



a place of safety

The story of refugees in the UK



For many of us, it is almost impossible to comprehend the horrors of living in a warzone, or understand what it would be like to live in fear of being violently attacked because of religion, race or sexuality.

So it's sobering to think that, around the world, 34,000 people are forcibly displaced from their homes and livelihoods every single day as a result of conflict or persecution.

There are currently more than 21.5 million refugees worldwide, desperate to find safety and rebuild their lives in a different country.

UCU and Refugee Action are united in the belief that we have a duty to help refugees wherever possible, and UCU members have been active in working with organisations like Care4Calais to provide aid and support.

Learning is a vital part of that support. Our members in colleges and adult learning settings know first-hand how much refugees value the chance to learn the language and skills which allow them to assimilate and work in the UK. That's why campaigns like 'Let Refugees Learn' are so important – we must continue to press the government for change so that no one misses out on the learning they need.

We also need to be vigilant in challenging negative perceptions about the impact of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. In the context of Brexit and fears about Islamic extremism, it has never been more important to ensure that people understand the reality facing refugees and the reasons why they deserve our help.

This pamphlet tells the real story of refugees – why they have fled their countries, the challenges they face and the ways in which, given a chance, they can enrich our society.

Sally Hunt
UCU general secretary

What is a refugee?

Refugee, asylum seeker, migrant – they're all the same aren't they?

No. Put simply, a refugee is someone who has been forced to leave their country and has been offered sanctuary in another. The formal UN Refugee Convention definition is someone 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 nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (Article 1, 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees)



An **asylum seeker** is someone who has left their own country and asked for sanctuary in another, but not yet been given it. Until they receive a decision as to whether or not they qualify for refugee status, they are known as an asylum seeker. In the UK, this means they do not have the same rights as a refugee or a British citizen would. For example, pretty much all asylum seekers aren't allowed to work.

An **economic migrant** is someone who has moved for work, like you might move to France for better pay or America for better opportunities. **Refugees and asylum seekers aren't economic migrants.**

People may also be **displaced internally** – meaning that they've been forced to leave their homes, but have remained inside their country.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are currently **65.3 million forcibly displaced people**, 21.3 million of whom are refugees. That's an average of 24 people displaced from their homes every minute.

Where do they come from?

I've heard there's a huge problem in Syria...



You're not wrong. As of the end of 2016, civil war in Syria has displaced around **11 million people**, 4.9 million of whom are refugees.¹

However, it's important to remember that Syria isn't the whole story, including for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. In the 12 months up to September

2016, the largest number of applications for asylum in the UK came from nationals of Iran, followed by Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Syria.

¹UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html>

The Addy family



Najah and Mahmoud are Syrian refugees. War has divided their family many times. 'When the war started my husband said you must take our daughters to Kurdistan,' says Najah. 'There was a dangerous Islamic group operating nearby and we were worried for the safety of our daughters'.

Najah has ten children. She arrived in the UK with her three youngest – son Aiman (21), daughters Dilshin (16) and Sharifa (12), and her husband Mahmoud. She also has seven other grown-up children with families of their own. Like many Syrian refugees, they're scattered across many different countries.

To escape the fighting, Najah and her daughters took a taxi to the Syrian border. Then they travelled to Kurdistan. 'It was very dangerous,' remembers Najah. There was bombing everywhere. There were groups fighting in the area.'

The women walked for three hours before the Kurdish police picked them up and took them to a camp for Syrian refugees. Mahmoud and Aimon later joined them in Kurdistan.

The family lived as refugees in Kurdistan for two years. Najah and Mahmoud both struggled with illness during this time. Like many Syrian refugees, they could not get proper medical care.

Because of this, the family applied for refugee resettlement to the UK. Finally, they were accepted. They were overjoyed, but also sad because Najah's grown-up daughter Newroz and

her two young children could not come with them. They stayed behind in the camp.

Since arriving in the UK, the family has worked hard to adjust to life in their new home. Life here is amazing,' says Najah. 'We enjoy it very much. But our first problem is that we don't speak English. When we know the language and can deal with everything ourselves, we are sure our lives will be better'.

