Refugee employment experiences: the case of Tamil refugees in the UK
PhD Thesis Executive Summary

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January 2010
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Introduction

“I want to work; I don’t want to go for benefit or anything like that” (Bimala).

“Immigration may be taking a hard stance but I’m very grateful that I had something good here. I shaped my life and career here in UK. [...] that’s a benefit that I’ve got from this country so I’m happy to repay” (Bhaskar).

At the end of 2007 there were approximately 11.4 million refugees worldwide (UNHCR 2008). The refugee population of the UK represented just 3 percent of this global figure, accounting for 0.5 percent of the total population of the country (approximately 299,700) (UNHCR 2008). The integration of these refugees is seen by the government as being in the interests of both the host population and the refugees themselves (Home Office 2005). Refugees living in the UK make up some of the most marginalised and excluded groups in society (Refugee Council 2004). Amongst these concerns, integration has become a key policy objective, and a matter of public discussion (Home Office 2000; Ager & Strang 2004). Employment is considered to be core to the process of integration. Employment promotes economic independence, provides opportunities to plan for the future, offers occasions to interact with the wider host society, makes available chances to develop language skills, restores self-esteem and encourages self-reliance (Ager & Strang 2008; Home Office 2005). Consequently the Refugee Integration and Employment Service was established in 2008, emphasising the significance of supporting refugee employment as a part of their wider integration and settlement in the UK.

There is evidence that, as a group, refugees possess a higher proportion of human capital skills than the population of their countries of origin as a whole (see Kirk 2004). This may occur because those who manage to leave are drawn from the more enterprising elements in their original society. However, research among particular refugee groups indicates that many refugees are underemployed or out of work in the UK, with the unemployment rate for refugees estimated at 36% in 2002, six times the then national average (Hurstfield et al. 2004; Bloch 2005; Home Office 2005). Many refugees essentially become long term unemployed after they receive legal permission to work (Phillimore & Goodson 2006).

This research specifically addresses the experiences of a group of Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka. It investigates the skills brought to the UK by Tamil refugees, the extent to which they utilise these skills, and how they adapt and develop their skills for the UK labour market. These individual experiences are understood through a focus on the employment of individuals within the social context of policies around integration. Employment which refugees consider to be appropriate, whether in terms of skills, gender, or ambitions, may lead to enhanced or improved integration of the migrant group into the resident society (White 2001; Bloch 2008). Targeting policies at education, job skills, and information about the labour market may aid integration and reduce ‘brain waste’ (White 2002).

Methods and research base

The aim of this research was to analyse the utilisation of skills of refugees within an agenda of integration through employment. The research is based on a case study approach with Tamil refugees predominantly...
in London. It is based upon qualitative research with twenty-six Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka, and a further seventeen interviews with ‘elite’ contacts in London. Further research undertaken with Tamils in Montreal offers a counterpoint to the situations of refugees in London, providing an international perspective on the wider Tamil diaspora.

Tamil context

Sri Lankan refugees are predominantly Tamils who have sought protection from persecution in the 19 year civil war (1983-2002) and the 2005 resumption of hostilities. The main concentration of Tamils in UK is in London. Estimates vary about the overall size of the community; it is generally suggested to be around 100,000 people. Tamil refugees were particularly referred to by other Tamils, as living in East London; specifically Newham. The refugees interviewed for this research mainly arrived in the UK between 1997 and 2001. The majority of these individuals were living or working within the Newham area, with a small group in Lewisham, and a few from other inner city London boroughs.

Key findings

1. Skills, qualifications and barriers to utilisation

“I've got two degrees, one's in Sri Lanka – one from the University, one from the college of Higher Studies, and I've got a fellowship in Berkeley, from Berkeley University, California, and I worked at the Wall Street Journal for a month” (Paavarasi).

