



# Refugee Council Chance or choice?

Understanding why  
asylum seekers come to the UK

**Heaven Crawley**

January 2010



Swansea University  
Prifysgol Abertawe



REFUGEE  
COUNCIL



# Chance or choice?

Understanding why asylum seekers come to the UK

**Heaven Crawley**

January 2010



Swansea University  
Prifysgol Abertawe



## The Author

Professor Heaven Crawley is Director of the Centre for Migration Policy Research (CMPR) at Swansea University. Heaven has undertaken research and analysis on various aspects of UK asylum policy and practice over the past 15 years including gender issues in the asylum process, access to legal representation, the detention of asylum seeking children, age disputes and the process of age assessment, the conduct of asylum interviews at ports and the factors that influence public attitudes towards asylum and immigration. Heaven was previously head of asylum research at the Home Office, Associate Director of the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) and Director of AMRE Consulting.

## Research Team

The research interviews were conducted by Simone Bizzell-Browning and Latefa Guemar. Simone Bizzell-Browning also assisted with the process of data analysis. Paul Dopson provided administrative support.

## Acknowledgements

The author and research team would like to acknowledge the assistance and support provided by the Refugee Council in undertaking this research. Particular thanks are due to Sarah Cutler, Lisa Doyle, Abdullahi Hussein and Gemma Juma.

A number of organisations assisted with the process of identifying asylum seekers and refugees willing to participate in this research. These include Brighton Voices in Exile, Migrants Resource Centre, Pathways to Independence, Somali Speakers Association, Swansea Bay Asylum Seekers Support Group (SBASGG) and Asylum Justice. We are particularly grateful to Laura Marziale from the Migrant Resource Centre, Alice Conroy, Tom Conroy, Sam Leicester and Abi Webb from Pathways and Mary-Jane Burkett and Alice Addison from Brighton Voices in Exile. Thanks also to Janet Hussain and Oksana Chrinowsky from the Asylum Seeker and Refugees Team at Swansea City Council.

Most importantly the author and research team would like to acknowledge with enormous gratitude the contribution of all those who took part in this research and who were willing to share information about some of the most difficult times in their lives. We very much hope that this research will improve current levels of understanding about the circumstances under which asylum seekers come to the UK.

# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Section 1 About the research</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1 Aims of the research	9
1.2 Methodological approach	10
1.3 Characteristics of the research participants	11
1.4 Structure of the report	12
<b>Section 2 Background and context</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 The policy context	13
2.2 The impact of policy changes	14
2.3 Existing evidence on the decision making of asylum seekers	16
<b>Section 3 The decision to leave</b>	<b>20</b>
3.1 The concept of ‘choice’ in the asylum context	20
3.2 Reasons for leaving	21
3.3 Planning the journey	23
<b>Section 4 The decision to come to the UK</b>	<b>26</b>
4.1 Making the decision	26
4.2 Importance of social relations and networks	29
4.3 The role of agents	31
4.4 The journey to the UK	34
<b>Section 5 Knowledge of the UK</b>	<b>38</b>
5.1 The asylum system	38
5.2 Access to employment and social welfare	40
5.3 Historical and cultural links	41
5.4 Politics, democracy and human rights	43
5.5 Sources of information	44
<b>Section 6 Conclusions and implications</b>	<b>47</b>
6.1 Key findings of the research	47
6.2 Implications for life in the UK	48
6.3 Policy recommendations	50
<b>References</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Appendix 1 Information sheet for research participants</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Appendix 2 Interview topic guide</b>	<b>56</b>

# Executive summary

## Research aims

There is considerable interest among policy makers in the UK and elsewhere in the decision making of asylum seekers and the factors affecting the place in which they claim asylum. The Refugee Council commissioned this research to investigate the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK.

A significant number of politicians, policy makers and the public appear to believe that asylum seekers are actually economic migrants who make decisions about where to seek asylum based on information about asylum systems, opportunities for employment and access to welfare benefits. There is a widely held belief that asylum seekers have a sufficiently detailed knowledge of these phenomena to make rational and informed choices about their final destination.

This research investigates the decisions made by asylum seekers who come to the UK and explores the extent to which these decisions are a reflection of chance or choice. It builds upon the growing, but as yet still limited body of evidence about the ‘choices’ that individuals are (or are not) able to exert over the country in which they will seek asylum, and the factors that might contribute to the decision making process.

## Methodology

The report is based on evidence gathered through a review of the existing literature and semi-structured interviews with 43 refugees and asylum seekers living in the UK. Ten of the respondents arrived as separated children. Focus group discussions were also held with 25 people. Research participants were asked about their knowledge of the UK before their arrival, whether they planned to come to the UK or wanted to go somewhere else, and how they thought they would survive.

The demographic characteristics of research participants broadly reflect those of all asylum seekers coming to the UK. The research participants came from a wide range of countries including Zimbabwe, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Iraq and Iran. Nearly 70 per cent originated from the top-ten refugee producing countries. All of those who participated in this research applied for asylum in the UK since 2003, with the majority (80 per cent) applying between 2004 and 2007. Around three quarters of respondents

applied for asylum in-country. One in five had been granted refugee status. Around a third of respondents were waiting for an initial decision at the time of the research and a further third had been refused, around two thirds of whom were awaiting an appeal.

## Policy context

The UK, along with other European countries, has responded to concerns about the number of asylum applications and perceived weaknesses in its asylum system by making significant changes to its asylum policy and practice. These changes have focused primarily on pre-entry controls, asylum determination procedures and support and integration policies.

Since 2003 the number of asylum applications in the UK has fallen dramatically. The Home Office has attributed the decline in asylum applications to the changes that have been made to the asylum system. There is, however, no clear evidence of a causal relationship between changes in asylum policies and the level of asylum applications. Existing evidence about the impact of policy measures on numbers and flows is ambivalent, at best. It seems likely that most of the fall in applications is consistent with a common trend of falling applications across Europe.

Evidence suggests that different kinds of policies are more or less effective in reducing asylum applications. Since there is no legal way to travel to the UK for the specific purpose of claiming asylum, refugees are forced to travel irregularly in ‘mixed flows’, and hence encounter the same border controls as other irregular migrants. There is evidence that pre-entry measures have had the greatest impact on the number of asylum claimants. They do not so much deter applications as prevent them.

Policies to remove social and economic opportunities for asylum seekers once they have entered a country of asylum have produced only limited effects on the number of applications, or no effect at all.

A growing body of research has investigated the choices made by asylum seekers, typically focusing on individual motivations and decisions. These studies question the relevance of policy issues in destination decisions made by asylum seekers and instead highlight the importance of links between countries of origin and destination, social networks, and the role of agents.

## The decision to leave

The term 'choice' is a contentious one when applied to the forced migration of asylum seekers. Despite the widely-held belief that the majority of asylum seekers are actually economic migrants, there is clear evidence that conflict is the single biggest reason why asylum seekers come to the UK and that most asylum seekers are primarily concerned with escaping from persecution or war.

The concept of 'choice' can be understood only in the context of the circumstances under which individuals leave their countries of origin. The lives of the research participants are characterised by experiences of war, conflict and persecution. It is these 'push' factors that are decisive in the decision to migrate, rather than the 'pull' of any particular destination country.

The absence of choice in the decision to leave should not be interpreted as meaning that asylum seekers are passive victims propelled around the world by external forces. Like all migrants, forced migrants make choices, albeit within a narrower range of possibilities. The choices that asylum seekers are able to make are shaped by their country of origin, age, gender, socio-economic status and education, as well as links with others who can help facilitate the journey and open up possibilities for the future.

For all of those who participated in this research, the primary objective was reaching a place of safety. The decision about where that place of safety might be was very much a secondary consideration.

The majority of respondents (over 80 per cent) had very little time to plan their journey and left within a matter of days or, at most, weeks of deciding their safety was at risk if they did not leave the country.

## The decision to come to the UK

Less than a third of the research participants specifically wanted to come to the UK. Among those who specifically wanted to come to the UK, the presence of family and friends and a belief that their human rights would be respected were the most important factors underlying that decision. For some the decision to come to the UK was largely opportunistic and motivated by the fact that it was possible to obtain travel documents, or make use of an existing visa. Respondents from Zimbabwe appear more consciously to have decided to come to the UK compared with other nationalities.

---

There is a widely held belief that asylum seekers have a sufficiently detailed knowledge to make rational and informed choices about their final destination. This research investigates the decisions made by asylum seekers who come to the UK and explores the extent to which these decisions are a reflection of chance or choice.

---

Just over two-thirds of respondents did not choose to come to the UK to seek asylum. This includes all but one of those who arrived as separated children. In very many cases respondents described having little or no knowledge of the UK. Some were aware of the existence of Europe but had no knowledge about the differences between individual countries (or even that individual countries existed).

The single most important reason why these asylum seekers had ended up in the UK was because a decision to bring them here had been made by others. Agents played a very significant role in providing access to travel documents and facilitating the journey. Most only became aware that they were going to the UK after leaving their country of origin. Some, including many of those who arrived as children, only found out that they were in the UK after their arrival.

Some people wanted to go to countries other than the UK but were unable to do so. This reflects the lack of choice that many asylum seekers have over the destination country.

## Social networks and the role of agents

Social networks only partly explain why asylum seekers come to the UK. A minority of people had



direct or close contact with others in the UK prior to leaving their country of origin and even fewer received any information that might have directly informed the decision making process. Barriers and opportunities to entry also play an important role in determining the extent to which these networks can be utilised.

There is a consensus in the existing literature that increasing restrictions on migration to Europe mean that many migrants who wish to claim asylum have no choice but to arrive illegally, and that this has created a 'migration industry' of agents (sometimes also described as smugglers and facilitators) upon whom asylum seekers must rely in order to secure access to protection. Approximately two-thirds of research respondents indicated that they paid for the services of an agent. This includes all but one of those who have been granted refugee status. Although many respondents were not provided with information about their destination, some were encouraged to travel to the UK.

There is evidence that agents are becoming increasingly influential in determining the destination of asylum seekers. Because social networks and connections have been disrupted by increasingly restrictive immigration regimes, agents have begun to fulfil many of the functions that these networks previously served. Agents serve to extend the reach of an asylum seekers social and search network.

Agents are often opportunistic and make decisions about routes and destinations as the journey progresses. Even where an individual has sufficient resources to be able to request a particular destination he or she may not be able to reach that place if the agent considers that their operation might be put at risk. This reinforces the idea that even where asylum seekers are able to exert a degree of choice over their final destination they may nonetheless be subject to the overarching objectives and interests of others.

There is significant variation in the range of services provided by agents and in the relationship that agents have with individual asylum seekers. Agents are both the villains and the heroes of the piece. If it were not for the services that agents provide many asylum seekers would simply not be able to escape from situations of conflict, political repression and human rights abuse. On the other hand, most agents are involved in making arrangements for an individual's journey for reasons of financial gain and do not necessarily have the interests and safety of individuals at the forefront of their considerations. Reflecting this, agents may 'sell' a misleading version of life in a particular destination country in order to persuade an individual that this is the best place for them to go.

## The journey to the UK

The journey was relatively straightforward for those asylum seekers (around a quarter of respondents) who travelled directly to the UK and entered using a legitimate visa or travel documents provided by an agent. Despite this many found the journey very difficult.

Many respondents described complex journeys, often passing through other countries on their way to the UK. Some of those who travelled through other countries on their way to the UK had initially thought that they would be safe and had intended to stay there. Others had spent weeks or even months in 'transit countries' whilst they decided on their next steps or raised additional funds. They did not consider that it would be safe for them to apply for asylum in these countries. Several commented on the implications of political relationships between countries for the ability to secure protection and on the treatment of co-nationals in the countries through which they passed.

## Knowledge of the UK

The report considers the quality and quantity of asylum seekers' pre-existing knowledge and information about the UK including in relation to the asylum process and access to employment opportunities and social welfare. It also looks at more general perceptions and images of the UK including in relation to people and places, culture, language, politics and human rights. The sources of this information are also discussed.

Very few of those who participated in the research had any detailed or meaningful knowledge of the UK asylum system. The overwhelming majority said that they did not know anything about asylum policies in the UK before they arrived. This was particularly evident among those who arrived as separated children. Some were generally aware of the possibility of claiming asylum but did not have any understanding of what the process involved. Many had simply assumed that they would be able to relay their experiences to the British authorities and would be allowed to remain.

The vast majority of research participants were working in their country of origin and most expected that they would be able to work in order to support themselves and their families when they came to the UK. Very few were aware that they would not be allowed to work when they came to the UK. They only became aware that this was the situation after they arrived.



The majority of respondents (around three quarters) had no knowledge of welfare benefits and support before coming to the UK. Most came from countries lacking well-developed welfare systems and had no expectation that they would be supported. Some were disapproving of the welfare system. There is no evidence that respondents consider the UK welfare system to be more generous than that of other countries.

Around a third of those who participated in this research came from countries which had previously been British colonies or under British administration. For the minority of respondents who were able to make choices about where to claim asylum, historical and colonial links appear to play an important role in their final destination. This is particularly evident in relation to those from Zimbabwe, for whom linguistic ties and similarities in terms of legislative and educational systems appear to be important.

The single biggest area of British life with which respondents were familiar was football.

Language was not found to be a significant factor in this research. Nearly half (44 per cent) described their English language skills before coming to the UK as 'very poor' and many said that they spoke no English at all when they first arrived.

Many respondents, and in particular those who had been persecuted as a result of their political activities, commented on the importance of human rights in the UK and on the perceived independence of the judiciary and systems of law and order. Perceptions of the UK as being sympathetic to the needs of asylum seekers and providing protection for refugees are often reinforced by agents.

## Implications for policy and practice

Current political and policy debates in the UK are underpinned by the assumption that asylum decision making is motivated primarily by economic considerations and reflects rational choices based on full knowledge of asylum systems in different countries of origin. This can result in a failure to properly hear what people have to say about the circumstances under which they left and the constraints within which choices are made.

The evidence from this research suggests that decision making in the context of forced migration is rarely a rational exercise in which people have full knowledge of all the alternatives and weigh them in some conscious process designed to maximise returns.

There is no legal route for entering the UK in order to make an application for asylum. The fact that many asylum seekers are forced to enter the UK illegally using the services of agents who provide false documents often undermines the perceived credibility of an asylum seekers' account, particularly if he or she then claims to come from a different country from that indicated on his or her travel document or does not apply for asylum immediately on arrival.

Although there is no evidence that asylum seekers choose to come to the UK because of welfare benefits or work, politicians and policy makers continue to use concerns about these perceived 'pull' factors as an argument for further limiting the opportunities for asylum seekers waiting for a decision. This is despite overwhelming evidence of the negative implications of the current policy approach for those living in the UK. Lack of access to work in particular has devastating psychological and social as well as economic consequences.

Although there is no evidence that policies introduced to deter 'unfounded' asylum applicants have been responsible for the fall in applications over recent years, these policies have significant implications for those who arrive in the UK, including those who are subsequently granted refugee status and allowed to remain.

Assumptions about the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK permeate political and public discourse and are reflected in media coverage. This, in turn, has implications for the lives of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK, many of whom spoke at length about experiences of racism and discrimination.

Understanding the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK has clear implications for UK policy and practice. These include:

- The need for joined-up policies at the UK and European levels to address the causes of forced migration;
- The importance of establishing protection sensitive border controls which can ensure that individuals are able to flee conflict and human rights abuse and, in turn, reduce the power and reach of agents;
- The need for the asylum determination process to be underpinned by a clearer understanding of the circumstances under which asylum seekers leave and the difficulties they face in securing legitimate travel documents;

- The need for policy makers and politicians to accept that there is no evidence to support the assumption that either the asylum system or policies for support and integration act as ‘pull’ factors, and to introduce changes to policy on work and welfare support to ensure that asylum seekers are able to rebuild their lives;
- The need for politicians, policy makers and the media to change the terms of the public and political debate on asylum by explaining more clearly the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK and challenging (rather than reinforcing) the idea that the asylum system acts as a ‘pull’ factor for people who are only concerned with improving their economic prospects; and
- The need for further research on what motivates agents to bring asylum seekers to the UK, on whether there are particular factors that are more or less important for people from certain countries of origin and about the motivations and knowledge of people who choose to come to the UK in preference to other countries.

Asylum policy making should be based on evidence rather than assumption. Many recent policies are driven by fundamental misperceptions about the extent to which asylum seekers actively ‘choose’ to come to the UK. Some of these misperceptions are reinforced by particular events, including the efforts of individuals living in France to travel to the UK in order to claim asylum. These events dominate media coverage and result in a skewed and overly simplistic understanding of the factors that influence the decision making of asylum seekers. It is only through in-depth research, such as that undertaken for this report, that it is possible to identify the complex set of factors that lead individuals to claim asylum in the UK rather than elsewhere, as well as the role of others (family members, associates and agents) in shaping this process and the journey with which it is associated.

# Section 1 About the research

## 1.1 Aims of the research

There is considerable interest among policy makers in the UK and elsewhere in the decision making of asylum seekers and the factors that influence the choices they make about where to claim asylum. The Refugee Council commissioned this research to investigate whether the arguments put forward by the Government and the Home Office about the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK are supported by evidence. It is often the case that when proposals are put forward for ways of improving the lives of asylum seekers in the UK, officials respond that introducing such measures would act as a ‘pull factor’ leading to more applications for asylum from those hoping to benefit from these policies. Previous research has found little evidence of such calculated decision-making on behalf of those fleeing persecution, and the Refugee Council saw the need for some new work to assess the impact of recent UK Government policies on the decision to claim asylum in the UK.

This research investigates the decision of where to claim asylum made by asylum seekers who come to the UK and explores the extent to which these decisions are a reflection of chance or choice. This work builds upon the growing, but as yet still limited body of evidence about the ‘choices’ that individuals are (or are not) able to exercise over the country in which they will seek asylum, and the factors (including pre-existing knowledge of human rights, asylum procedure, social welfare and political conditions in the UK, family and kinship networks, linguistic and cultural ties, and access to the labour market) that might contribute to the decision making process.

The research also explores the role of potential barriers (including border and immigration controls, restrictions on access to welfare and the labour markets, public hostility and information about policy and practice) that might influence any choices that asylum seekers make, as well as the role of agents and other key individuals (for example, family members) in the decision making process. Existing evidence suggests that agents and other individuals play an important role in shaping the decisions that asylum seekers make because they

provide, and limit, access to certain kinds of information and shape the context within which decisions are made.

Some of the existing research has explored the extent to which asylum seekers from different countries of origin share similarities in the processes by which decisions are made – for example, because they come from countries with historical, often colonial, links with the UK and therefore have access to certain kinds of information or particular routes of entry. There is rather less consideration of the extent to which age, gender and other factors (including educational and socio-economic status) affect the ‘choices’ available to asylum seekers.

This research approaches these questions from the perspective of asylum seekers and refugees themselves. In common with the recent research by Zimmermann (2009), it considers the role of human agency and decision making within the movements and the realities of how and why movements occurred. As Robinson and Segrott (2002, 7) suggest, if asylum seekers are seen as active agents, each adopting different strategies and each with different goals, it becomes necessary to reconceptualise flight “seeing it not as a single event but as a process rooted within and informed by the biography of that individual. The decision to flee, and the subsequent decision about where to flee to, arise from an individual’s past, represent that individual’s present and frequently shape their future”. The choices that asylum seekers are able to make will therefore be critically influenced by their country of origin, age, gender, socio-economic status and education, as well as their links with others who can help facilitate the journey and open up possibilities. Although this research, by definition, focuses only on those who have claimed asylum in the UK and does not include those who might otherwise have wanted to come here but have been prevented from doing so, it nonetheless provides important insights into the processes by which decision making takes place and the opportunities that asylum seekers do and do not have to influence the future direction of their lives.

## 1.2 Methodological approach

This report is based on evidence gathered through an in-depth review of the existing literature and semi-structured interviews with refugees and asylum seekers living in the UK. Three focus groups were also held.

An extensive review has been undertaken of the existing literature. This review includes all research published since 1990 in academic journals as well as research reports published or commissioned by governments (UK and elsewhere) and international and non-governmental organisations. The aim of the review is to 'map' existing knowledge on the decision making of asylum seekers, the effects of the various 'push' and 'pull' factors, and the role and implications of points of connection between people and places (through agents, friends and family and information networks). Material for inclusion in the literature review was identified through specialised online search engines along with websites hosted by academic institutions, organisations, and individuals active in the field. The main findings of existing research are outlined in section two of this report and elsewhere as appropriate.

A total of 43 asylum seekers and refugees were interviewed for this research, ten of whom were separated children when they applied for asylum. The circumstances of those who participated in the research were not known in advance of the interview and participants were not selected on the basis of status or the outcome of the application for asylum. Deliberative efforts were taken however to include participants from those countries from which the largest number of asylum seekers to the UK originate, and from a wide range of demographic backgrounds. The characteristics of the research respondents are described in more detail below. The interviews were undertaken in Brighton, London and Swansea. Access to research respondents was made possible with the assistance of a number of organisations. Many of these organisations also provided a space in which the interview could be conducted and, in some cases, made arrangements for interpreters.