Aimon, Dilshin and Sharifa are also learning English. Aimon was a mechanic in Syria and can't wait to start working to help his parents. His sisters are at school and college. 'It's a very nice country,' says Dilshin, 'but we still miss home'. Sharifa feels the same. 'It's good. I'm making friends,' she says.

Meanwhile, the family has been getting to know its British neighbours. Mahmoud has turned their neglected garden into an allotment, where he grows fruits and vegetables to share with other families on their street. 'We had a big garden in Syria,' he says. 'But the bombs hit it. It is all gone'.

'I'm very sad to be separated from my children,' says Najah. 'In Syria, we all lived in one place. We would see each other a lot.

I'm very worried about my daughter and son in Syria. I know she had a baby a month ago. I feel desperately worried for her. But she cannot find a way to call me.'

Mahmoud worries too. 'ISIS is everywhere,' he says. 'A couple of days there was a suicide bomb attack at a wedding that killed thirty-eight people near to where they live. Nowhere is safe.'

Most of all, the family want to be with their relatives again. There is hope that their daughter Newroz and her children will be able to join them through refugee family reunion. 'My greatest hope is for us all to be together again,' says Najah.

War, persecution, human rights violations can all drive people from their countries. The decision to leave is never an easy one; it's a last resort. What would it take for you to leave the UK? To leave your work, your home, your family?

Where do they go?

We've got loads of refugees, right? They all come over from Calais?

Actually, the vast majority of refugees – 86 per cent – are hosted in developing countries. Only six per cent of the world's displaced people are hosted in Europe. UNHCR has identified Turkey as hosting the most refugees at 2.5 million, followed by Pakistan, Lebanon, and Iran.

For comparison, by October 2016 the UK had taken fewer than 8,000 Syrians since the conflict began in 2011. But Jordan, a country with a population almost ten times smaller than ours and just 1.2 per cent of our GDP, is currently hosting more than 655,000 Syrian refugees – 80 times more than the UK.²

There isn't one fixed way that refugees arrive in the UK. People fleeing violence can be offered resettlement by the UNHCR, especially if they have special medical needs. The UNHCR selects and transfers these people to a safe country, like the UK, in collaboration with the host government. It's this route that David Cameron was talking about when he promised to take in 20,000 Syrian refugees by the end of this parliament.

But because the resettlement route relies on host countries pledging to take fixed numbers of people, it only offers sanctuary to a select few. The UNHCR estimates that less than 0.3 per cent of refugees are able to be resettled, leaving the vast majority of displaced people to attempt to find safety alone. If there is no alternative, desperate people are pushed into dangerous routes, often at the hands of traffickers.



What happens when they reach the UK?

It depends on whether someone arrives as a resettled refugee, or an asylum seeker. Resettled refugees receive their leave to remain upon arriving in the UK rather than being required to apply for asylum here. They arrive through a planned managed process involving the UN Refugee Agency, International Organisation for Migration and various UK organisations including the Home Office. Suitable accommodation is sourced prior to arrival and resettled refugees are helped by charities like Refugee Action and local authorities to settle in, live independently and plan their integration.

²Amnesty International, quoted in Al Jazeera

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/ten-countries-host-world-refugees-report-161004042014076.html>

If someone makes their own way here rather than being resettled, they can make an official asylum claim with the Home Office once they're here. **The system for claiming asylum in the UK is very complicated** and difficult for many people to go through – in particular for survivors of trauma, torture and violence. Decision-making is also problematic – each year thousands of cases which are initially rejected go to appeal, and of these over **40% of initial decisions are overturned on appeal.**³ That's inefficient and causes undue stress on people trying to find a place of safety.



Furthermore, people waiting for the outcome of their asylum claim have a very limited and difficult existence. While they are allowed to volunteer, they are not allowed to work. They are given a small allowance of around £5 per day. Many people who are entitled to receive support have great difficulties in obtaining it, and many asylum seekers fall into poverty.

