

# Coping with Destitution

*Survival and livelihood strategies of refused asylum seekers living in the UK*

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## About the Centre for Migration Policy Research

The Centre for Migration Policy Research (CMPR) is an inter-disciplinary research centre based at Swansea University. The Centre was established in 2007.

Asylum and migration issues have never been higher on the political and policy agendas. The unprecedented global movement of people seeking protection, employment and family reunion poses economic, social and political opportunities and challenges. These opportunities and challenges have local, regional, national and international dimensions. In this context, the Centre's mission is to encourage the exchange of ideas about asylum and migration and ensure that policy-making is underpinned by empirical evidence about the nature and causes of migration, the impacts on different countries and communities, and the effects – both intended and unintended – of policy responses.

The Centre's approach is underpinned by three key principles: a commitment to a rights-based approach to migration; a desire to understand and reflect the migrant experience; and recognition of the importance of policy-relevant research and analysis. CMPR is particularly keen to ensure that its research is accessible to a wide range of audiences, and is timely and policy-relevant. Members of the Centre work closely with policy-makers and practitioners in Wales, the UK, Europe and beyond to raise awareness of problems and issues, analyse underlying issues, model policy impacts and evaluate policy outcomes.

More information about the Centre for Migration Policy Research can be found at [www.swansea.ac.uk/cmpr](http://www.swansea.ac.uk/cmpr) or email [migration@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:migration@swansea.ac.uk) to be added to the mailing list and receive details of future research and events.

## **List of acronyms**

ASAP	Asylum Support Appeals Project
JCHR	Joint Committee on Human Rights
NAO	National Audit Office
NASS	National Asylum Support Service (now known as Asylum Support)
NI	National Insurance
PEER	Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation and Research
RCO	Refugee Community Organisation
UKBA	United Kingdom Border Agency

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# Executive summary

## Introduction

UK asylum policy has increasingly restricted asylum seekers' access to welfare support, both while their application is being processed and if they are refused. Over recent years, there have been growing concerns about the scale and impact of destitution among refused asylum seekers. It is estimated that 283,500 refused asylum seekers were living in the UK in 2005, and this number seems likely to have increased (NAO 2005). Existing evidence suggests that many asylum seekers have been destitute for more than six months and a significant proportion for more than two years. This strongly indicates that refused asylum seekers are prepared to face long periods of destitution in the UK rather than returning to their country of origin.

This research uncovers how the hundreds of thousands of people currently living in the UK, with no access to legitimate means of securing a livelihood, survive on a day-to-day and longer-term basis. The strategies adopted by destitute asylum seekers have been analysed within a sustainable livelihoods framework, to ensure a systematic understanding of the different types of resources to which asylum seekers do – and do not – have access, and the impact this has on their lives. This approach also allows us to identify changes to government policy that could help prevent destitution among refused asylum seekers. Fundamentally, the need to remain hidden and to avoid any risk of being deported affects every decision made by destitute asylum seekers, and in turn the coping strategies which they adopt.

## Key findings

### *Institutional resources*

- Many refused asylum seekers would rather remain destitute than apply for government support because they fear it will result in deportation.
- Many are unaware of their entitlement to free primary health care, or are anxious about contact with the authorities and therefore do not access health services.
- Destitute asylum seekers are often deterred from accessing support from large voluntary organisations because of a perceived lack of independence of these organisations from the Home Office.
- Churches appear to provide an important source of support for many of those living in destitution.

### *Social resources*

- Social contacts are often the most important resource and include a range of social relationships. Some asylum seekers receive support that is completely altruistic, but many are exploited by others in return for resources that help ensure survival.
- Some relationships are overtly transactional, with destitute asylum seekers providing childcare, cooking and/or housework, and sometimes sex, in exchange for meals, cash, shelter, or other daily necessities.
- Both men and women form sexual relationships with local people as part of their livelihood strategy, but these relationships are sometimes disempowering.

### *Economic resources*

- All destitute asylum seekers know it is illegal for them to work, but often have no choice but to work illegally to survive. Wages were mostly reported as being between £1 and £3 per hour, and in some cases were even lower.
- Most examples of illegal work involved low-skilled jobs, with low pay, long hours, poor working conditions, and a constant fear of being raided by immigration officials.
- There are very few examples of destitute asylum seekers being involved in criminal activity other than illegal work, as they are extremely fearful of being caught by the authorities and deported.
- There is evidence of both men and women involved in commercial sex work, with many of those who pursue this strategy being physically abused, sexually exploited or manipulated, or forced to stay against their will.

### *Access to resources*

- Speaking English is a crucial asset to allow access to broader social resources, and in turn to further institutional and/or economic resources.
- The existence of refugee and migrant communities from the country of origin plays a significant part in shaping asylum seekers' coping strategies and future possibilities.
- Gender plays an important role in determining the livelihood strategy adopted; with men sometimes viewed as better-equipped to find work and make friends, while women were more likely to have to stay at home looking after children.
- Destitute asylum seekers will avoid coming into contact with authorities, even if they are subject to abuse or the victims of criminal behaviour.

## **Conclusion**

Destitute asylum seekers use a range of strategies to cope with destitution and are forced to lead little more than a hand-to-mouth existence, with no hope that their situation will ever come to an end. Their overwhelming lack of access to institutional, social and economic resources denies them a sustainable livelihood, and results in a life that is robbed of dignity and unacceptable by human rights standards.

The survival strategies adopted by destitute asylum seekers are a consequence of asylum policy in the UK. That hundreds of thousands of people would rather live in poverty and in constant fear of deportation – reliant on friends, transactional relationships, commercial sex work or low-paid illegal work – rather than return to their country of origin, suggests the failure of government policy.

The government should accept the growing body of evidence that shows that destitution does not lead refused asylum seekers to return to their country of origin. The risks associated with continuing to pursue this approach are enormous, with significant implications for wider society. The evidence collected during the course of this research suggests the need for an entirely new policy approach – one which recognises both the human rights of asylum seekers and also their right to be human. Being human means having access to the resources needed to survive on a day-to-day basis with dignity. It also means having hope for the future.

## Recommendations

It is not acceptable for asylum seekers to continue to live in destitution, and the government has a responsibility to ensure that the human rights of asylum seekers are upheld. The humiliating and degrading strategies adopted by destitute asylum seekers to survive and avoid deportation reflects the need for changes to government and civil-society policy and practice. All aspects of the asylum system – including the flawed asylum-determination process that often leads to wrongful denial of asylum, and policies that deny access to resources (such as the right to work and access to welfare support) – must be urgently reviewed to ensure that all asylum seekers are able to secure a sustainable and dignified livelihood.

Our key policy recommendations are as follows:

- Improve the quality of asylum decision-making.
- Provide protection for those in need and those who cannot be returned.
- Ensure access to free legal advice and representation for all refused asylum seekers, in order that they can submit an appeal or submit a fresh claim if appropriate.
- Reinstate the right to work and earn a livelihood.
- Reintegrate asylum seekers into the mainstream benefits system.
- Provide welfare support for all asylum seekers until the point of return.
- Provide access to primary and secondary health care for all asylum seekers.
- Improved support and information should be provided to all asylum seekers by voluntary sector organisations.

# 1. Background and context

Asylum was one of the main policy focus areas of the former Labour government. There were six major pieces of legislation from 1997 to 2010, the primary objectives of which were to reduce the number of asylum applications in the UK; to speed up the process of asylum determination for those who arrive; and to increase the removal of those whose applications for protection are unsuccessful (Zetter and Pearl 2000; Lea and Lea 2003; Bloch and Schuster 2005; Flynn 2005). Limiting access to welfare support has been an increasingly important part of the strategy for delivering these objectives. Although nothing new, the extent to which access to welfare support has been used over recent years as an immigration-control mechanism intended to deter asylum seekers is unprecedented (Cohen et al. 2002). Also unprecedented is the extent to which asylum and immigration policy in the UK has developed a discourse of exclusion for those who are not seen as 'legitimate' beneficiaries of support (Walters 2004; Bloch and Schuster 2002, 2005; Schuster 2005; McDonald and Billings 2007). The impact of these policies on the lives of asylum seekers and their families, and the strategies that they pursue in coping with the increasingly difficult situations in which they find themselves, are the focus of this report.

## 1.1 The policy context

Asylum legislation has increasingly restricted asylum seekers' access to welfare support, both while their application is being processed and if they are refused. These changes have resulted in the exclusion of asylum seekers from 'mainstream' provision, and have led to an increase in poverty and destitution (Bloch and Schuster 2002, 2005). The changes began before the former Labour government came to power. The 1996 Asylum and Immigration Act withdrew rights to welfare benefits from in-country asylum applicants, meaning that asylum seekers who did not make a claim immediately on arrival in the UK had, instead, to seek support from local authorities within the provisions of the 1948 National Assistance Act. But it was under the Labour government that the pace of change accelerated, most notably through the creation of the National Asylum Support System (NASS) in 2000.

NASS was created as a result of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999 and represents a parallel system of welfare support and accommodation provision. Asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their application from the Home Office are provided with accommodation by NASS on a 'no-choice' basis, and a weekly allowance which is the equivalent of 70 per cent of Job Seeker's Allowance.<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, the government had slashed the weekly allowance for asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their application for asylum from £42 to £35 per week, a cut of nearly 20 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Asylum seekers are also entitled to other basic rights and services, including free treatment on the NHS. Asylum-seeking families with children are only entitled to limited additional payments and not to the full range of benefits paid to other families, such as Child Benefit, Educational Maintenance Allowance or the Family Premium (Reacroft 2008). In 2002, the government withdrew the entitlement to apply for permission to work, which had applied to asylum seekers who had been waiting for more than six months for an initial decision on their asylum application. As a result, the majority of asylum seekers in the UK are not permitted to work (Doyle 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> This is supposed to reflect the fact that asylum seekers in Asylum Support accommodation do not pay utility bills.

<sup>2</sup> Further details are available at [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/news/2009/july/20090730.htm](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/news/2009/july/20090730.htm)



A series of additional measures has been introduced with the aim of further limiting access to support for those who are not considered 'legitimate'. The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 included the controversial Section 55, under which access to NASS support for in-country applicants was restricted to those who could prove that they had made their application for asylum 'as soon as reasonably practicable' after arriving in the UK. The result was that in 2003, the most basic support was denied to 9,000 asylum seekers, many of whom applied for asylum within a few days or hours of arrival in the UK, and subsequently turned to charitable organisations and refugee community groups for shelter, food and washing facilities (Refugee Council 2004; Stewart 2005). Research commissioned by the Mayor of London (2004) estimated that around 10,000 asylum seekers a year were likely to be made destitute by Section 55 in London alone, and expressed concerns about the potential impacts on communities living in the city and for the provision of accommodation, health care and social services. Although Section 55 remains in place, the Court of Appeal ruled that the Home Office was in breach of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and the government was forced to modify its practice. Now, asylum seekers can only be denied support if NASS is satisfied that they have alternative means of support.

More recently, policy efforts have turned to the issue of welfare support for those considered to be at the end of the asylum process. The Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Act 2004 includes a clause that removes access to basic support for asylum seekers at the end of the appeal process (Bloch and Schuster 2005). Once an applicant's claim has been refused and there is no outstanding appeal they are told that they must not work, and that they are expected to leave the country within 21 days. Financial support and accommodation are cut off for single adults and childless couples. However, some refused asylum seekers are able to access limited support (in the form of vouchers) under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, if they are able to prove that they are taking reasonable steps to leave the country, or because the UK Border Agency believes there is no safe return route available. Refused asylum seekers are only able to access primary health care and are not entitled to free, non-emergency, secondary health care. For the time being at least, families with children continue to receive financial support and accommodation under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, although Section 9 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc.) Act 2004 gives the government the power to stop all support and accommodation. They can do this where they believe the family is not taking 'reasonable' steps to leave the UK by preventing local authorities from supporting the whole family. This means children must remain on the streets with their parents, or go into care without them (Children's Society 2008). From December 2004, the Home Office piloted the cessation of support under Section 9 for families not co-operating with their removal, but to date the measure has not been fully implemented.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 The scale and impact of destitution

The former government's policies in relation to the withdrawal of support for refused asylum seekers were strongly criticised. There was a widespread belief that the government deliberately used destitution or the threat of destitution as a policy tool to attempt to drive refused asylum seekers out of the country (Chakrabati 2005; Amnesty International 2006). During its inquiry into the treatment of asylum seekers, the Joint Committee on Human Rights (2007) concluded that through the policy of withdrawing support from refused asylum seekers, the government has been deliberately pushing them into destitution to force them back to their country of origin, and to deter potential immigrants from coming to the UK. The Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) recommended that "...[the] policy of enforced destitution must cease" and that the

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<sup>3</sup> The government announced its intention to repeal Section 9 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 2004 in its Draft Immigration Bill (2009).

Immigration Rules be amended so that asylum seekers are able to apply for permission to work where their asylum appeal is outstanding for 12 months or more, and the delay is due to factors outside their control (JCHR 1997: 42. para. 121).

Much of this criticism reflects growing concern about the scale and impact of destitution among refused asylum seekers. There are differing estimates of the number of people affected by these policies. The most authoritative of these is probably the National Audit Office (NAO) estimate of between 155,000 and 283,500 made in July 2005 (NAO 2005) but there is evidence that the numbers could be much higher. In July 2006, the Home Secretary announced that there was an asylum 'legacy' of around 450,000 incomplete or unresolved asylum cases. It seems likely that at least some of these 'legacy' cases are living in situations of poverty and destitution. In addition, none of the available figures include children arriving with, or born to, asylum seekers over the past ten years. It has been estimated that there could be more than 100,000 children caught up in the backlogged system, a significant proportion of whom may be living in conditions of destitution (Reacroft 2008). Given that the number of decisions (including refusals) has increased over recent years without a corresponding increase in the number of removals, it seems likely that the scale of destitution will also have increased in the period since the NAO estimate. There is also evidence that destitution is not a short-term condition (Amnesty International 2006; Brown 2008; Smart 2009). A recent survey undertaken by the Asylum Support Partnership found that nearly half of the destitute asylum seekers visiting voluntary sector agencies specialising in asylum had been destitute for more than six months (Smart 2009). A third of asylum seekers in the survey had been destitute for more than two years. This strongly indicates that refused asylum seekers are prepared to face long periods of destitution in the UK rather than returning to their country of origin (JRCT 2009; Smart 2009).

The impact of destitution on already vulnerable individuals is increasingly well documented. This work has been critically important in highlighting the existence of destitution among large numbers of asylum seekers living in the UK. Recent reports by Amnesty International (2006) and Refugee Action (2006) chronicle the plight of destitute refused asylum seekers across the UK. Research published by the Mayor of London (2004) and the Leicester Refugee and Asylum Seekers' Voluntary Sector Forum (2005) explores the impact of current policies on refused asylum seekers living in London and Leicester respectively. The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust's Destitution Inquiry (2007) looks specifically at the implications of destitution for asylum seekers living in Leeds. Most recently, research published by Barnados (2008) and The Children's Society (2008) has highlighted the particular consequences of UK government policies on children in asylum-seeking families, and the inherent contradiction between these policies and policies to reduce child poverty. As noted above, concerns about the use of destitution as a tool of immigration policy were highlighted by the Joint Committee on Human Rights (2007) in its report on the treatment of asylum seekers in the UK, and form the basis of the Still Human Still Here campaign which is trying to change legislation and policy in this area.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.3 The aims of this research

Although the existing body of research tells us much about the impact of destitution, it tells us rather less about how people cope with destitution, the livelihood strategies they pursue, and the agency that they exert in situations of extreme poverty and marginalisation. Relatively little is known about how the many thousands of people in the UK with no access to legitimate means of securing a livelihood actually survive. It seems

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<sup>4</sup> The Still Human Still Here campaign is a broad coalition of organisations including Amnesty International, the Refugee Council, the Red Cross, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and the Archbishops Council of the Church of England.

See [www.stillhuman.org.uk](http://www.stillhuman.org.uk) for further information about the campaign.

likely that many destitute asylum seekers rely upon friends and charity from voluntary organisations and churches to try to meet their basic needs of shelter, food, health, income and safety. Others are forced to find undocumented (illegal) work to survive. But the extent to which these strategies are successful, whether (as seems likely) destitution places asylum seekers in positions of additional vulnerability to physical and sexual violence, and the impacts of these strategies for the individual, family and community over the longer term, are largely unknown.

This research builds on the existing body of evidence but takes a rather different approach in two important respects. Firstly, it approaches the concept of destitution within a sustainable livelihoods framework (see 1.4, below). This enables a more systematic understanding of the different types of resources to which asylum seekers do – and do not – have access, and in turn of the strategies that they adopt in order to survive. Secondly, the evidence has been collected through an innovative methodological approach which enables the voices of those who are destitute to be heard and understood in different ways (see 1.5, below). Based on our findings, we make a number of recommendations for effective policy responses.

## **1.4 The sustainable livelihoods framework**

In recent years, understandings of poverty and of ways in which people escape from or fall into poverty have become increasingly dynamic. There have also been advances in the conceptualisation and understanding of the multiple dimensions and attributes of people's livelihoods. Linked to this is an emphasis on the importance of assets in determining people's abilities to move out of poverty, and consideration of the dynamics of chronic and transient poverty, and of the processes by which people escape from and fall into poverty (Dorward et al. 2009). This is reflected in a limited (but growing) number of in-depth studies that explore the ways in which migration controls can adversely affect the ability of both individuals and families to provide for themselves over time (see, for example, Leung and Lee 2005).

This report uses the sustainable livelihoods framework to analyse the experiences of destitute asylum seekers living in the UK. Oxfam defines a sustainable livelihood as a means of living which can maintain itself over time, and which can cope with and recover from shocks. This definition incorporates the economic (the functioning of markets, credit supply), social (networks, gender equity) and institutional (capacity building, access to services and technology, political freedom). Oxfam promotes the view that everyone has the right to a sustainable livelihood. Since the 1990s it has employed a sustainable livelihoods approach to help poor people gain better access to and more control over productive resources, strengthen their position in markets, and to ensure that these improvements are structural rather than temporary.

The sustainable livelihoods framework is a useful lens through which to explore the experiences of asylum seekers in the UK, and the ways in which they draw on a range of capabilities and assets to cope with destitution. The framework includes an explicit recognition of the dynamic aspirations of poor people; of diversity between different people adopting different strategies; and of diversification by people undertaking a variety of activities in pursuit of those strategies. It encourages a focus on the active agency of individuals: their ability to shape and influence their lives and environments and how they pursue a range of livelihood strategies to access resources, often in the face of numerous problems. This does not mean that agency can always be freely exerted or that asylum seekers have the power to exert control over their futures. A major influence on people's choice of livelihood strategies is their access to assets, and the policies, institutions and processes that affect their ability to use these assets to achieve positive livelihood outcomes. The livelihood strategies that asylum seekers pursue are bounded by structural constraints imposed on them by, amongst other things, the policy context outlined in the previous section.

