Help build a brighter future for refugees and asylum seekers

It has been over 60 years since the Geneva Convention was established to give everyone the right to asylum. However, refugees and asylum seekers continue to flee war, conflict and persecution in their home countries in search of refuge.

The Refugee Council is committed to being there today and well into the future for refugees and asylum seekers in need of support and assistance.

Leaving us a gift in your Will means that we can continue to be a lifeline for vulnerable refugee men, women and children in the UK. You can give them someone they can turn to. Someone they can trust.

To find out more about including the Refugee Council in your Will, please call 0207 346 1203 or visit www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/legacies

Registered charity number 1014576

The Refugee Council
PO Box 68614
London E15 9DQ
T: 020 7346 1205
E: supporter@refugeecouncil.org.uk
www.refugeecouncil.org.uk
Welcome

Welcome to the latest edition of Update. My name is Jade Amoli-Jackson and I have been volunteering at the Refugee Council for nearly eight years. I myself am a refugee and fled here from Uganda in 2001. I studied at Makerere University where I met my husband, the father of my three children. They were abducted in January 2001. I do not know where they are to date. I was abducted in July 2001 and taken to the bush with over 300 men and women. We were subjected to beating, rape, starvation and even had to bury our friends who were tortured to death. Fortunately, friends helped me to escape Uganda. Thankfully, I found refuge here in the UK and became a citizen in 2002. The hardest part is thinking about my three children who were abducted. I still have not heard anything about them.

My story is one of many that we hear at the Refugee Council from people who have had to flee their homes and seek refuge.

The theme for this issue of ‘Update’ is storytelling, which is an important part of healing and helps to rebuild lives. You will hear the stories of Adama who fled her home in Gambia to avoid being forced into marriage, and Faisal, who was 15 when he had to escape the Taliban in Afghanistan after his parents were murdered. You’ll hear how a famous author’s storytelling has resulted in vital funds for the Refugee Council. We also have an extract from ‘This is Where I Am’, a newly-released novel by Karen Campbell, which raises the subject of loss, freedom and separation; feelings that we are all familiar with.

The Refugee Council makes sure these stories can be told and, more importantly, heard. All of this can only be done thanks to the people who support us.

Thank you.

Jade Amoli-Jackson

Introducing our new CEO

We are delighted to introduce Maurice Wren, who started his role as our new CEO at the beginning of March this year. Maurice has been a trustee of the Refugee Council for over 6 years and has a wealth of experience and understanding not only of the refugee and asylum movement, but also of the challenges that refugees face in the UK. We look forward to working with him to ensure that vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers in the UK are protected well into the future.

“I’m thrilled and delighted to have joined the Refugee Council, an organisation I know well and admire deeply.

At a time of austerity and scarce public resources, there’s an ever present danger that people seeking sanctuary will be marginalised, so the Refugee Council has a huge role to play in standing up for the rights of refugees and celebrating the immense contribution they make to our society.

This means supporting refugees both directly, by helping them as individuals as they struggle to cope with the challenges of forced exile, and indirectly, by raising public awareness of the reasons why people need protection from persecution and harm.

My role is to make us even more effective as an advocate for the fair treatment of refugees, and in doing so I’ll be supported by a strong and diverse Board of Trustees, led by our newly appointed Chair, Yvonne Cass. You’ll find out more about her in our next issue of Update.

I feel privileged to have joined an organisation that’s characterised not only by the dedication of its staff and volunteers, but also by the generosity and commitment of its supporters and donors. Thanks to you, we will continue to make a genuine and lasting difference to the lives of the thousands of people who rely on the help and support of Refugee Council.”

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“The Refugee Council has a huge role to play in standing up for the rights of refugees and celebrating the immense contribution they make to our society.”

