

***“If you only look
at the barriers,
you can’t move”***

**Tackling Barriers to Education and
Employment with Refugee Women in
Wales**

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This report contains descriptions of trauma and abuse experienced by refugee women. Some readers may find parts of the content upsetting or distressing. Please take care when reading and access support if needed.

Acknowledgements

This report is dedicated to our collaborators: the women refugees who generously shared their experiences with us, courageously speaking up about the various barriers they face in accessing work and education, and building a new life in Wales. We hope that they are proud of the work they have done to make this report possible. We cannot name our collaborators in order to protect their anonymity and respect confidentiality – especially in light of the hostile climate that has been created for refugees and their families across the UK. But each and every woman we spoke to made a deep impact on this report and on us in the project team. We hope that we have managed to celebrate their resilience and creativity, especially in the development of practical solutions to tackling education and employment barriers.

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Contents

Acknowledgements 2

Glossary 4

Executive Summary 5

1. Introduction 8

2. Background 10

3. Approach 15

4. Barriers: 'I don't have a chance to show my skills' 19

5. Solutions: "I want a career" 32

6. Conclusion 42

7. References 44

Appendices 48

Glossary

Devolution	Devolution refers to the transfer of certain economic, political and social powers from the UK central government (Westminster) to nations and regions, such as the Welsh Parliament (Senedd Cymru).
Dispersal	Dispersal is a central government policy introduced to spread the cost of providing asylum support to local authorities across the UK. Dispersal means that sanctuary seekers can be 'dispersed' to anywhere in the UK for accommodation, they do not have a choice.
Labour market integration	Labour market integration ('LMI') refers to the participation of migrants, including refugees, into the labour market, i.e., their ability to find work.
Refugee	A refugee is someone who has also been forcibly displaced and has been granted asylum in a different country - they have been legally recognised as a refugee.
Safe routes	A 'safe route' refers to a legal route of entry into the UK for sanctuary seekers and refugees. This means that the Home Office formally approves of the journey to and entry into the UK. There are very few safe routes to the UK.
Sanctuary seeker	A sanctuary seeker is someone who has been forcibly displaced and is seeking international protection but has not yet been legally recognised as a refugee. In this report, we use the term 'sanctuary seeker' as opposed to 'asylum seeker' because the public discourse on 'asylum seekers' has been overwhelmingly hostile, focusing on immigration status and alleged irregular arrival. The term 'sanctuary seeker' adds the humanity back into the conversation by emphasising that people navigating the asylum system are displaced people searching for safety.

Executive Summary

This report finds that refugee women in Wales face a cluster of overlapping barriers when it comes to accessing education and work. These are: **childcare, language, poverty, discrimination, and the non-recognition of qualifications and skills from outside the UK**. These difficulties are intensified by immigration policies made in Westminster but felt locally in Wales, especially through dispersal and the lack of safe routes into settlement and work.

Key findings

The women who took part in our year-long research project were not lacking ambition or ability. They arrived with qualifications, work experience, and strong determination, but most were pushed into “starting over from zero” because of enforced poverty in the asylum system, qualifications not being recognised, or their English not yet being strong enough for the systems they are expected to navigate.

A major finding from our research, which is backed by evidence from many other countries, is that **care responsibilities and the availability of support structures shape outcomes**. Most of our collaborators were mothers, and some also cared for partners with health needs, which made it hard to attend classes, travel to college, or take up work.

A triple disadvantage

Refugee women experience a “triple disadvantage” linked to **their immigration status, gender, and ethnicity**. This matters because their experiences are not only shaped through their legal status as refugees, but also by their identities as women, and often women of colour, navigating a system that is increasingly hostile, under-resourced, and dismissive of trauma.

Our report highlights how racial discrimination affects the confidence, safety, and access to opportunity for refugee women and their children.

Sanctuary in Wales

Our research was based in Wales. This matters because immigration is not devolved, while education and employment are. This means that refugees are “dispersed” into local authorities in Wales, but some areas may not have the specialist services required to meet the complex needs of refugee women. This creates a gap between the policies controlling people’s status and the local systems meant to help them settle, learn, and work.

Our findings suggest that support works best when it is **local, lived-experience led, trauma-informed, and gender sensitive**.

Key recommendations

At a Wales-specific level, our recommendations based on our research findings are:

1. Training college staff: FE colleges in Wales, particularly in dispersal “hotspots”, would benefit from receiving training on the complex and intersecting needs of refugee women. Training support teams/guidance counsellors will have benefits for other students who may face similar financial, language and/or childcare barriers.
2. Mentoring: Employers and refugee women would benefit from mentoring programmes for refugee women starting work. This would help to build confidence, develop language proficiency, and ensure that opportunities for progression and retention are made clear to refugee women.
3. Innovative ESOL: Approaches to ESOL should go beyond standard practice and include innovative, practical approaches where refugee women can gain other practical skills at the same time as learning English.
4. Support network: Establish a Welsh Refugee Women’s Network to address issues of isolation by establishing local hubs of refugee women linked to the Welsh Refugee Council. This will enable access to training, specialist services, and a network of organisations, colleges and businesses. The network in turn can help to inform services, ensuring that intersectional, gender-sensitive, and trauma-informed provision is developed.
5. Occupational opportunities: Below, we make a recommendation to Lift the Ban on the Right to Work for sanctuary seekers. In the meantime, we recommend that Parliament allows a separate Wales-specific shortage occupation list, addressing regional skills shortages and enabling sanctuary-seeking women to support themselves whilst they wait for their asylum claim to be reviewed.
6. Childcare provision: Ensure that childcare is not a barrier to participation in education or the labour market by:
 - a) Encouraging businesses and institutions to have **childcare facilities** and **flexible working arrangements**.
 - b) Providing **flexible** ESOL lessons with childcare baked-in, either by ensuring lessons are during school-time, having “mother & baby” lessons, or providing childcare facilities.

