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The Benefits and Challenges of Including Refugees and Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Paid and Unpaid Positions in Non-Governmental Organisations through ‘Experts by Experience’ programs

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Abstract

With the increase in migration to Europe after the 2015–2016 ‘refugee crisis’, the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in society and the workplace became crucial. However, refugees find it difficult to obtain jobs with or without qualifications, whereas asylum seekers are restricted because of their legal status, affecting their right to work. NGOs working with refugees and asylum seekers have been trying to implement strategies for inclusion by involving more people with lived experience. However, are these efforts enough? What are the limitations and challenges of this approach? This paper investigates small-scale inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees in charities in the United Kingdom using qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews. It discusses the role charities play from the perspective of refugees, asylum seekers, and NGO workers. The paper will present a new concept in NGOs referred to as ‘experts by experience’ looking at its benefits and limitations.

Keywords: Refugees; asylum seekers; inclusion; NGOs

1. Introduction

This paper examines the concept of asylum seekers and refugees’ inclusion within non-governmental organisations (NGOs) after the 2015–2016 ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe. With the new approach to inclusion and diversity in NGOs, the need to include more people with the lived experience of the asylum process became vital to these NGO and so is the research to analyse their approach to inclusion. This paper argues that this approach to diversity and inclusion in the United Kingdom (UK) is useful, but there are still limitations and weaknesses to it. For instance, while refugees can undertake paid positions, asylum seekers volunteer because they are not allowed to work in the UK unless their asylum claim is "outstanding for

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more than 12 months" (GOV UK, 2021). This raises questions of how to avoid exploiting people and starting to compensate them for the work they do. Moreover, even when refugees are hired in position within NGOs, there are still hierarchies and power relations (Picozza, 2021) that can be eliminated. This paper highlights some of the strengths and weaknesses to the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees in NGOs, calling for more research in the area.

The literature has highlighted inclusion and diversity within the workplace (Harvey, 1999; Mor Barak, 2000; Mor Barak & Cherin, 1998; Roberson, 2006; Shore, 2011). Mo Barak (2000) defined inclusion as a way of encouraging and facilitating "*the inclusion of employees who are different from the mainstream in the organisational information and decision making*" (p. 344). Similarly, Harvey (1999) and Roberson (2006) agreed that inclusion refers to eliminating barriers to allow employees to fully participate in and add to the workplace. Therefore, inclusion is about creating an inclusive environment for employees to contribute to the workplace (Miller, 1998; Mor Barak & Cherin, 1998) regardless of their "*gender, ethnicity, race or age*" (Roberson, 2006, p. 2014) and disability (Kulkarni et al., 2016). Shore et al., (2011) developed a definition of inclusion centred around employees' perception and characterised by how they are treated and if their needs are met regarding their "*belongingness and uniqueness*" (p. 1265) to the organisation they work for. Efe (2023) highlighted the "*economic integration*" of refugees in the health sector in the UK.

Researchers have also highlighted exclusionary practices and obstacles to inclusion in the workplace for women and minorities, including refugees in specific (Ibarra, 1993; Knappert et al., 2020; Efe, 2023) and migrants in general (Major et al., 2014). These obstacles include exclusion from opportunities and networks (Ibarra, 1993), unemployment and language requirements, "*stereotypes and biased procedures*" (Knappert et al., 2020, p. 42), inequality (Roberson & Scott, 2022), and the construction of power relations (Zanoni et al., 2010). Regardless of the continuous research on diversity and inclusion, the need for more empirical perspectives should be encouraged in the literature. Specifically, the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in the workplace, especially since the 2015–2016 'refugee crisis' in Europe (Ortlieb et al., 2021), should be investigated. Thus, this paper's contribution is empirical, conceptual, and methodological. It draws on the concept of inclusion from the perspective of asylum seekers, refugees, and NGO workers using the concept of 'experts by experience'. Zoom is used to conduct online interviews. The research introduces the concept of 'experts by experience' drawing on the literature on inclusion and diversity.

Using qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews, this paper demonstrates the positive impact of inclusion within NGOs by exploring the concept of 'experts by experience'. The paper also explores the limitations facing the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees within charities. This paper recognises the efforts by NGOs to create an inclusive and diverse workplace but concludes that NGOs need a better approach to inclusion and diversity, especially when they work with diverse groups. Last, the paper answers the following research question: What is the role NGOs play in including people with lived experience in their services and what are the limitations to this approach?

