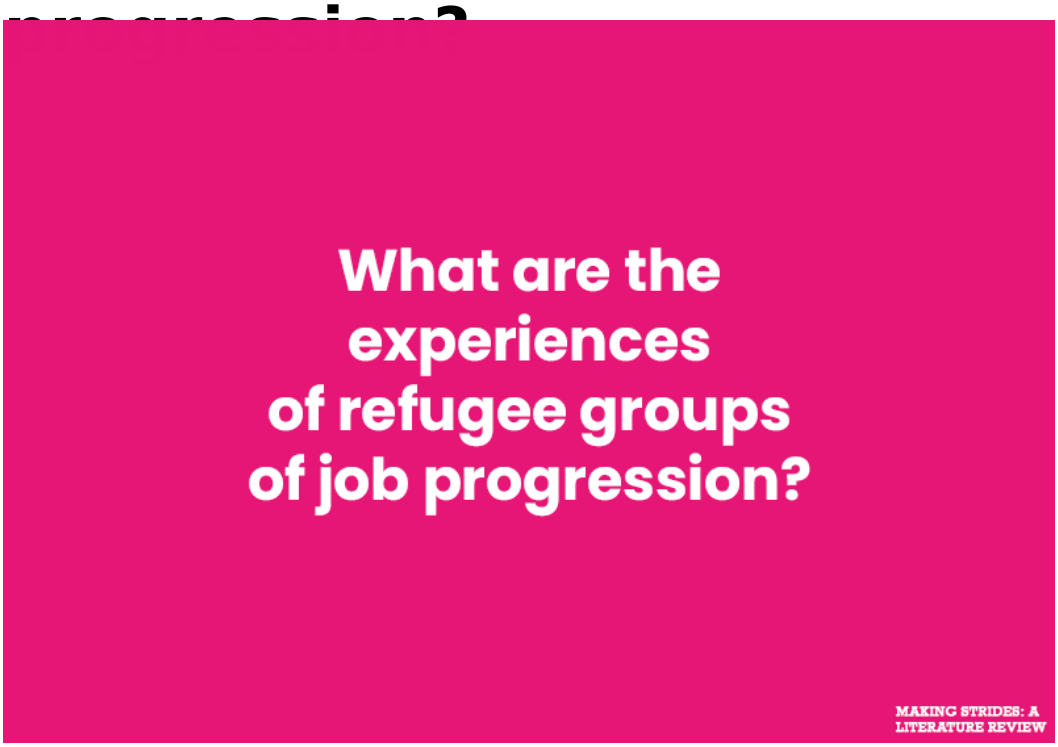
What are the experiences of refugee groups of job progression?



Research indicates that refugee groups in the UK tend to have poorer labour market integration outcomes than the wider

migration population. Ruiz and Vargas-Silva (2018) note that refugees are less likely to have readily transferable skills for the UK labour market because their motivations for resettling in the country differ from migrants who arrive in the UK for economic reasons. Those who have been forcibly displaced are also dealing with the potential additional challenge of processing traumatic events or experiencing health and well-being issues, which can prevent them from being able to work.

Refugee groups face numerous barriers to securing employment in the first instance, making career progression even more challenging. These include poor English language proficiency, limited access to learning support, lack of local work experience, difficulties in verifying qualifications, and employer discrimination (Bloch 2004, Stevenson 2019). Gendered barriers, particularly related to caring responsibilities, can further complicate employment prospects for refugee women. (Holtom and Iqbal 2020).

While abundant research is available on the experiences of refugee groups entering the labour market, less attention has been given to their progression pathways once employed. However, studies that explore this topic tend to agree that job progression is a significant challenge for refugee groups.

People will often find themselves working in entry-level positions, limiting their access to meaningful opportunities in the workplace. Gloster and Wimalasiri (2022) demonstrate that the tendency for refugee groups to work in typically entry-level roles

limits access to meaningful opportunities to progress in the workplace. Furthermore, a study by Holtom and Iqbal (2020) explored refugee employment in Wales and found an overrepresentation of refugees in part-time, insecure, and self-employed positions. The study concluded that the scale and the complexity of institutional and structural barriers refugee groups face significantly hinder their career aspirations, regardless of how “resourceful, creative and determined they are” (pg. 111).

Similarly, Arthur et al (2023) touch on the concept of “survival jobs” within refugee groups. These jobs, often not commensurate with their skills and experience, are characterised by precariousness and provide limited opportunities for skills development. This negatively affects both a person’s career development and well-being, potentially leading to an increased reliance on social support.

Another study focuses specifically on the experiences of refugees who have built specialised careers, such as medicine and education. Davey and Jones (2020) interviewed 15 refugees as part of their study and found that when participants encountered obstacles in practising their profession, they struggled to restore their former professional identity and develop alternative identities. As a result, they felt a sense of loss of identity, hindering their ability to progress further in their career paths.

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