Maurice Wren and Yvonne Cass at the parliamentary launch of our new report, ‘When maternity doesn’t matter’
What we found

We spoke to 20 asylum seeking women and 17 midwives who had worked with pregnant women in this situation. They gave distressing accounts of the impact dispersal and relocation had on their health and experiences of pregnancy. Their experiences included:

- Being moved away from midwives, GPs and specialist support that they trusted and understood, and suffering serious mental health problems before and after birth.
- Having to take public transport to and from hospital, and giving birth alone with no birth partner or the father of their child with them.
- Being moved multiple times during pregnancy, often to crowded and dirty accommodation where they felt unsafe and unable to care for their babies. Women talked about having to climb stairs to their rooms after caesarean sections, and having nowhere clean to sterilise bottles for babies.
- Having no cash for basic amenities for their baby or for transport, they had to walk long distances after childbirth or caesarean sections. Women talked about going hungry so they could feed their babies. One woman described having no cash to buy a buggy for her child or for transport, so she was forced to walk home from the hospital through the snow with her newborn baby.

Asylum seeking women therefore often need specialist healthcare and support in order to have the safest pregnancy possible. However, UKBA treats pregnant women much the same as any other person in the asylum system. Like other asylum seekers who apply for accommodation and support because they cannot support themselves (either while they wait for their claim to be processed or after their claim is refused) they are ‘dispersed’ to locations outside of London and the Southeast, where accommodation is more readily available. They may then be relocated to other accommodation and other areas multiple times.

Background

For any woman, pregnancy can bring health concerns, but women seeking asylum in the UK face additional challenges. Many arrive in the UK in poor health, having fled their country and made traumatic journeys to safety. Some will have experienced female genital mutilation, sexual violence, or torture. They may not understand the language or systems in the UK and are likely to be living in poverty. Research has shown that black African women, including asylum seekers, are six times more likely to die during childbirth than white women.

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To help us put the pressure on the government and change current policy, please join our ‘Dignity in Pregnancy’ campaign and sign our petition today at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/maternity to write to your MP!
Pregnant and homeless

When we first met Adama, she was pregnant and homeless. She had fled her home in Gambia to escape forced marriage to someone she knew as ‘uncle’ who was 45 years her senior. She was in love with another man, who she was forbidden to marry as he was from another tribe.

“This was really scarying me as I was not complying with tradition and my parents wanted me to marry. I was not a virgin and had already experienced love, and I felt that I could not go back.”

Since being in the UK, Adama has been detained, sexually exploited and experienced homelessness. She has a three year old daughter and is pregnant with her second child. Adama’s claim to asylum was refused but she knows that she is unable to return home as her family will not accept her.

“At the Refugee Council, my adviser tried to get hold of the Home Office, but they said that they could not process my application yet because they had more questions to ask me. Even though I was pregnant and homeless, they said that they could not help.

I went to social services, who took us to this horrible hotel. There was wee on the stairs, poo, you can’t imagine someone living over there. She gave us £30 and told me that it was my weekly allowance. Every day I would have to pack my bags and wait downstairs while she said that they were trying to find me another accommodation. One day I told her I could not wait any longer and that I was going crazy. After this, she gave me another address in shared accommodation. After three days she phoned me and told me that I had to move to another accommodation.

“Told me I can’t keep moving with my daughter.”

We finally received confirmation from the Home Office that Adama could get support, but that she would be dispersed out of London to another part of the UK.

Adama’s Refugee Council adviser strongly advocated on her behalf, arguing that she must be housed in London so that she could continue to access the services that were essential for her health and wellbeing. We phoned her when we finally received confirmation from UKBA that she could stay in London. She moved into Section 4 accommodation and received vouchers for food. She has now just submitted a fresh claim for asylum.

“If I hadn’t had the strong help from the Refugee Council, the UKBA wanted to push me out of London. My daughter will always ask me if I am sad, if I am OK, and will say that she loves me, and that keeps me going.”

Unfortunately, we meet women like Adama every week. Thanks to support from the Refugee Council, Adama was able to stay in London near the services she needed. Most women in her situation are dispersed to unfamiliar cities, often late in their pregnancy.