Once someone has refugee status, they may be able to apply for family reunion and have their loved ones join them in safety. However, the rules are very restrictive. Complex relationships that affect families torn apart by war – for example, people caring for orphaned younger siblings or unaccompanied children who've been separated from their parents – are excluded.

And then what?



Refugees and asylum seekers are usually **keen to rebuild their lives, integrate with their local communities and contribute to society.** For example, some will start businesses and create jobs, some may add to our culture through literature or art and others often give their time by volunteering. Famous refugees include the artist Lucian Freud, ballet dancer Carlos Acosta, singer Rita Ora, founder of Marks & Spencer Michael Marks, and scientist Albert Einstein.

But this is not always a simple process.

People with refugee status are allowed to work. However, there are often many other barriers that stop them from fully integrating, such as not speaking English.

³UK Government statistics for year ending Sept 2016
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-july-to-september-2016/asylum#asylum-appeals>

Mohammed



refugee voice

Mohammed is from Eritrea – one of the world's most repressive nations. At 17, he was sent away from his family for compulsory military training. 'As a young man in Eritrea, you don't have any dreams. You can't,' he says.

Fearing a future of indefinite military service – the fate of many young Eritreans – Mohammed decided to flee. He set off on foot towards the border with Sudan. It took him eight long, difficult and fearful days to escape his country.

Sudan should have been a safe haven, but it wasn't. The camp Mohammed had reached was already crowded with Eritreans. They had no healthcare or education, and they lived in fear of being abducted and ransomed by trafficking gangs.

There was no future for Mohammed here. He paid an agent to smuggle him into Turkey. Then he boarded a plastic dingy to Greece, along with 45 other refugees including women, children and elderly people.

After five hours at sea, Mohammed was terrified. Water was seeping into the boat. He could hear people crying and children screaming. All he could think about was that his family would never know what had happened to him if he drowned.

Just when everything seemed lost, Mohammed's boat was rescued by the Greek coastguard. But

even Greece wasn't to be a safe haven. He was imprisoned on arrival, and then told to leave the country. There was no chance to seek asylum.

As he spoke some English, he decided – like many Eritreans – to head for the UK. 'I had no choice,' he says. 'I wanted to reach a place where I could fulfil my dreams and live in safety'. He arrived here in January 2014 and was dispersed to Liverpool.

Three months later, Mohammed received refugee status. Since then, he has hardly stopped. He volunteers at several refugee organisations, got his first job, and even ran a half marathon to raise money for Refugee Action.

'I love the UK,' he says. 'I feel like a human here. I'm treated with dignity and respect regardless of my religion or race. I can speak without restrictions. I never knew what freedom meant before, but now I am free.'

Mohammed's message to the UK public is this: 'Thank you for the safety, respect and values you share with refugees. Thank you for sharing with us your shelter, food, time, thoughts and smiles.'

'For those who think negatively about refugees, we won't blame you. It's your right to argue against us, but just approach us, find out who we really are before you judge us.'

Prem

Prem was born in a small village in Bhutan. When he was thirteen, demonstrations in his country demanded human rights and democracy. The government responded by cracking down on dissent. They forced many families from minority groups – including Prem’s – to leave the country.

For eighteen years, Prem and his family lived in a refugee camp. ‘It was a miserable life, but we managed – we survived,’ he remembers. He finished his education, then volunteered as a teacher in whilst studying for his accountancy qualifications.

Despite his education, Prem had no status in Nepal and wasn’t allowed to work outside the camp. By this time he was married and had two young daughters. With no hope of a better future in Nepal, he decided to apply for resettlement. His family were accepted by UK.

When Prem’s family arrived, Refugee Action was there to welcome and support them. Eventually Prem became a volunteer himself, helping other new arrivals to settle in to UK life. He also established a community association for other Bhutanese refugees in the UK.

Prem’s goal was always to build a better life for his family. He decided to pursue a career as an

accountant instead. Once he was qualified, Prem’s search for work began. He applied for hundreds of jobs, but his lack of UK work experience held him back. So he passed his driving test and started visiting businesses in person. ‘I’m a determined person,’ he said. ‘I make a plan and I keep to it’.