Written informed consent was obtained from all those who participated. Where interviews involved asylum seekers under 18 years of age, permission was also sought from the child's social worker. Potential participants were given an information sheet providing details about the aims of the research (Appendix 1). Potential respondents were reassured that information provided during the course of the interview would be confidential and anonymised. It was made clear to all those who participated in the research that the

interview was in no way connected with their asylum application (particularly where a decision was outstanding) and that the information provided in the interview would not in any way contribute to, or impact on, the outcome of the decision making process. Participants were provided with an opportunity to leave their contact details in order to receive a copy of the research findings but they were under no obligation to do so. In most, but not all, cases the interview was audio recorded. Participants were reimbursed for their expenses.

The interviews were undertaken in a number of different venues in each of the locations. Most were conducted in the premises of the organisations that helped to facilitate access to respondents. Others were undertaken in the homes of those who participated. Some were undertaken in other locations, for example, in a church, a women's centre and at Swansea University. The interviews were undertaken using a detailed topic guide designed to ensure that consistency in the areas that the interviews covered (Appendix 2). Not all topics were covered in equal depth in all interviews: the particular experiences of respondents meant that different areas were of more or less relevance. With one exception, all of the interviews lasted for more than 40 minutes. Eight of the interviews lasted for more than one and a half hours. The average length of the interviews was just over an hour. The majority of the interviews (80 per cent) were undertaken in English and without the use of an interpreter.

As is always the case with this type of research, the conduct of the interview varied depending upon the circumstances under which it took place, the ability and willingness of the research participant to articulate his or her experiences, and a range of external factors. Some spoke at length and in great detail about their experiences and wanted to talk for longer whilst others were much more reticent. A number of people became very stressed. One woman cried throughout the interview, another periodically broke down, particularly when describing how her daughter had been left behind in her country of origin. Several respondents asked for breaks to compose themselves, to get fresh air or smoke a cigarette. Many were anxious and depressed, most notably when a decision had not yet been made on their application for asylum or it had been refused. For these people in particular, there was a desire to be heard and to explain the circumstances under which they had come to the UK. One young man who arrived as a separated child produced magazines and newspapers that had been sent over from his country of origin in support of his story and it was clear to the interviewer that he desperately wanted to be



believed. Several commented on their anxieties about the length of the asylum process and their concerns about the future, including for both children living in the UK and those left behind. One of the interviews took place on the same day that a family from the participant's country of origin was forcibly removed from the UK bringing these anxieties to the fore.

The material collected through the semi-structured interviews provides the primary data on which the analysis and conclusions of this report are based. This material is presented at length throughout the report in the form of quotations and narrative case studies. Testimony provided by individuals is presented in italics along with the nationality, gender, and age group of the respondent at the time of the research. All of the names used in the report are pseudonyms.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, three focus groups were held with asylum seekers and refugees living in Brighton. The focus groups were structured around three main themes: the knowledge that participants had about the UK before coming here, whether they planned to come to the UK or wanted to go somewhere else, and how they thought they would survive. A total of 25 people from a number of different countries of origin participated in the focus groups. One of the focus groups consisted of seven people from Zimbabwe. A second group of ten people consisted primarily of those from Sudan but included one person from the Democratic Republic of Congo and one from Yemen. The third focus group was a mixed group with participants from Zambia, Algeria, Ethiopia, Nigeria and China. The information gathered through the focus groups is less detailed than that gathered through the semi-structured interviews but confirms the findings and is referred to where appropriate.

### 1.3 Characteristics of research participants

Around a third (35 per cent) of the research participants were aged 35-44 at the time of the research, with a further 28 per cent aged 25-34. Taken together, those aged 24-44 constituted the majority (63 per cent) of the research participants. Five respondents were aged over 45, one of whom was in his seventies. Sixteen per cent were aged 18-24 years at the time of the research. Many of those in this age group had arrived in the UK as separated children. A further 9 per cent were aged 16 or 17 years old at the time of the research and had travelled to the UK on their own. In total, ten of the respondents were separated children when they applied for asylum. The age structure of the research group broadly corresponds with the overall

age breakdown of asylum seekers who come to the UK (Home Office 2008).

Gender plays an important role in shaping the refugee experience. Efforts were taken to ensure that both women and men were included in the research. Around a third (35 per cent) of those who participated were female. The proportion of female participants was slightly higher than the overall proportion for those seeking asylum in the UK which is approximately 30 per cent (Home Office 2008).

The research participants came from a wide range of countries. The largest groups were from Zimbabwe (seven respondents), Democratic Republic of Congo (six), Eritrea (five), Iraq (four) and Iran (four). There were three respondents from Somalia, two from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Algeria and one from each of the following countries: Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Sudan, Kuwait, Ethiopia and Burundi. In 2008 the top ten nationalities claiming asylum in the UK were Afghan, Iranian, Chinese, Iraqi, Eritrean, Zimbabwean, Somali, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Nigerian (Home Office 2009). Nearly 70 per cent of those who participated in this research originate from the top ten refugee producing countries for those claiming asylum in the UK.

A mixture of languages were provided by respondents in response to a question asking them what language they used as a child. Five described French as their first language. Two respondents said that their first language was English. Most, but not all respondents, spoke English at the time of the research. Respondents were asked about their English language skills before coming to the UK. Forty-four per cent described their English language skills as 'very poor' before coming to the UK and a further 12 per cent described their skills as 'poor'. Taken together these respondents (i.e. those who could not speak English) constituted more than half (56 per cent) of those who participated in the research. Around a fifth (21 per cent) described their English language skills as 'good' and a further 14 per cent said that they could speak very good English before coming to the UK. The remainder (nine per cent) described their English language skills as 'okay'.

Roughly equal proportions of those participating in the research described themselves as married or living with a partner and single (44 per cent and 37 per cent respectively). Two of the respondents had been widowed. Just over half (54 per cent) have children and, of these, the majority (80 per cent) had between one and three children. No-one who participated in the research had more than five children. The research participants had 56 children between them with ages ranging from one week to 45 years. Twelve of the participants had children who were five years or younger, and three had grown up children only. Most of

the children had travelled to the UK with their parents, others had arrived sometime later. A number of the children had been born in the UK. Some were still in the country of origin.

All of those who participated in this research have applied for asylum in the UK since 2003. Just over a quarter (26 per cent) applied for asylum in 2004 and a third (33 per cent) applied between 2005 and 2007. A fifth (21 per cent) applied in 2008 and a further fifth (19 per cent) in 2009. A significant majority (88 per cent) applied for asylum within a few days or weeks of their arrival in the UK. Five respondents applied some time later (between two months and seven years after their arrival in the UK).<sup>1</sup> Three respondents had travelled to the UK previously. One had visited family members on three separate occasions, one had travelled to the UK for medical treatment and one had attended a conference. In each case they had returned to their country of origin.

Around three quarters (74 per cent) of asylum applications were made in-country (that is, by people who had already entered the UK rather than at port on arrival) with the remainder applying at various ports of entry including Heathrow (four), Stansted (one), Gatwick (one) and Dover (one). Again, these proportions roughly approximate with overall figures for 2007 when 84 per cent of applications were made in-country (Home Office 2008).

In terms of current status, a fifth of those who participated in the research had been recognised as needing international protection and had been granted refugee status. In line with the 2005 policy change, most have only been granted leave to remain in the UK for five years. No-one had been granted humanitarian protection. Of the other participants, a significant proportion (37 per cent) had yet to receive an initial decision on their application for asylum. A further 37 per cent had been refused, around two thirds of whom were awaiting an appeal hearing against a refusal of their asylum claim. Finally, research participants were asked about their experiences of education and employment in their country of origin. The majority (86 per cent) attended school in their country of origin. Of these more than a quarter (27 per cent) had no qualifications. An equal proportion (27 per cent) had obtained university degrees. Ninety per cent of adult respondents were employed before leaving. The

biggest single type of employment was working for a government department. Six respondents were working in the civil service and one was working for an international organisation before coming to the UK. Other types of employment included retail, manufacturing and catering. The respondents included a nurse, soldier, teacher, shepherd, electrician, baker and car mechanic. Three respondents owned their own businesses.

## 1.4 Structure of the report

Section 2 provides an overview of the policy context within which this research is located. It summarises existing evidence on the relationship between asylum policy and practice and the level and distribution of asylum applications. It also provides an overview of existing evidence of the factors that are thought to affect the decision making of asylum seekers, including knowledge of asylum policy, links between countries of origin and destination, social networks, and the role of agents.

Section 3 examines the concept of 'choice' in the asylum context through an exploration of the circumstances under which asylum seekers leave their countries of origin. It presents the findings of the research in relation to the decision to come to the UK and the point in the process at which this decision was made, and by whom.

Section 4 explores the importance of both social networks on the one hand and agents on the other in influencing the decision to come to the UK and in facilitating the journey. The route taken to get to the UK is also discussed.

Section 5 considers the quality and quantity of asylum seekers' pre-existing knowledge and information about the UK including in relation to the asylum process and access to employment opportunities and social welfare. It also looks at more general perceptions and images of the UK including in relation to people and places, culture, language, politics and human rights. The sources of this information are also discussed.

The report concludes with a summary of the key findings of the research. It considers the implications of current understanding of the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK and makes recommendations for policy, practice and further research.

---

1 There are a number of different reasons why the application was made sometime after arrival. In most cases it was because the circumstances in the country of origin had changed significantly in the period since arrival and it was considered impossible to return. In addition, the application made seven years after arrival involved a woman who had been abused and treated as a domestic slave by her husband. She had been isolated and was unaware of her rights.

# Section 2 Background and context

## 2.1 The policy context

Since the late 1990s, debates about asylum in the UK, as in many other European countries, have been dominated by concerns about the high number of asylum applications compared to the mid-1980s and a desire to reduce the numbers reaching the UK to seek asylum (Schuster 2000, 2005). Just as significantly, there have been growing concerns about differences in levels of asylum applications between countries and over time. Policy makers seeking to understand these patterns have often concluded that the explanation for differential application rates between countries must lie in differences in the asylum systems of various countries which are perceived as being more or less attractive to potential asylum seekers.

Two assumptions underpin much of current understanding on the decision making of asylum seekers. Firstly, there is a view – held by many politicians, policy makers, sections of the media and, in turn, large swathes of the public – that most asylum seekers are in reality economic migrants who make choices about where to seek asylum based on opportunities for employment and access to welfare benefits. Secondly, there is a widely held belief that asylum seekers have a sufficiently detailed knowledge about the asylum systems of European countries and the rights to work and welfare to make rational and informed choices about destinations (Robinson and Segrott 2002). This can be seen in the concept of ‘asylum shopping’, or the idea that asylum seekers choose one country over another on the basis of a higher standard of reception conditions or social security assistance. Asylum seekers are assumed to be well informed about the relative openness and attractiveness of different destination countries’ asylum systems and, in addition, able to make conscious choices about where to live based on this information (Collyer 2004).

These assumptions are reflected in debates about the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK. The idea of ‘pull’ factors is frequently used to explain patterns of asylum applications across different destination countries and to reject calls for improvements in reception conditions such as entitlements to work. Received wisdom suggests that asylum seekers come to the UK in larger numbers than many other European

countries because of a number of ‘pull’ factors including the generosity of the welfare system and the ease of finding work in the informal labour market, the absence of identity cards and the UK’s fairly poor record on sending home unsuccessful asylum applicants (Gilbert and Koser 2006). The UK, along with other European countries, has responded to concerns about the number of asylum applications and perceived weaknesses in its asylum system by making significant changes to its asylum policy and practice. These changes have focused primarily on three areas.

Firstly, there has been a significant strengthening of entry and pre-entry controls intended to make it increasingly difficult for asylum seekers to enter or reach the UK in order to claim protection (Webber 1996, 2008; Schuster 2000; Nadig 2002; Flynn 2005; Middleton 2005; Reynolds and Muggeridge 2008). These pre-entry controls have focused on measures to stop people arriving including an extension of visa requirements and financial penalties for airlines and shipping companies transporting passengers who do not have permission to enter the UK. Airline and shipping company staff worldwide have effectively become immigration officers, turning back visa-less passengers or those with obviously forged documents (Webber 1996). Since there is no legal way to travel to the UK for the specific purpose of claiming asylum, refugees are forced to travel irregularly in ‘mixed flows’, and hence encounter the same border controls as

The UK, along with other European countries, has responded to concerns about the number of asylum applications and perceived weaknesses in its asylum system by making significant changes to its asylum policy and practice.



other irregular migrants (Reynolds and Muggeridge 2008). Although these pre-entry controls aim to reduce 'unfounded' applications, they are not 'protection-sensitive' and do not differentiate between those in need of protection and other migrants. This is reflected in the fact that interception activities conducted by the UK's outposted immigration officials and private carriers contain no safeguards for persons who many need international protection. Ironically pre-entry controls have most often been introduced in response to increases in the number of asylum seekers from particular countries, a phenomenon which might ordinarily be interpreted as constituting evidence of an underlying conflict and increased need for protection.

Secondly, for those who are able to reach the UK, rules concerning determination procedures have been made more restrictive (Thielemann 2004; Webber 2006; Reynolds and Muggeridge 2008). There are speedier asylum procedures for those deemed 'manifestly unfounded' and those who have travelled through 'safe third countries' before making a claim. Asylum seekers from countries which are deemed as being generally safe can be returned before an appeal against a negative decision is heard. Access to legal advice and representation has been significantly reduced through the imposition of time and cost limits and many asylum seekers are unable to access legal representation to assist them in presenting their case. Those who are badly represented or cannot find a publicly-funded legal representative face removal from the UK without key facts in their cases being considered by the Home Office or the courts (Cutler and Wren 2005). There is greater use of detention, including whilst initial decisions are being made for some individuals (so-called detained 'fast-track').

Finally, because provisions for support are widely regarded as an important pull factor for asylum seekers, access to welfare has become an important line of defence in the Government's attempts to reduce the number of asylum seekers (Schuster 2000; Bloch and Schuster 2002). A variety of measures have been introduced over the past decade to reduce the perceived attractiveness and costs of support and integration policies in receiving states. These measures include dispersal policies which provide accommodation on a 'no-choice' basis, removing the right to work until refugee status is granted for the majority (with few exceptions), and providing benefits in kind rather than cash (Zetter *et al.* 2003). Most recently the UK government has further reduced the level of welfare support provided to asylum seekers

waiting for a decision and has implemented a policy of limited leave to remain for five years for those granted refugee status.

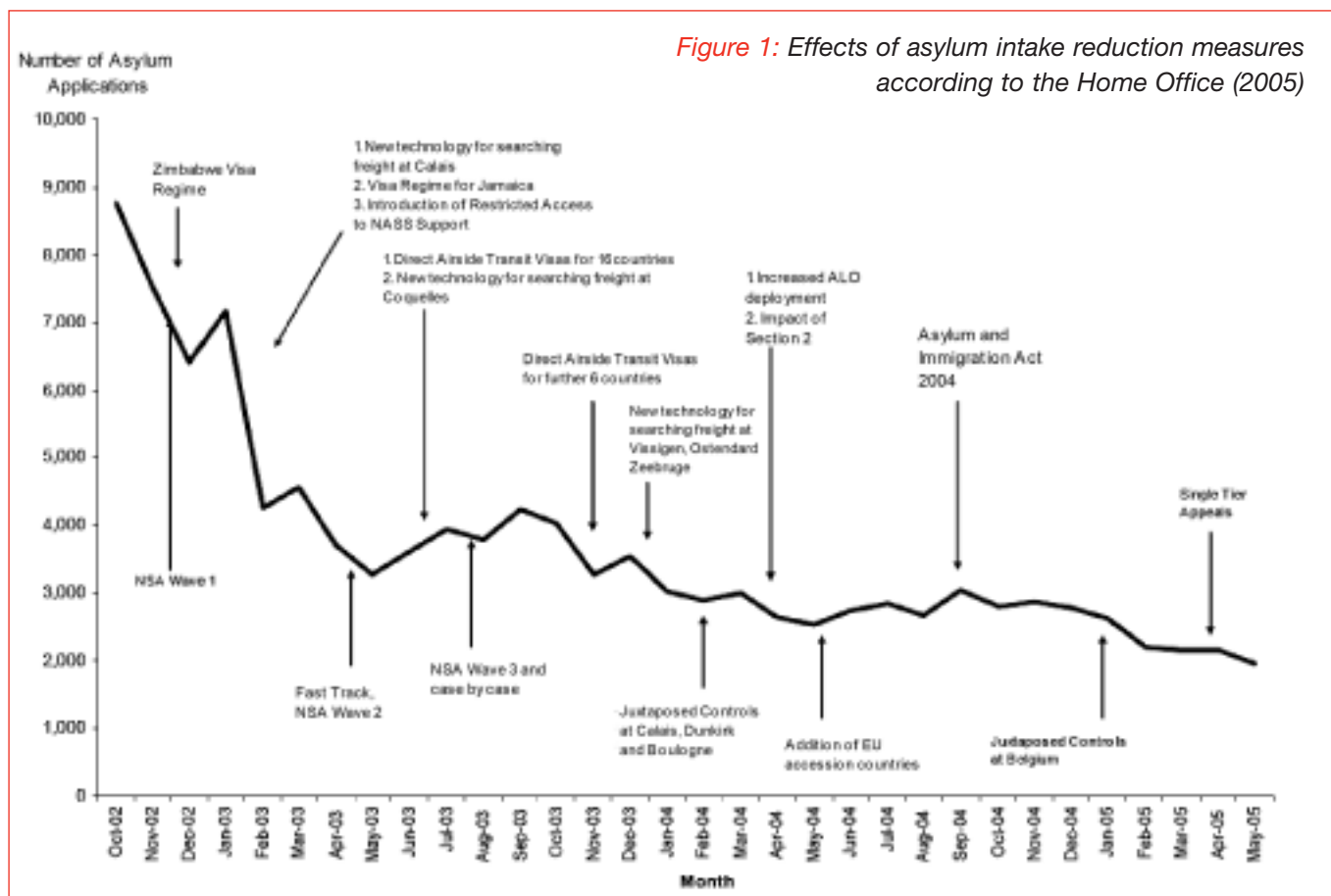
## 2.2 The impact of policy changes

In 2002 the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, made a public commitment that the Government would halve the number of asylum applications by the end of September 2003 compared with October 2002 (National Audit Office 2004). In the period since that time asylum applications have gone down from 84,130 in 2002 to 25,930, a fall of around 70 per cent (Home Office 2009). The UK Government, along with other governments in Europe, has attributed the decline in asylum applications to the changes that have been made to the asylum system (Collyer 2004; Hatton 2008). It is implied that potential asylum seekers are aware of these changes and that they have therefore chosen to go elsewhere. The Home Office maintains that there is a clear relationship between policy changes and increased border controls introduced over the past decade and the fall in asylum applications. This relationship was represented in its 2005 bulletin (Home Office 2005) (*Figure 1, opposite*) and has been interpreted as confirming the widely-held view that asylum seekers are mostly economic migrants who make informed choices about where to claim asylum based on pre-existing knowledge of asylum policy and practice.

In reality however there is no clear evidence of a causal relationship between changes in asylum policies and the level of asylum applications. Research undertaken for the Home Office found that it was difficult to establish causal links between specific policies and the flow of asylum seekers to Europe during the period 1990-2000 (Zetter *et al.* 2003). These difficulties in establishing a causal link arise from the tendency for a range of policy measures to be introduced simultaneously. This renders it difficult to disaggregate the impact of specific changes in asylum policy and practice. A consistent theme throughout the report by Zetter *et al.* (2003) is the muted relationship between policy and impacts, and the difficulty of attributing, from the available research literature and statistics, direct causal relationships between policy and outcomes.

In an effort to overcome this, Thielemann (2004) has devised a 'deterrence index' which includes measures

Figure 1: Effects of asylum intake reduction measures according to the Home Office (2005)



generally regarded by policy makers as having the potential to significantly influence an asylum seeker's decision as to which country to apply to. Using data on asylum applications to 17 European countries from 1985 to 2000, he found there to be a weak correlation between asylum applications and policy-related deterrence measures. He suggests that while European efforts to coordinate national asylum legislation appears to have deflected substantial numbers of asylum seekers to less developed countries, they have done little to address the unequal distribution of asylum seekers among Western European states.

It is also clear that different kinds of policies have varying levels of effectiveness in reducing asylum applications. The evidence presented by Zetter *et al.* (2003) suggests that direct pre-entry measures have had the greatest impact on the number of asylum applications, well founded or otherwise. These policies do not so much deter applications as prevent them.<sup>2</sup> Hatton (2008) also concludes that, on average, policies designed to tighten access reduced applications in Europe by 14 per cent between 2001 and 2006. By contrast policies which diminish the socio-economic

conditions of asylum seekers once they have entered a country – for example, through policies of dispersal, limiting welfare support or removing the right to work – are widely considered to have produced only limited effects or no effect at all (Böcker and Havinga 1997; Zetter *et al.* 2003). Thielemann (2003, 2004) suggests that this is because the key determinants of an asylum seeker's choice of host country are historical, economic and reputational factors that lie largely beyond the reach of asylum policy makers.

This evidence suggests that asylum applications may reflect other factors and influences, including changes in policy towards other groups of migrants, the state of labour markets or other conditions in destination countries, changes in countries of origin due to political, military and other events, or changes in countries chosen for asylum seekers by agents (Zetter *et al.* 2003; National Audit Office 2004; Collyer 2004; Hatton 2008). When patterns of origins and destinations are compared for separate years, it becomes clear that the destinations of asylum seekers have been constantly changing regardless of policy and practice.

2 Even so, Zetter *et al.* (2003) suggest that some of these measures, such as visa controls, may only have limited numbers for particular nationalities for a limited period of time, after which numbers again started to grow.