Since 2001, following a suggestion from Beverly to her publisher, ‘Penguin Books’ has donated 10p to the Refugee Council for every copy sold. After 12 years, ‘The Other Side of the Truth’ has brought in thousands of pounds in donations.

In November 2012, Beverley spoke at a Refugee Council event held at the Museum of Childhood in London. The event was set up both to celebrate 18 years of the Children’s Section and to mark the launch of ‘Turning 18’- our storytelling project in collaboration with ‘Penguin Audiobooks’ which was serialised on our website in the run up to Christmas.

As part of the collection, Beverley submitted an exclusive guest piece about her own experience of turning 18 in apartheid South Africa. The piece is a short but heartfelt account of how this significant birthday year became an ethical crossroad for the young Beverley.

Beverley’s latest book, ‘Death of an idealist: In search of Neil Aggett’, is the story behind the only white detainee to die in custody of Apartheid’s security police. UK publication is due later this year. You can find out more about Beverley and her work at www.beverelynaidoo.com

Supporter spotlight

Award winning children’s author, Beverley Naidoo, has been a keen supporter of the Refugee Council for many years.

Her relationship with the charity began when she was researching her novel, ‘The Other Side of Truth’ back in 2001. This powerful book won her the ‘Carnegie Medal’ in 2000 and the ‘Jane Addams Award’ in 2002 for its accurate and sensitive portrayal of separated child refugees in the asylum system.

While researching the book, she worked intensively with our Children’s Section to create a vivid depicition of the difficulties faced by young refugees who arrive in the UK alone, having fled conflict or persecution in their country of origin.

“Once I became aware of the cruelty and inhumanity of our state, I was faced with a choice. If I chose to do nothing, I remained complicit.”

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“Please help us fight for a change in policy and join our ‘Dignity in Pregnancy’ campaign.”

Please help us fight for a change in policy and join our ‘Dignity in Pregnancy’ campaign.

Author, Beverley Naidoo
‘This is Where I Am’, by Karen Campbell

Though most of our lives are far removed from the experiences of refugees, we all encounter feelings of freedom, loss and separation at some stage. Karen Campbell highlights these themes in her newly-released novel, ‘This is Where I Am’. The novel tells the story of Abdi, a Somalian refugee and his daughter, Rebecca, who arrived in the UK from Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. They are brought together with Deborah, a recent widow, through a refugee mentoring scheme, and an awkward friendship is forged. They help each other to come to terms with their grief while the family try to get used to life in a new country.

Below is an extract from Karen Campbell’s new novel, ‘This is Where I Am’:

‘This is Where I Am’, Karen Campbell

I go to the grocer’s shop. I can go to any shop now, in theory, but this small stretch of chip shop and licensed grocers and bookmakers are the shops I know. Thirty minutes walk away, there’s also a supermarket, a vast grey space full of tins and freezers which I went to on the first night. My fault. I had turned left instead of right. Eventually I came to its garish lights, and I recognised its blue and yellow sign because it was on the list for vouchers. When I got there, it felt like I had triumphed somehow. And then I realised I didn’t know the words for their food. That was the only time I thought I might lose control.

The cold in my hands was intense, my daughter was slipping from my grasp and crying because she was so tired, so hungry. So cold. You cannot imagine the pain of a cold that makes the blood in your fingertips go hard and die. Yes, now I know about gloves and hats, but not then. And where was I to leave my little girl? Alone in an unknown room? So we walked in the freezing night air, my daughter weeping into my neck, and me trying to shelter her inside my own thin coat. I could accept the sun had left us, but I struggled to understand where the moon was. At home, the moon and stars are so big, you can see by them, work by them through the night. Only thin glimmers here, cold specks in the muddy sky.

In the shop, it was a little warmer. I put Rebecca down, but she cried so much harder. My arms ached, the burning inside made worse by how the outside was so cold. Liquid was running from my nose, I saw the same on my daughter’s face. Clear and thick. I wiped it off her with the back of my sleeve.

