

Practice paper

Improving reach: promoting engagement by building bridges between refugee women and the voluntary sector

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What is known on this subject

- Refugee women are among the most socially excluded and vulnerable people in society in the UK.
- Refugee women are a reservoir of untapped and unrecognised skills, but are under-represented in the mainstream voluntary sector.
- A key challenge of bridge building between refugee communities and organisations is to hear multiple voices by bringing people together in meaningful dialogue.

What this paper adds

- Proactive approaches to engagement of refugee communities need to be structured, targeted, flexible and sustaining in order to achieve effective change operating at personal, cultural and structural levels.
- Community bridge builders bring special insights and standpoints with them in their invaluable role in connecting communities and organisations.
- For any long-lasting changes to take place in engagement between the voluntary sector and refugee women, the links and networks that are developed need to be sustainable and enduring.

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the outcomes of the evaluation of a project undertaken within a leading specialist provider of services to refugees and asylum seekers in the North West of England. The project's aim was to deliver the first stages of facilitating engagement between refugee women and the mainstream voluntary sector. Central to the project was the employment of two refugee women to carry out much of the project work by acting as *bridge builders* connecting refugee communities and voluntary organisations with each other. This was done by providing a number of bridge-building activities to facilitate engagement opportunities. The findings

confirmed that refugee women are a reservoir of untapped and unrecognised skills and qualifications, but they are under-represented in the mainstream voluntary sector because of multiple barriers and challenges. Bridge builders have a role in facilitating engagement, but raised concerns about the sustainability of such initiatives. The paper ends by suggesting some approaches to engagement for those working with refugees.

Keywords: evaluation, mainstream voluntary sector, practice, refugee women, social participation and engagement

Introduction

Refugees and asylum seekers are among the most socially excluded and vulnerable people in British society (see Box 1). They face many personal, cultural,

structural and individual barriers and challenges, which are often exacerbated by difficult personal histories. Multiple and simultaneously operating levels of

Box 1 Definitions used in this paper

A **refugee** can be defined as a person 'owning to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, who is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to or, owing to such fear is unwilling to, avail himself of the protection of that country' (1951 Refugee Convention).

An **asylum seeker** can be defined as a person who has lodged an asylum claim with the UK Border Agency on the above grounds and is awaiting a decision on that claim.

discrimination and the resulting barriers have been highlighted in the work of Thompson (1998, 2006) in his model of personal, cultural and structural levels of discrimination, and in Ledwith's multiple sites of oppression matrix (Ledwith, 2009). The impact of these barriers can be seen in many arenas, but particularly within the labour market, where refugees experience a high rate of unemployment. In the UK this is six times the national figure, despite the fact that many of these individuals possess high-level qualifications (Waddington, 2005). Only 29% of refugees are in employment, compared with 60% of other black and minority ethnic (BME) groups (Ager, 1999; Bloch, 2002; WLRI, 2004). Institutional barriers to employment and services arise because many refugees do not fit into standard categories (e.g. they may not have a passport, a certificate of qualifications or references from previous employers) (British Refugee Council, 2007). Refugees also experience social difficulties relating to isolation and loss, lack of confidence, and the impact of trauma (Bordieu, 1999; Thompson, 2006). Other challenges relate to integration, differences in cultural norms and values, changing and shifting identities, and various levels of racism (Home Office, 2001; Bloch, 2002; Ager and Strang, 2004; Waddington, 2005; Home Office Border and Immigration Agency, 2008).

The impact of such discrimination and exclusion is even more pronounced for refugee and asylum-seeking women, who face additional, gender-specific barriers (Lukka and Ellis, 2001; Equal Opportunities Commission, 2007; Tomlinson, 2008). Refugee women who arrive in the UK with male partners are often included on asylum claims only as dependents and not in their own right. Consequently, their needs and rights are framed in relation to this secondary or dependent status. Further discussion of this issue can be found in the work of Graham (2007) and a number of feminist writers (Bhavnani and Coulson, 2003; Hill Collins, 1998; Yuval-Davis, 1999; Hooks, 2000; Tomlinson,

2008). Refugee and asylum-seeking women have fewer opportunities for interacting and engaging with others outside the home, and consequently are seldom heard by those within the public arena, despite the good intentions of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to promote inclusion and increase diversity (Ghandi and Bartlett, 2007; Hernandez *et al*, 2010). This raises the important question of how the voluntary sector can improve reach with regard to such excluded and diverse communities.

