



# **Women refugees - from volunteers to employees: a research project on paid and unpaid work in the voluntary sector and volunteering as a pathway into employment**

Final Report

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*Working Lives Research Institute*

*Refugee Assessment & Guidance Unit*

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## Contents

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	4
<b>CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH AIMS.....</b>	<b>11</b>
AIMS .....	11
<b>CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODS – REFUGEE WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES.....</b>	<b>13</b>
Individual Interviews .....	13
FOCUS GROUPS AND WORKSHOP.....	17
ORGANISATIONAL CASE STUDIES .....	20
Table 2: Summary of organisational interviews .....	23
<b>CHAPTER 3: THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR AS AN EMPLOYER AND VOLUNTARY WORK AS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT .....</b>	<b>24</b>
THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR AS AN EMPLOYER .....	24
VOLUNTEERING, SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND REFUGEES .....	26
VOLUNTEERING AS SOCIAL PARTICIPATION.....	28
<b>CHAPTER 4: REFUGEE WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET .....</b>	<b>31</b>
EMPLOYMENT RATES OF REFUGEES .....	31
GENDER ISSUES .....	32
VOLUNTEERING AND EMPLOYMENT.....	33
<b>CHAPTER 5: REFUGEE WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR .....</b>	<b>36</b>
MOTIVATIONS AND RANGE OF ACTIVITIES .....	36
EMPLOYMENT RELATED EXPECTATIONS .....	36
TRAINING AND WORK EXPERIENCE : .....	37
SUPERVISION AND INDUCTION.....	40
REFERENCES.....	44
CONFIDENCE .....	45
VOLUNTEERING AS SOCIAL COMMITMENT .....	48
LIMITATIONS AND PROBLEMS .....	50
WHAT WORKS TO GET INTO EMPLOYMENT? .....	51
<b>CHAPTER 6: VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS’ EXPERIENCES WITH REFUGEE WOMEN VOLUNTEERS AND EMPLOYEES .....</b>	<b>58</b>
THE ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF VOLUNTEERS .....	58
RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF VOLUNTEERS .....	60
EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES MONITORING AND VOLUNTEERS .....	63
SELECTING VOLUNTEERS AND SKILLS MATCHING .....	64
MANAGING AND SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERS .....	67
SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTEERS - EXPENSES AND CHILDCARE PROVISION.....	68
TRAINING .....	69
VOLUNTEERING OR WORK PLACEMENT? .....	71
HELP WITH FINDING EMPLOYMENT .....	73
THE TRANSITION INTO EMPLOYMENT .....	75
RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF PAID STAFF - EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES ISSUES .....	78
SUMMARY OF KEY ORGANISATIONAL ISSUES .....	81
<b>CHAPTER 7: EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE.....</b>	<b>84</b>
RECRUITING AND SELECTING VOLUNTEERS .....	84
MANAGING VOLUNTEERS .....	84
HELPING VOLUNTEERS INTO EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS.....	85
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>87</b>
GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY SECTOR, FUNDERS AND POLICY MAKERS .....	88
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS IN VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT.....	89
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS IN EMPLOYMENT PRACTICE.....	89

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO THE 'MAINSTREAM' .....	90
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFUGEE WOMEN: .....	91
REFERENCES .....	93

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Umut Erel

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## Executive Summary

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Our research supports the view that volunteering can act as a pathway into employment for refugee women. Voluntary work can also provide important benefits to refugee women who for various reasons are not able to undertake paid employment, and organisations benefit considerably from their unpaid contribution. Providing opportunities for volunteers may also be integral to the organisation's mission.

However, many of our interview partners who wanted to use volunteering as a pathway into employment felt that their efforts to find employment were frustrated. A small minority of our interview partners experienced a smooth transition from voluntary activity to paid work, but for many refugee women, the pathway into employment was associated with setbacks. Thus, some secured employment that was part-time or sessional only. For many, the employment opportunities were temporary and it took some of them years to find sustainable employment.

Refugee women are actively involved in a large range of voluntary activities. Thus, our research counteracts any stereotypes of refugee women as involved only in supportive or administrative roles in voluntary organisations. Most of our interview partners were involved in a range of volunteering placements in different organisations.

What emerged clearly was refugee women's ability to build bridges and create cross-over knowledge between Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs) on the one hand, and Refugee Agencies (RAs) and Mainstream Voluntary Organisations (MVOs)<sup>1</sup>, as well as other mainstream volunteering organisations, on the other.

Thus, refugee women's voluntary work meant a broadening of their networks, both collectively and individually. This was a key asset in helping them in their pathways into employment.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this research project, we define 'Mainstream Voluntary Organisations' as organisations that do not primarily work with and for refugees.

But we feel that it is also important to recognise that not only does the voluntary work of refugee women make important contributions to refugee communities, but to the wider UK society also. In this sense, we feel that government policy should not only view volunteering as a tool for integrating refugee women, instead, refugee women should be seen as actively shaping and improving this society, too.

Our findings suggest that while volunteering was often regarded as a very worthwhile and satisfactory activity, on its own it is not enough to help refugee women into employment. However, volunteering can enable access to resources including: information, training, job and training networks. Volunteering was most successful as a pathway into employment when it was part of an individually tailored programme including ESOL, training and job search support.

A very positive impact on the ability of refugee women to find paid employment was played by 'gate openers'. These could be friends, advice and guidance providers, and often were volunteer co-ordinators. They played a key role in encouraging refugee women, giving relevant information and advice on training opportunities, job opportunities and also provided sustained coaching in writing applications and succeeding in job interviews. These gate openers were all the more effective if they had a good understanding of the specific circumstances of refugee women and their individual client, as well as of the mainstream labour market and thus could enable refugee women to make full use of all available opportunities.

Volunteering can also constitute an opportunity to try out new and different occupations in the new UK environment. This is particularly relevant in a context where many refugee women experience a societal process of de-skilling through non-recognition of their qualifications. This is often a very frustrating experience that necessitates a re-orientation, though sometimes it is also welcomed as an opportunity to change career directions.

The context of de-skilling of refugee women also provides the backdrop for another type of volunteering experience. Thus, many women can only secure paid employment in low skill, low pay jobs with physically difficult and at times unsatisfactory working conditions and environments. These are often as cleaners, care assistants or in unskilled factory work. For some of the refugee women we interviewed, volunteering therefore provides an alternative activity, which they find more meaningful and which gives them more satisfaction than their paid employment.

Again and again we found that refugee women are extremely keen and proactive in seeking out any training opportunities they can access. However, some factors including the fact that asylum seekers have to self-finance and that university education is expensive mean that most refugee women have very restricted choices. This often leads to a training history that is more influenced by which courses are available for free at the time than by the individual career progression and training needs of the women, so that training is not always used in a way as to help into employment.

When it comes to accessing employment in the community sector, refugee women and organisations alike sometimes felt that their personal experience and their volunteering experience was key in enabling them to find employment. This co-existed, however, unfortunately with a disappointment that often they did not find their more general skills recognised.

In most (but not all) organisations where we conducted interviews more refugee women than men volunteered. Women were seen as more flexible and as having better social and communication skills. Men were seen as more focused on employment and less willing to undertake unpaid work. Although voluntary work offers more flexibility than paid work the demands of childcare and domestic responsibilities were identified as the main barrier to women's participation. In this context the lives of refugee women were represented as

more complex than those of white UK female volunteers, still widely regarded as 'typical' volunteers. Lack of childcare provision is an important barrier for refugee women's participation in both volunteering and employment. This and other caring responsibilities may have additional effects as barriers: thus, some of our interview partners were told they were too old to participate in training or to consider certain careers.

Voluntary work is integral to the work of most voluntary and community organisations, however the proportion of work carried out by volunteers and the resources devoted to them vary considerably. A distinction is made between 'core' paid work and voluntary work, but where funding for paid posts is very limited and temporary in nature this distinction becomes difficult to maintain. Because of funding limitations relatively few paid posts are available in the sector, meaning that not all volunteers who hope to find employment within the organisation where they volunteer can have these expectations fulfilled.

Within case study organisations it was possible to identify refugee women who had made the transition into paid work. However this employment is not always 'stable' – sometimes only part time or sessional work is available. Although the opportunity to undertake paid work is valued by refugee women, part time employment can be very marginal (if not disadvantageous) in terms of financial benefit, particularly for single mothers. Because much employment is temporary women may have to revert to volunteering at the end of their contract. These issues are more apparent within RCOs than better-funded organisations.

The importance of the role of volunteer co-ordinator emerged strongly in this study. Co-ordinators provide induction and support; they can identify suitable opportunities for volunteers to apply existing skills and to develop new skills. They may also provide assistance to volunteers in preparing job applications, and accessing external training and education opportunities. However where no such post exists volunteers have to rely on the good will of already hard-pressed employees to supervise, coach and support them. If the volunteer co-ordinator

post itself is only funded on a short-term project basis this will limit the sustainability of the effort to involve and develop volunteers in the organisation.

Whilst voluntary experience or relevant work experience is expected of applicants for posts in the voluntary/community sector this is a minimum requirement rather than 'added value'. Relevant qualifications and the ability to convince an interview panel of their skills and competence are also important. Problems with written and spoken English were identified as reasons why refugee applicants may be unsuccessful. But within refugee organisations and refugee projects we found a questioning of their language requirements, whether these were 'realistic' and whether they indirectly discriminated against refugees.

Knowledge of refugee communities, of community languages and insight into the refugee experience are identifiable as advantages held by refugee applicants when applying for jobs within refugee organisations and refugee projects. However these attributes are not usually prioritised for jobs within the 'mainstream' or generic voluntary sector. We found a tendency for women participants to see their future within refugee based organisations, or organisations serving their national/ethnic community. This was also identified as an issue by organisational participants who felt that refugees might become restricted within the refugee sector. However within the context of increasingly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society refugees' knowledge and experience is relevant to a much wider range of organisations. But at the same time organisations need to look beyond the label 'refugee' and identify the generic skills and commitment of the applicant.

We found mainstream voluntary organisations with an interest in recruiting refugee women as volunteers, even if they had no shortage of applications from potential volunteers. This relates to the wish to diversify their volunteer workforce to better reflect local and client populations. Diversifying the volunteer workforce was regarded as easier than the paid workforce because the same

stringencies on selection do not apply, but it could also be seen as first stage of diversifying the paid workforce. However we were not told of any shortages of applicants for paid posts in these organisations. Refugee women have therefore to compete with 'home based' candidates for these jobs.

The category 'refugee' is not usually included in equal opportunities monitoring except within some refugee organisations. It is unusual to monitor volunteer applicants. Equal opportunities practice should become more attuned to the situation of refugee women and take issues such as English as a second language, recognition of overseas qualifications and gaps in the CV through the experience of flight into account. Although all organisations have equal opportunities policies we question how much systematic monitoring of equal opportunities information regarding staff and volunteers is actually carried out, making it difficult to analyse or even access the data.

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## Chapter 1: Research aims

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### ***Aims***

This report is the outcome of a research project carried out by Working Lives Research Institute and Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit at London Metropolitan University for the London Development Agency and European Social Fund.

The research examined refugee women's experiences of voluntary and paid work in the voluntary sector. We wanted to hear about refugee women's experiences of volunteering, as a contribution to UK society but also importantly as a step on the way to employment. While volunteering is often presented as a route into employment, the actual experiences of refugee women as volunteers have not yet been documented. This research has revealed both the opportunities and limitations of volunteering. We have made sure to include a variety of perspectives: we have interviewed refugee women themselves and found out about their experiences of volunteering and of paid work, mainly in the voluntary sector but where the volunteering led to employment in public and private sectors, we followed this route up, too. It was important for us to record which strategies and routes into employment actually work. Thus, finding refugee women who had found employment and felt that their volunteering had benefited them on the way was important for us. Of course, this also meant finding out what difficulties other refugee women faced in their volunteering experience. Furthermore we wanted to find out whether voluntary organisations' policies and practices enable refugee women volunteers to turn their experiences into an asset when job searching. That is why we have also conducted case studies with organisations and in-depth interviews with key informants who had a knowledge about refugee women's volunteering and employment issues. In short, we set out to

- Hear about the experience of refugee women as volunteers

- Identify the barriers faced by refugee women in making the transition from voluntary to paid work and the resources used to overcome them.
- Recommend good practice to voluntary sector organisations working with refugee women as volunteers
- Recommend good practice for voluntary sector organisations in the recruitment of refugee women into paid employment and for the inclusion of refugee women's concerns into good equal opportunities practice.

This report presents our findings: Chapter 2 explains our research method and provides a brief insight into to the experiences of our refugee women interview partners. Chapter 3 gives a brief overview of the voluntary sector as an employer and the role of voluntary work as social participation and civic engagement. Chapter 4 gives a summary of the issues refugees face in the labour market and emphasises specific problems for refugee women, though there are now a number of studies on refugee employment, a large scale study that is gender sensitive is unfortunately still missing. Chapters 5 and 6 present our empirical findings, first focusing on the refugee women's perspectives and then presenting the organisational views. The final Chapter presents good practice examples and recommendations.

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## **Chapter 2: Research Methods – Refugee Women’s Experiences**

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### **Individual Interviews**

In order to hear about refugee women’s experiences of working in the voluntary sector, we chose to undertake semi-structured interviews (cf. Gilbert 1993). This type of interview enabled us to maintain a clear focus on education, training, volunteering and employment. At the same time, the semi-structured interview allows the interviewees to develop their own emphasis. This is particularly important when researching marginalized groups, such as refugee women who are often the subject of comment, but whose voices are rarely heard. However, even policy and research seeking to improve the situation of refugee women often does not sufficiently listen to how refugee women see themselves and the issues they face. Therefore we found it important to use a method that allows our interview partners to express their own emphasis and concerns, too. As we took this premise seriously, we also emphasised that if there were any questions that they felt uncomfortable with, they did not have to answer those. As it happened, this did not occur very often, mainly it related to an exercise we asked our interview partners to undertake towards the end of the meeting (see below).

Most interviews were conducted in English, as most of our interview partners felt confident and comfortable in this language. Where interviewers had language skills, these were also utilised, thus we conducted an interview in French and another one in Turkish, as these were the preferred languages of our interview partners.

In the interviews with individual women, we were keen on hearing their experiences of training, volunteering or doing paid work in the voluntary sector. It was important for us to find out what problems they had faced but also how they had overcome them. Which resources had they used? Was it personal networks, professional networks? How did they gain access to advice and

guidance, training providers, formal or informal mentors? Alongside these issues, we wanted to find out how the refugee women themselves saw and evaluated their experiences.

