



Testimonies from Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the North East Region

The national campaign to restore the right to work for people seeking asylum

On the impact of not being allowed to work

Read testimonies from the Regional Refugee Forum North East's Right to Work Subgroup members. Each theme contains the voices of different people, from different countries of origin. But they all share the experience of exile, and all are now living in the North East and sharing the same experience of the UK asylum system, which doesn't allow them to work whilst their asylum claim is being determined or they cannot return home.

- Page 2** **Did people come here for work or to seek safety from persecution?** Is the Government right to view the right to work as a pull factor bringing people to the UK?
- Page 5** **The impact on self-respect, dignity and mental health**
- Page 7** **The impact on marriages and family life**
- Page 10** **The impact on young people**, who as the children of asylum seekers who do not have the right to work
- Page 12** **Poverty and destitution**
- Page 14** **The impact on the UK economy**
- Page 16** **Work ethics in country of origin**
- Page 17** **Why people take the risk to work illegally & responsibilities back home**



Did people come here for work?

I was a lecturer at University in Baghdad. I have an MA in methods of teaching English as a foreign language, and I have a BA in English and Literature, and a diploma in engineering. I had a private institute in Baghdad to teach women sewing and arranging flowers. I have these skills. I worked for 30 years in Iraq. I am used to working. But in March 2006 my husband was kidnapped and killed and this affected my life. I thought every knock on the door was someone coming to take me and kill me. I'm not afraid if they kill me directly, if they shoot me, but I am afraid of torture. I don't want them to torture me and cut me into pieces, like they find the bodies on the street. At that time I was afraid of everything and I left everything, I left my mother, my father, left my job, left my home. Now I miss them. When I came here I thought I could study, find a job, work. For me, before I came, I thought of the UK like paradise. But when I came I found no work, no study or anything for asylum seekers. I was shocked. I don't think this is a good system here.

When I came to the UK I didn't know there wasn't any right to work. I didn't know about anything. I came here for safety. It is not a fair decision the Government took and I don't think it was taken on the right grounds because by doing so it's destroying our dignity. Did they have research it, about how they knew people were coming to work? I didn't come here to ask for a work permit. No, I asked for asylum. But for how long will I be waiting, for what, when? I feel I am detained without trial. Detained indefinitely because I don't know when. So why can't I be given that little right, I need to work, I will feed myself and my family and restore my dignity. I don't think it was a fair decision. That idea I would find is like years ago in South Africa during the apartheid years when the apartheid law was in force, people were not given education, sometimes people would work for no money, just work for food. Their aim was to cloak their brain but feed the stomach so life will continue but without the brains, without being able to do what you wish to do yourself then it becomes nothing. It's like what we are facing now as asylum seekers. Yes, you will be given those vouchers, eat, go to bed, eat, go to bed, you can't even travel. In a way you end up like I am just waiting to die.

From 2002 (when the right to work was withdrawn by the Government) has this had any effect on the numbers of people coming into the country? Have people stopped coming because the right to work has been withdrawn? I guess not. The numbers have always been rising up. As long as there are conflicts in the world, when people flee from their countries, they are not fleeing because of lack of jobs, they are fleeing because of lack of freedom. And they want freedom. I guess one of the things which attracts people to England is there are robust systems of democracy, which I think makes it possible for people



to be what they want to be and develop as they wish. People will always move around wanting to have freedom. Just like when the American state was started, when westerners started to go into South Africa because of conflicts in Europe. I guess people were not looking for better homes in South Africa or better homes in America but it was the age to be free. I think that's the same reason why people want to come here, its not to look for jobs. But then once they are here I think it would be fair as well to give them to right to be themselves, to fend for themselves. Which will actually be cheaper to the state when people being allowed to fend for themselves and pay taxes. But to keep someone for ten years, I don't think its a cost effective measure. So people don't come to be fed and when people say "I want to work", they are saying "I want to look after myself", there is dignity to that.

Before I came here I never heard anything about any country, not even England. I didn't know. I sought asylum and I heard that hear. I didn't know I would be 2nd class person, maybe 3rd. I didn't know. I thought everyone was respectable and the law would help you to continue your life. And I thought this country could make you forget about everything, but it wasn't like that. We had been suffering from the Iraqi government and we're suffering from this government. Our life is like between two fires, because our government tortured us and here too, but in a different form. I didn't know I would be 2nd class citizen or worse, I didn't know that. I thought everyone was free if you want anything you can work you can do anything you wanted like a normal life. No I didn't know.

