

## SUBMISSION FROM THE REFUGEE WOMEN'S STRATEGY GROUP

### **Introduction**

The Refugee Women's Strategy Group is a group of refugee and asylum seeking women supported by Scottish Refugee Council and funded by Comic Relief whose aim is to ensure that the voices of refugee women are heard. We work together to represent the views of refugee and asylum seeking women in Scotland to key decision makers and service providers to influence the policy and practices that affect our lives. Our group is an integral part of the Scottish Refugee Policy Forum, a federation of Refugee Community Organisations in Scotland.

Our group's current priorities are: addressing the barriers to employment for refugee women; working to ensure that the asylum process is gender sensitive; improving access to sexual violence services for asylum seeking women; and facilitating information provision to women in the asylum process.

In February 2011 we held a Women's Employment Information Event and in November 2011 we published the findings from this event in our report, '*The Struggle to Contribute*'. The report (attached) details our recommendations to address the barriers that refugee women face on their journey to employment in Scotland. We have distributed our report widely and have discussed the issues with a range of agencies including Jobcentre Plus, Scottish Refugee Council and the Glasgow ESOL Forum.

We have raised the issues reflected in our report with the Scottish Women's Budget Group, Claudia Beamish MSP and Mary Fee MSP as Convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee. We have attended relevant debates at the Scottish Parliament and participated in the Scottish Government Women and Work Summit. We are core members of the Scottish Government, COSLA Strategic Migration Partnership and Scottish Refugee Council on-going review into Scotland's refugee integration strategy and look forward to contributing to the thematic meeting on employment to make key recommendations on these issues.

We therefore welcome the opportunity to present our written evidence to the Equal Opportunities Committee Inquiry into Women and Work and our continued commitment to supporting the inquiry, including through providing oral evidence should such an opportunity arise.

### **Overview**

Employment is a key issue for refugee women in Scotland. We know that ethnic minority women face additional barriers to employment and it is our view that refugee women are even further disadvantaged in the labour market, experiencing multiple barriers to accessing employment.

Recent research has shown that refugees face a constant struggle to access the labour market regardless of how long they have been in the UK<sup>1</sup>. Employment levels

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<sup>1</sup> Gareth Mulvey 'In Search of Normality: Refugee Integration in Scotland' 2013

among refugees are worryingly low and research has shown that refugee women are less likely to be employed than refugee men<sup>2</sup>.

Employment is a core element of the integration process. We believe that employment and the ability to access the labour market is essential to women's mental and physical wellbeing, to their children's mental and physical wellbeing and to their ability to integrate and to play a full role in Scottish society.

## **Recommendations – Cross cutting issues**

Below, we present our recommendations for solving some of the key equality issues affecting refugee women in relation to work.

### ***1. Inclusion of refugee women in government strategies***

Refugee women experience multiple barriers to accessing employment and while we often experience discrimination on a number of grounds, we feel that we are often discriminated against simply for being a refugee or asylum seeker. We are aware that being a refugee is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, nevertheless:

**We ask the Scottish Government to ensure that any strategy regarding Women and Work explicitly includes refugee women alongside other equality groups.**

### ***2. Recognition of skills and experience***

Refugee women bring a wealth of skills, experience and qualifications to Scotland and overwhelmingly they want to contribute to Scottish society. We are aware that the Scottish Government commissioned a study on this issue in 2010.

**We ask the Scottish Government to reconsider this study with a view to developing a comprehensive scheme for recognising the prior learning, skills, experience and qualifications of refugees.**

### ***3. Gender specific employability services***

It is our view that many refugee women need gender specific, specialist employability services to enable them to build confidence, understand the labour market and to be able to articulate their skills and competencies.

**We ask the Scottish Government to increase resources to enable gender specific employability services, such as the Bridges Programme Women's Empowerment Course and the Women into Work pilot trialled by Jobcentre Plus and Scottish Refugee Council, to be developed and to reach more women.**

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<sup>2</sup> Gareth Mulvey 'InSearch of Normality: Refugee Integration in Scotland 2013, Presentation from Dr Jenny Philmore, University of Birmingham at Glasgow University 30/1/12

#### **4. English language support**

Learning English is critical to refugees' ability to integrate and to access the labour market. We believe that more co-ordinated ESOL provision needs to be provided to asylum seekers, including classes with more contact hours at initial stages of the asylum process and work-related ESOL provision. Recent research carried out by Birmingham University evaluated 30 integration projects showing that targeting women impacts on families as a whole and is therefore an effective use of limited resources.<sup>3</sup>

**We ask the Scottish government to provide funding for more coordinated ESOL provision, including provision that is women specific and includes childcare facilities.**

#### **5. Right to work**

We believe that asylum seekers, including refused asylum seekers, should have the right to work regardless of the status of their asylum claim. A major barrier to refugee women accessing employment is the long periods of time spent in the asylum process, unable to work. This erodes our skills, affects our confidence and mental health, and has a huge impact on our future job prospects. Being able to work would enable us to develop skills and confidence, provide positive role models to our children and promote integration. We strongly believe that there is absolutely no evidential basis to support the view that granting the right to work would increase the number of asylum seekers coming to Scotland or the UK.

**Although we are aware that this is a matter reserved to the UK Government, we ask the Equal Opportunities Committee to take a strong, public stand in support of the right to work.**

#### **6. Employer attitudes**

From our experience, we believe that racism and discrimination exist among employers in Scotland. Evidence from the UK shows that ethnic minority women fare badly in accessing employment and that discrimination is present at every stage of the process.<sup>4</sup>

**We ask the Scottish Government to ensure that a comprehensive strategy is put in place to investigate and tackle racism and discrimination in employment in Scotland.**

#### **7. Childcare**

Childcare is a major issue for all working women, but refugee women are often even further disadvantaged by their lack of family and support networks to provide informal childcare.

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<sup>3</sup> Presentation from Dr Jenny Philmore, University of Birmingham at Glasgow University 30/1/13

<sup>4</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group on Race and Community (2012), *Ethnic Minority Female Unemployment: Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Heritage Women*

**We ask the Scottish Government to take the needs and experiences of refugee women in Scotland into account when developing its childcare strategies.**

### **Conclusion**

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Equal Opportunities Committee for the opportunity to ensure that refugee women's voices are heard on the issue of the barriers to employment for women in Scotland's communities and reiterate our willingness to participate further in the inquiry in any way we can.

### **Contact**

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