Therefore, we used an additional method to encourage the interview partners to expand their own perspectives. We asked them to think about their experiences of education, training, volunteering and employment and imagine they were to write a book about these. We asked them to tell us what chapters the book would have and what they would put into each of the chapters (cf. Plummer 2001). This encouraged the interview participants to tell us things that were important to them, but that they had not foregrounded in the interview so far. Thus, some women talked about topics such as personal relationships with partners and problems in the family, as in these two interviews

*I am going to start from my childhood and - the reason I'm thinking as a woman because I believe I had a particular life, very extraordinary life I have and because I left my country and I divorce, I brought two kids in this world and I was involved with theatre, I was a teacher, I did many different jobs. Yeah, especially I would like to write about my relationship with people, especially with men I wrote many screenplays is about relationship between men and women, the most complicated things we have in this world. (W26)*

*Well it would be a bit of my background, why I ended up doing voluntary work, what made me do volunteer work, then you can continue the worst part of it and the best part of it.*

**INTERVIEWER: WHAT WOULD BE THE WORST PART OF IT?**

*It's fighting you know for me it would be fighting in the family, we just nearly split up at that time so and the best part of it that I gained so much and I got this project but if I didn't do that voluntary work I don't think you know I would have gone back to engineering again. (W32)*

Others spoke about the difficulties and losses of the refugee experience, including the experience of being de-classed and having to cope with a loss of personal and social status, as well as feelings of isolation, which even those women who had found employment and gained qualifications in the UK felt:

*OK my main chapter changing, new country, with new language, with new culture and all things that I involved but still I have*

*problems. One of my main, one of the big problems that I imagine in here something else. I came here, but because still I, maybe I have to be patient because I hadn't the success that I wanted, it make me not happy. For all areas, for job, for my situation, far from my country, my family and culture here, which is different and wanting for that until you know five years. I'm here and still I haven't got networking as a friend and some close friends, I don't know what is wrong I have friends but not so close, it's just friends as when I go out, I haven't any contact. I think maybe people who work in different area have different culture, different ideas, different beliefs, maybe they interested of the every night pub no book, something deeper. (W29)*

The book chapter exercise also gave our interview partners an opportunity to contextualise their experiences within their wider life experiences but also within the social context of what it means to be a refugee in the UK in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, it is unsurprising that some felt they had to justify their position here and refute racist stereotyping:

*if you are displaced you losing your horizon and sometimes when you losing horizon you lose yourself as well but majority of the refugees somehow but especially they find their way somehow to survive and help others as well. I think this is the most important and the assumption that I feel always very upsetting, they think you are coming here for £20 and using their services here mm somehow hurting! (W17)*

*How to Survive is the title! (Laughs) because it is difficult, you know. Because as a refugee it is difficult, it is it is but for me it quite helped a lot because I've got this source of strength, I'm a believer, I know that God's hand has been on us and for all who are surviving they have that as well, a source of within the community, one would come in, sometimes I feel, I try not to let it affect me as a human being you see, it is hard, people are suffering. And the other side people think that refugees are coming for better life, and most of them they have tough time here (Pause) staying alive really! (laughs) Oh yes, how to survive, how to stay erm, when you know, to live well and happy in a different environment, when you know, in another country, in another culture, also use other people, not only my own experience you know, and use other people as well within the community who are refugees as well or from other communities as well so I could get a better picture here, a complete picture. Some of our erm, experience and story could be affected by many things going on in our life so we try to make it more realistic and getting different people's opinion as well to make it a complete book of refugees, not only Congolese but all of them! (W17)*

This last remark shows that many of our interview partners viewed their experiences as part and parcel of a wider collective experience be it as women like W29, or as refugees regardless of their national background, as W17 points out - an experience that contains the specific circumstances of a personal life but also goes beyond it.

This exercise also gave our interview partners an opportunity to share with us the meaning they are giving their own life. It allowed them to re-construct at times difficult and painful experiences into a positive, encouraging life story:

*INTERVIEWER: WHAT WOULD BE THE MAIN CHAPTER HEADINGS?*

*Valuing our experience! I feel a lot of refugees have experience that can be transferred to this society this experience if they have opportunity.*

*INTERVIEWER: WHAT DO YOU THINK HAS MOST HELPED YOU IN TERMS OF DEVELOPING THAT EXPERIENCE AND BEING ABLE TO USE THAT EXPERIENCE AND HAVE THAT EXPERIENCE RECOGNISED?*

*Mm I never quit I always try to find a way to move forward, and when you live in an exile it is very hard, you have up and downs. Sometimes lost my confidence as well, mm human has this our parts maybe is critical voicing then you start looking - broader picture*

For refugee women to value their own experience despite discouraging circumstances and even active hostility and disbelief from part of UK society is hard work. As the above quote shows, refugee women have to struggle to value their professional and educational experience in the face of mistrust and de-skilling. But furthermore, it is also hard work to value their experience of persecution and flight:

*it will be very good book because what I had erm, is really story erm it's something unbelievable and something I'd say wow this happened to me, something you never can forget and always you carry on, yourself on your inside and when you see what you feel to look after, to look your inside you say oh I'm lucky if I am here still, yeah.*

*there's a lot to say but if I had to divide it, that would be maybe three main parts, three main parts coming here, feeling helpless staying you know hopeless you know, and there's nothing you can do and then you know, saying the second part is like you know seeing the light at the end of the tunnel and then the third one is that the light is there, I'm there you know, the tunnel, I've passed through the tunnel and you know so you know I'm there! (W6)*

*I really don't know I mean how many chapters I would have, it feels like it would be quite long! (laughs) but I guess it would be something like having so many books in one book you know because you start again and again and again you know, it's just every turn is a new story and yeah it would be like that really you know. You take up something and the you cannot go anywhere with that and then actually, it's a very confusing experience you know and it would be about I guess confusion and chaos definitely, and then finding harmony in it - yes, definitely, I would finish it with kind of a positive sense. I don't like the stories that don't give people hope. (W19)*

This last remark may be key in understanding why a number of our interview partners preferred not to take part in this book chapter exercise. Some of them might be in a situation where they cannot make sense of their current experiences. If confusion is too overwhelming a feeling, it is hard to construct a coherent life story even less one that ends on a positive note as the book chapter exercise encourages.

### ***Focus Groups and Workshop***

We held a workshop for the refugee women participants of the research project on 20 May 2004. The purpose was two-fold: on the one hand we wanted to present our preliminary findings to our interview partners, thereby enhancing the accountability and transparency of our project, which all social research should aim to do. At the same time, the workshop gave us an opportunity to get feedback on our preliminary findings and thus improve on our interpretations. It offered an opportunity for the refugee women to share their own experiences directly with each other. We hoped that this would on the one hand provide a networking opportunity for them, thus benefiting each one of them and possibly leading on to long term networks. On the other hand, this triggered a new reflection on their experiences of volunteering and working in the voluntary sector. We undertook a number of discussions and focus groups, where the

women expressed much more critical views of their volunteering organisations and also shared experiences of racism and sexism, which they had not as openly discussed previously. They also formulated policy recommendations, some of which we include in the conclusions. We think that the combination of individual interviews, which reveal more introspective personal stories and focus groups, which encourage a more critical voice is a valuable lesson to be drawn from this research.

Finally, a few words on sampling: As the table below shows, the majority of our interview partners are skilled or qualified and have worked in their countries of origin. This reflects the preponderance of professional and skilled refugees to volunteer and also to be more successful in securing employment – albeit often below their skills (cf. Chapter 3). Also, the majority are caring for dependent children. We purposefully included refugee women who have been in the UK for a long time, as previous research has shown that it takes a long time to get settled and our interviews also showed, that the longer women were in the UK, the better their chances of being employed. However this cannot simply be seen as a function of time, but also of the previous refugee settlement policies lesser tendency to exclude asylum seekers and refugees from the labour market.

**Table 1: Individual Refugee Women Interview Partners**

(VM= Voluntary Mainstream, RCO= Refugee Community Organisation, RA= Refugee Agency, PUB= Public Sector, Priv= Private Sector)

	in paid work	volunteering presently	occupation in country of origin	country of origin	length of time in UK	caring for dependent child	age
W1	VM	RCO	secretary	Congo	11 yrs	yes	44
W2	no	VM	teacher	Uganda	3 yrs	yes	35
W3	VM	no	project management	Ethiopia	10 yrs	yes	35
W4	RCO	RCO	journalist	Somalia	18yrs	yes	40
W5	no	RCO	teacher	Sudan	11 yrs	yes	47
W6	no	RCO	nurse/midwife	Somalia	8 yrs	yes	46
W7	no	VM	classroom assistant /dental nurse	Malawi	3 yrs	yes	40
W8	PRIV	RCO/RA	secretary	Ethiopia	10 yrs	yes	42
W9	PRIV	informal, fund raising	government officer	Sierra Leone	3 yrs	yes	37
W10	no	RCO	research officer	Ethiopia	13 yrs	yes	38
W11	no	RCO	Senior administrator	Congo	9 yrs	yes	55
W12	no	RA	law degree	Sudan	13 yrs	yes	34
W13	no	RCO	housewife	Somalia	9 yrs	yes	39
W14	RA		teacher	Iran	10 yrs	yes	41
W15	no	no	engineer	Iraq	4 yrs	yes	32
W16	no	no	drafts person	Ethiopia	3 yrs	no	26
W17	PUB	VM	educational psychologist/teacher	Congo	6.5 yrs	yes	
W18	no	RCO	childcare worker	Congo	12 yrs	yes	39
W19	RCO	RCO	journalist	Turkey		yes	35
W20	PRIV	RCO	skilled sewing machinist	Bosnia	10 yrs	no	49
W21	RCO	no	psychologist	Bosnia	9 yrs	yes	36
W22	PUB	VM	medical doctor	Bosnia		yes	35
W23	no	RCO	development Worker	Sudan	10 yrs	yes	43
W24	PRIV	VM	high school student	Ethiopia	14yrs	no	35
W25	VM	VM	housewife	Sudan	12 yrs	yes	40
W26	RCO		teacher	Iran	18yrs	yes	42
W27	no	VM	teacher	Iran	10 yrs	yes	36
W28	RA		teacher	Sri Lanka	7 yrs	no	48
W29	PRIV	RA	designer	Iran	4yrs	no	42
W30	PUB	no	economist	Turkey	4yrs	no	26
W31	no	VM	accountant	Chad	4yrs	no	33
W32	RCO	no	electrical engineer	Kosova	4yrs	yes	33
W33	no	VM	dressmaking in factory	Turkey	13 yrs	yes	38
W34	no	PUB	teacher	Kosova	5yrs	yes	30
W35	VM	VM	stewardess	Uganda	12 yrs	yes	40

### ***Organisational case studies***

Organisational case studies were undertaken in order to gain insight into policies, processes and practices relating to the participation of refugee women as volunteers or employees across the range of organisations that provided the main focus of the study - namely Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs), refugee agencies and 'generic' NGOs. The focus on organisational processes provided a context against which to explore the varied experiences of refugee women, and from which to obtain illustrative examples of organisational practices. We do not claim that the case study organisations are 'typical' or representative of the many different organisations in which refugee women are involved. Instead this aspect of the research was intended to reveal similarities and differences in organisational practices and to analyse the implications of these for the experiences and progression of refugee women within such organisations. This analysis has provided the basis for identifying examples of good practice, and for recommending if and how such good practice could be more widely applied.

The case study organisations were selected drawing on existing contacts and suggestions from our key informants, advisory group members and from interviews with individual refugee women. Not all the organisations we initially approached were willing to participate - pressures of time and excessive workloads were the main reasons given for refusal. Six organisations agreed to take part - two from within the broad category 'RCO', two refugee agencies and two mainstream agencies. These organisations are identified in this report by the following codes: RCOA and RCOB; RAA and RAB; and MAA and MAB. RCOB and MAB were women-only organisations.

In each organisation we interviewed people with key responsibilities in the areas of service delivery, volunteer co-ordination and human resources, together with refugee women employees and volunteers. The number of interviews was determined in part by the size of the organisation. We also carried out observations of organisational activities (including a volunteer open day, community workshops and shadowing volunteers for two days). These

observations provided opportunities for informal discussion with employees, volunteers, prospective volunteers and clients of the organisation. We also collected and analysed available written policies and procedures relating to Equal Opportunities and to the recruitment, employment and development of volunteers and paid staff. Interviews with organisational representatives covered the following main topic areas:

- Overview of organisational mission and aims.
- Information on the deployment of paid staff and volunteers - including the numbers of paid staff, of volunteers, of paid staff who are refugees/refugee women, of volunteers who are refugees/refugee women and of paid staff who have voluntary experience.
- The role and contribution of volunteers in the organisation, including any problematic aspects (for example limited capacity to supervise, funding issues); the relevance of volunteers' experience and skills to organisational tasks
- Perceptions of similarity and difference in the motivation and involvement of women and men refugee volunteers
- Volunteer management - including how volunteers are recruited; how their work is allocated and supervised; expenses paid; volunteer contracts; support and training; accreditation and references; childcare provision.
- Policies, practices procedures relating to paid staff – including recruitment and selection, how equal opportunities are implemented in recruitment, selection, training and development practices; the extent to which applications are sought from refugees or from people from particular ethnic backgrounds; the relevance of work experience and volunteer experience to getting paid employment.

Interviews with refugee women employees and volunteers in the case study organisations followed a similar topic guide to that used for the individual interviews, but with more focus on their current work and role within the organisation.

The case study research was supplemented by a programme of interviews with 11 key informants, who represented a range of organisations with a stake in refugee employment and volunteering issues. In some cases these interviews were carried out with individuals who had contacted us because of their interest in our study. Table 2 gives a summary of the interviews carried out within case study organisations and with key informants.

**Table 2: Summary of organisational interviews**

(rw=refugee woman interview partner)

Reference	Position	
RAA1	Director	
RAA2	Community development manager	
RAA3 (rw)	Outreach worker	
RAA4 (rw)	Advisor/counsellor	
RAA5 (rw)	Volunteer	
MSA1	Volunteer coordinator	
MSA2	Deputy chief executive	
MSA3 (rw)	Team leader	
MSA4 (rw)	Admin assistant	
MSB1	Capacity Building programme officer	
MSB2	Volunteer coordinator	
MSB3 (rw)	Volunteer	
MSB4 (rw)	International programme coordinator	
RAB1	Volunteer Development coordinator	
RAB2	Deputy Chief Executive	
RAB3	Equal Opportunities Officer	
RAB4 (rw)	Volunteer	
RAB5	Work Placement coordinator	
RAB6	Volunteer coordinator	
RAB7	Human Resources Manager	
RCOA1	Volunteer coordinator	
RCOA2 (rw)	Health worker	
RCOA3	Director	
RCOA4 (rw)	Volunteer	
RCOA5 (rw)	Volunteer	
RCOB1 (rw)	Volunteer	
RCOB2	Director	
RCOB3 (rw)	Volunteer	
RCOB4	Volunteer coordinator	
<b>Other interviews</b>		<b>Type of organisation</b>
K1	Head, Employment Section	RA
K2	Contracts and employment manager	RA
K3 (rw)	Advisor	RA
K4 (rw)	Caseworker	RCO
K5	Director, Volunteer Research Centre	Academic
K6	Volunteer coordinator	MA
K7	Project coordinator	MA
K8	Director	MA
K9	Volunteer Bureau project officer	MA
K10	Director	MA
K11 (rw)	Women's development officer	RA

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## **Chapter 3: The Voluntary Sector as and Employer and Voluntary Work as Civic Engagement**

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### ***The voluntary sector as an employer***

According to NCVO (2004) the voluntary sector provides paid employment for approximately 569,000 people (or one in 50 of the working population) of which two thirds are women. Almost two thirds of the workforce works part-time, a more significant proportion than in the public or private sectors (Wilding et al 2003). The sector comprises relatively few large and many small organisations - thus the NCVO claim that most employees are found in organisations with less than 25 staff.