2. Methodology

The research builds on 21 in-depth Zoom semi-structured interviews that were conducted to understand the meaning of borders and everyday barriers and determine how to challenge



border practices in the United Kingdom. The use of telecommunication methods such as the telephone, Skype, and Zoom increased during COVID-19 and gained a great deal of popularity during the pandemic as teaching and research moved online. Thus, all my participants had access to Zoom. Gray et al., (2020) highlighted the importance and usefulness of Zoom meetings as an alternative to face-to-face meetings. The former obtained positive feedback from participants. Archibald et al., (2019) stated that Zoom interviews were time- and cost effective. Technical issues included audio, camera, or internet connection issues. However, according to Archibald et al., (2019) the advantages of Zoom conference meetings overpowered their disadvantages.

After obtaining ethical clearance from the University of Liverpool's Ethical Committee in April 2021, interviews were conducted with asylum seekers, refugees, and NGO workers from Refugee Action, The British Red Cross, Allies for Justice, Freedom from Torture, Toxteth Women Centre, and Global Village Café. Some of the NGO workers have the lived experience of the asylum process in the United Kingdom. The interviews were conducted in English and Arabic.²

COVID-19 restrictions influenced my decision to conduct online interviews instead of face-to-face interviews. I interviewed people from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran. I also interviewed a few people from African countries who bridged NGO work and the asylum process. Participants were from Merseyside, Manchester, Lancaster, and London. The sample included thirteen men and seven women between the ages of 20 and 50. Names and information about participants were anonymised to ensure their safety.

Participants were recruited using the gatekeeper approach. I approached the gatekeepers who were NGOs by sending them an official and formal email presenting myself and my research study, kindly requesting assistance in recruiting people including NGO workers and, refugees, and asylum seekers who might be interested in participating. The second approach used to recruit participants is through snowballing and contacting a few people from an organisation I volunteered with before. I contacted my acquaintances and asked them if they could contact any colleagues, who might be interested in participating in the research.

3. Findings

Based on the interview data, the topic of small-scale inclusion was explored through the lens of 'experts by experience'. The concept of 'experts by experience' has been used recently by NGOs to refer to the people with the lived experience of the asylum process in the UK working or volunteering with them but it has not been addressed in the literature. This approach of including people with the lived experience of the asylum process plays a crucial role in engaging people within organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees and creating job and development opportunities. However, there are limitations to the phrase 'experts by experience' including the problematisation of the use of the concept in terms of how people's experiences are valued and the existence of power relations within NGOs. Therefore, the paper makes suggestions about how to improve the experience of asylum seekers and refugees working with charities and NGOs.

² Additional notes:

The quotes from the participants have been slightly modified for grammar.

The interviews were transcribed and translated by myself as I speak both English and Arabic.

NGOs provide services like campaigning and advocacy, language teaching, social and cultural activities, asylum information sessions, and food banks. This paper focuses on the role of NGOs in the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees in paid or unpaid positions. While refugees can undertake paid positions within the NGOs, asylum seekers are not allowed to work. The only exception would be if they have been under the asylum process for more than 12 months, the delay is not their fault (GOV UK, 2021), and the jobs are restricted to the shortage occupation list. Asylum seekers are encouraged to volunteer instead. These restrictions further problematize the concept of 'experts by experience' in relation to volunteering.

4. The Role of NGOs

NGOs play a vital role in helping migrants. This has been especially true after the 2015–2016 'refugee crisis'. They provide services like healthcare, legal help and food, advocacy, lobbying, and awareness-raising across borders and countries within and outside Europe (Atar et al., 2022; De Jong & Ataç, 2017; Muralledharan & Bryer, 2020; Yang & Safer, 2018).

The literature shows the part NGOs play in assisting people in need not only in Europe but all over the world. Their role involves advocating and raising awareness about the treatment and struggles of migrants in different countries. In 2022, organisations in the United Kingdom condemned and acted against the UK-Rwanda plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. (Refugee Action, 2022).