In attempting to understand the ways in which asylum seekers experience and respond to destitution, this report adopts a holistic approach to the concept of sustainable livelihoods which goes beyond the economic or material aspects of life (De Haan and Zoomers 2005). This is not to suggest that material wellbeing is not an important issue: for asylum seekers facing the day-to-day concerns of securing food, shelter and other essentials, the material aspects of livelihood are crucially important. But securing a livelihood – and a life – also includes non-material aspects of wellbeing. These include the ability to access information, the management of skills and relationships, and the affirmation of personal significance and group identity. What an individual has – his or her assets – are not only necessary for survival, but also give meaning to that person's world through the opportunities that they open up for an individual to act to shape his or her future:

Assets are not simply resources that people use in building livelihoods: they are assets that give them the capability to be and to act. Assets should not only be understood as things that allow survival, adaptation and poverty alleviation: they are also the basis of agents' power to act and reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use and transformation of resources (Bebbington 1999: 2022 cited in De Haan and Zoomers 2005: 32).

This definition is particularly significant in the context of this research because it means that in order to be sustainable a livelihood must consist of more than simply the material resources for survival. Sustainable livelihoods must also include access to assets which open up opportunities and possibilities for the future. The sustainable livelihoods framework is also useful in this context because it promotes a people-centred and participatory approach (De Satge 2002). Examining livelihood strategies requires a methodology which focuses on the values and goals, choices and activities which matter to people, and the means for ensuring that their concerns are central to information-gathering and analysis (Walker et al. 2001).

## **1.5 Methodological approach**

Numerous challenges are presented when undertaking research with destitute asylum seekers. Many asylum seekers – and in particular those whose applications have been refused – are unwilling to engage with people they see as representing official bodies, including researchers from universities. In addition, coping with destitution often includes activities that the participants might be reluctant to discuss (for example coercive relationships, criminal activity, or use of drugs). Whilst previous research into destitution has been extremely effective in highlighting difficulties faced by those who are destitute, the methods used – primarily surveys – have been largely extractive. Such surveys have necessarily been structured around a number of pre-determined questions which reflect dominant understandings of destitution. In order to understand the complexity of destitution experiences and develop a dynamic picture of livelihood responses, it was important to choose research methods which could capture the specificities of the asylum process and which would be inclusive and participatory, as the sustainable livelihoods framework advocates.

### **1.5.1 The PEER method**

Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation and Research (PEER) is a qualitative research method based on the anthropological approach to studying social life, in which a relationship of trust and rapport is built up between the researcher and the researched. The PEER method is undertaken by members of the community of study, referred to as peer researchers, who interview other community members. The method is based on the principle that peer researchers have an established relationship of trust with the people they select to interview, which means that detailed data on sensitive issues can be collected within a shorter timeframe than that required by conventional anthropological approaches. By tapping into established relationships of trust between peer researchers

and their friends, PEER rapidly generates rich narrative data that provide insight into how people view their world, conceptualise their behaviour and experiences, and make decisions on key issues. Peer researchers feed back their findings to the research team in a series of debriefing interviews. The data are then analysed to generate an insider's perspective into the research subject (for further discussion of the PEER method, including its development, see Price and Hawkins 2002).

The PEER method is particularly suitable for working with groups that are difficult to reach using conventional research methods. Many of the interviewees in this study would have been unwilling to participate if the research had involved contact with an individual whom they did not know or trust. Because of their existing relationships of trust with peer researchers, they shared detailed and sensitive information. PEER therefore not only enables access to individuals and groups typically considered 'hard to reach', but also generates a deeper and more sensitive form of narrative data which reflect process and history. Moreover, unlike other research methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, PEER does not begin the research process with a set of pre-defined research questions or concepts. Because little is known about how destitute asylum seekers cope with destitution, a method that allows for unexpected findings to emerge is particularly beneficial. In addition, PEER encourages a sense of ownership of the research process among the peer researchers. Rather than extracting data from the group, the peer researchers are instrumental in designing the study, setting its scope, and shaping the findings. Particular attention is paid to gathering narrative data: stories and examples that illuminate the issues in question. This focus on narrative data encourages participants to avoid repeating normative (socially desirable) answers, which are common in many forms of social research, including focus group discussions.

### ***1.5.2 Recruitment, training and data collection***

For this study, a group of 16 refugees and asylum seekers (nine men and seven women) volunteered as peer researchers. A significant number of the peer researchers were refused asylum seekers with personal experience of destitution. They were recruited through a number of different routes: some were already in contact with researchers at Swansea University through their involvement in previous initiatives and events associated with the Centre for Migration Policy Research; others heard about the proposed research through email distribution lists and by word-of-mouth. The Swansea Bay Asylum Seekers Support Group (SBASSG) played an important role in distributing information about the project and in encouraging potential peer researchers to make contact with the research team. There was no formal selection process. The only requirement was that volunteers should be refugees or asylum seekers aged over 18 years. All of the peer researchers spoke English. However, many conducted their interviews in other languages, and many of their interviewees did not speak English. As volunteers, peer researchers were not paid for their work, but expenses associated with their participation in the project were reimbursed.

Once the group of potential peer researchers had been identified, they were invited to a three-day training workshop at Swansea University. During the workshop, the peer researchers spent time discussing their understanding of destitution and defining their own research questions based on what they considered to be the most important issues (see Box 1 for examples of conversational prompts used by peer researchers). The peer researchers also developed interviewing skills, and practised introducing the study to potential participants and asking for their informed consent to participate.

### Examples of conversational prompts used by peer researchers

Explain to your interviewee that you are interested in talking about other people who are like them or people with whom they spend time. Ask the interviewee to tell you about:

- The risks or dangers that destitute asylum seekers face.
- The people that destitute asylum seekers rely on for support.
- The fears and concerns of people who are destitute.
- The things that would improve life for destitute asylum seekers.
- The ways in which being destitute differs for men and women, young and old, and those with and without families/children.

Following the training workshop, peer researchers conducted in-depth, conversational interviews with other members of their social networks (between one and three other people per peer researcher). These interviews took place over the course of three months, whenever was convenient for peer researchers and their interviewees. Interviews typically lasted between one and two hours.

PEER interviews are conducted in the third person. Interviewees are not asked to talk about themselves but about 'other people like them' or 'other people in their social network'. This is for ethical reasons,<sup>5</sup> and to encourage frank and open discussion. During the initial stages of working with the peer researchers for this study it became clear that this particular group, and the friends they chose to interview, had a strong desire to answer some questions in the first person, and to talk about their own stories and experiences. The peer researchers thus obtained some first person narratives from their friends through open-ended interviews conducted alongside the third person PEER interviews. In addition, some of the peer researchers discussed their own life stories and experiences during the workshops and debriefing sessions. As all of these sources of data contained important insights into destitution, they have been included in the final dataset for analysis. This study therefore supplements third-person PEER data with interviewees' own first-hand accounts, and some examples of peer researchers' own stories.

No names of either the interviewees or any third persons were collected. Peer researchers asked interviewees' permission to interview them, explained the purpose of the study, and informed them that no personal identifying information would be collected about them. Country of origin, gender and the status of the asylum claim were the only data recorded from interviewees.

In total, the peer researchers interviewed 45 people (26 men and 19 women) who are – or had been – asylum seekers. Some were awaiting a decision, some have refugee status, others have been refused asylum and are considered by the Home Office as being at the end of the process. The total number of asylum seekers whose experiences are included in this study is considerably larger than the number of interview respondents because the PEER method actively encourages interviewees to discuss the experiences of others in their peer group or network (see discussion above). Informants came from a wide range of countries (15 in total). Peer researchers were free to select who they interviewed, providing that there was an existing relationship of trust between them, and that the interviewee had first-hand knowledge about coping with destitution, either through personal experience or through knowing others who had experienced destitution. Many of the peer researchers took extensive notes, although others relied on their memories of the stories and examples they had heard. The contents of these discussions, along with

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<sup>5</sup> Both to avoid identification of individuals and so that individuals do not feel they have to disclose personal or sensitive information to their friend who is the peer researcher.

the peer researchers' own interpretation of the data, were reported back to the research team during regular debriefing sessions during which detailed notes were taken. Each peer researcher was debriefed at least twice during the data collection period. These debriefing notes constitute the final dataset.

### **1.5.3 Data analysis**

Once the data collection phase had been completed, the research team and peer researchers met as a group to discuss and interpret the research findings. Preliminary findings were discussed with the group, and areas where findings were unclear or inconclusive were probed in small group discussions. Key themes such as the importance of social networks were discussed in greater depth to ensure that the research team's interpretation of the data was consistent with the peer researchers' point of view.

The final dataset was analysed thematically within the sustainable livelihoods framework, according to the types of resources used by asylum seekers facing destitution to secure livelihoods. Resources were classified as social, economic, institutional, internal (psychological resources, skills etc.) and public (such as parks and libraries). In reality, these categories oversimplify the complex experience of individuals. Categories inevitably overlap, and different combinations of resources are employed over time.

To stress the interconnectedness of resources, and to emphasise the fact that securing a livelihood is an ongoing process, case studies are presented throughout the report. These have been synthesised from the peer researchers' narrative data by the research team, and capture the dynamic processes of coping with destitution. The case studies reflect the mixture of first and third person data collected during the study. Whenever possible, peer researchers' own phrases and language are used. Their quotations should not be read as an addendum to the text, but as a central part of the analysis. Direct quotations are indented and in italics. All names are pseudonyms.

The qualitative data produced by the peer researchers and their respondents provide a vivid insight into the lived experience of refused asylum seekers coping with destitution. The data collected over the course of the study illustrate varied strategies for coping with destitution, and how these are influenced by numerous factors, including country of origin, gender, personality traits and social networks. Rather than providing a static snapshot of destitute individuals, the data show destitution as a dynamic process, in which individuals embedded within their own personal chronology (their conception of past, present and future), strategise to survive – and ideally, to develop – in the face of numerous challenges to their wellbeing and livelihoods.

## 2. Experiences of destitution

Before exploring the livelihood strategies that asylum seekers pursue in an attempt to cope with destitution, it is important to be clear about how the process of destitution occurs and its consequences for the daily lives of those affected. This context is necessary to be able to explain what is meant by destitution within a sustainable livelihoods framework.

### 2.1 How does destitution occur?

The policy context within which destitution occurs is outlined in section 1 of this report. This context is one in which the withholding of welfare support has been increasingly utilised by successive governments as a tool for controlling immigration. One of the consequences of this approach, and of the very many legislative and policy changes with which it is associated, is that the system of support for asylum seekers is extremely complex; indeed it has been described by the JCHR (2007) as a 'confusing mess'.

Research has found that destitution occurs at many points within the asylum process (Asylum Support Appeals Partnership 2008; Brown 2008; Refugee Survival Trust and British Red Cross 2009; Smart 2009). These include: at the beginning of the process before an individual can claim asylum (when he or she may have no money to travel to the nearest asylum screening unit to submit the claim); during the process (before asylum support is set up, or when an initial decision is made and there are errors in relation to entitlement); and at the end of the process (when appeal rights have been exhausted and entitlement to support ends). The Refugee Survival Trust (2005) found that administrative errors and procedural delays within the NASS support system are a major cause of destitution. In addition, refugees and others with leave to remain may find themselves destitute because of difficulties in accessing mainstream benefits. Research by the Refugee Survival Trust and British Red Cross has found that asylum seekers are most at risk of destitution when they move from one stage of the asylum process to the next. This is often caused by errors on the part of the United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA) in administering support, and a lack of understanding of the asylum process among asylum seekers. There is evidence of a great deal of confusion about entitlements and where to go for help, including among families with children (Children's Society 2008). This can mean that some asylum seekers are unable to secure access to support even where they are entitled.

Although destitution can occur at all stages of the asylum process, there is evidence that the majority of those who are destitute are asylum seekers whose applications have been refused and who, in the existing policy context, are no longer entitled to support (Smart 2009). Once an applicant's claim has been refused and there is no outstanding appeal they are told that they must not work, and that they are expected to leave the country within 21 days. Many refused asylum seekers do not leave the UK and at this point become destitute (Amnesty International 2006). There are two inter-connected reasons why this occurs.

The first relates to the issue of return. Although the government is committed to the idea of removing those whose asylum applications have been unsuccessful (including the objective of reaching a 'tipping point' where there are more removals than refused asylum seekers in each year), the reality is that in practice it is extremely difficult to forcibly remove people to countries where there are uncooperative governments, difficulties in obtaining travel documents, and/or logistical and practical difficulties associated with transporting people to countries where airports are not operational. Obtaining Emergency Travel Documents is a major challenge for the UKBA, particularly from nations that are not readily prepared to recognise their nationals (NAO 2009). Indeed the NAO has recently estimated that one-fifth of legacy cases cannot be resolved because of external factors.



Just as importantly, however, many refused asylum seekers are too fearful to return voluntarily, as they are from countries torn apart by conflict or where human rights abuses are rife. This is the case even where there are substantial financial and training packages on offer for those who decide to return to their countries of origin voluntarily.<sup>6</sup> Two out of three of those who are destitute originate from some of the most troubled countries in the world, countries characterised by conflict, political instability or widespread human rights abuses, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe (Refugee Action 2006; Smart 2009). Zimbabwe is the biggest single country of origin for refused asylum seekers in the UK (Brown 2008). While their countries remain volatile, many refused asylum seekers consider being destitute in the UK the lesser of the two evils.

A second, related, issue relates to the quality of asylum decision-making. Experts have long expressed concerns about the quality of Home Office decision-making on asylum claims and raised doubts about whether some asylum seekers receive a full and fair hearing of their claim (Chakrabati 2005; Flynn 2005; McDonald and Billings 2007). Drastic cuts to legal aid provision have made it very difficult for asylum seekers to secure access to good quality legal advice and representation. As a result, many do not feel that their claims have been looked at properly, but are unable to challenge poor decisions and are left unable to access support systems as their claims end prematurely. According to Refugee Action (2006), many respondents report that problems with their legal representation, as well as their experience of the determination process, have undermined their faith in the system and left them with a sense of injustice. This, in turn, further exacerbates their unwillingness to consider taking up a voluntary return package.

Most recently the NAO has identified problems with the decision-making process, including a failure in many cases to collect a full account of the application at the outset of the case, leading to loss of valuable information and the risk that applications are managed in the wrong way (NAO 2009). This is despite changes to the asylum process intended to improve the quality and sustainability of outcomes. Concerns about the quality of decision-making are reflected in the outcome of appeals. In 2007, 14,935 asylum appeals were determined, of which 23 per cent (i.e. one in four) were allowed and 72 per cent dismissed. Decision-making in relation to some nationalities appears to be particularly poor. For example, in 2007, 44 per cent of all cases from Eritrea were allowed on appeal, 50 per cent of cases from Somalia and 39 per cent from Sudan (Home Office 2008). This raises serious doubts about the quality of initial decision-making. For every person who successfully overturns a poor decision, many more may be falling through the net due to a lack of quality legal advice. In this context many individuals view a fresh asylum claim as the only possibility for securing a future, but are hindered by a lack of access to legal advice and representation (Children's Society 2008).

## 2.2 The experience of being destitute

It is clear from the research undertaken by a range of voluntary sector organisations, and from the evidence collected during the course of this research, that the lack of access to publicly-funded accommodation and support has a devastating impact on the physical living conditions of asylum seekers, in particular those whose cases have been refused but who fear the consequences of returning to their countries of origin. Many of these hardships are practical and relate to day-to-day difficulties associated with securing food and shelter. Because the move into destitution takes place following a period of economic marginalisation, few asylum seekers have any resources (for example, savings) to draw upon and slip into a downward spiral of increasing poverty (Refugee Survival Trust 2005). Many refused asylum seekers frequently move around or stay in severely crowded

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<sup>6</sup> The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) is open to all asylum applicants, those whose application has been refused, and those who have been given permission to stay in the United Kingdom temporarily ('limited leave to remain').

accommodation. Very often they sleep on the floors of other asylum seekers, including those who have been refused and who are being accommodated through Section 4 support (discussed in section 3 of this report). Refused asylum seekers often describe having to leave accommodation early in the morning, unable to return until late at night, to avoid being found on the premises by the accommodation provider. Experiences of sleeping rough were commonly recounted during this study, and echo the findings of previous research:

This guy's situation is very bad. He just got put out of the NASS property and he's sleeping rough. He doesn't have a place to stay; he just sleeps rough in the street. This man doesn't have friends, he is scared to tell people that he's destitute or that he's a failed asylum seeker, because he thinks people might tell other people and he's scared of being sent back home. He didn't tell me where he is staying. I really don't know how he is coping in winter, but it must be very hard sleeping outside.

My friend said, 'It is worse in winter because it is very cold. In summer sometimes it is better, you can even sleep on the pavement or on the corners, because it's warmer. It never came into my mind that one day I'd be destitute myself, especially in this country, which is ruled by civilised people. On paper they seem to be feeling sorry for people like me, but in the back of their minds I think they are happy. Living with friends is not good, but I have no choice. I am living like an animal in the bush, fearing for the lions.'

Many of those who participated in this research described how they and others suffer from ill health as a result of having no accommodation, a poor diet and lack of access to health care. Some struggled to obtain nutritious food, and relied on cheap foods (such as potatoes and oil). Others put on weight as they only ate cheap, high-calorie food but did not leave the house. Those sleeping on the street or in abandoned or poorly heated and damp houses also suffer ill health related to cold and damp:

I have a friend, for one year he'd had itching all over his body, he couldn't go and speak to the doctor because he's scared. My wife back home sent some medicine to me for him, and his skin improved but didn't get better. I know why his skin is so bad, [maybe it's] because it's so damp in his house, and he can't dry his clothes properly, so he has to put wet clothes on. He told me, 'What am I doing, I can't register somewhere, it's six months that I've been scratching my body but I can't do anything, and I'm ashamed to say it to anyone else.'

Experiences of destitution vary depending on individual circumstances, including being male or female and whether or not a person is single, in a couple, or has children. Recent research has highlighted particular concerns about the impact of destitution on families, where children are living in inappropriate accommodation (dirty, lack of heating or electricity, no privacy), or required constantly to move, disrupting any possibility of education (Children's Society 2008; Reacroft 2008). There was, however, no consensus among participants in this study that any particular set of circumstances is easier or harder to cope with: rather it was suggested that different challenges and difficulties arise. Many recognised that whilst having children opens up more possibilities for support, it also significantly increases the stresses and physical hardships associated with being destitute:

It's easier to get government support if you have children, but if you fail to get government support, it is harder to get support from your community or other people if you have children. Therefore, those who are outside of the government support system with children find life a lot harder than others in the same position without children.