The voluntary sector is expanding, reflecting its enhanced role in social policy, and the increasing involvement of voluntary organisations as contractors and providers of public services. This expansion has been accompanied by a recent rapid increase in the numbers employed in the sector and a more competitive labour market (Wilding et al 2003). Difficulties in recruiting staff are attributed to competition from other organisations and with salary levels below those in other sectors (NCVO 2002). Particular difficulties in recruiting management and professional staff are associated with a shortage of the specialist skills required. A more recent survey of voluntary sector employers revealed a decline in the percentage of organisations experiencing recruitment difficulties, but worsening problems of staff retention. This survey linked these difficulties to a lack of career progression (NCVO 2003a). A survey of voluntary sector employers regarding their current and future skills needs also revealed that they were less pessimistic than previously about recruitment generally, but identified a competitive environment for skilled staff, associated with skills shortages (Wilding et al 2003). This survey found that management skills - particularly project management - were regarded as increasingly important. Specialist technical and professional positions were considered the most difficult to fill because insufficient numbers of applicants possessed the required experience, skills or qualifications. These skills shortages may be experienced more acutely in organisations with few employees, where staff are required to span a number

of roles and to be multi-skilled.

The survey reports a concern amongst employers that skills shortages impact adversely on organisational effectiveness. Organisational responses to the problem focus mainly on recruitment practices (for example advertising strategy) or on changing the terms and conditions of the job to make it more attractive. A proportion of employers (19%) do nothing. The survey report expresses concern that 'training-based solutions [to hard-to-fill jobs] are rarely considered' (Wilding et al 2003:31).

The report distinguishes between skills shortages (difficulties in recruiting suitably skilled staff) and skills gaps (deficiencies amongst existing employees). Although commitment to staff development is high the report considers that levels of training and development across the sector are insufficient to address skills gaps, mainly because of the cost of training and to a lesser extent the lack of suitable provision. Amongst the factors placing extra demands on the skills resources of the sector is the impact of changing regulation and increased regulation. The report also highlights the increasing proportion of funding that is project linked, and recommends that organisations work with funders to obtain recognition of the costs of training and staff development within funding awards.

In 2001 a project was established to improve the diversity of the voluntary sector workforce. This project was set up in response to the claim that: 'while parts of the voluntary sector clearly welcomes diversity, the sector as a whole is failing to attract and retain enough staff and volunteers from diverse communities. Because of this we are missing out on high quality workers and volunteers and the benefits they would bring to voluntary organisations and service users' (NCVO 2004a). According to the NCVO's introduction to Managing Diversity (NCVO 2003b) there is scarce documentary evidence of employment related diversity initiatives within the voluntary sector. It recommends more research be undertaken into voluntary sector practice in this area.

### ***Volunteering, social exclusion and refugees***

Amongst the recommendations of the VSTNO report on skills is that 'given the role of voluntary organisations in working with new entrants to the labour market, and recognition that building skills is an outcome, voluntary organisations should more formally recognise this added value in reporting their work' (Wilding et al 2003:11). Voluntary work and work placements represent ways of involving new labour market entrants and it is interesting that the report does not discuss the contribution of volunteers towards the skills base of voluntary organisations. It is estimated that there are 3 million volunteers working across the sector as a whole (NCVO 2004b), and many small organisations are largely or wholly dependent on volunteer labour. According to Lukka and Ellis (2001) volunteering is generally understood as comprising activities that involve 'helping people', that are carried out within an organizational setting, and that involve volunteers helping those outside their immediate neighbours or family. This understanding thereby excludes 'informal' and community based volunteering. However according to Volunteering England - a new national voluntary development agency for England - volunteering includes both 'formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation' (Volunteering England, 2004).

A survey of over a 1000 volunteer-involving organisations (mostly within the voluntary sector) carried out by the Institute of Volunteering Research in 1998 found increasing formalisation of volunteer management - involving written policies and procedures; systems for volunteer support, supervision and discipline; training and development provision; with nearly a half of organisations offering some form of accreditation or certification of their work (IVR 2003). Despite this more professional approach 'many organisations are still failing to attract significant sections of society into voluntary work'. Women and white people are seen as 'over represented' whilst young people and people from ethnic minorities are seen as under-represented.

Government policies place considerable emphasis on encouraging greater voluntary participation. Volunteering is advocated as a means 'to build a fairer, more cohesive society' (Home Office 2003: 63) and is 'a vital part of active citizenship.... an important expression of citizenship and essential to democracy. It is the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and community, and can take many forms. It is undertaken freely and by choice, without concern for financial gain' (Home Office 2000a: 2). The advocacy of volunteering is closely linked to the combating of 'social exclusion'. Thus David Blunkett described voluntary activity as 'the cornerstone of any civilised society. It is an essential building block in our work to create a more inclusive society' (Blunkett 2001 quoted in IVR 2004:13). The Government defines social exclusion as:

*'a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown' (SEU 2004).*

Volunteering is advocated as a means to counter exclusion through organisational engagement with issues of inequality and disadvantage, by countering alienation, isolation and disaffection through the participation of 'excluded' people, and by providing opportunities for them to gain skills and experience that will improve their employment prospects. Commentators suggest that within the government policy arena the greatest emphasis is given to this last aspect, reflecting the way that social exclusion is represented as primarily an issue of unemployment (IVR 2004). This is reflected in the views found in the IVR's survey of volunteering organisations - that the Government's New Deal and Welfare to Work programmes may draw people away from 'real' volunteering and that there is a blurring between government support for volunteering and its desire to get people into work (IVR 2003).

People from black and ethnic minority (BME) backgrounds are particularly likely to be the subjects of social exclusion (Home Office, 2000b). BME people are reported to have much lower rates of participation as volunteers in voluntary organisations (Home Office 2001). However according to Lukka and Ellis (2001) many are actively involved in informal, non-organisationally based volunteering

within 'BME communities'. A distinction is made within policy documents between 'mainstream' voluntary sector organisations and organisations within the 'BME sector'. It is claimed that the BME sector brings 'distinctive value' to society, but that many BME organisations continue to be excluded from the traditional structures of the voluntary and community sector, and that their funding is significantly below that of similar organisations in mainstream voluntary sector. (Home Office 2000b). It is argued that the BME sector was 'created on a self-help basis by people directly affected by the problems to be addressed. The wider sector however emerged mainly from middle class people taking a benevolent interest in the disadvantaged. As a consequence the motivation of BME volunteers is often based on a personal involvement and commitment to the issue' (Home Office 2000b:17).

According to these sources refugee community organisations (RCOs) should be recognised as part of the BME sector (Home Office 2000b). RCOs are more dependent on volunteers than are refugee agencies, and thus provide opportunities for refugees to gain work experience. However as small locally based community organizations RCOs have very limited capacity in terms of human and financial resources when compared to more 'professional' or mainstream voluntary organizations. Under current legislation asylum seekers are not permitted to undertake paid employment. However the Home Office National Asylum Support Service (NASS) stated in 2000: 'we are keen to see asylum seekers and recognised refugees take an active interest in their own communities and in the local community by undertaking voluntary activity in the UK' (quoted in Stopforth, 2001). However, it appears that there is still some uncertainty as there is contradictory Home Office information which states that asylum seekers are not allowed to do paid or unpaid work. This has affected some of our interview partners, too, who were not accepted as volunteers by organizations who mistakenly assumed that accepting asylum seekers as volunteers would put them outside of the law.

### ***Volunteering as social participation***

A key problems with the above quoted notions of active citizenship and social exclusion is that they contain an implicit or explicit evaluation of the political and social position of those who undertake voluntary work. 'There is a tacit understanding that while the philanthropy of the middle classes is the hallmark of active citizenship, the campaigning of welfare rights groups and the like constitutes the undesirable face of political activism.' (Lister 1990:19). This is exemplified in the above quoted notion that the Black Voluntary Sector is more concerned with 'self help' and the immediate concerns of Black people while ethnic majority volunteers' motivations were more altruistic. A key role of the Black Voluntary Sector and especially RCOs has been to provide services or make services accessible to refugees, where statutory agencies or mainstream voluntary sector provision have failed to reach refugees. This has been further exacerbated by legislation since the mid-90s treating the asylum seeker and refugee population as 'undeserving' (Sales 2002). The creation of a separate and lower level welfare service for asylum seekers in NASS or the Section 55, which made a substantial number of asylum seekers destitute, has further meant that service provision became an even more urgent task for RCOs. This has had the effect of curtailing RCOs ability to engage in other activities, like campaigning (Zetter and Pearl 2000), as well as the development of coherent volunteering programmes, or even their ability to apply for funding, as we have heard several times from small and overburdened RCOs in our research (e.g. W11, W18, RCOB).

Furthermore, the highly politicised issue of asylum means that funding for both RCOs and Refugee Agencies is extremely vulnerable to fluctuations (RAB3). As a study on the Black Voluntary Sector points out, the racist campaign of the Daily Mail who opposed the funding of the National Coalition of Anti-deportation Campaign through the National Lottery has also activated fears in the Black Voluntary Sector that 'strong disagreement with particular government policies could be financially harmful' (Chouhan and Lusane 2004:9).

It is against this backdrop that our interview partners shared their experiences of volunteering and paid work in the voluntary sector with us. For many of them, their activities were framed as 'helping' others, even as 'humanitarian'

engagement (see chapter 5). We feel it is particularly important in this report to value their contributions to British society as a whole. Viewing the voluntary work of refugees as simply a step of proving their commitment to integrate is patronising and already puts the burden of proof of loyalty on them. We feel that it is important to recognise that refugee women, even though they are seen as outsiders, are already making a place for themselves and contributing to various activities and groups across different sections of society. As chapter 5 will show, refugee women we interviewed were often involved in a range of voluntary organisations, that included RCOs but also voluntary organisations that did not focus on providing refugee specific services. Therefore, their voluntary work cannot be reduced to 'self-help' although empowerment and 'capacity building' and campaigning should be seen as important contributions to shaping the whole of this society.

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## Chapter 4: Refugee Women in the Labour Market

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In this chapter we will briefly summarise existing research on refugee employment and the role of volunteering. In the second part of the chapter we will provide an outline of our sample, their education, employment experiences, childcare responsibilities and age range. These are all factors, which have a bearing on refugee women's employment situation. In fact, previous research suggests that refugees who have English language skills, have participated in training in the UK, are male and do not have childcare responsibilities have a significantly higher likelihood of being employed than others (Bloch 2004).

### ***Employment rates of refugees***

There are no comprehensive statistics on refugees, much less so with a gender breakdown. However a number of recent studies have looked at the employment situation of refugees. Nationally the average unemployment rate for refugees is around 36 %, (DWP 2003 p.6), however local studies have also found much higher rates of unemployment, e.g. a study in Newham found unemployment rates of 46% among refugees, compared with 12,3% unemployment rates among the general local population (Bloch 2000).

One of the key sources of data on refugee employment is Alice Bloch's study for the DWP with 400 refugees from different ethnic groups, based in several locations throughout the country. Among that sample, employment rates are only 29%. Interestingly, the study shows that this employment rate is lower than that for ethnic minorities with 60%. This may indicate that English language skills, being a newcomer as well as the process of insertion into the labour market which for most asylum seekers is delayed, and finally the stigmatised status of being a refugee have a negative impact on the ability to find employment. This latter aspect of the negative stigma that may make employers reluctant to take on refugees or acknowledge their status as refugees was made obvious in a study by the Employability Forum, where employers refused to be named, even as good practice examples, as they feared that the general

hostility towards refugees would stigmatise their businesses, too (Hurstfield et al 2004).

Refugees who were working were employed mostly in a few industries or types of jobs: catering, interpreting and translation, shop work and in administration and clerical jobs. Diversity of employment was much more limited than the work carried out before coming to Britain and there was a notable lack of involvement in professional jobs despite pre-migration experience.

Among those working, the terms and conditions were notably poor, thus 25% were in temporary jobs, compared with 6% of the working age population. Furthermore, 35% were working part-time because mostly they could not find full-time employment, compared with 23% of the working age population; 43% had been unemployed for over 6 months. The average hourly rate was £7.29 compared with a GB average of £11.74 and 11% were being paid less than the minimum wage (DWP p.7).

### ***Gender issues***

Refugee women are a group that faces multiple barriers to employment. Again, however there are no large scale statistical studies. Where figures for women exist, they indicate that women refugees suffer more from unemployment, e.g. a study in Newham found 20% of men were employed and only 7% of women (Bloch 2000)

The group of women refugees is very diverse in terms of education and labour market experiences in their home countries. Thus, the Refugee Skills Audit (Kirk 2004) has found a wide variation of educational background and employment experiences of women refugees according to countries of origin. Overall, this audit found that a 'quarter of male respondents had a highest qualification recorded, and a third of women. Eight per cent of all respondents (both men and women) had reached either undergraduate or postgraduate level, while 15 per cent of men and 19 per cent of women had achieved a post-16 qualification. (...)

Thirty-two per cent of men were recorded as having a highest level of either under or postgraduate, compared with 25 per cent of women.' (Kirk 2004 p. 10). 39% of the female sample were not economically active before coming to the UK (p. 11). While these figures give an impression, they should be read with caution, as they only offer a snapshot of the refugee population, drawn mainly from three countries at a particular point in time and do not adequately represent women, as they have not been fully included in the study design (cf. Kirk 2004), however they do make clear that among the refugee population there is a significant number of skilled and educated women. Dumper's (2002) study on refugee women qualified in medical and teaching professions puts particular emphasis on the problems experienced by women whose qualifications in these occupations were obtained in their home country in converting their qualifications and accessing employment that is adequate to their skills. As a consequence, they are often condemned to unemployment or underemployment, while their valuable skills are wasted.

To summarise, refugee women are faced with a number of barriers to the UK labour market. Gender and refugee specific reasons intersect in the construction of these barriers which include:

Lack of English, lack of UK labour market knowledge, lack of communication and interpersonal skills, non-recognition of qualifications acquired abroad, lack of recent work experience, lack of UK work experience, family responsibilities, lack of childcare facilities, breakdown of previous social networks which enabled childcare, discrimination.

### ***Volunteering and Employment***

Recent policy emphasises the role of volunteering (HO 2004, HO 2000c). Voluntary work, according to these sources has a double function: On the one hand it can provide work experience in the UK which is crucial for finding employment by gaining confidence, references and knowledge of the UK workplace culture. On the other hand, the voluntary sector provides valuable

services to refugees, and often the Refugee Community Organisations which provide these services rely on voluntary workers. Furthermore, these policy papers present volunteering as an important element and measure of integration: 'Integration is a complex process and its achievement can be measured in many different ways' states the Integration Matters report (p. 8) and mentions among other indicators to measure integration such as employment and racial harassment, '*volunteering, contact with community organisations*'. (ibid, my emphasis).

It is against this backdrop of an increased emphasis of the role of voluntary work and the voluntary sector that the present study should be read. The DWP study (Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 179) found that 29% of refugees were involved in voluntary work. It found that the better the English language skills and the higher the levels of education and qualification, the more refugees tended to be involved in voluntary activities. In our interviews with key respondents, however we found that much of the voluntary work of refugees and in particular refugee women goes unrecognised, on the one hand because it is within Refugee Community Organisation which may not be very formal (cf. also HO 2004) Another reason is that definitions of what constitutes voluntary work vary considerably, according to different cultural and educational backgrounds. When it comes to women's voluntary work, it often goes unrecognised as happens with so much of the labour termed 'women's work' because it is seen as natural and not even recognised as work. Thus, when women actively upkeep and clean the premises of a community centre, provide unpaid childcare or food preparation, etc. for community activities or other individuals in need, their contribution may not get valued as voluntary *work* at all but simply seen as an extension of their supposedly 'natural' caring role. Sometimes women themselves do not recognise their own contributions as voluntary work.

