

Coping with Destitution

Refused asylum seekers in the UK

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Oxfam warns of a hidden crisis on the streets of Britain, as thousands of refused asylum seekers face destitution

New research¹ reveals that many thousands of refused asylum seekers are living in destitution in the UK, regularly going hungry and with no safe place to live or sleep.

With no income, they are forced to live a hand-to-mouth existence, relying for food and shelter on handouts from friends or voluntary organisations, and often sleeping rough. Many resort to taking cash-in-hand work when they

can get it, or even entering into abusive relationships or sex work to survive.

Oxfam is calling on the government to end policies that lead to the destitution of refused asylum seekers – and for a fair, efficient asylum system that protects the rights and dignity of the people who use it.

CASE STUDY: SOLOMAN'S STORY



Soloman was arrested whilst praying with friends; his Protestant religion is banned by the military dictatorship in Eritrea. He was sent to prison but escaped and came to the UK at the end of 2009. His claim for asylum was refused in November 2010.

Soloman now gets no support from the UK government. He relies on friends (usually other asylum seekers) for food and somewhere to sleep at night. Sometimes he gets help from his church, or food parcels and small cash handouts from voluntary organisations. He has not had to sleep rough, but knows many refused asylum seekers who have.

“People go through all things - sleeping in bus stations and train stations, or even outside,” he says. “Not everyone has friends or a church to help them.” Soloman used to be a mechanic in his family firm in his own country. Now he is unable to work, but is studying English.

Soloman is now making a fresh claim and trying to collect evidence from home to support his case. He says: “To save your life you run away. You don't wait to collect ‘evidence’ that your life is in danger.” He hopes the new claim will be successful as he fears that if he goes home he will be arrested, tortured, or killed by the government. Soloman's family are not Protestants, but since he left, they have been fined and persecuted for his beliefs.

Soloman would rather be destitute in the UK than risk returning to his country of origin.

What is destitution?

OXFAM AND REFUGEES

Oxfam works with refugees all over the world, providing vital humanitarian assistance to those who have been forced to flee conflict, disaster, or persecution. Our experience shows us that most people don't choose to leave their homes; they are forced to by circumstances beyond their control.

Most refugees end up in neighbouring countries: Oxfam works with Sudanese refugees in Chad, Somali refugees in Kenya, and Afghan refugees in Pakistan. But whilst the majority of refugees are hosted by developing countries (4/5^{ths}), a small number come to the UK every year seeking asylum.

In the UK, Oxfam works with partner organisations to support women refugees and refugee community organisations to advocate for their rights. Oxfam also works with service providers such as the NHS, local authorities, and housing associations in the UK, training and supporting them to understand and meet the needs of refugees and asylum seekers.

Support for refused asylum seekers

In the UK, asylum seekers normally receive government accommodation and cash support of £35.52 a week. Those who have had an asylum claim refused are moved to 'Section 4 Support' – accommodation and an Azure payment card (not cash) worth £35.39 a week – which they can use only in a limited number of shops. Section 4 Support is conditional on agreeing to return home as soon as the UK government considers it is safe for someone to do so.

The majority of refused asylum seekers do not apply for Section 4 Support because they have little faith in the asylum system and think they have been wrongly denied asylum. Indeed, almost a third of initial decisions are overturned on appeal, demonstrating the poor quality of the decision making process. Refused asylum seekers do not want to accept the condition that they will return home when the UK government (rather than they themselves) thinks it is safe to do so.

Not taking Section 4 Support leaves refused asylum seekers with no money and no accommodation. In any case, delays in processing applications for Section 4 mean that even those who apply may still be forced into destitution, receiving nothing for many months.

CASE STUDY: PRECIOUS'S STORY

Precious left her home in Nigeria to avoid the local practice of female circumcision. When she sought help she was trafficked to the UK by the people who promised to help her. In the UK, her claim for asylum was refused and she has struggled to survive with no government support for many years. At times she has slept rough or stayed with friends. She has worked (illegally) in care homes and other places. And, at times, she has even turned to prostitution to get by. The UK government says that she could return to the north of Nigeria, where circumcision is not practised – but she would be a Christian returning to a Muslim area in conflict, and she fears for her safety.

