Precarious lives: experiences of forced labour among refugees and asylum seekers in England [research summary]

YHRMP ID
Salford 2014 - 3
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Aims

The aim of the summary was to highlight the key findings of a 2 year research study into forced labour experiences among refugees and asylum seekers.

Methodology

Thirty people living in Yorkshire and Humber who had made claims for asylum in England were interviewed about their

experiences of forced labour. They had worked in various sectors, including hospitality, domestic work, manufacturing, retail and construction. The sample included asylum seekers at entry to England, trafficked, and undocumented migrants.

A further 23 interviews were conducted with practitioners to provide supplementary information.

The survey used the International Labour Organisation's [ILO] definition of forced labour, and the 11 indicators they developed to identify situations of forced labour.

Key issues

The authors found that the most common experiences of those interviewed involving abuse perpetrated by employers or intermediaries included: the withholding of wages, excessively low pay and unacceptable working / living conditions. For some asylum seekers, enduring exploitative working conditions, including forced labour, was necessary to meet their and their families' needs.

Working below minimum wage is normalised for this group and, despite often attempting to resist such conditions, their socio-legal status means that they often have no choice but to accept

them. These migrants have little, perhaps no, opportunities to negotiate conditions. Domestic servitude, sexual exploitation, and care work were found to be the most exploitative of work carried out by trafficked migrants.

Extreme poverty was found to be the primary driver into exploitative work, with the most vulnerable groups being undocumented migrants and those refused asylum. Seeking work in these conditions can also lead to criminal convictions for the use of false documentation.

The authors propose 3 concepts to explain vulnerability to forced labour: unfreedom, precarity and socio-legal status.

The authors also highlight the limitations of the ILO’s classifications, particularly its narrow focus on the employer-employee relationship, which ignores wider social contexts.

Conclusions

Evidence from the interviews demonstrates that refugees and asylum seekers in the UK are at risk of being exploited through forced labour. The asylum system contributes to vulnerability to forced labour among refugees and asylum seekers by its

restrictive rules on work and access to welfare.

Recommendations

The full report recommends that 5 key principles should guide activity on forced labour. These are to:

- end the enforced destitution of asylum seekers
- stop the criminalisation of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in work
- all workers have the right to be protected from forced labour
- build universal labour rights
- shift the focus of enforcement from workers to workplaces

Separate recommendations are directed at 5 constituencies:

- the UK government
- the Home Office
- trade unions
- the refugee and migrant sector
- places of worship / faith-based organisations

These include allowing all refugees to exercise their rights to family reunion, to end the destitution of failed asylum seekers, and to improve the training and awareness of a range of statutory and voluntary organisations, and better enforcement of the law [including the minimum wage].

Web Link
Precarious lives: experiences of forced labour among refugees and asylum seeker...
Migrant Group
Asylum seekers
Trafficked
Undocumented
Topic
Work and education
Access to employment
Exploitation
Forced labour
Place
Yorkshire & Humber - region-wide
Year
2013
Resource Type
Report
Extra Information

The report was published by the University of Leeds and University of Salford. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Source URL: *https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/research-entry/precarious-lives-experiences-forced-labour-among-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-england*