In our sample, there is an overrepresentation of skilled and highly skilled or educated women. This may be due to the fact that we approached organisations and specifically asked for women involved in paid or unpaid work in the voluntary sector. This meant that the women were all identified as active in the voluntary sector, i.e. those women whose work tends to be forgotten would not

have been reached through our sampling. Moreover, as we were looking for those who had found employment through their voluntary work, again, this would skew the sample towards the more skilled. Finally it may simply reflect the higher proportion of skilled and professional refugees involved in volunteering as stated in the DWP report.

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## **Chapter 5: Refugee Women's experiences of the voluntary sector**

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In this chapter we will give an overview of the experiences of refugee women we interviewed and provide their perspectives on the experience of paid and unpaid work in the voluntary sector.

### ***Motivations and range of activities***

There are a range of motivations for volunteering among our interview partners. Clearly, finding employment was an important motivation for many, indeed most of our individual interview partners believed that volunteering was a helpful step in their pathway to paid employment. For some interviewees, volunteering was the key to their finding employment. At the same time, this motivation often co-existed with other motivations. In this section we will give a brief overview of the range of motivations for volunteering. Our research has shown that refugee women are actively involved in a large range of voluntary activities, including being on management committees, giving advice and guidance, interpreting, doing administrative work, fundraising, and more specific tasks like counselling, training, ESOL, mother tongue classes, and many more. Thus, our research counteracts any stereotypes of refugee women as involved only in supportive or administrative roles in voluntary organisations.

### ***Employment related Expectations***

The most important benefits of volunteering that were mentioned in our interviews were access to training, improving English language skills, upkeeping or updating existing skills, gaining experience of the UK labour market and workplace culture, gaining references and also overcoming isolation and getting to know UK society.

### **Training and Work Experience :**

For some interviewees, volunteering involved learning new skills, and they valued this learning experience, even where it was rather an informal 'on-the-job' training than a structured learning experience, as W13 explains:

*Yes, at the beginning when I came they, they were helpful, they told me what to do, how to do it they you know - like we're close we - you know, we help each other you know, everybody tell me and sort of computer how to use, how to enter files, it's helped me a lot, it's helped me a lot, yes.*

**INTERVIEWER: IN WHAT SORT OF WAY?**

*Erm I mean, coming here and starting doing the office work, that I didn't know before and since I came here I know how to do it, how to do filing, how to answer answering phone as well and everything. And er, in sort of you know, putting names in the computer I didn't know before, I just knew how to use computer, that's it, just how to open it, how to do word processing and then how to you know, turn it off, that's the sort of thing but now you know, plenty of things you can learn from the computer, internet and put clients' names in the computer.*

For some volunteers this informal training worked very well and they found it valuable, as it allowed them to get to know the UK work culture, professional ethics, and rules and regulations in their work area. However, in other cases the training needs of the volunteers clearly had to stand back before the organisation's needs for tasks to be carried out. For example, one interview partner feels she learned a lot in her volunteering placement and that it opened up a unique opportunity to eventually access paid employment. That is the reason why she values her volunteering experience, however in terms of workload and task allocation she felt it was 'traumatic':

**INTERVIEWER: DID YOU GET ANY KIND OF TRAINING OR SUPPORT?**

*No, no training at all, no proper induction, nothing at all, they just threw me into the ocean and said just learn to swim, whatever you do. And, and it was just like that really. For my project for example, there was no erm recordings, no examples of something*

*done and you know, the previous one, I didn't know what she did and kind of, erm, I just had to find my way around and you know.*

**INTERVIEWER: CREATE YOUR OWN JOB DESCRIPTION**

*yeah, definitely, I was trying to put that you know, create boundaries and kind of define it for myself you know what it should be and erm, and, meanwhile also you are terribly repressed, also they don't make you to tell your opinions and ideas because you are the newcomer, you should just sit there and listen and to be you know - you should be lectured, you should be advised and kind of you cannot have opinions and it was that kind of environment.*

Here, she emphasises that the position of a volunteer can often render them vulnerable in the face of wider power struggles within an organisation. As newcomers, unpaid staff and refugee women some of our interviewees experienced being put in an inferior position within the organisation.

One of the problems with gaining UK work experience is that skills and qualifications of refugee women are not always recognised. In the case of W22, she was told that unpaid work in a hospital was a precondition for being able to re-qualify as a doctor:

*Before I got this job in 96, all voluntary work I did was with the aim to get familiar with medical terms and pass the exam. But from 96, GMC suggested I should do six months attachment to hospital, which I did. But after all they didn't accept that.*

This is an example for a very frustrating experience of misinformation about the value of gaining voluntary experience in the process of skills recognition.

For other interviewees, volunteering allowed them to access external training facilities, either at the same time as ongoing training within the volunteering organisation or instead of training at the organisation. This access to training information was very valuable for many of our interview partners in building up their *confidence and expanding their skills, as well as their networks*. W18 went to volunteer in an organisation because she was feeling isolated and wanted to do something that she hoped would help other people, as well as improve her opportunities of finding employment.

*I was going there in that organisation and I was asking them if I can have yes, just doing something you know, if there is a paperwork for me to do you know I was I was so desperate. (Laughs) And erm so from then, I was always involved in the HIV some training around so they referred me to this training, I mean they just told me that you know it's for anybody training and I said oh, let me go!*

**INTERVIEWER: BECAUSE YOU JUST WANTED TO DO SOMETHING**

*to do something, yes! It's free, it's erm, two days a week, for one or two months, and erm, it's fine, fine for me, they pay your transport, you will have lunch there, I thought ooh, that's fine for me, because of the budget and everything, I said good. So I went there and then I started the training. My English was very bad at that time, and the course was in English, the course was in English. So it was quite difficult because you know HIV and health and you know, but because it was a training, mainly on how basic information about HIV first you have to learn you know and we were lucky because we had someone, a guy who is French, he's French but he lived in Africa so he was helping us, you know. Because he was already working in the field so he knew a lot of words in French and in English, so he was helping us with the language, that person. It was very very good. And he had erm, also because he was working on HIV and Aids and he had a contact with a lot of organisations the information, the small information that was always community organisations really because most of it was always the same people that you are meeting, if you go to one meeting you will see the same people and when they started seeing your face you know and they - not only relate but feel more confident you know to talk to you and to give you information because they know that you are going to use it and then do something.*

As becomes clear in this extract, volunteering and training can provide an opportunity to practise English that most interviewees found very useful. English skills were important in enabling interviewees to reach out, and without English language skills, they could not access training facilities or volunteering outside their ethnic community. On the other hand, for some, especially single mothers with childcare responsibilities, learning English was difficult and some were not able to get formal English education up to a standard that would enable them to enter training or volunteering in an English speaking environment.

A few of the volunteers had extensive in-house and external training facilities and enjoyed and valued these very much, especially those who were still asylum seekers and therefore had very restricted financial resources and no access to fund education or training otherwise. Unfortunately, most organisations did not or felt they could not pay towards their volunteers' external training needs. However as W18 states, the reimbursement of travel and lunch expenses, and childcare expenses for those who need them, is very important in order to enable refugee women volunteers to participate in training.

Again and again we found that refugee women are extremely keen and proactive in seeking out any training opportunities they can access. However, some factors including the fact that asylum seekers have to self-finance and the fact that university education is expensive mean that most refugee women have very restricted choices. This often leads to a training history that is more influenced by which courses are available for free at the time than by the individual career progression and training needs of the women, so that training is not always helpful in getting closer to employment.

### ***Supervision and Induction***

The role of the volunteer supervisor is crucial in matching the skills of the volunteer with tasks the organisation has to carry out, as well as making sure that the volunteer actually benefits from on the job training or any other training opportunities.

The process of supervision is important already at the start, thus, W2 recounts that having to go through an interview in her second volunteering organisation at first felt frightening, however retrospectively she contrasts it positively with previous volunteering placements.

*I was interviewed, and I had, well so many questions, why are you interested in adult guidance, what do you know about adult guidance? It was a formal interview! Very very .....! The day of the interview because everything was so official, those people were like they'd never seen me and it was good in a way but it frightened me. But at the end of it when they said yes, you do*

*qualify, I was like phew thank you Lord because it was quite frightening really. I had never been for an interview!*

In retrospect, she felt that this interview which assessed her skills and interests was vital in making her aware of the development opportunities that volunteering held for her. Moreover, she felt a sense of achievement at having succeeded in the interview.

Another positive aspect of receiving supervision is that volunteers can feel treated on a par with employees. This is important in giving them recognition for the quality of their work and makes them feel valued and appreciated. Thus, W29 recounts about a work placement in the private sector, that it boosted her confidence in her professional skills and her ability to succeed in this country, too. Initially she didn't find the tasks difficult but was unsure whether her work would be recognised as valuable:

*it was easy but at first I wasn't sure because I feel so far, so distant between me and that place and in here and actually after a few weeks, they my manager was, she is so nice and I talk give me some artwork but she asked me to design like other three designers, graphic designers. So then she asked me and every Monday they have brief and she asked me this is project, all of designers work on that and they choose one of them. So I feel I'm involved in a sort of competition and the first time when she chose my design I was surprised that really so I can do that, so my first design it was about Valentine Day, so they choose and other graphic designer told me and they surprised actually. But after that, again second design again choose my - third and gave me so confidence, I feel so confident because I thought I'm so far from their ideal but she said your idea's fantastic, well done and sometimes she gave me project that by myself, nobody else. I've done a big project.*

While supervision is crucial in order to foster confidence in professional skills and provide training, it is also important in familiarising the refugee women volunteers with the different types of workplace culture. This is important in being able to build good working relationships with colleagues and managers. Many of our interviewees have told us how difficult it was for them to understand the finer nuances of the workplace culture in their volunteering placement or job. They often had to find out by trial and error and felt that the whole onus was on

them to 'change' their personality (W15) as one put it. This is of course a challenge that should not have to be met by the refugee woman alone, however we have found very rare examples of supervisors actively explaining the workplace ethos and culture. Again, W29 had a positive experience of being supervised in a previous placement with a voluntary sector organisation, where the workplace culture was in marked contrast to the more formal and focused workplace culture she was used to and experienced in the private sector:

*Yeah, my line manager sometimes I would ask her to give me feedback and she would give me that it's good, they give me feedback that my job which as I remember she said it's good, talk more because when I start to do my job I just concentrate on the computer, I don't go around I just do my work which I that time, I thought it should be like that. But in here, it should be like that, I should (laughs) in here more is strict but there it wasn't but I thought it should be, I don't like that. But it was very good.*

This example of contrasting workplace cultures in the private and voluntary sector also makes clear that it is not simply a matter of getting to know 'the' UK working culture, but being able to understand and navigate different working environments within the UK labour market.

A further role of supervision can be to encourage refugee women volunteers not to give up despite considerable barriers, as the case of W33 shows. W33 has childcare responsibilities as a single mother and she also cares for her brother who is long term ill. Furthermore, within her family networks, she is the only one speaking English and therefore often takes on the role of interpreter for them. She has previously worked in manual jobs only and feels that her standard of written English is low. Her current volunteer placement involves a training in giving advice and guidance. The supervisor has encouraged her to enrol into ESOL classes. Despite her heavy family responsibilities, the personally tailored support she gets in her volunteering placement has encouraged her to continue:

*I get yeah, I get support from [my supervisor], after every week she give me one hour for learning, she support me for English, extra lessons she giving me which is make me [feel ashamed if I leave the placement now] because I was thinking to leave but how much she spent time for me I think oh I have to because she was spending time for myself, I shouldn't give up, so it's really extra and it's good for me.*

She also appreciates the support of her supervisor and other staff, which is part of a structured training programme, which will enable her to access employment once she has finished it. Although this is a structured training, she feels there is flexibility enough for her to take the programme more slowly as she has to allow for time for improving her English literacy and for her caring responsibilities.

*If you concentrate you can finish as much as quick then you're gonna get job, some people get within three months, but I give myself one year because I was taking slowly and my one is for myself I think with the one year I may get better because at the moment I am studying, I get some help from college, some from [my supervisor], and some I learn from what I read. So if I all put together it's going to make huge thing. But my brother really affect me hard because I have to be with him and I've got a son, I have to be with him and I've got myself, I can't, sometimes I can't even think to eat because lots of things to do when you do lots of things you always forget yourself you know, that make me be ill.*

So, in W33's case, the value of an integrated programme of training, ESOL and work experience, including tailored supervision that the volunteering placement becomes clear. As she says, taken together, these three can make a huge difference in helping her onto the pathway to skilled and fulfilling employment. The various barriers she describes are unfortunately not only specific to her, but many refugee women carry these responsibilities which make it crucial that there is an element of flexibility that allows them to develop themselves as well as caring for others.

The above positive experience throw into sharp relief a volunteering experience, where support was limited, there was no induction or supervision and the allocation of tasks was unclear. The following extract shows how this can undermine the confidence of refugee women volunteers:

**INTERVIEWER: WHAT KIND OF RESPONSIBILITIES AND TASKS DID YOU HAVE WHEN YOU STARTED AS A VOLUNTEER?**

*I did everything, that's what they do you see in that organisation actually, there are no areas that you know you can do this or and that or it's just, it's like whatever is left there that others actually didn't like to do it's just your responsibility. And, it's just everyone*

*tells you what to do you know, everyone actually whenever, they cannot catch up with them they will find you, you know and kind of,*

*IT'S VERY DIFFICULT, YES.*

*if I really you know, if I honestly expressed what I felt, I felt used and I felt really abused*

Thus, we can conclude that the role of supervisors is crucial in enabling refugee women to develop their potential, both in terms of professional skills and in terms of the less tangible skills such as interpersonal skills, and most importantly confidence into their ability to succeed, both at the task in hand as well as in the paid labour market.

## **References**

Volunteering is a way to prove through a reference that refugee women gained UK work experience. Many skilled and highly qualified interviewees had problems in having their qualifications and their work experience recognised in the UK. But even when their formal qualifications were accepted, employers still view UK work experience as the yardstick and do not equally value overseas experience. Being able to get a reference therefore was a key motivator for volunteering.

*all I remember is thinking 'my gosh how am I going to work in this country', although I had experience back home like my IT skills, secretarial from back home and then I was very familiar with the environment and then the first thing that when I applied for job in this country, the first question is 'have you ever worked in this country before'? And I didn't work in this country before, but obviously I need a reference as well but obviously I need a reference as well and then there's confidence and everything and then I sat down one day and said' oh, volunteering!' a friend of mine was a volunteer and I said volunteering, yes I can have an experience, if I volunteer and why not?*

Most of our interview partners received references from their volunteering placements, however one of them related a discouraging experience. W17 had been volunteering in a mainstream voluntary organisation for two years. She was very happy with the work she carried out there, as it was her first

experience of working with children with disabilities in the UK, she got to know the regulations and procedures, improved her English and gained new contacts and access to information about training.