Precious would rather live in destitution in the UK than return to her country of origin.

What is destitution?

We really don't know how many refused asylum seekers are living in destitution in the UK, but the most recent official estimate was between 155,000² and 283,500. Whilst many may have since returned voluntarily, or been granted status, we do know that in 2009, Red Cross provided emergency assistance to 11,600 destitute asylum seekers, of which the majority were refused asylum seekers.³

• Hungry

Many refused asylum seekers report going hungry. With little or no money for food they must rely on food parcels from places such as a Red Cross Destitution Clinic, voluntary and faith-based organisations, friends or strangers. People report that when they have money they can eat. When they don't have money they go hungry.

CASE STUDY: LUCY'S STORY

Lucy was a teacher in Cameroon. Now she is an asylum seeker in the UK, and survives on Section 4 Support. Lucy says: "Of course I want to go home - everyone wants to be at home. If I go back I won't be safe. Being on Section 4 Support makes me feel like a criminal. There are two supermarkets close by, but I have to walk to the one I have vouchers for, 45 minutes walk away... and then 45 minutes back. I can't choose what I eat. I am African... but I can't shop at the cheap good local shops that sell African ingredients. This is such a waste of life. I was a teacher in my country, but here my skills, my confidence, my ability are all depreciating".

- **Homeless**

Many refused asylum seekers are homeless. Some sleep rough in parks, on benches, or in public places. Others stay with friends or in shelters provided by voluntary organisations. The risk of being attacked, or caught by the police, is very high. Voluntary organisations are simply unable to cope with the level of need.

- **Nowhere to go**

Our research revealed that many refused asylum seekers spend all day walking the streets, or sitting in cafes or drop-in centres. Others spend hours going around on underground trains or night buses because they have no safe place to go.

- **Living in fear**

Many refused asylum seekers feel they are forced to live in the shadows, constantly fearful of being found and returned home, even if it is not safe. Most won't report violence or abuse to the police. Even when they are entitled to some support, there is extreme reluctance to take this up for fear that such contact with the state could lead to immediate deportation.

- **Reliant on friends**

The vast majority of refused asylum seekers are deeply reliant on social contacts, often other refugees, to provide food and shelter. Those sleeping on friends' floors or sofas often leave their accommodation early in the morning, unable to return until late at night. Their complete dependence upon their friends often creates difficult situations as they can offer little in return.

- **Exploitative relationships**

Often refused asylum seekers become involved in exploitative long-term relationships to survive. This may involve women and men providing childcare, housework, and sometimes entering a sexual relationship in exchange for food, cash, or shelter. Crucially, there is no sense of when this humiliating situation might end.

- **Illegal work**

Some refused asylum seekers work, even though they know they are not legally entitled to do so. Employers are all too aware of this fact and will exploit them. Our research revealed refused asylum seekers working in exploitative conditions with low pay, long hours, poor working conditions and a constant fear of being raided by immigration officials.

- **Sex work**

Some refused asylum seekers resort to commercial sex work. Some women reported advertising in phone boxes or working out of hotels. Others reported working in brothels and being subject to exploitation and intimidation. Men also resort to having sex with men for money.

CASE STUDY: ARASH'S STORY

Arash was involved in student protests opposing the authoritarian government in Iran. He fled the country to avoid arrest and sought asylum in the UK. Arash says: "I had a good life. I would like to go back and see my family. But if I go home, they will put me in jail with no trial. I might go to prison, and I might be hung. If it was safe, I would go back straight away. I want an identity. I want a normal life."

Arash was refused asylum, and has made three further appeals. He does not get any support from the UK government. Taking Section 4 Support would mean that he has to agree to return to a situation he does not think is safe – and he has no faith in the asylum system. Decisions about his case, and the cases of friends, seem inconsistent and unsound. Although Arash had professional skills in his own country, in the UK he gets by illegally doing cleaning work for £3/4 an hour.

Arash would rather be destitute in the UK than risk returning to his country of origin.