According to Atar et al. (2022), NGOs played a crucial role in assisting refugees during the 2015–2016 refugee crisis. In border zones, *"a large number of individuals would have frozen to death or succumbed to disease and starvation if no charitable organisations were collecting and distributing supplies and warm clothing in transit or in camps"* (Atar et al., 2022, p. 4). NGOs also contribute to the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees on a small scale within the NGOs themselves. This approach aims to benefit asylum seekers and refugees as well as NGOs (Sohler et al., 2009). Asylum seekers NGOs can be a space for practice, networking, and empowerment (Magro, 2008). This approach has been beneficial for NGOs as well in terms of __ obtaining additional skills, especially *"intercultural and linguistic competence"* (Sohler et al., 2009, p. 45) that play an important role in helping NGOs transcend language barriers with asylum seekers coming to seek help.

NGOs have also been criticised in relation to inclusion in the workplace and the need for their reform (Azmat et al., 2015). Volunteering with NGOs can be beneficial to asylum seekers in terms of building relationships and preparing for employment when they get refugee status and self-development (Yap et al., 2020; Vickers, 2016). However, limitations to volunteering and power relations (Hassemer, 2020) between paid workers and unpaid workers or the hierarchy between citizens and refugees joining NGOs for paid positions need more scrutiny. Bird and Schmid (2021) revealed exploitation within NGOs. They can participate in *"reaffirming hierarchical understandings of what types of jobs"* (p. 15) refugees can access. James (2021) underlined other limitations, including *"disempowerment, lack of agency and exploitation"* (p. 17) and *"inadequate formal support"* (p. 18). Picozza (2021) addressed the *"unspoken racial hierarchies between 'helpers and translators of migrant background and Germans"* (p. 143). Moreover, according to Hassemer (2020) it is rare for asylum seekers to transition from volunteering to



waged jobs within NGOs even when they volunteer “*with hopes of future paid employment*” (Vickers, 2016, p. 447).

Given the above literature, there is a need to address small-scale inclusion within organisations and its benefits for NGOs as well as refugees and asylum seekers. It is also crucial to demonstrate the challenges and limitations of this small-scale inclusion. This paper builds on previous studies on inclusion in the workplace as well as the scholarly debate on the role of NGO in recruiting asylum seekers and refugees, highlighting the strengths and the challenges to this approach from the point of view of people with the lived experience of the asylum process in NGOs in the United Kingdom. This paper introduces the concept of ‘experts by experience’ used by NGOs as part of their inclusion and diversity program and present its limitations and weaknesses. While there is a growing literature focusing on the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees as paid or unpaid workers, the literature and the empirical side remain limited and insufficient.

4.1. Rethinking the Role of NGOs: Small-Scale Inclusion

This section illustrates NGOs’ contributions in helping refugees and asylum seekers overcome different barriers within the host community. Given the dominant role of NGOs in different sectors, there is a demand and need for “*inter [cultural] and linguistic competence*” (Sohler et al., 2009, p. 45), which leads organisations to employ migrants or “*promote volunteering*” (Sohler et al., 2009, p. 45).

At the level of NGOs and national charities, there are different missions to fill the gaps left by the government and assist refugees legally and socially as well as to advocate and provide counselling services in the United Kingdom (Sohler et al., 2009). The services involve “*offering emergency food, clothes, and cash to those facing severe hardship, and giving advice about how to access services*” (Mayblin & James, 2019, p. 382) and other roles, including advocacy, campaigning, and lobbying (Muraleedharan & Bryer, 2020).

A participant talked about the role of Refugee Action, one of the leading organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. This role includes providing services in different sectors such as

“Providing housing for people who are homelessness, and help finding them with housing, providing a hotel over the weekend or making an application for asylum support. Some charities help with mental health support, counselling, and things like that. We provide clothing for those in need . . . and raise awareness about the issue been a refugee. That is an important part of it, and the language of course is a huge barrier, so we can help sometimes overcoming language barrier” (interview 3).

The above exemplifies some of the roles charities play in overcoming everyday barriers asylum seekers in the United Kingdom face. For example, the financial barrier can be overcome by providing accommodation and clothes, the language and social barriers can be overcome through English courses and awareness-raising in different institutions about refugees and asylum seekers. A participant (interview 4) noted that he received much help from charities to overcome the financial barrier, including food and clothes; the social barrier, including different activities and programmes; the language barrier, including lessons and school supplies; and the legal barrier, including legal information and, sometimes, case workers (interviews 3, 4).