If you are by yourself, a friend or a nice neighbour can accommodate you for a short period, but if you have kids it becomes very difficult because sometimes they don't have enough rooms to offer you, and you can't sleep in the living room with your kids. But by yourself you can sleep on the sofa. Besides that, the cost of living with the kids [is higher] – they eat too much compared to a single person.

Some commented that they considered women to have more capacity and skills to cope with destitution; others that women were particularly vulnerable and had more difficulties than men in finding accommodation, particularly if cultural and social norms mean that it is considered inappropriate for single women to stay with men:

Women don't feel it [destitution] as much as men, it's easier for them to live, it's easier for them to feel at home. Some of them won't even remember that they are destitute, when they are somewhere they just feel that they are part of it, unless there is a challenge from the place that they are living. They can live on a limited budget, they can prepare things so easily, most African women can prepare food out of something very quickly. Men are a bit vulnerable.

[A] man can spend all day in the library, and then go and share a house with the men. It's not very strict. You can sleep on the sofa, drink together. Women are different, they always need privacy.

Not surprisingly, destitute asylum seekers who are living in these circumstances are highly vulnerable to crime and various forms of exploitation. Research involving case studies of destitute people has found that some work for cash-in-hand and in the sex industry (Taylor 2009). Issues of vulnerability to exploitation and abuse are discussed later in this report (section 6).

Although many asylum seekers struggle to deal with the physical impacts of being destitute, destitution also has significant mental health implications due to stress and uncertainty, poor living conditions, and physical vulnerability. Even in the absence of destitution, many asylum seekers struggle to deal with the consequences of their situation, including loss and grief associated with the circumstances of their departure from their country of origin, guilt and anxiety about those left behind, and difficulties in adjusting to life in a new country. Many asylum seekers also feel deeply anxious about the outcome of their claim for asylum and what will happen if their application is unsuccessful. For those who are refused, this concern about the future becomes a reality. Refused asylum seekers express deep disappointment and dissatisfaction at the unfairness and poor quality of the asylum process and, in some cases, the legal advice and representation they received (Amnesty International 2006). Many of those who participated in this research were devastated at having their claim for asylum rejected by the authorities, particularly as they had previously regarded the UK as a proponent of human rights. The disappointment of having their hopes of protection raised by virtue of being successful in reaching the UK and making a claim for asylum, only for these hopes to be dashed, was one of the hardest things for some people to bear. The perceived unfairness of the asylum system made people feel even worse about their own position. Many had observed other asylum seekers with circumstances very similar to their own

being granted 'status' quickly while they had been denied.<sup>7</sup> Others had seen people whom they did not consider deserving of status being given leave to remain. The quality and consistency of the decision-making process was repeatedly questioned.

It is clear that the psychological and emotional repercussions of destitution are felt as keenly as economic hardships. Refused asylum seekers often face destitution while already carrying the burdens of past experiences. Many people suffered traumatic events before arriving in the UK, including torture, sexual violence, political oppression and the violent deaths or disappearances of loved ones. Combining pre-existing trauma with the stress of destitution resulted in severe psychological distress:

My friend said, 'Imagine, I came here from my country for political reasons and fearing for my life, and guess what? Here, again, I'm being tortured emotionally.'

My friend explained, 'Destitute for me is the hard life, beginning again. I already had trouble in my country with the government, and when I came here I thought I was going to make a new life, but now another difficult life has started. It makes me feel in a low mood and desperate.'

My friend told me, 'Destitution means pain and suffering. It brings back all the horrible and sorrowful memories [of what] destitute asylum seekers have been through in life.'

Many people are separated from their families and are desperately concerned about them. Some have not seen their spouse or children for years, and face the prospect of not knowing when – or indeed if – they will see them again. There are expectations from some asylum seekers' families back home that they will be able to provide support to these family members simply because they are in the UK. Asylum seekers may not feel able to tell their families that they are destitute and unable to send money back home. Several people's parents had died or become gravely ill while they were in the UK, but they were unable to return home. Many destitute asylum seekers are unable to communicate with family members living in the country of origin (or in other countries) due to the cost of long-distance telephone calls:

He was in jail for four years. After that he got out, got married, and then was going to get arrested and had to run away. His wife was pregnant and he has a lovely daughter. He has never seen her, and every morning his daughter lays a plate for him at the table, saying she wants her dad to come back.

Almost universally, refused asylum seekers said that their main fear was deportation. They were afraid that if they were returned to their country of origin they would be captured – or in many cases, recaptured – and sent to prison, killed or tortured:

He said, 'If I was sent back my life would be very short, there is no peace in my country.'

For those people with a partner or children in the UK, there are anxieties about leaving their family behind if they are removed from the UK. Linked to these fears are concerns that if they are forcibly returned, they will have no economic resources back home, and will end up homeless, starving, or sick. In comparison to these possibilities, experiences of

<sup>7</sup> The peer researchers talked about 'status' in a general way and were not necessarily referring to refugee status. In the context of this report, 'status' refers to any type of status whereby the person can remain legally in the UK, even if not permanently (for example, humanitarian protection or limited leave to remain).

being destitute in the UK – however awful – are nonetheless considered preferable because they are not life-threatening. People would rather face homelessness and hunger in the UK than risk imprisonment and death back home. As the evidence presented in this report shows, fear of deportation shapes many of the coping and livelihood strategies of destitute asylum seekers. They go to great lengths to avoid any situation where they could come into contact with people who could report them to the authorities. This deters people from working illegally, going out in public or at night, and accessing vital services. Committing a crime is seen as an extremely high risk activity in terms of being captured and removed from the UK, and the majority of respondents said that destitute people try to avoid engaging in criminal activities because of this fear.

All of these experiences of destitution – the physical hardship, mental anxiety and concerns about the future – can lead asylum seekers who are destitute, particularly those who have been refused, to feel that their lives are “forgotten and wasted” (Refugee Action 2006). Many participants in this study spoke of feelings of worthlessness, of hanging on as long as possible while realising that their health was deteriorating and their lives, aspirations and windows of opportunity were passing by. Despairing and desperate, a large number spoke of having considered taking their own lives:

My friend is very angry about his situation, just like myself, he is feeling so bad every day. Even me I sometimes want to kill myself because I'm destitute, I don't feel like I'm a human being in this country.

Destitution can lead to acute personal crisis, threatening fundamental aspects of an individual's identity, as illustrated by the case of Yenee (below).

#### **Impact on mental health: Yenee**

Yenee was the most depressed woman that her friend, one of the peer researchers, had ever seen. After losing her appeal for asylum, she lived in a large city in England where she relied on a series of boyfriends for support, although she did not want to discuss this during their interview. Yenee had started to attend a different church from usual, where the pastor promised her more help and support if she converted from her own branch of Christianity. Yenee was seriously considering this, to the shock and dismay of her friends who share her original religion. Some of her friends in South Wales demanded that she come to visit them to help her rediscover herself and her identity. She is currently staying with them. However, since she arrived, her mental state has worsened to the extent that she has required medical attention. For Yenee, her status of being 'stateless' was one of the most disturbing aspects of her situation. According to the peer researcher, 'She feels stateless – someone who is out of her country, she is nowhere. The word 'stateless' is very touching [poignant] in my language. She has no protection, she isn't in this country, and can't return to her country.'

## **2.3 Defining destitution within a sustainable livelihoods framework**

The term 'destitution' has been used so far in this report as a shorthand term for describing a situation of extreme poverty or economic marginalisation, in this case among asylum seekers for whom legitimate access to resources is prohibited through legislation and policy. This usage is consistent with dictionary definitions which define 'destitution' as being 'without the basic necessities of life' or as 'an extreme state of poverty in which a person is almost completely lacking in resources or means of support'. In many senses, however, destitution is a contested term. Before exploring

livelihood strategies for overcoming destitution, it is important to clarify exactly how the term has been understood for the purpose of this research.

In context of the asylum system, the technical definition of 'destitution' is set out in both the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. Section 19 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 states that "a person is destitute if (a) he does not have adequate accommodation or any means of obtaining it (whether or not his other essential living needs are met); or (b) he has adequate accommodation or the means of obtaining it, but cannot meet his other essential living needs". The definition provided in Section 19 of the National, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 is simpler still: "Where a person has dependants, he and his dependants are destitute for the purpose of this Part if they do not have and cannot obtain both (a) adequate accommodation, and (b) food and other essential items". According to Amnesty International (2006) this definition applies to both those who are destitute and those who are likely to become destitute within 14 days.

Many organisations working with asylum seekers have employed a version of this definition. The Children's Society (2008: 5) defines destitution as "lack of regular access to basics, like food, medicine and a place to live", a definition which takes into account that asylum seekers may be able to get sporadic, usually short term, access to resources through friends or charitable organisations. A similar, if more explicit, definition was employed for the Second Destitution Tally undertaken by the Asylum Support Partnership: an individual was defined as destitute for the purpose of the research if he or she has "currently no access to benefits, UKBA support or income, and is either homeless or staying with friends only temporarily" (Smart 2009:4).

For the purpose of this research it was considered important that asylum seekers should define what it means to be destitute. At the outset of the project, the peer researchers were asked to discuss and agree what the concept of destitution meant to them. They agreed that people who had exhausted all official means to remain in the UK and who subsequently have all state support withdrawn are highly vulnerable to destitution. There was some debate over whether other people such as those receiving forms of support (such as Section 4 support) could still be described as destitute. Most felt that destitution was characterised by a complete lack of formal support such as housing and food and that those in receipt of Section 4 support could no longer be considered destitute. Perhaps more significantly, destitution was only really considered to apply to those asylum seekers who had been refused status and who had no prospects or possibilities of support in the future. A lack of access to resources arising from errors or delays in administering support was not considered to constitute destitution.

This definition is perhaps surprising because it is narrower even than the technical definition of 'destitution'. When seen in the context of a sustainable livelihoods framework, it is clear that the peer researchers' understand destitution as encompassing more than economic or material hardship. For the peer researchers, destitution is primarily about exhausting the asylum process, and being without any legitimate status, basic rights or entitlements. They feel that an important aspect of being destitute is the fact that at this stage, people lack security and are limited in the degree to which they can plan and hope for the future:

Destitution means taking every right from somebody. Destitute asylum seekers are living ghosts. It's somebody who has no support, whether financially [or otherwise], and no place to live.

Many of those who participated in the research understood destitution as constituting not only the lack of material goods or assets, but the lack of possibilities for the future with which this lack of assets is associated. Virtually all of those who described their experiences of destitution did so in terms that reflected a lack of hope for the future and a lack of freedom to make the kinds of decisions they would like to make to improve their lives:

Living here is like being in a big golden cage for me, in a big open space, and everybody else is free, and just you are a slave. You know why? Although your last cage was smaller than this [back home], this is a golden cage. But please tell the government that a cage is a cage, whether it's golden or iron. When you put a bird in a cage, it can't go out, in contact with other birds and singing.

For some people, having no prospect of a family life – being unable to marry or bring family members into the UK – is one of the most distressing aspects of being a refused asylum seeker. One man had married in a UK mosque, but cannot make the authorities aware of his marriage because of his insecure legal situation. He is unable to live with his pregnant wife as she is living in NASS accommodation. Instead, he is living with, and relying upon, friends who live some considerable distance away. Another man described desperately wanting a wife and children – a family life – but being unable to have this life because he will not have a sexual relationship without being married, due to his religious faith. Destitute men in particular said that it can be hard to develop a relationship with a woman. They believe that women are not interested in them as they have no money or status:

My friend wants to get married, he is 38 years old, he says 'I can't stay like that, but you know, it's very hard to get a woman and nearly all my friends are married and I'm always asking them if they know any lady who wants to get married with a destitute person. And they always have the same answer, 'no, we didn't find one for you'. Generally, ladies don't accept a person without his papers.

The effects of destitution on people's sense of social status are also marked. Destitution is said to contribute to a lack of social confidence, a perception that people look down on you, and the feeling that you are 'nobody'. This is particularly the case for those who have previously experienced a high social status and those who are highly educated and technically skilled. People talked about feeling de-humanised and completely abandoned by humankind:

The meaning of destitution? He felt like he'd been abandoned by the human race. As a destitute he has no hope in life, destitution makes people feel hopeless.

Destitution is a nice way of calling us slaves, prisoners. It is the worst life. A human being should not experience this. The way they live is without any opportunity. They are just stuck in one position. They feel valueless, worthless, useless, non-resisting. Some people get depressed, suffer mental illness as a result of the experience.

He said, 'Destitution to me means no support, help, and hell. I don't feel that I'm a human being. I feel that even dogs are better than me. It really makes me feel very angry and powerless. My friend, I am really suffering, worthless, by profession I'm a teacher, but now I don't know how can I describe myself? I am valueless. I am a family man, my family is also suffering back home. I depend on my friends and on handouts. I move from one friend to another, some of my friends are complaining about me, some are gossiping and some are laughing at me. I am a laughing stock.'

Finally, in previous research, many destitute asylum seekers have described feelings of being 'in limbo' and of having a 'suspended identity'. Stewart (2005) describes the daily lives of many asylum seekers as being dominated by, and dependent upon, the immigration decision. Asylum seekers perceived they could only have a 'normal' life after receiving the Home Office decision. This suspended identity was 'in between' their former life and the 'normal' life they wished to begin in the UK. Those who participated in this research who had received a negative decision described similar feelings of suspended identity or being in limbo. These were also accompanied by feelings of frustration, disappointment and anger about not being heard or believed:

He said, '[The government] play with us. I've been here for eight years, and I've really got a problem, and they know where I am, if it's not a risk for me why didn't they send me back? But they don't allow me to [have] a life here either. I'm in between this world and the next world – in limbo – you don't know where you will end up.'

She told me, 'Because there is no hope in life, you don't know how your life is going to be, no future, no plan.'

The definition of destitution used in this report reflects the voices and experiences of those who participated in the research. For many asylum seekers, destitution is not simply a technical or legal term to describe a lack of resources: it is about the denial of any hope for the future and the possibility of rebuilding a life.



### 3. Institutional resources

This report uses a sustainable livelihoods framework as a lens through which to explore the experiences of asylum seekers in the UK, and the ways in which they draw on a range of capabilities and assets to cope with destitution. The institutional aspect of the sustainable livelihoods framework includes the institutional resources that facilitate access to resources, as well as the policies and policy processes that enable or prevent access to resources for different groups in society. It also includes the social norms, customs and behaviours – or ‘rules of the game’ – that define access to resources.

Institutional resources in this context refer to both state institutions and civil society organisations. It is important to note that for some respondents, the division between state and civil society is unclear. For example, whilst some view organisations such as the Welsh Refugee Council as independent, others believe that these organisations are representative of – or even controlled by – the government. Given the levels of fear and anxiety experienced by many refused asylum seekers, this has an impact on their willingness or otherwise to access the resources and support that these organisations offer. Refused asylum seekers have an almost universal fear of interaction with the state and its representatives, and are extremely unlikely to access state resources for fear that this may result in deportation. Other research has reported cases where people have been physically attacked and verbally abused, but their fears of detention and deportation have meant that they have not approached the police (Refugee Action 2006). There is also evidence from this research that refused asylum seekers will avoid situations where they might come into contact with the police, even if they are the victims of crime:

Destitution is someone who is living dead, a living ghost. Like my friend, she doesn't have anywhere to sleep, she doesn't have food, she doesn't have rights, even if someone abused her, she couldn't tell anyone, because if she told the police, they would take her to a detention centre.

Given these fears, it is perhaps not surprising that few refused asylum seekers consider institutional resources to be part of their strategy for survival. Indeed they may choose not to access even those limited resources (Section 4 support, health care and charitable resources) to which they are entitled.

#### 3.1 Access to state support and benefits

Although refused asylum seekers are not entitled to NASS support and accommodation, there are a number of possibilities for securing access to institutional resources. These include through so-called ‘hard case’ or Section 4 support, or by making a fresh asylum claim and therefore regaining entitlement to NASS support whilst the application is considered. For families, and those with additional physical needs, it may also be possible to secure support and accommodation through a local authority.

There is some statutory provision for those who are destitute and temporarily unable to leave the country, so-called Section 4 support. According to the Home Office (2008), under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, support is provided in the form of accommodation and vouchers to the value of £35 a week to cover the cost of food and other basic essential items. Individuals are generally eligible for Section 4 support if their asylum application has been finally determined as refused, but they are destitute and there are reasons that temporarily prevent them from leaving the UK. These might include a physical impediment to travel or some other medical reason, the lack of a viable route of return to a country of origin, or an inability to obtain appropriate travel documents.

It is important to understand that the majority of refused asylum seekers do not apply for Section 4 support (Amnesty International 2006). Some are unaware that this form of support is potentially available to them (JRCT 2007; Refugee Survival Trust and British Red Cross 2009). Others choose not to access this support because of the concerns about being removed from the UK that were discussed in the previous section of this report. One of the criteria for Section 4 support is that a destitute refused asylum seeker is taking all reasonable steps to leave the UK, or to place themselves in a position in which they are able to leave the UK. This applies even to those who cannot be returned through no fault of their own, for example, because it is unsafe or because the country of origin will not issue the necessary travel documents (Refugee Action 2006). Existing research suggests that many refused asylum seekers, including families with children, remain destitute rather than applying for Section 4 support, because one of the conditions is that the recipient must agree to return to their country of origin when it is safe or possible to do so (Amnesty International 2006; JRCT 2007). They may fear that they will be forcibly returned to their countries of origin when the government judges this to be safe:

You have to be very strong to have to sign for that [Section 4 support]. It binds you to when the government says it's safe, you have to go back. So people stay away from that. Other people get wrong information – that when you get Section 4 you will get in a waiting room just waiting to go back.

Research by Amnesty International (2006) suggests that some nationalities, for example Iraqi Kurds, refuse to apply for Section 4 support as they believe they will then be coerced into making a 'voluntary' return to Iraq.

It is also important to recognise that not all asylum seekers who apply for Section 4 support as part of their livelihood strategy are successful in securing access to this resource. Decision-making can be slow, and some of those who apply may wait for months for a decision and remain destitute in the interim (Amnesty International 2006; JRCT 2007; Refugee Survival Trust and British Red Cross 2009; Smart 2009). ASAP (2008) has found that the general quality of decision-making about whether or not to provide support to those who are destitute is poor. ASAP contends that the 'culture of disbelief' associated with the asylum determination process extends to decision-making on Section 4 support. Support is often refused because the UKBA does not believe that an individual is 'destitute', for example, because he or she is temporarily staying with friends or relatives, or receiving support from charities and voluntary sector organisations (ASAP 2008).<sup>8</sup> Some 2,000 asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers appeal to the Asylum Support Tribunal each year against a refusal or termination of asylum support by the UKBA (CAB 2009). Research has found that this group of tribunal users is notably disadvantaged because they do not have access to legal representation, which has been shown to considerably increase the chances of success.

