

This project was carried out between July 2003 and December 2004 by the Working Lives Research Institute and the [Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit](#), London Metropolitan University. It was funded by the European Social Fund and the London Development Agency Objective 3 co-financing programme. The focus of the project was employment pathways between working as a volunteer and finding employment in refugee community organisations (RCOs), refugee agencies and organisations in the wider voluntary and community sector.

The aims of the project were to:

- Identify the barriers faced by refugee women in making the transition from voluntary to paid work and the resources used to overcome them.
- Recommend good practice to voluntary sector organisations for training and assessing the skills of refugee women as volunteers.
- Recommend good practice for voluntary organisations in the recruitment of refugee women into paid employment and for their career progression.
- Make recommendations for the inclusion of refugee concerns into equal opportunities policies.

The research involved interviews with 35 refugee women. Their ages ranged from 26-55 years and they came from 14 different countries including Congo, Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Bosnia and Kosovo. Their length of time in the UK ranged from 3 to 18 years. The majority were skilled or qualified and had worked in their countries of origin. Eight had worked as teachers; other occupations included secretarial and administrative work, nursing and medicine, dressmaking and engineering. Most were caring for dependent children. Seventeen were currently employed.

We also conducted case studies of 6 organisations, comprising two RCOs, two refugee agencies and two 'mainstream' or generic voluntary organisations. In each organisation we interviewed people with key responsibilities in the areas of service delivery, volunteer co-ordination and human resources, together with refugee women employees and volunteers.

## **Project findings**

Our research supports the view that volunteering can assist refugee women in finding employment, as well as providing important benefits to women who are not able to undertake paid employment. Organisations also benefit considerably from their unpaid contribution. Our research highlights the breadth and depth of voluntary activities in which refugee women are involved, and the research report documents the experiences of refugee women as volunteers in a wide range of organisations and activities.

Our study reveals that women participate as volunteers for a variety of reasons – to counter loneliness, to help their community, to 'give back' to organisations that have helped them, and to develop their skills and gain experience that will help them find employment. Volunteering provides a meaningful alternative for women who are unable to undertake paid employment because of age, family commitments, ill health or because they are not entitled to work. They often volunteer in more than one organisation at the same time – or combine voluntary with paid work.

Scarce funding means that employment opportunities in the community and voluntary sector are limited, and for most women the transition from volunteering into employment was not straightforward but involved many setbacks and disappointments. Volunteering is not a guarantee of employment, but it can provide access to advice and guidance, training, information and networks as well as work experience and references. The 'success stories' of women who had found employment highlight the importance of good supervision and training, both in-house and

external courses. Also of key significance is the part played by 'gate openers' who could be friends, advice and guidance providers, or volunteer co-ordinators. They shared information on training and job opportunities and gave practical advice, support and encouragement to refugee women.

Representatives of organisations in the refugee field highlighted the importance of having a workforce that 'is representative of our clientele' and they identified knowledge of community languages, access to refugee communities and insight into the refugee experience as advantages held by refugee applicants when applying for certain jobs within refugee organisations and refugee projects. However they also suggested that refugees could be disadvantaged in relation to non-refugees, because of their atypical experience, their level of spoken and written English and by being less able to 'sell' themselves at interview. This was leading some organisations to review their selection requirements and to consider the effectiveness of their Equal Opportunities policies in helping refugees into employment.

### **Examples of good practice**

In our report we identify examples of good organisational practice in supporting refugee women volunteers, making the best use of their skills and experience and helping them to find employment. They include:

- Targeting under-represented groups, aimed at building a volunteer profile that reflects that of the organisation's users/clients.
- Promoting and advertising volunteer opportunities amongst clients, through community networks and partner organisations, organising open days for prospective volunteers.
- Establishing a register of potential volunteers, with information on their skills and interests.
- Creating job descriptions for volunteer posts, reflecting different areas of organisational work and skills levels.
- Matching volunteer job descriptions with the skills and interests of volunteer applicants on the register
- Appointing volunteer coordinator(s) who provide regular supervision for volunteers
- Entering a clear volunteering agreement that spells out what volunteers and the organisation can expect from each other, including volunteers' entitlement to training
- Building volunteer costs, including training, supervision and childcare into funding applications
- Providing training opportunities for volunteers through including volunteers in internal staff training and development activities, as well as making use of external courses.
- Developing individual action plans relating to the job and educational aspirations of volunteers
- Coaching on how to write CVs and job applications and how to act in job interviews
- Encouraging volunteers to apply for jobs - where they have a realistic chance of being successful
- Providing opportunities for sessional, part-time or consultancy work in the sector this can provide small payments, and boost confidence, as well as enhancing the CV
- Advertising short-term posts internally, where volunteers have the opportunity to gain short-term work experience it often boosts their confidence. This helps in subsequent applications when they have to compete with a wider range of candidates.
- Providing realistic and detailed feedback on unsuccessful job applications, if a volunteer has applied for a job within the organisation
- Encouraging volunteers to use internal and external careers advice and guidance

