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BETWEEN DESTITUTION AND A HARD PLACE:  
FINDING STRENGTH TO SURVIVE REFUSAL FROM  
THE ASYLUM SYSTEM: A CASE STUDY FROM THE  
NORTH EAST OF ENGLAND

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**Finding strength to survive refusal from the asylum system: a case study from the North East of England**

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## 1. Research summary

### Background and aims

It is well documented that, in the UK, refusal from the asylum system can lead to eviction from property, homelessness and destitution (Lewis, 2007, 2009; Crawley et al., 2011). Although the number of people who are living in destitution following the asylum process is not known, it was estimated that in 2005, there were over 283,500 nationally (NAO, 2005) and anecdotal evidence suggests that this number is increasing. In the North East of England, it is suggested that several hundred people live in destitution at any one time (although total numbers will be much higher) following the asylum process (Prior, 2006) and local charities report that their services continue to be accessed by an increasing number of people. While the consequences of destitution have been well documented nationally, the ways in which people find strength to survive the experience of destitution following a refusal from the asylum system are less well known. In addition, the experiences of people who are destitute and living in the North East of England have not been widely reported.

### The aims of this research were:

- to document the lived experiences of people in the North East of England who find themselves destitute following the asylum process .
- to uncover the ways in which they find the strength to survive.

Peer researchers enabled accounts of destitution, coping and surviving to be collected and the findings help to illuminate the multiple ways that people find strength to cope with destitution in a country not of their birth. Recommendations are given for policy, practice and future research.

## Key findings

1. Destitution for many people is a long term reality, rather than a short term phase of homelessness.
2. The experience of becoming destitute following the asylum process begins a continuous cycle of:
  - Finding the strength each day to secure somewhere to sleep for the night and to meet other physical needs.
  - Learning to live with constant fear.
  - Living between destitution and a hard place. Life is lived with very limited choices, each resulting in intolerable outcomes.
3. While recognising that destitution can be a crushing experience, it can also help to develop resilience and the deepening of friendships with people across many different cultures, relying on a variety of different relationships to survive.
4. The experience of destitution invokes intense anger against the UK government, which defends a doctrine of upholding international human rights and yet, at the same time, continues to force people to live in destitution within the UK.
5. People who find themselves destitute following the asylum process develop strategies to keep physically, emotionally and spiritually strong:

### 4.1 Keeping physically strong

- Many people draw on food parcels, small cash donations and meals from local charities and faith-based groups in the local area. The majority of participants were afraid to go to statutory organisations as they believed that they were an extended arm of the Home Office.

- The support of friends is important for a floor or sofa to sleep on, but this is limited, as many friends are on limited income or are claiming asylum themselves.
- For some, the informal economy is the only way to be able to meet physical needs. People are often forced into illegal work, which often results in long hours, exploitation and unreported accidents.

### 4.2 Keeping emotionally strong

- All of the research participants described how they drew strength from the belief that they had a genuine case to seek asylum and hoped that eventually justice would be done.
- The majority of research participants found strength through the support of friends, local families and also 'trusted' individuals in local churches, charities and other organisations.
- Strength was drawn from people who could give some 'hope' in the midst of despair; the simple act of being believed brought strength and hope.

### 4.3 Keeping spiritually strong

- Many people drew strength from spiritual understandings of hardship and suffering.
- The experience of adversity brought both strength and defeat; at times, strength was found in going through very difficult circumstances, since each trial had the capacity eventually to make the individual stronger. At other times, however, the difficulties brought defeat and depression. In

many cases (nationally) this depression has led to self-harm and suicide.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

Destitution should be recognised as a long-term condition and, as such, should not be an outcome of the asylum process in the UK, nor should it be deliberately structured to create destitution. This report recommends that:

- Destitution is not used to force people to go back to their country of origin following a refusal from the asylum system, as this is neither humane, nor does it work.
- Local Authorities need to actively engage with the issues raised by destitution following the asylum process, rather than pretending that these people do not exist because they do not access statutory organisations.
- There is a need for improved recognition and financial support by the government for those community and voluntary organisations who provide support for those who are destitute, but whose funding is actually disappearing.
- The resilience and strength shown by individuals seeking asylum should be harnessed and developed by giving the right to work in the UK for those in the midst of an application for asylum and also following an asylum decision or until removal.
- The asylum process should be improved, so that people do not remain in the UK and living in destitution when they have a case for asylum.
- Those seeking asylum should have the right to work, subject to certain conditions. Not having this right leads to

crime and exploitation and a demeaning of the dignity of those waiting for a decision.

- The Home Affairs Select Committee, in reviewing the asylum process, should adjudicate on whether the government is failing to meet its obligations under human rights legislation.