Eventually, Prem found a job – but it was a care home, not an accountancy firm, that took him on. He worked as many shifts as he could. The residents at the care home enjoyed his company. ‘Always, they talk to me about the war,’ he said. ‘It’s very interesting’.

Between shifts, Prem kept on applying for accounting jobs. One day, the owner of an accountancy firm gave him a chance. If he would work for free for one week and prove his skills, he could have a job. Prem worked diligently and was hired after just a few days.

Not wanting to let down the care home, Prem spent several months working seven days a week. ‘I didn’t want to betray them, they hired me first,’ he said. Eventually, he was able to cut down his shifts and spend some time with his wife and (now) three daughters. ‘I am very proud,’ he says.





Refugees who arrive here without speaking English find themselves unable to do many everyday tasks we take for granted: getting on a bus, explaining your pain to the doctor, talking to your neighbour. It makes it harder to get a job, and it means that Britain misses out on a whole pool of skills – for example, the highly qualified Eritrean doctor who works as a cleaner because she can't talk to patients.

So what can I do?

Campaign

The UK Government has a lot of influence over how refugees and asylum seekers are treated, as well as how many refugees we take and what we do to ameliorate the situations that drive people to flee their home country in the first place. You can put pressure on the government to make life better for these people.



Learning English is a crucial part of settling in to life in the UK, but funding for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision fell by 55% between 2009 and 2015. This has led to the closure of many ESOL classes and has made it much harder for refugees in many areas to access the learning they need.

With support from UCU and others, Refugee Action is calling on the government to make sure all refugees are given English lessons so that they can rebuild their lives here. They are also asking them to make family reunion rules fairer and easier to navigate. Find out more and add your voice at www.refugee-action.org.uk/campaigns

Talk

Talk to your friends about the issue – especially the ones who disagree. Talk to refugees and asylum seekers in your communities. UCU branches could organise local meetings to discuss how to support refugees in the UK and abroad. If you're a UCU member, why not use this booklet to start a classroom discussion? See



www.refugee-action.org.uk for more information. These other organisations also have useful information:

- British Red Cross
- Asylum Aid
- Refugee Council
- Scottish Refugee Council
- Welsh Refugee Council
- UNHCR

Donate

Refugee Action, along with friends and allies, works to help refugees rebuild their lives in safety. You can give a one-off gift or regular donation to one of these organisations to help them support more refugees. Find out more at www.refugee-action.org.uk/donate

LET REFUGEES LEARN

Learning English is essential

To **benefit** local communities and Britain as a whole



of the public agree

For a **unified** country

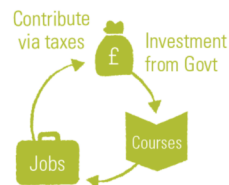
We want a strong and unified country with opportunity for everybody.

For refugees to **integrate**

If you're not able to speak English, you're not able to integrate

David Cameron, 2016

For the UK Govt to **invest** funds more efficiently



For Refugees to **rebuild** their lives



To study

I want to learn English because it will help me to open different doors. For example, going to university.



To volunteer

I looked for [volunteering positions for] a long time but couldn't get anything. I think it is the language.



To build relationships

I want to talk to other people so they can tell me how they live and I can tell them how I live.



To work

I am a nurse but they say to work as a nurse I must do a test in English...but I don't know English.

But there are barriers to participation



English Lesson Funding



Long waiting lists

[The representative] called three different colleges to enroll me into level 1 but all were full.



Being assigned the wrong class

Two weeks and there was nothing new to me. They did not teach me anything new.



Gender barriers

It's hard because I have children... it's hard.



Distance

I wish the college was closer to my house.



Learning hours

Two hours in one week is nothing. There needs to be three or four classes per week.

We need to make changes

Refugee Action calls on the Government to act on:

FIVE ESSENTIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Create a fund



2

Publish a strategy



3

Ensure full and equal access



4

Access for asylum seekers



5

A community based support framework