That's not a strong reason. When I came here I gave my case. If they think its not true just take me out from this country. For example, I'm from Iraq. Everyone knows Iraq is a very rich country, I don't have to work here. Different people come in, the Government's policy has to know which ones come to work and which really come for political situation. Mixing all is no good it affects everyone, I don't think its a good idea. I don't know who created this idea. I don't know. its really bad. If they give us money instead of vouchers, its still the same. I don't know why. I am looking for this answer, I don't know why. What is the point?

There is no good reason behind it. Let them work. If the situation in their country gets better and they say go back and you're not allowed to work anymore, then it is still the same. Because if they give me an opportunity to work and the government knows where I am working, its the same. Anytime they can say your country is ok and you can go back. But that's not good to tell everyone you are not allowed to work. Whatever the government says about me, I lost more than 6 years. It affects me and its hard to go back on. You can't be normal ever, it affects your life forever.



Even if the government's argument is that some people are coming for work, then it becomes their duty to try and screen those who are coming here to work. But those who come to claim asylum cannot be denied their right to work just because there are 'cheats'. It defeats the entire system. They cannot punish innocent asylum seekers who are genuinely running away from problems, and deny them when they come here, strip them of any dignity. I think that is adding salt to a wound

My appeal would be, and I am talking from the bottom of my heart, these are people who are going through horrible times in a civilised and developed country like this, and I think its unacceptable. In a country where they could contribute so much they are vilified as if they are animals. We have got to appreciate that we've become a village now and there is a lot that these people can give, a lot that we know they are able to give, and the government simply needs to open up. We are not saying they should open up for everyone, if there are loopholes they need to close then that is their duty to close those loopholes, but to ask people to give them money for nothing and food for nothing it just un-African, more so it is un-Zimbabwean.

I know the Government thinks so, but this will not decrease the numbers. People are coming into this country for other reasons, such as political or religious reasons. In my opinion it is not correct to disallow people from working. If these people were allowed to work while waiting for a decision to be delivered, it would have no affect at all to give those already here permission to work.

I had to go to Kenya because of my involvement in politics. I suffered a desert life for 16 years, where it was so hot, 45 degrees. I came to UK four months ago (under the Gateway refugee resettlement programme). I am very lucky and grateful that I was able to come here on this programme. But after I arrived here I was upset by the condition of my brothers and sisters who have not been able to work or live a normal life for 6 or 7 years as they have no work permits. They are suffering. Some people are actually evicted from their house and made homeless for 6 or 7 years without any kind of income, no work permit and no benefits.

First of all it should not have taken so long for their asylum cases to be determined, and I feel grief, really, really I feel grief that these things are allowed to happen. I plead for the Government to give them permission to work so that they can earn money and support their families. The government should decide so that these people can live a normal life. We ask the Government today and will continue to ask them in the future.



If it was safe again, I would like to go back home today, because there I have a job, home, family, my mother, brothers, friends. Here I haven't got anything. I pray to God every day that if Iraq is safe I would like to return. Here in the UK everyone has their own life. I live alone and I am not used to it. I am used to living in a big family. You live alone, you eat alone, and even in Ramadan you used to have a big family all eating together. It was a shared life. I am not used to this here. For 50 years I lived in Iraq, and I am not used to being without a job. Maybe if I had a job I would get used to living here. But even then I would return if Iraq is safe. But at the moment I am still afraid. Maybe they will kidnap me and kill me. Up to now there are many militias there and no security there.

The impact on self-respect, dignity and mental health

Its a degrading situation. You feel useless in a place that sings democracy. Not being able to work is degrading to me. It is something that has been taken away from me, something that I believe is a right that nobody should lose. Its depressing because my background is feeding my own family. We have very strong family values. I have a big duty of care that has been stripped away. And not being able to do that for myself, I feel a failure in life. I feel very much a failure in life. The kids, I would have loved to do anything that the children would ask me for. But this position is a crippled life. .

As a volunteer with the refugee service and as a leader for my own community, which is the Zimbabwean Community in the North East, I have witnessed people who are so depressed, who I can say they are now mentally disturbed, people who had skills but cannot use them anymore. It's like somebody taking a certain measure of power away from you. If you lose that something, it won't just go, it will go with a part of yourself. That makes the You inside you.

It is degrading. It is mentally disturbing. It is crippling, mentally crippling. You know if you are crippled physically that is one thing but if you are mentally crippled that's the end of a human being. People are going to the doctor for stress, depression, sleepless nights. It just becomes a problem that is spreading.

I would say I would like to be given the right to work. There will be less troubled people, the doctors will see less asylum seekers in their surgery, as most of it is just mental health problems because people can't do what they used to do. Given the right to work it will restore our dignity, it will restore our normal lives, which we haven't lived for 5 years. Its too long to live a life that is not normal.