## 2. Policy context

### **Asylum process in the UK**

The process of claiming asylum in the UK is both complex and inconsistent (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2007). In recent months, the UK Border Agency has been dissolved amidst accusations of incompetence (Arkell, 2013) and Asylum Support (formerly known as the National Asylum Support Service or NASS) is constantly faced with allegations of ineptitude and bias. The UK remains a signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees and therefore is legally obliged to admit any persons seeking asylum and, as such, they are permitted to remain in the UK until their claim for asylum has been decided. Reaching a peak of 84,132 in 2002, official government statistics indicate that there are currently 22,592 people claiming asylum in the UK (ONS, March 2013). However many of those seeking asylum have waited many years for a decision to be reached.

Once admitted to the UK, the person seeking asylum is prohibited from employment (Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, 2002) and is allocated accommodation on a 'no-choice' basis by Asylum Support, which is the parallel system of welfare and support set up by the Home Office for those people seeking asylum. Asylum Support, formerly known as NASS, was created by the Labour Government in 1999 as a result of the Asylum and Immigration Act (1996). Financial support is given as a weekly allowance and is currently set at £36.62 per week for a single person over the age of 18 years (Parliament, 2013).

In 2000, the Labour government responded to public and political pressure to move people who were seeking asylum away from the congested airports and port areas of the UK, by instituting a system of 'dispersal'. The North East of England became one of these 'dispersal' areas, with ten out of twelve local authorities in the area setting up housing contracts with the Home Office. As a result, the North East of England has seen an increase in people from minority ethnic groups, especially Black Africans (Craig et al., 2012). Nonetheless, the

'non-white' population in the region remains one of the lowest in the country, at only 5.3% (ONS, 2013) and, at the time of publication, there are 2,040 people registered as seeking asylum in the region and housed by the single housing provider, G4S (North East Refugee Service, 2013).

Once allocated accommodation, it becomes the responsibility of the individual who is seeking asylum to 'prove' that they have a just and valid claim to asylum and are seeking safety from persecution. It has been well documented in recent years that, to a large extent, the asylum system is run as an adversarial system, whereby people are seen as 'illegitimate' until they can prove themselves 'legitimate' claimants of asylum (Bloch and Schuster, 2005; MacDonald and Billings, 2007). During this time, between an initial claim for asylum and a Home Office decision on the application, people seeking asylum are entitled to some services, such as basic NHS care and education for children, but they are not entitled to wider welfare benefits.

The most recent government data indicates that 37% of people seeking asylum in the year up until March 2013 were granted asylum or a form of temporary protection (ONS, March 2013). The options for those who are refused become very limited. Some individuals and families are deported back to their country of origin, although the exact numbers are not publically available. For some, there is the opportunity to apply for limited support under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. At the time of writing, this number stands at 2,968 (ONS, March 2013). This includes the offer of accommodation and financial support in the form of vouchers and is only available to those who can prove that they are taking reasonable steps towards voluntary return to their country, or if there is no safe route back to their country. Families are currently not evicted from their accommodation upon final refusal, although the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Act 2004 does give the government the power to stop all support and accommodation to families. To date, this has not been acted upon.

The final 'option' for single people and childless couples, upon final refusal of their application for asylum, is to leave their accommodation within 21 days and to seek voluntary return to their country of origin. Without accommodation, permission to work or recourse to public funds, and afraid to return to their country of origin because they believe they will be imprisoned or tortured on return, people become homeless and destitute. Increasingly this policy is seen as an active move by the UK government to make life so intolerable for people following a refusal from the asylum process that it will effectively force a decision to leave the UK (Amnesty International, 2006).

### **What is destitution?**

'The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 defines a person as destitute if they do not have adequate accommodation or any means of obtaining it (whether or not their other essential living needs are met); or they have adequate accommodation or the means of obtaining it, but cannot meet other essential living needs' (Independent Asylum Commission, 2008, p. 91).

Whilst recognising that there are many causes of destitution and that this can happen throughout any stage of the asylum process (Lewis, 2007; Report of the Parliamentary Inquiry into asylum support for children and young people, 2013), for the purpose of this report, destitution is defined as a state of homelessness following a final refusal at the end of the asylum process in the UK. The individual is stripped of all financial and housing support and, crucially, continues to be denied any permission to work. The result is that people are left in a state of destitution and have to rely on friends and/or charities to give them basic food and shelter.