Refused asylum seekers participating in this research have also experienced difficulties in accessing Section 4 support even where they ostensibly meet the eligibility criteria. One respondent had been waiting for eight months for a decision. Another man had two children with a local woman. However, their relationship ended, and because the children's mother had alcohol problems, the children remained living with him. However, his children were not eligible for Section 4 support, so he could not apply for Section 4 housing. Another man had a partner who was living and working legally in a

<sup>8</sup> There is evidence that UKBA consistently fails to recognise that support is provided by voluntary sector organisations and churches on an emergency basis only and is not designed, or able, to meet the person's 'essential living needs' (ASAP 2008). According to ASAP (2008), the fact that someone has managed to sustain themselves on charitable support for any period of time should never be used as justification for refusing support.

city in England, where she had been sent by an employment agency. Although he was looking after their child and was not receiving any money from the child's mother, he was not considered eligible for Section 4 support. Instead, he was living with his sister, who has status.

Anxieties about the risks of applying for Section 4 support, along with difficulties in securing access, are reflected in the fact that the number of destitute asylum seekers currently being supported under Section 4 is relatively low. As at the end of December 2007, there were just 9,140 applicants (excluding dependants) in receipt of Section 4 support (Home Office 2008). For those who are able to secure institutional resources through Section 4, this is not without its own problems and difficulties. Section 4 support is provided in the form of vouchers. There is evidence that these vouchers do not always arrive: in the first six months of 2008, the Refugee Survival Trust saw 76 cases of destitution related to the non-delivery of tokens that affected 53 adults and eight children (Refugee Survival Trust and British Red Cross 2009). When vouchers do arrive they can only be exchanged at specific outlets, and then only for food and drink. Research by the Children's Society (2008) indicates that families on Section 4 support have problems in obtaining shoes and clothing, in using coin-operated machines or telephones, in using public transport and gaining access to culturally appropriate food. Some people seek to swap their vouchers for cash in supermarket car parks or through schemes run by community groups, but they often find it difficult to find people willing to swap the vouchers, or may lose a proportion of the vouchers' value in the exchange. Comments made by participants in this research reflect these difficulties:

We get £35 Tesco vouchers each week for all personal items, including food. Even when you buy 'value' and reduced items it is too little... You need to spend money on other things, for example, bus fare. Some places will only change vouchers for people of certain nationalities, some will not refund the full value of the vouchers.

The inadequacies of Section 4 support, and the difficulties in securing access, mean that some refused asylum seekers view the possibility of making a fresh claim for asylum as the only meaningful long-term solution to their situation.<sup>9</sup> As noted earlier in this report, experts have long expressed concerns about the quality of Home Office decision-making on asylum claims and raised doubts about whether some asylum seekers receive a full and fair hearing of their claim. These concerns are shared by many refused asylum seekers who do not consider that their cases have been properly considered. Even where all the issues in the case have been properly examined, cases are often determined as falling outside the strict and narrow criteria of the 1951 Refugee Convention. The fact that many cases are successful on appeal (as many as one in two for some nationalities) reinforces the view among many refused asylum seekers that they might be allowed to remain in the UK if their case is looked at again. A fresh claim not only provides the possibility that refugee status will be granted, but also re-establishes eligibility for full NASS support whilst a decision is being made.

Although this possibility exists, making a fresh claim for asylum is not easy. To prevent multiple claims for asylum, there is a test that a fresh claim has to meet before it will be properly considered by the Home Office. This test for whether a claim is fresh is set out in Immigration Rule 353 and is essentially based on whether there is any new information, that is, information which no decision-maker (whether the Home Office or an immigration judge) has yet considered. This new information must mean that there is a

<sup>9</sup> A fresh claim is where someone who has previously made an asylum claim, which has been finally refused, makes a new claim that they should be granted asylum. For more information see ILPA (2007).

real chance the claim will be successful.<sup>10</sup> The main types of fresh claims are: where there is a change of country conditions, which means that those who were previously refused asylum because their country was relatively safe are now potentially in danger; where there is a change in a person's personal circumstances; or where evidence comes to light. The procedure is that the asylum seeker assembles all relevant new information and submits it to the Home Office. The Home Office then decides (a) whether the test for a fresh claim is met and, if so, (b) whether to grant asylum. If the Home Office will not even accept that the fresh claim test is met, the only way the decision can be challenged is by a process called judicial review. Making a fresh claim for asylum is therefore not a straightforward process. One of the biggest difficulties for most refused asylum seekers in submitting a fresh claim is a lack of access to the legal advice representation that is necessary to be able to present the evidence in a way that meets the Home Office's criteria. Nonetheless, there were examples in this research of individuals who had been able to submit a fresh claim for asylum and who had therefore been able to gain access to institutional resources (i.e. full NASS support) as a result. Most importantly, some of these refused and once-destitute asylum seekers were granted refugee status and leave to remain in the UK:

My friend lost his mum from cancer while he was here as a destitute, but there's no way that he could go back because it's not safe. He made a fresh claim and got his papers last year. He volunteers now for local organisations, and is a refugee, and gets all benefits etc.

Finally, there is some evidence that access to institutional resources is better for those refused asylum seekers who have children. Although the Home Office has made efforts to remove support from families at the end of the asylum process – including through the introduction of Section 9 – families who are refused asylum usually continue to get asylum support under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This means they get the same kind of support as families who are seeking asylum until they are removed from the UK, in recognition of the fact that they have children who need to be supported. Families can sometimes get extra help from local authorities' children's services departments, but this depends on their immigration status and on the local authority's own criteria for asylum (Children's Society 2008). This is not to suggest that refused asylum seekers with children do not become destitute, but that there are additional possibilities available to them in terms of access to institutional resources, particularly housing. This is reflected in the fact that most of the research participants knew of destitute families who were receiving support from their local authority. They recognise, however, the difficulties associated with raising children in these circumstances, and the additional risks of deportation that these families face because the authorities know where they live. Reflecting this, one participant in the study lives alone with his child without the support of social services. He chooses to work illegally as part of his livelihood strategy, rather than risk the possibility of deportation.

### 3.2 Access to health care

All asylum seekers are entitled to free primary and secondary health care. Once their appeal rights have been exhausted, refused asylum seekers are entitled to NHS primary health care, but since April 2004 they have been denied free health care at NHS hospitals unless it

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<sup>10</sup> Paragraph 353 of the Immigration Rules states: "...submissions will amount to a fresh claim if they are significantly different from the material that has previously been considered. The submissions will only be significantly different if the content: (i) had not already been considered; and (ii) taken together with the previously considered material, created a realistic prospect of success..."

is for emergency treatment or to continue with treatment they were already receiving.<sup>11</sup> All other secondary care treatment is chargeable. This applies to all refused applicants, including children, pregnant women, cancer patients, and diabetics, regardless of whether someone is receiving Section 4 support (Amnesty International 2006).

There is evidence that some refused asylum seekers are indeed denied treatment or presented with a bill for their health care. Reacroft (2008), for example, reports the situation of a pregnant woman who was charged £3,000 for maternity services received during the birth of her child. The situation in Wales is slightly different. Although immigration issues are not devolved to the Welsh Assembly Government, public services such as education, housing and health are the responsibility of the Welsh Assembly Government, which takes a rather different approach. A recent change to policy means that if an asylum seekers' claim for asylum has been refused, he or she will not be charged for treatment but will be entitled to receive free NHS treatment until the point of their departure to their country of origin (Cohen 2009). Although this policy change was known at the time of the research, it did not come into effect until July 2009.

Although refused asylum seekers are entitled to access primary health care, it is clear that many were either unaware of this right or are so anxious about contact with the authorities that they decide not to do so. Instead, if they were ill, they self-medicated or asked friends to buy over-the-counter medicine for them. Several people received medicines or medical advice from 'back home' (i.e. from their country of origin). Of those who had been ill, one described the period of illness as 'the worst four days I have had in the UK', but she remained at home being cared for by friends rather than visiting a doctor. The lack of an address, not having the appropriate HC2 form,<sup>12</sup> and being unable to speak English are all barriers to accessing health services. People are also anxious about receiving unaffordable medical bills:

I don't have fixed address – how can I get the right to a GP or health care? One time I went to see a GP for registering and was given a form to fill out. Because I couldn't write English, I took the form home. My friends told me not to bother as I didn't have an address, so I never went back.

Above all, however, refused asylum seekers are afraid of being questioned about their address and immigration status, and being reported to the Home Office, with the accompanying risk of deportation. Many people believe that all state bodies share information with each other, such that accessing any one service will result in the Home Office being informed:

He's scared of registering with a GP as you have to give your address, and then your address is on the prescription, then they call out your address at the pharmacy.

When you go to a GP they ask a lot of questions about where you live. When you say you are homeless they phone the Home Office – they tell the GP you are not allowed to stay here. The GP said 'you have to leave the country'.

Once you are ill, some people are scared to go to the hospital. The Home Office are always looking for you, so if you go to the hospital they might ring the Home Office. When you are a failed asylum seeker people have that mentality. They think that if they go to hospital they will be deported.

<sup>11</sup> GP practices retain the discretion to register failed asylum seekers, to the same extent that they have this discretion in relation to registering any patient, regardless of immigration or residency status.

<sup>12</sup> Asylum Seekers who are supported by the UKBA are eligible for exemption from prescription charges, and should be automatically issued a HC2 full exemption certificate by the UKBA, on behalf of the Department of Health.

There were very few examples from the research of instances of refused asylum seekers successfully accessing primary health care resources. The case of one man stands out as an exception. As a result of chronic health problems, he had been provided with a social worker, a support worker, and other services such as respite care, through initial contact with the NHS. He stays on a semi-permanent basis with friends from church.

Most respondents had not experienced serious illness requiring secondary health care, and said that they had no idea what they would do if this situation arose. The case of Abeda, below, shows the extent to which some people are unwilling to contact health services. In this case, the woman's baby was delivered at home without any attendance by health care professionals. There are clear implications for the health and wellbeing of refused asylum seekers, their children, and indeed the wider population if health services are – or are perceived to be – inaccessible.

#### **Access to secondary health care: Abeda**

Abeda is a young woman whose claim for refugee status was refused while she was pregnant. Her partner's claim has also been refused. NASS had agreed to continue housing her because she was pregnant, but her partner was afraid that she could be removed at any time, so he moved her into his sister's house. His sister has refugee status, and lives with her own children and several other people. Abeda slept on the sofa, helped with the housework, and had a good relationship with her host, although the house was crowded. When the time came to deliver the baby she was too afraid to go to hospital, and thought she could not register with a GP, so she stayed at home. An older woman (not a health professional) who lived nearby attended the birth. After the baby was born, things became much worse. Abeda had no money to buy clothes for the baby, and relied on other people's second-hand offerings. If her boyfriend's sister wanted to sit up late watching the TV, Abeda had to wait up too, as she slept in the living room. She found it difficult to look after the house and the other woman's children in addition to her own baby. She was encouraged by a friend with whom she used to share a NASS house to make a fresh claim, saying that she could not hide away forever. Abeda has now made a fresh claim and is being provided with accommodation by NASS.

### **3.3 Civil society and voluntary sector organisations**

UK policy shifts in relation to asylum have had significant implications for refugee community-based organisations (RCOs) and other organisations working to support refugees and asylum seekers (Zetter and Pearl 2000; Zetter et al. 2005). These organisations have articulated the needs of, and expanded their activities for, their client groups in an increasingly constrained policy arena. Dealing with the consequences of destitution is an important part of the work undertaken by voluntary sector organisations, and the growing reliance of refused asylum seekers on the resources and support provided by civil society and voluntary sector organisations is well documented. Those who are destitute account for 40-50 per cent of all the clients who are seen by these agencies (Refugee Action 2006; Smart 2009). There is evidence that, in many cities, local agencies and refugee community groups provide a range of support including emergency cash and vouchers, money for travel, legal advice and food. They also help families to apply for Section 4 support, lend moral support, and provide contact with other new arrivals as well as places to stay (Leicester Refugee and Asylum Seekers' Voluntary Sector Forum 2005; Refugee Action 2006; ASAP 2008; Children's Society 2008).

The evidence from this research indicates that whilst voluntary sector organisations play an important role in supporting asylum seekers, many of those who are destitute are unable to access the institutional resources potentially available through this route, or alternatively, choose not to do so. There are a number of reasons for this finding.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that much of what is currently known about destitution and its impacts is as a result of research undertaken directly by, or with the close support of, the major refugee charities, particularly the Refugee Councils and Refugee Action. By definition, many of those who participate in the research will be destitute asylum seekers who are being provided with support and resources by those organisations. This, in turn, produces a skewed picture about the extent to which destitute asylum seekers as a group are able to access the resources available through this route. In contrast, this research has used an innovative methodology (described in detail in section 1 of the report) which enables greater access to those not currently in contact with any organisations or institutional structures. This provides a truer picture of the extent of 'hidden' destitution and the limited extent of the institutional resources available.

Secondly, there is evidence that even where destitute asylum seekers approach voluntary sector organisations for support, they do not always receive it. Again, this evidence is not necessarily captured in existing research, much of which has been undertaken by organisations providing support to those who are destitute:

Most rely on friends and family as well as fellow asylum seekers who are still under NASS support. Mostly they go to churches, mosques, Refugee Council, the Red Cross, and Asylum Justice. I went to the Refugee Council twice, and the third time I went there, they said there are no vouchers, so I stopped going.

I haven't been to the Refugee Council for two to three years as there are so many people there they can't answer all of them. For a short time they helped me with food, but after that they cut it.

Some of those who have attempted to access resources available through voluntary sector and refugee organisations do not consider that access is provided on an equal basis for everyone. There is a perception that ethnic or national background determines the extent to which resources are available to those who are destitute. In addition, some of those who participated in the research said that they did not like the way they were made to feel by some of the voluntary sector organisations to whom they went for support:

They aren't happy with the Refugee Council – he felt it's their responsibility to protect them, but when he went there he felt discriminated against, as though he's a beggar or something. A lot of destitute people have complained about the attitude of the staff there.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is evidence that many refused asylum seekers perceive voluntary sector organisations – in particular the larger ones – to be state institutions with connections to the Home Office. As a result of their anxieties about their status, and concerns about being returned to their country of origin, they do not try to access the resources potentially available to them through this route.

Most of them don't go to find advice because they're scared, there is no trust. They don't go to Refugee Action or Citizens Advice. But, if they do go for advice, they go to church, because they trust church more than they trust offices... I went once, to Refugee Action to get help, but when they asked me about my address, I was scared, and gave them the wrong address, and after that I didn't go back to them.

### 3.4 Support provided by churches, mosques and faith-based organisations

Of all institutions mentioned by respondents, churches appear to have done most to respond to the needs of refused asylum seekers. This reflects the wider programme of activities and advocacy work to support destitute asylum seekers undertaken by various churches in the UK over recent years.<sup>13</sup> The support provided by churches includes cash and food, but also English language classes, clothes and social events. In many cases, the support provided by the church may be the only type of institutional support to which a refused asylum seeker has access:

Before, I used to go to the church and get £5 for me and £5 for my wife every week.

I lived with my children in [city]. At first the council was looking after the whole family although I had failed in my claim. This was due to the Children's Act – cash every week, housing. We had to pay for utilities. Suddenly they said they couldn't give us money, only housing. It's only because I was going to this church [that we managed to cope]. We were the only asylum seekers there. They helped to look after the family. If we hadn't gone to that church, we would have been very, very destitute.

Although many refused asylum seekers spoke very positively about the support they had received from churches, some were more critical. Some of these comments suggest that churches can sometimes be reluctant to provide support because they feel that they might be breaking the law. In these cases, asylum seekers can feel as if they have been completely abandoned:

When I was destitute, I went to church with my documents, because I had no choice, there were not a lot of people from my country around at that time. The priest read what the Home Office had written, and told me, 'I am so sorry, you must go to your country. We cannot break the rules.' People don't know how to help you. Even the priest, he didn't know anything. I said, 'Honestly, I don't have anything to eat today.' From his pocket he gave me £5 because my money had already stopped. This is a very rich church. He asked me for my address, and told me that people from the church will come with food, and then I waited one, two, then three weeks. I didn't have any money. I walked to the church even though it was far away. He said, 'Oh no! I had forgotten', and said that it [the food] would come soon, but nobody helped me, nothing came.

In addition, there were some reports that churches have, on occasion, taken advantage of the vulnerability of refused asylum seekers. Most churches that offer support are said to do so without conditions, regardless of the person's faith (although a prayer meeting may be held before support sessions). There were a small number of reports of churches behaving less responsibly: in one instance, a church had allegedly encouraged a vulnerable and mentally unstable woman to change her religion in order to access more resources (see case study of Yenee earlier in this report).

<sup>13</sup> For example, Church Action on Poverty, a national ecumenical Christian social justice charity, has been campaigning for a number of years to change the policies that lead to destitution among refused asylum seekers (see [www.church-poverty.org.uk/campaigns/livingghosts](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/campaigns/livingghosts))



Mosques were not mentioned as frequently as churches as a resource. The resources that mosques offer appear to be mainly spiritual and social: they do not appear to routinely offer the material support that many churches organise, although worshippers are said to sometimes organise a cash collection for people in need. Perhaps one of the most important resources provided by churches, mosques and faith-based organisations are the social events and networking opportunities that they provide. These can be critical in securing access to social resources, the importance of which is discussed in the following section.

## 4. Social relationships and networks

The previous section of this report explored the ability of refused asylum seekers to access institutional resources to maintain a sustainable livelihood. In the current policy context it is clear that refused asylum seekers have limited access to institutional resources (Section 4 support, primary health care, support provided by voluntary sector organisations). Moreover, concerns about the consequences of accessing these limited resources mean that the risks may be perceived as outweighing the benefits. In this context, social resources are absolutely central in providing asylum seekers with the resources for physical existence, and equally importantly, with psychosocial resources such as support and empathy. Some of these relationships are based on love, trust and loyalty. Others suggest dependency, or even exploitation.

### 4.1 The importance of social resources

Social resources refer to relationships of trust, and exchanges that can provide informal safety nets. Social resources include individual personal relationships, formalised communal interest groupings, and other formal and informal networks (Bull et al. 2008). In other words, social resources are other people. Existing research on destitution has highlighted the importance of social resources in the livelihood strategies of destitute asylum seekers. Many people are highly dependent on friends from their own communities, including other asylum seekers and refugees, for providing a floor, sofa or mattress to sleep on (Amnesty International 2006; Refugee Action 2006; Doyle 2009).