At a **UK level**, we have identified key policy areas that have a significant detrimental impact on the lives and health of refugee women in Wales and act as central barriers to employment and education.

Our recommendations at a UK-level are:

- 7. Lift the Ban:** The Lift the Ban campaign is a coalition of over 240 organisations in the UK asking the government to reinstate the Right to Work for sanctuary seekers unconstrained by the shortage occupation list after six months of having lodged an asylum claim (Lift the Ban Coalition, no date). Our research has found that the ban pushes sanctuary-seeking women into poverty, which is incredibly difficult to get out of, even when refugee status has been granted.
- 8. Family reunification:** Immediately re-open **family reunification routes** to asylum and settlement. Our research shows that when refugee women can reunite with family, barriers, such as isolation and access to services, are removed.
- 9. International obligations:** Establish an immediate independent review into the **lack of systemic gender-sensitivity** in the UK's asylum process.

1. Introduction

Our report focuses on refugee women's access to **education** and **employment** in Wales and was carried out in collaboration with the Welsh Refugee Council.

Refugees overwhelmingly report a desire to provide for themselves and build a new life (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 89; Bešić and Aigner 2023: 1; Bridekirk and Hynie 2020: 290). However, they face significant social and structural barriers when it comes to finding education and work opportunities that match their skillset (Bridekirk and Hynie 2020: 291). Many refugees rely on organisations like the Welsh Refugee Council (WRC) to navigate the UK education system and labour market (Bešić and Aigner 2023: 2). For example, the WRC provides ESOL lessons, coaching and mentoring to support refugees entering further and higher education, and employment support via its Employment Programme. This study identifies gaps in support to help develop tailored, trauma-informed, and intersectional services for refugee women.

The UN estimates that over 117 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide by the end of June 2025 (UNHCR, no date). That is 36 times the population of Wales displaced because of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations. It is important to note, however, that of this number, 67.8 million are internally displaced people, 42.5 million are refugees and 6.86 million are sanctuary seekers. What's more, most refugees (4 in 5) stay in their region, seeking sanctuary in neighbouring countries (Refugee Action, no date). In Europe, there are approximately 13.2 million refugees, with Türkiye hosting most of these (UNHCR, no date).

It is estimated that almost half refugees worldwide are women (Bešić and Aigner, 2023: 1; Leibig and Tronstad, 2018). Yet, women sanctuary seekers and refugees are often overlooked by policymakers (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 73). Refugee women are a particularly vulnerable group, facing what has been labelled a 'triple disadvantage' because of their immigration status, gender and ethnicity,¹ meaning they can be further marginalised through erasure.

In the UK, refugee women are often overlooked in public discourse because most main asylum applicants are men (Jorgensen, 2025). However, patterns of migration are highly gendered, with men typically making the dangerous journeys to the UK to claim asylum due to the risk the journey presents to women and children (UN, 2017). Women are therefore more likely to use resettlement and family reunification routes to join their male partners or other family members later on (Jorgensen, 2025). Hence, refugee women's experiences in Britain are affected by a range of factors, with delayed arrival and childcare responsibilities impacting their language proficiency and social contacts, as well as their access to education and work (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 74; Bešić and Aigner 2023).

In Wales, there is very limited research on the refugee population, which is a small minority of under 9,000 refugees in a population of about 3.2 million (Home Office, 2025). However, the intersection of non-devolved immigration policy and devolved education and employment systems create a distinct regional context that shapes refugee experiences, particularly in dispersal areas. There is a need for trauma-informed services and approaches to sanctuary, and this must be intersectional to

¹ Most refugees arriving to the UK come from countries that have experienced British colonial rule or high levels of violence and resource extraction for the benefit of Britain, meaning that there is a highly racialised aspect to their treatment in the British asylum and immigration system which echoes colonial-era racial hierarchies (Refugee Action, 2024: 14).

address the complex needs of triply disadvantaged refugee women (Anjum et al, 2025: 7; Groutsis et al, 2023: 215). Hence, research on the lives of refugee women in Wales is valuable because it can inform policymakers and service providers about the experiences and needs of a large minority of the refugee population (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 73).

In the next chapter, we dive deeper into the background of immigration and sanctuary in the UK, and Wales specifically, going on to detail some of the unique barriers faced by refugee women. In Chapter 3, we outline our trauma-informed, collaborative approach. In Chapter 4, we explain the barriers we have identified with refugee women and in Chapter 5, we move on to discuss potential solutions. Finally, in Chapter 6 we summarise our findings and offer our recommendations to policymakers, service, providers, and educational and business institutions.

2. Background

2.1 The History of Migration in Wales

Research done by the Centre of Movement of People (CMOP) at Aberystwyth University² on behalf of the WRC shows how migration has shaped Wales for millennia. Historical evidence demonstrates that successive waves of movement have contributed to the country's social, cultural and economic development, from prehistoric settlement following the last Ice Age, through Roman occupation, Norman conquest and the arrival of Flemish refugees in the twelfth century, to labour migration during the Industrial Revolution and the resettlement of people displaced by conflict across Europe during the twentieth century.