## 2.3 Existing evidence on the decision making of asylum seekers

As noted above, it is often assumed by policy makers and the public that individuals have a detailed knowledge of asylum policy and practice in different countries and that they make rational choices and decisions about where to claim asylum based on this knowledge. It is assumed that when policies are changed asylum seekers quickly become aware of these changes either directly or through their agents. A growing body of literature has investigated the choices made by asylum seekers, typically focusing on individual motivations and decisions. These studies question the relevance of policy factors in destination decisions made by asylum seekers and instead highlight the importance of links between countries of origin and destination, social networks, and the role of agents.

### Knowledge of asylum policy and practice

Evidence on the extent to which individuals have information about asylum policy and practice in destination countries is mixed. On the one hand, some research suggests that particular countries may be perceived as having a more or less generous asylum policy. This impression may be a general one reflecting assumptions made by individuals about the overall political and human rights situation, or may be based on information provided by a family member or an agent seeking to transport an individual to a particular destination. Although this information is not always correct, and in some cases may be deliberately misleading, it can nevertheless be important. Some studies have identified a correlation between refugee recognition rates and the number of asylum seekers in certain countries (Koser 1997; Vink and Meijerink 2003; Neumayer 2004; Papadopoulou 2004). As with all other factors however, it is unclear whether the existence of a correlation between refugee recognition rates and higher applications means that recognition rates are a significant causal factor.

Other research finds not only that many people do not have any choice about the country to which they travel, but that even those who do, know little or nothing about the asylum system before they arrive (Robinson and Segrott 2002; Collyer 2004; Gilbert and Koser 2006). This includes individuals who are able to draw upon existing social networks of family, friends and co-nationals (Koser and Pinkerton 2002). Many of the respondents in Robinson and Segrott's (2002)

study for example, did not arrive with the intention of claiming asylum, or in the knowledge that they would have to insert themselves into a series of complex procedures, such as interviews, forms and fingerprinting. The authors found that a number of people had no idea at all about the asylum process. Detailed knowledge of asylum procedures or perceived weaknesses in these procedures were less important reasons for people coming to the UK than a perception of the UK as a tolerant country. Research with asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Colombia, Kosovo and Somalia found that few of the respondents arrived with much knowledge of the UK and their knowledge was limited to general impressions of the country. They knew little about asylum policy and practice (Gilbert and Koser 2006). Middleton (2005) similarly concludes that many - perhaps the majority - of asylum seekers do not arrive in the destination country with a detailed knowledge of asylum policy but on the basis of a vague notion that they will receive protection.

Research has also considered the implications of changes in policies for support and integration of asylum seekers. Allowing asylum seekers to work whilst their claim to asylum is being assessed has been regarded as a pull factor for potential asylum seekers. This is reflected in the fact that virtually all countries of destination in Europe have work restrictions for asylum seekers in place. A number of countries, including the UK, have gone further and now prohibit the vast majority of asylum seekers from undertaking any work until their asylum application has been accepted (Thielemann 2004; Doyle 2009). In addition it is widely perceived that economic migrants are drawn to the UK and other European states by the promise of welfare benefits (Bloch and Schuster 2002, 2005). In this context reductions in both the level and type of support for asylum seekers have been viewed as a mechanism for discouraging potential asylum seekers.

Evidence on whether opportunities for employment and access to welfare support shape the decision making of asylum seekers is relatively clear. Economic considerations do play a role when it comes to decisions about where to apply for asylum but only for those who are in a position to choose in which country to lodge their asylum application (Thielemann 2003). Such a description can only be applied to a small, and arguably decreasing, minority of asylum seekers, most notably those who have the financial resources to pay an agent to take them to a particular location. Moreover as Thielemann (2003, 25) points out, "[s]eeking physical security from persecution as well as economic opportunities in a country of destination can hardly be regarded as incompatible objectives for people forced to leave their country of origin". It seems

likely if asylum seekers are able to make any choice at all, then they are more likely to be drawn to countries that are perceived as rich, economically thriving industrialised countries in which they are able to rebuild their lives. They are generally unaware of short-term changes in economic growth rates and employment levels or of any specific restrictions on the right to work (Neumayer 2004).

Studies have identified that there is no statistically significant relationship between the level of social and welfare benefits and asylum applications and little evidence for the claim that there is widespread and systematic 'asylum shopping' to exploit differences in host countries' welfare provisions (Thielemann 2003; Neumayer 2003). As with the general state of the economy, the general generosity of welfare programmes may be of greater significance than the generosity of social and welfare benefits specific to asylum seekers. Whilst financial support is clearly important in enabling an individual to survive and rebuild a life, it is not a motivation for seeking asylum in the UK (Zimmermann 2009).

## Links between countries of origin and destination

Existing research on the decision making of asylum seekers suggests that historical and cultural links predispose people to seek asylum in specific countries (Böcker and Havinga 1997; Castles *et al.* 2003; Neumayer 2004; Thielemann 2003; Middleton 2005; Moore and Shellman 2007). Historical links, most commonly as a result of colonial relationships between countries, create powerful connections in a number of ways. Past colonial links mean that individuals are more likely to have members of family or other co-nationals living in certain countries. As suggested below, these social networks can play an important part in facilitating migration although it seems likely that their significance has been reduced by increasingly restrictive systems of immigration control which make it more difficult for asylum seekers to enter the UK. In addition, historical links between countries mean that some countries have common language, legal, education and welfare systems as well as shared cultural reference points. These characteristics may lead people to feel that they can integrate into certain countries more easily than others (Robinson and Segrott 2002) Individuals may also have a strongly held belief that although their countries of origin have won independence from the UK, the 'motherland' has an ongoing duty to protect them or that the problems they are experiencing now are linked to divisive colonial rule.

In an early study into the decision making of asylum seekers Böcker and Havinga (1998) found that the existence of colonial ties was the most significant influence on asylum destination. Their study also highlighted the significance of a common language, the importance of an established community of co-nationals, and trade links between the country of origin and destination. This conclusion is supported by Zetter *et al.* (2003), who identify a number of structural factors influencing the decision of asylum seekers to apply in particular countries. These include former colonial relationships between particular sending countries and particular receiving states as well as other long standing historic ties which may not be easily susceptible to relatively short term measures designed to curb unfounded claims for asylum. The existence of settled communities of co-ethnics or co-nationals and linguistic and cultural affinity with the receiving state, as reflected in the existence of migrant networks, may also play a role. The authors suggest that these factors help to explain why the number of asylum applications in individual countries appears at times to have operated independently of changes in asylum policy and practice.

## Social networks

There are no clear definitions in the literature on the decision making of asylum seekers about what is meant by social networks but these are usually understood as comprising family and friends, community organisations and intermediaries such as labour recruiters and travel operators (Koser 1997; Koser and Pinkerton 2002). A number of studies have found that social networks assist or encourage movements by informing, facilitating or supporting migrants (Thielemann 2003; Neumayer 2004; Papadopoulou 2004; Williams 2006). For example, the presence of family and friends played a part in determining why around a third of the respondents in the research undertaken by Robinson and Segrott (2002) chose the UK as the country in which to claim asylum.

Robinson and Segrott (2002) found that family and friends shaped the migration decisions of asylum seekers in two distinct ways. Firstly, the prospect of family reunification or the knowledge that when they arrived they would know someone (even if not a close relative) acted as a strong influence for many asylum seekers once they had made the decision to leave their home country. Secondly, relatives and friends in the UK passed information about life in this country back to potential asylum seekers, either before or during the journey. However the amount of information provided



by friends and family living in the UK was found to be much less than expected and was almost invariably positive. Thielemann (2003) has similarly found that the number of people from the main countries of origin already resident in a particular host country is strongly and positively correlated with the number of asylum applicants this country receives. Although the amount of information received is quite low, it appears that any kind of contact, no matter how fleeting will constitute an important factor for potential asylum seekers, and one that can tip the balance towards a decision to claim asylum in any particular country. This research suggests that once a migratory flow is established it may continue even where policies in relation to asylum seekers change (Castles *et al.* 2003).

There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that the nature of social relationships and the role that they play in the decision making process is becoming increasingly complex. As Koser and Pinkerton (2002) suggest, the geography of asylum migration to the European Union (EU) is changing and some of the fastest growing groups in countries such as the UK have been those with little previous connection to their chosen country of asylum, for example, Colombians and Chinese. This is largely a reflection of increasingly restrictive immigration control policies and, in particular, the introduction of pre-entry controls, including visa requirements, for nationals of countries with colonial ties. This has had the effect of disrupting existing social networks between some countries of origin and destination, and creating new patterns and flows towards which immigration controls have been less typically directed.

In addition, there is some evidence that social networks may have effects that are counterintuitive. Based on research undertaken with Algerian asylum seekers living in the UK, Collyer (2004) notes that many of those in his study had travelled first to France and then on to the UK. These asylum seekers appear to be an exception to factors highlighted in recent work in the area of choice of asylum destination since their presence in the UK cannot be explained by the factors identified in the existing literature, namely favourable policy, family networks, cultural affinity or the activities of agents: "Rather, their migration to Britain was motivated by a range of other factors relating to historical complexities of the Franco-Algerian relationship" (Collyer 2004, 376). Collyer suggests that for groups such as Algerians there may be a deliberate choice to reject the 'mother country', not least because of actual or perceived political links or cultural affinity between the two countries. Moreover he suggests that some may deliberately choose not to exploit social networks and relationships in particular countries

precisely because of the stress that can be imposed on these relationships during the asylum process (and beyond).

## The role of agents

Policies to restrict or control entry have dominated the European response to asylum flows over the past decade or so. This has resulted in measures which include increased visa restrictions and pre-entry controls, changes in procedures for asylum determination and criteria, the introduction of temporary protection regimes and a range of policies intended to deter asylum seekers from entering member states. For some time now it has been recognised that increasing restrictions on migration to Europe mean that many migrants who wish to claim asylum have no choice but to arrive illegally (Morrison and Crosland 2001). There is near-universal consensus in the existing literature that this has created a 'migration industry' of agents (sometimes also described as smugglers and facilitators) upon whom asylum seekers must rely in order to secure access to protection (Koser 1997; Van Liempt and Doomernik 1998; Koser 2000; Salt 2000; Koser and Pinkerton 2002; Nadig 2002; Castles *et al.* 2003; Thielemann 2003; Papadopoulou 2004; Collyer 2005). Indeed many commentators go further and suggest that it is extremely difficult to consider migrating to the West without the services of an agent (Middleton 2005). This is particularly true for those making journeys which are long and complex (Collyer 2004, Reynolds and Muggeridge 2008).

A wide range of activities may be undertaken by agents in their efforts to get asylum seekers into the UK and other countries (Nadig 2002). These activities include securing travel documents and tickets, arranging the journey itself and even travelling with the asylum seeker to his or her final destination and facilitating contact with other individuals and organisations. The activities of agents are often described as 'smuggling'. Smuggling is typically a short-term, commercial relationship between the individual offering the service and the migrant 'client' paying for it, and it is terminated after the crossing (Papadopoulou 2004). Smuggling differs significantly from 'trafficking' which involves an on-going exploitative relationship with the agent (Morrison and Crosland 2000). In practice however it may be difficult to differentiate between these two types of movement during the journey, not least because those who are smuggled or trafficked may travel together in a single group and may be separated out at different points in the journey. The definition of smuggling using the

services of an agent more closely describes the experiences of many of the asylum seekers and refugees who participated in this research.

In the research undertaken by Robinson and Segrott (2002), agents were critical determinants of the destination eventually reached by asylum seekers. In some cases agents were in a position to impose their will upon their clients about destinations and routes, but in others, agents and asylum seekers negotiated, with the outcome depending on the ability of the latter to pay and the former to deliver chosen destinations. The research found that, in simple terms, agents provided three kinds of services to the asylum seekers in the sample. The first was the provision of travel documents, including tickets, visas and passports. The second type of service was the actual facilitation of journeys. In certain cases agents travelled with asylum seekers, often so that they could re-possess false documentation before arrival in the UK. The third type of service was the channelling of asylum seekers towards particular destinations, either through limiting the possibilities available to them, offering a choice of migration destinations, or giving advice on specific countries.

The evidence from existing research suggests that the exact mix of services provided to any one individual varies greatly, according to the relationship that exists between the agent and the asylum seeker and their relative 'power' in any negotiations. The common assumption is that migrants who are smuggled are recruited by criminals and have little to say within the migration process and agents are widely described by policy makers and politicians in negative terms. In reality however the relationship between agents and those who use their services seems much more diverse (Van Liempt and Doomernik 1998). To some extent agents are both the villains and the heroes of the piece. If it were not for the services provided by agents it is clear that many asylum seekers would simply not be able to escape from situations of conflict, political repression and human rights abuse. On the other hand, most agents are involved in smuggling for reasons of financial gain and do not necessarily have the interests and safety of individuals at the forefront of their considerations. As a result agents may 'sell' a version of life in a destination country that is misleading.

There is evidence that agents are becoming increasingly influential in determining the destination 'choices' that are made by asylum seekers (Zimmerman 2009). Some asylum seekers have effectively lost control of their own migration with their destinations being decided by agents rather than, for

example, by the location of friends and family (Koser and Pinkerton 2002; Gilbert and Koser 2006). As Collyer (2005) suggests, the agent is effectively employed to extend the reach of a migrant's social and search network. It also seems likely that one of the consequences of the growing use of agents is that economic class has become an increasingly important factor in determining the destination of asylum seekers (Van Hear 2004). As a result of the escalation of the costs associated with negotiating the increasingly restrictive regimes unfolding in richer countries, access to protection will be limited to better resourced migrants. This does not necessarily mean that those who have greater resources – and therefore choices – at their disposal are not in need of protection. Rather it means that the capacity to migrate and seek protection is even more limited and, in turn, more dangerous, for those who are poor.

# Section 3 The decision to leave

## 3.1 The concept of 'choice' in the asylum context

The term 'choice' is a contentious one when applied to the migration of asylum seekers (Robinson and Segrott 2002). Despite the widely-held belief that the majority of asylum seekers are actually 'economic migrants', there is clear evidence that conflict is the single most significant factor associated with most flows of asylum seekers to the countries of Europe (Zolberg 1989; Zolberg *et al.* 1993; Castles *et al.* 2003; Zetter *et al.* 2003; Neumayer 2005; Hatton 2008). In some cases these conflicts take the form of an all-out internal war, often leading to international humanitarian, diplomatic or even military intervention. In other cases, there is persecution of ethnic and religious minorities by dominant groups, or by leaders using ethnicity or religion as a way of consolidating their own power. Some groups may be particularly vulnerable or deliberately targeted because of their gender or age, or because they have relationships with others who are considered to be undermining the hierarchies of power. Others are targeted because of their political opposition to dominant regimes.

For all of those who participated in this research, their primary objective was reaching a place of safety. The decision about where that place of safety might be was very much a secondary consideration. This is perhaps not surprising given the nationality of research participants and their experiences in their countries of origin. A significant proportion (40 per cent) came from countries in which there is (or was at the time of their departure) on-going conflict in the form of war (Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka). Others (around a third) came from countries in which there is well-documented political repression of opposition groups (Zimbabwe and Eritrea). Religious and gender-based persecution is a feature of some of the countries from which respondents originate (Iran, Pakistan and Algeria).

The concept of 'choice' can only be understood in the context of the circumstances under which individuals leave their countries of origin. The narratives presented throughout this report emphasise that refugee migrations are characterised by experiences of war,

conflict and persecution. It is these 'push' factors that are decisive in the decision to migrate, rather than the 'pull' of any particular destination country (Middleton 2005). A similar point is made by Collyer (2004) who points out that the first consideration in any analysis of the choice asylum seekers make must be the absence of choice. This absence of choice is reflected in the experiences of many of those who participated in this research, for whom there was simply no choice involved in the decision to leave.

*The only thing in my mind was to be safe. I didn't make any choice to leave my country.*  
*(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 35-44)*

Some emphasised that they did not want to leave because it meant leaving behind family members and loved ones, as well as homes, jobs and friends.

*I didn't want to come to the UK. I was working. I had a nice house in Zimbabwe and my own business. I was involved with the church. I never had a plan to leave.*  
*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

Others described how they were effectively forced to leave their countries against their will. Salena was forced by her family to marry a man living in the UK for whom she became a domestic slave and who abused her mentally and physically over a period of more than four years. It was clear that she did not want to come to the UK but was forced to do so by her family.

*I didn't want to go and she just made me go, just like that...I did not want to come to the UK, it was my mother's decision. (See case study below).*

### Case study

Salena is from Zimbabwe. When she was growing up she went to a girl's boarding school and found that she was attracted to women. When her mother made arrangements for her to marry a neighbour she ran away but was found and beaten up by her brother: *I still have scars on my body.* Salena told her family that she was



a lesbian. As a result which she was arrested and raped by a policeman. When she was released she ran away to the copper belt where she became a sex worker. Unable to cope with what she described as a “horrific experience” Selena returned to her family and was once again beaten up. Her mother then arranged for her to marry a man. She travelled with the man and his family to the UK on a false passport. Once in the UK the man treated her like a domestic slave and physically and mentally abused her. Although she was helped by several women who eventually managed to get her into a refuge, she returned and was beaten so badly by her husband that she was hospitalised. She was subsequently diagnosed as being HIV positive. Although Selena was eventually able to escape and apply for asylum she remains very depressed and uncertain about her future.

The absence of choice in the decision to leave should not be interpreted as meaning that asylum seekers are passive victims propelled around the world by external forces (Robinson and Segrott 2003). It is important to recognise that there is a continuum between the rationale choice behaviour of proactive migrants seeking to maximise net advantage and the reactive behaviour of those whose degrees of freedom are severely constrained by the circumstances of their departure (Richmond 1993; Turton 2003; Middleton 2005). Between these two extremes there are a large proportion of people crossing state borders who have little control over the economic, social and political pressures exerted on them but nonetheless exercise a limited degree of choice in the selection of destination and the timing of their movements. Like all migrants, forced migrants make choices, albeit within a narrower range of possibilities (Turton 2003). Even under the most difficult of circumstances, asylum seekers are able to exert some agency, although the room for manoeuvre may be severely constrained by the situations in which they find themselves. The ability of asylum seekers to exert agency also reflects their individual characteristics (for example, gender, age, class and education) and family background (for example, whether they are married or have children), and the relationship between structural constraints (for example, the political and economic conditions) and facilitating factors (such as social networks and existing links with potential destination countries).

## 3.2 Reasons for leaving

Research participants were asked about the circumstances under which they decided to leave their country of origin and many provided detailed accounts of their experiences. Many respondents, both men and women, described being targeted by the authorities and imprisoned as a result of their political opposition. A woman from Zimbabwe described being repeatedly raped by the police, burnt with cigarettes and threatened with death. A man from the Democratic Republic of Congo who was part of a group of student activists was arrested three times and tortured. Another was arrested because of his opposition activities and had to go into hiding from the authorities after his escape from prison. Others described how family members had been killed or had gone missing.

*I was persecuted, I have been tortured, insulted, harassed. I had everything you can imagine...When my brother escaped from Algeria, the army and the Gendarmes were looking for him. They killed my father and my brother. Actually we didn't know about my brother. We never heard any more since they took him in 1998...we had no news. There are 200,000 disappeared in Algeria. When we won the election, the army cancelled it and started to torture all member of the FIS [Islamic Salvation Front]. They have opened camps of concentration in the desert like Hitler.*

*(Algeria, male, 35-44)*

Some of the respondents were not politically active but were assumed to be opposed to the Government as a result of their work with marginalised groups. One man worked with street children in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Government believed that the organisation he was working for was equipping the children with weapons to overthrow it. He was detained for three months before his uncle bribed a police officer and helped him to escape. A Tamil woman from Sri Lanka described how her work with an international organisation meant that she regularly travelled through areas controlled by the LTTE (the Tamil Tigers). She was accused of supporting the LTTE and her husband, an importer of building materials, was accused of providing the group with financial support.

A number of respondents described how they had been persecuted because of their religion, race or national identity. A young man from Iraq described the

3 According to the Minority Rights Group, Sabian Mandaean face extinction as a people. Around two-thirds of the population has been expelled or killed since 2003. In September 2005 the BBC estimated the remaining population at 13,000. See [www.minorityrights.org/5746/iraq/sabian-mandaeans.html](http://www.minorityrights.org/5746/iraq/sabian-mandaeans.html)

difficulties he experienced as a member of a minority religious and ethnic group, the Sabian Mandaeans.<sup>3</sup>

*I am not Muslim, I am a Sabian Mandaean. You either have to leave Iraq or change your religion. I went with my parents to stay with a Christian friend but this was not safe. While we were staying with our friend, many Christians were killed. My parents considered this to be a very dangerous situation and began planning for me to leave. There were just two good things under Saddam Hussein, he had security under control and there was no threat with regard to different religions – but only these two things.*

**(Iraq, male, 25-34)**

A woman from Eritrea was beaten because she was a member of a Pentecostal prayer group. Her husband, along with other men in the group, was taken to prison and is still being detained.<sup>4</sup> A Christian man from Algeria is a member of the Kabyle, a minority ethnic group.<sup>5</sup> He described how a group of twenty men came to burn down the house where they used to pray. He does not know who the attackers were because the Kabyle Christians experience persecution at the hands of both the government and the GIA (an armed Islamic group that is trying to overthrow the Algerian government). Another man from Kuwait is a Bedoon. He explained that the Bedoon in Kuwait have no nationality and therefore no rights. He was accused of being involved in political activities and imprisoned.