The focus of this paper is on improving the engagement of refugee women through a variety of *bridge-building strategies*, with a particular emphasis on the voluntary sector. It reports on innovative work arising from collaboration between the VCS and RA, a leading specialist provider of services to refugees in the North West of England. Two refugee women, supported by a team of project workers and with a shared aim of bridge building, used a number of different strategies to improve reach. These included raising awareness training, organising networking events for VCS organisations and refugee women to come together, and individual organisational audit and self-assessment work. Opportunities, challenges and lessons learned from these engagement strategies and processes, and the impact of this work on both the refugee women trainees themselves and the organisations with which they worked, are explored. Notwithstanding the specific nature of the project as a local initiative within North West England, the paper has wider national and international relevance due to the global challenges presented by the movement of people creating complex diversity within communities, and the need for effective engagement and bridge-building strategies.

Background

Shifting agendas

The concept of equality has gradually shifted from being largely focused on culture and colour to encompass other factors such as ethnicity, religion, culture, gender and other social divisions. However, the term *refugee* is not an officially recognised category in this new approach to diversity. Refugees now occupy a unique social space which interlinks their diverse global international histories and their experiences of dislocation and instability with their new lives in the UK, and policy tends to focus on controlling them and restricting immigration, rather than on promoting equality (Burke *et al*, 2000; Hurstfield *et al*, 2004; Tomlinson, 2008). This emphasis has presented some significant challenges for public sector organisations, including the VCS, that are seeking to address equality for refugees (Dimond, 2004; Wilson, 2004). Attention

has been focused on social exclusion and the need to combat this through civic participation. A range of initiatives reflect this approach (see, for example, UK Border Agency, 2009). However, social exclusion persists, and the gender issues are not being systematically addressed. Change depends on the development of local and grass-roots initiatives that are informed by anti-racist and anti-sexist approaches. Recent developments in bridge building can and do make positive contributions to this process of change (Abrahamsson *et al*, 2009).

Bridge building and engagement within a challenging climate

Effective engagement with refugee communities requires the participation of members of those communities who, through their social position and experience, possess knowledge and insight into their own communities, the wider society and the public sector. Bridge building is a potentially useful tool that can facilitate such engagement. Bridge builders work in the capacity of paraprofessionals, cultural mediators or community brokers, acting as links between excluded communities and organisations to bring about meaningful dialogue between refugee communities and key providers of services (Sanders *et al*, 2002; Abrahamsson *et al*, 2009). Such individuals have been viewed as organisational 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Tomlinson, 2008), but taking on such a role can be a challenge. This is especially likely when bridge-building activities are viewed as an extension of other day-to-day work, and are therefore not given priority, or when an 'us and them' situation develops when attempting to engage and create dialogical platforms and opportunities with various communities.

The Improving Reach (IR) Project

The IR Project aimed to initiate and evaluate a range of bridge-building strategies by drawing upon aspects of community development methodology about dialogical approaches in the building of relationships (Hill Collins, 1998; Burke *et al*, 2000; Cropper, 2000; Craig and Lovel, 2005). The project was informed by an earlier local RA study on volunteering that focused on the views of refugee women and VCS organisations about volunteering and inclusion issues (Refugee Action, 2006). Research findings from that study suggested that although many VCS organisations were keen to include refugee women as volunteers in their organisations, they required additional support in order to achieve this. Refugee women had a strong desire to contribute to their local communities by

volunteering, using their skills and developing others, but had little knowledge of how to achieve this (see www.workinglives.org/volunteers.html; Al-Krenawi *et al*, 2001; Refugee Action, 2006).

The IR project began in 2007 and ran for a 12-month period with the twin aims of:

- making a lasting difference to the way in which the VCS engaged with refugee communities, particularly women
- using the skills of refugee women to benefit refugee communities, the VCS and those receiving a service from the VCS.