While government ministers assert that 'destitution is very explicitly not used as a tool' in immigration control (Damien Green, 2013), there is a growing body of

evidence that suggests otherwise (Chakrabati, 2005; O'Neill and Hubbard, 2012). The Joint Committee for Human Rights (JHCR, 2007a) revealed a 'deliberate policy of refusing benefits to some asylum seekers combined with a ban on legal working left many would-be refugees in appalling circumstances'. Amnesty International (2006) stated that the UK government was 'deliberately using destitution in an attempt to drive refused asylum seekers out of the country', and there is no evidence to suggest that things have changed in the last seven years. The label of 'refused asylum seeker' is powerful. As Zetter (2007) has shown, bureaucratic powers can use these powerful labels to represent state interests, rather than that of the refugee. The response of the government is to offer Section 4 'hard case' support, but this is refused on many occasions, applications take a long time to process and many people choose not to apply for Section 4, believing that this will be a back door to deportation back to their country of origin and to the danger from which they fled in the first place (Prior, 2006). There is a growing body of research, which demonstrates the inconsistencies and failures of the UK asylum system, including poor legal representation, letters going to the wrong address and therefore not received and poor interpretation at the asylum interview (Asylum Support Appeals Project, 2007). O'Neill and Hubbard (2012) assert that 'given the weight of evidence, we can only conclude that the destitution of refused asylum seekers is primarily due to the asylum system' (p.6). While the UK government neatly sidelines these issues, the populist media has accentuated the sensationalised stories of "scroungers and skivers" and a criminal underworld around people seeking asylum (Khosravinik, 2009). Refugees and people seeking asylum are not only constructed as unwanted (ICAR, 2004), but are subject to multiple exclusions, which include both economic and racial dimensions (Garner, 2010). There is increasingly a general discourse on the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor in the UK, and people who are refused following the asylum process are at best seen as unworthy of support (Walters and Schillinger, 2004; Chakrabati, 2005; McDonald and Billings, 2007) and at worst, as stripped of 'life' (Darling, 2009). Amnesty International and a consortium of concerned charities underscore this invisibility

in their 'Still Human; Still Here' campaign. Likewise, the British Red Cross reflects this sentiment of 'Not gone, but forgotten' in a recent advocacy report highlighting destitution following the asylum process and urging the British Government for a more humane asylum system (British Red Cross, 2010).

### **Evidence of destitution: national and local context**

The challenges of destitution following the asylum process have been well documented in the UK in recent years through research, as noted above; many national and international charities have also highlighted the main issues (Amnesty International, 2006; British Red Cross, 2010). Whilst detailed statistical evidence of destitution continues to be very difficult to obtain, Refugee Action suggested with the BBC in 2006 that there were between 400,000 and 450,000 unresolved asylum claims in the UK. Recent press announcements suggest this figure has barely changed in the last 7 years.

The current body of research based evidence in the UK suggests that people who find themselves destitute following the asylum process face multiple difficulties. For example, it renders people vulnerable to illness (mental and physical) and exploitation (Lewis, 2007; IAC, 2008). In addition, researchers at Leeds University have recently demonstrated the ways in which people seeking asylum and refugees not only lead 'precarious lives' but this can include being forced into exploitative labour practices (Lewis et al, 2013). Colleagues in Swansea (Crawley et al., 2011) have extensively documented the survival strategies employed by people following refusal from the asylum system in the UK and uncovered a picture of food hand-outs, distrust of statutory organisations and the use of a wide range of transactional relationships to survive. The impact of destitution is well known and has been documented across several cities in the UK, including Leeds (Lewis 2007, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust,), Swansea (Crawley et al., 2011, Oxfam GB Research Report), London (Mayor of London, 2004) and Leicester (Leicester Refugee and Asylum Seekers' Voluntary Sector Forum, 2005). In addition, national and international charities have highlighted the difficulties

faced by people seeking asylum (Amnesty International, 2006; Refugee Action, 2006) and children's charities have looked at the impact on families (Raecroft, 2008, Barnardos; Pinter (2011), The Children's Society). Hunger, physical illness, mental distress and exploitation are common themes running through all of these accounts.

While several charities, community organisations and faith based groups have emerged over the last decade in the North East of England to tackle the challenges faced by those who find themselves destitute, documented evidence of either the numbers or the experiences of those who are destitution remains sparse. A recently published report by the Regional Refugee Forum and the North East Child Poverty Commission (Crossley and Fletcher, 2013) has highlighted the multiple ways that people seeking asylum in the North East of England become trapped in poverty. In 2005, research into destitution in the North East of England (Prior, 2006) indicated that the experience of destitution in this region is similar to that in other areas in the UK, as is the kind of support offered through a wide range of voluntary, charity and faith based groups. A snapshot of charity/faith based provision in one week in March 2013 recorded over 110 people receiving food bags in Teesside alone, and this is only one part of the North East region. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the problem is increasing in the North East of England and recent figures indicate that although the number of people claiming asylum in this area of the UK is slightly decreasing overall due to a reduction in the number of local authorities contracting with the National Asylum Support Service (North East Refugee Service, 2013), the rate of turn-over is very high.

### 3. Research question

**What are the mechanisms that support resilience in people who find themselves destitute following an initial refusal from the asylum process in the UK?**



#### 4. Methodology

This study was a piece of qualitative research, using a peer ethnographic methodology, as it seeks to investigate the narratives of the lived experiences of the research participants. Two peer researchers were given training in research techniques and they then recruited and interviewed the research participants. Twenty two men and two women were interviewed by the peer researchers to explore their views and experiences of living in destitution following the asylum process. All of the participants were either destitute at the time of the interviews or had experienced destitution in the preceding few months. Nineteen of the participants described their nationality as Sudanese, with the other participants from Libya, Somalia, Eritrea and Palestine.