For most individuals in any given society, family is the most important social resource. Many asylum seekers do not have family members in the UK who are able to support them. In two cases, men were sent money from their families overseas: one from his relatively wealthy family who had remained at home, and in the other case from relatives living in other developed countries. In both cases, the money was insufficient to support them completely, but helped them buy basic necessities. Even where family members are living in the UK, support is not always offered nor is it not always straightforward. For example, Tahiya (see case study in section 4.5) lives in a dependent and servile relationship with her sister. For an older sister to host a younger, unmarried sister, who is then responsible for domestic chores, is not uncommon in her country of origin. What is different is that Tahiya is completely isolated from other social support or options in life. It is this – rather than the domestic chores – which is so difficult for her to accept. In another case, a man who became destitute sent his wife to stay with her brother in another British city. However, he was unable to stay with this man himself, as this was seen as inappropriate in their culture. Instead, he slept on the streets for several nights before finding shelter through people he met at a mosque. Cultural norms around family members and expectations about roles in families thus shape people's experience when they do have family members around.

The importance of social resources becomes apparent when considering the experiences of those without such resources. The situation of these people was widely considered to be worst of all. Many of those with no-one to turn to are asylum seekers who have arrived in the UK relatively recently, and have not had the opportunity to build social relationships with others by the time their claim is refused. Others have been fast-tracked and find themselves destitute after a period of being in detention:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The detained fast track is a process in which asylum seekers are held in detention while their asylum claims are decided within an accelerated legal schedule.

He was caught at the airport when he arrived in the country and taken straight to a detention camp, where he did his interview. He was then housed by NASS. There is no way that he can go back [to his country of origin]. He applied for Section 4 support eight months back, but he hasn't got anything yet. To him, sleeping rough was one of the worst experiences of his life, it was even worse than what he'd been through back home in his country. It's very difficult because of the cold. He only slept out for about two weeks before finding a friend from home, in South Wales. Immediately he came in, his case was rejected, in a country where he knows no-one, no family, no friends.

Even for those who have been in the UK for some time before being made destitute, it can be hard to build up social resources that can be accessed in times of crisis. For some of the respondents, building up relationships with local people and 'integrating' into local social life is seen as difficult. Reasons for this included wanting to avoid social spaces, such as pubs and clubs, for fear of trouble breaking out and the police arriving (and the subsequent risk of being questioned). Other people expressed the view that local people look down on them, or feel there is no potential in developing friendships or relationships with them as they have no security or future. Others simply cannot bear the questions that they will be asked if they make friends with people from somewhere other than their own country. Having a social life is almost universally considered to be difficult in the absence of economic resources. One said that, *'It's shameful to always ask a friend to pay for you when you go out with friends.'* Another asked, *'How can you have a social life when you don't have a source of livelihood?'*

In addition, it is important to recognise that, for some, accessing social resources comes at a cost. Destitution places a strain on relationships, and relationships may change over time. People who offer support may do so only under certain conditions (e.g. in exchange for something else), and may not have the best interests of the refused asylum seekers at heart. The vulnerable position of refused asylum seekers in society means that they are at risk of manipulation and exploitation from many different parties as they seek access to social resources. Manipulation and exploitation may come from family members and 'friends', as well as unscrupulous employers and strangers. This is discussed further in section 6 of the report.

## 4.2 Mobilising social resources

[Finding somewhere to stay] depends on your networks. If you don't go out or have access to the net or a phone, then there is no network.

Social relationships can be between individuals, or between individuals and a wider network of other people. Many study participants stressed that 'contacts are everything' and that in order to meet the basic requirements of survival, to access social support, and even to find work, it is essential to have a portfolio of social contacts. These can be friends, fellow countrymen and women, extended family members, passing acquaintances, fellow worshippers at church, people with whom accommodation was previously shared, or contacts made during chance encounters, for example at the pub or on a bus. Most people said that they would turn to people from their own countries of origin in the first instance, often due to issues of language (see case study of Marjani below). However, there are also many examples of people of different nationalities and from different continents assisting one another.

Some people have what can be described as medium-term accommodation arrangements – places where they can stay for the foreseeable future. These tend to be close friends, romantic partners, relatives or people who rent their own accommodation. Those without such an arrangement had different approaches to finding short-term shelter. They might ring everyone whose phone number they have stored in their phone, even if it is someone they only met briefly. They might ask friends to refer them to other people in their social network who they think might help them. People have to be persistent and often have to overcome their own feelings of shame about asking for help. Many participants talked about visiting friends in cycles of days or weeks, so that there was less chance of their friends tiring of them.

### **Support from fellow countrymen and women: Marjani**

When Marjani arrived in the UK and claimed asylum she knew no-one and did not speak any English. Her case was processed and refused within three months. Because of the quick decision, she had no chance to learn any English or get to know people. However, for the last 18 months, Marjani has had all her basic needs met by a network of people from her country of origin (and people from other countries in that region). She met a few members of this community in church, and since then has been supported by dozens of different people, moving between houses after a few days or weeks. Some of these supporters are still asylum seekers living in NASS accommodation, and therefore do not want to risk having her to stay. Nevertheless they invite Marjani over for a traditional meal, and to talk about common interests. There is no question among the social network that they should continue to support her. They even club together to donate money to her from time to time. As one of her friends said, 'There are lots of positive people here, we are really covering each other.' However, Marjani feels ashamed about her reliance on other people. She always offers to clean and run errands for her hosts.

Some respondents commented that particular institutions and organisations had enabled them to build up social resources which could be mobilised at a later date. It was reported that the Refugee Council in Swansea plays an important role in putting new asylum seekers in touch with other people from their area or who can speak their language. Another example of a social network offering support was a large and well-organised African community based in Cardiff. For many, the church was the most important place to meet other people:

I learnt from my father, who had moved to a different country when he was young, and told me that when you go to a foreign country, the first thing you should do is look for a church – so I have always done that, and since I arrived I have been okay.

The ability to build and maintain a social network is a complex social skill at which some people are more competent and successful than others. The peer researchers considered that refused asylum seekers had to be positive and proactive with social contacts in order to access maximum support. Making friends and getting out and about were considered the best ways of meeting people who may be able to provide support although it was acknowledged that this could be very difficult if people were 'closed': either too traumatised by past events, or anxious about going outside:

If you are in a position of having good friends, then it's easier if you're destitute, you have lots of people who can help you. But if you are very quiet and don't get involved, then it is more difficult for you to find places to stay.

The ability to build a social network also relies upon having a method of communication, most importantly a mobile phone. As one previously destitute man said, 'My mobile phone is the only permanent address I have. It's the first thing people get when they arrive in the UK.' Another had ended up sleeping in the streets in London, with no money and no other resources, and it was only through receiving a phone call with the offer of a job from an old contact that he was able to escape from this situation.

### **The importance of social networking: Patrick**

Since becoming destitute several years ago, Patrick has relied on friends and food parcels from local churches to survive. He has built up a network of friends who support him when he needs somewhere to stay. Patrick already has a degree, and wants to continue his education, and has found places on various courses run by charities. Part of the reason that he goes on these courses is that, 'I want my history to be known, and I want my identity not to be lost.' Workshops also provide Patrick with the opportunity to extend his social networks. He is described as having an outgoing and confident personality, and when he goes on courses, he shares his contact details with other participants, and subsequently keeps in touch. This means he can move from one friend to another to find accommodation, as the types of people he meets in such contexts tend to be sympathetic towards his situation. However even Patrick finds it difficult in winter, when the shorter days mean he is unable to move around outside as much, and he is unable to stay at his friends' houses all day, as most of his friends are fellow asylum seekers who are not allowed to have visitors. Patrick nonetheless feels that these are the only people who really understand his situation, saying, 'It is only the wearer who knows where the shoes pinch.' In spite of their relative poverty, his friends share what little money they have with him. Although Patrick has been relatively successful in securing accommodation, he struggles with the lack of independence and privacy, saying, 'I am eager to open my own room and sleep on whatever is available, where no-one would see where I have slept in my own room except the Lord.' He remembers how, one night, the friends he had been staying with were cautioned for having illicit visitors in NASS accommodation. He was desperate for a place to sleep, so he visited other friends and pretended to fall asleep on the sofa in order to stay the night. Patrick has recently fathered a child. His partner – the child's mother – comes from the same country as him, but has leave to remain. He hopes to submit a fresh claim on the basis of his right to a family life. However, he is currently unable to find a solicitor willing to represent him.

Although many of the networks described by research participants are local to South Wales, it is clear that social networks are often widely distributed across the UK, particularly between those from the same country of origin and people who have previously shared accommodation. Even refused asylum seekers appear to be fairly mobile, often visiting friends and contacts in other parts of the country. They typically ring ahead and arrange for the friend they are visiting to buy a coach or train ticket for them in advance, as they are unlikely to have the cash themselves. Given that South Wales does not have large ethnic minority networks compared with other areas of the UK, it seems likely that refused asylum seekers move to other areas where they are better connected and therefore more able to mobilise social resources.

## **4.3 Relationships with other asylum seekers and refugees**

Asylum seekers, others who have been refused status and refugees with leave to remain are reported to go to great lengths to help out their friends. In the first stages of facing destitution, most people rely entirely on their contacts in the refugee and asylum-seeker community for shelter, accommodation, money and other support. These relationships can be extremely altruistic, reflecting empathy and common understanding of the experiences of asylum seekers and the situation they face in the UK.

Asylum seekers get to know each other while sharing NASS accommodation, and housemates often continue to help one another after support has been withdrawn, by offering a floor or sofa to sleep on. This places them at risk: if the accommodation manager were to discover that they were hosting destitute asylum seekers they could lose their accommodation. Many of those who participated in the research commented that they considered it to be a moral imperative for asylum seekers to care for people less fortunate than themselves, whenever possible. Leaving a former housemate or even acquaintance to sleep on the street is simply not an option for most people:

There is one man I know who is a failed asylum seeker and destitute, and is living with his friends who are living under NASS accommodation. They cannot keep him there but they have no choice, they cannot leave him wandering on the street.

The following quotation is from an African asylum seeker, but also reflects other asylum seekers' responses to destitute people:

I think it has to do with being Africans. We tend to feel sorry for the other fellow, even if ourselves we don't have much. If you go to Africa, even to the poorest family in a village, they would look for something, even if it's the last meal, to give you something.

Although some people have friends who host them over relatively long periods, most people who do not have their own accommodation move between friends every few days or weeks. However, all people staying with friends were concerned that this was not a sustainable solution. Simply having somewhere to stay did little to assuage the huge anxieties and worries they had about their future, as illustrated by the case of Karima, below.

#### **Anxieties about the future: Karima**

Karima managed to delay eviction from her NASS accommodation for about six months after her claim was refused, by pleading and crying with the accommodation provider. She now lives with her friends but constantly feels 'totally unsure' about her life. She sleeps on the floor and gets some basic food and toiletries from a local church. She is looking for a 'good man' to have a baby with, as a way to escape her current situation. She would rather work, as she wants to contribute to the households who look after her, but she is too afraid to even try to work illegally: 'I sometimes want to work underground, but I am afraid not to be caught. If I am caught, they will throw me into jail. If I don't get some sort of money, I can't help my friend, and how long will I live on others?'

As well as accommodation, other refugees and asylum seekers offer destitute asylum seekers a range of support such as washing their clothes and sharing meals, especially if they are unable to offer a place to stay because it is considered too risky (for example, if it is likely that their house will be inspected by the accommodation provider). Most refused asylum seekers who are not working also rely on fellow asylum seekers for small amounts of cash for daily necessities, in spite of their incomes being very low.

The social resources that these friends offer each other extend beyond material support. One man who was still awaiting a decision on his case had a childhood friend who also lived in the UK, whose application for asylum had been refused. He spent hours on the telephone to his friend's wife, who was still in the country of origin, trying to persuade her not to leave her husband for another man (she had not seen him for a number of years and was losing hope that he would ever come home, or that she would ever be able to

join him). Another man, lonely and traumatised, was longing for a wife as a companion and comfort, and his network of contacts from his country of origin and extended family members were able to put him in touch with a woman whom he eventually married. A woman spent hours and considerable resources on the telephone and writing letters home to try to uncover fresh evidence to support her destitute friend's fresh claim. This involved tracking down lost relatives, and sending messengers out across the country, in order to get a letter from her family describing what had happened to force her to flee the country. Several other refugee friends petitioned the Home Office on behalf of destitute friends, even offering to support them fully if they were given leave to remain.

#### 4.4 Relationships with local people

Although existing research has noted that refused asylum seekers are often supported by other refugees and asylum seekers, particularly those from their own country of origin, very little has been said about social relationships between asylum seekers and local people living in the wider community. The term 'local people' is used here to describe either Britons or longer-established immigrants who have regularised status (for example, a work permit, refugee status or student visa). The evidence collected during the course of this research suggests that these relationships – which range from long-term 'romantic' relationships, to short-term transactional relationships, to friendships with fellow church-goers, or people simply concerned about their situation – are one of the most important social resources available to those who are destitute.

There is clear evidence from this research that having a long-term relationship with a local girlfriend is a common way for men to reach a position where their livelihood is sustainable, at least for the short term. However, there remains, in many cases, an ongoing risk of deportation which results in an inability to plan for the future. Several men had girlfriends who supported them, often providing accommodation, transport, and/or cash. Some of these relationships were with British women; others were with women from other countries who were legally resident in the UK with work or student visas, or refugee status. Some men had children with their local girlfriend, or were acting as stepfather to their partner's children (see case studies of Senay and Dabir below). While these relationships may begin at least partly through a desire to establish a sustainable livelihood, over time they often develop into more meaningful and mutually affectionate relationships.

##### Men supported by girlfriends: Senay and Dabir

Senay had a child with his Welsh girlfriend, but is not able to marry her due to his status as a refused asylum seeker. She is several years older than him, and this caused him some concern at first, as in his community it is unusual for men to marry outside their tribe, let alone marry an older, foreign woman. He admits that his initial interest in the relationship was security but over time they have become close, and he does not want their family to break up. His social life revolves around her and her family; he does not have other friends. Her family know and like him, and she is helping him find a solicitor and apply for a fresh claim. He finds it very hard 'living at the mercy of others', and feels depressed when he sees his girlfriend supporting the family while he is unable to go out to work.

Dabir lives with his girlfriend, who has refugee status and who works. He doesn't work but he helps her with her two children from a previous relationship. As he says, 'I am learning to be a dad, even though I don't have my own kids.' This is a tough role for Dabir, but the hardest aspect of his life is fear for the future: 'Since I've been living with my girlfriend, life is better, but I still fear that one day I'll be picked up and deported... going back where I was, I don't want to think about it... I still live in fear.'

For some men, establishing a relationship with a woman can prove to be a relatively risk-free and reliable strategy compared to other livelihood strategies (such as working illegally). For others, the strategy can go badly wrong, particularly when it is not clear to all of those involved in the relationship what the potential risks are. As Stewart (2005) notes, many asylum seekers feel ashamed of their status in the UK and the stigma with which this is associated. As a result, an asylum seeker may either actively try to hide their asylum identity or construct an alternative identity. Where this identity is hidden from a partner in the context of a relationship it can have devastating consequences, as illustrated by the experiences of Peter (case study below).

### **Establishing families with local people: Peter**

Peter began working illegally after his case was refused. Even his girlfriend did not know that he was a refused asylum seeker – he told her that he had a student visa. They eventually had a child together, and Peter was able to rent a good house for them and buy them everything they needed. Unfortunately the couple fell out with each other, and during an argument Peter threatened that he would leave his partner and take their child back to his country with him. Peter's girlfriend was frightened by this threat, and admitted her concerns to her health visitor, who informed the police. When the police came to the house, they discovered that he was a refused asylum seeker and he was detained. At the time of the research he was awaiting trial for working illegally and faces possible deportation. His former girlfriend is distraught that her actions have resulted in this outcome, as she had no idea that he was a refused asylum seeker.

Other men who are involved in relationships with local women did not consider this to be a sustainable livelihood strategy. Many of the men who participated in this research described feeling emasculated by the relationships which they had formed in order to survive. They were not necessarily attracted to their partner, and often became involved with women who they would not otherwise wish to have a relationship with, were it not for their economic needs (see Hakim's case study, below). As one respondent put it, 'There is no love here – just common interest makes people live together.' Another man put it rather more bluntly: 'You need to have guts in those times.' In some relationships, there is not even the pretence of a romantic attachment. One man living with a woman who has refugee status said, 'We speak very honestly that we don't like each other, but I need a place for eating, rest, and sex, and she needs help with the bills. We have said to each other that the first time we find anybody else better than each other we will leave each other.'

### **The impact of being dependent on others: Hakim**

Hakim lives with and is supported by his girlfriend, an established migrant (it is thought she has a work visa) who comes from a country near his country of origin. His girlfriend is married to another man, who remained at home when she moved to the UK. In spite of having a relatively secure domestic situation, Hakim is distraught about the position he is in. He is afraid that his wife back home will similarly be having other relationships. He feels as though he is not a man as he is relying on a woman to support him – particularly as he had a 'top job' back home. He admits that he is only in the relationship because he needs the accommodation and other support. He told the peer researcher that he feels 'worthless and lower than a cockroach'. He receives £10 a week from his girlfriend and has no money to socialise, buy clothes, or use public transport. He concluded that if he were able to return home he 'would never come back here, never, and no-one from my family will ever set foot here. I will make sure of that. This country has a nasty habit of reducing people's worthiness, making them destitute'.



Several men described having relationships with much older women who they found physically unattractive, who had alcohol or drug-related problems, or other mental health or social problems. Both Berhani and Farai are young men who are in relationships with local Welsh women at least 15 years older than themselves. Neither man considers the woman that he is with to be an ideal choice of partner, given his own social norms and preferences. In addition, both women use drugs, and Berhani and Farai have ended up using drugs and alcohol within their new social circles, despite having never used substances before. Although Farai has a relatively secure place to stay, and all his basic needs are met, he is desperately unhappy and says that his pride is broken. Berhani expresses his desperation even more strongly: 'I used to be like a river, but they stopped me here, and now I am like a swamp, I am putrefied. We finished university and came here with potential. We were ready for a struggle, for life, but now I am disappointed and tired and alone.' Berhani even considers committing suicide rather than what he sees as the alternative, of 'dying, slowly, ill, over five years'.

Women also engage in relationships with local men. These relationships are often more overtly transactional and involve exchanges of money or other resources for sex (see section 5). It is difficult to draw a clear distinction between these explicitly transactional relationships and longer-term, ongoing relationships which nevertheless involve some form of exchange. Some women, such as Magda (see case study, below) are pragmatic and strategic about using their sexuality to secure resources, and do not necessarily feel manipulated by the men concerned.

### **Exploiting sexual resources: Magda and Djany**

Magda lives in NASS accommodation without paying rent, despite her asylum claim being refused, since developing a sexual relationship with the property's owner. He is an old man, by whom she feels neither threatened nor coerced. She has two other boyfriends, both local residents though not originally from the UK, who provide Magda with her other needs, such as clothing and money. Her main concern is making sure that the old man does not find out about these other boyfriends. Because of these relationships, she does not need to work or rely on anybody else. Despite having found a way to survive and keep a roof over her head, Magda is frustrated and angry with her situation, saying, 'Destitution means being half dead or half alive, take your pick.' She feels like an observer of life, watching everyone else getting on with life, 'never having a plan for the next hour, never mind the next day or week'. When asked whether she was concerned about sexual health in the context of her multiple sexual partners, she responded, 'The cold in this country could kill a person faster than diseases.'

