

Case studies on the impact of Covid-19 on migrants in the UK

Ahlam on clear information and working together¹

A refugee, with memories of previous lockdowns that she endured in her home country, calls on people to work together as the only way society can get through the coronavirus outbreak.

Ahlam, originally from Yemen and now based in Glasgow, works with the British Red Cross as a UK Voices Network ambassador, advocating for the rights of asylum seekers and refugees.

Since 23rd March 2020, Ahlam has been working from home but this has brought with it a practical challenge. *“I have a little bit of a problem because most of our work now is done through emails and I don’t have internet in my flat, I use data on my phone and it can be quite slow – it is a bit of problem unfortunately.”*

The bigger picture according to Ahlam was that there wasn’t enough clear information reaching her community at the start of the pandemic. *“In the beginning there wasn’t a lot of clear information, there was a lot of misinformation. Nobody knew what was going on, even the Government weren’t clear in the beginning what they wanted people to do.”*

Ahlam is urging the authorities as well as organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees to make sure they get the relevant information to them.

“Most of the refugees and asylum seekers came here not speaking a lot of English so it is also very important for organisations working with them to try as much as they can to get the right information to them in their own language so they know what to do.”

“I’ve been in lockdown before in my country, it brought back bad memories at the beginning it affected me a lot because I just remember all the bad memories when I was in my country but I’m trying to keep myself positive.”

“If we want to get through this, it isn’t something people can do alone, we need to work together.”

One of the ways Ahlam and her friends in the refugee and asylum-seeking community are keeping positive is through social media and Whatsapp groups.

“We try to share jokes and we share cooking tips, we also talk about films and TV shows we are watching. It was also nice to participate in the clapping for the NHS, it changed our mood because all of us are very stressed.”

¹ This story was collected on 3rd April 2020

Saffie on financial support, access to information and social interaction

“We thank the UK Government for helping workers with the furlough scheme, business with grants and loans, people who are unemployed and those who’ve lost their jobs with the £20 increase to Universal Credit.

But we have to ask what have they done for asylum seekers? We have had to flee from our countries because our lives are in danger and here we struggle to survive on weekly payments of £37.75 and £35.39.

We have been having issues in the use of our Aspen card at some supermarket and stores as some machines in some shops wouldn’t recognise it and being a section 4 applicant you’re not allowed to withdraw money from a card but can only spend in store and this really caused inconvenience for us especially after managing to get some bargain items and going to the till and the machine wouldn’t recognise the card.

We were even expecting the little the Home office could have done is to give everyone the opportunity, be it a first time applicant or the ones in section 4, to be able to withdraw money from cash machines during this period. With the situation in the country and the supermarkets this was a terrible experience.

In this public health emergency we all need to have access to the news and the most up to date information from the government. Asylum seekers have to choose between food, hygiene products and mobile data. We can’t even keep in touch with our friends for support through this difficult time. If we have a television in asylum accommodation, the Home Office’s constructed provider can punish us for having a TV. A friend gave me a TV as she was moving home and bought a new one but I was scared to take it in case the Home Office stopped my asylum support.

In asylum accommodation we are not allowed visitors so can never have friends come and check in on us, so the only way to keep in touch with friends is through phone. Usually we go to the British Red Cross for support, advice and food bank vouchers but this is harder to get now. The Red Cross also helps us to socialise with other people experiencing the same trauma and experiences. We can share our ordeals, laugh and cheer each other up at the Red Cross but right now we can’t do that and are really suffering.

All day we have to stare at the four walls of our rooms and can’t have any entertainment. Can you imagine doing this day in and day out, not just during this pandemic but often for years at a time, while the Home Office review your asylum claim?

We feel so lonely right now. I thank God for organisations like the Red Cross who can help us with food bank parcels, toiletries for everybody and most importantly home deliveries for food parcels as well as prescription deliveries for the vulnerable who have been isolating. I am lucky because I speak English and I am an educated woman, so many people in Glasgow are suffering in silence and can’t even express themselves in English.”

Samsoudini on the need to unite²

The coronavirus outbreak has had a huge impact on society, including members of refugee and asylum-seeker communities. Samsoudini is seeking asylum and volunteers at the Red Cross refugee service in Darlington and he is a UK Voices Network ambassador. He is helping to organise online groups for people in his community to continue to socialise, exchange ideas and lift each other's morale. He has also been involved in food parcel deliveries for vulnerable people in his community. Samsoudini urges everyone in society to join forces and work together to defeat the virus.

The outbreak of the virus has caused significant concern for many of the people Shams supports through the Red Cross refugee service, and now their office has been forced to shut due to new safety guidelines.

"I'm a volunteer and I cannot be there at the centre to help people."