*I am Bedoon. We were born in Kuwait from generations, but we used to have some rights in Kuwait and Bedoon now have no rights at all. With no nationality, we are denied all rights as Kuwait citizens. In 1995 we could apply for nationality. It was only one year and they stopped it. They took the number they wanted all the rest and I am one of them, had no state. We are all stateless. They didn't want to recognise us...Bedoon in Arabic means without, without nationality...I was accused of a political act, to organise sit in and march against the government. I was in prison for 32 days...I had to sign paper. I don't even know what it was about. You can die in prison or stay there forever.*

**(Kuwait, male, 25-34)**

Several of those who participated in the research described violence and human rights abuses that had taken place at the hands of their spouses, parents or other family members. Under international refugee law, women who are subject to community and familial abuse are entitled to protection if the state systematically fails to protect them. This is reflected in UK case law. One woman from Pakistan described how she was forced into prostitution by her husband. Selena, whose experiences were described above (see case study) was beaten by her brothers because she was a lesbian and forced to marry a man who subsequently physically and mentally abused her.

Ten of the research participants arrived in the UK and applied for asylum as separated children. Existing evidence on the pre-flight experiences of separated children suggests that children can experience conflict and political oppression in particular ways (Hopkins and Hill 2008; Crawley 2009a). This reflects the relative lack of power that children often have, which requires them to engage with political structures in ways that differ from their adult counterparts. Children can also be particularly vulnerable in situations of conflict.

The experiences of children who participated in this research varied widely. Some were directly involved in conflict or had been persecuted because of their political, ethnic or religious identity. A 16 year old boy from Iraq was imprisoned for two and a half months as a result of his participation in a demonstration and his father's political activities. Another boy from Eritrea was unable to practice his religion (Pentecostal) and was afraid that he was to be forcibly conscripted. A young man from the Ivory Coast described how his family had been attacked and their house burnt. Although the reasons for the attack are unclear the consequences were clearly devastating for him and his family. Both parents were killed and he was seriously injured.

*...I saw the smoke and a group of people standing by my house. When I got there my mum was very naked. My dad was standing up. I am the eldest and I tried to protect my family but they put me down and beat me up. I tried to protect my mother from the man that was on top of her so they held me down and went to cut off my left hand. I covered it with my right hand and in the process lost my thumb.*

**(Ivory Coast, male, 18-24)**

4 According to Amnesty International, hundreds of members of Eritrea's Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, both adults and children, and several pastors, have been arrested since early 2003, following a government directive of May 2002 closing down the minority churches and ordering them to register with the new Department of Religious Affairs. See <http://asiapacific.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAFR640062004?open&of=ENG-ERI>

5 The Kabyles are a Berber people whose traditional homeland is in the highlands of north eastern Algeria and who have been involved in clashes with the Algerian authorities. See [www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?!=1&id=1415](http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?!=1&id=1415)

Roni was 16 years old at the time of the research. He was a child soldier in the Democratic Republic of Congo but ran away from the rebels (see case study). Unlike the other children in the research he had independent economic resources and was able to be strategic about his escape although he was still unable to reach his preferred destination.

### Case study

Roni was a child soldier in the Democratic Republic of Congo who ran away from the rebels and went to Uganda with another older soldier. Whilst in Uganda Roni stayed in a house for three months. He was not allowed to leave the house but a teacher came to the house and taught him English. He described how he wanted to go to Ireland where he has an uncle. He paid for his accommodation in Uganda, for his English lessons and for an agent to take him to Ireland using money that he got from selling diamonds he had acquired whilst he was a soldier. His long term aim is to go to university to study computers, mathematics or physics: *I thought I would be staying with my uncle and that he would send me to school and to university.* Roni was taken by the agent to Kampala and then to the UK. He has not yet been able to make contact with his uncle.

Others were not directly targeted but realised that the general context of conflict and human rights abuse in their countries of origin meant that it was necessary for them to leave in order to remain safe. For some the decision to leave followed violence experienced by other family members. A young man from Iraq described how his father and brother had been detained and beaten because they were working with the US army. Another described how his father had been killed in the conflict in Afghanistan and he and his family fled to Pakistan.

## 3.3 Planning the journey

Research participants were asked about their experiences in the period leading up to their departure, including how much time they had to plan their journey, whether they were able to make arrangements to sell possessions and whether they told others, including family and friends, about their intentions. The extent to which an individual is able to plan his or her journey away from a situation of actual or perceived threat will be significantly reduced where the decision

to move is made in a situation of panic or in the face of an immediate threat (Richmond 1993). This is reflected in the findings of the research. Over 80 per cent of those who responded stated that they had very little time to plan their journey. Most said that they left their country of origin within a matter of days and at the very most a few weeks. Several had left children behind.

*There was no time to leave [pack], I haven't even taken clothes or money at all...I left my two youngest [children] and only my son came with me. He is still in South Africa.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 45-54)*

*I had only four days to leave. You can't have time when you are in danger.*

*(Eritrea, female, 25-34)*

*I had no time. Within two weeks I left the prison and the country. I had no time. If you stay they can pick you up again.*

*(Kuwait, male, 25-34)*

*The maximum amount of time was one week. I knew that I was being followed.*

*(Ethiopia, male, 35-44)*

Others spent many months or even years planning their escape and securing the resources to make this possible. However, even in these cases the point of departure was characterised by a similar sense of urgency and is often determined by factors outside of their control.

Because they left in a hurry, most people either did not have time to make arrangements for their possessions or had nothing to sell.

*I left everything, my car, my house.*

*(Afghanistan, male, 35-44)*

*I just closed my business and left it.*

*(Iraq, male, 25-34)*

This was particularly the case for those who arrived as separated children who, with the notable exception of a child soldier who had been given diamonds as payment for his services in the Democratic Republic of Congo, had no independent economic resources. Around a third of respondents were able to make arrangements for their property to be sold before they left. The proceeds were then used to finance the journey.



*I sold my house to pay for the journey, I had to sell it quickly and cheaply. There was no money left over.*

*(Somalia, male, 45-54)*

*I had to sell my farm, my house...everything. If you don't sell it they are going to destroy it or take it for free.*

*(Sudan, male, 25-34)*

There are significant variations in whether or not family members helped to plan the journey. Much depends on the circumstances of departure. Over half of respondents were able to inform at least one member of their immediate family of their intention to leave. In many of these cases, family members played a direct role in planning the journey by providing financial or other forms of support, and information. This was particularly the case among those who were politically active.

*Normally when things got difficult my family would move me. I never knew where I was going. One time my mum sent me to stay with one of my cousins and said someone is going to take you and move you somewhere. I didn't know where I was supposed to go but my family knew I was really in danger and worried that I would disappear...the secret service would take people to government buildings and torture and kill them and we would never know what happened to them. They would be lost.*

*(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 25-34)*

A significant minority of respondents did not tell family members of their intentions to leave the country. In some cases this was because of concerns that family members would potentially come to harm if they knew about the plans.

*You can plan your journey but you must be secret. You can't even tell your family, it would not have been safe.*

*(Sudan, male, 25-34)*

In other cases, family members were directly responsible for the violence and abuse that was being experienced. This included two of those who arrived as separated children.

Respondents were asked who had helped them to plan their departure and make arrangements for their travel out of the country of origin. A small proportion of respondents said that they had received no assistance in planning their journey. With the exception of two

individuals, all of these respondents either had, or were able to apply for, travel documents of their own. The most important source of assistance in planning the journey was an agent, loosely defined here as a third party who not a close friend or family member and was usually, but not always, paid for the services provided. The role of these agents and the assistance they provided is discussed in detail in the following section of the report. Other sources of assistance in planning the journey included churches, community groups, political groups and co-workers.

In some cases respondents were assisted by individuals with whom they had a chance encounter. A woman from Pakistan described how she had married a man who had forced her to have sex with other men for money.

*I was in hospital because I had had a baby and when it was only two or three months old my husband brought two or three men together to have sex with me and I started bleeding. While I was in hospital I met an old friend from childhood. She helped me to get out and is looking after my daughters now.*

*(Pakistan, female, 25-34)*

The separated child from the Ivory Coast whose experiences are outlined above was assisted by a rich man who lived in his village. The man had witnessed the events that had taken place.

*There was a man, a rich man. I realise now that he was a politician, who lived in our village. I used to go to his house and do domestic work. When this situation happened he came over and when he saw I was covered in blood and that my dad had already passed away he took me very far away to a traditional medicine doctor. When I woke up I cried a lot and cried for my parents. He told me everyone and everything was gone. I always cried that I want my parents that I want to go home. The man realised that I was not very good [well] and he decided that he would help me and take me out from there because if they find me they will end up killing me and he told me that that they should not know that he was the one hiding me because it was not safe for him either.*

*(Ivory Coast, male, 18-24)*

There is clear evidence that conflict is the single most significant factor associated with the decision to leave. This is reflected in the experiences of those who participated in this research, all of whom were concerned primarily with reaching a place of safety.

Most had very little time to plan their journey or to make arrangements for the sale of their possessions. Although some had told family members of their intention, others had not done so but had instead relied upon others, including agents, to make arrangements for their journey. Having made the decision to leave, forced migrants then make decisions about where to go, albeit within a narrower range of possibilities than is the case for other migrants. The process by which this happens, the constraints within which decisions are taken and the role of others in the decision making process are the focus of the following section.

# Section 4 The decision to come to the UK

## 4.1 Making the decision

As noted earlier in this report there is a belief held by many policy makers, politicians and the public, that asylum seekers actively choose to come to the UK in preference to other potential countries of asylum and that this decision is based primarily on information that they have about the asylum system and the level of support to which they will be entitled. This has led to accusations that the UK asylum system is a 'soft touch'.

This belief is not supported by the existing research evidence, much of which suggests that destinations are determined not by personal choices regarding particular qualities of life or ideals but by the practicalities and demands of the situations that individuals face having fled their homes as refugees. The overwhelming finding of much of the existing research is that many asylum seekers are not aware of their eventual destination when they make the initial decision to migrate. Koser's (1997) study of the reasons why Iranians went to the Netherlands to seek asylum found that in many cases the final destination was determined by the routes used by the agents to take them to Western Europe. In these cases the respondents simply paid the agents to get to Europe and were unaware, often until they arrived, which specific country they were being taken to. Gilbert and Koser (2003) similarly found that many of the Afghan, Colombian, Kosovan and Somali respondents in their research had not chosen their own destination. The reason why they ended up in the UK was often linked to the role of agents, who often chose the final destination. Papadopoulou (2004) has found that for many Kurdish migrants the destination was Europe, understood as a broad space of safety, protection and opportunities. None of the Somali refugees in Zimmermann's (2009) study aspired to go to the UK for any particular reason unique to the UK and Europe was instead the main focus.

The findings of this research are consistent with these conclusions. Less than a third of those who participated in this research said that they specifically wanted to come to the UK to claim asylum. The

reasons for wanting to come to the UK varied considerably. One respondent, a young man from Iraq who is a Sabian Mandaean, said that his parents had specifically chosen to send him to the UK because they: *believed that the UK was a good place to be human* (Iraq, male, 25-34). His uncle had previously moved to the UK. Others commented that they wanted to come to the UK because family members were already living here or because there was an existing community of people from their country of origin. The importance of social networks in the decision making process is discussed in more detail below.

For others, the decision to come to the UK was largely opportunistic and motivated by the fact that it was possible to obtain travel documents, or make use of an existing visa. This was perceived as substantially reducing the costs and risks associated with the journey. One person from Afghanistan was working for the British embassy and had travelled to the UK on three previous occasions. When he was persecuted for working with foreigners he considered it to be the obvious choice to come to the UK because of the social connections he had made on previous visits and the fact that he could get a visa.

*Because I work with them [British embassy] the only country that should help me is the UK.*  
(Afghanistan, male, 35-44)

His comments also suggest that he considered that the UK had a duty to protect him. A woman from Sri Lanka was able to apply for a visa to visit her brother-in-law, although in retrospect she regrets that she did not know she could apply for a work-permit. Another woman from Iraq had not intended to come to the UK and had fled initially to Dubai (see case study). When her relationship with her husband broke down and she was unable to stay in Dubai as a divorced Muslim woman, she seized the opportunity to come to the UK presented by an invitation to visit to her brother-in-law who was dying of cancer.

## Case study

Amira used to live in an area in Iraq where Shiite Muslims are the predominant religious group. She and her family are Sunni and are easily identified as such because her son is called Omar, a name that is almost never heard among Shiites. When Amira's cousin was killed, the family left everything behind and travelled to Dubai using a visa to visit Amira's sister. The family lived in Dubai for some time but Amira's relationship with her husband broke down and she had to change her plans: *He was hurting me and beating me all the time...I couldn't stay in Dubai because my husband wanted to divorce me and then I would not be able to stay in Dubai as a divorced woman from Iraq. They can send me back to the war. I couldn't go back to Baghdad.* Amira has a brother-in-law who was living in the UK and who was married to a British woman. He had cancer and was very ill at that time. He wanted to see Amira and her children before he died and invited them to come to the UK. Amira felt this was the only option available to her: *I had no choice, I only know this brother-in-law. For me it was an occasion [opportunity] when he started asking me to bring my kids to see him. I thought I will seek asylum then.* Her brother-in-law died before she arrived and she did not see him again.

Although it is difficult to generalise by nationality or country of origin, those from Zimbabwe appear more consciously to have decided to come to the UK compared with other nationalities. Several of those who were interviewed indicated that they had come to the UK because family members were already living here. All seven members of the Zimbabwean focus group said that they had chosen to come to the UK in preference to other countries. When asked the reasons for this preference, many of these respondents mentioned colonial relationships between the UK and Zimbabwe, and resulting similarities in terms of language, education, and legislation.

Although some asylum seekers in this research had actively chosen to come to the UK, this was not the case for the majority of respondents. Just over two-thirds of the asylum seekers who participated in this research did not choose to come to the UK but had ended up here. This includes all but one of those who arrived as separated children. In very many cases respondents described having little or no knowledge of the UK. Some were aware of the existence of Europe but had no knowledge about the differences between

individual countries (or even that individual countries existed). Others were told that they would be taken to 'a white country'. Both age and levels of education influence the extent to which individuals have knowledge of other countries.

*I didn't know I was going to the UK. I just knew I was going to travel. I just followed instructions.*

*(Democratic Republic of Congo, female, 18-24)*

*It doesn't matter where you go, just somewhere nice and safe that you can survive...I didn't know anything. I just wanted to go somewhere safe.*

*(Iraq, male, 18-24)*

*Outside of Africa everything was Europe. Even America was Europe.*

*(Burundi, female, 25-34)*

The single most important reason that many asylum seekers do not choose to come to the UK is that this destination decision is increasingly made by others, in particular agents who provide access to travel documents and facilitate the journey. The role of agents in the decision making process is discussed in more detail below.

Research participants who did not choose their destination country were asked at what point in their journey they had found out that they were coming to the UK. Although some were informed of their destination at the beginning of the journey, most were made aware that they were going to the UK in transit, often at the point of being handed tickets for the plane or train. This was particularly evident for separated children, only one of whom was actively involved in the decision making process. These children travel long distances, often unaware of the routes to be taken or their final destination.

*When I arrived in England I did not know where I was and I cried. I was let out of the lorry in the morning and arrested by the police. They took me to social services...social services told me where I was.*

*(Iran, male, 18-24)*

*I didn't know I was in the UK, the policeman told me.*

*(Iraq, male, 18-24)*

*I was like a fool. I knew nothing about where I was.*

*(Ivory Coast, male, 18-24)*



One boy from Iran, who was 16 years old at the time of the research but whose age was disputed by the Home Office, described how he had originally travelled to Greece after being involved in a demonstration. He had been arrested in Greece and was returned to Iran where he was imprisoned for two and a half months and treated badly. His fear was that he might end up in Greece again.

*I did not know that I was in England, I thought maybe I was in Greece again. When the police took me to the police station I thought about what happened in Greece again. I was crying. A Kurdish interpreter came and explained where I was. I said 'Oh thanks for my God'.*

*(Iran, male, 16)*

Finally, there is evidence that some people wanted to go to countries other than the UK but were unable to do so. This is a reflection of the lack of choice that many asylum seekers have over the destination country. Roni (see case study above) was the only separated child in the study with independent resources to pay for his journey. He wanted to go to Ireland where his uncle was living but found himself in the UK. A woman from Sri Lanka had wanted to go to India because the cost of living is cheaper but had been unable to obtain a visa. A woman from Iraq who was not able to choose her destination now believes that she should have tried to get to Canada where her mother and father are living. Negasi (see case study below) explained that he had travelled to the UK on a business visa for a work-related conference. When he returned he was arrested as a result of his political activities. After he was released, Negasi decided to return to the UK using the same visa. However the UK was not his preferred destination country.

## Case study

Negasi is from Ethiopia. He described how he had become involved in political protests against the government following the election in 2005 which he considers to have been rigged. He travelled to the UK to attend a work-related conference at the same time that the government was cracking down on members of the opposition. When Negasi returned to Ethiopia and went back to work he discovered that his office had been searched and his computers seized. One morning he was followed by government officials who took him into detention: *It was the worst time of my life. I had no contact with my family, no-one knew*

*where I was. I was there for ten days. My wife advertised that I am missing in the newspapers. I was instructed not to interfere and to stop what I am doing. I was released on these conditions.* Negasi described how he had returned to his normal life but then his two brothers were arrested and detained. He started writing against the government again and was told that he was causing a problem by friends that worked within the government.

At that point Negasi decided that he had to leave. He wanted to travel to the United States because he had previously worked at the US embassy and has family living there but decided that he would use his business visa to return to the UK: *You have to make a choice between which country is closer, which country is safer and then how can I actually get there. Kenya was too difficult going through the airport...The UK was the only option available because I already had a visa.* Negasi believes that it was a mistake to come to the UK even though he had very little choice at the time of his departure from Ethiopia.

His options for the future – and for his family who remain in Ethiopia - are now severely limited: *I wasn't granted [refugee status] and now everything is completely closed. I am in limbo. My documents are with the Home Office. My life is totally ruined. I can't go to America.*

Although he has been refused asylum, is currently destitute and longs to be reunited with his wife and children, Negasi maintains a strong belief in the UK as a democracy and as a country that respects human rights: *I knew the UK is a country that has got a very good human rights record in Europe, the best. My sense is that even now it is better than other countries in Europe.*

This evidence suggests that whilst some asylum seekers choose to come to the UK most do not. Some actively want to go elsewhere but are unable to do so and therefore seize the opportunities that come their way. For others the choice about which country they will travel to is effectively made by others. The decision makers in these cases are either family members or other individuals who are able to make arrangements for travel including agents who facilitate the journey.

## 4.2 Importance of social relations and networks

The findings of this research largely confirm the findings of existing research into the importance of social networks in the asylum context (see section 2.3).

Nearly half of those who participated in the research had family and friends living in the UK before they arrived. For a number of respondents it is clear that this played an important role in influencing the choice of destination.

*I have a cousin in the UK. I contacted her and she suggested I come over to visit her. I did not intend to claim asylum. I came here to wait for things to improve back home, for things to be better.*

**(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)**

*It was a very clear decision for me because my daughter and brother are here.*

**(Zimbabwe, female, 45-54)**

But the UK was not the only country in which respondents had family members or friends. Nearly as many people had family or friends living in other European countries including France (three), Germany (three), Holland (two), Denmark (one), Austria (one), Belgium (one), Sweden (one) and Ireland (one). Two respondents had family members living in Canada and one in the United States. The fact that respondents did not claim asylum in these countries suggests that social networks only partly explain why asylum seekers choose to go to some countries rather than others. Barriers and opportunities to entry also play an important role in determining the extent to which these networks can be utilised.

It is also important to note, as previous studies have, that whilst many respondents reported the presence of family and friends in the UK, only a minority of people had direct or close contact prior to leaving their country of origin and even fewer received any information that might have directly informed the decision making process. Some respondents reported receiving very general information that suggested the UK would be a good country in which to claim asylum.

*My sister says she likes it very much and she is doing fine and the law is better, not like Congo. Here people respect each other.*

**(Democratic Republic of Congo, female, 18-24)**

*I have a brother in Bristol who came ten years ago. He always said to me UK is a good country.*

**(Somalia, male, 35-44)**

*Two of my brothers and some of my other relatives were living here. Sometimes I would speak to them on the telephone. They told me it's a safe country with law and order but that it's no longer easy to get a job.*

**(Somalia, male, 45-54)**

Other respondents described how family members tried dissuade them from coming to the UK. One woman from Zimbabwe said: *I talked to my daughter regularly. She tried to put me off and said it would not be very nice but because of my situation I had no choice.* (Zimbabwe, female, 45-54). Another woman who was in close contact with her cousin described how she was discouraged from travelling to the UK: *My cousin told me it was [financially] hard to live in London. I thought they did not want me to come to England and were lying.* (Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)

Others made contact with family and friends only after their arrival in the UK. This did not always prove successful or useful.