Djany faced destitution after her claim was refused and she was told to leave her NASS accommodation, leaving all her belongings behind apart from her toothbrush. She had nowhere to go, so routinely spent evenings in pubs, looking for a man to take her home that night, just so she could have a place to stay. Sometimes men gave her money: at other times she simply got a bed for the night. She eventually met an older man who appeared to be kind and caring. Not wanting to spoil what she thought could be a longer-term relationship, she didn't go home with him that night, but went out to a pub and found another man to go home with. She met the older man for dinner on another evening, told him about her situation, and he invited her home. Djany moved in with him, and soon became pregnant. However, his family disapproved of the relationship, and forced her to leave the house while she was still pregnant. In desperation she turned to the church, where someone volunteered to accommodate her. At the time of the research, Djany was still pregnant and staying with this person. She had no idea about what would happen in the future.

Although these social relationships with local people are mostly either romantic or sexual, there were several examples of local people providing long-term support with seemingly straightforward altruistic motives. However, for destitute asylum seekers, even these relationships may not resolve feelings of long-term insecurity (see Ali's case study, below).

### Receiving local support: Ali

Ali is a refused asylum seeker who was staying with different friends in a northern city in England. He is an educated man, who spends his days studying in the public library. This was where he met an older man, who started chatting to him about books. The two became friends, and when the man learned about Ali's situation, he offered him a room in his house. The man has a large house and garden, so Ali moved in, and helps him with the gardening. In spite of this secure, long-term accommodation and good relationship with the man – they have lengthy intellectual discussions – Ali feels insecure and struggles to find enough cash to clothe himself. He washes his clothes and dries them overnight on the radiator so he can wear them the next day.

## 4.5 Transactional relationships between individuals

The relationships described so far in this section are largely based on altruism, even if the power relations involved mean that refused asylum seekers feel as though they have little or no choice but to mobilise these social resources to survive. In addition, there are many relationships between refused asylum seekers and the people providing resources for them that are overtly transactional, and in some cases exploitative, with destitute asylum seekers providing childcare, cooking and/or housework (including gardening in some cases) and sometimes even sex in exchange for meals, small amounts of cash, shelter, or other daily necessities. In many cases this exchange is entirely voluntary on the part of the destitute asylum seeker, who positively wants to contribute something to the household that is helping them. One man, for example, described cooking dinner for his friend when he returned from work as the high point of his day. In other cases however, people's vulnerability and lack of access to resources is clearly being exploited. Several cases were reported of women who were in servile and disempowered positions in other people's houses:

I sometimes see some of my good sisters, they don't deserve those guys, but they don't have the say. They might live with them, they will be house servants, cooking for them. It could be anybody, but it's usually someone from your area. I know why my sisters go there, it's just to live.

Tahiya's situation was briefly described at the beginning of this section. Tahiya is living in an exploitative relationship with her sister. Although this arrangement is not an unusual one for her culture (an older sister hosting a younger, unmarried sister, who is responsible for domestic chores), Tahiya feels completely powerless in the relationship because of her situation. It is the lack of any sense of a future, rather than the daily domestic duties, that Tahiya finds difficult to bear.

### **Transactional relationships with family members: Tahiya**

Tahiya lives with her older sister, who has status. She has lived with her sister for several years, since her claim was refused. Apart from the occasional visit to church without her sister, Tahiya does not leave the house and lives in almost total isolation. Although she is not physically locked in, her sister does not allow her to go outside and mix with other people. Tahiya is also afraid to go outside as she lacks confidence. She fears that something bad will happen, and she has almost no social contacts apart from a few people she met at church (one of whom is the peer researcher who interviewed her). She also feels a sense of loyalty to her sister, who paid for Tahiya to travel to the UK. In return for allowing her to stay in the house, Tahiya's sister expects her to do all the housework and to care for her child while she goes to work. Tahiya considers herself to be a maid for her sister. She is extremely unhappy with the situation and cannot contemplate the thought that it will continue indefinitely, but she has no idea what else she can do. Her sister does not give her any money, and is not keen to change the situation, as it allows her to continue with her 'regularised' life. It suits her to have her sister in a dependent position, taking care of the childcare and domestic arrangements.

Although the transactional element of social relationships is apparent and acknowledged by both parties in some cases, in others the transactional element is not so clear cut, but nevertheless appears to be important.

### **Implicit transaction in friendships: Abeda**

Abeda is of no fixed abode, and moves between friends. Despite having quite severe health problems including high blood pressure (which remains untreated as she is afraid of visiting a GP), she finds that whenever she stays at certain friends' houses they choose that time to visit their allotment, and she is obliged to come along and labour in the garden – which she 'absolutely loathes'. Abeda is always expected to take care of the children wherever she is staying. She is fed up with this situation, and feels ashamed of being at the mercy of her friends. In particular, she is worried about what would happen should something go wrong when she is looking after one of the young children, for example, should a child choke or fall over and have to go to hospital: 'What would social services or the police say?' She says she feels like a 'nuisance to society', and that she is turning into a 'moron', because she cannot plan ahead.

The evidence presented in this section suggests that for asylum seekers who are destitute, and in particular for those who have been refused, social resources form a critical part of their survival strategies to cope with destitution on a day-to-day basis. These relationships also have the potential to form a longer-term livelihood strategy, albeit under circumstances of stress and anxiety about the future. For many research participants, social relationships are important not only because of the material benefit that they provide, but also because they confirm a person's worth and existence. Over time, dependence on a limited number of people for social support can become draining on individual relationships and friendships. It also takes its toll on the independence and personal freedom of destitute asylum seekers. For many refused asylum seekers living in this situation, the only long-term strategy for securing a sustainable livelihood is to try to access their own economic resources.

## 5. Economic resources

The ability to access economic resources is an important aspect of the sustainable livelihoods framework. Economic resources include money, capital, or other resources that can be traded on the market. Access to economic resources is affected by the general economic situation and the human capital assets of individuals and groups. The ability to access economic resources is also, crucially, affected by policies, institutions and processes directed towards groups and individuals in society. These policies – and in particular, the fact that asylum seekers are not allowed to legally access the UK labour market either whilst their application is being determined or once it has been refused – fundamentally undermine the ability of asylum seekers to use their human capital to access the economic resources necessary to achieve positive livelihood outcomes. As suggested in the introduction to this report, this is not an accident or oversight on the part of the government. Rather, it is a deliberate policy designed to encourage asylum seekers whose claims are considered by the Home Office as being at the end of the process, to return to their countries of origin rather than remaining in the UK. The consequences of this policy for asylum seekers who arrive in the UK with high levels of educational and technical competence have been explored in detail elsewhere (Doyle 2009). One of the consequences is that refused asylum seekers may have little or no choice other than to work illegally in order to survive. This undermines Home Office policy, and leaves asylum seekers vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

### 5.1 Access to economic resources

The evidence collected during the course of this research suggests that in the initial stages of being refused and having NASS support withdrawn, the only access that asylum seekers have to economic resources is through cash handouts provided by friends or other contacts. In addition, some refused asylum seekers may be able to access limited economic support through civil society and voluntary sector organisations (see section 3.3). In a small number of cases, people were said to have saved up money while they were on NASS support. However, as NASS support is very limited (currently equivalent to 70 per cent of Job Seeker's Allowance, and shortly to be reduced further), saving money from this income requires extreme discipline and strategising, limiting the purchasing of everyday items. In two cases, people received a small amount of financial support from relatives overseas, but this was not sufficient to survive on and only enabled the purchase of basic necessities. A number of respondents have undertaken voluntary work, for example working in a charity shop, whilst destitute. Although volunteers are not paid for their time, they receive money for transport costs and are often provided with lunch, which can be an important addition to their daily livelihood. In addition, voluntary work provides a distraction from the stress and anxiety of their situation, and an opportunity to increase social contacts, a vitally important resource in the context of destitution (as discussed in section 4 of this report). Finally, many respondents are able to develop social relationships over the longer term, which provide access to material support, often including some cash.

Money is necessary for numerous aspects of everyday life, and many of those who are made destitute can make the limited economic resources which they are able to secure go a long way. Like other poor people, they employ a range of day-to-day strategies to manage these resources including, walking (often long distances) rather than taking the bus; buying reduced or damaged items in the supermarket; buying clothes, crockery and other necessities second-hand from charity shops or getting handouts from churches; and by visiting food shops at the end of the day to take advantage of discounted produce:

For clothes, they went to a charity, or take out some clothes from the bin... For transport, they can't [afford it]. If a trip is really important, they borrow money from a friend.

The longer that destitution continues, the less sustainable this hand-to-mouth existence and dependence on social contacts and small handouts becomes. As was noted in the introduction to this report, destitution is often not a short-term condition (Amnesty International 2006; Brown 2008). There is evidence that many asylum seekers are destitute for more than six months, and an increasing proportion for more than two years (Smart 2009). With the passage of time it becomes increasingly difficult for most refused asylum seekers – with the exception of those in long-term relationships – to survive on a day-to-day basis.

## 5.2 Illegal working

Although all refused asylum seekers know that it is illegal for them to work, there are numerous and often intractable difficulties in sustaining a livelihood through solely institutional and social resources. As a result, finding a job may come to be viewed as the only possible solution, especially when people feel under pressure in terms of finding accommodation. Over time, the possibilities of support from social contacts become increasingly limited and existing resources become exhausted. In addition, some asylum seekers face demands from their families back home, who may themselves be experiencing extreme hardship. Some reported that they were compelled to work to meet these demands, and send back as much as possible from what little they earned:

The more you stay here, without any papers or anything, you end up on bad things because you see people every day progressing, progressing, and you are staying the same every day. The others are starting working and improving their own life, living a very good life. Some of them have a skill, like driving a big car, driving forklifts. They feel that they should be decisive.

My friend told me, 'For the past two years I've been sleeping almost rough, I've been sleeping on friends' sofas; friends have been helping me, especially with food. Sometimes I try to go to work to support myself so I don't have to depend on food and handouts from my friends. Last November, I started working on a farm to support myself. I know it's not allowed, but from the small amount of money I was earning I was sending money to my family. I have to find work; if not, the family back at home will die of hunger – even myself, I will not survive. I'm a middle-aged man. I can't depend on my friends. They are out working, and I have to wait for them to come home before I can eat.'

For refused asylum seekers who decide that they have no alternative but to work in order to survive, there are two main ways of getting a job. Firstly, for jobs needing identity papers, people can buy fake National Insurance (NI) numbers or passports, or borrow them from someone. It is possible to buy false passports or real passports with false photos and names applied (French and Belgian passports are said to be available). Again, social resources are critically important in being able to secure the papers necessary to access economic resources. People who obtain false papers do not actually meet the people who make and sell them – they are obtained through a long and convoluted chain of contacts:

If you want to find work and you don't have the right papers, you can't find papers, unless you know someone who also knows someone.

You would know someone who can help you get documents, and you'd never meet the people who get the documents. It is easy to get the fake documents. The only problem is getting the money to pay for them. Different forms of ID have different costs. Passports cost the most.

It was reported that some employment agencies knowingly take on people with fake NI numbers or documents, or do not bother to check carefully. However, other employers may be duped, sometimes by an agent. In these cases people have access to the same working conditions and pay as everyone else, although the agent may deduct part of the salary for securing the employment:

At the moment [my friend] is working as a [job role]. [Q: How did he get the job?] There are agencies which do this. When you arrive they reject people with proper NI numbers and take only people with fake NI numbers. He knows, because two people arrived at the same time and this happened. You go there and discover these things, they know about these tricks. They give you jobs as a cleaner, minimum wage, and only pay you two out of three week's wages. They are very experienced and know how to manipulate people. They can recognise an asylum seeker from the CV or background.

Other people simply borrowed a friend's genuine passport and used it to register for a job. Such friends or acquaintances might demand money for this favour:

One person might have a good passport, and lend it to their friend to register for the job. Or they might give it to someone to copy it. They can lend you the paper if they aren't working – then they might demand half the money while you are working.

Alternatively, refused asylum seekers can work in the informal economy, being paid cash in hand by employers who are not concerned about them having the correct papers. Some employers even deliberately seek out illegal workers as they do not want to pay tax and NI, and can get away with poor pay and conditions for their workers:

Some managers speak to people to find workers. [They say] 'I am looking for five people to work here, if they have no papers it's no problem, I will pay them cash.' It happened to my friend. [They said] 'My friend, I can give you a job, but keep your mouth shut.' They pay you cash after two weeks.

A large number of examples of people working illegally were reported by the peer researchers. As with most other aspects of coping with the threat of destitution, the experiences of refused asylum seekers vary enormously. The vast majority of examples of illegal working were stories of low-skilled jobs, with low pay, long hours (or taking multiple jobs), poor working conditions, working weekends, and a constant fear of being raided by immigration officials. In certain sectors, having a job meant rising at 4am and not getting home until evening. The types of jobs mentioned by peer researchers are not reported here due to fears among the peer researchers that this could lead to targeting of particular sectors by the UKBA. With the exception of commercial sex work (discussed below in 5.3), most cases of people working and able to support themselves independently were of men rather than women. Men were said to have more options for

low-skilled, physically laborious jobs as they are stronger. Many are working in occupations that are very different from those they worked in before coming to the UK:

One time in [large city in England] I found a man who is a highly qualified professional, but now he is doing a low-skilled manual job. He didn't introduce himself to the immigration here when he first arrived. He was scared of being refused and sent back home. He has been here for some years.

By contrast, some refused asylum seekers have been able to secure professional employment and have successful careers. Khalid is a highly qualified professional who had worked overseas in other developed countries for many years and who had lived in South Wales whilst seeking asylum. When his case was refused, he decided that he was not willing to 'sit around' waiting like others in this situation who he had seen. He went to a large city in England and began working illegally for a technical company, who apparently were not overly concerned with his illegal status as they were so keen to employ someone with his skills. Khalid now drives an expensive car and wears smart clothes, but nevertheless continually worries about being removed from the UK.

Peer researchers did not want to report on the location of employment for fear that the information could be used to target those working illegally. However, it is clear that towns and cities in South Wales are not the location of choice for those wishing to work illegally. Many said that people moved to larger cities outside South Wales to get jobs, as they felt less conspicuous. In addition, there were seen to be more job opportunities in other cities.

Not surprisingly, given the circumstances under which refused asylum seekers are able to secure employment and the type of work that they end up doing, the economic resources that are generated by working illegally are limited. In most cases the wages received were just enough for a hand-to-mouth existence, covering accommodation and food, and not much else (see case study of Nishaat, below):

Some of them work for the lowest salary, just for sleeping and food. This is what they must do, because it's better than stealing.

Wages were reported as being between £1 and £3 per hour. Some people were paid for a shift or over a longer period (a week or month), so the hourly rate was even lower:

I knew a man who worked for three months, and was promised £35 every day, but after three months he asked for the wage, but [the manager] said he would give him just £50 for three months. But, he said, 'I need £3,000!' But the manager threatened to report him to immigration, so what could he do?

Because of their situation, refused asylum seekers who work illegally as part of their livelihood strategy are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. These risks are discussed further in section 6 of this report.

### **Illegal working: Nishaat**

Nishaat is a family man, with a wife and several children back in his home country. He had hoped to bring them to the UK, but since his claim has been refused he is unable to

do this. He still needs to send money to his family as without this, they have nothing. Every day, all he does is get up, work, come home, eat, and sleep. He works long hours for a low wage (£60 a week), and sees no-one socially. He rents his own small room. He now says, 'I wish I had died there [back home], then at least my family would have known that they had a father there.' This has been his life now for eight years – he likens it to a state of rigor mortis. The only thing that keeps him going in spite of his homesickness and stress is his wish that 'just one time again I can see my family and children'.



There were very few examples of criminal activity apart from illegal working. Two examples were provided of destitute people selling drugs, and there were also two examples of petty shoplifting offences (where food was taken due to hunger). As shown in section 4, all refused asylum seekers are extremely anxious and fearful of being picked up by the police or immigration authorities and forcibly removed to their country of origin. This serves as a significant deterrent against involvement in criminal activities.

It should also be noted that, whilst a significant number of stories of illegal working were reported, a sizeable proportion of respondents said that they would not even consider working illegally, regardless of how desperate their situation became. All stated that they were keen to be allowed to work, and it is clear that many have educational qualifications and technical skills that are being wasted in the UK. But for most refused asylum seekers, the risks of being detained and removed from the UK as a result of working illegally are simply too high. Others said that it was too hard to find work, and that certain ethnic groups and nationalities found it easier to find work than others, depending on the perceptions and prejudices of local employers. One man said, 'You need luck to get work and you need luck to get papers, it's just like winning the lotto.' Some simply cannot work as they have poor health or young children.

### 5.3 Transactional/commercial sex work

It is clear from the evidence presented in section 4 that both women and men engage in social relationships as a means of securing access to both material resources and emotional and psychological support. These relationships often provide meaning in the lives of refused asylum seekers living in destitution. It was also suggested that it can be difficult to distinguish between longer-term, ongoing relationships and those where sexual relations are more overtly transactional and involve exchanges of money or other resources. Although there is no distinct line between commercial sex work and transactional sexual relationships, several peer researchers reported cases that they saw to be clear examples of women having sex for purely commercial reasons. This took place in various contexts. One woman advertises in phone boxes and works out of hotel rooms, returning each night to look after her two children, and earning enough money to support her family and rent a house. Another woman was cajoled into brothel-based sex work by her friends, but soon left when a client asked her to become the live-in carer for his disabled mother instead. A group of women who rented a house together (having initially been provided with the house by one of the women's boyfriends) ran an informal shabeen together in their backyard. A shabeen is an illicit bar or club, often in a home within a residential area, where alcoholic beverages are sold without a license. The term originated in Ireland but has spread to many other parts of the world and is now closely associated with drinking dens in residential areas in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Shabeens are often places where casual sexual encounters take place (Kalichman et al. 2009):

A group of women share a house with this friend... It's the same system that we have back home, whereby you go behind the house, cook food, people come to the house, have drinks, pay for that food and drink. They are running a shabeen. The house is all women – apparently they are very close, but they do clash. They are worried that the police might come around – because sometimes the fights are very big. When you look at them, they don't really look destitute – they are selling food – and I think they are selling sex.

In the cases of more formal sex work (e.g. the shabeen, or brothel-based sex work, rather than picking up men on the street or in pubs), most of the peer researchers pointed out that these activities did not take place in South Wales, but in large cities in England.