About health, if you talk to someone about what they have experienced is more psychological than physical. Someone can't do anything, just go away and sleep, walk, and it affects your life. You can't say



that person looks sick if you see him. But you feel unhappy, miserable inside and you feel that you can't smile and you feel lonely because there is no integration, nothing. And everyday repeats itself, everyday, everyday, then maybe sometimes worse. Its very bad, you can't imagine. That's more than 6 years I've been waiting and I've lost all opportunity. If I went for example to college may be I would have graduated now, I'd have finished it. Or if I had done anything else, maybe now I would have a different life. But they tell us wait, but you don't know when, and you have to wait, wait and you can't do anything. Its more than 6 years, its a long time. And I can't go back and start, I can't, its very hard. Its hard to catch up, its impossible, really impossible. No you can't catch up. And for more than 6 years you don't see your family as well and your life here is dangerous and you can't do anything. Its like a prison exactly.

We are not allowed to marry like ordinary people. We feel like 3rd class people, not allowed to work not allowed to marry, not allowed to have love. I hope our situation gets better and they let us work and let us get married. We are normal people nothing different. We suffered from a bad government in Iraq and we've suffered again here. Again. But in different ways. Nothing changed. I hope everything changes as soon as possible. I hope the government changes the policy and lets people work.

Behind that category, that name of 'asylum seeker' there is an individual who matters, an individual who, when you take away the dignity that they have you are stripping them of themselves, they are left with nothing, they are likely to behave in many ways, they are reacting in different ways, some commit suicide and we have quite a number of people who have committed suicide, we have had homes that are in crisis.

Sometimes you see that they seem to be suffering even more than the physical abuse they have received from their own countries.

Its a human right for anyone to find a job or to work, to improve who he is in life. Because without a job and without education, people aren't in life. That's my belief. If you work you feel you are in life. If you don't work its like being a dead person, without hope, without aims, without anything. When you work you improve humanity in people. Why did I go to volunteer? To prove I am helpful and can support people.

I went to the refugee service after 1 month and asked to work as a volunteer. And I worked with STEM Strong Together East Middlesbrough as a volunteer interpreter and teacher. To fill my time. I went to the British Heart Foundation to work as volunteer seller, to fill the afternoon from 1 to 4. I like to have



contact with people and improve my language, and also to forget the problems which I faced in Iraq. They kidnapped my husband and killed him and this affects me. I try to restart my life but the problem of work it makes me depressed. I am upset. Like I live endlessly without hope.

They should know the background of asylum seekers. This benefit culture, it just goes against our culture, and forcing us to receive money for doing nothing, you are killing us. Probably you are no better than Robert Mugabwe who is physically beating us up, you are emotionally beating us up. So in as much as we appreciate that you have given us refuge from physical abuse don't emotionally abuse us as well, especially in such a country that is civilised like this one.

I think it is human nature that when dignity is stripped from an individual they are likely to react in so many ways. It is almost un-African that people are not allowed to work and then they are forced to receive vouchers from the government. It is a stripping of dignity, especially to the man and even to some women who were used to fending for their families. And once that dignity has been stripped away from them they cannot have control over their own children, especially when they are teenagers. They cannot provide for them and we see a whole host of consequences that we have to deal with.

There are a lot of negative impacts to society and community coming from this policy of not allowing people to work. People could be forced to commit crimes, such as stealing and robbery and even murder, and suicide – throwing yourself into the sea. This policy can lead to such crimes and also to severe depression, and insanity. I have seen some of my friends found hanged, and some people throw themselves in the sea. In the 7 years I have been living here, many people I know have thrown themselves into the water, many have hung themselves, many have sunk into depression.

The majority of the British wrongly assume that asylum seekers are allowed to work. There are others who believe that asylum seekers don't want to do anything. As asylum seeker is like any other person, who can work, can learn and can teach, like myself. An asylum seeker is a human being with skills. It is vital that people should see asylum seekers as equal. We are human beings. As human beings we have to work. So we need work permits.

The impact on marriages and family life

Marriages are breaking down because of the stress caused by the law which forces some families not to work. I cannot describe the amount of stress which comes with not being allowed to work. If you were used to waking up the rest of your life working and then suddenly you are told "No, just sit there, don't



work “, it is so so stressful. And I can understand why some marriages actually brake down because people would struggle to handle that situation where they are no longer allowed to work. It brings a lot of argument in the family because kids want this and the wife wants that and you can’t provide for that and all the frustration is vented out and sometimes people end up not respecting each other and then they separate. In fact it is not just marriages that have broken down, some people have actually lost their mental strength, we have quite a lot of people we know who have developed mental health problems because they can’t handle this. And others have actually committed suicide. So it has brought chaos to family life. It is not encouraging family life.