The work took place in a staged and incremental process focusing on personal, cultural and structural levels of change and engagement. It included the following activities:

- 1 awareness-raising training about refugee issues in VCS organisations
- 2 a self-assessment audit of organisations using the 'Refugee Awareness' audit kit, *Getting Ready: a toolkit to support voluntary and community organisations to involve refugees as volunteers* (Refugee Action, 2007)
- 3 providing networking opportunities at themed events for refugee women and VCS organisations
- 4 development of an 'Engaging With Refugees' training pack (Volunteer Centre Liverpool and Refugee Action, 2007) by RA trainers, and delivery of this by them to a diverse group of 25 local VCS organisations. The training sessions were well received and prepared the VCS organisations for later bridge-building work
- 5 recruitment of two refugee women trainees with very different histories and experiences of ethnicity, faith, culture and family circumstances, the political framework of their countries of birth and length of time in the UK. They brought a global and international perspective to the project, which informed their work. In order to protect their identities, no further information about them is provided here
- 6 an intense induction and training programme to familiarise the two trainees with RA's organisational policies and procedures. Training included human rights, immigration legislation, approaches to building sustainable communities, event management and conflict resolution. The trainees worked with representatives from a range of 18 VCS organisations to undertake organisational assessment work. Their aim was to review and assess current diversity policies and practices, with each organisation supporting them in developing more inclusive approaches to refugee women in particular
- 7 six networking events, organised by the two women, which brought together organisations (including voluntary and community organisations (VCOs), refugee community organisations (RCOs), and the

public and statutory sectors) and refugee women, representing 33 different nationalities, to begin dialogue concerning opportunities for inclusion. This was a particularly important stage of the work. The themes that were addressed included women's health, education and training, employment, and celebration of cultural diversity. The events took place in a range of community-based venues with crèche facilities provided to encourage refugee women to attend. VCS organisations were able to provide information (both written and verbal) about their services and volunteering opportunities. The final event, celebrating multi-culturalism, was an evening of music, dance and song performed by refugee women. While such an event could be viewed as reminiscent of the *saris, steel bands and samosas* multi-cultural events that were popular in the UK in the 1980s, it also constituted an important coming together of diverse communities underpinned by common experiences of dislocation, pain, instability and also resilience. The event allowed the telling of personal and political histories through music, song and dance. Engagement at such emotional and educational levels of such diverse groups provided a useful platform from which to move on to more political events in the future – moving from the cultural level to other levels of engagement (Ledwith and Springett, 2010, p. 182).

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation was undertaken by adopting a largely retrospective approach. AN facilitated the reflection of the project team concerning the effectiveness of the different engagement and bridge-building strategies. In evaluating the impact on both the trainees and the organisations involved, a collaborative approach was used, with the evaluation design and methods being agreed with project staff (Connell *et al*, 1995).

Multiple methods of enquiry were used, beginning with a group interview conducted by AN with the project team, which enabled some formulation of baseline data. Individual semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the trainees and the two project managers. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Burnard, 1991). Documentary evidence, in the form of feedback and comments from those taking part in the various bridge-building and engagement activities, was used. Such feedback was often freely given to the project team during telephone and face-to-face conversations and via email correspondence. The project team, recognising the value of such feedback, documented this evidence early on in a project diary. Other professionals were aware that

feedback might be used for monitoring and evaluation information. Refugee women were aware that their comments would contribute to the effectiveness and progression of the project. They generally gave verbal feedback, and this was sometimes captured in the project diary. Professionals tended to give more email- and telephone-based feedback. This feedback provided useful complementary evidence to the feedback forms used in both the awareness-raising and networking events. The approach proved to be more user-friendly and inclusive for the refugee women, many of whom had difficulties with written English. It helped to counter the low rate of return of often partially completed feedback forms from networking events. With this in mind, for the final event a comments board was used, on which the participants could briefly write or draw their comments. Photographs were taken at events in order to demonstrate the activities and celebrate success. Finally, AN conducted structured telephone interviews with a sample of six VCS organisational representatives from the 18 targeted organisations that were receiving the organisational assessments. A diverse sample was deliberately selected in order to provide a range of different perspectives. Key selection criteria for inclusion of these organisations related to the particular client group using the service and the type of service they provided. This sample included advocacy organisations, a museum and art education organisations.