“Take Aabo’s hand, baby. Look. Put your cold hand in Aabo’s warm one.” Together we trudged the aisles, overcome by coloured boxes and the huge chests of ice-bags. Were my vouchers for all of these things or just some? What were they? Was it food or drink or paper or books? Nothing I could recognise. Nothing I could touch or see the shape or smell of. Was I meant to open up one of the packets to check? Several times, I lifted up an item, then dropped it again. Impotence and hunger growing, trying to keep smiling for my daughter. For so long, all my food had been given to me. I’d forgotten how to provide. At last, a man came up to us, words spattering like oil in a too-hot pan. ‘Help’ was one I seized on.
New therapeutic workshops

This year will see our therapeutic casework unit expand its provision of workshops to meet the ever complex emotional needs of our clients. One of these new workshops focuses on psycho-educational therapy, and has been set up to meet the needs of the refugees and asylum seekers who we meet daily through our other projects.

Why Psycho-Educational Therapy?
Psycho-educational therapy is a way to help the clients we work with start to deal with the significant and unique challenges they face adapting to life in the UK. They will have experienced trauma and anxiety due to the situation they have fled or what they have had to endure to get here, economic hardship, cultural and language difficulties and of course, attitudes of the local population towards them. Unchallenged or unrecognised, these issues can have a huge psychological effect on our clients, impeding their ability to function day-to-day and to rebuild their lives here in the UK.

Psycho-educational therapy offers a client-centred and responsive service and will be addressing difficulties that refugees and asylum seekers frequently struggle with, such as managing stress and anxiety as well as the loss of a known way of life and separation from loved ones. An important reason for running these workshops is to break the isolation clients experience and provide a sensitive response to the hopelessness they may feel about their current circumstances.

BREAK THE ISOLATION CLIENTS EXPERIENCE AND PROVIDE A SENSITIVE RESPONSE TO THE HOPELESSNESS THEY MAY FEEL ABOUT THEIR CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES

The workshops are running throughout 2013 and hope to see our clients regain emotional and social skills, better understand their own situations, improve their longer-term rehabilitation and support each other. Alongside this, we aim to nurture the potential inherent in each individual, as well as the qualities learnt through experiencing great adversity.

Fawzia Bheekhun, our new Therapeutic Caseworker who is running the groups, said:

"I am excited about this new project. While counselling and therapy is client led, and is about providing the client with a safe space for reflection and contemplation, this project is about empowering and getting the client to engage in the discussions and reflect on their views and perspective and perhaps question how they respond to their circumstances leading to them making better and healthier choices."

Our first groups of the year have had a great attendance and fantastic feedback from clients. We hope this will continue throughout the year.

The workshops
Our programme of workshops looks at key areas of concern for our client group:

- Assertiveness/boundaries
  Gain a better understanding of assertiveness

- Emotional blocks
  Identify them to help remove the blocks and move forward

- Victim or survivor
  Reflection on the client’s journey and how they coped

- Managing stress and anxiety
  Relaxation techniques and meditation

- Sexual health
  Awareness of safe sex and health issues

- Self worth
  Strength and resilience, and coping strategies

- Loss and separation
  Emotions and understanding feelings

- Living in exile
  Information sharing as a coping strategy

- Exploring guilt and shame

- Self care and healthy living
  Personal care

- Understanding the impact of refugee trauma

Our Therapeutic Casework Unit is offering new Psycho-Educational Therapy to our clients

Counselling & Support

Image: Joanne Kennedy

Image: Joanne Kennedy
Faisal’s story

Faisal fled Afghanistan at the age of 15, and after arriving in the UK, was held in a detention centre as an adult because the authorities did not believe he was a child. Faisal tells us in his own words of his horrific experience in the detention centre and how he felt he wasn’t treated like a human being:

“My name is Faisal. I’m from Afghanistan. My mother and father were killed by the Taliban. Someone helped me escape and they put me in the lorry with other people. I was inside the lorry for many days. I was so scared I couldn’t even breathe. I thought I would die in the lorry. But when I was found in the lorry the police took me out. They asked me lots of questions - how old I was. I told them I was 15, but they didn’t believe me. Maybe it was because my hair was long but that’s because I was in the lorry for a long time.