I arrived in the UK in September 2002. I’ve been living here for 6, almost 7 years and I am not permitted to work. This policy has a huge negative impact, on both myself and my family. It has caused us severe depression. At the moment when my children ask me to provide for them like any other citizen around, I am not able to do what my children ask. As a result, my children feel they are inferior. I am not allowed to work and I sit around. This is affecting all of us.

This policy has a big emotional impact. My children ask me, “Daddy why don’t we go on holiday?”. When they ask me this question I feel grief from the bottom of my heart. I don’t even know how to answer that question. I don’t want to give them false hope and I don’t want to lie to them. Because lying is not good. So I struggle to give them answers.

During the Christmas holidays my children see other children from their school with new Christmas shoes. Why aren’t we decorating our house like the other houses? When they ask me these questions I don’t give them an answer, I just feel grief in my heart and say nothing.

My children would like to feel equal with other children, but they cannot feel equal. They feel inferior and it is psychologically affecting them. That’s the situation we are in.

Sometimes you actually use your own money to buy groceries for others, because you go into a family and virtually they have got nothing because what they are receiving from government is not enough, and sometimes they don’t get anything, contrary to what people say. And so you chip in and you buy them food. You are basically helping to keep body and soul together but you are also implicitly creating a problem because you move in with the groceries and as soon as you go out there is division between the husband and wife, because the husband feels belittled because the wife is thanking you for bringing the food and the husband thinks that you fancy her now. Because we have taken out the role that he is



supposed to be playing in the family and so there is turmoil being created in the family. Although we are going in to do good, we are creating another problem

Within the Zimbabwean community in Britain today we know that the divorce rate is on the increase and one of the main reasons is this idea that the husband is not allowed to go out and work because they are an asylum seeker. Yet back home this man was probably a doctor, a banker, a manager. I think sometimes you sit down and you say they seem to be suffering even more than the physical abuse they have escaped from in their own countries.

If you have Section 4 support you are not allowed to have anyone living with you, it doesn't matter who. 6 people live there in the house I live in. How can I bring my wife there, sharing the bath and everything? Its very hard. She can't come. And also I can't go because her family doesn't have enough place she has to look after her disabled brother.

We are not allowed to marry like ordinary people. I don't know why. We have a very bad situation. We feel like 3rd class people, not allowed to work not allowed to marry, not allowed to have love. Because you need your life, a simple life, but the government doesn't let you. Its very very very bad. You are in middle of a situation I can't change myself, this waiting for a decision. (To be allowed to marry here) you have to ask for a form which costs a lot of money, nearly £300, and you have to get a solicitor which will maybe because you £500, and after that they refuse you or maybe not. Its big money. I can't afford that money as I'm not allowed to work. I hope our situation gets better and let us work and let us get married. Simple like that. We are normal people nothing different. We suffered from bad government in Iraq and we've suffered again in here. Again. But in different ways. Nothing changed. Thank you very much. I hope everything changes as soon as possible.

We both feel very angry. You can't do anything. You can't. I keep telling her just wait, wait. She says how long, I say I don't know, just wait. And that situation, that problem, causes too much headache for me. Sometimes we have arguments. Because I can't go there. Its very very bad. She says why don't you come, but sometimes you have no cash and you can't travel every day. They don't give us cash, they give us £35 as vouchers you spend for food

There is a problem in families. They quarrel in front of their children. It is not a good life. And then sometimes they go and do black work and this is dangerous to the family. Because they don't allow them to work. Some people I know, the husband beat his wife, about money because they didn't have enough they needed for the children. If they work in the black it makes them nervous because they are



doing something against the law and they are afraid, and this affects their life. Sometimes the quarrel and he beats his wife. She went to the police and they separate them, and they are destroyed. Maybe they will divorce. It destroys family life.

The impact on young people, whose parents are not allowed to work

The agenda for the Government on young people is that 'Every Child Matters', but the problem is the ground is not level for every child in this country. Because for young people whose parents are not allowed to work it means they have limitations on providing for their families which means that the choices for these young people are also limited. It means that those young people cannot develop to their full. Even their social development is affected as well because, in the back of their mind, when they play with other kids or other young people they know they are not as equal as them. I think this has a negative effect on young people as they grow up. So to say that every child matters is not true, because some young people are being denied certain resources because their parents can't work to provide for their children. They are having to depend on state handouts and the handouts are limited as well.