- The Tamil participants had a wide variety of skills. Three different types of skills are defined by the University of Washington (2007):
  - Self-management skills are the basic personality traits and attributes that support individuals in their ability to manage themselves in a new environment (e.g. ambition, creativity).
  - Transferable skills are a combination of self-management skills and technical job skills that can be transferred from one job to another (e.g. meet deadlines, communication).
  - Work-content skills are the technical skills needed for a specific job (e.g. engineering terminology, legal knowledge).
- The women clearly out-performed their male counterparts in educational qualifications, however, men had more examples of specific work experience.
- English skills were significant in enabling the use of other skills. For Tamil refugees English language knowledge was a skill in itself, although they often had some basic knowledge of the language as a consequence of British colonization.
- English abilities influenced refugee perceptions of what it was possible for them to achieve in the UK. Overall the women’s abilities in English were marginally lower than their male counterparts, despite the fact that more of the women had ‘very high’ English abilities compared to the men. In Montreal the support individuals had to enable them to learn French made a significant impact upon the opportunities for refugees to pick up the language.
- The use of skills was also influenced by the ambitions of the individual and what they desired for their lives in the UK. The four main barriers which prevented individuals from achieving the full utilisation of their skills were:
  - Motivation
  - Lack of confidence
  - Family responsibilities
  - Connections to home
• Some of these barriers prevented people from fully utilising their skills, other features were surmountable.
• Full utilisation of these skills is not always a priority for the individual; there are wider concerns such as family responsibilities to be taken into account.

2. Gender differences

“In our culture, most of the women when they get married, then they don’t think about work or career or anything, and mostly husbands support them. So that’s why they don’t have the motivation to carry on with their studies or career” (Jayani).

“We don’t have social security back home, so the women always want to look to the husbands to provide everything” (Khush).

“The problem is once the women start to remain at home and look after children, when they are ready for employment then it becomes difficult because maybe they haven’t updated their skills, maybe because of looking after children they did not do any English classes, and they did not integrate into the society properly” (Kibru).

• The variation between men and women’s abilities was negligible, yet the differences in employment experiences were considerable.
• Women overall experienced a greater underutilisation of their skills than men.
• The employment of men was often related to their abilities, whereas for women it was more related to their family situation (for example, work which fits around childcare responsibilities) and personal ambitions.
• This underutilisation was not a concern for some of the women interviewed. They saw their role as being in support of the education of their children. Those who were concerned by an underutilisation of their skills were in general attempting to overcome this in some way.
• Tamil women had greater opportunities to work in Montreal compared to London. The broader definition of ‘family’ in relation to family reunification policy provided opportunities for female family members, such as grandmothers, to travel to Canada and care for their grandchildren whilst the children’s mothers worked.

3. The ethnic economy and community

Ambition

“We have been given the opportunity, to set up our own businesses and come up in business life - call it an entrepreneurial enhancement culture that has been encouraged in the UK” (Ponmudi).

“Self employment, that means find a shop. I mean a grocery shop” (Jwalia).

• Individual ambitions related to their personality and circumstances
  o For the more highly skilled working members of the community, success involves working outside the ethnic economy towards a specified type of employment (for example a professional occupation) which utilised their skills and experience.
  o For less skilled individuals the link between what they aspire to do, and what they are able to do, is often broken in the host country. To make a living they often have to alter or lower their aspirations or train further to achieve their goals.
• Tamil refugees entering the large Tamil community in London experience similar circumstances to other people entering large ethnic communities as economic migrants.
• The ethnic community offers support in terms of accommodation and personal assistance; the ethnic economy provides employment, both legal and illegal.
• Of the interviewees who were working or volunteering, twelve were involved within the ethnic economy (eight women and four men). Five men found work outside of the Tamil ethnic economy, but found the work through Tamil networks. Seven people were unemployed (five women and two men).

• Employment within the Tamil ethnic economy was significant, but this affected employment prospects. Working within the ethnic economy often limited the level of skill utilisation possible.

**Risk and information**

“I've got the confidence - because I used to work I know all this kind of business” (Jwalia).

“Because my Dad was working locally in a Tamil supermarket, he didn't have any knowledge of like how to get education from the college or anything” (Rustam).

• The information field of Tamil refugees is generally tied up within the Tamil community. This field affected their awareness of options outside the community – both the jobs themselves, and how to go about applying for a position beyond the ethnic economy.

• For some men, their information fields had expanded into the wider labour market, often as a consequence of education, and they had been able to achieve greater use of their skills in the wider labour market.