Men having sex with men for money was mentioned by two peer researchers:

I know about two or three people who, just for money, are gay, but they don't like it like this, they just do it for some money from an old man. [They are] just young people in their twenties, but they sleep with really old people. They just do it for money and shelter. [Q: How do they find these men to sleep with?] Every city has its places. In [city in Wales], I know this one place where the bad people go, selling stolen laptops, in a bad pub. That's where they meet these men. [Q: Is it direct sex for money or do they have some kind of relationship?] It's just a direct exchange. They don't have a relationship or friendship, because this action in my culture is really bad.

Men have sex with men mostly for shelter. They go for even older men or women, just so that they can have somewhere to stay.

Given the severe economic marginalisation and hardship experienced by destitute asylum seekers, it is perhaps not surprising that men are also involved in commercial sex work. Men, like women, have to draw on all of their resources to survive, even when this involves engaging in activities and relationships that are culturally and socially unacceptable.

The evidence presented here suggests that transactional sexual relations and commercial sex work are survival strategies for some destitute asylum seekers. For some women this is clearly a choice, albeit one that is made in severely constrained and limited circumstances. For others, it is less clear that the decision to pursue this strategy has been made independently:

Others advise her, why do you keep your own resources to yourself? Because you are a resource, just exploit your own resources. For one man, if she asks him for one hour £25, and gets three or four people in one night, she might get £75 a night. She needs someone to force or direct her in that way – she wouldn't think that way in herself.

Most of the peer researchers were careful to point out that they, and others in the asylum-seeker community, did not judge women for being involved in this sort of work – they understood that often, people had little choice. As one peer researcher put it, 'Women are just trying to make ends meet. They are just pushed into a corner.' Compared to other livelihood strategies, potential earnings from sex work are much higher. In one example of street-based prostitution, a young woman charged £25 per hour; in another, fees are between £60-£100, depending on the client and the services provided:

Girls can earn a lot of money through lap dancing/pole dancing. One girl said she earned £800-£1,000 a week. They earn money for dances and can earn extra if they sleep with them [clients], but they don't have to sleep with them. They also said it was easy to steal the wallets of drunken men. Women will go with men for money or for no money, but just to have a bed for the night.

Nonetheless, for these asylum seekers, as with those who work illegally, access to economic resources does not, in and of itself, constitute a sustainable livelihood. All of these activities – as with securing access to institutional resources and utilising social resources and networks – are associated with risks as well as opportunities. These risks and costs – which are physical as well as psychological and emotional – undermine the possibility of securing a sustainable livelihood and a sense of the future.

## 6. Access to resources

This report has outlined the different kinds of resources – institutional, social and economic – which asylum seekers draw upon in their efforts to cope with destitution. It is clear from this evidence that a wide range of strategies are employed on both a day-to-day basis and over the longer term. The picture of destitution, and the livelihood responses with which it associated, is one which is both complex and dynamic. It is also a picture which varies considerably depending on the human resources of individuals, families and communities, and according to gender and other dimensions of social difference. This section considers the implications of these differences for the access that destitute asylum seekers have to different types of resources, and the actual and perceived risks with which different livelihood strategies are associated.

### 6.1 The importance of human resources

The ability to develop a sustainable livelihood strategy depends, in significant part, on an individual having skills, knowledge, the ability to work, and good health. These resources and strengths enable asylum seekers to cope with the challenge of destitution and to mobilise social and economic resources. They are required to make use of other types of resources: in other words, human resources are necessary, but not on their own sufficient, to achieve a positive livelihoods outcome (Bull et al. 2008). Existing research suggests that most of those who arrive in the UK to claim asylum have higher than average levels of skills and formal qualifications (Doyle 2009). In this sense they would not ordinarily be considered vulnerable to poverty as a result of a lack of human resources. However, because of the particular policy context within which asylum seekers find themselves, they are actively discouraged and legally prevented from utilising these resources.

Although many of the research participants talked about the importance of ‘luck’ and ‘fate’ in determining outcomes, it is clear that opportunities are structurally determined, and arise from being well-connected, educated, experienced, and having a grasp of the English language. ‘Luck’ and ‘fate’ are not opportunities that can be seized if individuals do not have these human resources or are experiencing poor mental health, trauma or depression. The peer researchers stated that the most important internal resources for destitute people were the qualities of being proactive, motivated, and able to network well with other people. Speaking English was thought to facilitate coping with destitution, partly because it allowed people to network more widely. This in turn enables access to other kinds of resources and opportunities. Determination and faith – both religious and the ability not to lose hope – were also identified as important. Some also relied on alcohol and other drugs to cope with the stress of destitution. Ironically, many of those who arrive with significant human resources (education, resilience, social contacts etc.) find these are worn down during the course of the asylum-determination process, and particularly when they are refused and become destitute. High levels of depression, anxiety and mental ill-health are associated not only with the experience of becoming a forced migrant and all that this entails, but also with the asylum process and, more specifically, with the experience of being destitute:

My friend told me, ‘I’m not feeling safe. I am stressed and have depression. I am scared of the future and I’m alone and nobody. I think also that God forgot me... I feel like all of the world has died and I am the only person left, waiting to die.’

Although human resources and the capacity for survival play a central role in the ability of refused asylum seekers to cope with destitution, this capacity is influenced by external factors. For many of those who participated in the research, the existence of refugee and

migrant communities from their country and/or region of origin play a significant part in shaping future possibilities. Those communities which have been in South Wales the longest have the best knowledge of local and bureaucratic systems, and have strong community leaders. They can organise themselves well, have good access to information, and are therefore in a better position to provide support to destitute people. However, different groups of asylum seekers feel that they are treated differently from others. Many of those from Sub-Saharan Africa described feeling as though they always 'come last' and that they are treated negatively due to their skin colour, not only by local people and officials but also by other asylum seekers and refugees as well as established community groups.

## **6.2 Gender differences in access to resources**

Gender is an important factor in determining the survival and livelihood strategies employed to cope with the threat of destitution and accompanying risks and vulnerability. The difference that gender makes is not, however, straightforward. There was no clear consensus among the respondents about differences in experiences between men and women whose claims had been refused and who face destitution (see section 2.2). Some argued that men were better equipped to go out and find work and make friends, while women were more likely to have to stay at home looking after children. Some said that men were better able to cope with sleeping on sofas and floors, and the corresponding lack of privacy. Others said that it was easier for women without money to find a boyfriend to support them. Because gender norms in most parts of the world encourage men to feel that they should provide for their partner and family, men may find it particularly disempowering and emasculating to be dependent on women. Issues around privacy in shared accommodation are often said to be more difficult for women, and for Muslim women in particular who do not feel it is appropriate to stay with men (aside from close relatives or their husbands) on their own. Several peer researchers suggested that it could be harder for men to cope with the psychological stress of destitution, as men tend to 'burn themselves inside' and not talk about their problems, whereas women were said to discuss their problems more openly with friends.

In terms of livelihood strategies, the evidence presented in section 5 suggests that women are more likely than men to be involved in commercial sex work. Although this kind of work may provide some of the highest economic returns, it also presents the greatest risks of all the livelihood strategies, in terms of the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, and of gender-based violence. In other forms of transactional relationship, women are also at much greater risk of coercion, entrapment and violence. While men may not be particularly comfortable in sexual relationships that they perceive to be purely pragmatic and for the purposes of survival, there is no evidence that they are physically abused, sexually exploited, or forced to stay against their will (although they may feel forced to stay through lack of alternative options). By contrast, there are numerous stories of women in this position. The experiences of some of these women are discussed further, below (see section 6.6).

## **6.3 Actual and perceived risks in accessing resources**

The coping and livelihood strategies that individual destitute asylum seekers pursue are shaped by perceptions of risk. For virtually all refused asylum seekers, the biggest risk of all is perceived to be being caught by the authorities (either directly by the UKBA, or as a result of contact with the police or service providers) and being removed to the country of origin. This fear shapes many of the decisions that asylum seekers make, both on a day-to-day basis and over the longer term. This is reflected in the willingness or otherwise of destitute asylum seekers to access institutional, social and economic resources at different points in time. There is evidence from this and other research that many asylum seekers

choose not to access those limited institutional resources, such as Section 4 support, primary health care, and support available through civil and voluntary sector organisations because of concerns that their safety and that of their family may be compromised:

Many asylum seekers, if I am brutally honest, don't trust any organisations, they all think that somehow or other the information will get out – people from the Home Office could come, you don't know. That person who seems like a volunteer might be from the Home Office. People feel that they can tell things when they are at the drop-in, but sometimes you tell what you shouldn't tell. And when you are destitute you are always at risk. What if you are taken from the street or the police come to ask for your ID? People abandon such places when they become destitute. Asylum seekers would still be suspicious going there, but it's still the destitutes who mostly don't want to go. Others will warn you that you shouldn't go there.

Beyond these risks to physical safety there are also psychological risks associated with being dependent upon others. In order to access the support that may be available through civil and voluntary organisations, refugee community organisations and individual community members, asylum seekers also need to consider whether or not they want to accept this help, and the terms on which it is offered. Some people are said to be too proud to access such resources, or do not feel comfortable wearing second-hand clothes. They might also be deterred from seeking support from civil society if the supply of support (e.g. food vouchers or voucher-exchange programmes) is patchy (there one week but not the next), especially if they have to walk long distances to access the support (bearing in mind that many do not have enough money to use public transport). Destitute asylum seekers may be reluctant to accept support from civil society organisations, even those specifically providing support for asylum seekers and refugees:

While their case is going through, we become close, but then after their case is finished they tend to stay underground, they don't want to surface because of fear of deportation. Only one or two come to the drop-in centre. Some of them leave [city in Wales].

People don't want to be helped – they want to be self-sufficient. They feel humiliated and don't ask for help. They just remember their lifestyle back home.

Although people are grateful for the help they get from civil society and voluntary sector organisations, all agree that such support is not enough to fundamentally improve their lives. Voluntary organisations and individuals may be able to provide a few material necessities and emergency help, but this can never be a substitute for people being able to generate their own livelihoods:

Most of them aren't happy [with the support they get] because they are still struggling. There is no change in their lives. Even if they know their rights, it's hard, there's no-one who can stand up for them and help them reach their expectations. They have tried so many things and so many times and nothing has changed. They get fed up of asking for something repeatedly that they know they won't get. They feel unwanted, lost, and they feel like they are invisible creatures.

This feeling of being an 'invisible creature' can be so overwhelming that even those who are destitute and living in circumstances of abject poverty may actively choose not to access these resources. This choice may be difficult to understand, but for many asylum seekers represents the only possibility of making any 'choice' about the future at all.

## 6.4 Use of public resources and spaces

Public resources and spaces include libraries, parks and public transport. Many of those who are destitute spend a large proportion of their time in such public spaces, and simply walking the streets. They have many hours to fill each day, and if they do not have their own accommodation or money, they have to make use of public spaces and resources. Some people spent time at the local 'Under 25s Information Centre', and others (typically men) sit in pubs and clubs – not necessarily drinking – until the early hours of the morning. Pubs and clubs provide a warm place to pass the hours and also provide possibilities for social contact. In some cases, public transport serves as accommodation: in London, people were said to spend hours of the night going around on underground trains, or sitting on night buses. Sometimes people feel so uncomfortable staying with friends that they choose to spend a night or two sleeping outside or on public transport, to give themselves and their friend a break:

You might use a bus pass, shuttling round all night on the bus. It's very risky as you go to places that you don't know, spend time at the bus stop during nights, and might be caught. Many people won't tell you this part, it's the lowest point you can get to. You might have a place to go, but you feel that your friend needs privacy or you don't feel comfortable staying there.

However, public spaces are also fraught with risks. Even before they are refused and become destitute, asylum seekers can feel vulnerable in public spaces, not only due to fear, but also to a lack of social connections (Stewart 2005). Many people reported avoiding places where any confrontation might occur, such as football matches or town centres at night. The principal reason for this decision was the fear of being caught and removed from the UK, either as a result of 'stop and search' activities by the police, or if trouble broke out (for example, a fight in a pub) and the police were called. People felt that they were more likely than local people to be questioned in such incidents. In addition, if they were injured or attacked in such an incident, they would be unable to access any form of redress against the offender as they would not want to take the matter to the police. Most people are reluctant to have any contact with law enforcement officers due to the perceived risk of deportation:

My friend said, 'I don't leave the house at night. I don't go to nightclubs because I don't want to be in troubled areas, because I don't like the police asking about ID cards or wanting to search me. I want to be safe all the time.'

Destitution makes people feel afraid all the time. If you meet police on the street, you begin to shiver, you begin to stammer, they ask you about immigration and lots of questions, and it makes people feel fearful.

The desire to keep under the radar and not attract unwanted attention, and to avoid the police and immigration officers at all costs, means that people believe it necessary to be extremely cautious and law-abiding. Most reported that they would not want to do anything to risk police attention, and some reported even feeling unable to browse around clothes shops in the town centre in case they were questioned on suspicion of shoplifting. Other risks faced in public areas include racist behaviour. One man was shouted and sworn at in the street, and was so upset afterwards that he did not leave the house where he is staying for three weeks.

## 6.5 Sustainability of livelihood strategies

The evidence from this research indicates that in the absence of access to institutional resources, those who are destitute rely heavily upon the ability to mobilise social relationships and networks. But this strategy is not without its own costs and risks. Ultimately, those who participated in the research recognised that it is not a sustainable strategy. Refused asylum seekers are very sensitive to the needs and perceptions of their friends, and most express concerns about being a burden on others (see case study of Mary, below). Relying on other people to cope with destitution has its costs both for the person supporting them and the destitute asylum seeker him or herself. Although friends are often extremely helpful and welcoming to begin with, staying with friends in the longer term is difficult. As a result, many people move from friend to friend to avoid becoming too much of a burden:

She said to me, 'The issues about staying with friends are that they treat you with no respect, you don't feel at home, they take advantage of you, you will become "food for work". You do jobs to get food, cleaning the house and doing laundry. To make your friend happy, to let you stay, you have to do those things for her.'

Living with friends is a hard thing. They get fed up looking after you if you have no income. Space is a problem and accommodation is often tiny.

### Moving between friends: Mary

Mary has been moving between friends for several years, and is finding it increasingly difficult. She was staying with some friends for a while, but when they had a baby they asked her to leave. After this she stayed with different friends on a short-term basis, but had no certainty of finding a safe place to stay on any one night. She remembered her worst night during this time: 'I remember one day we had a conference at the church. I was working hard and was very tired. I walked to a friend's house who had let me sleep there for some days. When I got there she had a visitor staying so there was no place for me to sleep. I was very tired... it was night and I was walking in the park, there was a man and he started to follow me, maybe he had drunk a lot or taken drugs. I was very scared and started to scream and run, full of tears. I went to another friend's. It was a long way away. It was also raining. I'll never forget that time... if someone is without accommodation, they are like a ship moving without a compass, there is no future, no goal, totally no rest.' Mary has recently made a fresh claim and is back in NASS accommodation and studying at college.

Ultimately, many people feel uncomfortable relying on others:

He is receiving help from friends, but as a man, he is always in tears. He praises his friends saying they are doing well helping him, for at least one night at a time, but at the same time he feels ashamed of his position.

There was a man, a spiritual leader in the church, and people found out that he needed help. They wanted to gather some money for him, but when he found out that people wanted to help him, he felt bad and wanted to leave the city. He thought it was a humiliation.

Tensions can also arise if the hosting friend has a spouse or partner who does not want them to stay. After time, the host and/or other friends may start to pressurise their guest into doing things they do not want to do (such as working illegally, or even in one case, starting to sell sex) or trying to persuade them to go elsewhere, to another city. The relationship can break down if the power dynamic changes, for example where an asylum seeker supporting a refused asylum seeker gets refugee status:

There are people who have papers versus people who don't have papers. We can be friends, the two of us who don't have papers – but if one of them then gets papers, everything changes. It is like a ticket to heaven, and you are the lost sheep. Then that friendship totally changes. They are planning work and college, and you are nothing to them.

For those hosting refused asylum seekers there can also be risks. Several people reported feeling anxious about being caught in the houses where they are staying. Property managers can let themselves in without prior notice at any time, so destitute asylum seekers tend to stay in the house only at night, and must occupy themselves during the day at other people's houses, or in parks and libraries. This is particularly hard in winter when the days are short and cold. Raids on NASS properties suspected of harbouring illegal guests often occur in the early hours of the morning. Destitute asylum seekers rarely have a room or even a bed to themselves when they are hosted by friends. They often sleep on the floor or sofa, and in overcrowded accommodation, of which the following is a typical example:

She shared a room with four people when she became destitute. There were also four people in the lounge, and three others in another bedroom. So there were 11 people and one bathroom – which was always a mess as no-one would clean it. They quarrelled a lot. They survived with no heating because payment arrangements were difficult.

The lack of privacy in such accommodation was difficult for both men and women. One man felt he had lost his self respect, as his host's girlfriend saw him sleeping on the sofa each morning. Destitute asylum seekers staying in other people's houses were often unable to turn the heating on when needed, did not have a chance to use the bathroom when they wanted, and could not eat meals until their hosts wanted to share food with them. Simple issues such as people in the household going to bed at different times, or being woken up early in the morning on the sofa by the household's children, or feeling that they had to vacate the house when their friend's boyfriend or girlfriend was coming round, can make daily life uncomfortable:

My friend told me, 'When you are living with friends, some of them are okay, some of them aren't, but there's no alternative – you must join them. This is your dark time, you don't have any choice. Everybody who is adult wants his own way to live. When you are living with others it's difficult, you don't have any choice when to sleep, what to eat. Those who are easygoing are okay, but those who are closed, who don't express their feelings, will suffer a lot. They fear to ask you to top up their mobile or for their bus fare or to go to the pub. They are not working, they don't have money, they don't join you even if you invite them. They don't feel comfortable.'

In addition, there are a number of potential risks associated with accessing social resources, which were discussed in section 4 of this report. These include transactional relationships that are only entered into out of desperation; coercive or violent



relationships which are either entered into knowingly due to desperation, or are entered into unknowingly, then cannot be escaped due to the vulnerable social position of refused asylum seekers; and in a small number of cases, misusing alcohol and/or drugs when socialising with people who use them.

It is also important to recognise that even those who work illegally and have access to limited economic resources do not feel that their livelihoods are sustainable. By working illegally, some people are able to build a relatively sustainable livelihood for themselves – renting a flat or a room in a shared house, paying bills and buying everyday necessities. However, due to their lack of status and rights, they are highly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, and are unable to plan for the future – and therefore this does not constitute a sustainable livelihood. Gabi managed to support herself for several months by starting work, and was able to rent a flat. In spite of this relative security, she still felt that she was not in a position to establish a meaningful social life for herself. Earning some money does not necessarily mean the end of destitution for refused asylum seekers. Leading a meaningful life requires feeling the possibility of a future:

Gabi found two types of destitution: the first [before she had a job] was full of fear, no hope, horrible. But when she started a job... she felt some relief, but at the same time she doesn't have any confidence to confront the asylum system, she doesn't have any continuity or security in her own life.