Refugees fleeing the First and Second World Wars, the Spanish Civil War, and Nazism all found sanctuary in Wales, while post-war migration from South Asia, the Caribbean and later Sri Lanka further transformed Welsh communities. More recently, migration from the European Union, alongside the arrival of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine, has continued this long tradition of Wales as a place of settlement and sanctuary (Wyn et al., 2025).

2.2 UK Immigration Policy: Stigma and Hostility

The 1998 Government of Wales Act transferred some powers from the government in Westminster to a devolved Parliament in Wales (the Senedd), including education and employment. However, immigration policy is not devolved and continues to be managed directly by the Westminster government in England.

In 1999, the Labour government introduced the Asylum and Immigration Act which established a policy of “**dispersal**”, with the aim of moving sanctuary seekers out of London and the South East of England to the midlands, North of England, Scotland and Wales. The justification for this was cheaper accommodation and to more “evenly distribute the responsibility of housing asylum seekers across the country” (Bernhardt et al., 2025; Wyn et al., 2025). This policy of dispersal has created “hotspots” of dispersed refugees in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport, and Wrexham, shifting sanctuary beyond England and London and introducing diverse arrivals to Wales (Wyn et al., 2025).

UK immigration and asylum policy has long been shaped by political rhetoric portraying the system as “broken” and sanctuary seekers as “bogus” economic migrants (see Hymas, 2026; Roy, 2026; Tozer, 2026), despite evidence to the contrary (Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, 2025; Montiel-McCann and Julios-Costa, 2025). This narrative not only negates the diversity of skills, ambitions and qualifications that sanctuary seekers arrive with (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 91; Groutsis et al, 2023: 214), but also denies their well-documented experiences of displacement. Such hostile rhetoric has fuelled hostile policies, like the Nationality and Borders Act (2022), Illegal Migration Act (2023), and the now defunct Rwanda Plan (2024), which all sit in contradiction to the Refugee Convention.

² This research was part of a series of workshops co-developed with the WRC. Migration stories were also collected for the Shaping Nations book (WRC, 2024).

What is the Refugee Convention?

The Refugee Convention of 1951 established a set of rights for people displaced by conflict, persecution, violence, or human rights violations (UNHCR, 1953). One such right refers to “**non-refoulement**”, which means a person cannot be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom. Another right is that refugees should not face prosecution for illegal entry into a country from which they are seeking protection. This recognises that people fleeing violence or persecution may be unable to use “regular” routes into a country. The Illegal Migration Act (2023) made it illegal to claim asylum for refugees arriving to the UK irregularly, violating terms of the Convention.

Gender and immigration policy

In 1995, the UN hosted its fourth Convention of Women in Beijing in which countries declared a commitment to gender mainstreaming, now considered a key document on gender equality (UN, 1995). This commitment was an important recognition of the gendered patterns of violence that shape conflict and persecution, meaning that most refugee women have experienced some sort of violence, including sexual violence (UN, 2017). However, the UK, which is a signatory, has been criticised for not systematically assessing its policies, including immigration and asylum policy, for gender impact (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 73).

In 2004, the Home Office introduced ‘Gender Guidelines’ which made the asylum procedure, theoretically at least, gender sensitive. These guidelines advise that women sanctuary seekers should have access to female interviewers, childcare so they do not have to disclose traumatic information in front of their children, and that interviewers should follow guidance on the effects of trauma when conducting their interviews (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 75; British Red Cross and Voices Network, 2022: 17). However, women sanctuary seekers continue to report that they are forced to disclose information about sexual violence to male interviewers, including in front of their children, and are exposed to aggressive and insensitive styles of interviewing (Women for Refugee Women [WRW], 2024b).

In 2011, the Council of Europe established a treaty aimed at preventing and combating violence against women and girls (VAWG), known as the Istanbul Convention. The Istanbul Convention sets out standards on prevention, protection, prosecution and adequate provision of services to respond to the needs of victims and those at risk of sexual violence, recognising that people most at risk are women. It also addresses asylum and migration, requiring gender-based violence (GBV) to be recognised as a form of persecution when establishing refugee status. The UK is a signatory to the Convention, but it was only ratified in 2022.

The evidence gathered during this research overwhelmingly paints a picture of a hostile immigration and asylum system which is letting down women by failing to understand or properly appreciate the trauma that they have experienced, including GBV.

How is the UK’s immigration and asylum policy impacting women?

The UK’s immigration and asylum system has significant gendered impacts on women. Women seeking asylum may experience detention, dispersal, and welfare

restrictions in ways that deepen trauma and insecurity, particularly where systems fail to recognise their experiences of violence, caring responsibilities, and long periods of uncertainty.

Navigating the asylum system: Enforced poverty and deprivation

Throughout the UK, sanctuary seekers are subject to the condition '**No Recourse to Public Funds**' (NRPF). NRPF means that sanctuary seekers cannot access welfare support such as benefits. The government does provide people seeking sanctuary with an allowance. However, this is currently set at £49.18 per person per week, or just over £7.02 per day, and is significantly reduced for those in 'full board' accommodation (Refugee Action, 2024: 18). This forces women and their families into poverty, making it harder to meet basic needs such as food, housing, and childcare. One mother in our Swansea focus group, for example, described becoming anaemic during her pregnancy because the food provision in her asylum accommodation was not sufficient or culturally-appropriate. Time and again in our research, we see how conditions imposed by the asylum system have long term detrimental impacts on women and their families.