*I have a friend who came here in 2005 in Manchester. When I came here I find his [telephone] number.*

**(Afghanistan, male, 18-24)**

*I have a half sister [father's daughter] in London. I had her address when I arrived but no telephone number. NASS collected me from there. I couldn't stay there. We occasionally talk on the telephone now, but we did not grow up together and have never been very close. She didn't know I was coming and didn't recognise me.*

**(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 25-34)**

Waheed (case study below) explained that he did not know that his family were in the UK until he arrived: *When I was in Yemen, I was there for two weeks and the ELF [Eritrean Liberation Front] helped me. They gave me three phone numbers, one for if I ended up in Australia, Italy or the UK. [When I arrived in the UK] I contacted the person and they told me my family were here and took me to them.* (Eritrea, male, over 65 years)

## Case study

Waheed is an elderly man who is an artist from Eritrea. He left his country because he was persecuted by the Eritrean government for producing cartoons that were critical of the regime. Although the cartoons were anonymous he was identified and detained. He was able to escape from prison by with the assistance of friends in the government. He was ill with diabetes and prostate problems at this time. Waheed described how his wife and children were also threatened by the security services as a result of his political activities. Waheed's wife and children fled to Ethiopia but were deported to Kenya. Waheed wanted to go with them but was too ill to make the journey by foot. His family then travelled to the Sudan and on to the UK where they were granted refugee status. Waheed remained in Eritrea for some time but did not know where his family were. Eventually he was able to make his own escape. He left Eritrea with the help of an agent and travelled to Yemen where he stayed for two weeks when he was assisted by the Eritrean Liberation Front to travel to the UK. When he arrived he found out that his family were already in the UK and was re-united with them. He applied for family re-union in 2004 but has not yet received a decision on his case. At the time of the research he was living without any support or ID.

Nearly three quarters of respondents said that they were aware of the existence of a community of people from their country or region of origin living in the UK although some expressed surprise at the number co-nationals living in the UK. For a few respondents, the presence of co-nationals or co-ethnics in a country appears to be a factor in influencing the decision about where to claim asylum. For example, one Somali man commented: *I asked the agent to take me to the UK because I heard there was a large Somali community in the UK (Somalia, male, 45-54)*. For most respondents however the presence of co-nationals appears to have made little or no difference to the decision about where to go. Some people appear to view the presence of co-nationals as a risk rather than an advantage.

*When I come here I was afraid to talk to people from my country. My mother told me to stay away from Afghan people. I don't want to be with them. I don't want to see [be reminded of] this country anymore.*

*(Afghanistan, male, 18-24)*

Moreover it is possible that some deliberately avoid engaging with social networks because of a desire to escape from oppressive or discriminatory cultural and social norms and practices which they experienced in their country of origin and associate with co-nationals. Others tried to make contact with fellow asylum seekers from their country of origin but found that the people in their social networks were not necessarily able to help them.

*I knew that others were here through the MDC [Movement for Democratic Change]. When we came here we were given a phone number for other ladies, activists that had left as well... We were given contacts for New Zealand, Canada and UK as at this stage it was not clear where we would end up... We were told 'when you get there they will help you', but when you get here you don't see these people. People when they come here don't want to know anymore, most of them have given up. A lot of people lost a lot of things, people died, so people would rather stay away and not get involved again.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

This evidence suggests although social networks can sometimes be important in the decision making of asylum seekers they do not always operate in ways that might be expected or associated with other types of migration. Not all asylum seekers have family and friends in the UK nor is this necessarily the most important factor in the choice of destination for those that do. As Koser (1997) suggests, there is evidence of an unusual spatial disassociation between the choice of destination and the actual locations of relatives and friends in Europe. This may be the result of preventative or deterrent controls that serve to weaken or even remove the strong social imperatives that networks represent, causing people to explore new and different options (Zimmermann 2009). Collyer (2005) for example has noted the anomalous situation of asylum seekers from Algeria moving away from well-established communities of co-nationals living in France. Although many Algerians have family links to France and the majority continue to travel there, Collyer suggests that strict migration controls reduce the possibility of taking advantage of the social capital inherent in these networks. Even more importantly, he suggests that other factors and processes may be occurring which lead social networks to be used differently. In particular Collyer (2005, 711) suggests that new migrants may come to purposefully avoid social networks partly because they are conscious of the burden that they place on them, but also because they disapprove of the ways in which co-nationals choose to live: "From being a pole of attraction, social



networks have almost become a repellent force”. This is reflected in some of the comments made by Algerians who participated in this research.

*I didn't know anybody here. The main family in Europe I have are all in France...We didn't really have contact with them except when they come on holiday to the village with nice clothes and cars. When went to France I was sad to see the life they have there.*

**(Algeria, male, 25-34)**

*I have family in France as all Algerian people have but I have no relationship with them. Algerians who live in France become as nasty as the French themselves.*

**(Algeria, male, 35-44)**

This evidence suggests that the social networks of asylum seekers have changed dramatically over recent years. These changes are likely to have significant implications for the decision making of asylum seekers, not least because agents have begun to fulfil many of the functions traditionally serviced by social networks (Koser and Pinkerton 2002).

### 4.3 The role of agents

The findings of this research support the conclusions of other studies that agents are critical determinants of the destination eventually reached by asylum seekers (Koser and Pinkerton 2002; Robinson and Segrott 2002). Approximately two-thirds of research respondents indicated that they paid for the services of an agent. With the exception of one person who had entered on a visitor's visa, all of those who participated in the research and were granted refugee status had to use the services of an agent in order to travel to the UK. The services provided by the agent varied considerably from making practical arrangements for the journey, through to providing the necessary travel documents and accompanying the respondent to the UK. In some cases respondents were even taken to the Home Office in order to make their application for asylum. This evidence reinforces the conclusion that agents have begun to fulfil many of the functions traditionally served by social networks (Koser and Pinkerton 2002). As Collyer (2005) suggests, the agent is effectively employed to extend the reach of a migrant's social network. This is reflected in the fact that many agents are identified through family members rather than directly and were often referred to by respondents as an 'uncle, or a 'friend of a friend'.

The costs of the journey varied enormously, ranging from £200 to £15,000, and averaging around £3,000 to £4,000. Prices were often quoted and paid in US

Dollars. Those using the services of an agent paid significantly more than the minority who were able to arrange their journeys independently. The cost of using the services of an agent depends on both the level of service provided - including whether the journey is direct or involves overland and often illicit travel - and the final country of destination. Less than a third of respondents had the means to finance their journey independently. The majority stated that their families (or, in three cases, the church or a family friend) either paid for the journey or contributed towards it.

*We paid the agent \$10,000. We had the money. My father earned a lot of money working for the Americans.*

**(Iraq, male, 18-24)**

*I had the money. I had worked and was selling my paintings to the Gulf.*

**(Eritrea, male, over 65 years)**

*I had some diamonds, so when we sold these diamonds it's the money I gave the agency. It was a lot of money, these diamonds were quite expensive. All the money I got for diamonds I gave him.*

**(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 16)**

*My mother sold all her jewellery and also my uncle and my cousin. Bedoon don't have money, they are poor in Kuwait but where there is a problem we are all united and they all helped me.*

**(Kuwait, male, 25-34)**

Others had enough money to cover part of the journey, but not all. This reflects the findings of other research that the ability to seek protection is even more limited and, in turn more dangerous, for those who are poor (Van Hear 2004).

*I did not have enough money for documents. This is why I hid on the train from Italy to Calais.*

**(Eritrea, male, 16)**

Nearly half of the research respondents had been provided with travel documents by an agent. Agents frequently imposed their will upon their clients about destinations and routes. This was particularly evident where individuals lacked either the information or economic resources to choose particular countries, or when the departure took place at very short notice. Many asylum seekers are not provided with any opportunity to choose which country they travel to. In some cases they are not even informed what their final destination will be and only find out on arrival.

*You don't decide on which country, you take what they [the agents] give you...Agents can give you a choice if you have time and want to wait, but if you are in a hurry you just take what they give.*

*(Somalia, male, 35-44)*

*I wanted to go anywhere to Europe, just outside the country, for my safety. The agents tell you at the beginning do not ask. I did not know I was going to the UK until I was in the plane. You do not know whether they will take you to France, to Italy, Holland. This is according to what agreements they have.*

*(Eritrea, male, over 65 years)*

*The family wanted to take me to a safe place and worked with agents. The agent told the family they would take me out of Somalia and then depending on other factors they would see where I could go. There was no particular information guiding me to choose one country over another.*

*(Somalia, male 18-24)*

In other cases however, agents actively encouraged individuals to come to the UK. Some agents suggest that the UK's asylum procedures and recognition rates are more generous than those of other countries.

*I was going to any country. The agent said to me, it's the best country for asylum seekers. The agent said 'it's the only country the UK that helps people who are in danger'...I wasn't in a position to choose where to go. The agent suggested UK...I was very scared, if I don't listen to the agent, to be sent back to Kuwait. He said UK. It was no chance to discuss.*

*(Kuwait, male, 25-34)*

Other agents emphasise the general human rights situation in the UK and the fact that there is religious tolerance. These aspects are considered particularly important by those whose human rights have previously been violated or who have experienced religious intolerance.

*When the agent was telling us about the UK he said 'the UK is a democratic country and they recognise people's human rights. That is why they are helping you'. When the agent first suggested the UK I thought this might be because Zimbabwe was a British colony, but he said 'no, it is because they recognise people's human rights'.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

It is not clear from this research what motivates some agents to promote the UK as a destination for potential asylum seekers in preference to other countries. One possible explanation, though one which is purely speculative, is that some agents have particularly strong connections with the UK and are more easily able to secure travel documents to facilitate entry to the UK than to other countries. They then market their product by telling asylum seekers what it is that they think they want to hear in order to encourage individuals to agree with this 'choice'.

It is important to note that many agents appear to be largely opportunistic and make decisions about routes and destinations as the journey progresses. Even where an individual has sufficient resources to be able to request a particular destination this may change if the agent considers that their operation is being put at risk, for example, if there is a possibility that an individual will be intercepted by the authorities and his or her papers removed or if a route which previously appeared possible becomes less so. This reinforces the idea that even where asylum seekers are able to exert a degree of choice over their final destination they may nonetheless be subject to the overarching objectives and interests of others.

*You don't have a choice, when you are controlled by someone. You don't have a choice, and there are different prices for different countries. Some people will get their choice of country but sometimes you can say I want to go to the UK and you pay the money and they will say okay and then you get near and the agent realises there is some extra control so they have to drop you anywhere. To be honest they will drop you in the sea, because if they get caught they will be in big trouble and in Sudan they will probably be killed...The agents only care about getting their money. They don't care where they drop you because they know you're not going to ask them 'why did you drop me here?' Because you don't know them, you'll never see them again.*

*(Sudan, male, 25-34)*

Relationships with agents are experienced by asylum seekers in different and sometimes conflicting ways. On the one hand, agents clearly play a critical role in facilitating the journey to the UK, and therefore open up the possibilities for individuals to access options for the future that would not otherwise be available. On the other, many asylum seekers, most notably those with limited resources or who are particularly vulnerable, experience the journey to the UK as

threatening and difficult precisely because they do not know where they are going and do not feel safe. This was evident in the accounts of those who arrived as separated children. Several of these children had travelled with large groups of other people and described being held for lengthy periods awaiting the next stage in their journey.

*A lot of people were travelling. They were different languages and different nationalities. They went to different places. In the day I was hidden in a cellar as they thought we would maybe run away and at night put in a truck...The agents would come at different times of the night and take about ten people at one time... For the last part of the journey I was put on a lorry on my own.*

*(Afghanistan, male 18-24)*

This description of the journey to the UK suggests that many of those whose entry is facilitated by agents travel in 'mixed flows' of people each of whom may have different experiences of the journey reflecting, among other factors, their age and economic resources.

In addition to providing travel documents and making arrangements for the journey, some agents accompany asylum seekers to the UK, often presenting themselves as members of a family group in order to get through immigration controls at the port of entry.

*I travelled with a woman from Yemen. She belonged to the agent. She accompanied me to London. She told me to say she was my daughter if we were asked at the airport.*

*(Eritrea, male, over 65 years)*

*An agent travelled with me, I was very scared and upset and I cried much of the way. The agent told me I had to stop crying because I would mess things up, He said 'If you mess things up you are playing with my life – you don't play with my life' ...when we arrived at Heathrow we passed through as husband and wife and he said 'we have to go somewhere else now' and he took me to the Home Office in Birmingham.*

*(Burundi, female, 25-34)*

In many cases the agent's primary objective for accompanying the asylum seeker on his or her journey appears to be in order to retain travel documents in order that these can be used to facilitate a further journey by somebody else to the UK. A number of respondents also indicated that agents had delivered

them to specific locations within the UK, for example, a community organisation or the Home Office, before leaving them.

*The agent travelled with me all the way and took the passport back once we had passed through Heathrow and he had taken me to some people in the Somali community. He said 'you can take care of yourself from here'.*

*(Somalia, male, 18-24)*

*The agent accompanied me to Heathrow and dropped me in Finsbury and then took back the passport and left.*

*(Somalia, male, 45-54)*

Although the vast majority of respondents had been smuggled rather than trafficked, for some there were clearly long-term consequences associated with using the services of an agent. This was particularly the case where a false identity had been acquired to gain entry to the UK or where the journey had yet to be paid for.

*I came in on false papers but afterwards I thought this is not right. It says I am South African but I am from Zimbabwe.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

*Last week he [the agent] was swearing at me 'you did not send money back'. He said 'send me 5 million Iranian money [about £300]. I say I haven't got 5 million. He said I spent a lot of money to get you to the UK.*

*(Afghanistan, male, 18-24)*

In addition some of the children who participated in the research provided accounts that clearly involved abuse and exploitation. Although Anthony (case study below) did not describe himself as being trafficked because he was brought into the UK by his stepmother, his relationship with her and the actions she subsequently took suggest otherwise.

## Case study

Anthony is 16 years old and comes from Nigeria where he lived with his mother. His father was in a secret cult and when he died, Anthony was under pressure to take his place. He was reluctant to do so and warned by his mother that he should run away because his refusal to get involved meant that he would be killed. He went to live with his grandmother in Benin but for reasons that are unclear ended up living on the streets. In the meantime his mother died



and he met someone who knew his stepmother. He travelled back to Nigeria but again found himself threatened. Fearing for his safety, his stepmother arranged for him to travel with her to the UK but subsequently abused him: *She brought me here to the UK. I came to England with her straight from Nigeria. She abused me as well. She forced me to have sex with her. She also broke a bottle and smashed me over the head. I've got the scars all over my body now.* Anthony described overhearing a telephone conversation which made him believe he was about to be sold to someone else: *She was saying 'he is ready, you come pick him up', and I had a feeling that she was going to send me out. And then she said 'someone is going to pick you up from here'. I never knew any family here in England, why should someone come and pick me up? So then I ran away and was in the street. Anthony was taken in and looked after for a few months by a man who he met but then returned to the streets where he lived for almost a year. During this time he met his current partner who had been trafficked to the UK. Anthony's story is not believed by the Home Office and he is extremely anxious about the future.*

## 4.4 The journey to the UK

This section concludes by looking at the journey which asylum seekers take to get to the UK. Many respondents provided very detailed accounts of the route taken after leaving their country of origin. As suggested earlier, it is clear from these descriptions that many asylum seekers do not know the final destination to which they are travelling. The final destination can - and often does - change as the journey proceeds. However the fact that some asylum seekers pass through other countries on their way to the UK raises particular issues because of the requirement in European law that a person fleeing from persecution in his or her country of origin is to seek protection in the first safe country where this is possible.<sup>6</sup> If an asylum seeker passes through another country on the way to the UK, the Home Office may attempt to remove them.

The journey to the UK was relatively straightforward for those asylum seekers (around a quarter of respondents) who travelled directly and entered using a legitimate visa or travel documents provided by an agent. This is not to suggest that the journey was not difficult or stressful in other ways. The circumstances of departure from the country of origin, the illicit nature of the entry, the attitude of others (including agents and immigration officials) and uncertainty about their future contributed towards the considerable anxiety experienced by many of those in this group. Nonetheless for those who were unable to travel directly and who instead made long and difficult journeys these anxieties were greatly compounded by what they experienced on their way to the UK.

Many respondents described complex journeys, often passing through other countries on their way to the UK. The countries through which asylum seekers travelled included France (five), Italy (four), Sudan (four), South Africa (three), Dubai (three), Pakistan (two), Kenya (two), Libya (two) and Turkey (two) as well as Greece, the Netherlands, Syria, Uganda, Ghana, Kuwait, Yemen, Iran and Ethiopia (one respondent each). A woman from Eritrea described how an agent, 'a business man', took her from Sudan to Libya by lorry and then onwards to Italy by boat and then France by train. She alluded to some of the difficulties experienced during the journey.

*We were 56 people in a very small boat. It was danger. I am not sure how many women, maybe 18 maybe less. [There was] no respect. They wanted to touch, too many men.*

*(Eritrea, female, 25-34)*

A man from Sudan described how he had travelled on a ship for one month his arrival in the UK.

*I thought I was going to Canada. I travelled for one month by ship with six or seven other Sudanese. Three of them have been deported. When I arrived they said 'get off this is the UK'. This is a safe country, I didn't know if it was the UK or not. I had spent a month locked in the hold of a ship. It could have been anywhere but as long as it wasn't Africa I would be safe.*

*(Sudan, male, 25-34)*

<sup>6</sup> The Dublin II Regulation sets out the rules for deciding which EU country should decide an asylum application and is based on the principle that the first European Union country which the asylum seeker entered into should decide their asylum claim. Some non-EU countries are also deemed to be safe in the sense that it is assumed they will decide asylum claims in the same way that the UK would. Lists of safe third countries are made under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 s 12 and delegated legislation, e.g. the Asylum (Designated Safe Third Countries) Order 2000 SI 2000/2245.



In many cases respondents were unaware which countries they had travelled through until they arrived in the UK. This was likely to be the case where individuals were effectively held in captivity by agents with large numbers of other people whilst awaiting the next stage of their journey. One young man from Afghanistan who arrived as a separated child described how he had travelled from Afghanistan to Pakistan and then on to Iran by car and truck. The entire journey took around two months. Another man from Iraq spent one month travelling from Mosul to the UK via Ghana: *During that month there were many of us travelling. We were given food but we were not allowed to walk around or talk to people. I did not know I had been in Ghana until I arrived in Heathrow and they told me that's where I had come from (Iraq, male, 25-34). Samuel (case study below) travelled to the UK by bus, Land Cruiser, car and truck.*

### Case study

Samuel is a 16 year old boy from Eritrea who arrived in the UK and claimed asylum on his own because of the difficulties he faced as a result of his religious beliefs. He and his mother are Pentecostal. His mother has been imprisoned because of her religion. Samuel also expressed concerns that he might be forcibly conscripted: *the army sometimes come to school and they take children to do national service.* Samuel described how he had left Eritrea with four other boys from his school. The journey to the UK was long and complicated. From the school they caught the bus to the border to Sudan where they stayed for 14 days. Then a friend of his mother paid an agent \$1000 for the next stage of the journey. He travelled through the Sahara Desert in a Land Cruiser. The journey took ten days. When Samuel reached Libya he was taken by another man to Italy: *we changed to a city car and then went over to Italy. I saw Eritreans having a difficult time in Italy. I hid in a train until Calais and then I paid another \$500 and a truck took us. When I arrived I was in West Ham.*

Some of those who travelled through other countries on their way to the UK had initially thought that they would be safe in those countries and had intended to stay there. It was only whilst they were there that their plans changed. In some cases this was because the country they had travelled to was not safe. Agnes (see case study) initially moved from one area of Zimbabwe to another but realised she was not safe when police

went to her home and raped her sister. Her husband then arranged for her to travel to South Africa but shortly after her arrival she was told that the Zimbabwean authorities had found out where she was. She then travelled to the UK via Dubai. Other Zimbabweans also travelled initially to South Africa but did not feel safe and were concerned that they would be deported. Similar concerns were reported by Somali respondents who had initially travelled to neighbouring countries such as Kenya.

### Case study

Agnes is from Zimbabwe. Her husband was an MDC activist and she was also involved in political activities: *Because of the injustices I was trying to help orphans because their food was often being diverted from the NGO's to the rich people. I joined a group of MDC women and we started having 'prayer meetings' in my house so that we could meet and make plans but one of the neighbours blew the whistle on us. Consequently our leader and two of the other ladies were captured. Agnes was warned by a friend (a policeman) that the authorities were looking for her and went to stay with an aunt in another town. Soon after she left the police went to her house where her sister was staying: she was not involved with the MDC but they raped her anyway.* As a result, her husband arranged for her to go with a group of women to South Africa. Agnes had intended that she would stay in South Africa until the situation in Zimbabwe improved: *When I first went to South Africa I thought I would just be there for a few weeks until things settled down. I didn't know things would get worse.* A week after her arrival Agnes was told she had to leave quickly because the Zimbabwean authorities had found out where she was. Despite the threat to her life, Agnes was reluctant to leave: *All I know is that I was taken to the airport because I was crying at that time, I was torn apart...I didn't want to leave my husband and my family. I was thinking about my sister. I didn't want to go. My husband said I must go and he would follow. He was trying to get me out of the way, to persuade me to go...I wouldn't have left. It wasn't my decision to come here.* Agnes travelled with the agent to Dubai and then on her own to the UK. Agnes's husband fled to South Africa after she left but was subsequently killed. She never saw him again.

In other cases people move because there is an unexpected opportunity to go somewhere else. A Somali man described how he and his wife and two children had travelled to Kenya after they were persecuted by members of the dominant clan. They had stayed in Kenya for eight months during which time their third child was born. His wife and children then had an opportunity to travel to the UK and he joined them at a later date. Others, including Amira whose experiences were described earlier (see case study above) described how their own circumstances had changed and had resulted in them unexpectedly travelling to the UK.