The participant noted that charities can help challenge racial barriers by providing opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds, including people with experience, and by mixing people *'from different phases, different backgrounds, different understandings, different philosophies, and different genders'* (interview 4).

The government is supposed to initiate programs to assist asylum seekers, but the lack of an inclusionary programs and the development of exclusionary practices (Griffiths & Trebilcock, 2023) are problematic creating more distance and barriers between the host country and asylum seekers and refugees. Therefore, NGOs can step in to help people overcome the everyday barriers they face in the host country that are the result of the hostile environment (Parker, 2020; interview 11). An asylum seeker mentioned that NGOs helped him with multiple services including food, clothes, services, and social events including tours sometimes:

"They take us tour of the city and I remember once outside the town for two days, it was a programme in Birmingham to Wales. In my experience, they helped me with the art lessons, English lessons, study materials, books, pencils, pens; they helped me with bus ticket sometimes to go somewhere. They were the backup for this difficulty of the economic borders" (interview 4).

The participant discussed the help he obtained from NGOs to overcome the everyday difficulties in the UK through events and art and language classes. These helped him overcome and challenge social, economic, and language barriers that asylum seekers suffer from under the asylum process in the UK. NGOs can introduce different programmes that offer small-scale inclusion. A participant expressed the need for more programmes of this type:

"These charities, and non-profit organisation could do amazing stuff in terms of educating people because we live in our rooms for years and months as asylum seekers because of limitations, the social limitations, and other borders we talked about. We are not seeing, we are living in a bubble, we are living in a narrow circle, little our circle. So, these activities bring us to the light instead of living in the shadow. Sometimes, I cannot even imagine why you don't have enough of these charities. These activities that could help people to interact" (interview 4).

According to participant (4), asylum seekers struggle with isolation and loneliness as well as social limitations because they live in a social bubble. One way of bursting this bubble is through small-scale inclusion programmes that include practices and activities encouraging asylum seekers. Such programmes can help people interact with people outside their circle and feel included as well as build relationships. However, this approach is still limited. As one participant put it,

"We are pouring water into a boat with holes, you know. Rather than fixing the boat, you're just plugging one hole after another, and then the other hole gets damaged again. We have the capacity and resources and even the knowledge of how to build a fresh boat, but all we managed to do and all we are allowing ourselves to do is just to plug the holes temporarily" (interview 12).

Organisations can do more than provide services and essential needs for asylum seekers and even refugees, they can be more inclusive even on a small scale by trying to help people socialise and step outside their circle. They can design programmes and create opportunities that asylum seekers and even refugees need (Le Louvier and Innocenti, 2023). One of the



ways to address people's needs aiming to build a new boat rather than plugging the holes in NGOs is to obtain the opinions of people who fall in the aforementioned gaps (interview 12). It is about recognising people's skills, efforts, experiences, opinions, education, resilience, and power. Organisations in this premise should be ready for "*constant self-renewal and to draw on the discourses of strengths approach, capacity-building and collective learning to serve the needs of all involved*" (Butler, 2005, p. 155). By doing this, organisations start to see the strengths in asylum seekers and refugees as well as potential and skills rather than "*reproducing categories of vulnerability*" (Bird and Schmid, 2021, p. 1245). The following section focuses on the idea of 'experts by experience' and their inclusion in NGOs and charities as well as the limitations to this approach.

4.2. Experts by Experience

'Experts by experience' is a concept that has been used in different sectors and settings in UK "*social work and social care in recent years*" (Scourfield, 2010, p. 1893). It has recently been used in the charity sector to refer to people with the lived experience of the asylum process working for NGOs and charities (Yeman & Yohannes, 2023). Experience refers to volunteering, trusteeship, or paid jobs depending on the charity. For instance, Refugee Action is a leading charity working toward building a more inclusive environment and trying to shift the power dynamics within the organisation and across departments by "*including more people with lived experience of the asylum process, creating career paths for them, and raising the possibility of achieving real power and influence within the charity while embedding an anti-racist approach*" (Refugee Action, 2021, p. 6). The organisation also runs a pilot programme to help other organisations build an inclusive environment when working with people referred to as 'experts by experience'.