In 2002, the **Right to Work** for sanctuary seekers was withdrawn, not only pushing sanctuary seekers into deeper poverty but also creating a 'chilling' effect for all refugees in terms of employment. Lack of clarity and understanding about who was included in the policy meant that many businesses stopped hiring refugees altogether (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 90). The knock-on effects of this policy are not hard to imagine.

For women, the enforced deprivation resulting from NRPF and the ban on the Right to Work can make them especially vulnerable to exploitation. Research by Women for Refugee Women (WRW, 2024c: 4) found that 38 percent of women refugees surveyed were forced into or stayed in unwanted or abusive situations just to survive. A separate report by Women for Refugee Women (WRW, 2024a) also found that the policy of hotel accommodation meant that women sanctuary seekers were placed in unsafe situations.

Work bans also have negative impacts on women's mental health, with 85 percent of survey respondents reporting anxiety and depression and 78 percent feeling unvalued and helpless (WRW, 2024c: 16). The asylum system places women refugees in 'limbo' – a period of prolonged uncertainty that constrains their ability to settle in their new country and foster a sense of belonging, further exacerbating psychological distress and leading to heightened social vulnerability (Anjum et al., 2025: 2; Groutsis et al. 2023: 221). This means that, when women do get granted sanctuary, they are often isolated, destitute and have education, skills and employment gaps of several years.

Reunification changes

Analysis by the Migration Observatory (Jorgensen, 2025) shows that women refugees make up most asylum applicants coming under family reunification schemes. This means that women are more likely to come to the UK seeking sanctuary once their partner or family member has already arrived, joining them later. As previously mentioned, this appears to be due to the danger of the journey to the UK. A report by UNICEF has found that nearly half the women and children they interviewed had experienced sexual abuse during migration – often multiple times and in multiple locations (UN, 2017). Yet, there are almost no safe routes into the UK beyond Ukrainian

and Syrian resettlement schemes, and Hong Kong British National Overseas routes (Home Office, 2026).

In addition, since September 2025, family reunification in the UK has been “paused” (Home Office, 2026). This has disproportionate impacts of women sanctuary seekers, who are the main users of such schemes (Leibig and Tronstad, 2018: 9) – 92 percent of those granted visas through this scheme are women and children (Safe Passage, 2025). Changes to UK policy therefore have immediate and direct impacts on women’s safety.

2.3 Employment barriers for refugee women

Access to employment is a central component of refugee integration, yet refugee women face persistent, well-documented structural and gendered barriers that limit both entry into the labour market and the quality of work obtained. These barriers are closely linked to inequalities in recognition of prior qualifications, language acquisition, caregiving responsibilities, and experiences of discrimination, and are further shaped by asylum and immigration policy.

One key issue is the **underutilisation of skills**. Evidence shows that 40 percent of refugee women with tertiary education are employed in roles for which they are overqualified, double the rate of women born in the ‘host’ country (Leibig and Tronstad, 2018: 10). Even when in employment, refugee women frequently experience downward occupational mobility, with their qualifications and prior professional experience unrecognised or undervalued (Bešić and Aigner, 2023:2; Szkudlarek et al., 2021). This contributes to a pattern of ‘deskilling,’ where women are concentrated in low-paid, part-time roles, often in sectors such as cleaning, hospitality, and retail, regardless of prior expertise.

Many refugee women are unable to provide **documentation** due to displacement or conflict, while UK systems for recognising overseas qualifications are often complex or non-existent. As one collaborator in Cardiff described, being asked to produce certificates that are inaccessible due to forced migration effectively blocks entry into appropriate employment. This institutional barrier interacts with employer uncertainty regarding refugees’ right to work and limited understanding of international qualifications (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 93), perpetuating cycles of under- and unemployment.

Language is another barrier consistently identified in the literature. Limited English proficiency restricts access to jobs, training, and wider integration opportunities, particularly in the early years following arrival (Leibig and Tronstad, 2018: 26). Language acquisition itself is often hindered by inadequate provision and caring responsibilities, which disproportionately fall on women (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 88). This creates a compounding disadvantage: women with better language skills have employment rates up to 40 percentage points higher than those with little or no proficiency (Leibig and Tronstad, 2018: 9), yet structural barriers limit refugee women’s ability to improve their English.

Discrimination, both sexist and racist, also plays a significant role. Refugee women report experiences of racism, hostility, and bias, contributing to insecurity and reduced access to opportunities (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 78). Muslim women are vulnerable to discrimination due to visible markers of identity, such as wearing a hijab (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 78). Additionally, experiences of GBV, both prior to and

during the asylum process, can have lasting impacts on women's ability to engage in employment. These dynamics can lead to trauma, disrupted employment histories, and loss of documentation, further compounding labour market exclusion (Leibig and Tronstad, 2018: 8).

Finally, care responsibilities represent another barrier. **In Wales, structural inequalities in childcare provision affect all women** but are particularly acute for refugee women. Women in Wales are significantly more likely to be economically inactive due to caring responsibilities and 73 percent of Welsh families are not using formal childcare, reporting cost as the barrier (WEN Wales and Oxfam, 2022: 12; WEN Wales, 2024: 5). Refugee women are often solely responsible for childcare (Bešić and Aigner, 2023: 4), frequently without access to extended family support networks that they may have relied upon prior to displacement (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 77). The high cost and limited availability of childcare thus present significant barriers for refugee women.