For others the situation was rather different. They had spent weeks or even months somewhere else whilst they decided on their next steps or raised additional funds but had no intention of remaining in these 'transit countries'. This was often because they did not consider that these countries were a safe place in which to live. Several Algerian respondents said that they had spent time in France but considered it unlikely that they would be protected if they remained there and claimed asylum: *...very few Algerians can have refugee status in France. The two governments are very linked with each other. They share too many interests (Algeria, male, 25-34)*. Hakim (see case study) wanted to come to the UK partly because his brother was living here and had been granted refugee status but also because he did not want to stay in France, which he perceived as being closely connected with his home country of Algeria and where he believed he would experience racism. These comments reflect and reinforce the findings of Collyer (2004) that Algerian asylum seekers may reject France as a potential destination country because of the colonial relationship between the two countries and on-going political links.

### Case study

Hakim is from Algeria where he was detained and tortured as a result of his opposition to the regime. His father was killed and his brother escaped from Algeria and was granted refugee status in the UK. Hakim assumes that his other brother, who went missing in 1998, is dead. Unable to get a visa, Hakim found an agent to take him to France, the only destination that he was offered. He paid 100,000 Algerian Dinars (about £1,400) and travelled by boat to Marseille where he stayed for five days. Hakim then travelled on to Paris. In Paris he met with some Algerians who told him where he could obtain a fake French passport for around €500 so that he could travel to the UK. Hakim specifically

wanted to come to the UK because his brother is here and because he did not want to stay in France: *I wanted to join my brother, and France has bad policies with Algerian asylum seekers. The French are well known for their racism, especially with Algerians because of our history.*

Others similarly commented on the treatment of co-nationals in the countries through which they passed. Samuel (see case study above) travelled from Eritrea to the Sudan and then on to Libya and Italy. He decided not to stay in Italy, again a destination country with a colonial link to the country of origin, when he saw how other Eritreans were being treated: *In Italy I saw Eritreans having a difficult time...In Italy there are lots of Eritreans. They have not enough food to eat. They have no house. You can't believe but if you visit Italy you can see them (Eritrea, male, 16)*. The decision of these respondents not to claim asylum in the countries through which they pass on their way to the UK reflects real and perceived differences in recognition rates for different nationalities in different countries, and in reception conditions. In both of these cases there is a perception that asylum seekers are treated particularly badly in those countries with which there are colonial links. This evidence contrasts with other studies (including Robinson and Segrott 2003) which suggest that colonial links may have positive implications on the decision about where to claim asylum.

Although there is evidence that some asylum seekers decide not to apply for asylum in certain countries because they do not consider these countries to be safe, the belief that asylum seekers actively choose to come to the UK in preference to other potential countries of asylum because the UK asylum system acts as a 'pull' factor is not supported by the evidence presented here. Less than a third of respondents specifically wanted to come to the UK, and for those that did it was predominantly a belief that the UK is safe and has a good human rights record that motivated the decision. For the majority of respondents, the decision to come to the UK was either opportunistic or made by others, most notably agents, of various kinds, who have effectively taken control over the decision making process. There is very strong evidence that many asylum seekers either cannot exercise 'choice' over the country to which they travel because they do not have sufficient resources (both economic and social) to do so, or end up in the UK by chance having made the decision to head towards Europe. Whilst the physical journey to the UK

is relatively straightforward for those who travel directly, many described long and complex overland journeys, often taking days, weeks or even months. The costs of the journey, the risks experienced along the way, and the eventual destination are to be determined by the agent, or more specifically, a series of individuals employed by the agent to facilitate various parts of the journey. For these asylum seekers, chance is clearly a more significant factor than choice in determining the country in which the asylum claim is made.

# Section 5 Knowledge of the UK

## 5.1 The asylum system

The concept of ‘asylum shopping’ assumes that all asylum seekers are experts in comparative European asylum legislation (Collyer 2004). The findings of this research largely reflect and reinforce the findings of existing research (see section 2.5 of this report) which suggests that asylum seekers have limited access to up-to-date information about asylum policy and practice. For all of the reasons already discussed, only a small proportion of those who participated in this research specifically wanted to come to the UK. For many, the decision was made by others or at a point in the journey some time after the initial departure. As a result very few had any detailed or meaningful knowledge of the asylum system. The overwhelming majority (around nine out of ten of all respondents) said that they did not know anything about asylum policies in the UK before they arrived. This included those who arrived as separated children, many of whom who were anxious about what would happen to them when they arrived: *I didn’t think about nothing, I only think about maybe I am going to prison and I am scared sometimes (Iran, male, 16).*

Some respondents said that they were generally aware of the possibility of claiming asylum but they did not have any understanding of what the process involved.

*I know you could apply for asylum but not any detail or what the criteria was.*

*(Somalia, male, 45-54)*

*I am an old lady. I just wanted to leave as soon as possible. I didn’t know anything. I was hoping to live in my Uncle’s house with the family. I thought he will look after me but he told me I should ask the government for help.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 45-54)*

*I did not know about claiming asylum, did not know how to do it or what you need. In my country there is no asylum. Here there is a system very different than my country.*

*(Eritrea, male, 16)*

Those who have been in the UK for some time reflected on their experiences and recognise that they were very ill-informed when they first arrived:

*When I look back this is quite a funny experience. It was the immigration officer at the airport that told me that what I was telling them was called ‘seeking asylum’. I started to understand really the meaning of asylum seeker once I had been to some training at refugee organisations after I arrived here.*

*(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 35-44)*

Asylum seekers who had an awareness of the possibility of claiming asylum before they arrived had generally obtained this information from one of two sources, either family members or agents. Some had been given information by family members living in the UK. This information was almost always sparse and in some cases family members discouraged individuals from claiming asylum at all.

*My brother is a refugee, but he never explained to me the process. There are thousands of Algerians in the UK. They can claim asylum but didn’t because they don’t know how to claim. They are very scared to be sent back. Algerian refugees already here discourage the newcomers. They told them ‘better not to claim’.*

*(Algeria, male, 35-44)*

Moreover although agents often provide some information about the asylum system this also tends to be limited.

*When we were leaving South Africa I was told by the agent ‘you tell them you have come to claim asylum’ but I didn’t really know what the word meant.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

*The agent told me to say ‘asylum’ when I arrived in the UK.*

*(Iraq, male, 25-34)*

As noted earlier in section 4.3, some respondents were told by agents that they should go to the UK because the asylum system is more generous than that of other countries. They were told that they would be safe and would be more likely to be granted refugee status.



In reality grant rates change over time and for different nationalities so that it is impossible to say that some countries are more generous than others. In this sense agents effectively behave like salespeople who tell their customers what they think they want to hear. Because this research was undertaken only with those whose end up in the UK it is not known whether asylum seekers who go elsewhere are given similar or different information. There is no evidence that the information that is provided is accurate nor that it varies in line with changes to policy and practice. Indeed many respondents felt that they had been misled by agents and were disappointed when they subsequently received a negative decision.

*The only thing the agent told us was that other countries might send us back but that New Zealand, Canada and the UK will allow you in because they know our problems and what is happening here.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

*All I know [is that] they told me to go there and they will let you in to stay, but my big surprise was that this is not true.*

*(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 35-44)*

Several respondents were keen to point out that had they been more informed about the asylum system before they had arrived they would have been in a better position to secure their status. When Waheed arrived he found that his wife and children were already living in the UK and had been granted refugee status (see case study). He applied for family reunion in 2004 but his case has not yet been resolved. He has no ID and is not receiving any support: *If I know the procedure I would have solved my problem from the beginning.* A woman from Zimbabwe whose case has been refused, in part because of the delay in making her asylum application made a similar comment: *If I had known in detail I would have claimed asylum at the port of entry.* Another woman from Sri Lanka was working with a number of different international organisations for more than ten years, and the government for three and a half years. She has realised since coming to the UK that she would have been eligible for a work permit: *I could have applied for skilled immigration, the points system, if I knew.*

Despite having a limited knowledge of the asylum system, few of the respondents were under any illusion that it would be easy to enter the UK or that they would not face difficulties once they had arrived. Some people knew that there was a possibility of being detained but nonetheless considered this to be

preferable to remaining in their country of origin. This was the case even among those who had previously been detained as a result of their political activities.

*I was expecting to be detained but to be detained is a better life than a free life in my country.*

*( Eritrea, male, over 65 years)*

Around a third of respondents had known of people who had been returned to their countries of origin from the UK but were not deterred by this:

*When I was in Congo I was aware some people had been deported, but at the time it this was of no concern to me, it was not my business*

*(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 35-44)*

Some respondents were of the view that those who had been unsuccessful in securing protection had in some way transgressed the law and this was why they were being returned. It did not occur to them that they might find themselves in the same situation. Once they were living in the UK this situation changed and many respondents reported feeling anxious about the possibility of removal. One woman travelled to the UK from South Africa using false papers. She stayed with her cousin hoping that the situation in her home country, Zimbabwe, would improve so that she could return. After some time she realised that things were getting worse and decided to apply for asylum. She was anxious about what the consequences of this decision might be: *I was afraid. I didn't know what to do. I thought if I claimed asylum when I arrived in the country they would deport me back to Zimbabwe. I didn't know what was going to happen (Zimbabwe, female, 35-44).* She has subsequently been granted refugee status.

Finally, it is worth noting that in the absence of any detailed information about the asylum system many respondents had simply assumed that they would be able to relay their experiences to the British authorities and that they would be allowed to remain. They did not consider that the accounts that they provided would be questioned or the details of their lives disputed. Whilst many were stressed and anxious about what would happen to them, particularly those who had received a negative decision, others maintained a blind faith that, in the end, they would be allowed to stay. Several considered that the UK had a moral responsibility towards them, as the 'motherland' and as a contributor to the problems that they had experienced in their own countries.



*We come to the UK because it is our mother. As a mother, British need to protect their children...I think they are obliged to help us because it is their fault that we are suffering.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 45-54)*

*I am disappointed now because they [the British] are behind all our problems. They should have a moral responsibility towards us.*

*(Iraq, female, 45-54)*

Others, particularly those who had been persecuted as a result of their religious identity, relied upon their faith to get them through the asylum determination process. Knowing little or nothing about how things work, or the basis on which decisions are made, they put their faith in God.

## 5.2 Access to employment and social welfare

The vast majority (90 per cent) of research participants who arrived in the UK as adults had previously been employed in their country of origin. Some were working for a government department, others were professionals with relatively high levels of skills and qualifications. Several owned their own businesses. As in the Robinson and Segrott (2002) study, many respondents did not expect to start working immediately upon arrival in the UK but in the longer term there was a near universal belief that they would be able to work in order to support themselves and their families.

*All I know was, like in my country, everybody should go to work to take care of their family.*

*(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 35-44)*

*I didn't think it would be an issue for me to find work. I've always been someone who has worked. It's hard to think I would just come here and just sit, not work.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

The evidence from this research also strongly suggests that removing permission to work has not had any impact on the decision making of asylum seekers. As suggested throughout this report, only a minority of asylum seekers are actively in a position to make choices about their destination country. Moreover although the right to work was removed from most asylum seekers nearly a decade ago, very few were aware that this policy had been introduced until after they arrived in the UK. Those who were aware before claiming asylum arrived in the UK as visitors and decided to apply subsequently.

*I think this is not clever. How can somebody know about something before we arrive? When we are persecuted in our country how can we know about policy in another country?*

*(Algeria, male, 35-44)*

*[B]efore I came I didn't know that asylum seekers are not allowed to work and I think that this rule is not good for the British economy. I heard people are waiting for ages and having everything paid for them. This is ridiculous.*

*(Algeria, male, 25-34)*

*I was thinking if I had status I wanted to have my dignity back. I can work and do anything to live without being humiliated. I didn't know anything about what kind of work but I am ready to do anything. I had no idea about the system.*

*(Iraq, female, 45-54)*

The inability to work can lead to difficulties with family members in the country of origin who have expectations that they will be supported. Agnes (see case study above) described how her family in Zimbabwe expect her to send money to them and cannot understand why she is unable to do so: *My mother has cancer and needs money for treatment. When I phone my family they don't believe me that I have no money. They think I am lying. They say 'how can you not be working in England?' They think that you are somebody that's not responsible, who doesn't want anything to do with them any more (Zimbabwe, female, 35-44).* Negasi (see case study above) also commented on this situation. His claim for asylum has been refused and he is currently destitute.

*I'm happy about the right to freedom of expression but my personal situation depresses me a lot because I can't meet my personal expectations of myself and no-one could trust me back at home. My friends in the US think 'what's the matter with you?' I'm not a lazy person but they think that I can't be bothered to make anything of my life.*

*(Ethiopia, male, 35-44)*

For those who are older – particularly those who are approaching or beyond the age of retirement – the issue of being able to work is less relevant. Waheed (see case study above) was an artist in Eritrea and was forced to leave after he was imprisoned for producing cartoons against the regime. For him, moving to the UK held no prospects of a better life: *At my age, what will I do if I leave my country? I am better to die close*

with my friends. What shall I produce....nothing. My life, at this age, would have been better in my country because I can sleep, I can paint, in my retirement (Eritrea, male, over 65 years). Although he is allowed to work in the UK, Waheed was told that he is too old to work when he visited Job Centre Plus. For those who arrived as separated children access to education was considered much more important than access to work. Several respondents expressed a desire to continue their education although few have yet been able to do so.

*I'm thinking about school, college or university. I was good with numbers, mathematics. I want to go to university. I have heard of Oxford and Cambridge universities. That's my dream.*

**(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 16)**

*My step-mum told me 'when you get there [to the UK] you can continue your school[ing], but when I got here the reverse was the case.*

**(Nigeria, male, 18-24)**

As with employment, the majority of respondents (around three quarters) had no knowledge of welfare benefits and support before coming to the UK. Most came from countries lacking well-developed welfare systems and had no expectation that they would be supported. They simply assumed that they would have to work to support themselves or would live with their families. Few of those who arrived as separated children had any concept of what might happen to them or how they would support themselves.

*I did not think about this. You do not think about the consequences. This is why people die in the desert or on the ocean because you only concentrate to go out.*

**(Eritrea, male, over 65 years)**

*I didn't even think about that [social welfare]. I thought I would live with my daughter and help her look after her child because back home this would be normal. When I was interviewed I was told that I could not come into Britain to take someone else's job by looking after my grandson.*

**(Zimbabwe, female, 45-54)**

*I didn't know anything. I just thought I would be able to live.*

**(Iraq, male, 18-24)**

Some were disapproving of the welfare system and the support provided to people who are capable of working and contributing to the economy.

*I didn't know about the welfare system. I don't like it actually. If you qualify for it you should be on it but I actually believe that it has a negative impact on people... I believe that people on the benefits should only be there because they can't work. I just feel it's because of the system that people are not working. If you have the right to work then you should work. If you don't have experience then you should get it. There are opportunities to upgrade your skills. People in the [United] States toil and struggle to make a living and in the end you are successful.*

**(Ethiopia, male, 35-44)**

*In the UK I know it's good but I think it just makes people lazy and makes society static.*

**(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 35-44)**

Those respondents who were aware of the welfare system had limited knowledge. Most knew of compulsory education for children and free healthcare prior to their arrival but little else. No-one knew that those refused asylum are unable to access secondary healthcare in most parts of the UK. The majority of those who had prior knowledge of the welfare system were from ex-colonies or countries that had been under British administration and two respondents explicitly stated that they were aware of the British welfare system because the welfare system in their own countries (Sudan and Zimbabwe) had been established under British colonial rule. There was no evidence that respondents consider the UK welfare system to be more generous than that of other countries. Indeed some consider the welfare system of other countries (Canada, Norway and Sweden) to be better. It is important to remember that having knowledge of welfare systems does not necessarily mean that this was an important factor in the decision to come to the UK. Neither is it possible to ascertain from this kind of research the relative importance of this factor compared with others.

## 5.3 Historical and cultural links

Asylum seekers who are unable to exercise any choice over their final destination, most usually because this decision is made by an agent, constitute the majority of respondents in this research. For these asylum seekers historical and cultural links are unimportant. Many had simply headed towards Europe in search of safety. Most knew little or nothing about the UK and had a greater knowledge of neighbouring countries. Not surprisingly those who had arrived as separated

children had even less knowledge than those who arrived as adults. Although some provided information about their perceptions and images of the UK, these images and perceptions played no role in the process through which they came to be here. For the minority of respondents who were able to make choices at different stages in their journey, historical and colonial links appear to play an important role in their final destination, not least because these links opened up possibilities for coming to the UK that would otherwise not have existed. This is particularly evident in relation to those from Zimbabwe, for whom linguistic ties and similarities in terms of legislative and educational systems appear to be particularly important.

Around a third of those who participated in this research came from countries which had previously been British colonies or under British administration. Many of these respondents, particularly those who were older, commented on this fact and said that they had some knowledge of British history as a result.

*We were a British colony so we learnt about the Queen and the royal family.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

*We are a British colony. We learn about British history. We learn all about British.*

*(Pakistan, female, 35-44)*

*We are a former colony so we learn at school that UK colonised Iraq.*

*(Iraq, female, 45-54)*

*I knew about the Queen. When I was 11 or 12, Eritrea was under British administration and I was at school and was given some commemorative pencils for drawing King George VI.*

*(Eritrea, male, over 65 years)*

Just under half of the respondents felt confident that they would be able to fit into British society. For some this confidence came from the familiarity of being in a country which has shared cultural reference points, most notably food, education, and television.

*The kind of life that I have lived has always been a British one. I was raised by my grandmother in a council house. The food I was eating at home is the same as I am eating here. The television programmes I watch here are the same as the TV programmes I used to watch when I was growing up. Everything is just the same. I went to school where many of the teachers were British and I studied Shakespeare.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

For others however, education and a willingness to adapt are considered more important. Their confidence about being able to fit into British society stems not from any historical or colonial relationship but from having a high level of education prior to departure from the country of origin. This is reflected in good English language and inter-personal skills.

*I did think I was going to fit in somewhere. I didn't think I would have any problem. I have very good English, very good interpersonal skills. If I had protection then I would very easily be integrated into the society. I thought there could be nobody who could not understand me. I had read a lot about the history of the UK in my University days so I wasn't worried about it. Even without the protection I think I am very much integrated. I have very much involved myself in everything.*

*(Ethiopia, male, 35-44)*

*Because I am educated, I have knowledge about people, I can go easily with people, I think I can fit. Algerians are like chameleons. We fit everywhere. Anywhere you put them they can adapt. I learned English here. I had no access to courses because I was destitute but I speak to people, I listen to TV and Radio 4. Nothing is similar between here and Algeria, except the air we breathe.*

*(Algerian, male, 35-44)*

This is not to suggest that all of the respondents felt that life was what they had expected or that they found it easy to integrate. Nearly half of respondents said that there are considerable cultural differences between their country of origin and the UK, including in relation to food, gender roles and responsibilities, relationships between parents and children, and the ethnic composition of British society.

*We came here to save our lives, no influences. We didn't talk about ourselves as woman. The husband is the priority in Tamil culture. Here [it is] mostly equal, but in Tamil men are considered superior, mainly because they are the bread winner.... Dress is not the same and the food is very different. Alcohol and cigarettes are few in our culture and they don't smoke in front of children and the family members stay together until they get married. Even [after] 40 years, men and woman, if they don't get married they will stay with the parents.*

*(Sri Lanka, female, 35-44)*



*I'd never met a white person. Everything was new.*

*(Ivory Coast, male, 18-24)*

Respondents were asked about their perceptions of British society and where these perceptions had come from. Many named historical and political figures such as the current Queen, Queen Victoria, Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher and Churchill. A surprising number of people, particularly those from Zimbabwe, talked about Princess Diana and said that they had watched her funeral on TV. Others named musicians such as The Beatles and Elton John. London, including landmarks such as the London Eye, Big Ben, Buckingham Palace and Tower Bridge were familiar to a number of respondents but other cities (Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds and Brighton) were also mentioned. Many said that their knowledge of British culture and of British people and places came from television programmes that they had watched in their countries of origin, including *Fawlty Towers*, *Keeping Up Appearances*, *The Bill* and *Mr Bean*.

The single biggest area of British life with which respondents were familiar was football. A large number of British football clubs were mentioned including Manchester United, Liverpool, Arsenal and Chelsea. All of these clubs are global brands and it is possible to watch British football worldwide on satellite television.

*The only thing I know about Europe was about football. We always had in my village a TV in a tent during the World Cup. You had to pay to go and watch. We didn't have money to go in but we would stand outside and listen to the shouting. It was very exciting.*

*(Ivory Coast, male, 18-24)*

Robinson and Segrott (2002) similarly found football to be a key area of British life about which asylum seekers are aware. The authors suggest that teams such as Manchester United not only create a perception of the UK as a globally successful country but also reinforce the idea that the UK is a rich nation.

Finally, previous research has found that language is an important consideration in the decision making of asylum seekers (Robinson and Segrott 2002). By contrast language was not found to be a significant factor in this research. A third of respondents described their English language skills as being 'good' or 'very good' before coming to the UK. Virtually all of these respondents were from countries with colonial links to the UK. Nearly half (44 per cent) described their English as 'very poor' and many said that they spoke no English at all. Some respondents, most

notably those who arrived as children or had not received any education in their country of origin, did not know what languages were spoken in specific European countries:

*I was thinking all European countries they speak English and they are like UK, they have education in English.*

*(Eritrea, male, 16)*

*I didn't know anything, I didn't even know a place called the United Kingdom existed.*

*(Burundi, female, 25-34)*

A number of respondents came from countries that were previously French colonies and described the difficulties they experienced on their arrival in the UK as a result of being unable to speak English.