As soon as they finish A levels or college, regardless of how they have excelled in their studies, the law is you cannot access any university course because of the status of your parents. A typical example would be if a young asylum seeker wanted to do a course in say medicine, nursing, or physiotherapy. They can't access that because the policy is that they can't do that unless their parents have got the right to work here. While they are not accessing courses they want to do, they cannot work either, so they are just hanging there, doing what? That's where the problem is. So what is the future for this child? What are they going to be doing for their future? Most of them are just forced to wait until the Home Office makes a decision about where their parents are going, either deported back or granted some status to live here or work here. Then the lives of these young people, which was on a limbo, they start thinking of moving on in terms of accessing university. But by the time they are going to university they are already behind, 1 year, 2 years, 3 years, 4 years, 5 years behind their age group, so their lives are affected for the rest of their lives. At the age of 16, 17, 18 the young person is quite mature to understand what is happening. It is very, very painful. Towards the end of A levels the friends that have been supporting them all along will not become very relevant to their lives now because the language will change, their aspirations are going to be changing because the rest of their friends will be talking about which university they are going to. They will become uncomfortable in that environment so they withdraw. They can't be seen to be as happy as everybody else when things are not alright with their



future. If they were used to socialising going to cinemas going say to the pub or just to enjoying themselves, I think it will take someone who is very strong to continue doing this under the circumstances which are unfolding that, whether you like it or not, you are going separate ways, you are not going to university. Academically you might be a good performer but you are not going to university because of the situation of your family. It means that they will also have to start looking for friends who are sharing the same scenario like themselves and sometimes that does not bring any solace at all.

I think it is a time bomb because a young person who is angry about their situation, they can easily blame it on others, and who knows what they can do next. I think when we have a lot of young people whose future has been destroyed by the fact that they had no choice, they can easily turn against the system and they can easily turn against all institutions and that brings hatred in our communities. I think the system is not helping those young people to grow up as responsible adults in their communities, but it is actually alienating them from their communities and sooner or later the consequences will be felt, and they will be negative, and I think we will have problems in our communities, once we have young people who are being affected by a system negatively not to perform and achieve their life aspirations.

When a young person is growing they are emulating, they are learning quite a lot from their parents. I don't know what lesson they will be getting when they see their parent is not working, is not providing for the family, but they just go to the post office to collect vouchers to buy food. Everything is being provided for by the state – accommodation and health care. I don't think that is a very good example to any young person. If you are talking about hard work, being hard working and being responsible for yourself, if you are not allowed to do that, how then is the child going to learn about the importance of working hard to support yourself and sustain yourself?. So there are some lessons which these young people are learning and they are not happy with that as well because I think every child is proud of their parents providing, working hard to provide food on the table, not to be given for free. It is disempowering, not only to the parents it is also disempowering to the young people because they are not learning anything from what they see happening in the home. So there is no role model there. We hear a lot of scholars saying we get a lot of problem in the streets because certain ethnic groups have no role models. If the role models are supposed to be say parents or adults who are supposed to be working hard to show how it is done, and if their hands are tied, they can't do anything, how are they going to be role models?. I don't think when we talk of role models we are talking of role models in the streets. Its in the family. Role models start from within the family. I think it is important to start from the home, and if the home is broken because the family is not allowed to work, the family is not providing, the family is not allowed to excel, they are not allowed to use their skills to bring food on the table, the



young people are not learning anything at all except that it perpetuates the dependence syndrome. Who knows how they are going to be these young people when they grow up?

The problems of drugs and drinking, they are all coming. They can actually be encouraged within this group because of this system of not allowing their parents to work. They are spending their time at home, doing what? Someone is going to say "Oh why don't you try this to get over your stress?" Who can blame them for trying it when they are stressed day in day out?

I have been working with young people from all backgrounds in Teesside and I have seen how young asylum seekers whose parents are not allowed to work suffer because of the difference which they have compared to all the other young people, and this is what makes me, to be honest, angry because I see some young people being destroyed, their future being destroyed by a policy which I think is very, very unfair.

Once dignity has been stripped away from the parents, they cannot have control over their own children, especially when they are teenagers. They cannot provide for them and we see a whole host of consequences that we have to deal with.

There is untold suffering. Some of this, I am sorry to say, is now leading to some undesirable consequences for the entire community i.e there is a young man who has now drifted into drugs and picked up by police for ship-lifting on a number of occasions and it is going to take a lot of money maybe to bring him straight into the line.

So people will react in some cases in unacceptable manners. For example I have seen two young men who are in the hands of police now. Physically able bodied people who could have the right to work and work, but because they cannot do that they have been caught up by the police doing the wrong things. That is a problem in the community.

On poverty and destitution

I've been in the UK for more than 6 years. The Government stopped all support to me in 2004 and I hadn't anything, any support, any benefit, until 2007 when they introduced Section 4 support. For 3 years I hadn't any support and nowhere to sleep, I just keep moving from friends to friends. That period of time, that situation, destroyed our dignity. I couldn't work, I couldn't do anything. It was a very bad situation.