Organisations have used this concept to include refugees and asylum seekers into their services, "*especially during longer periods of unemployment within the employment procedure*" (Sohler et al., 2009, p. 45). Organisations like Refugee Action, Allies for Justice, and Freedom from Torture have been trying to include more 'experts' with the experience of the asylum process in their different teams. However, the concept has its limitations. Although it is beneficial to include more refugees and asylum seekers in NGOs, especially in charities that are designed to help people overcome the asylum process and its different barriers, the questions of how this is done and whether it will benefit volunteers and 'experts' need to be answered.

The interviewees in this study bridged their experience of the asylum process and their experience of working or volunteering with a charity. Seven participants (interviews 1, 8, 10, 12, 19, 20, 21) were part of what is referred to by NGOs as the 'experts by experience' scheme. Some people volunteered in other areas like planning and organisation of events, such as charitable donation activities and the fundraisers (interview 6).

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in including people with lived experience in NGOs as a way of encouraging asylum seekers and refugees to join the labour market (Magro, 2008), bridging not only their knowledge of the asylum process but also their skills. A participant (interview 12) reported on the importance of the experience of the asylum process in shaping his approach to helping people,

"Experience can be shared to help more people because we could speak to people of knowledge, and I think Freedom from Torture, Refugee Action and some other organisations even out of the UK have started to be interested in bringing people with lived experience on board and making them the

real centre of the organisation, cause the reality is if an organisation is claiming to be working for refugees, supporting refugees, then I do not understand why the people at the high level are not refugees themselves promoting the message or encouraging other people.”

First, there are shared experiences (interview 12, 19, 21) among asylum seekers even if their individual experiences are different. These can include the difficulty of crossing borders, looking for safety, dealing with the border gatekeepers and the police, going through the asylum process, and sometimes it can include sharing languages/dialects. These shared aspects create an environment of trust and compassion. A participant reported that the reason he joined a charity was to try and help people going through the same issues he went through, helping them deal with the pain with compassion and understanding *“I think when people go through that difficulty, there’s always that compassion to say okay, I’ve gone through so much of a hard time”* (interview 12).

People with lived experience bring hope (interview 19) and encouragement to other people to overcome everyday barriers within the asylum process (interview 12). Having a model of resistance and resilience is empowering for people who are new to the asylum system: One participant said *“they going to find it easy when they see people will struggle like them or people who have been through the process”* (interview 19). This helps asylum seekers not only understand but also survive the asylum process.

However, according to one participant (interview 12) bringing a few people on board as ‘experts’ in the United Kingdom alone is not enough. He continued saying that people who are hired as ‘experts by experience’ in NGOs need to be at the centre of these organisations because the target group is asylum seekers and refugees. This also raises the question of why refugees are not in high positions. The charity/NGO sector should be preparing asylum seekers who would want to join the charity sector once they get their refugee status while paving the way for them to enter high positions by developing their skills, including them in concrete decisions, and bringing about change. People with lived experience of the asylum process can push to achieve such change in the charity sector. As a participant noted, *“there shouldn’t be anything for us if it is without us”* (interview 19).

A participant (interview 12) stated that when he was in the asylum process, obtaining information from someone without lived experience was difficult. He reported that ‘experts by experience’ can relate to the experiences of other people within the asylum process. This shows the difference between theory and practice in the asylum process. When asylum seekers and refugees are trained and equipped with the skills needed for the charity sector, they can thrive in this sector. Additionally, ‘experts by experience’ have the advantage of getting the reality on the ground. A participant said, *“this is because you get to have more detail of what is happening on the ground more than what you get on paper”* (interview 19). For example, the participant mentioned the decision period for asylum cases should be six months. The Home Office *“aims to make a decision on claim within six months”* (GOV UK, 2021, section 3), in reality, people can wait in limbo for years (Jubany, 2017). Some other examples include the lived experience of living on a budget of £5 a day, suffering from isolation, or dealing with the language barrier (interviews 10, 12, 13, 19, 21).