*I wanted to go to Paris or any country in which I can communicate easily.*

*(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 35-44)*

*When I first arrived I was like a stupid, I couldn't speak English to anyone or understand anything, just like a stupid.*

*(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 25-34)*

Although asylum seekers understand the importance of language, they are not necessarily able to exercise choice in their country of destination to would enable them to exploit these linguistic ties. The fact that asylum seekers are increasingly unable to travel to countries with a common language has implications for the longer-term integration process.

## 5.4 Politics, democracy and human rights

Existing research has found that some forced migrants seek asylum in the countries of Europe, and specifically the UK, because they perceive that these countries offer a high level of peace and public order. Democratic institutions and the rule of law constitute a particular draw for those who have been persecuted by their own governments or individuals or groups that the government is unable (or chooses not) to control (Robinson and Segrott 2002; Castles *et al.* 2003). The findings of this research support these findings. Many respondents, and in particular those who had been persecuted as a result of their political activities, commented on the importance of human rights in the UK and on the perceived independence of the judiciary and systems of law and order.



*I knew UK is a democratic country. Everybody is free. You can do anything that you want as long as it is not against the law.*

*(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 25-34)*

*Before I came here I thought people are respectful and the UK government pays attention to human rights more than other countries in Europe.*

*(Iran, male, 35-44)*

*The first thing, it is a very civilised country with democracy and human rights. We hear how they treat others...Britain is well known in the world for its politics and human rights.*

*(Eritrea, male, over 65 years)*

*I used to hear that UK is a country of justice, and the most important thing is that judges are totally independent and receive no orders or pressures from the Government.*

*(Algeria, male, 35-44)*

Others, most notably those who had been discriminated against because of their ethnic or religious identity or who had experienced violence and abuse because of their relative lack of power as women, emphasised the importance of seeking asylum in a country in which there is ethnic and religious tolerance and where the rights of women and children are respected.

*My mum says 'I am going to send you to a European country, they have respect for humans. They don't care if you are Muslim, Christian or whatever'.*

*(Afghanistan, male, 18-24)*

*I know that the UK is modern and the most democratic and powerful country. I had one idea, that UK they give more freedom to the people and religious freedom...I know that in the whole of Europe they give more opportunities and freedom to children. And I know that there is freedom for women, education, and freedom to dress.*

*(Afghanistan, male, 35-44)*

Again, agents play an important role in providing some individuals with information about the ethnic and religious tolerance in the UK.

*We didn't know where to go. He [the agent] advised to go to the UK. He said it is the best country to give asylum. He said 'your religion and beliefs will be respected'.*

*(Pakistan, female 35-44)*

Although more than a third of those who participated in this research have been refused asylum, there nonetheless remains a strong belief that the political and human rights situation in the UK is far preferable to that left behind in the country of origin. Many feel that they have not been fairly treated by the asylum system and their experiences have not been properly understood. Despite this they understand, and appreciate, the importance of democracy and law and order, and feel safe.

*Here we are safe. No-one is coming to rape you. No police are coming to take advantage of you.*

*(Burundi, female, 25-34)*

*The way things are done here are not that different to the way things are done at home. The only difference [is] things are done fairly here. In Africa there is a lot of cheating. If you want something done you have to know somebody. There's no fairness, just cheating and greediness. Here almost all people are honest and things are done in an honest way. People really respect the laws.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

## 5.5 Sources of information

This section concludes with a brief discussion of the sources of information asylum seekers have about the UK prior to their arrival. The evidence presented in this report suggests that the information individuals have about the asylum system, opportunities to access work and welfare and about British society in general is generally limited but that it varies considerably. It is clear that this information is not always correct and is often partial. It is also clear that individuals are often not able to act, or make choices that reflect the information that they have because there are limited choices available to them or because other, most notably agents, effectively take decisions for them.

For many of those who participated in this research, questions about their knowledge of the UK prior to arrival were meaningless. Most emphasised, and wanted to talk about, the circumstances of their departure and the journey to the UK. These respondents said that they had no interest in living anywhere else and had therefore neither looked for, nor paid particular attention to, information about the UK before they were forced to leave.

*Before I came I didn't know anything about the UK. I love my house. I want to stay with my family. I am not so interested by foreign countries.*

*(Eritrea, female, 25-34)*

*I never thought I will come here so I was not so interested in the UK in particular. I just had general information like any other country.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

Knowledge about the UK also reflects, to a significant extent, the age and educational background of respondents. None of those who arrived as separated children had any knowledge of the UK before arriving. Those living in urban areas, and those who are highly educated and professionally employed, had a greater level of general knowledge about countries other than their own or immediate neighbours. Knowledge is gained both through the education itself, particularly for countries with colonial links to the UK, and through the greater interest in learning about the world that this education generates. The only significant exception to this was a young man from Iraq who was not educated but owned an internet cafe. He explained that he knew about other places in the world through the internet.

*City people like me are interested in what is going on all over the world.*

*(Eritrea, male, over 65 years)*

*I have always been interested in learning and knew as much about other countries, maybe more.*

*(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 35-44)*

Many respondents said that the images and perceptions that they had of British society were formed largely through the media, and in particular television. British television programmes are screened in many of the countries from which respondents originate and the BBC and BBC World Service are widely regarded as reliable sources of information. For the vast majority of respondents television programmes were not a direct source of information but rather framed their understanding of life in the UK. Only a very small number of respondents had used the internet to look for information about the UK before departing: one had spoken to her uncle in the UK using MSN; another had used the internet to find out information about the UK when he was living in Italy. No-one was aware of any information campaigns aimed at dissuading people from coming to the UK. Other research has identified social networks as an important and trusted source of information for

potential asylum seekers (Koser and Pinkerton 2002; Robinson and Segrott 2002). The findings of this research confirm that family and friends can and do provide information about the UK but suggest that both the quality and quantity of this information is extremely limited. Many respondents reported that they did not contact family and friends until after their arrival in the UK. As previously stated, some of those who made contact prior to departure were given limited information or even discouraged from coming to the UK at all. Others considered that the information they had been given had been misleading and had given an impression that things were better in the UK than they had found them to be.

*You are not told the truth in detail, you are only told the good things.*

*(Burundi, female, 25-34)*

*The people who come here never talked about the problems they faced. Not even one person indicated about the things they were going through.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 45-54)*

Those who participated in the focus groups also made similar comments. It is interesting to note that this point was made particularly strongly by Zimbabweans: 'We saw glorified images – everything looked better/different' (Focus group). This supports the conclusion of Koser and Pinkerton (2002) that there can be a tendency for migrants already in a country of potential asylum to focus only on the positive aspects of their experiences, or to misrepresent their experiences.

Finally, this research has highlighted the increasingly important role played by agents as a source of information about the UK. Although other research has noted the growing importance of agents in the process by which asylum seekers come to the UK, it is clear from the evidence presented in this report that a growing proportion of asylum seekers are forced to rely upon agents because of increasing border restrictions which prevent them from entering the country. Although some of those with access to substantial financial resources are sometimes able to negotiate with the agent and agree upon the destination country, many others are simply taken to Europe and then travel onwards to the UK at a later date or end up in the UK by chance. These asylum seekers are almost wholly dependent upon agents for information about potential countries of asylum and to this extent at least "have effectively lost control of their own migration" (Koser and Pinkerton 2002, 3).

The information that agents choose to give to asylum seekers may or may not be correct. Often agents explicitly highlight the benefits of the UK and suggest that the chances of being protected are higher than for other European countries. Many of the reasons given to respondents as to why they should go to the UK indicate that agents are not unlike anyone else trying to sell a product. They tell their potential customers – in most cases individuals who have limited options, resources and time - what they think they want, or choose, to hear. For example, a Pakistan woman who was being persecuted because she was Christian was advised to go to the UK because *'your religion and belief will be respected'*. A Bedoon from Kuwait was told he should go to the UK because *'it's the only country the UK that helps people who are in danger'*. A young boy from the Democratic Republic of Congo was told by an agent that *'if you go there [to the UK], you are unique and people will like you because you are black'*.

It is widely assumed by policy makers, politicians and the public that asylum seekers come to the UK having weighed up the relative benefits of different countries of asylum and with full knowledge of what to expect when they arrive. This assumption is not supported by the evidence here. Only a minority of asylum seekers in this study wanted to come to the UK and even those that did made this decision based on existing colonial, familial and linguistic links rather than knowledge of the asylum system or levels of welfare support. Very few had any knowledge at all of procedures for asylum determination. Most simply thought they could relay details of their experiences in their country of origin and would be allowed to stay. Similarly most assumed that they would be able to work to support themselves and their families, even though permission to work was removed for most asylum seekers nearly a decade ago. For many asylum seekers the features of UK society that were considered the most attractive relate to systems for political engagement and representation, the existence of democracy and respect for human rights. Most were aware, at some level, of some aspects of British life and culture, especially football, but this knowledge was incidental to the decision making process, over which most respondents had little or no control. The role of social networks in the dissemination of information appears to be weakening as the role of agents increases. Agents, as well as family and friends, often tell asylum seekers what they want to hear. As a result they are largely un- or ill-informed about what it will be like for them if and when they arrive in the UK.

# Section 6 Conclusions and implications

## 6.1 Key findings of the research

This research has explored the extent to which individuals are able to exercise 'choice' over the final destination in which they seek protection, and the factors that inform the decision making process. As has been suggested throughout this report, the concept of 'choice' is a contentious one in the asylum context. The majority of asylum seekers in Europe come from countries in which there is well-documented political oppression, conflict and human rights abuse (Castles *et al.* 2003). As a result the choices that asylum seekers make are rarely the outcome of a rational decision making process in which individuals have full knowledge of all the alternatives and weigh them in some conscious process designed to maximise returns. The lives of those who flee conflict and human rights abuse are fundamentally shaped - and their possibilities limited - by the circumstances in which they find themselves as well as by the particular background of those concerned (including their access to economic and social resources and personal attributes including education, language, gender and age). Nonetheless, within these constraints asylum seekers, as human beings with hopes and needs, aspirations and dreams, do their best to exercise some control over their lives. It is striking that within political and policy debates, the very idea that asylum seekers should be able to exert any choice is considered an anathema. This is reflected in the act that where any choice is exerted or desired by an asylum seeker it is assumed that he or she is not genuinely in need of protection.

The report provides evidence on the experiences of asylum seekers who have come to the UK. One in five of those who participated in the research have been granted refugee status and just over a third are still awaiting a decision on their claim for protection. It is clear that changes to asylum policy and practice over recent years had a very limited impact on the decisions of research participants to claim asylum in the UK. Only a third had chosen to come to the UK and the factors influencing this decision reflect colonial, historical and linguistic links, the presence of family

members and a general perception of the UK as a safe and politically stable country. For others, the decision about where to seek asylum was made by others, most commonly an increasingly complex network of agents and facilitators. For this group, who represent the majority of those who participated in the research, policies here in the UK had no impact. In some cases respondents were given information about where they would be going only during the journey or were told where they were when they arrived. None had any detailed knowledge about the asylum system, welfare support or work. Some had specifically wanted to go to other countries but through chance or circumstance found themselves in the UK.

This evidence, particularly when seen in the context of other research exploring patterns of asylum flows across Europe and the decision making of asylum seekers, significantly undermines the commonly-held assumptions that the UK is perceived by asylum seekers as a 'soft touch'. This assumption has underpinned policy and practice in relation to asylum over the past decade or more and has resulted in a series of measures intended to reduce the perceived 'pull effect' of different policies, particularly in relation to welfare support and access to work. There appears to be a race to the bottom of protection standards as European countries try to outdo each other in the misguided belief that this will reduce the perceived attractiveness of their countries. The only policies that appear to have a significant impact on applications for asylum are the ones that prevent entry. These are not protection sensitive and exclude all asylum seekers, placing lives at risk. They also significantly increase the risks associated with the journey to a place of safety because individuals become reliant upon the services provided by agents who are able to charge significant amounts of money in order to secure access. For those able to navigate pre-entry controls in order to seek protection, the policies that have been introduced to deter have a devastating impact on the extent to which individuals, including those eventually granted leave to remain, are able to rebuild their lives.



## 6.2 Implications for life in the UK

It is important to understand the consequences of assumptions about the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK for the lives of those who arrive. Although there is no evidence that policies introduced to deter 'unfounded' asylum applicants have been responsible for the fall in applications over recent years, these policies penalise all asylum seekers, breach their human rights, and damage the individuals concerned as well as receiving societies (Schuster 2005).

For those who arrive, the most important feature of their life in the UK is the fact that they are now safe. All of those who participated in the research emphasised the importance of living in a country where they no longer have to worry about their physical safety and security. But this does not mean that they do not have anxieties about the future. All had left their countries under circumstances in which they had limited control and many, most notably those who are waiting for a decision or have been refused asylum, continue to feel this way.

*Life has gone now. I can't do nothing. I can't control my life.*

*(Afghanistan, male, 18-24)*

*Though I am safe now what I go through every day is torture, mental torture. My life is being controlled. I am not allowed to do anything. I don't get any support. I am just struggling, just living in fear.*

*(Nigeria, male, 18-24)*

Many expressed a desire to be able to eventually return to their countries of origin. This was particularly the case for those who had left behind children and other family members.

*I want to go home because I left my son. I mean, everything in my life was at home. Zimbabwe is what it is now, I don't feel safe to go back there because anything can happen to me and I don't know where is my son. Here we are just settling without family. It's not home. We are just here because of circumstances.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

*I never thought that I would stay away forever. Home is always home. You have it, you can't take it out.*

*(Ethiopia, male, 35-44)*

*When my country is safe I want to return. I have my family...my sister, my mum, my cousins, my friends.*

*(Iraq, male, 18-24)*

But most were also acutely aware that it would be impossible for them to return until the situation had improved in their country of origin and it was safe for them to do so.

*I would rather they shot me here. That's why you know sometimes I think if they want to send me back, because I've got nobody. They shoot me here, its better because I don't want to see any more...*

*(Afghanistan, male, 18-24)*

*It's not secure, it's not safe back home. These activities I used to do opposite to the government, I'll never be able to go back while we have the same government.*

*(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 25-34)*

Although this research has not explored the asylum determination process itself, it seems likely that assumptions about the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK have implications for the way in which applications are determined. The fact that many asylum seekers are forced to enter the UK illegally using the services of agents who provide false documents often undermines the perceived credibility of an asylum seekers' account, particularly if he or she then claims to come from a different country or does not apply immediately on arrival. Assumptions that the decisions made by asylum seekers are motivated primarily by economic considerations and that they make rational choices based on full knowledge of asylum systems in different countries of origin are reflected in a failure to properly hear what people have to say about the circumstances under which they left and the constraints within which choices were made.

Despite a lack of evidence that asylum seekers choose to come to the UK because of welfare benefits or work, the government and Home Office continue to use concerns about these perceived 'pull' factors to justify the direction and content of its asylum policy. This is despite overwhelming evidence of the negative implications of the current policy approach for those living in the UK. Existing research shows that skilled and educated people are being left destitute and forced to rely on handouts (Doyle 2009). For many of those who participated in this research, the vast majority of whom had worked in their country of origin and were often employed in well-paid professional

roles, the inability to work was the biggest difficulty they faced in rebuilding their lives. Lack of access to work has psychological and social as well as economic consequences.

*I never expected to be here for five years, especially not working, no money, nothing, still living with handouts. Sometimes I just cry. It's like I am worthless, like I am just this piece of junk.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 35-44)*

*In our culture we describe men as big cats, lions or pumas. Someone who has to struggle every day, it is his spirit. When you take a big cat or a man and domesticate it, feed it all the time, after five years when you take the same cat to the big forest he will be killed, and this is what is happening to some of the asylum seekers. You can never take back this life that they take away from you now.*

*(Democratic Republic of Congo, male, 35-44)*

*The biggest difference is not being allowed to work. My life came to a standstill when I got to this country. My mind has gone rusty. I am not able to look at a meaningful life anymore. I look at it and I think, oh what a wasted life.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 45-54)*

Finally, there is evidence of increasingly negative public attitudes towards both immigrants in general and asylum seekers and refugees in particular (McLaren and Johnson 2004; Lewis 2005; Crawley 2009). Although there is insufficient space in this report to discuss the complex processes through which attitudes towards asylum seekers are formed, it seems likely that the nature of recent political discourse around asylum issues, including in relation to the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK, has negatively affected attitudes. In particular, there appears to be a relationship between negative media coverage of asylum issues and an increase in government statements and proclamations on the subject, many of which have been negative in tone and content (McLaren and Johnson 2004). As Lewis (2005, 46) suggests, “[t]alking tough on immigration has reinforced the idea that asylum is a problem and has not served to reassure the public...Unless a more positive language can be found with which to talk about asylum the public will remain concerned both about the issue and about the Government’s ability to deal with it”. Although the exact nature of the relationship between public and political discourse on asylum and the experiences of individual asylum seekers and refugees is unclear, many of those who participated in this research spoke at length about the

racism and discrimination which they had experienced since coming to the UK.

*I have never heard about racism before I came. When I was in London I couldn't see any. When I have been outside London I seen what racism is. My wife wears hijab. When we were in Sheffield people look at your wife like she is a hated sight. If you go to hospital or library they didn't like us and they swear. One day a group of people took off my wife's scarf and swore at her.*

*(Algeria, male, 35-44)*

*After we arrived three days there was heavy snow. Our children went outside to play and they were attacked, even the windows. We were scared. Then it was the same in school...They throw a balloon with urine on the window so we reported. When we came back from London after the break we found rubbish in the back side of the garden. Next day [there were] small pieces of glass in the back door. We couldn't get out from the house.*

*(Sri Lanka, female, 35-44)*

*I had one bad experience. I caught the bus. I asked about an all day ticket but I only had £10... The bus driver was not happy. He asked me to go and buy change. I try to explain and woman in the bus said 'you go to Africa and buy the change there' and the bus driver was laughing. I know I can complain and he can have a trouble because the rule here is against racism but I didn't. I just waited for the next bus.*

*(Zimbabwe, female, 45-54)*

The evidence collected during the course of this research suggests that dominant assumptions about the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK are associated not only with policies which undermine the ability of those seeking protection to gain entry but can also have a negative impact on the ability of those who arrive to rebuild their lives. Dominant assumptions about the nature of the journey to the UK can undermine the perceived credibility of the asylum application and may mean that those in need of protection are refused status. Assumptions that asylum seekers come to the UK primarily to access employment opportunities and social welfare benefits are associated with policies which have removed the right to work and reduced welfare benefits leading to poverty, deskilling, loss of self-esteem and significant under- and unemployment, including among those recognised as needing international protection and allowed to remain. Political statements and policy

initiatives which suggest that the majority of asylum seekers are actually economic migrants and are not deserving of international protection have led to a hostile public debate on asylum which, in turn, is reflected in increased incidents of racism and discrimination directed not only at asylum seekers but towards minority communities in general.

## 6.3 Policy recommendations

The findings of this research undermine dominant assumptions about the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK and provide strong evidence on the consequences of the current policy approach. There are clear implications for UK policy and practice.

### 1. Addressing the causes of forced migration

Given the strength of evidence on the underlying causes of asylum flows, policy efforts should focus on the root causes of forced migration (conflict and human rights abuse) rather than policies intended to prevent and deter asylum seekers from arriving. This will require joined-up policy making at the UK and EU level in relation to the promotion of human rights, humanitarian action, development aid and trade and investment (Castles *et al.* 2003).

### 2. Creating protection sensitive border controls

Measures to increase the strength of national and regional borders through increased pre-entry controls have reduced numbers by making it physically impossible for individuals to gain access to countries in which they might claim asylum. This has taken place at the expense of providing access to protection for those in need and has significantly increased the power and control of agents upon whom asylum seekers are increasingly forced to rely. It has also significantly increased the risks associated with seeking protection by forcing people to undertake more dangerous journeys. The UK and other EU States should examine their border controls and ensure that they are sufficiently protection-sensitive as to allow refugees to continue to seek asylum within Europe. States should examine their visa policies regularly to ensure they are not preventing people from fleeing an area of conflict or human rights abuse (Reynolds and Muggerridge 2008). Pre-entry controls should include protection safeguards. Outposted immigration officers, airline staff and private contractors will need appropriate training to ensure that they are able to identify those who have protection needs and ensure

that their asylum claims are examined appropriately. These standards should apply across the countries of the Europe so that protection standards are universally raised rather than lowered.

### 3. Improving the asylum determination process

The asylum determination process should be informed by a better understanding of the circumstances under which asylum seekers leave. It is currently assumed that those who make choices about where to claim asylum are not genuinely in need of protection. The complexity of routes and modes of entry to the UK are also perceived as undermining the credibility of the application. When considering the treatment of individuals who travel without proper documentation, decision makers should take into account the lack of choice of those fleeing persecution, including where there are no facilities for issuing passports within the country of origin, due to it being a country in upheaval or where certain people are denied passports (Reynolds and Muggerridge 2008). Asylum seekers should not be penalised because they enter the UK illegally or using forged or false documents. Those who do not meet criteria for Convention refugee status should be granted legal status that enables them to remain in the country of asylum if it is clear that they cannot return to countries of origin.