Data was analysed qualitatively by coding chunks of interview text and comparing and contrasting these codes with each other until themes arose. These themes were then analysed until the research findings were generated. Peer researchers were involved in the research process from data collection through to the writing of the final report (Appendix 1).

#### 5. Findings

**Destitution for many people is a long term reality, rather than a short term phase of homelessness.**

Many accounts of homelessness following a refusal from the asylum system document destitution as a short term situation, but twelve out of the twenty four participants in this research had been living destitute for over 6 years. Another seven participants had been here for between 2 and 6 years. It was clear that destitution for them was not a short-term situation to cope with, but a long term reality. All of these participants said that they could not go back to their countries as they believed that they had a legitimate case to claim asylum here in the UK and they were sure that they would be imprisoned and tortured immediately on return to their country of origin. Destitution had become a

reality to live with until either they could bring a fresh claim for asylum or the regime in power in their country changed. It was clear that even being forced to live in destitution would not make them return to the danger they believed awaited them in their country of origin. Tarig said that he had been living in destitution for six years in the UK and when asked why he didn't return home he said:

I have been here a long time, many years.....and the reason is because I am having a case inside me and I left Sudan and I went through danger more than the situation I am in now. More of these difficulties, sometimes put you under a great danger and you may get killed or die and every time I think about hunger and disrespect or many things, I just compare them to the danger I have been through from my country until I got there and I put them on the scales and I found that the balance was in favour of now. And I have to be strong because if I couldn't win, this that means I am very weak and I have no power to protect my case [Tarig].

**The experience of becoming destitute following the asylum process begins a continuous cycle of:**

**Finding the strength each day to secure somewhere to sleep for the night and to meet other physical needs.**

The experiences of the research participants concurs with many other studies in the UK, which describe the devastation felt when a letter was opened from the Home Office refusing their application for asylum and the subsequent fear that began to be a permanent feature of their lives. Many of the research participants described their panic at having to secure somewhere to sleep and to find shelter. The majority of people interviewed found shelter with friends, but

as they were also seeking asylum or on low income, the support they could offer was limited. For several of the participants, shelter had been found with local families and also with local churches or charities providing accommodation. Life then became a constant struggle each day to find somewhere to sleep for the night, commonly moving from friend to friend, while knowing that it was difficult for those hosts to provide support. Jamal describes it in the extract below:



The most important thing is the accommodation. The important thing is to be stable and to have somewhere stable to live....I don't mind if they only build four walls and I mean any place to stay would be fine. I don't mind – somewhere to hide you from the street. You feel you are in the house it makes you feel stable. And even if you have a friend, you won't be able to enjoy your life and have privacy. It is too heavy a burden for your friends.

All of the research participants described the mental anguish they felt when they first knew that they would be evicted from their accommodation and many described feeling depressed, devastated and ground down. Both Faisal and Hashim said that they felt 'crushed' by the refusal letter:

At the beginning it was like a crash and I was broken down because I escaped my country because of problems and something like that and came here and claimed asylum and received a refusal. I was absolutely crushed [Faisal].

I felt I was a lost person, devastated, crushed and I was out of control [Hashim].

For many, the experience of eviction was exacerbated by limited English language ability and difficulty in accessing help. None of the participants interviewed had tried to seek help through statutory organisations, other than one person who went to his General Practitioner for help, but rather accessed local charities, church based groups and/or other community groups. Many of the participants were fearful of going to statutory organisations, as there was a widespread belief that these organisations were all linked to the government in some way. This climate of distrust extended to health services, housing organisations, welfare agencies and local authorities.

### Learning to live with constant fear

The overriding emotion experienced by all of those who had been refused asylum was that of fear. Fear became a constant companion and shaped many of the narratives of destitution. Many people expressed fear and anxiety about what would happen to them, where they would live and what the Home Office would now do with them. They were fearful of the police, of being taken to prison and of being deported. Participants were also very afraid that the friends they were staying with would get into trouble from their landlords and be evicted themselves, as a consequence of having homeless people sleeping on their floor.

I stayed with my friend after they [Home Office] refused me. It was difficult but it was better than when you don't have any place or support. I used to sleep on the sofa. It was really difficult as you are living with fear 24 hours a day. There might be a knock at the door any time or maybe the housing provider will come. I wasn't scared for myself, I was scared for my friend because I had nothing to lose but all of my fear was for all of the people I was living with. I didn't want to make a problem for them. I was living in fear and I used to be the last person to go to sleep and the first person to wake up. This was my biggest difficulty [Osman].