Including ‘experts by experience’ can also influence traditional campaigning and advocacy methods. Charities have always been campaigning on and advocating for the different issues



asylum seekers and refugees face. The latest campaign was for lifting the ban on work for asylum seekers and the offshoring process (Refugee Action, 2020–2022). Charities have been fighting for the right to work to be granted to asylum seekers, but that did not change the current policy dealing with work in the UK. A participant from a charity in the United Kingdom mentioned that these campaigns have enjoyed mixed success (interview 3). The government has often carried on with its policies. Some charities do not even receive feedback or a response from the Home Office. Sometimes, it is not even clear when a problem is fixed whether the campaign played a role in doing so or not (interview 3). However, including refugees and asylum seekers who have not only been through the border-crossing experience but also faced the everyday barriers that come with the asylum process ensure they can highlight and insist on resisting certain policies (interview 19).

Asylum seekers and refugees can use their experience to raise awareness. Participants highlighted the importance of this (interviews 4, 10, 13). An expert by experience told me about their school visit and about how the schoolchildren thought refugees were “*bad people*” until they heard the refugee’s story. He noticed that ‘the perspective of the children has changed, and they learn very quick’ (interview 13). This practice of raising awareness in not only schools but also other spaces in the host community and of allowing people to share their stories is crucial in re-orienting public opinion.

‘Experts by experience’ sometimes communicate with the Home Office and assert their autonomy, confidence, and perspective. An expert by experience reported,

“We would understand the message better, so for me, I think whatever we want to fight, what we want to address is better to include the people who have been through that experience and who know the pain of that experience. For me it will be difficult to talk about refugees or talk about the experience of being a refugee and then you invite someone only as case worker. The Home Office will not know the experience just from one side, but the person who has suffered through the experience is the refugee himself, so you have to bring them on board, and I think that that’s one of the things we have been trying to even get with the Home Office to try to work more with refugees”(interview 13).

According to this participant, it is not enough to talk about the issues facing refugees and asylum seekers. It is also vital that their voices be heard, including their experience of the asylum process demonstrating that refugees and asylum seekers are resilient.

A representative from expert by experience team (interview 19) mentioned that there is more response from the Home Office when refugees and asylum seekers are involved with organisations campaigning and making videos about certain issues compared to when someone speaks on their behalf. This can also bring an element of resilience against borders and their gatekeepers. ‘Experts by experience’ can insist on and fight for or against certain policies rather than moving on when a campaign fails. The interviewee mentioned a story about moving from the Border Nationality Bill to the Lift the Ban campaign. While both policies affect people in the asylum system, providing the resources and funds to continue the fight instead of moving on to a different campaign is still important:

“We were just saying in the meeting that I think it’s unfair for us to say, okay, the bill is not going to be successful now. The next thing we’re going to do is look at the Lift the Ban campaign. Well,

you still need to process that it has not been successful, but it's going to affect lives, it's going to affect us. So instead of just holding our hands and saying it's done, it's not done" (interview 19).

Thus, people working as 'experts by experience' can challenge the everyday barriers in the community through raising awareness and within the organisations by helping other asylum seekers overcome the challenges of the asylum process. One of the advantages of collaborating with 'experts by experience' is their resilience and resistance, which make it difficult to ignore their voice by the government. As a participant said, "*we push for it until they try and get to move the work*" (interview 19).

'Experts by experience' can participate not only in case working, campaigning, and advocacy but also cultural activities through planning and organising events and activities that are tailored for the needs of the asylum seekers visiting the NGO. They can empower people in terms of making decisions (interview 5) and in terms of making choices. Activities charities conduct are not only useful for challenging the social barriers between asylum seekers and the host community, but they can also be a method of engaging people in society through cultural and social exchange. They can make people feel a sense of belonging somewhere, even if it is in a small charity. The isolation and separation from family members caused by fleeing and joining the host country can affect people. Some charities create a space for people to mix, exchange cultures and knowledge, and socialise while learning the language. A participant said,

"They miss their family, so having all the women together, making some food together, creating that family, they seem to enjoy the social side. Sometimes, I wonder if they are learning any English or just having a chat" (interview 5).

At events like the above, women volunteers are not only active participants but also organisers. Such events can help asylum seekers with their social skills and give them the confidence to speak to funders or other people attending the events. The events also help people relate learning a language to its social aspect.