2.4 Summary

These outcomes reflect both structural barriers and gendered assumptions. Refugee women's skills and experiences are frequently obscured by dominant narratives that position men as primary earners, despite evidence that 80 percent of refugee women and men believe that both men and women in a household should work (Leibig and Tronstad, 2018: 25; Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 90). This contributes to unequal access to employment support and networks, with refugee men more likely to engage with services, build social connections, and enter the labour market (Allwood and Wadia, 2010:94). As a result, labour market integration rates for refugee women remain significantly lower compared to refugee men: across Europe, only 45 percent of refugee women are employed, with unemployment rates exceeding 20 percent – more than double that of women born in the country (Leibig and Tronstad, 2018: 19).

The cumulative impact of these barriers is reflected in poorer wellbeing outcomes for refugee women. Underemployment and the loss of professional identity are linked to increased stress, frustration, and poorer mental health (Anjum et al., 2025: 8; Bridekirk and Hynie, 2020: 290–291).

At the same time, it is important to note that employers identify clear benefits to hiring refugees, including high levels of commitment and productivity, as well as the advantages of a diverse workforce (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 93).

Overall, the evidence demonstrates that refugee women's employment outcomes are shaped by a complex interplay of gender, migration status, and structural inequality. Addressing these barriers requires targeted, gender-sensitive policy interventions that recognise both the specific challenges faced by refugee women and the significant economic and social contributions they can make.

3. Approach

Our project can be split into two approaches: focus groups with refugee women and surveys sent to employers in Wales to capture the barriers that they face to including refugee women. The focus groups were conducted in dispersal hotspots in Wales with refugee women, ensuring that this report is grounded in lived experience. Employer surveys were used to develop toolkits for refugee women to support employment, and for employers, to support engagement with refugee women as potential candidates.

This report is centred around our focus groups, presenting the barriers that refugee women reported when accessing education and employment in Wales, and proposing solutions that were co-developed with the women we spoke to.

3.1 Focus groups

Focus groups are like group interviews but tend to be led by a topic that is explored during the session, rather than a series of structured or semi-structured questions as in standard interviews. This gives participants the freedom to discuss their experiences on their own terms.

We conducted a total of four focus groups between November 2025 and March 2026. These focus groups were held in person, in Cardiff, Swansea and Newport, with one focus group held online. The choice of in-person locations was informed by the WRC's presence in Cardiff, Swansea and Newport, where refugee numbers are higher relative to other localities in Wales (Home Office, 2025). Online, women joined from across Wales. In addition to the refugee women who attended, the sessions were also attended by the researcher from The Open University (Camila Montiel McCann) and facilitated by Athina Summerbell and Sidra Rahimy of the WRC.

In total, we spoke to 43 refugee women from: Albania, Bangladesh, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Gambia, Honduras, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Syria, Namibia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Sudan. This is a small sample that is not representative of all refugee women in the UK or Wales specifically, meaning that we must be careful about generalising our findings. However, our objective with this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of refugee women in Wales, opting for a qualitative, in-depth approach to fill gaps in knowledge identified in the previous chapter.

Research that has been done on refugee women in the UK and around the world tends to use qualitative approaches, like interviews and focus groups, with small numbers of refugee women or even individual case studies (see Anjum et al., 2025; Bešić and Aigner, 2023; Gheorghiev, 2025; Groutsis et al., 2023). This is because the intersecting conditions that refugee women face as a result of gender, ethnicity and immigration status, as well as trauma (Bešić and Aigner, 2023: 2; Bridekirk and Hynie, 2021: 293; Theisen-Womersley, 2021: 44), necessitates a more in-depth approach to fully grasp the complexity of the obstacles faced. In short, the goal tends to be “not numerical saturation but analytical depth and richness” (Anjum et al., 2025: 4-5). More information on the limitations of this study can be found in Appendix 1.

Our approach to the focus groups was trauma-informed and collaborative. Trauma-informed research practice prioritises the safety, empowerment and resilience of participants, taking steps to ensure that research avoids re-traumatisation (Alessi and

Khan, 2023). Refugee women have often experienced extreme violence and it is well-documented that people forced to flee war, natural disaster and violence typically suffer from post-traumatic stress (Theisen-Womersley, 2021: 2–6). What's more, the experience of navigating the UK's hostile asylum system often has retraumatising effects on refugees, which are increasingly compounded by the (at times violent) public displays of hostility in recent years (Montiel-McCann and Julios-Costa, 2025; Theisen-Womersley, 2021: 267). Considering this, the physical, mental and emotional safety of the women refugees we worked with, along with the staff at both the OU and WRC, was paramount.

As our aim was to empower refugee women to tell their own stories, identify barriers and workshop solutions, we opted for a collaborative approach rooted in lived experience. The researcher and facilitators who ran the focus groups all have either direct or familial experience with forced migration to the UK and the asylum system. This had two intended effects: 1) to facilitate the creation of a safe space through shared experience and 2) to redress potential power imbalances that often arise between researcher and participant (Alessi and Khan, 2023: 123–125). We did not want to relate to the refugee women we spoke to as strangers or objects of study but rather as valued collaborators, whose experiences, resilience and ideas form the basis of this report. As such, we refer to our focus group 'participants' as 'collaborators' to reflect the importance of their role in shaping this research.