In addition, several people described becoming fearful and distrustful of their friends, unsure who to believe and who not to believe. This climate of fear led to a general atmosphere of distrust, both with existing friendships and this also extended to new relationships. Some of the Sudanese participants explained that they are often fearful of meeting new arrivals from Sudan, anxious that they might be spies sent by the Sudanese government to report back on people in the UK seeking asylum. Several of the participants talked about friends who had become depressed and mentally ill due to the desperation and constant fear they were living with. Many of the participants described the multiple ways that living with fear impacted adversely on their own mental health. All of the participants described the ways that they had become physically ill, due to a poor diet, the cold weather and crowded sleeping conditions. Two people explained that paradoxically it was a 'relief' when they were diagnosed with Tuberculosis, as that meant that they would be given a hospital bed and they were then given some supported accommodation subsequent to hospital discharge.

#### **Living between destitution and a hard place - life is lived with very limited choices, each resulting in intolerable outcomes**

It is clear from the narratives of the research participants that they felt that they had no choice but to stay strong. One of the main difficulties experienced by people following refusal from the asylum process was of being between destitution and a hard place. Destitution was felt as a state where life is lived with very limited choices, each resulting in an intolerable outcome. This was described using many different metaphors but they all alluded to being trapped and suspended in some sort of 'no-man's land', unable to move forward with your life and yet unable to go back, as that would mean returning to the country you escaped from and returning to danger. Several people described it as a being 'held in a gap in life' or as 'waiting in the middle of the road'. Other research studies have reported on similar experiences described as being held in a 'golden cage' (Crawley et al., 2011), although their experiences were by no means

'golden'. What is particularly interesting is that for ten of the men interviewed, they had tried to go to another country to claim asylum or the Home Office had attempted to deport them but, for a whole plethora of administrative reasons, none of these attempts had been successful and so they again believed that they were living between destitution and a hard place.

I can't go back to my country and I hadn't slept for 2 days. I went to the church and I didn't find it open so I went to someone to sleep with but he called the police. It became very difficult for me so I went and applied to go back voluntary return to my country but they refused that application. I told them to take me back to Darfur, because I am from Darfur and you take me there to Darfur and release me over there because I don't want the UK government to arrest me. Just leave me there and I can hide from the Sudanese government. Just let me go. They refused my application and also they didn't want to support me [Ahmed].

Several of the participants described experiences of being detained in a detention centre for anything between one month and 18 months. Four of the participants had been released from detention back into destitution, where they were only required to give an address (usually that of a friend) and they were then released back onto the streets, with no provision from the Home Office for accommodation or financial support. One participant explained how he was driven from a detention centre in Scotland to an alley in a North East town, the van doors were opened up and he was literally taken out of the van and left in the street.

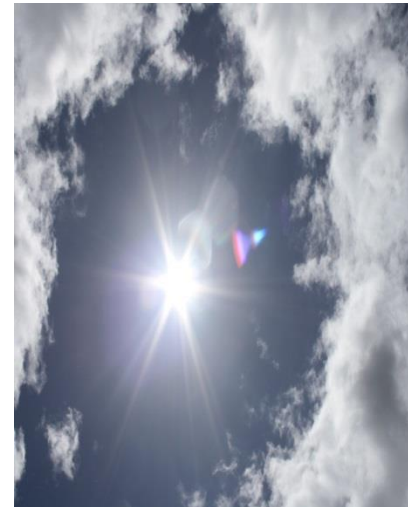
### Developing resilience and deepening friendships across cultures

While recognising that destitution can be a crushing experience, it can also develop resilience and the deepening of friendships with people across many different cultures, relying on a variety of different relationships to survive. Many of the participants talked about finding strength in numbers; meeting together with others in the same situation gave stability and fortitude. There was a strong sense of equality in destitution in that, no matter your previous social status, everyone was now on the same social level and, no matter how big your problems were, there were others with a greater problem. Both of these understandings developed strength to survive destitution.

You always find someone who has a problem bigger than your problem. Everyone is the same. No-one is better than anyone else [Hammed].

Interestingly, mutual support and meeting together was not necessarily only with people from similar people groups or countries. People drew support from meeting with others who were destitute across a wide range of cultures and languages. This is possibly particular to the North East of England, where there are relatively small numbers of migrant communities in comparison to other areas in the UK. Participants talked about forming friendships through English language classes, through informal networks and through organised activities arranged by specific local organisations. The lack of large cultural groups in the North East of England meant that people made friendships across different cultural groups, rather than only with people they identified as from their own culture. Many of the participants said that this was not the same in other cities they had been to in the UK, where people tended to stay together in cultural groups and not to mix friendships across language and cultural barriers. Omer,

one of the peer researchers, described it using the analogy of camels in the desert:



When camels are in the desert, they stick together to keep themselves cool, because the temperature of their bodies are lower than the outside temperature. That is why people stick together and also go to organisations and charities.