Choosing what activities people want to undertake, asking them about their needs, and giving them a choice have been a helpful approach by a charity in Liverpool:

"We try to run the activities they ask for or whatever; it is not me saying this could be a good idea if you do this because it will help you. We sort of work with them to see what they feel and would help them to overcome different barriers and borders" (interview 5).

'With' in the quote represents partnership rather than power relations. However, one of the issues with the organisation of activities for asylum seekers is that their inclusion rate in planning, organising, and making decisions about these activities is still low. Another issue is determining how to avoid exploitation and reward people for the work they do even if they are in voluntary positions. If organisations want to do something for asylum seekers and refugees, then they need to treat the latter as partners rather than subjects. A participant stated,

"At the end of the day, if you want to do something for the asylum seekers, or the refugees, then include them and hear from them. Sometimes you might come up with a solution maybe we do not need it, but then if you come and talk to us and say what do you need? Maybe we just want too little, or we just wanted algorithm minimum. So, says a lot of benefits to dealing with people who are experts in that area. And mostly because people have started these organisations with the best



intentions. There are British themselves and they have no experience of their asylum system or the migration system. Yeah, but because they have the resources and sometimes the passion in it is good, it's not good enough to run an organisation that is effective and relevant" (interview 19).

According to this participant, the effectiveness and relevance of NGOs depends on the inclusion of more voices. Sometimes, what people need is different than what the organisation is planning. One of the advantages of including people who have claimed/are claiming asylum in organisations is it provides a perspective on what is happening on the ground and what people claiming asylum need. People who most likely have not been through the asylum process and have no experience of everyday barriers typically run NGOs. Organisations should be collaborating more with refugees and asylum seekers.

4.2.1. Barriers within NGOs

According to interviewees (interviews 12, 19, 21) the terms 'inclusion' and 'experts by experience' need further scrutiny. These terms are trendy (interview 21), but they can be limited in meaning and practice. There are also barriers within organisations that need addressing (interview 12). Asylum seekers and refugees might not be empowered to speak up and raise their voices against issues in organisations because of existing power relations. They think that if they raise their voices, the organisations will not help them anymore (interview 19). Women feel less empowered to speak because of cultural differences and they might not be part of the team because of childcare responsibilities (interview 19). Therefore, building an environment for people to be comfortable with sharing is vital. There is a great deal of work to be done to empower refugees and enhance their skills (interview 21).

"Having expert by experience in your board or like you know representative from expert by experience, how many of those organisations are doing this? I'm not entirely sure. We still got a long way to go, but I think it something that we explore at the moment. Like does being an asylum seeker or refugees or going through the process to make you an expert on everything, I don't think so. I think maybe that's some misunderstanding. I think people in organisations are using that as a blanket kind of statement where we've got people from lived experience, and I don't think that's the case and what have you done to enhance their skills. Obviously, they might have the understanding of what people are going through but in terms of other skills that they need to learn here to be able to do the job effectively and have an impact on decision-making. For example, having one person from lived experience doesn't change your decision making ultimately this power imbalance anyway, and so you just going to use it as a rubber stamp basically. You just tick boxes and to say we've got one" (interview 21).

Thus, there are multiple issues with the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees in organisations. First, power is not in the hands of asylum seekers and refugees, and this raises questions about their influence and the power relations within the charity. Second, inclusion becomes a myth or an exercise in ticking boxes when there are one or two members with lived experience. It does not mean that a certain organisation is inclusive by carrying out a tick box activity. An interviewee observed a meeting in the charity she works for and how there was a lack of minority inclusion (i.e., asylum seekers and refugees): "*most meetings that we go to are 80% of British people then 20% of the minority, the ethnic minority*" (interview 19). It is obvious that there is a discrepancy between who is a majority and who is a minority in NGOs. The majority/minority aspect plays a role in affecting decision-making and revealing power structures within the charities.

Interview 21 questioned whether experience of the asylum process and everyday barriers is enough to call someone an expert. Are organisations doing anything to work on people's skills and prepare them to join the NGO/charity sector if this is what they wish for? Including people with lived experience is not only about increasing the number of such people in a charity but also about providing training and skills and helping these people thrive in the jobs. It is also about reducing the divergence between the majority/minority within the organisation. Reorganisation is needed within the charity sector to address the imbalance between who has the means, the voice, and the resources within the charity and who has been included to reach a certain quota or to make charities look good (interview 21). According to the participant (interview 21) it is crucial to work on people's skills and equip them with the knowledge and trainings they need to fulfil the job recognising that experience of the asylum process is important and so are the skills needed for the job.