I had to sleep in the park. It's really hard, you can't imagine, it's a really bad, bad situation. It's a bad memory, a cold, rough life, starving, everything terrible. Now I get Section 4 support which is Vouchers worth £35 per week. But still you can't do anything. 24 hours just repeats itself, keeps repeating and repeating and you can't do anything. It's a waste of time, a waste of age. And when you go to the shop and take out the voucher you feel ashamed and embarrassed.

I've been away for 5 years in the UK, and when I left Zimbabwe my business was gone, my own business was destroyed, my house was also destroyed and taken over, and now being in the UK for more than 5 years I still have nothing. I own nothing. Home is home ok, but if I have to go back today I am on zero ground, I'm on ground zero. What in life is there for me to start life? I am aging, I will not have another 40 years to live or another 40 productive years of my life, there's only a little bit left now. Why can't I live it in dignity?

For many years I have depended on a local charity that gives clothes to asylum seekers. My background is a dressmaker, so I would be able to make my own dresses. I'm not in a position to do that anymore. I would continue with the job I know, that is dress making. I would love to go back to what I am used to, that would be going back to my origins.

I get £35 worth of vouchers per week and these vouchers can only be used at a certain store, it does not give me a choice of store. You just have to go to that particular store that's all. And £35 won't buy much. People talk about the credit crunch, things have gone so much up in the shops but my vouchers will still stay the same amount. It's hard to fill the gap. A few months ago I used to buy eggs for £1.19 but of recent it went up to £1.50. And everything else that I cannot list now has gone so much higher. £35 puts me in difficult situation. With children you cannot afford to buy enough food for the house, let alone with vouchers, you can't buy clothes, you can't use them to travel by. In other shops they don't even allow you to buy a packet of paracetamols, because they are food -only vouchers.

If you have a house that NASS has given you to stay in, you cannot keep whoever is your sister who has been taken out of the house because their case has been decided and refused,. You will be breaching the NASS laws of being a resident in that house. Which is very difficult. There are people who actually sleep in the parks, in the bus station, because I can't keep you. If NASS finds us here, you and me will be out of this house. The refugee centre gives charity of £5 per week and a bag of food, it's only a few foods. But no one would live off £5 a week. Talk about transport, everything else that can come out of £5. It is degrading. It is mentally disturbing as well. It is crippling, mentally crippling. You know if you are



crippled physically it is better but if you are mentally crippled that's the finish, that's the end of a human being.

When you are in a situation like that (destitute) some friends are kind, some of them just ignore us and they hurt us actually. Sometimes we have no place. They want their life, their normality, some people were married and they need their freedom. They work hard and earn money very hard and sometimes they are not ready to spend for you. Its not one day, 2 days, 3 days, it's very hard to support someone from your pocket and you don't know till when. That's the problem. If, for example, you could say I'll just be with you this week and after this week I'll give everything back, then maybe they'd say OK. But our future at that time was unclear, so it was very hard. We los some friends and we made some friends. It was really hard and not nice for a young man who is not disabled or anything, and you have to ask someone for money. It is embarrassing to us. You can't do anything. 24 hours, it just repeats, keeps repeating and repeating. You can't do anything, you can't travel, you can't go anywhere because you need money.

Some people are deprived of even the basic things like choosing what to buy, because they only have vouchers, and these can only be used at a specific shop.

The impact on the UK economy

Benefits are not part of Zimbabwean culture. We are a people who are willing to feed ourselves and our own extended families. Like any other Asylum seeker who would wish to do so. Myself, I have been called a scrounger whilst walking on the street. I am not a scrounger by choice. But it is being an asylum seeker that makes me what I am today, that I have to depend on somebody to give me something to eat. There is a little example I can give you. Recently they have been talking about electricity for those who cannot afford electricity, like the elderly. I find that inconceivable. I can't take that in. If a 90 year old woman has no electricity in her house and there is a 20 year old asylum seeker who lives in a house with free everything?, I can't find any balance there. Why would an able bodied person be given things for free when a 90 year old can't afford electricity in her own house? Because that person can't work any more. Why can't there be a shift of balance?

Too many people here are not allowed to work. If they were able to work they could give this community something. The Government would not be spending money paying for their houses, for their vouchers. Its a good opportunity for these people and for the government too I think. There is no good reason behind it. Let them work. If they let us work you have to pay your rent, I don't pay rent. But I'd



still be proud, I'd still be happy. Because after that I'd be free. But now you live with uncertainty and can't do anything

If I was allowed to work I would be able to support myself and my family. I would be able to contribute to the economy of the UK. I will pay taxes. That means I am contributing to building the country.