### **Recommendations**

The following are some key recommendations from our report:

**General recommendations for voluntary sector, funders and policy makers:**

- Give formal recognition that volunteering is valuable civic engagement. It should be highlighted in refugee resettlement policies and refugee volunteering should be given practical support.
- Provide accessible and effective support mechanisms for funding applications for refugee organisations.
- Recognise volunteer participation as a core organisational activity and provide funding for the costs, including supervision and co-ordination, volunteer training and development, childcare and volunteer expenses.

**Recommendations for organisations in volunteer management:**

- Prioritise the role of volunteer coordinator when developing and enhancing the participation of volunteers in the organisation.
- Include volunteers in in-house training activities
- Review their equal opportunities policy, and consider its application to volunteers as well as paid staff.
- Identify target groups under-represented amongst the volunteer force
- Consider equal opportunities monitoring of volunteers.

**Recommendations for organisations in employment practice:**

- Recognise volunteer experience as of the same value as paid employment experience
- Give detailed information and guidance on how to fill in application forms, avoiding UK culturally specific jargon
- Develop detailed Job Specifications that:
  - Instead of generic requirements such as '3 years job experience' or 'degree level education' explicitly state which skills are expected
  - Accept these skills even when gained outside the UK or outside of a degree
  - Recognise overseas qualifications
  - Have language requirements appropriate for the specific job, enabling candidates to be accepted whose spoken or written English is not 'perfect', but is good enough to do the job
- Provide English language support/ training during working hours
- Provide flexible working, including: term-time working, or allowing staff to work from home during half-term, contribute to childcare expenses when staff have exceptional overnight, early morning or late night duties
- Provide in-house career progression courses, targeted at refugees
- Provide mentoring for career progression
- Allow staff unpaid time off to try out another job, without losing their right to return to their original job
- Include refugee status and experience within equal opportunities policies and practices, taking account of issues such as:
  - English as a second language
  - Recognition of overseas qualifications
  - Gaps in the CV through flight
  - Longer periods spent re-training
  - The implications of all of the above for the age of applicants

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

- As well as incorporating volunteer expenses (including travel, meals and childcare) and volunteer coordinator costs funding for volunteers should include:
  - funding specifically for external training courses
  - funding or facilities for external 'mainstream' mentoring or advice and guidance that is tailored and ongoing and has a good understanding of labour market developments and skills gaps
  - this mentoring/ advice and guidance should be geared towards the volunteers' needs and provide opportunities for moving on into other organisations or training
- More networking and information exchange is needed amongst refugee employment advisors and managers and volunteer co-ordinators of both refugee and mainstream organisations. Placements and training courses should build on refugee women's experience and skills, and be linked to their individual development plans.

### **Recommendations for refugee women:**

- In order to make best use of volunteering:
  - Ask to learn specific skills
  - Ask to be given specific, developmental tasks
  - Ask for structured training/ careers advice
  - Ask an experienced member of staff to help with applications and job interview preparation
- Use the volunteering organisation as a platform for networking with other organisations, find out about their training and job opportunities
- Use opportunities in the mainstream, including volunteering to improve:
  - Written and spoken English
  - Experience of different workplace cultures
  - Confidence about your knowledge of the UK system
  - Confidence about being 'job ready'

**To access the full report in downloadable PDF format please click [here](#)**

### **Disseminating our findings:**

- A workshop discussion was held on 7th December 2004, attended by representatives of voluntary agencies, refugee organisations and refugee women who had participated in our research. At this workshop we presented for discussion [key findings and issues](#) emerging from our research. To view photographs from the workshop please click [here](#).
- We presented preliminary findings at the AGM of the Refugee Women's Association in March 2004 and at the Evelyn Oldfield Unit's conference 'Refugee Volunteering: Integration in Action' conference in November 2004.
- Our findings will also be disseminated through articles in journals and magazines for community and voluntary organisations.

### **The project team**

The project team consisted of [Umut Ereli](#) and Azar Sheibani (project managers), Frances Tomlinson and Ute Kowarzik. For more information about the project please contact [Frances Tomlinson](#).

## **Useful links**

RAGU's project for Asset UK: for more information about education, volunteering and preparation for employment for asylum seekers click [here](#)