The phrase 'experts by experience' can also be problematic in terms of volunteering. Asylum seekers join the NGOs as volunteers (e.g., helping organise events, provide consultancy services, conduct sessions (interview 10)). When asylum seekers with no right to work are involved, volunteering can walk a fine line between helping such people develop their skills and engaging in their exploitation. Exploitation was highlighted in Bird and Schmid's (2021) study.

In the current study, a participant (interview 21) said that a white consultant gets more than an "expert by experience" if they are asked for advice. Therefore, if people are regarded as 'experts', they should also be treated as 'experts'. Many people have *"loads of skills and experience and are contributing to your service and decision-making, and you're happy to have utilised them."* Therefore, exploitation was a concern for this participant (interview 21). NGOs should make sure that people are not exploited and that opportunities are open to them.

Another problematic aspect of the phrase of 'experts by experience' is the question of how people are valued. Yeman &Yohannes (2023) highlighted this point by saying that *"experiences are reduced to and measured against the idea of 'well-founded fear of persecution"*. It implies that people are only valued for the experience they have as asylum seekers and refugees focusing on the narration of *"one aspect of refugees' life"* (Yeman &Yohannes, 2023). A participant heighted this idea of how people are valued:

"What value do we put in and if we are saying that they are experts and I think ideally will be good to have a different definition. You just value in there the fact that they have been through the process or are you also valuing the whole kind of skill set, and not everybody will have the whole skill set, so how do you differentiate that? I think that this a long way to go in terms of the language that is used. But it's great that they value him because he's been through the system, but don't just value my journey. Value me as a person, but value me my whole skill set, what I can bring to the organisation."

According to the interview, the term 'experts by experience' is problematic if it is about the experience of crossing a border and the asylum process, while people have other sets of skills they can bring to the organisations. The language in the NGO/charity sector should take into consideration how people feel about the concept of 'experts by experience'. Scourfield (2010) highlighted the learning aspect that comes with expertise *"rather than simply having the status ascribed to them"* (p. 1891). Refugees and asylum seekers should be valued for not only their



experience of crossing a border and going through the asylum process but also their skills and knowledge with the efforts of NGOs to help them develop the skills needed for the job.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, there is an element of inclusion in the charity sector. Seven out of twenty-one people participating in interviews were ‘experts by experience’ who went through the asylum process and chose to work in the charity sector to help other people (interviews 10, 19, 20). Some organisations are more inclusive than others (Refugee Action, Allies for Justice, Freedom from Torture). However, some issues need to be reconsidered in the charity sector. Inclusion can be taken to a higher level by empowering people, valuing them for their skills and knowledge, training them, including them in influential positions, and making sure that they are not exploited. By analysing and overcoming the limitations of the inclusion of people in charities, NGOs can empower people who want to join the charity sector. This paper tackled the concept of inclusion in the charity sector, focusing on NGOs working with refugees and asylum seekers. It demonstrated the different roles NGOs play and the services they offer to help asylum seekers and refugees overcome different barriers in the United Kingdom. However, there are limitations to the work NGOs do, especially in terms of including people with lived experience. This paper argues that including people as ‘experts by experience’ in the charity sector can lead to small-scale inclusion. However, there are challenges and limitations facing this approach, such as exploitation especially for asylum seekers volunteering, power relations, power structures and inclusion as a ticking box exercise. These limitations can be summarised in the following questions: What are people valued for? Is it their experience of the asylum process or for their skills and knowledge, or both?

This paper introduced the concept of ‘experts by experience’ used by NGOs to refer to people who bridge the experience of the asylum process and work for NGO to help other people struggling with the asylum process. There is a need for further research looking at the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in NGOs either as paid workers or volunteers analysing the phrase of ‘experts by experience’. This can be conducted on a larger sample to highlight more strengths and weaknesses to the inclusion and diversity approach taken by NGOs to include more people with the lived experience.

Conflict of Interest Statement: None declared.

Notes

I secured ethical clearance from the University of Liverpool’s Ethical Committee in April 2021 as part of my PhD project.

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