*At the time I said this is an opportunity for me to learn, to get experience from UK, ok? There was an accident that happened, I do remember it now, one of my colleagues went in for a proper job, a job where they would get paid! So it's a proper job! (Laughs) Where you get paid, yes! And she gave this place, my friend and all of that name and all of that, so when they call these people for reference they tend to give negative references. I'm sorry to say that, but this is what was happening, that's what helped me to leave because when you ask people how long have you been here, they would tell you three years, two years, in a voluntary, to me it was quite a long time, it was quite a long time not to be paid. Every time you say why can't you employ them because they've been here for long, they would say because we don't have enough funds and all of that. That was quite negative.*

**INTERVIEWER: SO THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF YOUR COLLEAGUE YOU REALISED THAT THEY DIDIN'T GIVE GOOD REFERENCES?**

*No they didn't. So it was their way of keeping these people working for them on a voluntary basis.*

While this is the only example we heard of an organisation giving a negative reference, it highlights a problem experienced more widely by our interview partners: some organisations come to rely on the work of their volunteers to an extent that they do not effectively enable them to move on into paid employment or other activities.

### **Confidence**

As a consequence of being out of the labour market for some time, due to their experiences of flight, as well as being faced with various forms of discrimination, many refugee women lost confidence in themselves and their skills. Here, it is also worth mentioning that many highly skilled refugees lose their skills and subsequently their confidence through their enforced absence from the labour market during the asylum application period. The loss of confidence can be an important barrier to finding employment and even to volunteering (Focus Group,

May 2004).

However, volunteering has also provided many refugee women with an opportunity to gain more confidence. Interviewees who were happy with their volunteering experience and successful in securing paid employment stressed that volunteering improved their confidence in their professional and language skills.

*I was gaining some skills and the confidence you know going out, speaking to people and then they were showing me you know how to use things and you know, in this country how things work. So it was like building some confidence, I'm someone you know, I'm doing something and it was very important, it was very very important doing some volunteering that's why I'm here [in my paid job, U.E]. If I am doing some volunteering work now to help people, to develop themselves for example, to give them the confidence that. I gained during my work that will be something you know.*

Thus, volunteering can be a key step in gaining the confidence needed to succeed in finding paid employment. Here the aspects of giving to others and learning for oneself are intertwined. This was an important point that was reiterated over and over by many of our interview partners:

*I went for a [job, U.E.] interview and the question is 'why you want to work in volunteering, development agency'. I said to them 'by being a volunteer I know how much confidence I got at the moment and then I want to pay back that one, I want to develop the other volunteers'*

When we asked at our focus group discussion about what works to find employment one of our interviewees replied:

*From my point of view, as a job adviser, because I work in my community for two years, I believe it's find work placement and work as a volunteer, they can build their confidence (focus group May 2004)*

A key component in giving confidence can be working and especially training in women only environments:

*I think also it's good because you are empowering women to get into the job, I was thinking that before I was not able to apply for any job apart from my community but when I did get that course so different course, high level of women, refugee women can make them confident and move on and so it's good for women to let them know that they are not under men, they can move on and be very important within the society, and make a difference (Focus Group May 2004)*

While we feel it is very important to recognise these positive experiences, we have also found that other aspects of volunteering may undermine confidence. Some women also pointed out that it may be useful to volunteer or work in a Refugee Community organisation, as being able to use their own language can be a positive experience at first. However it was also pointed out that as a long term solution, being confined to working in one's own community can be unhelpful, because it can make women feel insecure about their ability to speak English and cope with an English working environment.

Thus, while some relationships at the volunteering organisation can be supportive and boost confidence, at the same time interviewees mentioned experiencing racist and sexist behaviour from colleagues. This was particularly expressed through not taking their work seriously, being taken for granted and not having their skills and contributions recognised. This experience, of not being seen as competent or capable, was unfortunately common to many of our interview partners. Often they were not taken seriously because they had an accent speaking English. Our interview partners also pointed out that African women were faced with racist stereotyping, especially by not taking their skills and qualifications seriously. This was very frustrating as many of our interviewees felt that they were excluded from skilled jobs because of this racist stereotyping.

### ***Volunteering as Social Commitment***

While volunteering can provide a pathway into employment, most of our interview partners also saw volunteering as social commitment. Apart from access to work, they had diverse motivation to volunteer: For some of them, volunteering is a possibility to counter isolation, and a way to get to know UK society. For others it is a way to help the refugee community, or to contribute, both on the scale of their own refugee community, refugees in general and on a wider scale.

Thus, one interviewee saw her volunteering as a form of 'humanitarian' work. This is an important argument, considering that refugees are stereotyped as 'taking' from society or even 'scrounging'. Furthermore, as the interviewees often come from developing countries, to see their contributions as 'humanitarian' work sheds new light on the view of the UK as a developed country, bestowing development and humanitarian aid on other countries, but not in need itself. On the other hand, these voluntary activities may also be directed towards the country of origin. Thus, volunteering was sometimes also directed at fundraising efforts for charitable organisations or causes back home.

Some interviewees emphasised that they volunteer because they recognise the difficult situation of other refugees as people in need. They focus on the aspects of building a community, often this is linked with a concern for young people. This has come up in two ways in the interviews: on the one hand, the difficulties refugee children experience in the education system, as they have to adapt to a new language, institutional and learning environment, as well as culture. They feel that their commitment is needed in order to prevent the children from failing educationally. On the other hand, some interviewees were concerned that the children or second generation more generally may lose contact with the cultural and social heritage of the parental generation. They were concerned with teaching mother tongue classes or transmitting ethnically specific cultural

values. In this context, the family was often seen as a vulnerable institution, and therefore unable to fulfil these roles.

For some interviewees, the aspect of empowerment was key to their volunteering activity. Thus, one interviewee started out volunteering in order to gain work experience in the UK. However while she was talking to other refugee women, she realised that they had all experienced similar problems of isolation, lack of access to services and feelings of depression. Thus, building communication networks that allow refugee women to overcome isolation set up by social, economic and linguistic problems can be a key aspect of empowering. Especially being able to share with each other experiences of pain that they cannot easily discuss in other contexts, such as in the family is important. Voluntary activity is linked with this aspect of empowering, and consciousness raising that the difficulties they are experiencing individually can be overcome collectively.

Access to services is difficult for refugee women, because of language difficulties, legal, economic and other factors. Therefore, many interviewees stressed that their volunteering activity was necessary in allowing other refugees to know about and be able to make use of services.

Therefore it is important to recognise that social commitment and trying to improve their own employment prospects can often go hand in hand as a motivation to volunteer. The context of de-skilling of refugee women provides the backdrop for another type of volunteering experience. Thus, many refugee women can only secure paid employment in low skill, low pay jobs with physically difficult and at times unsatisfactory working conditions and environments. These are often as cleaners, care assistants or in unskilled factory work. For some of the refugee women we interviewed, volunteering therefore provides an alternative activity, which they find more meaningful and which gives them more personal satisfaction and recognition than their paid employment.

The reasons for this are complex and often a number of factors come together. Some of our interview partners wanted to work but could not find jobs that suited them. This might be because health problems or childcare commitments restricted their choice. This is particularly the case, as many of the jobs readily accessible to refugee women with little English, whose qualifications and work experience are not recognised or who are considered 'old' are physically hard, involve unsociable hours and may not be viable therefore for those with health problems or young children. Another group were those who were not able to find employment that suited their skills due to the need to earn money, the lack of English language skills, lack of recognition of qualifications.

This is important to recognise that volunteering while opening doors to employment for some cannot entirely make up for all the problems that marginalize refugee women from the labour market. Suitable ESOL provision, sustainable childcare, and affordable training as well as well structured routes to recognise qualifications from abroad are also necessary.

### ***Limitations and Problems***

It is difficult to talk about the limitations and problems of volunteering, as many of our interview partners felt at once grateful to the organisation for providing them with an opportunity and therefore found it hard to formulate their criticism. However the following aspects can be identified from both individual interviews and from discussions held as part of the participants' workshop:

- Lack of funding for childcare
- Lack of funding for transport
- Lack of respect for volunteers, their skills and their work, feeling that their work has been exploited
- Disappointment about having enough skills to volunteer, but when they apply for a job they might be told that other candidates were more skilled
- Some organisations are still unclear about the rights of asylum seekers to volunteer

- Some of our interview partners found it very hard to be volunteering below their skills and at times felt that they had better skills than their paid colleagues but were not allowed to use them. They felt that their paid colleagues did not want to admit that they could be better skilled.
- Power dynamics and hierarchies within organisations along the lines of:
  - Paid vs. unpaid workers – these can be exacerbated, when paid workers feel less qualified than volunteers or when volunteers are not allowed to take on more challenging tasks
  - Racism: many women felt that racism played a key role in misrecognising their skills and abilities
  - Gender: e.g. hostility towards women only organisations,

### ***What works to get into employment?***

For some of our interview partners, the voluntary experience was a key in opening up pathways into employment:

Thus, W3 arrived in the UK in 1993 and applied for asylum. She had the right to work and received a national insurance number straightaway. For two years, she tried different forms of employment and self-employment (as a nanny, opened an internet café, etc.), but all of these were short lived. In 1997 her child was born and she looked after the child for a year.

In 1998 a friend recommended she try volunteering and she found a placement in a mainstream voluntary organisation. The organisation paid for her childcare and W3 describes her manager as very supportive. She stayed with this organisation for 8 months, before she found temporary paid employment in 1991 as an administrator in another mainstream voluntary organisation. After three months, she gets another temporary job with the same organisation as a project worker. At the end of her contract she successfully applies for a project management post with the same organisation.

Some of the key factors for this successful experience were

- Good education background and work experience in home country
- Gets work permit and NI soon after applying for asylum

- Determination to learn language, variety of work experiences in the UK
- Networks - friend talks to her about volunteering
- Volunteer placement – childcare paid and supportive manager
- Gaining confidence
- Gaining access to information about suitable job vacancies
- Paid work with prospects for progression

A number of our interview partners viewed their voluntary experiences as key in opening up employment prospects. However, it should be stressed that even in these ‘success stories’ there have been setbacks along the way. Furthermore, most of these women had been in the UK for several years and had accessed training, education or other forms of employment before finding a voluntary placement that helped them into paid employment. Looking at the individual experiences of refugee women we found that while volunteering was often regarded as a very worthwhile and satisfactory activity, on its own it is not enough to help refugee women into employment. However, volunteering can enable access to resources like:

- information
- training
- job networks
- training networks

After arrival in the UK, W32 has given up a technical profession and re-oriented towards community work. She has gained experiences as a volunteer and then set up on her own an RCO and fundraised for her own job, where she now also supervises volunteers. Thus, she can provide a view from both sides:

*Yes, you have to be flexible first. You have to be clever enough to understand before you take any decision you have to understand the other person then you take the decision, not just based on yourself, the one that's good for you. But always sell the volunteering as something that will benefit and I've heard here volunteers have said "Well I just want to help the organisation". I said "No you're not going to stay here more than one month if you just apply to help the organisation. You have to come here and you have to have a reason for yourself" for yourself, not just*

*helping the organisation, I could expect that for someone a bit, say old, and is lonely but even he needs to have something in his hand that you know - or get this little thing, big thing get this little.*

**INTERVIEWER: WHY IS THAT IMPORTANT?**

*Well, I don't think you know, it's a relationship, everything is a relationship and you can't base a good relationship on just giving, you have to take and give so that's why I make it strong.*

Thus, while flexibility is key, W32 emphasises that the volunteer herself needs to be clear about how she wants to benefit from the experience.

Volunteering can also constitute an opportunity to try out new and different occupations in the new UK environment. This is particularly relevant in a context where many refugee women experience a societal process of de-skilling through non-recognition of their qualifications. This is often a very frustrating experience that necessitates a re-orientation. This reorientation can be felt as a limitation of choice, as well as opening up new options that the women had not previously considered. Thus, often the frustrations of not finding recognition or employment in their old/ chosen profession are followed by a re-assessment of their skills in the UK. Often this leads to refugee women re-orienting to work in the community sector. This is a contradictory process, which can be experienced by some as marginalization and by others as a process of empowerment.

For some women it took a long time to realise and accept that they could not find employment in their previous occupation. Thus, W19 tried to requalify and set up her own business before considering work in the community sector.

**INTERVIEWER: AND HOW DID YOU GET THIS IDEA TO VOLUNTEER THERE IN THAT ORGANISATION?**

*In fact I always knew, since I came to this country, I always you know, knew from the first two years on, I understood that these are the areas that we can work in and so, somehow you know, I have to erm, get something! (Laughs)*

**INTERVIEWER: THESE ARE THE AREAS WE CAN WORK ON.**

*Because everyone I knew was working as an advisor or as you know in social area and, working with the community actually, working for community, with community and doing community work. And, so also they were the ones actually erm, that I kind of saw as you know, who have proper employment you know, they had, their rights and everything and otherwise you just work as a, you work in factories or you know, restaurants and takeaways and it was all so obvious that all the educated people from [my country] who graduated there kind of did this kind of jobs*

So in her case, volunteering within an RCO helped her to learn about the work required and allowed her to successfully apply for a part-time job when there was an opportunity at this organisation. When asked what helped her into employment, she stresses the importance of her education and flexibility, but also of networks and friends who helped to explain about application procedures and doing mock interviews. In addition to voluntary work experience, the importance of help and support when filling in application forms, and preparing for job interviews were stressed by many of our interview partners who have secured employment.

We identified people who took this role of sharing information and giving practical advice and support as 'gate openers'. These could be friends, advice and guidance providers, and often volunteer co-ordinators. They played a key role in encouraging refugee women, giving relevant information and advice on training opportunities, job opportunities and also provided sustained coaching in writing applications and succeeding in job interviews. These gate openers were all the more effective, if they had a good understanding of the specific circumstances of refugee women in general and the individual's strengths and abilities in particular. But it was also important that they had a good understanding of the mainstream labour market and thus could enable refugee women to make full use of all available opportunities.

This is all the more important as the refugee specific voluntary sector has very limited resources and funding is subject to political changes. This means a limitation to the refugee specific employment market is very difficult in the longer term:

*But it was really difficult to erm, get opportunity and the reason I guess, because there isn't actually so many opportunities and so many positions to apply or to erm or organisations to work in. So, the ones exist actually usually are occupied and people don't leave actually. Yeah! (Laughs) it's very very competitive and you will have big actually power struggles because of that, between community organisations among people who work in community*

We have found that many refugee women volunteers were able to build bridges between refugee specific organisations and the mainstream. Often, they volunteered in different organisations at the same time and could thus create cross-over knowledge between refugee community organisations on the one hand, and refugee agencies and mainstream voluntary organisations as well as other mainstream volunteering organisations, on the other. Thus, our interview partners felt that they personally benefited but so also did the smaller community organisations they worked or volunteered for - from the technical, organisational and structural know-how that they gained in larger organisations. Thus, refugee women's voluntary work meant a broadening of their networks and their understanding of a multi-ethnic city, both collectively and individually. This was a key asset in helping them in their pathways into employment.