Several of the research participants acknowledged that they had friends who had found the experience of destitution too much, giving accounts of friends who had taken their own lives, turned to drug and alcohol abuse and/or suffered from severe mental illness. Nonetheless, destitution was seen as something that had to be endured and, for many of the participants, made them stronger as a result of the experience. Almost all of the participants described their current destitute state as a form of torture. Repeatedly participants described how they had been tortured in their home country, but to live in destitution in the UK was a form of slow torture.

Ahmed poignantly summed it up below:

My country is more difficult than here. I asked them to send me back to Darfur. I asked them to send me to Darfur and I prefer to die by a bullet, not die here by the rain and hunger. I told them I want to die in Darfur and not here but they refused that.

Many saw their destitute situation as an active ‘policy’ by government to make their life as difficult as possible. They were acutely aware that to be an asylum seeker was a situation used by politicians for their own ends and Osman summed it up by describing asylum seekers as ‘weapons in the war to win the election’. In several of the interviews, this frustration was turned to anger and several of the men who were interviewed described how they believed that it was this anger that gave them the strength to go on. The majority of the participants were extremely angry that they found themselves living in a destitute state: angry at the injustice of the Home Office in refusing their case for asylum, angry at their inability to work and make their own living, and angry that they were not believed. Several of the research participants described the ways that this anger gave them strength and developed tenacity. Many of the people who spoke to the peer researchers said that their experiences were complex. For some, each difficulty and obstacle had made them stronger but for others and at other times these obstacles had weakened them.

Interestingly, when asked about family and friends in their country of origin, the picture was mixed. Some of the participants found strength to keep going because family in their own country were in danger and relying on them for support; for others, contact with family was a source of sadness and distress, as it reminded them of their loss and the distance between them.

### **People who find themselves destitute following the asylum process develop strategies to keep physically, emotionally and spiritually strong:**

#### **Keeping physically strong**

Many people draw on food parcels, small cash donations and meals from local charities and faith based groups in the local area to keep physically strong. Participants described a daily struggle to eat and, although they appreciated the food parcels and donations of food given by various organisations, these were inadequate to meet even their daily needs. Friends were a good source of food and shelter but this was limited, as many friends were living on low income or claiming asylum themselves. Participants described the ways in which they ate flexibly between friends, but often went without any food on some days. The majority recounted similar stories of sleeping on the sofa of a friend, or the floor, getting up early in the morning and wandering around the town all day, sometimes in very hostile weather conditions, then returning to the accommodation late at night. Some had slept rough in bus shelters, derelict houses and in parks. Several people said that they thought that they would have literally died without the support of local charities, churches and community organisations.

I lived 5 years without support. I depended on these local organisations to survive [Zena].

If these organisations weren't there, I may have died because the government doesn't give you any support and we are not allowed to work in this country and we don't have a place to stay. All of these things I have faced and if I hadn't gone to these organisations, I wouldn't have known what would have happened [Gibrel].

Nonetheless, there was huge shame attached to getting food hand-outs and, without exception, all of the male research participants said that they wanted to work and to earn their own way in life. Many participants explained to the peer researchers that working was part of their culture and that they had been surprised and shocked that they were not allowed to work when they first came to the UK. Osman clearly stated it as:

Our culture is to work...not to sit back and let someone else to feed you. It has destroyed my life, waiting for others to feed me. I have always worked, since I was a young man, I have worked.

For some, the informal economy is the only way to be able to survive physically. This included illegal work, where exploitation was a common experience, along with long hours. Siddig explained how he had worked in a factory 12 hours a day, for 7 days and had not been given any payment at the end. He had no course for redress. One of the peer researchers recounted an incident when a friend suffered a severe hand injury with knife when working illegally in a restaurant kitchen. The owners would not take him to hospital and by the time he arrived in Accident and Emergency, several hours later, he had suffered irreversible damage to his hand and has been unable to use it since.

### **Keeping emotionally strong**

All of the research participants described how they drew strength from the belief that they had a genuine case to seek asylum and hoped that eventually justice would be done.

The biggest thing is that I didn't come here for a visit, or to enjoy the weather (laughs). I have a case and if I don't fear going back, there is no reason for me to stay here for such a long time, from 2006 without support and live in a situation like this. It is something which is unacceptable for me but my circumstances pushed me and knowing I have a case has made me very strong [Majdi].

Majdi's comments were common among the people interviewed for this research. In answer to the question of 'What keeps you strong when you find yourself destitute?', the majority of participants said that they believed that they had a 'case' to claim asylum and therefore they believed that eventually justice would be done. Participants described fleeing war, torture and imprisonment and expressed a passion and determination that their case for asylum would eventually win. For all of the participants interviewed, they had already had a refusal of their application for asylum from the Home Office, but all believed in the validity of their 'case' and this belief kept them strong. Using again an analogy of a camel in the desert, Osman explained that the only way for camels to survive alone in the harsh heat was to face the sun and in a similar way, the only way to survive destitution was to face the heat of the Home Office and to believe that justice would eventually be done.