Destitution is particularly difficult for people with families. Kwame has a wife and two young children. His wife is unable to work as the children are very young, and he works in the informal economy earning a low wage. Kwame tries his best to save up to buy decent things for his family, like thick blankets so that they can avoid illness – as he does not know what they would do if anyone in the family became ill. However, he is already concerned about what will happen when his children get to school age, as he will not feel able to send them to school. Although Kwame is managing to sustain the family's livelihood in the short term, the family's illegal status means that the children's future welfare and education is under threat.

## 6.6 Vulnerability to exploitation and abuse

I didn't expect that it could happen in this country... sleeping with men for money, having no voice, not being able to tell anyone... it's not supposed to happen in this country. If you don't feel safe here in the UK, where else will you feel safe?

Asylum seekers in the UK are widely regarded as a vulnerable group in the sense that they are denied basic human rights (Stewart 2005). Refused asylum seekers who are destitute are perhaps the most vulnerable of all to exploitation and abuse. This can take many forms, but the two most obvious are associated with illegal working and coercive, and, in some cases, violent or dangerous sexual relationships.

Many refused asylum seekers reach a stage where they feel that the only possibility of a sustainable livelihood is through working illegally. This is not a decision that is made easily. Illegal working is recognised as being a risky activity. People fear their workplaces being raided by immigration authorities – with some justification, as in recent years there has been increasing coverage in the media of such actions. However, being raided is only one risk associated with illegal working. People may be exploited by employers who can manipulate them with the threat of informing on them to the immigration authorities at any time. Reflecting this, they are typically paid far less than the minimum wage.

Although they recognise that they are being exploited, few people want to report these employers for fear that premises will be raided and illegal workers caught. People do not want to protest at bad treatment or cause any trouble at work, as they do not want to be reported to the immigration authorities or fired:

Those who work are physically and emotionally drained: they are always afraid of getting caught, they are working long hours – you want to leave it, but you can't because you need the money at least to cover your accommodation costs.

Others reported poor working conditions and even violence. Those asylum seekers who have been unable to secure access to any papers (passport or NI number) and/or whose lack of status is known to employers, appear to be most at risk:

One man was working illegally. The Inland Revenue contacted his manager as he had a false NI number and his stamps on his documents were forged. The manager made him work long hours, weekends, blamed him for things he didn't do, called him at any time and he has to go to work or he will lose his job. He will do anything to ensure he doesn't lose his job.

I have one friend whose boss hit him sometimes, and when he wants to ask him why, [his boss] said 'I will ring the Home Office'. [My friend] was angry and said, 'I can't find anybody to say to this shit, "We are human. We need life, we need food, we need family here".'

In addition, destitute refused asylum seekers, particularly women, are especially vulnerable in terms of negotiating safe sex. These women are unlikely to access family planning or other health services for the reasons discussed in section 3.2, namely a lack of information or knowledge about entitlements, or concerns that they will become known to the immigration authorities. These women may therefore be particularly vulnerable to unwanted pregnancy and STIs including HIV.

If they are threatened in a relationship, women are unlikely to seek protection from the police and may have no-one else to whom they can turn for their basic needs. Melani had her claim for asylum refused, and moved in with her boyfriend who had leave to remain in the UK. She was unaware that he was a drug addict. Soon after she moved in, he began to beat her, and even brought his friends back to the house and forced her to have sex with them. She stayed there for five months as she had nowhere else to go and was frightened to report him. One day when her boyfriend hit her he broke two of her front teeth. A neighbour intervened as she heard screaming, and went on to help Melani by providing her with a flat to stay in and access to false papers. Melani now works and rents her own flat. Her boyfriend does not know where she is.

Rehena faced a similar problem of being forced into sex against her will because she had nowhere else to live. Rehena moved in with her female friend, Sarah, and Sarah's boyfriend, after her case was refused. One day, Sarah went away for a few days for work, leaving Rehena behind with her boyfriend. That evening, when sleeping on the sofa, he tried to have sex with her. Rehena initially refused, but he was insistent that he wanted sex immediately. The sexual relationship started and lasted for some time, until Sarah found out what was going on and threw Rehena out of the house.

The peer researchers in this study recognise these risks, and said that it was important for destitute people to take care, and set boundaries, when meeting new people. The most extreme experiences of abuse and exploitation are those described by Berhane, who was effectively held against her will (see case study, below).

### **Risks associated with being destitute: Berhane**

Berhane was newly arrived in a large city and knew nobody when she was made destitute after her claim was refused. She did not speak any English. Berhane met a man at church, who came from the same region of the world as her. He offered her a lift home and she broke down in tears, explaining that she was destitute and had nowhere to go. The man took Berhane to his house in the countryside. At first, he took her to church, and she helped him around the house. After some time, however, she recalls, 'I didn't have any other place to go, and he started to play with my body, and wouldn't let me out alone. I didn't love him, we aren't the same age, but I didn't have any choice, they [the Home Office/authorities] pushed me to go with the man.' Berhane lived in this situation for over a year. During this time, she says, the man was 'very clever' – always using condoms to make sure she didn't get pregnant, as he just wanted her as a housemaid. During a rare trip alone into the town centre, she bumped into someone from her home country – someone who had known she was living in this city, and who had been trying unsuccessfully to find her. This friend assisted her in making a fresh claim and finding NASS accommodation, so she was able to leave the man's house. After this ordeal, and all the exploitation she suffered, Berhane still feels that the worst thing the man did was to not tell her that she had the opportunity to make a fresh claim 'because he was happy with the way things were. He had food, he had a cleaner, he was relaxed'.

## 7. Conclusions and implications

### 7.1 Key findings of the research

Access to welfare support has increasingly been used as a tool for controlling immigration in the UK context. As a result, increasingly large numbers of asylum seekers – and in particular those who are considered by the Home Office as being at the end of the asylum process – have effectively been made destitute. They are almost completely excluded from institutional resources and cannot legitimately work.

The devastating impact of destitution on asylum seekers has been documented in other studies and is reflected in the findings of this research. Destitute asylum seekers face numerous and severe challenges to their psychological and physical wellbeing. These challenges partly reflect the scale and depth of their poverty, but also the particular implications of being an asylum seeker. Even in the absence of destitution, many asylum seekers struggle to deal with the consequences of their situation, including loss and grief associated with the circumstances of their departure from their country of origin, guilt and anxiety about those left behind, and the difficulties of adjusting to life in a new country. For those who are refused, there is also a lack of certainty about what will happen in the future and a deep concern about being returned.

This research focuses on the survival and livelihood strategies that refused asylum seekers pursue in order to cope with destitution. This is important because relatively little is known about how the many thousands of people currently living in the UK with no legitimate means of securing a livelihood actually survive. The findings of this research suggest that asylum seekers respond to the difficult circumstances in which they find themselves, by actively engaging in a range of activities for their survival on a day-to-day basis and over the longer term. These strategies are as disparate and diverse as the experiences and backgrounds of those who constitute this large, and ever-increasing, group. Some of these strategies are characterised by extremely high levels of vulnerability and poverty, often associated with street homelessness, hunger, and high levels of vulnerability to violence, including sexual violence; others by relative independence and self-sufficiency. Coping strategies can, and often do, change over time, depending on how long an individual has been destitute and the extent of his or her social contacts and networks. Typically, people progress from relying on friends and moving regularly between friends, to a position where they are either working illegally, or they are reliant on a longer-term boyfriend, girlfriend, relative or close friend. Others exit destitution when they are able to access institutional resources again, for example if they make a fresh claim for asylum, or are eligible for Section 4 support.

In trying to better understand the livelihood strategies that destitute asylum seekers pursue, this report looks at the ability of asylum seekers to access institutional, social and economic resources. Asylum seekers are able to access some, albeit very limited, institutional resources, for example through the government, voluntary sector organisations and the church. Refused asylum seekers have an almost universal fear of interaction with the state and its representatives, and many refused asylum seekers consider the risks associated with accessing these institutional resources to be high, and as outweighing the potential benefits. There are concerns about the consequences of being identified and reported to the immigration authorities. These concerns undermine access to even those resources to which asylum seekers are legitimately entitled, including Section 4 support and primary health care.

In this context, social contacts and networks are often the most important resource that asylum seekers have at their disposal. It is clear that those with no, or limited, social resources are in the most difficult position. There is strong evidence of extensive relationships of support between refused asylum seekers, current asylum seekers, former

asylum seekers who now have some form of leave to remain in the UK, family members in the country of origin, and other community members (who may be Britons or other established immigrants). The types of relationships that refused asylum seekers engage in to access social resources range from those in which they are supported by someone whose motives appeared to be almost completely altruistic, to those in which asylum seekers manipulate relationships with other people to get what they need, through to those in which asylum seekers are themselves exploited by others in return for resources that would help ensure their survival. In all but one case, asylum seekers were not physically forced into abusive relationships. However, in most cases, they nevertheless felt compelled to enter into relationships because of an absence of other feasible options for survival. Men, as much as women, are involved in transactional relationships, although these differ in character. Women appear more often to be in short-term and more overtly transactional commercial relationships, whilst men tend to describe longer-term relationships that they are reluctant to enter into but which are necessary for their livelihood. Men, as well as women, are vulnerable to sexual manipulation.

Economic resources (in amounts adequate to support relatively independent living) are only accessible to those who are willing and able to risk working illegally. Refused asylum seekers have a strong desire to generate their own livelihood, and do not want to be dependent on either their friends or the state. Nevertheless, they must weigh up this desire with the risk of deportation if they are found to be working illegally, which deters many people from seeking work. There is evidence that both men and women are involved in commercial sex work, although the dividing line between this and other kinds of transactional sexual relations is not always clear. Activities to secure economic resources – as with securing access to institutional resources and utilising social resources and networks – are associated with risks as well as opportunities. These risks and costs undermine the possibility of securing a sustainable livelihood and a sense of the future.

It is clear from the evidence presented in this report that being able to secure a sustainable livelihood means more than simply being able to survive and meet the basic economic or material objectives of life. In order to be considered sustainable, a livelihood must also include access to assets which open up opportunities and possibilities for the future. This sense of the future is central to the understanding of sustainable livelihoods in this report, and is reflected in the descriptions provided by asylum seekers and refugees of what it means (and feels like) to be destitute. Even those who are coping economically live with chronic stress, caused by fear of deportation and lack of security for the future. All are surviving rather than achieving a sustainable livelihood, because all share a lack of certainty about the future, and most feel that their mental and physical health is exhausted by having to cope with destitution. For refused asylum seekers, this concern is as great as, if not greater than, other dimensions of sustainable livelihoods such as physical security or food. The promise of a future, and the possibility of enhancing their livelihoods, is a fundamental part of a sustainable livelihood that is missing for people who are placed in this position.

## **7.2 Policy implications and recommendations**

Present government policy in relation to destitution is demonstrably failing to achieve its aims. Destitute asylum seekers who are considered by the Home Office to be at the end of the asylum process are simply not returning to their countries of origin regardless of how awful things are in the UK. Indeed, in 2009 only 4,945 – less than two per cent – of the estimated 283,500 refused asylum seekers in the country returned voluntarily under the Assisted Voluntary Returns Programme. The low level of voluntary return is indicative of the clear decision of refused asylum seekers to choose a life of destitution rather than accept state support on the condition of returning to their country of origin. Government policy reflects a failure to formally acknowledge the ‘limbo’ status of asylum seekers, particularly those from countries to which return is not possible. Aside from the human

cost to the individuals concerned, it is undesirable in policy terms for potentially hundreds of thousands of people to be driven into destitution and off the radar of statutory service providers. If anything, by excluding people from the asylum system and severing contact between refused asylum seekers and the state, return is made less likely (Refugee Action 2006).

This evidence is not new. To date, however, the government has chosen to ignore the consequences of destitution, convinced that this policy is necessary to create a 'tipping point' in the number of those returning, to reduce the costs of providing public support and to assure the public that the asylum system is credible and is not being exploited. The government should accept the growing body of evidence that shows that destitution does not lead refused asylum seekers to return to their country of origin (Smart 2009). The risks associated with continuing to pursue this approach are enormous. It is clear that current policy is having a devastating impact on individuals. But it is also clear that both the scale of destitution and the increasing length of time for which individuals find themselves destitute have significant implications for wider society.

The evidence collected during the course of this research suggests the need for an entirely new policy approach. This approach should be one which recognises both the human rights of asylum seekers and also their right to be human. Being human means having access to the resources needed to survive on a day-to-day basis with dignity. It also means having hope for the future.

The findings of this research have clear implications for policy. The causes of destitution, which force refused asylum seekers to turn to degrading and humiliating strategies simply to survive, must be removed. We make the following recommendations to address the failures of the asylum system:

### **1. Improve the quality of asylum decision-making**

Although there have been significant changes to the asylum determination process over recent years, there remain significant concerns about the quality of initial decision-making. These concerns are reflected in the fact that one in five of all refusals are overturned at the appeal stage. For some nationalities the proportion rises to half. Many of those who are refused do not consider their claims to have been properly considered. A lack of access to quality legal advice and representation exacerbates these concerns. There is also a failure on the part of decision-makers to understand that even where the circumstances of an individual's departure do not fit the narrow technical definition of a Convention refugee, he or she may still have very legitimate concerns about returning to the country of origin. The quality of asylum decision-making must be urgently addressed.

### **2. Provide protection for those in need and those who cannot be returned**

Not all refused asylum seekers have unmet protection needs, but those who do must not be forced in a situation where they are required to return, or lose access to, welfare support. The majority of destitute asylum seekers come from a limited number of countries to which return is impossible or potentially very dangerous. Over recent years there has been a very significant reduction in the proportion of asylum seekers allowed to remain in the UK on a discretionary or humanitarian basis. In 2007, the number of asylum seekers granted Humanitarian Protection (HP) or Discretionary Leave (DL) was just 2,200. This figure has been declining steadily since 2002, when 20,190 people were granted Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR) in the UK. This is despite the very significant increase in applications from Iraq, Iran, Zimbabwe and Eritrea, countries to which the Home Office accepts it is very difficult to return refused asylum seekers. Temporary renewable protection should be granted to those fleeing armed conflict or endemic violence, or those at serious risk of systematic or generalised violations of their human rights, who are unable to establish that they are individually at risk. Temporary leave to remain should also be granted to those who are currently unable to return through no fault of their own, for example, due to medical issues or a lack of travel documents.

**3. Ensure access to free legal advice and representation for all refused asylum seekers, in order that they can submit an appeal or submit a fresh claim if appropriate**

High quality legal advice and representation should be made available to all those at the end of the process, in order to ensure that the substantive claim has been fully and fairly heard, and that humanitarian protection issues have been considered. This is particularly important given the high proportion of asylum decisions that are overturned on appeal for certain nationalities and countries of origin. Not all of these cases even get a proper appeal hearing; many refused applicants have to represent themselves because they are unable to find a legal representative.

Policies that deliberately use destitution as a tool for encouraging refused asylum seekers to return to their country of origin, should end. For many asylum seekers, destitution, however difficult, is still preferable to the alternatives associated with return. The following recommendations seek to ensure that asylum seekers are able to access a secure and sustainable livelihood:

**4. Reinstate the right to work and earn a livelihood**

All asylum seekers who have been in the UK for more than six months while their case is being processed should be allowed to work until a final decision has been made on their application. Permission to work should be granted to those people whose claim for asylum is refused, but who are unable to return home through no fault of their own, and are complying with instructions to report to the authorities. This policy response will remove the need for asylum seekers to resort to illegal work and transactional and commercial sex work, as outlined in section 5. Furthermore, the right to work would allow asylum seekers to contribute through taxes rather than applying for government support.

**5. Reintegrate asylum seekers into the mainstream benefits system**

The reduction in welfare benefits for asylum seekers and the establishment of a separate system through which these are provided, reflects an underlying assumption on the part of politicians and policy-makers that welfare benefits act as a 'pull' factor. There is no evidence that this is the case. What is clear, however, is that these changes have served to marginalise asylum seekers and to create significant poverty for individuals and families alike. Asylum seekers should be entitled to the same benefits (and at the same level) as other claimants in the UK, including all allowances for children. Reintegrating asylum seekers into the mainstream benefits system, and allowing them to work legally while their cases are determined, would help to ensure that this group of sometimes highly-skilled and educated people do not lose their skills base, and can draw on their considerable human resources to contribute to British society and maintain their self esteem. It would reduce the levels of destitution faced by some, as well as exposure to the irregular and undocumented labour market. Such a strategy would ensure that those who are eventually granted leave to remain will be able to integrate more quickly – rather than having been left in limbo, losing their skills and becoming marginalised from the rest of society, as highlighted throughout this report.

**6. Provide welfare support for all asylum seekers until the point of return**

Refused asylum seekers who need welfare support should be given cash support under Section 95 until they return to their country of origin or are given status in the UK. Section 4 support should be removed. It is costly, inefficient, and is currently not being accessed by a sufficiently large number of people to warrant the costs of its administration and the associated appeals process. Welfare benefits should always be provided in cash rather than in the form of vouchers. Vouchers undermine human dignity and place further constraints on the already limited choices that asylum seekers have (as outlined in section 3.1). The provision of support should not be made conditional on returning to the country of origin.

**7. Provide access to primary and secondary health care for all asylum seekers**

All asylum seekers, including those whose applications are refused, should be provided with free access to both primary and secondary health care. This includes family planning, maternity services, and treatment for HIV/AIDS and other STIs. Although refused asylum seekers in Wales are now entitled to the same health services as those who are ordinarily resident, this is not the situation in the rest of the UK, where refused asylum seekers remain liable for health care costs. The access to primary and secondary health care available in Wales should be extended to the rest of the UK. There will need to be a significant information campaign to make refused asylum seekers aware of their rights and entitlements, and to ensure that they are not prevented from accessing health care because of concerns about confidential information being passed to the immigration authorities.

**8. Improved support and information should be provided to all asylum seekers by voluntary sector organisations**

Many voluntary and faith-based organisations, particularly those working with asylum seekers and refugees, play a critical role in providing material support to destitute asylum seekers. They also serve as the means through which individuals are able to access information about their rights and entitlements, and to extend their social networks (as outlined in sections 3.3 and 3.4). It is clear, however, that some destitute asylum seekers are unable to secure access to these resources. Some of the barriers to access are related to perception. Many asylum seekers do not view these organisations as independent from government, so may be reluctant to make themselves known. In other cases, individuals from particular groups and backgrounds do not consider that access to these organisations is equitable. Voluntary organisations should make it clear to destitute asylum seekers that they are independent from government, and that any information provided by asylum seekers about their circumstances will be treated confidentially. In addition, there is a need for greater awareness among those working with other destitute and marginalised groups in the UK about the particular issues facing asylum seekers. Given the scale of the problem of destitution among asylum seekers, voluntary sector organisations who have not previously worked with this client group should be made aware of the difficulties they face in securing a sustainable livelihood.



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