W5 clearly attributes her ability to find employment to her skills and qualifications some of which she gained in the UK. But she also identified her ability to access refugee communities:

*All of them there is aspect where they meet people with Arabic skills because with [Mainstream Voluntary Organisation 1] it is a refugee helping and they need people who speak Arabic this is why I think I get these jobs. And with [Mainstream Voluntary Organisation 2] they need a community access worker to work with the community who know about the community and they need to find out about domestic violence within ethnic community so they need to bridge these gaps between two communities so this is maybe one of the strands why I get the job, maybe.*

W19 also attributes her ability to finding employment in a mainstream voluntary organisation to her experience gained in the RCO and her own personal experience as a refugee:

*I had confidence because, because I was already doing that job and I was, experience about our community that I actually had, felt so confidence about that, because the job was also about Turkish community and working with Turkish families in that mainstream organisation and, and I knew that I am one of the actually, erm, best you know that, who got the whole picture of the community I also had the experience myself you know coming to, and I was, I'm speaking about my experience, it's not like you know coming here and pretending I've never been Turkish and white middle class English! (Laughs) you know I had the same immigration experience and, and erm, same difficulties, same problems, language barriers, being invisible you know, humiliation, and - losing you know, everything that you have, I mean including your self esteem and you know your identity, everything you know, you start from the beginning, completely. And so you know, I knew I could talk about that endlessly. (laughs) and erm, and they asked, yeah questions about that! (Laughs) So I was willing to talk (laughs) and erm - I got the job.*

When it comes to accessing employment in the community sector, refugee women and organisations alike sometimes felt that their personal experience and their volunteering experience was key in enabling them to find employment. This co-existed, unfortunately with a disappointment that often they did not find their more general skills recognised. However within the context of an increasingly multi-ethnic city, refugees' knowledge and experience is relevant to a much wider range of organisations. Organisations need to look beyond the label 'refugee' and identify the generic skills and commitment of the applicant. While finding employment through their voluntary experience was not easy, the types of employment available were also often limited to part-time and temporary employment which our interview partners found very hard, as they often ended up working much longer hours than they were paid for. One interviewee thus coined the term 'volunteering on the job' (W21) for this type of volunteering, which she stressed was not positive. Thus, while it is important to recognise and make use of the employment opportunities in the refugee specific voluntary sector and in the voluntary sector as a whole, this should be seen as a first step towards widening the employment options of refugee women and recognising the value of their contributions to a workplace.



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## Chapter 6: Voluntary organisations' experiences with refugee women volunteers and employees

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This chapter draws on the material collected from case study research and from interviews with key informants. It highlights issues relating to the participation and management of volunteers, and to the progression from volunteering into paid employment, with particular regard to how these issues affect refugee women.

### ***The role and contribution of volunteers***

Volunteers were to be found in all the case study organisations - however there were differences amongst them in terms of the ratio of volunteers to paid staff and in explanations given of how and why volunteers were used. The scarcity of funds and the need to make the best use of limited resources make volunteer participation a necessity for most organisations in the community and voluntary sector. For example in MSA we were told:

*And the use of volunteers - or the increasing use of volunteers, is down to funding issues. (MSA2)*

*We have I think 21 paid members of staff, part time, three quarter time or full time. We actually have 26 volunteers in active positions at the moment so our volunteers actually outweigh the paid members of staff. (MSA1)*

Although volunteers were described as making an important contribution to the work of the organisation, organisational participants stressed that that they should be not be regarded just as an unpaid labour force:

*So we don't just use volunteers here as part of sort of unpaid labour, but primarily for three reasons. First of all they obviously do enhance the services to clients, particularly it does offer a stepping stone for asylum seekers to actually experience being in a workplace and learning, and to work in an organisation and many of our staff who are refugees and asylum seekers have come through that route. They're our sort of link with the outside world in a sense because it's very easy when you're working in a place all*

*the time during the day to day pressure it's quite often you don't see things which perhaps aren't being done as well as they could be and we're actually quite reliant on volunteers to ask questions, to raise issues, why do we do it like that and I think it's particularly important for volunteers who are themselves refugees and asylum seekers to feel able to say that isn't the way you should be treating people from another country and things like that and feel they can make those comments and help improve the service. (RAB2)*

Volunteering is supported here not only because it enhances the services the organisation provides to refugees and asylum seekers but also because it offers them work experience. It further provides an opportunity for the expression of voice and participation by clients and users of the organisation's services. Thus volunteering can be directly linked to the mission of the organisation. Other examples of where volunteering could be regarded as making a direct contribution to the achievements of the organisation's mission include MSB, where providing opportunities for African women to volunteer was identified as a way of developing their confidence and skills thus contributing to the organisation's mission of empowerment. RCOA had funding for a project that involved the youth of their community in volunteering as a means of 'keeping them off the street'.

Organisational representatives stressed the benefit of volunteering to both the organisation and the volunteer:

*Because they take a load off our shoulders, we are more relaxed so our services are more productive the clients are happier we are happier of course and also I am hoping that the volunteers are happy as well because they gain a lot of experience from us, gaining experience, knowledge in a work environment because this is the community organisation but we work very professionally. So they see how an organisation works and how they fit within the organisation and it's a really useful experience for them as well. (RCOB2)*

Whilst valuing the contribution of volunteers, organisational representatives emphasised the importance of maintaining the distinction between core (paid) work and volunteer work, and that where volunteers are used for organisational work particular attention should be given to the benefit to the volunteer:

*We would say that volunteering ought not to be a job that we need to have as a core thing if we need a secretary we should have a secretary we shouldn't have a volunteer and if we were going to do it on a sort of unpaid basis we would want there to be some work experience and some really quite careful guidance around career path and so on. (RAA1)*

The separation of volunteer and core work was identified as important in order not to compromise the organisation's funding position or to undermine the position of paid workers:

*But you know people here know the score, we have limited funding and the volunteers are helping us to extend our capacity for which I am grateful, if we didn't have them we would do less but where we get the funding to do paid work we use the money to recruit someone to do it so they never take away paid jobs. (K10)*

However an emphasis on the distinction between 'core' and voluntary work may contribute to the marginalisation of volunteers. The refugee women who attended our participants' workshop identified being taken for granted and not having their work recognised as particularly negative experiences of volunteering. We found examples of organisational initiatives designed to counter this through highlighting the contribution of volunteers. These include the organisational chart displayed in the reception area at MSA, which showed organisational members and their positions together with their photographs. Both paid and unpaid staff were included and it was not possible to distinguish which was which. Another example was at RAB where efforts were made to 'celebrate' the contribution of volunteers:

*Every two months we have a trustee meeting and we do try to report on the initiatives which are undertaken by volunteers and we have had the volunteer coordinator come sometimes to the trustee meeting to give a presentation on the work of the volunteers to try to make sure they're seen to be an integral part of our work. (RAB2)*

### **Recruitment and selection of volunteers**

Volunteers are recruited into organisations through a variety of methods. Well-known and established voluntary agencies have no shortage of people wanting to volunteer:

*We put one advert in The Guardian last January and we got over 100 people who phoned up in the space of a week (K7).*

RAB4 gave the reputation of RAB as her reason to volunteer there:

*When I was studying my Masters degree in Refugee Studies I was advised to work with refugees and the only organisation came to my mind was RAB so I phoned up and then found out how should I work with them. And then they send me the application form and everything. But the purpose I chose RAB was because it was an experienced organisation dealing with refugees (RAB4)*

MSA advertise for volunteers in their newsletter and through their outreach programmes. People interested in volunteering are invited to an open day, where they can meet representatives (both volunteers and paid staff) of the different projects and find out what kind of volunteering work is available. They are given a pack that includes an application form, job description and person specification for a volunteer. Those interested in pursuing volunteering are asked to return the application form. This asks for details of their work experience and education and applicants are also required to provide a personal statement and names of two referees.

Recruitment processes in RCOs tend to be less formal, and volunteers are largely drawn from community members, through clients and community networks. RCOB found no need to advertise for volunteers:

*We have lots of contacts in the community so first of all it is mouth-to-mouth advertising, we have other volunteers, we tell them and we send written things to other community organisations and inform that we have this sort of volunteer post. We don't advertise to any other newspaper or things like that because it costs us and we get already lots of volunteers (RCOB4)*

Thus RCOB3 had become involved through her friends already volunteering there:

*Before I started as a volunteer I waited for couple of months [the director] put me on the list because there were other friends who were also volunteering. As soon as it was available they did let me know. (RCOB3)*

In most organisations more women than men worked as volunteers. Explanations for this drew on assumptions about gender roles and about differences between men and women in terms of skills and interests:

*I think women are more flexible [than] I think than the men are, or the men appear to be. (MSA1)*

*I think it's harder for men actually because I think men find it hard if men are given opportunities to be a leader in the voluntary organisation they like it but I think for a lot of men it's sort of you want a job but it's not a real job. (RAA1)*

*Women you know they tend to socialise more than men. A lot of men when they come here they're so depressed they want to stay at home and they're not forthcoming women tend to talk to people outside very easily so they learn about places, they learn about things and they get to know people, (RAA2)*

However interviewees also identified limitations and difficulties for refugee women to participate:

*Yeah, men are more reliable. Because women have more domestic duties, it's because of that, not because women are bad no, because women have children, it's very difficult you know (RAA5)*

The circumstances of refugee and migrant women were differentiated from those of 'traditional' female volunteer:

*We have people with very complicated circumstances in terms of their stay here so much that OK somebody might come here committed to volunteer but then they don't turn up because they've managed to get a day's job so it doesn't always work you know the way it's planned. It's really very different from the way like - say middle class white women with time on their hands and they go and work in a hospital they have the time and the money. It's very very different I think for African women you find because for them it's like desperation to get skills and to get into a job. (MSB1)*

K7 thought that in her organisation as a whole:

*Refugee women are quite a small proportion of the amount of people that volunteer for us I get the feeling that there might be a cultural thing as well refugee women are much more isolated which means that they would be less likely to volunteer I think. (K7)*

RCOA were concerned to involve more women as volunteers. The director identified the large number of single women in his community most of whom were widows, whom they encouraged to volunteer as a means to build their self-confidence. However the volunteer coordinator highlighted some cultural factors that affected their participation:

*Why women, they don't turn up into volunteering with us it definitely is the culture. In our culture volunteering means first within family taking care of grandsons and parents and grandparents and maybe neighbours. Well refugee women when they move to this country, everything is new for them and they are really scared about their children and they want to focus on their children's education, they try to stay most of the time at home, take care of them, pick them from schools go outside with them. I mean they try just to keep them under their eye so as the average children number in families are three or four, so this needs a lot of effort and attention for mums, so they focus on their children's education and they stay home. (RCOA1)*

### **Equal opportunities monitoring and volunteers**

In a number of interviews organisational representatives expressed the wish to increase the diversity and representation of different groups amongst their voluntary workforce - even when the organisation was not short of volunteers.

This may be easier to implement with volunteers because:

*We don't have to go through the same kind of selection process [as for employees]. If someone comes to us then if we want we can try and accommodate them, if we don't want, we don't have to I know that sounds a bit unfair but you know, it's part of the objective of the organisation, is to gender equality and stuff it's one of our core values then I think that's in some way in practice we can maybe try to do something about it (K10)*

In another mainstream agency we were told:

*Equal opportunities policy goes right down to the volunteering level of [the organisation]. Obviously I mean in terms of the type of work that we do, we do have to have a certain level of English but it doesn't need to be fluent and what's more important sometimes is that we have people who speak the same language as our clients than people who can actually speak fluent English, that is much more important. (K7)*

Within the refugee sector it is recognised as particularly important that refugees should be strongly represented amongst their volunteers, but there may be reluctance to monitor the immigration status of people applying to volunteer. This is because of issues around immigration and asylums are highly sensitive:

*It would put off people especially asylum seekers, you know because they want to come here to provide a service and we don't want anything that would make them think hm, why are they asking for my status? (RAB6)*

However in MSA the Equal Opportunities form asks potential volunteers to identify themselves in terms of citizenship and immigration status (for which there were nine possible answers including 'refugee', 'asylum seeker' and 'rather not say') along with gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and HIV status. None of the people we talked to there (including two volunteers who were both asylum seekers) identified this as problematic.

### **Selecting volunteers and skills matching**

We were interested in how far organisations tried to match the existing skills and aspirations of volunteers with organisational needs. In an international charity we were told how this process was accomplished:

*If you like there's a supply side of people coming to us and saying can we be a volunteer. And then there's also a demand from the staff because people say that we need a volunteer in our team, I will say OK I'd like to see a short job description of what you would like a volunteer to do then I will look through the people who have applied and if we don't have any suitable people there, we will put something on the web site or we will go to one of the volunteer centres that we do link with. (K10)*

In MSA we were told of a similar proactive initiative to identify areas where volunteers were needed. The following account emphasises that when allocating tasks and roles to volunteers, importance is given to improving the representation of different client groups, as well as to matching the skills and interests of volunteers to organisational needs:

*We need to be aware of what volunteers we have in post but also all the line managers have just been asked what roles do we actually foresee. Because I've got a stack of people enquiring or interested so what we're going to do is looking at mixing and matching and also looking at the organisation in terms of how we represent the [client] community as well have we got enough women volunteers, have we got enough people from Africa, the Caribbean? A lot of people do come to us with a lot of skills so we've been kind of gently propping them up and bringing them up to a certain level so we know when opportunities come and we can let them know and then we put them into selection. (MSA1)*

K7 described the part played by her organisation's volunteer training programme in determining how volunteers were placed there:

*Once people have gone through the application form, got to the interview stage, we vet people at that stage as well. At the moment we've got more than 60 applications for interviews and we only have 40 places so we will have to decline some places. And then we go through the training day and at that point it's quite obvious who will be able to do casework because casework actually doesn't require high levels of skills, it requires a certain type of personality almost. And we've got people who come in to do admin tasks in the office every day just helping us with photocopying and emergency provision which doesn't require a high level of literacy or anything like that and we've got one of our volunteers who is setting up an internet site, so there's a whole range of office things that people can do as well. (K7)*

K7 reference to casework raises the question how far volunteers are involved in the giving of advice and services to the organisation's clients. Within RAB this was identified as an area in which volunteer involvement was necessarily limited:

*Our advice service has had to be accredited by the quality mark. So whilst we do use volunteers for some quick advice giving and*

*train and support them around that, there are some limits about what we can do on that (RAB2)*

This policy was a cause of frustration to one of RAB's refugee women volunteers who described it as a change implemented during her time with the organisation:

*So we came here, we are allowed to talk one to one with client. Suddenly they change for some reason so we are not allowed to do that, we have to always work with somebody else watching and listening to what she or he is doing. We still do that but personally I don't appreciate that because it doesn't, you know when you are involved it's different than when you are just observing, watching. (RAB4)*

It is not possible always for a single organisation to fulfil the aspirations of volunteers or to make the best use of their skills and experience. An example of a refugee woman in this situation was MSB3. She had started volunteering there after meeting one of MSB's workers on a training course. She volunteered for one day a week and was mainly engaged in administrative work. She was positive about the organisation and the help she had received:

*I like working there they are very professional and they can build my capacities*

However she was not so happy with her work there:

*You see, the work that I am doing now, at MSB it is not the work that I like to do, because I have more skills than that*

The volunteer coordinator acknowledged that MSB3 was a 'very well recognised researcher' but they were not able to make use of these skills partly because 'her English isn't that great at the moment'. However MSB3 also volunteered at a country-specific organisation that had:

*Given me the chance to do the work that I do in Sudan coordinating, managing and fundraising, planning, real planning, I like this. But because I speak in Arabic, I don't like it.*

She thus identified both these experiences as having complementary advantages and disadvantages, and in relation to MSB:

*Although I don't like it [the work] but I learn from it. And also they are welcoming, helping me in any kind of training course.*

MSB3 made good use of opportunities available within both the organisations where she currently volunteered. This highlights the flexibility that volunteering can provide – she was able to divide her time across both organisations. MSB3's aim was to obtain paid employment and she reported at the dissemination workshop that she had now succeeded in finding a paid post in an organisation working with Arab women.

