Precarious Lives : Refugees and Asylum Seekers’ Resistance within Unfree Labouring

YHRMP ID
374
Author(s)
Waite, Louise; Lewis, Hannah; Dwyer and Peter James et al.

Aims

The authors aim to critically engage with the concept of resistance, specifically in the context of forced labour. They aimed to address a perceived gap in understanding about migrants’ experiences of labour exploitation and the reasons they may be involved in it. The broader research project underpinning this paper which aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of severe labour exploitation and unfree labour among asylum seekers and refugees living in the UK was funded by the ESRC, with fieldwork conducted in the Yorkshire and Humber region in 2011 and 2012.

Methodology

- The methodology involved a qualitative approach due to the hidden nature of the research topic and population.
- Fieldwork took place in Yorkshire and Humber in 2011 and 2012.
- Ethnographic ‘outreach’ techniques were used to negotiate access to, and build trust with, potential migrant interviewees. Snowballing techniques were also used, as were established and newly developed contacts with organisations in the region.
- Purposive non-random sampling techniques were used to recruit 30 asylum seeker and refugees aged 18 and over with experiences of unfree labour for in-depth interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 practitioners and policy-makers working in refugee, migrant, trafficking and employment organisations.

Key issues

The paper begins with a conceptual discussion of the term ‘forced labour’, suggesting the concept of ‘unfree labour’ as more helpful in reflecting the spectrum of labour types between forced and voluntary, including for example economic coercion. The research focuses on three groups: refugees, asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers. The research found that members of these groups were vulnerable to severely exploitative, and in many cases, forced, labour. The authors explore acts of

resistance within the labour settings that individuals found themselves in. There is a conceptual discussion of resistance as subtle and every day, as well as being exemplified in more visible protest movements. Three terms are suggested as useful within the concept of resistance: resilience, reworking and resistance. The authors acknowledge the argument that it is necessary to recognise the powerlessness of workers, but also argue that it is desirable to acknowledge moments and acts of resistance rather than presenting only a portrayal of passive victims. They give examples of resistance such as workers grouping together and making representations to employers. The act of working itself was seen as an example of resilience or even resistance for asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers, in a context where individuals in these groups are not permitted to work.

Conclusion

The authors conclude that it is very difficult for ‘unfree’ workers to improve labour conditions, particularly in the context of decreased labour regulation, and austerity. They state that many participants in the study did not attempt to leave forced labour situations but worked hard and did not want to lose their job.

Web Link
https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1176
Migrant Group
Asylum seekers

Refugees
Refused asylum seekers
Topic
Exploitation
Forced labour
Labour conditions
Work and education
Place
Yorkshire & Humber - region-wide
Year
2015
Resource Type
Journal article
Volume
14
Number
2
Pages
476-491
Email
eprints@whiterose.ac.uk

Source URL: *https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/research-entry/precarious-lives-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-resistance-within-unfree-labouring*