Issues emerging from the evaluation

Impact on organisations

Building relationships, building trust

The importance and impact of the trainees' outreach work and networking in building relationships based on mutual trust and respect were highlighted by the wider project team. The success of the networking events and the organisational assessments relied on the trainees' unique positions as both organisational and community insiders in being able to engage in effective dialogue to build relationships with refugee women and VCS organisations. The trainees' bridge-building work led to some unexpected longer-term outcomes above and beyond the original aims of the project. This was evident on many occasions, resulting in the recruitment of refugees as volunteers, as students on education programmes and as paid staff. For example, an organisational representative and college ESOL (English Speaker of Other Languages) tutor who was attending the education and training networking event commented that 'It was great to see so many participants ... I had a great time networking,

and made some interesting and useful contacts. I also managed to recruit some students for ESOL.’

A number of organisations had preconceived ideas about the reasons why refugee women did not apply to be volunteers or paid workers. The trainees were able to challenge and educate the organisations involved, helping them to see how highly qualified, experienced and diverse these refugee women were.

The structured reviewing of policies and practice in action proved to be a very useful exercise for many of the organisations. Reflecting on the approach, one organisational representative stated that it was like having a critical friend who ‘helped us to know we were going in the right direction’ and ‘it was useful to think through what we had in place ... it made us sit and think.’ This appeared to be the case even for those organisations that could demonstrate a good track record of inclusion of BME communities. One such organisation commented that ‘you get caught up in the process you always follow ... it helped us think about where the problems may be.’

Another organisational representative commented that the assessment work had highlighted how easy it was to unintentionally create barriers for refugees. They spoke of how the trainees had gained the knowledge and confidence to successfully challenge institutional policies and practices with regard to the payment of volunteers. Other organisational representatives spoke of the insights that they had gained into the needs of refugee women in relation to service provision and access (e.g. the importance of providing crèche facilities at events). It was clear that the second stage of the project complemented the awareness-raising training, providing opportunities for deeper reflection and further action. It also provided an opportunity for organisations to appreciate the different levels of engagement that are required for change at both intellectual and emotional levels. One organisational representative claimed to have ‘a better understanding of processes that people go through, how to promote volunteering opportunities to refugees and asylum seekers.’

The networking events succeeded in providing the opportunity and dialogical space for some positive community and sectoral engagement. For example, a participant from a VCS organisation who attended the education and training event commented that ‘the event was great, we had some really interesting chats with people, and hopefully we’ll be able to find some suitable placements for those interested in volunteering.’ These new opportunities to meet with communities whom they had previously perceived as ‘hard to reach’ appeared to be helpful, constituting the first steps towards future engagement.

Impact on the refugee women trainees

From organisational ‘outsiders’ to ‘insiders’

The trainees brought a range of skills to their bridge-building roles in terms of academic and professional qualifications and experiences. They had experience of working in a range of government-based voluntary and community organisations both in the UK and in other countries. As their roles developed their confidence increased at both personal and professional levels. As one trainee recounted, this made her ‘more conscious of what I am capable of and not be too afraid and just to go for it.’ The other trainee echoed this view, commenting on the impact of the mentoring support in the project in terms of personal and skills in reflection. She described ‘dealing with yourself dealing with problems and not being too hard on yourself, seeing more positiveness than negativeness, and not being too critical about yourself and the work that you do. ... Have more faith in yourself; I’ve certainly done that.’ This confidence was noted by their colleagues, who commented that ‘from the start to the end of the project you could hardly recognise them as the same individuals.’

One key area of importance for the trainees that was highlighted was the official recognition of their qualifications and personal experiences by RA. They felt that their previous informal caring and community work experience both in the UK and in other countries was valued. This helped to confirm their professional identities in their work and further increase their confidence, and it contrasted with the more common experience of *embedded ethnocentrism* (Tomlinson, 2008), in which highly skilled and qualified refugees do not have their qualifications recognised (Refugee Action, 2006).