### ***Managing and supporting volunteers***

We sought to identify what resources were made available for the support of volunteers, and what systems operated for their management and supervision within the case study organisations. The capacity to supervise volunteers, together with a lack of space and other resources, were identified as constraining the number of volunteers that could be taken on by an organisation. For example:

*We have very limited space and ability to take over more volunteers and we discuss this many times within the team. Yes we want to help them, yes we want them to support us, but we don't have neither the staff or the ability to look after all of them to give them a fair chance. So what we do usually if we can't offer volunteers here I encourage them to find somewhere else. (K3)*

Where job descriptions for volunteers are produced and volunteers with appropriate skills and interests are selected for the job, the day-to-day supervision is carried out by the team leader responsible for producing the job description (K10 and MSA1). But the demands on hard-pressed staff can lead to reluctance to take on the supervision of inexperienced volunteers:

*It depends on the volunteer I tend to ask first do I need to spend so much time with this volunteer or otherwise I have no time. I don't have much time, I would rather work with a volunteer who will not be you know, like micro supervised you know! It's so difficult because we have no time for them (RAA2)*

RAA2 thought that 'to support volunteers you really need somebody focusing on it' but the organisation currently had no funding for a volunteer coordinator. At RAB volunteer co-ordinators recruited volunteers, provided an initial induction and allocated them to teams, where the team leader supervised their work. Daily briefing and debriefing meetings were held involving the team leader, the volunteer and the volunteer coordinator in which any problem issues were aired and discussed. Our study highlights the importance of the volunteer coordinator role in ensuring the effective use of volunteers and in supporting and developing them – in both large and small organisations. For example RCOA5 described the help she had received from volunteer coordinator at RCOA:

*I found she is clever with your character to know where to place you. She knows what I need and she sometimes gives me advice about my studies, she told me I must improve my language first, that will help me to find any work and she focus on that.*

### **Support for volunteers - expenses and childcare provision**

In all the organisations volunteers' expenses for meals and off-peak travel were reimbursed. Where no specific funds were available for volunteers the money for these expenses had to be found somehow from the organisation's general funds – constituting another limiting factor on the number of volunteers that they could take on.

A lack of childcare provision was identified as the main barrier to refugee women's participation as volunteers across the case study organisations. They were generally unable to provide financial or material help with childcare for volunteers, and this was seen as consistent with practice across the voluntary sector, and reflected the lack of available funding:

*We don't have enough financial sources to pay for childcare for mums so they don't come to us. (RCOA1)*

However funding had been obtained for childcare on certain projects that combined volunteering with training. A good example was the MSA's Black and Ethnic Minority project. Crèche facilities and limited childcare expenses were provided:

*Yeah, my project is kind of unique because it's coming from the Department of Education and Skills and they do fund childcare, travel and expenses, and the courses. (MSA3)*

MSB had funding for childcare for women attending their volunteers' training programme, and at RAB some community development projects had built in funding to cover childcare. We were also given examples of how organisations tried to provide flexibility that would make it easier for women with children to participate:

*I had one person who's a refugee women who, her children are at school but she volunteers in those times and actually that's true of all the mothers that we have, they volunteer within the time that their children are at school. And that's fine for us. (K7)*

## **Training**

Interviewees across the organisations recognised the importance of training for volunteers. It was normal practice to include volunteers in training organised in-house. For example at RAB:

*Induction, so they organise that, but during the year they are training in the different services volunteers are called on to attend, depending in the place where they are volunteering or the service they are [providing] (RAB4)*

RCOA4's experience included both internal and external training, together with opportunities to shadow and observe:

*When I was a volunteer I went to so many courses they send me on many courses and in-house training and because of my helping clients with all kinds of application forms and give them advice and interpreting for them so I had all the information or knowledge almost once a week I was assisting the manager for like 35 minutes to an hour and there were two others, counsellors because they deal with the client as a counsellor, I was in with them as a welfare officer or outreach support officer.*

Through volunteering refugee women can find out about, and access a range of 'free' courses' including those provided by partner organisations. However there are limitations on the amount of training organisations are able to offer volunteers. RAA provided volunteer induction and 'customised work experience' for refugees with specific training needs. However the Director questioned how much of their scarce resources for training should be allocated to volunteers:

*I have been in voluntary organisations for a long long time you know and see millions of volunteers going through and you know in an agency there is a limit to the amount that you can invest in an individual volunteer who's going to be with you for X amount of weeks or whatever (RAA1)*

RCOB resolved the uncertainty about volunteers' entitlement to training by making explicit what they could expect:

*Volunteers have training rights - they can go three times for training outside but if we are doing in-house training they can always join For instance, the recent training we had it was about domestic violence, it was 2 days' training. So volunteers and the employed they all attend the same day (RCOB4)*

At MSA volunteer members of the Black and Ethnic Minority team members were studying for NVQ Level 3 advice and guidance. Their experience included classroom teaching, in-house training and shadowing experienced workers. According to the volunteer coordinator:

*They're actually putting their skills not only what they learn in the classroom but also on-site training and now they're actually doing the job. (MSA1)*

The team leader described how she worked with the volunteer members:

*As regards to adult guidance, I'm kind of taking them through real kind of practical work and career guidance with migrants. Shadowing me and also training them how to fill in their assessment forms or other forms which we'll use. (MSA3)*

The Deputy Chief Executive explained how this project fitted within the organisation's funding strategy:

*Wherever we get funding we build in volunteer costs which include training and development (MSA2)*

### ***Volunteering or work placement?***

A focus on the training and development of volunteers raises the issue of what, if anything is the difference between volunteering and work placement. Both represent forms of unpaid work. According to one employment adviser working with refugees:

*Work placement is more training aimed a work placement usually gives you a taste of what you can do this country. It is like a job match in a way. That is why I prefer to send my clients to a placement rather than voluntary work (K3)*

This advisor prefers work placement as preparation for employment because it is more job focused. But as volunteering becomes more structured the distinction becomes less clear:

*A work placement needs a very kind of tight arrangement between the volunteer and the actual placement provider and that's a lot more structured. Though volunteering has kind of evolved quite a lot within the kind of charity voluntary sector, a lot more of it is coming through as more of a kind of tighter contract about roles and expectations. (MSA1)*

However work placements were perceived by some respondents as less valuable to the organisation mainly because they are often of short duration and because the person who is 'placed' may have less commitment than the volunteer:

*It's rare that we take work placements rather than volunteers, we do need people who can volunteer for six months and generally work placements are shorter than that. (K7)*

The short duration of work placements was also identified as a reason to question whether employers will value them:

*If you've got a CV and there's nothing on it apart from three months or whatever, five weeks' work placement it's not really going to help you get a job. So if you can say I volunteered for a year or whatever, that's much more solid. (RAB5)*

MSA4 had initially joined the organisation on a work placement linked to a training course in IT that she was taking in one of MSA's partner organisations. She had an initial interview where she was asked:

*How do you think we can help you, so those were questions you had to kind of think about before actually coming, what do I want, where do I think I want to go and how do I think I am going to get the kind of help I want?*

MSA4 also had experience as a volunteer in another organisation. She differentiated the two as follows:

*They are different. As a volunteer really you are given tasks and there is more of an open attitude about it. So as a volunteer [you are asked] what do you want to do today and do you mind doing this? I think it's [work placement] a step forward to actually getting into the job because then when you actually get into the job it's all there and you sort it out and you do it.*

Arguably work placements are most relevant and useful where the volunteer has interest in a specific area of work and can be provided with structured experience to carry out the tasks involved. Whilst 'volunteering' is generally linked to voluntary and community organisations, work placements are also undertaken in public and private sector organisations. However employment advisors reported problems in accessing sufficient placements – particularly in the private sector, linked to high levels of social and media hostility to refugees. This leads to reliance on the voluntary sector, which appears less suspicious of

refugees, has a greater need for unpaid workers and experience of managing them. But where unpaid work placements are found refugee women may have difficulties in participating, because of the additional expenses involved, the lack of available childcare and generally less flexibility than is usually found with volunteering.

### ***Help with finding employment***

We were interested in the assistance organisations provided to volunteers in finding employment. A basic expectation of the voluntary experience is that it offers an alternative source of UK references for refugees, and organisational representatives confirmed they are willing and able to provide references. We asked whether they thought some further accreditation of volunteer experience would be useful. It is not usual to provide any such accreditation except where volunteering is carried out within a national scheme (for example Millennium volunteers at RCOA) where certificates are provided to volunteers who have fulfilled the project's requirements. In some organisations we were told that providing accreditation was under consideration but that there was concern it might be thought patronising or tokenistic (RAB1, MSA1).

Volunteering also provides opportunities to work on different organisational tasks and gain experience tailored to specific job aspirations. For example at RAB:

*We had a volunteer who actually worked downstairs in the main reception area because you know she wanted to get a job in that line and she was doing admin work and she wanted customer services experience and she's been able to get temp work [in that area]. We have done that, when they say specifically I want to get job in this area you know and we will when vacancies come up we will put them there. (RAB6)*

This account highlights the active role of volunteer in identifying opportunities available in the organisation. In MSA we were told that refugee women volunteers who had made progress in accessing employment or further qualifications were those:

*That we've been working with over about two years and they've taken our advice to access everything that we've had to offer for free, where it hasn't meant an issue to do with their immigration status. Also they've looked at external options so they've done some training with us and they've done a little bit of volunteering and then they may have come back to us and said what next and I've got one in particular at the moment she was a qualified teacher. She's now over here, she's done some training at [partner organisation] with careers stuff, she's doing her educational course she's got some external funding, we've helped her write letters, etc. She now wants to offer as a volunteer to go into nursery school in ready for her PGCE. (MSA1)*

Volunteers are able to access advice and guidance from employment advisors where they are employed in the organisation. RCOA had no such advisor and the volunteer coordinator described her efforts to fill the gap:

*Volunteers [who are] unemployed or seeking for a job I'm not an expert but anyway I give them what I can, I direct them to professional agencies to write professional CV's start from the beginning with them. I encourage them to come and search for Internet, I talk to them through their difficulties for interviews I'm not required to do that, but I do that as an extra to help them more quickly (RCOA1)*

Although not part of her formal role she had 'attended training, and collected a few tips' to help her give employment advice. The need to give employment related support was recognised as another reason why a dedicated volunteer coordinator is so important:

*It's a full time job on its own to support volunteers you know to go through the action plans, to do a work programme, development programme because we all are very very busy I still feel that we're not doing that job really efficiently we've got a waiting list for volunteers to come and volunteer for our organisation, so I am trying to see if there is a possibility of recruiting maybe somebody a volunteer coordinator or a volunteer worker to start working in that area to recruit volunteers to kind of supervise them then start looking for job possibilities for them we have a job search kind of course as well so we encourage them to go on and two of our volunteers have already been they have already started applying for the jobs. (RCOB2)*

We were also given examples of organisations providing limited opportunities for volunteers to undertake paid work. RAB sometimes had funding for projects that involved interviews or focus groups. They were considering training refugees in interviewing and leading focus groups and then paying them to do so (as practised in certain other refugee agencies). MSB had offered short-term consultancy contracts as a way for women to ‘demonstrate their expertise’ (MSB4) as well as providing some payment and enhancing their CVs.

### ***The transition into employment***

The usefulness of volunteering as a means to gain employment depends in part upon how far prospective employers value this experience. In one organisation we were told:

*We would expect [employees] to have work experience for us unpaid work experience is as good as paid employment (K1)*

Voluntary experience is of particular relevance within the voluntary sector and in an international NGO we were told that it is now ‘absolutely a prerequisite almost’ for employment but that ‘a very high level of qualification’ is also expected which according to the interviewee ‘might make it harder [...] especially for the refugee women’ (K7). In another international NGO they looked for:

*Evidence of commitment on the CV, it's still an important thing to somehow have an experience overseas if you've never shown any interest in other cultures and other ways of living and seeing anything of the world, then it's a bit strange that you want to work here. So we'd see it very positively that people have volunteered somewhere (K10)*

These comments raise the question of what constitutes the ‘right experience’ and how far the experiences of refugees in both their country of origin and in the UK fit with these expectations. According to K7 for jobs that involve working with refugees:

*Obviously refugees are at an advantage in some ways but at a disadvantage at an advantage because they are part of that world, they understand things much much better than people who are not and they have specific experience which is invaluable and have access because they are refugees as well. And disadvantaged because of the language, because of the qualifications, because in terms of women because of childcare.*

RAA1 was sceptical about specifying voluntary experience as a requirement for jobs in his organisation, because he thought it might raise unrealistic expectations amongst volunteers. He argued:

*There will be some things in the person specification which will be around an understanding of the experience of being a refugee which clearly advantages somebody who has but you have to have that understanding if you are going to do the job it isn't just put in to weight it unfairly. Things like community languages might be a significant part of the job but actually being a volunteer in RAA or anywhere else would not be. We wouldn't ever say being a volunteer but what we would say is [if the job] required experience of work with community groups, we might put depending on the job either paid or unpaid so quite often we would put paid or unpaid.*

In all the case study organisations examples were provided of refugee women employees who had progressed into their jobs having been volunteers in that same organisation. In MSA we were told that volunteering in the organisation could act as a kind of 'extended job interview' (MSA2) and that:

*There's people within the Black and ethnic minority team who if there was an opportunity to employ them I would encourage them to apply (MSA3)*

However job opportunities are scarce, so that not all volunteers can expect to find employment within the same organisation:

*A lot of them [volunteer] in hopes that it might lead to a job within the organisation that's the expectation. So it can be quite difficult. (MSB1)*

MSA2 emphasised the importance of being honest and explicit with volunteers in order to avoid raising expectations that cannot be fulfilled:

*At the beginning we say we cannot guarantee anything. We have regular supervision with the volunteers and issues such as that are discussed and I know, a couple of examples recently where we have I'm talking about the careers guidance posts it was asked about by one, if not two of the volunteers, and they were told as part of the supervision you don't have the necessary skills that we state.*

There was a shared expectation amongst organisational representatives that volunteers should not normally work for longer than about six months within the organisation, by which time it is anticipated they should be ready for employment or to move on into further training or education. However the lack of available job opportunities and the circumstances of some refugee women volunteers mean that this is not always a realistic time frame for them. Under these circumstances it may be 'difficult to sustain motivation of volunteers' (RCOA3). RAB4 described how her motivation had changed:

*The length of time that you are volunteering, while you are waiting to find a paid job that waiting time is too long. Your motivation could change you are not more involved as you should be. This is why I decided to drop one of the days I was volunteering in the same organisation and give it to someone else.*

RAA3 had been involved at RAA for nearly 10 years, firstly as a 'client', then as an active member of one of the community groups linked to RAA and at the time of our study was also employed for a few hours each week as an outreach worker. She came to the organisation initially because of her children's problems in adapting to life in the UK:

*And my daughter and my son was oh, horrible because they don't have any friends I saw someone and she told me about RAA and why you don't go there because they have a youth group so I came here because my son and my daughter want friends*

When asked how she came to be more actively involved as a volunteer she explained:

*I think the reason many women have you know because I was having problem in my family I was alone really, and came here and*

*RAA is my second house I came here and do jobs and my mind was in another place, not crying at home*

She was now studying for a qualification in community work and explained her reason for doing so as:

*To find a job! Because RAA have you know, many many jobs here, but for us, because we don't have any qualifications to do that job, I've got experience so now I need the qualification I really really love being involved with the community you know, I want to have that qualification, it's really hard, really hard*

Her reference to 'us' may be taken as referring to 'us refugees' and their difficulties in accessing employment. RAA3 emphasised that her aim was to find:

*Paid job, properly I don't want two hours or only half days or something like that, no. I want a full time job real thing you know!*

This comment highlights how, in a situation of limited funding, many opportunities for paid work are confined to part time or sessional work. And because most employment is temporary, women may have to revert to volunteering at the end of their contract. Although the opportunity to undertake paid work is valued by refugee women, part-time employment can be very marginal (if not disadvantageous) in terms of financial benefit, particularly for single mothers. RCOA2 gave an example of how a change from full-time to part-time work had affected her:

*I worked as a full-time, now I work as a part-time because we have very limited funding for my post and I have to look for the funding. Because I'm employed by the organisation I have to pay for my prescription whenever I go to the GP that's why sometimes I keep being ill and not going to the GP and not taking medicine because I think sometimes it's too much.*

### **Recruitment and selection of paid staff - equal opportunities issues**

Amongst refugee organisations we found a shared view that it was important that refugees were well represented amongst the paid staff:

*We [senior management team] pride ourselves on having quite a diverse workforce and that it is representative of our clientele (RAB2)*

However there were also concerns that selection processes should be seen to be fair and consistent with both internal equal opportunities policies and equality legislation. The outcomes of selection should not compromise organisational standards or quality:

*We have to get the best worker for the sake of all refugees. Just because this person deserves a break doesn't mean to say that you can give them a job. (RAA1)*

It has been noted already how refugees may have advantages in relation to other candidates for certain posts, in terms of their understanding of the refugee experience, their access to refugees and their knowledge of relevant languages. However a number of disadvantages, associated particularly with refugees were also mentioned. Thus the experience of refugees does not usually conform to the assumptions and expectations associated with conventional personnel specifications and interview questions. They will have career gaps, which according to MSA2 are:

*Such a problem on CVs and there could be a whole variety of reasons but many people look at career gaps and go hm, wonder where that person's been?*

RAB2 explained how refugees can be disadvantaged in the interview by the 'atypicality' of their experience:

*I do think there is a problem about how we take account of refugees and asylum seekers' diverse experience and the amount of weight we give to that vis à vis other factors when we have tried to fill a more junior management post and we've had refugees and asylum seekers apply and they quite often haven't been successful because they haven't been able to demonstrate that they've had management experience. And they may well have done something in their own country which is quite relevant but they didn't feel it was relevant or it didn't come out in the interview and in terms of equal opportunities policies and procedures it's quite hard to make allowances for that (RAB2)*

In this extract RAB2 identifies some aspects of equal opportunities procedures as unhelpful to refugees presumably because of the requirement that all interviewees be asked the same questions and their answers evaluated according to the same criteria. She explained that within RAB they had started to question some of their formal requirements for employees:

*I think sometimes standards which we ask perhaps aren't realistic in terms of being able to attract refugees there's quite often quite a lot of emphasis on written and spoken English and the reality is that it's an organisation where quite a lot of weight is given to verbal and written skills and communication because it's quite a complex organisation. On the other hand it may not matter so much for an advice worker but it does matter that an advice worker can understand policy guidance and the law.*

In another organisation we were told that they reviewed their requirements for degree level qualifications, to take account of the lack of recognition of overseas qualifications:

*We try to be a bit more creative about how we describe the skills and the level of skills that we need. So we would look at what people have done and their academic background is part of that but what else they've done and also their opportunity to have done things. (K10)*

A number of interviewees identified issues of language and confidence as affecting the ability of refugee women to perform effectively in selection interviews:

*I can think of a couple of cases where I've interviewed people who have fantastic skills who are refugee women who just weren't able to put that across at interview and very much fell to pieces and at RAB there probably aren't very many more supportive environments with people saying take your time don't worry please get yourself together, we'll take as long as you want, but actually still couldn't put it across. (RAB1)*

At RAA they had made efforts to address the problem of where:

*We know the people are really very able and very skilled so we try to find a way of making them let those things out verbally and showing them in different ways so that they are not disadvantaged in the interview (RAA2)*

For certain posts they included representatives of the different communities involved in the organisation on the interview panel:

*First of all the panel has to represent the different communities so in the beginning they would already be confident and if they cannot say it in English they can say it in the language and that person in the panel can interpret because if they insist on just English then people won't be able to say much. So that's why we try to do that to supplement the support that they get during interviews. Because we know for a fact the only thing is that they did not say it in the interview. (RAA2)*

In describing organisational practices designed to facilitate the appointment of refugees (or in some cases other migrants or members of ethnic minority groups) organisational representatives stressed the importance of reaching out as widely as possible to different communities when advertising vacancies – through adverts in ethnic minority press, and via networks of partner organisations, appropriate websites and email lists, internal and external newsletters and notice boards. However in other cases it was considered appropriate to impose some restriction in order to improve opportunities for internal applicants (specifically volunteers). Thus at MSA job descriptions took into account the qualities of volunteers already involved in the tasks at hand. In K11's organisation they sometimes advertised certain short-term posts internally only, giving volunteers the opportunity to gain some paid work experience and to develop their confidence, thereby helping them to compete with other candidates when the post was advertised more widely. At MSA they had also taken advantage of provision within Equal Opportunities legislation to designate certain posts:

*Some of the posts we've had have been designated posts so [MSA3] was a designated woman and black post so we were allowed that under Section 5 of the Race Relations, Section 8 of the Equal Opportunities because of the type of post that it was. (MSA2)*

### **Summary of key organisational issues**

- Our study has highlighted the contribution of volunteers to organisations and the range of their involvement. It has shown how women refugees

may often be identified as particularly interested in undertaking volunteering work, but how their opportunity to participate may also be limited particularly by the lack of available childcare.

- There is an inevitable tension between the position of paid staff and volunteers but it is important that volunteers are not marginalised within organisations, and that proper account is taken of their needs in allocating resources. Where volunteers are supported with appropriate training and facilities they can significantly enhance the services provided by the organisation, within the constraints of their availability and of organisational structures and policies.
- The more the volunteer 'puts in' the more she may be expected to 'get back' from the organisation this is largely understood in terms of opportunities for training and to develop skills.
- Volunteering provides access to information, networks, advice and training as well as job experience and references. The role of volunteer coordinator is very significant in this respect. Co-ordinators provide induction and support; they can identify suitable opportunities for volunteers to apply existing skills and to develop new skills. They also provide assistance to volunteers in preparing job applications, and accessing external training and education opportunities.
- Many women refugees who are employed in voluntary and community organisations have themselves been volunteers within the same organisation often having been assisted through training, support and encouragement. However the limitations of funding mean that this will not be possible for all volunteers leading to some frustration and disappointment. Volunteering in itself is not a guarantee of employment. Amongst the organisations where we conducted interviews we were not told of any significant difficulties in recruiting and retaining suitably qualified staff so that the job market appears quite competitive.
- Knowledge of refugee communities, of community languages and insight into the refugee experience are identifiable as advantages held by refugee applicants when applying for jobs within refugee organisations and refugee projects. However these attributes are not usually prioritised

for jobs within the 'mainstream' or generic voluntary sector. This may create a situation where, without broader recognition of the relevance of their experience and skills, employment opportunities for refugee women may be largely confined to the refugee sector. It is arguable that within the context of an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society refugees' knowledge and experience is relevant to a much wider range of organisations.

- Equal opportunities policies as they are currently understood and practised within the voluntary/community sector do not always fully take refugee women's situation into account. Organisations with an interest in employing refugees are reviewing and revising their practices. There is considerable variation amongst organisations as to how far refugee status is included in equal opportunities monitoring of volunteers and employees. Although all organisations have equal opportunities policies we question how much systematic monitoring of equal opportunities information is actually carried out, making it difficult to analyse or even access the data.

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## **Chapter 7: Examples of Good Practice**

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We have here selected a variety of positive practices, from different organisations. We are aware that they may not all be viable in every organisation because of differences in size, capacity, staffing and organisational mission.

### ***Recruiting and selecting volunteers***

- Targeting under-represented groups, aimed particularly at building a volunteer profile that reflects that of the organisation's users/clients.
- Promoting and advertising volunteer opportunities amongst clients, through community networks and partner organisations, organising open days for prospective volunteers.
- Establishing a register of potential volunteers, with information on their skills and interests.
- Creating job descriptions for volunteer posts, reflecting different areas of organisational work and skills levels.

### ***Managing Volunteers***

- Appointing volunteer coordinator(s) who provide regular supervision for volunteers
- Entering a clear volunteering agreement that spells out what volunteers and the organisation can expect from each other, including volunteers' entitlement to training days
- Providing each volunteer with an individual development plan that includes their training needs and is regularly reviewed and revised
- Skills matching: matching volunteer job descriptions with the skills and interest of volunteer applicants on the register

- Building volunteer costs, including training, supervision and childcare into funding applications, enabling:
  - Provision of childcare on the premises
  - Re-imburement for travel expenses, lunch and childcare costs
- Providing training opportunities for volunteers through:
  - External training
  - Including volunteers in internal staff training and development activities
  - Partnerships with other organisations, so that volunteers can access a wider range of placements, and training and development opportunities
- Recognising the contribution of volunteers to the organisation and providing opportunities for their voice and participation through:
  - Having an organisational chart that includes both paid staff and volunteers
  - Regular reports to management committee on the contribution of volunteers
  - Including volunteers in staff meetings, team meetings, staff development activities.

### ***Helping Volunteers into Employment Pathways***

- Developing individual action plans relating to the job and educational aspirations of volunteers, and identifying appropriate training opportunities
- Coaching on how to write CVs and job applications and how to act in job interviews
- Encouraging volunteers to apply for jobs - where they have a realistic chance of being successful

- Providing opportunities for sessional, part-time or consultancy work in the sector this can provide small payments, and boost confidence, as well as enhancing the CV
- Advertising short-term posts internally, where volunteers have the opportunity to gain short-term work experience it often boosts their confidence. This helps in subsequent applications when they have to compete with a wider range of candidates.
- Providing realistic and detailed feedback on unsuccessful job applications, if a volunteer has applied for a job within the organisation
- Encouraging volunteers to use internal and external careers advice and guidance
- Encouraging volunteers to network with other organisations in the field

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## Recommendations

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At the focus group discussions held as part of the workshop for refugee women interview partners, participants were asked to make recommendations for how they could best be helped to overcome barriers into employment. Five areas emerged as key:

- The ban on asylum seekers undertaking paid employment and restrictions on their participation in education and training. Participants felt strongly that these restrictions should be removed. Our research reinforces the negative impact of these policies in creating frustration, reinforcing dependence, resulting in wasted opportunities to apply the commitment, skills and experience of refugee women to the maximum effect. Specifically also the residence and working rights of refugee women should not be dependent on their husbands.
- The negative image of refugees and asylum seekers. Suggestions included the proposal that the government should educate the general public about the root causes of flight, to prevent racism against refugees, and that refugee women should be given a voice through a representative in the government.
- Access to volunteering opportunities: participants recommended setting up London wide meetings where refugee women volunteers can exchange their experiences, and establishing a volunteering bureaux specifically for BME and refugees. There should be more volunteering or Work Placement opportunities, incorporating training and ESOL and support for childcare
- Access to training and education: recommendations included dropping the requirements of 'work experience in the UK' from training, volunteering and job specification (as e.g. in social work courses); higher education should be free/ accessible to refugee women; training (including ESOL) should be government provided for both skilled and

unskilled refugees; childcare should be an integral part of any training provision. The combination of training and formal learning in the volunteering organisation is important. Organisations need to talk to the volunteers and see their needs, aspirations and plans

- Access to employment: participants recommended that occupations where there is a high demand for workers (such as social workers, teachers, doctors and nurses) should be made more accessible for refugees, and schemes should be developed to have their education easily recognised.

We highlight also the following recommendations based on our analysis of the experience of refugee women and of organisational practices.

### ***General Recommendations for Voluntary Sector, Funders and Policy Makers***

- Give formal recognition that volunteering is valuable civic engagement and often constitutes a meaningful alternative to employment, as well as an important contribution to this society. Volunteering should be highlighted in refugee resettlement policies and refugee volunteering should be given practical support.
- Provide accessible and effective support mechanisms for funding applications for refugee organisations.
- Recognise volunteer participation as a core organisational activity and provide funding for the costs, including supervision and co-ordination, volunteer training and development, childcare and volunteer expenses.
- Provide training to organisations on good practice in volunteer management.

### ***Recommendations for organizations in volunteer management***

- Regularly review the role of volunteers and identify how far their contribution is reflected and represented in the organisational mission
- Prioritise the role of volunteer coordinator when developing and enhancing the participation of volunteers in the organisation.
- Develop mechanisms for recognising volunteer contribution and involving volunteers in organisational activities
- Include volunteers in in-house training activities
- Review their equal opportunities policy, and consider its application to volunteers as well as paid staff.
- Identify target groups under-represented amongst the volunteer force
- Consider equal opportunities monitoring of volunteers.

### ***Recommendations for organisations in employment practice***

- Recognise volunteer experience as of the same value as paid employment experience
- Give detailed information and guidance on how to fill in application forms, avoiding UK culturally specific jargon
- Develop detailed Job Specifications that:
  - Instead of generic requirements such as '3 years job experience' or 'degree level education' explicitly state which skills are expected
  - Accept these skills even when gained outside the UK or outside of a degree
  - Recognise overseas qualifications

- Have language requirements appropriate for the specific job, enabling candidates to be accepted whose spoken or written English is not 'perfect', but is good enough to do the job
- Provide English language support/ training during working hours
- Provide flexible working, including: term-time working, or allowing staff to work from home during half-term, contribute to childcare expenses when staff have exceptional overnight, early morning or late night duties
- Provide in-house career progression courses, targeted at refugees,
- Provide mentoring for career progression
- Allow staff unpaid time off to try out another job, without losing their right to return to their original job
- Include refugee status and experience within equal opportunities policies and practices, taking account of issues such as:
  - English as a second language
  - Recognition of overseas qualifications
  - Gaps in the CV through flight
  - Longer periods spent re-training
  - The implications of all of the above for the age of applicants.

### ***Building bridges into the 'mainstream'***

- If volunteering is to be an effective route into employment, a cross-over between the volunteering organisations and the 'mainstream' should be created. As well as incorporating volunteer expenses (including travel, meals and childcare) and volunteer coordinator costs funding for volunteers should include:

- funding specifically for external training courses
  - funding or facilities for external 'mainstream' mentoring or advice and guidance that is tailored and ongoing and has a good understanding of labour market developments and skills gaps
  - this mentoring/ advice and guidance should be geared towards the volunteers' needs and provide opportunities for moving on into other organisations or training
- More networking and information exchange is needed amongst refugee employment advisors and managers and volunteer co-ordinators of both refugee and mainstream organisations. This networking should be aimed at creating and identifying placement and voluntary opportunities, publicising these widely and matching them with the skills and interests of refugee women. Placements and training courses should build on refugee women's experience and skills, and be linked to their individual development plans.

***Recommendations for refugee women:***

- In order to make best use of volunteering:
  - Ask to learn specific skills
  - Ask to be given specific, developmental tasks
  - Ask for structured training/ careers advice
  - Ask an experienced member of staff to help with applications and job interview preparation
- Use the volunteering organisation as a platform for networking with other organisations, find out about their training and job opportunities
- Use opportunities in the mainstream, including volunteering to improve:

- Written and spoken English
- Experience of different workplace cultures
- Confidence about your knowledge of the UK system
- Confidence about being 'job ready'

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