It has caused me depression. If I am allowed to work I believe that I could find a job quite quickly. In my opinion people should be given permission to work and be able to support our families and contribute to the country, instead of preventing people from working and forcing them to sit down at home in front of the TV

People are wasting their lives here. I know people who have been here 7 or 8 years. Not only have they got older, but they have wasted their time, not living, not earning. Its not a proper life. These people could contribute a lot to the economy. They are just wasting their time and will not find satisfaction. I ask the Government to reflect on this situation again. If they are permitted to work they will support their families. They will have the opportunity to do whatever they want with their life. They will contribute to the economy and help build the country. These are young people, if they are not allowed to work it means they cannot support the older people and others who are unable to work. If the young people are not allowed to work, who will support the older generation? It is very good for the country for individuals, for these young people to be allowed to work.

We have just finished a survey, we are actually going out trying to educate the community, mythbusting as it were. It is quite alarming the misinformation that the public have about asylum seekers, that they come here, they are given cars, given houses, everything for free. And yet on the contrary this is a group of people who are suffering and they think they don't want to work but they are unaware that they are not allowed to work. And that is creating tensions. Hate crime is actually on the increase here basically because of these misconceptions that people have.

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work, they have lost dignity, they begin to behave in a way that fulfils the prejudices that people have, so it becomes chicken and egg, it becomes a vicious circle. I am sure the government is not doing itself any favours in denying these people the right to work. They allowed them in the country in the first place and the problems that they create are problems that they will probably have little power to solve.

There is untold suffering. Some of this, I am sorry to say, is now leading to some undesirable consequences for the entire community i.e there is a young man who has now drifted into drugs and



been picked up by police for ship-lifting on a number of occasions and it is going to take a lot of money maybe to bring him straight into the line.

I had my own business, but because of political reasons I was forced to flee my country. I have various skills, I have skills to work in an office, in a factory, in administration, computer skills. I've been here for 7 years, I've taken some courses and know the British way of life and language because I have been here for 7 years. If I am given the opportunity for my skills to be used – the ones I had in my own country and the ones I've built here, it would be better

Most Zimbabweans are well educated. The majority of them are professionals. Now when we talk of an 'asylum seeker' or a 'refugee' it is a label given to someone who is a parent, someone who has a proper name and someone who has a proper profession. So they cease to be doctors, cease to be nurses, cease to be teachers because we apply the name "asylum seeker". But behind that name there is an individual who matters, an individual who when you take away the dignity that they have you are stripping them of themselves, they are left with nothing

Work ethic in Country of Origin

I think for most Africans it is a man's duty to provide for their families. Although it wasn't written anywhere that this is the law but it was part of our culture that a men should work hard for their family. The idea was working hard to bring money into the family, the idea was work work work, to work very hard to make sure there is food on the table for your family that's what we believe in and that is what was happening.

I've been in the UK for more that 5 years and I'm still waiting for a decision. I've not been able to work as I am an asylum seeker. But I have managed to do a lot of volunteering in the community and in my local refugee centre. It is my culture that I work, so instead of wasting time lying around at home doing nothing, it is very stressful, so it is a matter of killing time, just looking for something to do

Going to work is a normal way of living for us. I wouldn't expect anyone to look after me or my family. I wouldn't even put it as an agenda. It's just normal that somebody should work and feed themselves and their family.

Not being able to work is degrading to me. It is something that has been taken away from me, something that I believe is a right that nobody should lose. Its depressing because my background is



feeding my own family. We have very strong family values. I have a big duty of care that has been stripped away. And not being able to do that for myself, I feel a failure in life.

Benefits is not in Zimbabwean culture. We are a people who are willing to feed ourselves and our own extended families. Like any other Asylum seeker who would wish to do so. Myself I have been called a scrounger whilst walking on the street. I am not a scrounger by choice. But it is being an asylum seeker that makes me what I am today, that I have to depend on somebody to give me something to eat.

I was a lecturer at University. I have an MA in methods of teaching English as a foreign language, and I have a BA in English and Literature, and a diploma in engineering. I had a private institute in Baghdad to teach women sewing and arranging flowers. I have these skills. When I graduated in 1976, within one week I had a job at the Institute of Technology as an assistant lecturer. I worked for 30 years in Iraq. Even my father continued to give lectures after he retired. We don't like to sit without work, even women. I am used to working.

It is important for people to work. This is a human right. In our Quran it says it is important to work. God advised people to work; work is like worship. It is equal. If you work it helps people to be satisfied with themselves and to society and to family.

Why people take the risk to work 'in the black' (illegally)

It makes you sick at heart. Give us the chance to work. Give us the chance to work. Even if you don't give us the papers yet, give us the opportunity to work. I have responsibilities to so many. There are so many people who want this.