Of particular note was the anger felt by these participants at the injustice they felt had been done to them. The majority of participants described disbelief and disappointment that they had escaped war, torture and danger in their country, only to arrive in the UK and not to be believed. This was exacerbated because they had believed the UK to be a just and fair society, which supported human rights. These participants described the ways that the UK proclaimed a discourse of supporting human rights internationally and yet they themselves were living without support in the UK, something they viewed as a violation of their human rights.

Osman spoke passionately below:

The UK Government treat me as not-human. They don't give me anywhere to live, they stop support, deny access to work. Show me where is the human rights in the UK? People talk about human rights, but there is no justice here.

One of the hardest aspects of seeking asylum was the culture of disbelief by the Home Office but also by the media and society at large in the UK. Jamal explains the consequences of not being believed in the extract below:

There are some people who become crazy because of thinking too much about this their situation [refusal and subsequent destitution], who have been in this situation for a long time and as I heard from other people, as I see by myself, I think we will become sick and tired when you think about all that has happened to you and what the Home Office said about you and not being believed.

The majority of people were forced to develop strategies to deal with a life lived in a culture of disbelief, distrust and personal fear. Strength was found through the support of friends and also 'trusted' individuals in local churches, charities and organisations. Participants explained the ways that they drew strength from organisations and individuals who allowed them to talk, who could give hope in the midst of despair and who trusted them. In particular, participants drew on individuals who were able to give them hope. Being believed brought both strength and hope to cope with day-to-day hardships. For some of the participants, organisations gave hope by helping with practical measures to make appeals, new asylum claims and other bureaucratic procedures, something that

gave hope that there was a future in the UK, regardless of how marginal that was. Hope and dignity were intertwined; hope for the future was important but only if this was within a context of mutual respect. When talking about local charity and faith based organisations, Mahahoub said:

Yes, they helped us to live with a 'good spirit' and they used to speak to me and help me to get out of this situation. They basically just helped me to feel 'I am here'. And even though I have received a refusal letter, that I am still a human being. And thank you very much to them because they came and talked to me while I didn't have anyone to speak to. And I remember when I felt down, I just go to [a local charity] and they basically make everything easy for me.

The therapeutic benefit of talking was mentioned by several of the participants. Talking and trusting were intertwined; talking with trusted individuals developed trust and trusting relationships allowed space for people to open up and to talk. Osman talked about people who gave you 'good words'; hope, trust and a space to talk.

#### **Finding strength by keeping spiritually strong**

Many people in this study drew strength from spiritual understandings of hardship and suffering, in order to keep spiritually and mentally strong. Several of the participants described the ways that their struggles were seen as a test of their faith. Several of the men took the same spiritual texts, found in both the Bible and the Qur'an, which use the analogy of a test as being similar to gold being refined by fire. It is the difficulties that get rid of the impurities in one's life and therefore difficulty, danger and struggle are a test of that faith.



And to be strong is the only way that can help you to get to the shore and also to your goals. And because I have a case, I have to be strong despite all of these things I have to be strong. And I am strong or I keep myself strong because I am hoping I will reach a brighter future. As a Muslim, I accept everything that God has waiting for me [Ali].

This experience has refined me and the many problems have faced me at the same time and I have been able to pass through them and become stronger [Fisal].

He further explained it as: I can't change my situation because God wants me to go through this; God examines you to see how strong you are. It is a text from God and you have to pass this test.

The consequence of these trials and struggles developed spiritual strength and a deepening of faith. In many instances, faith and hope were used together, where faith was tested and there was hope through faith for a better future.

Hope helped me to wait all of this time. I have hope that I will get the things that I want and the situation will be better and everywhere I say, tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow [Matan].

## 6. Conclusions

The experience of destitution following a refusal from the asylum process in the North East of England shares many similarities with other detailed accounts in other areas in the UK. It includes a daily struggle to find food, shelter for the night and to learn to live with a life lived in constant fear. Nonetheless, the accounts in this study highlight both strength and resilience in destitution and document the ways that people find the strength to survive. Importantly, it was found that destitution for many people is a long term reality, rather than a short term phase of homelessness. While acknowledging that destitution following the asylum process can be a crushing experience, leading to physical and mental illness, drug and alcohol dependency and suicide, it can also develop tenacity and resilience.

The accounts of destitution in this study are testimony to a complex experience of vulnerability and despair, mixed with a deepening of friendships, mutual support through adversity and a deepening determination to see justice done. People who find themselves destitute following the asylum process develop several different strategies to build resilience and rely on a wide range of relationships to help to support them through this difficult time.