The familiar position of refugee women as outsiders in organisations was also challenged within RA, where their status quickly changed from organisational ‘outsider’ to ‘insider’ (Abrahamsson *et al*, 2009). This facilitated the development of their personal and professional relationships both inside and outside the organisation. Their working environment already constituted a zone of diversity inhabited by workers and volunteers from a range of ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds (50% of the staff were from BME backgrounds, reflecting many of the communities with whom the trainees were working). The trainees reported that RA constituted a comfortable space for them both personally and professionally, and their sense of belonging increased after a short time in their posts. They were given the freedom to self-manage, with support offered in the form of formal and informal supervision and mentoring. They were encouraged to become actively involved in key decision making in the project work, thereby challenging the common

perception of refugee women as passive recipients (Tomlinson, 2008). Of particular relevance for both trainees was the fact that work was not just a means to an end, but also a place where they were able to support other refugees. One of the trainees who had few family members in the UK also regarded the workplace as somewhere where she hoped to develop long-lasting friendships. Her main expectations of her traineeship were to ‘gain some experience with regard to recruiting and supporting volunteers ... create contact(s) and build networks, establish partnerships and I guess create new friends in a way as well doing what I love doing really ... for me I got a job working with refugees and asylum seekers, to me that’s always been my passion and I’ve been doing it for years, so that was a kind of achievement in itself.’

The diverse racial and ethnic culture of RA had a positive impact on both trainees, helping to cushion their experiences of the assessment work with unfamiliar VCS organisations and personnel. The consistent use of self in this type of work, using personal biographies, experiences and social positioning, can sometimes be potentially emotionally draining (Burke *et al*, 2000). This use of self was also important in the work with other refugee women, and helped to gain their confidence, trust and respect. One trainee commented that ‘when you help people [refugee women in the community] more than you’re asked to you know you always kind of get more respect or are seen differently if you like, you build that trust, you have an honesty and people aren’t afraid to approach you anymore – and now when I pick up the phone and ... they want to speak to C [IR team] they’ll recognise me and they’ll go “Oh, it’s OK you can help me”, and I’ll do the best I can, and that’s lovely, it’s really nice that people can trust me to do that for them.’

The trainees also found themselves in the position of role models for other refugee women. After one of the networking events a refugee woman made the following comment to one of the trainees: ‘You have inspired me to do what you are doing. I’m thinking if you can do this so can I.’ As their work progressed in the networking events, such comments became more frequent.

Shifting identities, shifting power

The trainees’ transition to the status of ‘organisational insiders’ within RA could have rendered them ‘community outsiders’, affecting their position within their own communities, and leaving them marginalised in those communities (Abramamsson *et al*, 2009). Bridge-building work involving the empowerment of women from BME backgrounds has sometimes challenged the more traditional values held by some within these communities, ‘illustrating how exclusion and belonging are relative and contextual’ (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 11). There was a shift in power dynamics, but

it was experienced in relation to the trainees’ role as advisers and assessors in the organisational assessment work, which contrasted with the more common perception of women refugees as recipients of services.

Short time scales and difficult targets

The time needed to meet all of the objectives and targets was underestimated. Short-term funding and timescales proved to be the main challenges to the assessment work. The very nature of the IR project, in addition to the many training commitments, learning new terminology, and finding their way around the workings of a new organisation, resulted in both trainees being extremely busy, with little reflection time factored into their work. One trainee reported being ‘dropped in at the deep end ... we wanted people to take us seriously and not just see us as trainees.’

Although a largely ‘hands-off’ style of management conveyed confidence in the trainees’ abilities, it left them feeling swamped at times (a common situation for those working as paraprofessionals). There is a danger that these workers will be set up to fail as organisational expectations outweigh the reality of what can be achieved within a short space of time. An example of this was the underestimated length of time required to access and meaningfully engage with organisations and communities in order to build the trusting relationships necessary to meet project targets and objectives. This is particularly challenging when attempting to engage seldom heard communities, raising further questions about deeper and superficial changes. With such short-term approaches to equality and diversity, there is always a danger of just ‘ticking the box’ and failing to address the root causes of inequalities.