We fled here from political problems. Myself, I worked in the United Nations office. There is nobody who can support them (my family back home) when I'm not there, and I can't work. Children have to go to school, it's not free like here in England. How can I educate them, house them? How can I provide? I lived with my mother. My father is dead. So I have to feed my mother, she is over 70 years old. I have to seek some way of sending her money to support her, I'm seeking left and right, I can't ask a Charity for money to send to my country, so I have to seek black work.

I am the eldest in my family. My father died and I am responsible for my mother and two brothers, who are handicapped. When I was in Iraq I had a good salary because I worked at the University, and I helped support my mother and two brothers. Because my mother had only a little income from my father's pension. I went shopping for her, bought her and my brothers what they needed. I had a car and took



them on picnics. Now its difficult. I haven't any money to send to my mother to support her and she needs money. Last week she asked me if she died, then who would make sure she was buried right?. Who will be responsible for my brothers if she dies. When I was young I though the UK was paradise and everything was good.

Certainly working on the black helps people a lot, that's for sure. When my mother is sick, I can't send her vouchers to make her better. So I have to work to look after my mother.

They shot dead my 19 year old son in Congo. We had a mass here, but if I don't have money I can't send it to my country to bury my son

So we have to go and search for work, black work, to send some money home to our families. If today they gave us permission to work, we wouldn't have to work on the black and we would pay tax in England.

The risk is there for everyone. So many people are working on the black because they don't give us permission to work.

I've been here over 3 years, waiting. For me personally, the risk of being caught was there, but I had to support my family back home. One day will be the day it is your turn to be arrested. So I was arrested. Now I am in the legal process. I have to go and sign every day at the police station and I go to court in September to see what the Judge decides. I don't know what will happen to me. That's for the Judge to decide. But since the start of August when I was arrested, and freed the next day, I've had to sign at the police station every day. But its the Judge's decision. I don't know what he will decide. My solicitor asked if I could sign one or twice a week. But he Judge refused and said I must sign every day. But I think if he Judge is a father like me, or a mother, who has responsibilities, he wouldn't wish me harm. He would say, Monsieur, if you were working for your family, then he could see the reasons. I wasn't working to get drugs, or such things. I went to work to help those people who brought me into this world.

I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't take drugs. We work to help our children, our wives, our families. People waiting are suffering.

I know the police and immigration know that people work on the black. They know. The Police know and Immigration knows. The reason we work on the black is because we are working to support our families. It seems like they don't know why we work, but they can understand why. They know he is married, is the father of children, with a family. But how can he live on £35 vouchers a week? I don't think you



could live on that. Even a week's food for the house is not £35. But a man like me, a father of 7 children, I have £35 of vouchers. So they don't know the reason we work? They make out they don't know, but they know.

They give me £35 vouchers a week. What am I supposed to do with vouchers? In 2006 I even asked to join the army of this country. But they said at my age, 40, I was too old to be a soldier. They only recruit young men of 17 or 18. But I did ask to do that, but they said No. I need to find work. I am strong enough to find work. I really need to work. I am strong.

The fathers suffer. If today you deport someone to his country, it will be terrible, because he will start with nothing, at zero. But if he could work now, he could organise himself. There are so many people who have been here for 5 years, 6, 8 years, and if you returned them to their country now where would they start? What will they eat, what will they do? You don't have a house, or anywhere to stay and no money. Its terrible.

If they gave us permission to work it would be so good. In Canada they give people who don't have papers the right to work, and also in the USA.

I want to ask immigration, the people who judge us, to review the system, to give us the right to work. Perhaps give us a house for one week, two weeks, but give us the chance to work and we can find a house. It would also give us freedom, to do what we want. We are all trapped in the system, we can't escape the system. We hate it.

If they gave me permission to work tomorrow, first I would smile, I would be so happy to just do what I did in my country. I worked at the Airport, I worked on the border between Kinshasa and Brazzaville. I know airports, I know the system. If they gave me permission to work at 12 o'clock, I wouldn't waste a minute. A 12.05 I would be in the agency asking for work

If today immigration gave the opportunity to work, the chance to work to everyone then I know that everyone would wait patiently for immigration's decision. If they gave permission to work today then I know myself, and 10 or 15 other people I know, in 5 minutes we'd go to all the agencies, the factories, the companies, and seek work.

We have a proverb in Arabic. It says if you don't allow people to do things, it makes them do things the wrong way. Because they don't allow them to work people find black work. And this is not good for the Government because they don't pay taxes.



I want to ask immigration to give asylum seekers permission to work. The same as the USA. The same as Canada.

We ask immigration, PLEASE, if you can hear me, I say, help us, give us the chance to work. We don't need vouchers. We don't need to go to the post office to collect £35. We need work, like in Canada and the USA. That's what I want to say to immigration.

I am proud to give these answers to your questions. I was looking for the opportunity to speak about the suffering and I am very happy I have found that opportunity today.

