

**Transcript of a presentation delivered at the Brockley "Festival of Ideas for Change" held on Sunday 20th November 2016 held in the Mural Hall at Prendergast Hilly Fields College, SE4, London.**

**Festival website: [www.brockleysociety.org.uk/brockley-festival-of-ideas](http://www.brockleysociety.org.uk/brockley-festival-of-ideas)**

## **Refugees and their Challenges**

### **Rosario Guimba-Stewart, Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network**

I once asked a client sitting at the reception in our centre how she was, she just looked at me and smiled. Her interpreter then came to help discuss her situation with our adviser.

On another occasion, a woman came to our office with two young children and a suitcase and told me that they have been evicted by their landlord. They have nowhere to sleep that night, no money and no support from the government.

I only have 8 minutes here to talk but if you give me a thousand minutes I could tell you a thousand stories of destitution, desperation, loneliness, fear, isolation many of our clients experience.

I am sure you have heard many sad stories of refugees on boats, on land, risking their lives to escape persecution. Some have made it and the unlucky ones died along the way. The refugee crisis is continuing all over the world, wars and internal conflicts have dehumanised many people. They have lost their country, their families, their home, their jobs. Many have been killed, tortured, raped or witnessed their loved ones being killed or tortured.

You may say, we can't bring all of them here! We can't and we're not!

At the end of 2015, the number of refugees and internally displaced people worldwide had risen to 65.3 million. The numbers reflect the on - going crisis in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Burundi, Yemen, Sudan and many more. Most refugees flee to neighbouring countries. Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan currently host the most refugees. According to United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), UK hosts less than 200k refugees.

Refugees or asylum seekers when they come to the UK, have already been battered physically, mentally and emotionally! They come to the UK with hope of rebuilding whatever is left of their lives. People at the Home Office don't welcome them with open arms, they are treated with suspicion and they have to prove that their and their families' lives are at risk. Many don't speak English, many don't know the system and many have no legal support.

During the process of claiming asylum, asylum seekers get £36.95/week/person (money for food, sanitation, travel and clothing). The process of claiming asylum may take months, sometimes years.

They are not allowed to work.

If they are granted refugee status – they will be entitled for mainstream benefits.

Many do not get support from the government even if they get Leave to Remain.

**Though safe now in the UK, refugees still face many challenges in rebuilding their lives.**

Poverty and destitution is one of the main problems many of them face.

It is made worse by being unemployed or lack of qualifications or their qualifications not being recognised here.

Many of them if they are employed often end up doing low paid or unskilled jobs such as cleaning.

Language is a major barrier to employment, even with qualifications such as teaching or engineering, if they can't speak the language it would be difficult for them to get those kinds of jobs.

Many refugees have also suffered and still suffering from hate crime from people who see them as bogus, as terrorists or people who are here to have a good life and steal their jobs. This kind of thinking is reinforced by the media, who are biased against refugees and who run negative stories about them.

If they are not working and can't speak English many of them remain isolated in their community.

### **RIISING TO THE CHALLENGE:**

But given the chance and support, refugees are able to rise to the challenge, they are able to contribute to their host community.

### **Did you know?**

Michael Marks – a UK citizen, one of the founders of Marks and Spencer was a Jewish – Polish refugee from Belarus. He fled to the UK in 1882

Rita Ora – singer and actress, is an Albanian born in Kosovo, her family fled to the UK during the Kosovo war.

Fabrice Muamba – is a Congolese refugee, he became a football player for Bolton

Albert Einstein – Physicist, German-Jewish refugee escaped Germany in 1938

Sigmund Freud – Jewish –Austrian, founder of psychoanalysis took refuge in the UK in 1938

Boris Johnson – is a descendant of a Turkish refugee

About 1,200 medically qualified refugees are recorded on the British Medical Association (it is estimated that it costs around 25K to support a refugee doctor to practice in the UK and training a new doctor is estimated to cost between £200k-£250k (Reaping the rewards: re-training refugee healthcare professionals for the NHS, October 2009 NHS Employers)

An estimated 30k jobs have been created in Leicester by Ugandan Asian refugees since 1972

## **WHAT CAN WE DO?**

There are many organisations and individuals, trying to give refugees in the UK a better start to put their lives back together.

At Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network, a charity set up in 1991, we provide the following services. They are

Legal support, welfare benefits and housing if they are entitled to it, access health services

If they are job ready, we help them get jobs or find courses

Providing counselling and therapeutic activities for women who experienced trauma

We have English, sewing and knitting classes and we provide food parcel and a small amount of money if they are not receiving any support from the government.

### **But we have limited resources and capacity and the need is massive!**

Your support and participation is valuable to help us achieve a society where refugees feel included

### **What can you do to help?**

Our charity is one of the many refugee organisations supporting refugees in London and like many organisations, we always welcome support from the public.

Donations are always welcome – food, money

Fundraise for us – Yesterday a few local residents organised a fundraising event for us and raised over £2k. We have a place at the London Marathon next year. If you want to run and fundraise for us, please let me know.

Volunteer and offer your skills – We are always looking for people who have the time, skills and passion to help us.

Help Campaign – One example is a campaign to Let Refugees Learn – government has cut funding for English classes by 50%, you can help campaign for the funding to be restored.

Raise awareness/challenge misconceptions about refugees – I hope that some of the facts and figures you heard from me today have informed you of what refugees have gone through or going through. I hope it will give you encouragement to learn more about them and welcome them.

Every year, in June – we celebrate refugees' contribution in the community and promote their image and raise the public's awareness on their situation. Join us!

But the greatest act you can give to refugees is kindness, understanding, and compassion towards them, they may be in your neighbourhood, in school or in your workplace.

Thank you all for listening to me and I thank the people from Brockley Festival of Ideas for inviting me here and bringing the plight of refugees in the agenda.