### 4. Providing access to work and increased benefits

There is no evidence from this or any other research that welfare and work act as 'pull factors'. The policy change introduced nearly a decade ago to prevent asylum seekers from working whilst their claim is determined has had no measurable impact on the level of applications received. This fall is attributable to other factors including the reduction of conflict in Europe and significant increase in pre-entry controls. Most asylum seekers continue to assume that they will be able to work to support themselves and their families. There is no evidence that higher levels of welfare support are associated with higher numbers of asylum seekers. This is because individuals are usually unaware of the existence of these benefits or do not in any case consider that they will be entitled to such support. Neither the removal of the right to work nor the reduction in welfare benefits that have been introduced over the past decade are based on evidence that these factors influence the decisions that asylum seekers make about where to seek protection. The fact that both policies continue to dominate political discourse serves only to further undermine

public understanding of asylum issues and the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK.

Although the 'pull factor' argument is misguided it continues to block positive policy change to improve the lives of those already here. These policies are associated with poverty and with the under- and un-employment of refugees who are granted protection. Asylum seekers should have the right to work if they have waited for longer than six months for their case to be resolved, or if they cannot return home. There is no evidence that this would lead to an increase in asylum applications. There should be increases in the level of welfare support provided to asylum seekers whilst they are waiting for a decision. Asylum seekers and their families should receive the same levels of financial assistance as individuals and families living on income support.

## **5. Changing the terms of public and political debates on asylum**

In order to meet the UK's obligations to provide protection to refugees and facilitate community cohesion, the nature of the political and public debate on asylum issues need to change. Changing the nature and content of the public debate on asylum means explaining more clearly the reasons why asylum seekers come to the UK. Politicians and policy makers should refrain from arguing that asylum seekers are drawn to the UK by so-called 'pull factors' such as access to welfare benefits or a generous asylum system. There is no evidence to support this assertion. These myths are perpetuated and exacerbated by the media and can result in racism and discrimination affecting not only asylum seekers and refugees living in the UK but also for others from ethnic minority backgrounds about whom assumptions are made. Ultimately this undermines efforts to build community cohesion. Government needs to rehabilitate the concept of asylum, remind people why the 1951 Refugee Convention was written and separate this from debates about economic immigration (Lewis 2005; Crawley 2009). The findings of this research provide an opportunity for this process to begin.

## **6. Addressing research gaps**

This research has addressed a number of key issues in relation to understanding why asylum seekers come to the UK. In so doing however it raises additional unanswered questions which can only be addressed through further in-depth research. It is clear, for example, that there are very many types of agents providing different kinds of services and with different kinds of relationships to the asylum seeker. What is

less clear are the reasons why agents give some asylum seekers certain kinds of information and not others. This report has provided some potential explanations as to why agents might encourage asylum seekers to come to the UK, or bring them here regardless of their preferences, for example, the fact that it may be easier to secure travel documents to enter the UK because of long history of inward migration and links to nations across the world. However it is not possible to be clearer about what motivates agents without further research. Similarly, whilst this research has looked at the decision making of asylum seekers from a wide range of countries and backgrounds it would be useful to know whether there are particular factors that are more or less important for people from certain countries of origin, for example, by focusing on the decision making of individuals from particular countries of origin. Comparative research with refugees living in different countries would also provide useful information about the motivations and knowledge those asylum seekers who choose certain countries in preference to others. Given the importance of research in ensuring that policy is based on evidence rather than assumption efforts to address these gaps should be made by a range of organisations, including the UK Border Agency.

The evidence presented in this report forms part of a growing body of evidence that that the current approach towards those seeking international protection has a range of unintended consequences. It reduces the ability of refugees fleeing conflict to secure access to international protection and reduces the ability of those who come to the UK to rebuild their lives within the limited possibilities open to them. Asylum policy making should be based on evidence rather than assumption. It is clear that many recent policies in this area - and the political debates with which they are associated - are driven by fundamental misperceptions about the extent to which asylum seekers actively 'choose' to come to the UK. Some of these misperceptions are reinforced by particular events, including the efforts of individuals living in France to travel to the UK in order to claim asylum. These events dominate media coverage and result in a skewed and overly simplistic understanding of the factors that influence the decision making of asylum seekers. It is only through in-depth research, such as that undertaken for this report, that it is possible to identify the complex set of factors that lead individuals to claim asylum in the UK rather than elsewhere, as well as the role of others (family members, associates and agents) in shaping this process and the journey with which it is associated. This evidence offers Government an opportunity to rethink and reframe the direction of UK asylum policy.



# References

All website resources accessed on 20th August 2009

- Bloch, A. and Schuster, L. 2005 'Asylum policy under new Labour', *Benefits* 13(2), 115-118
- Bloch, A. and Schuster, L. 2002 'Asylum and welfare: contemporary debates', *Critical Social Policy* 22(3), 393-414
- Böcker, A. and Havinga, T. 1998 *Asylum migration to the European Union: Patterns of Origin and Destination*, Brussels: European Commission
- Castles, S., Crawley, H. and Loughna, A. 2003 *States of Conflict: Causes and Patterns of Forced Migration to the EU and Policy Responses*, London: IPPR
- Collyer, M. 2005 When do social networks fail to explain migration? Accounting for the movement of Algerian asylum-seekers to the UK, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(4), 699-718
- Collyer, M. 2004 'The Dublin regulations influences on asylum destinations and the exception of Algerians in the UK', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17(4), 375-400
- Crawley, H. 2009a 'Between a rock and a hard place: negotiating age and identity in the UK asylum system', 89-106 in N. Thomas (ed) *Children, Politics and Communication: Participation at the Margins*, Bristol: Policy Press
- Crawley, H. 2009b *Understanding and Changing Public Attitudes: A Review of Existing Evidence from Public Information and communication Campaigns*, London: Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, [www.theworkcontinues.org/downloadaddoc.asp?id=147](http://www.theworkcontinues.org/downloadaddoc.asp?id=147)
- Cutler, S. and Wren, M. 2005 *Justice Denied: Asylum and Immigration Legal Aid – A System in Crisis*, London: Asylum Aid and Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID)
- Doyle, L. 2009 'I Hate Being Idle': *Wasted Skills and Enforced Dependence Among Zimbabwean Asylum Seekers in the UK*, London: Refugee Council
- Flynn, D. 2005 'New borders, new management: the dilemmas of modern immigration policies', *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (3), 463-490
- Gilbert, A. and Koser, K. 2006 'Coming to the UK: what do asylum seekers know about the UK before arrival?', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32(7), 1209-1225
- Hatton, T. 2008 'The rise and fall of asylum: what happened and why?', *CEPR Discussion Paper DP6752*, London: Centre for Economic Policy Research
- Home Office 2009 *Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom 2008*, Home Office Statistical Bulletin 14/09, London: Home Office, [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs09/hosb1409.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs09/hosb1409.pdf)
- Home Office 2008 *Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 2007*, Home Office Statistical Bulletin 11/08, London: Home Office, [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs08/hosb1108.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs08/hosb1108.pdf)
- Home Office 2005 *Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 2004*, Home Office Statistical Bulletin 13/05, London: Home Office, [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/hosb1305.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/hosb1305.pdf)
- Hopkins, P. and Hill, M. 2008 'Pre-flight experiences and migration stories: the accounts of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children', *Childrens Geographies* 6(3), 257-68
- Koser, K. 2000 'Asylum policies, trafficking and vulnerability', *International Migration* 38(3), 91-111
- Koser, K. 1997 'Social networks and the asylum cycle: the case of Iranians in the Netherlands', *International Migration Review* 31(3), 591-611
- Koser, K. and Pinkerton, C. 2002 *The Social Networks of Asylum Seekers and the Dissemination of Information About Countries of Origin*, Home Office Research Findings 165, London: Home Office, [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/r165.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/r165.pdf)
- Lewis, M. 2005 *Asylum: Understanding Public Attitudes*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research
- McLaren, L. and Johnson, M. 2004 'Understanding the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment', pp.169-200 in A.Park (ed) *British Social Attitudes: The 21st Report*, London: Sage
- Middleton, D. 2005 'Why asylum seekers seek refuge in particular destination countries: an exploration of key determinants', *Global Migration Perspectives Working Paper 34*, Geneva: GCIM, [www.gcim.org/attachements/GMP%20No%2034.pdf](http://www.gcim.org/attachements/GMP%20No%2034.pdf)
- Moore, W. and Shellman, S. 2007 'Wither will they go? A global study of refugees' destinations 1965-95', *International Studies Quarterly* 51(4), 11-34
- Morrison, J. and Crosland, B. 2001 'The trafficking and smuggling of refugees: the end game in European asylum policy', *New Issues in Refugee Research Working Paper 39*, Geneva: UNHCR, [www.unhcr.org/3af66c9b4.html](http://www.unhcr.org/3af66c9b4.html)

- Nadig, A. 2002 'Human smuggling, national security and refugee protection', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15(1), 1-25
- National Audit Office (2004) *Asylum and Migration: A Review of Home Office Statistics*, London: NAO, [www.nao.org.uk/publications/0304/asylum\\_and\\_migration\\_review.aspx](http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0304/asylum_and_migration_review.aspx)
- Neumayer, E. 2005 'Bogus refugees? The determinants of asylum migration to Western Europe', *International Studies Quarterly* 49(3), 389-410
- Neumayer, E. 2004 'Asylum destination choice: what makes some Western European countries more attractive than others?', *European Union Politics* 5(2), 155-180
- Papadopoulou, A. 2004 'Smuggling into Europe: transit migrants in Greece', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17(2), 167-184
- Reynolds, S. and Muggeridge, H. 2008 *Remote Controls: How UK Border Controls are Endangering the Lives of Refugees*, London: Refugee Council
- Richmond, A. 1993 'Reactive migration: sociological perspectives on refugee movements', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 6(1), 6-24
- Robinson, V. and Seagrott, J. 2002 *Understanding the Decision-Making of Asylum Seekers*, Home Office Research Study 245, London: Home Office, [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hors243.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hors243.pdf)
- Salt, J. 2000 'Trafficking and smuggling: a European perspective', *International Migration* 38(1), 38-56
- Schuster, L. 2005 'A sledgehammer to crack a nut: deportation, detention and dispersal in Europe', *Social Policy and Administration* 39(6), 606-621.
- Schuster, L. 2000 'A comparative analysis of the asylum policy of seven European governments', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13(1), 118-32
- Thielemann, E.R. 2004 'Why asylum policy harmonisation undermines refugee burden-sharing', *European Journal of Migration and Law* 6, 47-65
- Thielemann, E.R. 2003 'Does policy matter? On governments attempts to control unwanted migration', *IIIS Discussion Paper 9*, Dublin: Institute for Internal Integration Studies, [www.tcd.ie/iiis/documents/discussion/pdfs/iiisd09.pdf](http://www.tcd.ie/iiis/documents/discussion/pdfs/iiisd09.pdf)
- Turton, D. 2003 'Conceptualising forced migration', *RSC Working Paper 12*, Oxford: University of Oxford, [www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/PDFs/workingpaper12.pdf](http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/PDFs/workingpaper12.pdf)
- Van Hear, N. 2004 'I went as far as my money would take me': conflict, forced migration and class', *Centre on Migration Policy and Society Working Paper 6*, [www.compas.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/files/pdfs/WP0406.pdf](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/files/pdfs/WP0406.pdf)
- Van Liempt, I. and Doomernik, J. 2006 'Migrants' agency in the smuggling process: the perspectives of smuggled migrants in the Netherlands', *International Migration* 44(4), 165-90
- Vink, M. and Mejerink, F. 2003 'Asylum applications and recognition rates in EU Member States 1982-2001: a quantitative analysis', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 16(3), 297-315
- Webber, F. 2006 *Border Wars and Asylum Crimes*, London; Statewatch, [www.statewatch.org/analyses/border-wars-and-asylum-crimes.pdf](http://www.statewatch.org/analyses/border-wars-and-asylum-crimes.pdf)
- Webber, F. 1996 *Crimes of Arrival: Immigrants and Asylum Seekers in the New Europe*, London: Statewatch, [www.statewatch.org/analyses/crimes-of-arrival.pdf](http://www.statewatch.org/analyses/crimes-of-arrival.pdf)
- Williams, L. 2006. 'Social networks of refugees in the United Kingdom: tradition, tactics and new community spaces', *Journal of Ethnic and Minority Studies* 32(5), 865-79
- Zetter, R., Griffiths, D., Ferretti, S. and Pearl, M. 2003 *An Assessment of the Impact of Asylum Policies in Europe 1990-2000*, Home Office Research Study 259, [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hors259.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hors259.pdf)
- Zimmerman, S. 2009 'Why seek asylum? The roles of integration and financial support' *International Migration* [early view, August 2009]
- Zolberg, A. 1989 'The next waves: migration theory for a changing world', *International Migration Review* 23(3), 403-30
- Zolberg, A., Suhrke, A. and Aquayo, A. 1993 *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World*, Oxford: OUP

# Appendix 1

## Information sheet for research participants

You are being invited to take part in a research project to better understand the reasons why people seek asylum in the UK. Before you decide whether or not to take part it is important for you to understand the aims of the research and what it will involve. **Please take time to read the following information carefully.** Feel free to talk to others about the project if you wish. You can also contact us for more information (details below) before making a decision about whether or not to take part.

### What is the aim of the research?

The aim of this research is to get a better understanding of the importance of a range of factors (for example, perceptions of the UK, family and friends, cultural and language ties, access to welfare support and work) which influence the decisions of people who seek asylum in the UK.

### Who can take part in the research?

We are particularly interested in finding out about the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees from Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Iran, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Nigeria and Pakistan. We would like to speak with people who arrived in the UK after January 2004. You can take part in the research whatever your legal status or situation.

### What will I have to do?

We would like you to take part in a face-to-face interview with a researcher. You will be asked a series of questions about your background, journey to the UK, and the factors that influenced your decision to come here.

### Where will the interview take place?

The interview will take place in a location of your choice. This could be a community or refugee organisation, a cafe, your home or somewhere else. The researcher will find out where you would like to meet when the appointment for your interview is made.

Will you cover my travel expenses for the interview?

Yes. If you decide to take part in the research you will be given £15 cash to cover the costs of your travel to the interview and any other expenses associated with your participation in the research.

### Will anyone else be in the meeting?

No. There will be no-one else in the meeting apart from the researcher. If you need an interpreter please let the researcher know so that one can be arranged.

### What will happen to the information you collect during the interview?

During the interview the researcher will take notes of what you say. The interview will also be recorded on a tape if you are happy for this to happen. This is simply to make sure that we record the information you give us accurately. The written notes of the information you give us will be stored securely. The recording of the interview will be destroyed.

### Will anyone know that I have participated in the research?

No. Everything you say during the interview is confidential. The information you provide will be anonymised so that it will not be possible for anyone reading the final report to know that you have taken part in the research. You do not need to provide your name or contact details but if you do it will enable us to stay in touch with you and provide you with a copy of the findings of the research.

### Will my participation in the research affect my asylum claim or the services I receive?

No. Your participation in the discussion is in no way linked to any services or advice you may receive from the Refugee Council or from any other group, organisation or institution. There will be no negative or positive effects on any services you may receive. Your participation will also have no effect on your asylum claim or your status in the UK, nor on any services you may receive from the government.

### **Who is undertaking the research?**

The work for this project is being undertaken by researchers at the Centre for Migration Policy Research (CMPR) which is based at Swansea University ([www.swansea.ac.uk/cmpr](http://www.swansea.ac.uk/cmpr)). The research is funded by Refugee Council ([www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)). The Refugee Council is the largest organisation in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees to make sure that their needs and concerns are addressed.

### **Will I receive any feedback on the findings of the research?**

Yes. We are committed to providing feedback on the findings of the research to everyone who participates in the project. If you provide us with your contact details we will send you a copy of our report.

Alternatively you can contact us at [migration@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:migration@swansea.ac.uk) and we will send a copy to you. Or you can obtain one from the Refugee Council ([lisa.doyle@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:lisa.doyle@refugeecouncil.org.uk))

### **Where can I get further information about the project?**

If you would like any further information about the project before you decide whether or not to take part in the research you can contact Dr Heaven Crawley at Swansea University [h.crawley@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:h.crawley@swansea.ac.uk) or telephone [mobile number provided]



# Appendix 2 Interview topic guide

## Section 1 Background of research participants

- Age, gender and country of origin
- Language used as a child, any other languages spoken and English skills before arrival in the UK
- Marital status and number of children. Research participants with children were asked about the number and ages of children and whether the children live with them in the UK
- Year of arrival in the UK, whether previous visits had been made and for what purpose, year of asylum application, whether application was made at port of entry or in-country and current status.
- Educational and employment experiences in the country of origin

## Section 2 Circumstances of departure from home country

- What were the circumstances under which you decided to leave your country?
- Was there a general conflict in your country of origin or were you / your family specifically targeted?
- Did you have much time to plan your journey?
- Did you leave in a hurry? Were you able to pack / make arrangements to take things with you?
- Were you able to sell your house / possessions or make arrangements for others to look after them?
- Did you have time to tell others (including family, friends and employers) about your plans?
- Did you decide to come to the UK before you left your country? If no, at which point in your journey did you decide to come to the UK?
- If you didn't choose to come to the UK, when did you find out this was your destination?
- Did anyone else (e.g. an agent / facilitator) suggest you should come to the UK or was this you / your family's decision?
- Did you want to go somewhere else?

## Section 3 Your journey to the UK

- Did anyone help you to plan your journey? If yes, who?
- Did anyone help you with travel documents and visas to come to the UK? If yes, who?
- Did you come to the UK directly or through other countries?
- If you came through other countries, which ones?
- Why did you decide to come to the UK rather than staying in those other countries?
- Did your plans change during the journey? If so, why?
- How much did the journey cost?
- What did you have to pay for e.g. travel tickets, services of agent, passport, other papers.
- How did you pay for it? Did anyone help you?
- Did you intend to stay in the UK permanently when you arrived?
- Do you want to return home?
- Do you want to go somewhere else, for example, another European country, the US, Canada?

## Section 4 Perceptions of the UK

- What was your perception of the UK before you arrived?
- Did you have any particular ideas about the UK and what it would be like, for example, in terms of the society in general, or the economy, or the political situation?
- Did you know about any particular British people or places?
- Where did your ideas and perceptions about the UK come from?
- What was the role of television / film / the internet?
- Had you heard about the UK from family and friends living here?
- Did you learn about the UK when you were in school / University/ if so, what kinds of things did you learn about?

- Did you have any family and/or friends living in the UK before you arrived?
- Did you have any family and/or friends living in any other European countries?
- Did you have a close relationship / frequent contact with these family / friends?
- Did they give you any information about living in the UK / Europe?
- Were you aware of any official information about life in the UK before you left your home country, for example, information produced by the UK government? If yes, what did it say? What image did it give about life in the UK?
- To what extent did your perceptions / expectations of the UK match the reality of living here?
- Is your experience what you expected it to be?
- In what way is life in the UK similar or different to what you expected / thought it would be like?

## Section 5 Knowledge of UK asylum policy and practice

- Did you know anyone else that had migrated to the UK before you left your country?
- Were you aware of the existence of a community of people from your country / region of origin living in the UK? If yes, how were you aware of this (social networks, internet, media sources etc)
- Were you aware that you could claim asylum in another country before you left?
- Did you know anything about asylum policies in the UK before you arrived?
- What did you know? How did you know get this information (through the media / television, family/friends etc)?
- Did you think it would be easy or difficult to get into the UK?
- Before you arrived, were you aware that some asylum seekers are held in Immigration Removal Centres?

- Before you arrived, were you aware that some asylum seekers are returned back to their country of origin?
- Were you worried / concerned about what would happen to you when you arrived in the UK?
- Did you think you would be allowed to stay / get refugee status?
- What did you think you would do if you were not allowed to stay?

## Section 6 Living in the UK

- Did you think you would be able to find a job in the UK?
- What kind of job did you think you would be able to do?
- Before you arrived, were you aware that asylum seekers are not allowed to work before they get a decision?
- Were you aware of the welfare system in the UK before you arrived?
- What did you think you would be entitled to in terms of access to housing, education, healthcare?
- Did you know anything about the welfare system in other countries? If yes, what did you know?
- Did the political situation in the UK influence your decision to come here? If yes, which aspects of the political situation were most important (e.g. right to vote, freedom of speech, freedom to dress / behave as you wanted)?
- Were you aware of any civil and human rights organisations in the UK? If yes, did the existence of these organisations influence your decision to come here?
- Did you think you would be able to fit into British society easily?
- Do you share the same language?
- Are there cultural similarities / differences that influenced your decision?
- Did you have any knowledge / concerns about racism and/or discrimination?

As a human rights charity,  
independent of government, the  
Refugee Council works to ensure that  
refugees are given the protection they  
need, that they are treated with  
respect and understanding, and that  
they have the same rights,  
opportunities and responsibilities as  
other members of our society.

This report can be downloaded at  
[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)



240-250 Ferndale Road London SW9 8BB

T 020 7346 6700 F 020 7346 6701

[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

British Refugee Council, (commonly called the Refugee Council) is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales, [No 2727514] and a registered charity, [No 1014576]. Registered office: 240-250 Ferndale Road, London SW9 8BB, United Kingdom. VAT reg no: 936 519 988

