



Racism, destitution and asylum
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PAFRAS Briefing Papers

PAFRAS (Positive Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers) is an independent organisation based in Leeds. By working directly with asylum seekers and refugees it has consistently adapted to best meet and respond to the needs of some of the most marginalised people in society. Consequently, recognising the growing severity of destitution policies, in 2005 PAFRAS opened a 'drop-in' providing food parcels, hot meals, clothes, and toiletries. Simultaneously experienced case workers offer one-to-one support and give free information and assistance; primarily to destitute asylum seekers. PAFRAS works to promote social justice through a combination of direct assistance, individual case work, and research based interventions and analysis.

Below an underclass, destitute asylum seekers exist not even on the periphery of society; denied access to the world around them and forced into a life of penury. To be a destitute asylum seeker is to live a life of indefinite limbo that is largely invisible, and often ignored. It is also a life of fear; fear of detention, exploitation, and deportation.

It is from the experiences of those who are forced into destitution that PAFRAS briefing papers are drawn. All of the individual cases referred to stem from interviews or conversations with people who use the PAFRAS drop-in, and are used with their consent. As such, insight is offered into a corner of society that exists beyond the reach of mainstream provision. Drawing from these perspectives, PAFRAS briefing papers provide concise analyses of key policies and concerns relating to those who are rendered destitute through the asylum process. In doing so, the human impacts of destitution policies are emphasised.

Racist victimisation

The sixth of these briefing papers focuses on destitution and racist victimisation. In the 1998/99 year the Home Office began to record racially and religiously motivated harassment, wounding and assault. The total number of recorded incidences was 17,720. In 2006/7, the last year from when statistics were available, this had increased to 38,454.¹ Statistics for offences against those seeking asylum are not recorded separately. But independent studies indicate that asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable to racism violence.

¹ Nicholas, S. Kershaw, C. and Walker, A. (2007) *Crime in England and Wales 2006/7*, London: Home Office, p. 36.

Between 1989 and 2006 research by the Institute of Race Relations documented the deaths of 18 people seeking asylum as a result of incidences with a racist dimension: A figure that the author of the report explains is likely to be an under-representation.² Whilst in 2004 an independent report commissioned by the Greater London Authority (GLA) noted that:

[A]sylum seekers and refugees are suffering harassment, and that this is under-recorded and likely to be significantly disproportionate to their number in the community.³

This 'under-recording' has been further reiterated by other research, and for example, the Refugee Women's Strategy Group discussed in 2007 that, of 80 female asylum seekers and refugees living in Glasgow that they had surveyed, 50% had experienced racial harassment and 59% had not reported this to the police.⁴

By focusing on racist victimisation and destitution, this briefing paper aims to examine the context within which racial violence and harassment is located. That is, racism is considered structurally, within an analysis of an asylum system that, by design, renders those whose claims have been 'refused' homeless, and with few rights. Drawing from interviews with destitute asylum seekers, and a questionnaire (discussed in more detail below) given to 20 PAFRAS 'service users', it examines the level of racist victimisation to which destitute asylum seekers are exposed.

Every person who took part in the questionnaire described at least one incident where they have been abused or assaulted in some way since being in the UK. More than one person simply answered, when asked how many times they have been victimised, with 'many'. The reason, they explained, was that there are too many incidences to count. Elaborating further, this abuse has been at the hands of a range of actors from state officials to members of the public.

² Athwal, H. (2006) *Driven to Desperate Measures*, London: Institute of Race Relations.

³ The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (2004) *Media Image, Community Impact: Assessing the impact of media and political images of refugees and asylum seekers on community relations in the UK*, London: The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK, International Policy Institute, and King's College London.

⁴ Refugee Women's Strategy Group (2007) *Our Voices Matter*, Glasgow: Refugee Women's Strategy Group and Scottish Refugee Policy Forum.

Whilst this briefing paper, however, initially set out to focus only on particular incidences of racist victimisation; the results further emphasise the extent to which racism is experienced by people as a regular factor in their lives. Examples of harassment, indifference, different treatment and discrimination were highlighted systematically by almost all respondents. They suggest a form of institutional racism that is consolidated against destitute asylum seekers; and through which racist violence is both hidden, and enabled to flourish.

Exploring racist victimisation

Between April and May 2008, 20 destitute asylum seekers – selected at random – who come to the PAFRAS drop-in were given a questionnaire which asked about experiences of racist victimisation.⁵ The questionnaire took as a starting point the definition of a racist incident set out in the Macpherson Report that:

*A racist incident is any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person.*⁶

Due to the sensitive and personal nature of such a questionnaire the purpose of the questions were explained fully *before* the questionnaire was handed out. These questions asked if respondents had ever experienced racist violence through contacts with members of the public; police officers; immigration officers; staff in detention centres or holding facilities; or in any examples other than those above. If the answers to any of these questions was 'yes'; then respondents were asked how many times they had experienced particular racist incidents; were given the opportunity to describe any incidents if they so wished; and whether they had reported these incidents to the police or other relevant agencies. Of 20 questionnaires given to people all were completed.