They put me in the detention centre - they said they were going to deport me back to Afghanistan. I was feeling so bad, I was looking for something in the room to kill myself. The first 3 days, I didn’t eat anything. I was begging them to let me go. I was crying and crying but they just laughed and made a joke. It was like a nightmare, they treated me like an animal. I didn’t feel like I was a human being.

It was like a nightmare, they treated me like an animal

When I first heard that someone had come to see me I was really happy. They said it was someone from the Refugee Council. He said ‘Don’t worry, I will help you.’

Then one day, many officers came to my room. When they took me out I thought they were going to send me back to Afghanistan. I was so scared and my heart was beating so fast I thought I was having a heart attack.

Later I got a call from the Refugee Council. He said you will be released today. I was in the detention centre for 32 days. I remember walking through so many doors...thinking this is only a dream.

The man from Refugee Council came and helped me. He was like an angel - if not for him I would have probably been sent back to Afghanistan and I would be dead by now.”

If you missed Faisal’s story when it was first launched as an animation, and to hear the stories of other child refugees, visit our website at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/animation
Refugee Week celebrates the rich contribution of refugees to the UK. Each year, we run events and activities online that teach new audiences about what it is to be a refugee. In the last three years, we have hosted a Human Library at London’s Celebrating Sanctuary festival. The Human Library enables people to hear the story of a refugee or an asylum seeker first hand. This year, we are doing something a little different in response to an email from a supporter.

Bill wrote to us to say he was at Kings Cross and cross! He was at a photography exhibition which portrayed refugees as “unhappy, alienated and fundamentally victims, true in their way, but likely to put the great British public off the idea of asylum.” He said we need to show the other side of the story; what refugees can offer the UK when they get the support they need. This year, Bill will be working with us to take photos of refugees that show the other side of the story.

The photos will feature 10 refugees who have rebuilt their lives in the UK and who actively make a contribution. The photos will be exhibited during Refugee Week in London and then later in other spaces around the UK. We will also make them available online.

We also hope to host our popular football tournament in Leeds, which brings together local refugee teams with other local football teams, showing how sport can break down social barriers. The Refugee Council will be kicking off Refugee Week on 16 June with a stand at the Celebrating Sanctuary festival in Southbank, London.

Look out for more information about our events during Refugee Week in our e-newsletter. If you haven’t signed up to this already, just add your details to our online form at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/enewsletter

Challenge events are coming near you!

We’re now promoting a wider range of sponsored challenges than ever in locations across the UK and overseas! Whether you’d like to cycle from Land’s End to John O’Groats, or trek across the countryside, there’s many ways to get active and raise funds for our work protecting refugees in the UK.

You can now search for challenges near you, by your preferred type of challenge, or even search by event date! Check out our new challenge calendar and search function on our brand new website at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/challenge

We’re also offering places on the London Nightrider 2013! This exciting bike ride offers you the unique chance to cycle a 100K loop around London lit up at night, past over 50 of the capital’s iconic sights. The event will take place on 8-9 June, setting off from your choice of either Alexandra Palace or Crystal Palace. And if you register to take part in the Nightrider for the Refugee Council, entry will be at the reduced rate of £39! Register online today while places last!

Want to keep up with the latest news and views on refugee and asylum policy? Keen to find out more about our work and how to get involved? Join us on Facebook and Twitter and get the latest Refugee Council news, research and events as soon as it happens. Join the conversation by following us on Twitter at @refugeecouncil and liking us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/refugeecouncil

To find out more about taking part in a challenge for the Refugee Council, or if you have an idea for your own fundraising event, get in touch by emailing fundraising@refugeecouncil.org.uk or call us on 020 7346 1205.