Building capacity: projects and people

Investing and building capacity in the trainees to help them to secure employment after the life of the project was a key concern for RA. They would clearly have benefited from more structured targeted support towards the last phase of the project, and from some focus on their differing and specific career development needs. Over the year the trainees had formed close working relationships and developed friendships with people inside and outside RA, which made leaving difficult. At the end of the project one trainee had secured employment in a specialist women’s voluntary organisation, while the other trainee faced unemployment. This trainee, after attending a number of interviews, felt that she had returned to the

position she had been in prior to working at RA, where her previous experiences were not valued.

Once the project had ended there was limited capacity to offer ongoing support to the participating organisations. The sustainability of short-term projects offering longer-term outcomes such as this is an important issue, highlighting the need to develop longer-term strategies and funding for such work to continue. It is significant that RA applied for further funding to continue this work and to roll this out to more VCS and statutory organisations, but this application was unsuccessful.

Conclusion

A number of positive elements arose from the project, highlighting the key roles played by the community bridge builders in facilitating effective engagement. However, the project also raises some key concerns about the capacity and sustainability of short-term funded projects. For any long-lasting, long-term changes to take place in engagement between the VCS and refugee women, links and networks developed from project work between the voluntary, statutory and community sectors need to be sustainable and enduring.

A commitment to the values of equality and social justice is necessary in the hearts and minds of those working both on the front line and in the decision-making positions in VCS organisations that are committed to inclusive practice. On an individual or personal level, as can be seen from this project, being open, responsive, respectful and reflexive are all important qualities and drivers for those engaged in such work. The experience of employing refugee women as trainees and bridge builders helped to illuminate how RA, as an organisation, and others can best support refugees as paid workers and volunteers. However, although there was much evidence to indicate that the assessment work led to many positive outcomes in terms of attitudes and practice, it was also evident that a major cultural shift would be necessary in order to make effective changes. This would require ongoing, longer-term strategic support.

One recommendation from the evaluation was the progression of the assessment work by rolling this out at local and national levels to all sectors with a government-funded, *Investors in Refugees* award. This could result in refugees having more confidence in the values, policies and practices of the organisations that they need to access. This is particularly timely given the Refugee Council's statement on the *Moving On Together* policy (British Refugee Council, 2009), which recommends that refugees are considered as a distinct group and that equality impact assessments with

regard to service provision, housing, education, health and employment are undertaken. A key challenge to the IR project has been how to hear multiple voices and bring people together in a meaningful dialogue. As refugee women, the trainees were able to use their multiple standpoints and their special insights into both the needs of marginalised communities and the organisations with which they were working (Burke *et al*, 2000). They were able to engage with other refugee women because they were united by the specific experiences of being refugee women (i.e. their journeys, their experiences of dislocation, loss and instability, and their resilience). These commonalities helped to bond the women together even more so than other BME women.

The IR project constituted the first steps towards addressing some key issues in the engagement of refugee communities using bridge-building techniques. However, success will depend on addressing deep-seated questions. Although the project succeeded in creating engagement opportunities, the onus is now on the local VCS organisations involved to take the next steps and recruit and support refugee women volunteers. It would be useful to evaluate the experiences of such volunteers and their organisations over a

Box 2 Proposed proactive approaches to engagement with refugee communities

- Flexible engagement strategies and activities that reflect the diversity of refugee communities where race and ethnicity interact with other social divisions.
- Development of a knowledge base about the social, cultural and economic needs of refugee communities and the organisational possibilities. Recognition of specific areas of need, such as accessible venues and language provision.
- Use of local and national research evidence to inform strategies.
- Early integration of evaluation into engagement strategies that involve stakeholders.
- Structured and targeted engagement at all levels (personal, cultural and structural) to increase sustainability.
- Reframing the terminology of social exclusion/inclusion from 'hard to reach' to 'seldom heard', in order to emphasise organisational responsibilities.
- Building alliances and networks, and sharing the learning with others working towards various areas of social justice.
- Avoiding over-reliance on community spokespeople who claim to speak on behalf of their community.

longitudinal study in order to appreciate the full long-term impact of the project work concerning effective engagement of refugees. With this in mind, it is important that new questions about how to engage with communities are asked. The strategies listed in Box 2 have emerged from the research undertaken and the conclusions discussed.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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