It was explained to everyone that any questions could be ignored; and all respondents were guaranteed anonymity and given the opportunity – if they wanted – to go through the questionnaire in private, or with the researcher.

Members of the public

Of the 20 people who filled in the questionnaires 15 (75%) answered that they had experienced some

form of racist incident whilst in the UK through the actions of a member of the public. 10 of the people who said this, explained that they had experienced racist incidents on multiple occasions. The nature of these incidents varied. 2 people had been physically attacked in incidents that were so severe that they had been hospitalised (one person had been beaten over the head with an iron pipe, and another with a baseball bat); 4 people had had their property (when housed) vandalised through, for example, objects thrown through windows; whilst 12 discussed incidents that had involved name-calling, and other forms of harassment.

Of the 15 people who said that they had experienced some form of racially motivated victimisation in their encounters with a member of the public, only one said that they had reported an incident to the police, although she maintained that their response had been positive. All other people explained that they would not contact the police due either to their immigration status or due to a perception that the police would be unwilling to help. One person stated:

*Even if you report to the police they don't do anything. Also, you might be victimised. The police don't trust us.*⁷

The police

15% (3 people) who were surveyed explained that they had experienced a racist incident through the actions of the police. All of these incidents occurred when the people in question were held in a cell for short term holding purposes (all in relation to immigration matters). All of the incidents involved taunting and racist abuse, with one person being told that he should not be in the country. None of these incidents were reported to senior officers in the police, or to other agencies.

Immigration officers

14 people (70%) had experienced racism through contacts with immigration officers, or people working in some capacity for the Home Office as immigration officials. 7 of these people stated that this had happened to them on more than one occasion. All of these incidents reflected concerns by respondents that, in one way or another, racism had underpinned the decisions by, or attitudes of immigration officers in the way that they had carried out their jobs. 4 people mentioned that on arrival in the UK they felt that they had been discriminated

⁵ Of those who filled in this questionnaire, 5 were female and 15 male. All were adults.

⁶ Macpherson, Lord. (1999) *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*, London; the Stationary Office, Chapter 47. Para: 12.

⁷ Interview with author, May 2008.

against in some way when initially claiming asylum; and 1 person stated that they had been singled out as someone who would want to claim asylum before they had even done so.⁸ 1 person discussed that she had been dragged out of her house naked when taken in a dawn raid.⁹

The culmination of these incidents – many of which occurred in routine encounters with immigration officers when, for example, reporting to Immigration Removal Centres – had left a number of participants particularly embittered as immigration officers occupied a symbolic space in relation to the outcome of their asylum claim. As one person stated ‘I just wanted justice here but I have not got it. This country does not understand justice’.¹⁰ Or as another individual suggested:

*Their actions, their name calling, their decisions, it is a form of hatred. The immigration service has failed me, and not only me.*¹¹

None of the people involved had complained to the police, but 5 people had complained to senior immigration officers or members of staff working in the same sphere. None of the respondents felt that their complaint had been dealt with effectively.

Staff in immigration removal centres

6 of the 20 questionnaire respondents had been detained at some point, and 5 of these explained that they had encountered racism when held in a detention centre. The nature of these incidents ranged from name calling to violence and one person stated that:

*Some of these people are very bad. It's the sort of thing people don't believe. Some of the staff are ok. But some of them, they enjoy it, they enjoy keeping us behind bars.*¹²

One woman, who had been detained along with her newborn child, explained that there were not enough bathing facilities for the amount of people who were detained and, as such, she had been

forced to wash her child inside a bin.

Other examples

9 people (45%) said that they had experienced specific incidences of racism in contexts other than those mentioned above. These incidents occurred through encounters with a variety of agencies and bodies and one person stated that he had been assaulted by a member of staff at a charity. He suggested that by the time he made a complaint to the police, the police explained that the charity had already made a complaint against him and, as such, he was advised to discontinue the proceedings. The majority of people had not complained to the police about these incidents and, as one person explained, ‘no one would have believed me as he [the perpetrator] is an important person compared to me’.

Conclusions

It has not been the intention of this briefing paper to assert that those seeking asylum that have experienced racism are simply passive victims. Yet whilst some people evidently are prepared to complain about particular racist incidents many are silenced by virtue of their immigration status. Moreover, as one person explained:

*You are asking me about racism, I am homeless, I am not allowed to work, I am not allowed to exist in this country. There is your answer.*¹³

As the respondent alluded to, the racist incidents that are highlighted in this briefing paper have all occurred within a context where increasing numbers of people are forced into indefinite penury. Popular racism requires analysis in a context of institutional racism.

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⁸ It is of note to mention that upon enactment of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, immigration officers were in some ways exempt from the duties as, it was claimed, they had to discriminate in order to carry out their job effectively. See Burnett, J. and Whyte, D. (2004) ‘New Labour’s new racism’, *Red Pepper*, 124, October, 28-29.

⁹ See also Burnett, J. (2008) *Dawn Raids*, PAFRAS Briefing Paper No. 5, Leeds: PAFRAS.

¹⁰ Interview with author, May 2008.

¹¹ Interview with author, April 2008.

¹² Interview with author, May 2008.

¹³ Interview with author, May 2008.