my relatives?' and I gave my advice, but I wanted to make sure I'd given right advice or not, and I went upstairs and asked (Co-worker 2) and, who has got more

*experience than all of us, so then he say, OK, yeah is right, our advice is we can tell you what is going to come for you, what is going to happen, you can do it, but it's going to happen, this and this and this, so if you are willing to risk these things you can do it, but you need to think between risk and your pleasure now. So she said, 'oh thank you, just I came to ask you, I came to ask you'.*

*L: OK, that's the end of my questions. I don't know if there's anything else you want to say about any experiences that you've had, or how you feel about stuff now. That's my questions finished.*

*P: I don't know, have I been useful, helpful to you or not?*

*L: yes, yes you have. It's really interesting to speak to someone and look at how their life was before and then how much it has changed*

*P: no one, no one can (p) swap their life for no reason. I mean from my experience, I came over here, left my job, my husband left job, my sons left their school, their education and we left our family, our parents they are old, who knows that we will see again or not, we left our house, we left our friends, close friends, we left everything behind us just for one reason, to find the space, safe space for us, and even we paid (laughs) we paid a lot of money that if someone had this money here, had this money that I paid, they would say why I need to move from my house if I've got this money? Why? It's \$13,000, so if you have got £11,000 so why do you need to go somewhere else? So, and then because I say to you, just thinking how can I escape from this now, and you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow if you pass this trouble then you can see that tomorrow is worse than the past days before, but still, this is human, this is for everyone, but at least, just think I was lucky because I came in [West Yorkshire] and I find it easy to find [voluntary organisation], find support, but if I had been somewhere else, I've heard in Birmingham, I've got some friends there, they haven't got like support, refugee support like here, or maybe, [town], for example, they haven't got, and so many asylum seeker and refugee come from [town], from [another town] and asking for support here, for help here, and so many times we have faxed, deal with clients from [town] and [another town], helping them, because they come over here because they've got friends that say 'come here because we've got club, we can help you because we've got other support there so we can help', and when you come for first time you are like,*



*when you face for the first time new life, new things, you are like small child that's started to go in school for first time, first year, starting to learn ABC, it's like you are, I cant say I was stupid because I was not stupid, but I didn't know anything, I had not any knowledge, like small child trying to help, trying to educate, trying to learn (p) I don't know what I miss, if I miss anything to tell you, I don't know (p) But the main thing is that our family they came here, the wont come for pleasure, for tourist (unsure) even when I came here for first time, they gave me a three bedroom housed, a three single bedroom house and someone, one of my friends asked me 'why you haven't got double bed, just three single beds?' and I say oh my God leave it, I haven't come here for tourism I came here just because I need to escape, I need to escape, 'but no, you are entitled to have proper bed', double bed is just for pleasure, it's not (laughs) I don't need, I haven't come here for tourism, I need just the immediate things to get on with my life, I need for example shower, I needed where to cook, or how to cook, I need stove or something, but didn't need (unsure) I've left in my home so it's just I need.*

*L: yeah. OK, that's it thank you.*

*P: if you've got anything don't hesitate to ring*

*(After the interview we talk about her home, and she says she had fresh things growing in her garden like lemons, clementines, figs, pomegranates, and vines full of grapes. She says the seasons were 'proper seasons' in her country, and she laughs because she brought some summer clothes over here but says that she might as well send them back. We had a discussion about what name she would like me to use in the interview and she talks about Vera, which means summer, or Pranvera, which means spring. She chooses Pranvera because in the spring, everything is green and new, and there is hope for a new year and that is how she feels).*

## Appendix Four

### Tables of thematic codes

The three tables below show the frequency of specific issues raised in interviews with key informants. The examples chosen highlight barriers and constraints raised by service providers, positive supportive structures raised by women asylum seekers and refugees, and specific aspects of service provision referred to positively (again by the women).

**Table 9 - Barriers/constraints/negative (Service providers' interviews)**

Asylum case	6
Domestic violence	4
Employment barriers	14
Financial issues	9
Harassment	2
Housing	8
'Move on' when given positive decision	4
Negative perception of asylum seekers	11
Problems with language clusters	7
'White List'	1

**Table 10 - Positive/supportive aspects (Women asylum seekers and refugees interviews)**

Church	3
Friends/contacts	14
Feeling of safety/security	5
Opportunity to do voluntary work	5
Services – General (see Table ? below for specific references)	18
Social events	3
Voluntary groups/RCOs	9
Women-only groups	3

**Table 11 - Service provision referred to positively (Women asylum seekers and refugees interviews)**

Counselling	2
Dentist	2
Education	11
Health care	6
Housing	2
Language classes	5
Local authority asylum teams	5