In practice, this trauma-informed and collaborative approach involved ensuring that the focus groups were relaxed and informal, that everyone had a chance to speak and be listened to, and that our collaborators set the boundaries of our discussion. In all the in-person focus groups, we took a break for lunch, allowing us to sit and share a meal together. Our collaborators also received a 'thank you' voucher to show our appreciation for their contribution. We prioritised ensuring that both the in-person focus groups (which took place in WRC offices) and the online focus group created a safe environment, and collaborators were reminded that they could pause or stop the conversation at any time (see Appendix 2 for more information on how ethical considerations were addressed).

In the focus groups, we were aiming to understand:

- What are the **barriers** that refugee women in Wales face in accessing education and employment?
- What are possible **solutions** to such barriers?

Each focus group was audio recorded by the WRC for the purposes of transcription. Once the focus group was finished, one of the facilitators from the WRC would transcribe and anonymise the transcripts, passing on the anonymised version to the researcher for analysis through a secure file transfer and then deleting the audio recordings. This process was designed to ensure that the identities of our collaborators were protected, even in unpublished research materials. It remains, unfortunately, a very real concern that if the identities of the women we worked with are revealed then their safety, and that of their families, may be at risk.

The anonymised focus group transcripts were then analysed by the Principal Investigator using qualitative thematic analysis, following Naeem et al. (2023) This involved a step-by-step process described below:

1. Data familiarisation: the researcher read through the transcript several times to immerse herself in the discussion and refresh her memory.
2. Keyword identification: keywords were selected that represented repeated issues, either through the words themselves or related words (synonyms).
3. Code selection: sections of the text were then assigned to a keyword, which indicated a certain topic.
4. Theme development: following keyword coding, the coded parts of text were combined into broader themes.

Steps 1-4 were conducted for each focus group transcript separately, ensuring that we have a strong understanding of localised barriers. Steps 5-6 below were used to bring together themes throughout all four focus groups:

5. Conceptualisation: the transcripts were compared to each other and to other national and international research to identify common themes, but also any differences that may suggest the need for localised solutions.
6. Development of conceptual model: finally, we explored how the identified themes connect to each other, which can help us to understand the root causes of the barriers that refugee women in Wales face and to develop targeted solutions.

3.2 Surveys

Alongside the focus groups, we conducted a survey with employers in Wales to complement the qualitative findings and to better understand the organisational barriers that shape refugee women's access to the labour market. The survey was designed by the WRC and rolled out with the help of our student intern. It aimed to capture views from those working within institutions that play a direct role in recruitment, training and progression, and to identify the practical support that may help them engage more confidently and effectively with refugee women.

The survey reached almost 50 organisations across Wales, including charities, businesses, colleges, local authorities and large public bodies. Respondents represented a range of organisation sizes, from small organisations with fewer than 10 staff to major employers with over 500 employees. This breadth was important because it allowed the research to capture perspectives from different types of institution and across a variety of workplace contexts.

The purpose of the survey was intended to add an organisational perspective on the barriers and opportunities involved in inclusion. In that sense, the survey helped to test whether the issues raised in the focus groups also resonated with the employers who would be central to implementing change.

The questions focused on employers' confidence, experience and concerns around including refugee women in **education and work**. In particular, the survey explored organisational awareness of right-to-work processes, recognition of qualifications, support needs, and confidence in creating inclusive pathways. It also asked respondents what kinds of practical tools, guidance or support would be most useful in helping them to respond more effectively.

We approached the survey as a targeted piece of applied research designed to highlight common themes, identify recurring uncertainties, and inform realistic recommendations for practice. Its value lies in showing how willingness to support refugee women often exists alongside uncertainty about how best to do so. The survey findings, along with evidence gathered in our focus groups, were used to produce toolkits, which can be found on the WRC's [website](https://wrc.wales/impact/)³.

3.3 Summary

In this section, we have described our research approach, which is qualitative, trauma-informed and collaborative. Common themes and important local differences were identified through thematic analysis of focus group discussions and used to develop a conceptual model that maps the barriers to work and education that refugee women face in Wales.

A survey was used in this research to gain insight into the barriers from the 'other side'. This was analysed separately by our student intern and used by the WRC to develop 'toolkits' for businesses and educational institutions in Wales to support them to engage with refugee women. A toolkit was also developed for refugee women to help familiarise them with the Welsh labour market.

3 <https://wrc.wales/impact/>

4. Barriers: “I don’t have a chance to show my skills”

In this chapter, we describe the barriers identified in our focus groups in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and online.

4.1 Childcare

Most of the women we collaborated with on this project were mothers, and the challenges childcare presented in terms of engaging in education and employment are also those faced by parents across Wales, such as the cost of childcare, the need to fit work and education around school hours, and concern about children’s wellbeing. High childcare costs are a well-known barrier for low-income families in Wales, especially in the context of a cost-of-living crisis (WEN Wales and Oxfam Cymru, 2022), and refugee women are often affected even more acutely because of enforced poverty, restricted access to work, and limited support networks.

Sacrifice: “I put my ambition aside”

Across all our focus groups, women described putting their own ambitions aside to prioritise their children. This is a familiar experience for many mothers, but for refugee women it is often intensified by a lack of community support and the pressure of starting again in a new country. In practice, this can mean that limited time, energy and money is directed towards children, whilst refugee women put their own needs aside.