CASE STUDY: NIKKI'S STORY



Nikki's application for asylum has been refused but she is appealing the decision. She receives no government support and at the moment is destitute. She relies on friends for food, accommodation, and cash to buy the things she needs. "Everyone is doing as much as they can for me, but I don't know what is going to happen from week to week. I know people who have had to sleep on the streets and a disabled man whose case was refused who had to sleep in a stable". Nikki is from Zimbabwe and does not feel she can go home. She says: "Things are very different in a conflict state. Going back is not an option at the moment."

Nikki would rather be destitute in the UK than risk returning to her country of origin.

What does Oxfam want to change?

It is not acceptable that tens of thousands of refused asylum seekers are living in destitution in the UK; it is a hidden crisis which shames us all.

“Thousands of people are being forced into destitution as a result of government policies. We must end the policies that lead to destitution, and are unacceptable in the sixth richest country in the world.”

Kate Wareing, Director, UK Poverty, Oxfam

The government must change the policies that lead to destitution and ensure a fair, efficient asylum system that protects the rights and dignity of the people who use it. Oxfam is calling for:

1. Refused asylum seekers to remain on cash support

Refused asylum seekers should get cash-based government support, without conditions – until they are granted permission to stay, leave voluntarily, or are removed from the UK.

This will ensure:

- Refused asylum seekers do not have to live in destitution.
- They will not be left without support whilst claims for Section 4 are being processed.
- They will be able to buy what they need with cash, rather than an inflexible payment card.
- Regular contact with the authorities will allow government and voluntary organisations to work with those who have been refused to assess their options – rather than forcing refused asylum seekers ‘underground’.

CASE STUDY: FARAH'S STORY

Farah is from Somalia and was forced to become a child soldier at the age of 10. He lost everything in his country's civil war: his family, his friends, his childhood. After 15 years in the militia, he escaped from Africa to the UK, where he sought asylum. His claim was refused in October 2010, and he has been destitute since then.

“I would like to go back, but what about my safety? Can they guarantee that I will be safe?” Farah relies on friends, other asylum seekers, and help from voluntary organizations. He also does voluntary work, but has no paid employment. “I'm a survivor. After everything I have been through, I can cope with this,” he says.

Farah would rather be destitute in the UK than risk returning to his country of origin.

2. The quality of decisions in the asylum-determination process to be improved.

Initial decisions made by the asylum determination process are often wrong. Almost one third of asylum applications that are initially refused are successfully overturned on appeal; and even ‘refused’ asylum seekers are entitled to make a fresh claim, on different grounds, which may then be successful at a later date.

Improving the quality of the asylum determination process would ensure:

- Those entitled to protection will get the protection they need.
- Asylum seekers will have more faith in the decision making process, and be more willing to abide by its decisions.
- More accurate initial decisions would save the UK government approximately £13.5 million in administrative and support costs.

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The research

The research was conducted by 16 refugees and asylum seekers, a significant number of whom were refused asylum seekers with personal experience of destitution. The researchers spoke to 45 people, all of whom were, or had been, asylum seekers. Those interviewed talked not only about their own experience, but those of a wide network of friends and contacts, providing an overall picture of the experience of hundreds of asylum seekers in the UK. Some of the researchers, and some of those they interviewed, have since been given status (refugee/humanitarian protection/discretionary leave to remain).

Interviews for this briefing

Thank you to all the refugees and asylum seekers who have shared their experiences with us. Interviews for this briefing were conducted December 2010 and January 2011. Names have been changed to protect identities.

Asylum in the UK

People seek asylum because they believe they have a “well-founded fear of being persecuted (by the State) for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (Refugee Convention 1951). The UK ratified the Refugee Convention in 1954 and has since offered sanctuary to those fleeing persecution. Around 25,000 applications for asylum are made in the UK each year; around 20% of these are successful at initial stage; 28% of those that go to appeal are then successful. Appellants with legal representation have a 51% success rate.

Notes

1. This briefing reflects the research done by Swansea University's Centre for Migration Policy Research, part-funded by Oxfam.
2. National Audit Office, Returning Failed Asylum Applicants (2005).
3. British Red Cross, Not Gone, but Forgotten (2010).