• On the basis of the information most individuals had available to them, the ethnic economy was perceived to be a lower risk employment option for both men and women.
  - Women become a part of the ethnic economy, for example in Tamil community organisations, due to the perceptions of what is deemed to be appropriate work for them. Women are not always expected to work and therefore formal employment in the UK often meant working in the familiar environment of the ethnic economy.
  - In contrast, men of a variety of different backgrounds felt through the ethnic economy they had potential to develop their own businesses. The types of businesses mentioned were generally in retail and most often grocery shops serving the Tamil community.

• Work in Tamil businesses has a cyclical effect, as it relates to the experiences of employment refugees have when they first arrive in the UK. People open businesses in these areas because they have some experience in them, often having been employed in Tamil businesses when they were seeking asylum or as a first job as a refugee. Such businesses have also offered a significant informal route into employment, particularly for Tamils forbidden to work as asylum seekers.

4. **Integration and employment**

“Compared to other European countries, Tamil refugees have not largely dispersed outside the capital, and the people outside London rarely know our existence or the identity” (Bhaskar).

“A lot of Tamil refugees don’t mix with other communities; they are a very closed community” (Paavarasi).

“I went into a convenience store because [that's] where I had the experience” (Pomnudi).

• Employment may offer experiences which facilitate the process of integration however, it is only possible if the employment offers opportunities for transactions between Tamil refugees and the wider community. The Tamil participants in this research were largely working and socialising within the ethnic community, limiting the potential for integration.

• Work within the ethnic economy may create a ‘portfolio of obligations’ which can limit individual’s opportunities to leave and look for employment in the wider labour market.
The experiences individuals had when they were asylum seekers were significant in their later situations as refugees. Asylum seekers, who worked illegally or before the right to work was removed, were influenced by their employment experiences. The sense of obligation, or the knowledge acquired, by individuals who had formally worked influenced the type of employment they sought later.

**Conclusions**

The significance of being a refugee and Tamil cannot be separated, the reasons for their refuge being so intertwined with their ethnicity and/or nationalism. Like migrants entering large communities, for this group of individuals, their experiences cannot be understood in isolation from their connections to wider Tamil society. However, the importance of the wider Tamil refugee community and the ability to be immersed within the Tamil ethnic economy on a day-to-day basis, contributes to the difficulties that Tamil refugees face, integrating into wider societies.

The Tamil refugee participants who entered the large Tamil community in London encountered similar social contexts to other people entering large ethnic communities as economic migrants (Fuglerud 2001; Fong & Ooka 2000). The community impacts upon attitudes, ambitions and experiences of employment. Recognition of this for Tamils and other refugee groups should be taken into consideration by policymakers. Refugees need to be supported within their social context, taking into consideration the implications of the wider communities of which the individual is a part. The importance of the Tamil community represents a paradox between the ethnic economy and integration. On the one hand, the ethnic economy may aid integration by providing employment opportunities and support for the individual; yet, on the other hand, the ethnic economy hinders integration by limiting opportunities. The focus on the ethnic economy was by virtue of the fields of information in which they were immersed. The information available to these refugees gave them more opportunities in the ethnic economy than within wider communities. Yet integration is a personal experience, based upon individual personalities and preferences, and their hopes and ambitions within the host country. Moving asylum seekers to areas where there are few other refugees from the same ethnic community may reduce the support networks available to individuals.

The research has established the importance of employment within the process of integration and discussed the significance of employment experiences. As with others, this research questions the logic behind the removal of the right to work for asylum seekers (Refugee Council 2005). The exclusion of asylum seekers from the labour market removes their economic independence, limits their opportunity to plan for the future, reduces the occasions they have to interact with the wider host society and develop language skills, lowers their self-esteem and discourages self-reliance. This research has demonstrated how an individual’s early employment after their arrival in the UK impacts upon their subsequent work.

This research was part of a PhD undertaken in the Department of Geography at the University of Sheffield, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), awarded January 2010. For more information please contact Ruth Healey at r.healey@chester.ac.uk
References


Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the people who participated in this research. Without the support of the refugee participants this thesis would not have been possible. I am also grateful to the wider Tamil communities and refugee organisations in London and Montreal for their assistance and support. Specifically I would like to thank my supervisors Paul White, Tariq Jazeel and Megan Blake at the University of Sheffield, and acknowledge the support of Alan Nash who hosted my visit to Montreal in the Department of Geography and Planning at Concordia University.

1Note: all of the interviewees have been anonymised in this research with pseudonyms used to identify individuals.