Saadia*⁴, who joined our Cardiff focus group, explained this clearly:

*I had a lot of ambition. I did many courses. I did a Foundation [course], I did medical aesthetics, another Foundation. Then I went to a parents’ evening and saw that my children were behind. I have four children...That is why I left everything. I put my ambition aside. I did not work for a long time. **Now I wake up and feel I lost myself.***

Saadia, like other women we spoke to, was highly motivated and wanted to study, gain qualifications and find meaningful work in the UK. Here, she describes how she stopped pursuing her own goals because she was worried about her children’s progress at school. Without extended family or wider community support, she felt she had to choose between her own and her children’s future and, in putting her children first, felt she had “lost” herself.

Women’s role in the family has traditionally been as the primary carer of any children and, despite cultural shifts that have seen more women pursue their own careers, women remain the primary caregiver in Wales (WEN Wales, 2024: 19). Gendered patterns of migration can often exacerbate such gendered inequalities as women arrive later with their children while their male partners have already found work, meaning that often the burden of childcare falls to women out of necessity of keeping one stable income (Jorgensen, 2025).

Saadia’s story resonated strongly with the Cardiff group. Amina had won a sanctuary

⁴ All the names used in this report are **pseudonyms**, none of our collaborators real names are used to protect their safety.

scholarship to study for an MA in Psychology. She holds a BA in English Language and Literature from her country of origin and an MA in Social Sciences. She is a mother of two children and, when we spoke to her, was expecting her third:

I had an ambition to continue with my PhD... but after thinking about the kids and the family, I gave up this year. I told myself I'd take a break and be with the children.

I was so driven towards it and then suddenly I just stopped – because I knew I would have a little one soon, and they'd need my support. I also have my children, and my husband, who is very supportive. But thinking of him too – he's been forced to stay home with the kids this year so I can finish my master's – **it gives me a sense of guilt.**

The women we spoke to across Wales described a familiar tension for many women: pursuing personal goals can feel selfish when time is already stretched between children, partners and home. Most of our collaborators had fled violence, left behind established working lives and, in the process, lost their sense of identity and future direction. Research has shown that refugees who have high levels of education, like Amina and Saadia, experience greater disappointment and more stress when they struggle to find work that matches their skillsets (Bridekirk and Hynie, 2021). This is reflected in the feelings of a loss of identity that many of our collaborators shared with us.

Chioma, a single mother-of-one, described this loss vividly:

I'm also a fashion designer. I make clothes...I used to make [my daughter] clothes from when she was born until she turned five. Every birthday, I made her a dress. But since moving from hotel to temporary accommodation, I couldn't work, couldn't do any of those things. I packed my sewing machine away and haven't made clothes for her since. Because of time and having to care for her, I can't do what I enjoy anymore.

Childcare means that refugee women in Wales are unable to apply and further develop their skills. What results from this is a loss of the sense of self beyond childcare, but also the degradation of their skills, including creative skills like Chioma's. This has knock on effects in trying to find work as refugee women often have skills gaps that employers may not understand.

In Swansea, women echoed this sense of identity loss. Eshe, a mother-of-three, said:

We are our health, and we are putting our life... aside **and I don't even recognize myself.**

Noor, a mother-of-four, added:

Remember, I don't know who I am... sometimes I don't have time just to do my thing.

Women reported simply not having the time between childcare and the stress of the asylum process (such as being moved from accommodation to accommodation) to begin studying to address skills gaps. This then shaped the kinds of work they felt able to consider once they had refugee status. In Newport, Carla, a young mother, spoke

about wanting to become a Teaching Assistant:

*Well, **at the beginning, being a teaching assistant wasn't my exact idea. I want to work... whatever. But like I said, because I have to take care of my child, I think that will be the easiest way.***

Carla dismisses her own ambitions for employment “whatever”, even though later in the discussion it emerged that she wants to become a criminal psychologist. Being a Teaching Assistant is valuable work, but women (especially women from migrant backgrounds) are often pushed into “nurturing” roles, or into jobs such as cleaning, because these are seen as easier to fit around caring responsibilities and as “women’s work” (Gheorghiev, 2025; Gyimah et al., 2022).

Refugee women face the same childcare pressures as other mothers, but they also face additional barriers linked to trauma, separation from family, disrupted health and the impact of the asylum system.

Rana, in Newport, described this through a translator who was also one of our collaborators:

Rana says she has many problems at home. **Her husband is disabled and her son has a chronic disease. She has to care for both.** When she arrived, it was hard to focus, but now she feels comfortable because she never studied English before and now, **she is improving.**

Rana is not the only woman we spoke to who had significant and extensive caring responsibilities for a partner as well as children. This can make accessing education such as ESOL incredibly difficult as attending classes becomes harder to fit in between caring for children, school runs and caring for partners. Mental and physical health issues, which are prevalent in refugee communities due to post-traumatic stress (Berthold and Critelli, 2019; Theisen-Womersley, 2021: 2–6), are not predictable and problems may arise that need urgent attention and mean that classes are missed. This has knock-on effects in terms of access to work, which is hard to find without English proficiency and if you need to work flexibly to care for family.

Yet, Rana’s resilience is clear: despite the pressures at home, she is continuing to study and improve her English, attending classes whenever she can. Similarly, Carla shows resilience through her adaptability – she wants to and needs to work to support her young family and has adapted her goals to fit around the reality of her childcare obligations, opting to seek out Teaching Assistant positions with the hope she may later be able to study criminal psychology when her child is older.