On top of questions about their asylum claims he said people were contacting him about a range of worries, from where to get information, how to access healthcare and how they were going to be able to feed their families.

"With the coronavirus the asylum seekers have got many, many problems. Starting with how to get out and do their shopping. Even before we can only really go out on a Monday when we get money to do our shopping, now with the shortage of supply, we struggle. If you have to wait until Monday, now there is nothing on the shelves as you can see in the media."

"People are very confused about the information, they are not getting the right information, and most of them can't read English. They do not know what to do or even where to go to get information. The Red Cross are trying to reassure people as best they can."

"There are also concerns about access to healthcare. What to do with prescription pick up, other health issues, HC2 renewal, GP appointments. Among many other issues."

"Asylum seekers are confused about their cases, about how to do things and most of all how they and their families are going to live through this. Because they just don't know."

"You think if you run away from your country you will be safe, but what you are faced with is another problem without people noticing it. Now because of the Covid-19 we feel like a forgotten part of the population."

"I am trying to create online groups, due to the social distancing rules, where once or twice a week over Zoom, social media like WhatsApp groups that we can have an exchange of ideas, talk about the advocacy we are doing and how we can continue that virtually, on social media. We can also have improv comedies, jokes or storytelling to lift people's morale. People can come up with uplifting videos for us and for the wider British public."

"We will also use these online groups to see who needs support. In my local community people are doing food parcel deliveries, of course with the social distancing in mind, with a mask and gloves you knock on the door and then stand back and let them the food from their doorstep. People are volunteering for this to help the elderly or those who cannot go"

² This story was collected on 26th March 2020

out. I have been doing that. It is bad for us but we can get through this.”

Shams said many organisations, which support refugees, and asylum seekers, which used to have drop-ins where people can come, socialise, and talk to people about their issues – these are now being done virtually or people have the option to call someone if they need to talk.

He urged anybody in need to reach out to those organisations.

“If you have questions you can pick up the phone, don’t go out, and talk to someone who can help you. Don’t suffer in silence, speak up, let your voice be heard. Even though the time is difficult there are people who are here to help, don’t suffer in silence.”

“If we don’t stick together what is going to be left? The worst part is that we have something really terrible and scary, I’m not going to emphasise it any other way. This is a bad disease but if we don’t come together, we will not survive. Let’s stick together, understand each other, let’s be tolerant, let’s help each other and we will get through all of this [...]. Asylum seekers are confused about their cases, about how to do things and most of all how they and their families are going to live through this. Because they just don’t know.”

“The last thing we need is to be treated like we don’t matter, we do matter, especially at these difficult times they can use our talents and skills. There are doctors and nurses among the asylum seekers and refugees.

“There are people specialise in many things, let us help, we are here to integrate to be part of the community. We want to stand up and be counted, this disease doesn’t discriminate, we are in this together.”

Simon on choosing between food and phone credit

“I came from the Democratic Republic of Congo to seek asylum in the UK over 14 years ago. Everyone knows of the danger in my home country and the persecution that we face but the Home Office still refuse to believe the truth. The past 14 years have been incredibly difficult. I have not been living but just surviving. My life has been on pause.

When I came to the UK, I was a young man with my whole life in front of me, now 14 years later, I have missed out on so much. Even before coronavirus, I was barely surviving on around £5 per day. We have to travel to the bigger shops that have lower prices but now with lockdown we can’t travel and the small shops have hiked their prices. Things like soap and hand sanitiser are very expensive and leave only a few pence for food and other essentials.

Since lockdown, essential support services like the Red Cross and Govan Community Project have closed their doors so you have to have phone credit or data to even contact them for help. This means deciding to eat or get phone credit. The recent increase of 26p per day to asylum support is heart breaking. I just want to live in dignity, afford the most basic things and to be safe.

As an asylum seeker, I am banned from working and contributing to my community. I have a passion for social care and have always wanted to work in this sector but I cannot, just because I came here to seek safety. If the UK government lifted the ban on work, I could be a key worker in the fight against coronavirus, caring for the most vulnerable.

I go to Freedom from Torture and take part in their Healing Neighbourhoods projects due to my past experience. Freedom from Torture advocated for me to study at college. They were not going to let me in because I am an asylum seeker but Freedom from Torture pressured the college to let me study. I am so grateful to them for that.”

Walter on loneliness and keeping connected

Walter is a migrant who came to the UK from Cameroon and now lives in Leeds and volunteers for the British Red Cross. He is a Voices ambassador.

“Communication is vital for anyone making a breakthrough in a new community. It was hugely challenging when I first came to the UK – the cultural shock, being away from your family, having to deal with the immigration system. It can feel very lonely at times but, as time went on, I started to get myself settled, got involved with a lot of community activities and made friends.