In the North East of England, friendships are developed across many different cultural groups, including with British people, as large mono-cultural minority ethnic groups do not exist in this area in the same way that they do in other areas in the UK. Local charities, organisations and faith based groups play a crucial role in supporting people not only with food and emergency shelter, but also by giving moral support. 'Being believed' was identified by the research participants as crucial in supporting resilience. All of the research participants believed that they had a valid case for asylum and were determined that justice would eventually be done. They were angry that the UK defended a doctrine of human rights on one hand and yet left them destitute on the other. This anger



resulted in a strengthening of resilience and determination to stay in the UK until justice was done on their asylum 'case'.

Finally, faith played a large part in building strength; destitution was conceptualised as a 'test' or a 'trial' from God and to go through such a trial built developed faith. Living between destitution and a hard place, people had no choice but to carry on living in the UK in destitution until justice was done in their case. This was both a hope and a prayer; it was also a source of strength.

#### 7. Recommendations for policy and practice

##### **Implications for policy and practice**

Destitution should be recognised as a long-term condition and, as such, should not be an outcome of the asylum process in the UK, nor should it be deliberately structured to create destitution. This report recommends that:

- Destitution is not used to force people to go back to their country of origin following a refusal from the asylum system, as this is neither humane, nor does it work.
- Local Authorities need to actively engage with the issues raised by destitution following the asylum process, rather than pretending that these people do not exist because they do not access statutory organisations.
- There is a need for improved recognition and financial support by the government for those community and voluntary organisations who provide support for those who are destitute, but whose funding is actually disappearing.
- The resilience and strength shown by individuals seeking asylum should be harnessed and developed by giving the right to work in the UK for those in the midst of an

application for asylum and also following an asylum decision or until removal.

- The asylum process should be improved, so that people do not remain in the UK and living in destitution when they have a case for asylum.
- Those seeking asylum should have the right to work, subject to certain conditions. Not having this right leads to crime and exploitation and a demeaning of the dignity of those waiting for a decision.
- The Home Affairs Select Committee, in reviewing the asylum process, should adjudicate on whether the government is failing to meet its obligations under human rights legislation.

#### 8. Recommendations for future research

Further longitudinal research is required to explore the long-term nature and the severity of destitution in the UK.

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## Appendix 1

### Methodology

#### **Design**

A peer ethnographic methodology was used, as it seeks to investigate the narratives of the lived experiences of the research participants. While ethnography often involves gathering data through the direct social interaction with the research participants, peer ethnography involves using people from the target research population as researchers. Yap et al (2010) reminds us that ‘powerful social groups’ often have the ‘speaking rights’ of refugees, rather than those experiencing the refugee process themselves, while O’Neill and Hubbard (2012) assert ‘the voices of destitute asylum seekers are rarely heard’ (p.4). Peer ethnography is an innovative way to help those voices to be heard.

#### **Sampling and recruitment**

Two peer researchers were given training in research techniques and they then recruited and interviewed the research participants. Twenty two men and two women were interviewed by the peer researchers to explore their views and experiences of living in destitution following the asylum process. All of the participants were either destitute at the time of the interviews or had experienced destitution in the preceding few months. Participants were given a supermarket voucher in return for their involvement in the research. Participants were recruited by the peer researchers from their friends, contacts and associates in the area. Nineteen of the participants described their nationality as Sudanese, with the other participants from Lybia, Somalia, Eritrea and Palestine.

Sampling only included participants who had experienced destitution following a refusal of an asylum application and who had been in the UK for 6 months or more. The length of time participants had been living in the UK ranged from between 2 and 8 years and, at the time of the interviews, participants said that

they had been living destitute from between 2 months to 7 years. The participants all lived itinerant lives, moving between several towns and cities in the North East of England and elsewhere in the UK. Ethical approval for this research was obtained in line with University of Sunderland Ethical Committee protocols.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The study was collected in several locations in the North East of England between September 2012 and February 2013. All of the interviews were conducted in Arabic. Interviews were recorded using a semi-structured interview schedule as an initial guide. To elicit the participants' perspective, initial open-ended questions began by asking, 'Can you tell me about your experiences following refusal from the asylum system?' and then more specific questions asking, 'What keeps you strong when you are living in destitution?', and 'What keeps you here in the UK?'. All names were changed to preserve the anonymity of the research participants and interviews were recorded. The peer researchers translated the interviews from Arabic into English and they were then transcribed in English for analysis. Data was analysed qualitatively by coding chunks of interview text and comparing and contrasting these codes with each other until themes arose. These themes were then analysed until the research findings were generated. The peer researchers were fully part of the research process from the stage of developing the interview questions, selection of research participants, collection of the interview data, translation of the interviews into English, data analysis and to final completion of the research report.

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This report was produced in association with the 'Race', crime and justice regional research group, a consortium of researchers in all North East universities together with regional freelance researchers. Other recent reports produced in association with the group include:

'Race', crime and justice in the North East region

A place called Townsville, rural racism in the North East

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