That’s challenging for everyone at the moment. Coronavirus is keeping us all at home and that’s difficult because we’re social beings. Families are separated, social media is where we connect now and, the more isolated people are, it has an impact on what activities they can do and on their mental health. There are issues of poverty, unemployment, family separation, domestic violence – it’s had a huge impact.

I am a busy man. I work with charities like the British Red Cross and with people with learning disabilities. We have a peer support network and I have access to social media but that’s not the case for everyone. People will need helping to get out of this quagmire. Many cannot see a light at the end of the tunnel but we have to look forward to the future.”

Zikee on staying connected³

Zikee is a young refugee in the UK who fears she may already have contracted the coronavirus. She self-isolated as a precaution and has thankfully now recovered.

“You are afraid, what if it is the coronavirus and you are affecting more people. It really affected me mentally and also physically. At first, I can’t say for sure it was coronavirus but I had the symptoms. So I was just keeping myself home for the past few days just to recover, and I have recovered fully.”

³ This story was collected on 27th March 2020

According to Zikee this frustration is felt acutely by asylum seekers who are confused by what this means for their safety and their future.

"This is definitely affecting refugees and asylum seekers, the asylum seekers their cases are now on hold or postponed and it's really frustrating for them not knowing what to do. They're in a really stressful situation, when they just don't know what to do."

With the support of the British Red Cross and other organisations, refugees like Zikee have spent years campaigning and lobbying the government to provide more help to asylum seekers and refugees.

In her own case, Zikee was left homeless when after years of uncertainty she finally received her refugee status, it came along with a letter informing her that she would have to leave her asylum accommodation 28 days later.

Speaking about the effect that the coronavirus lockdown is having on campaigns like increasing the move on period, Zikee said:

"It's like being put on hold, we can't fight for that. And it's really stressful that we just don't know what to do anymore. We don't know what tomorrow brings. Whether we'll be alive today or tomorrow and that change, it really affected us."

The Government has announced that the 28-day move on process will be put on hold for at least three months because of the Covid-19 situation.

"We are all self-isolating and quarantining so I think it's important if we all try to check up on each other mentally. Some people are really like myself, I really struggle being just by myself in a quiet place. I love socializing. In this moment. It's really important that we just check up on each other mentally, that we are all you know, doing really good."

Anti-trafficking case study of Sada and the British Red Cross response during Covid-19

Background

Sada is from the East of Africa and is in her 30s.

She experienced rape and child sexual abuse by a family member and as a result was prescribed to be punished by death by the people of her village. She was then trafficked to the UK on a false passport and spent over 12 years in domestic servitude.

After escaping, she spent time on the street homeless, before accessing support to enter the National Referral Mechanism¹ (NRM) and claiming asylum. Owing to arriving on false documents, the Home Office and Police refused to engage with her case. She received a negative reasonable grounds decision (first stage decision) through the National Referral Mechanism. She went through the asylum process and appeal with very limited legal representation and was turned away at court for representing herself.

She was evicted from her asylum accommodation, spending more time on the street homeless where she was attacked and abused multiple times. A fresh asylum claim was submitted without the Solicitor taking a witness statement and as a result it was refused. Section 4 accommodation was provided, but by the time she accessed the support of the British Red Cross, she was at risk of being evicted again.

Issues of access to accommodation and to appropriate legal advice were compounded during the Covid-19 crisis and the work of the British Red Cross centred on supporting survivors to access these basic requirements.

British Red Cross (BRC) Support offered

The BRC Anti-Trafficking Officer was able to offer intensive and extensive case-management during this time. Work was carried out to gather the evidence required to support the NRM reconsideration request and the fresh asylum claim.

Referrals were made to specialist counselling NGOs who could offer Sada support based on her specific experiences. We sought pro-bono legal advice for immigration and public law.

In addition, partially owing to her highly traumatic life experiences, and also on account of delivering our remote casework during the pandemic, it took a long time for the client to develop trust with us, before she was able to disclose the information that eventually supported her reconsideration and asylum claims.

¹ The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of human trafficking and modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support.

Outcomes

Through the support of the BRC, the NRM reconsideration request was accepted and she is now receiving support through the NRM. We were also able to ensure access to a specialist female solicitor who is now working with the client via video-call on producing a witness statement, planning for a psychological assessment and commissioning a country expert report ready for submitting a fresh asylum claim. Through one of our funded projects we were able to provide the client with a tablet with internet, which means she can access her legal appointments and English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes from home.

Offering support via our remote-model of casework meant that our Anti-Trafficking Officers needed to spend more time with clients, as the usual work took longer via remote methods, and in addition, people had additional complex needs that required further support and assistance.