Lack of support: “No one to catch things when we fall”

Across all focus groups, women described the isolation of arriving in a new country after being forced to leave everything behind, including one’s extended family, community and social networks. Nadia, who joined the Cardiff focus group, put it simply:

Because we don’t have extended family here – no mothers, no aunties, no cousins – **no one to catch things when we fall.**

Nadia later compared the demands of childcare to being “like an octopus”:

We have to be like an octopus, with many arms and many jobs.

*Responsibilities and spending a lot of time for kids affect us mentally and physically. **All of us have a story.***

“All of us have a story” and yet the stories of refugee women are often ignored, sidelined, overlooked, undocumented – even though they are deeply relatable to all mothers in one way or another: stories of **sacrifice, resilience and responsibility**. Our collaborators are individuals – motherhood is one part of a much larger identity. But when they are alone in a new country, with their children and sometimes husbands as their only close contacts, they can lose the other parts of themselves.

Chioma described this well:

*It's so difficult for me. I have a little girl who isn't used to anyone else. I have no family here to look after her – it's just me and her, 24/7. **I have no one to ask: “Please, can you pick up my child from after-school club?”***

As Nadia said, there is often no one to “catch things when they fall”, especially for single mothers like Chioma, which can lead to isolation, disconnection and depression.

In Swansea, Aisha, Eshe, and Ngozi described how constant childcare demands can be:

*Aisha: You have to do everything for your kids. And so, it's a great responsibility. And so, **you're like building a new life, doing new things... following new rules and at the same time taking care of the kids.***

Eshe: Like can I just have 5 minutes? Or I end up going to sit on the toilet for a whole hour...

Aisha: ...I use the sitting on the toilet to be honest!

*Eshe: ...**I'm sitting on the toilet because I'm like, this is the only peaceful place I can be in this house...***

Ngozi: ...But I think they [her children] talk to me when I'm sleeping...

Eshe: ...My 5-year-old will even open my eyes and say, “Mama, please.” Yeah. She will do this.

There is humour in this exchange and a recognition that children do not understand the other demands on their parents, but it also points to exhaustion. Even five minutes alone can feel like a rare pause in a day spent caring for others, as well as learning English and the norms of a new culture. That pressure does not stop when children get older. Aisha explained:

If you have a teen, you need to pay close attention to your kids, especially with problems like smoking, drugs...social media and mental and psychological health, especially if you just move to a new country. Sometimes the kids can struggle a lot with the move, and you cannot just have kids and then abandon them...and go [and do] some job...**I love working but at the same time, [children] are human and we have to take good care of them.**

Aisha, who has an MA in ESOL and translated for two other women in our session, makes clear that although she loves working, and she is highly educated, she has placed her ambitions behind her children's needs. Ngozi described the isolation that can result from this:

You're still a stranger, you're still a foreigner, and you still don't have real friends. You still don't have your society.

Family support is often what makes childcare possible. And friendship is also important for mothers to have a fulfilling life and a safe space to express their concerns. Indeed, two of the women in the Swansea focus group had become friends after meeting while picking up their children from school – shared experience and culture brought them together and now they offer each other emotional and practical support. However, for refugee women, that support is usually not available because relatives have been left behind and meeting new people in the UK can feel intimidating with language and financial barriers.

Dilnaz, who spoke to us in Newport, summed this up well:

That's why community is so important. It's important to laugh and have people around you. Back home, I could leave my children with my family without asking. Here, it's very different.

Other research has shown that refugee women are particularly isolated and that this has negative impacts on their mental health (Liebig and Tronstad, 2018: 29). Employment does not just offer the opportunity for the women we worked with to apply their skills, education and experience (of which there is plenty), but also to make connections.

These women, *like all women*, deserve time for themselves, the chance to pursue their ambitions and the opportunity to build new connections, not just for themselves and their wellbeing, but so that they can be their best selves for their children instead of operating in a cycle of burnout that can have damaging long-term effects.

4.2 Qualification recognition: “How can I bring a certificate from my country?”

As seen above, many of the women we spoke to had studied and worked in their countries of origin. They brought with them a wide range of skills, qualifications and experience. Across our discussions in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport, and online we met biomedical scientists, fashion designers, aspiring jewellers, teachers, solicitors, writers, and more.

One persistent issue, which is also widely reported in the literature (Alwood and Wadia, 2010: 90; Anjum et al., 2025: 8; Bešić and Aigner, 2023; Bridekirk and Hynie, 2021; Gheorghiev, 2025; Liebig and Tronstad, 2018), is that the UK often does not recognise international qualifications. This means that refugee women are frequently forced to, as one of our collaborators put it, “start from zero” – or “below zero” – because they must rebuild their lives while also trying to secure housing, internet access, food, language learning and practical understanding of a new system of bureaucracy.

For many of the women we spoke to, being able to use their skills in Wales would not

only have helped them settle more quickly but would also have improved their mental health and supported their families. Aziza, who came to the UK seeking asylum through family reunification, has one grown-up daughter. She described her experience as follows:

*I have been in the UK for almost four years...I spent my asylum time in the [North of England] [in] a small, safe, nice city. Alhamdulillah, I did not suffer the problems I hear from others, like racism. During that time, I **studied English and volunteered for a small charity. After I got my work permit, I started working in the NHS, because in my country I have a Biomedical Science certificate.** I worked about 10 months. After I got my leave to remain, I needed to move here [Cardiff]. **Many things happened.** I came to WRC first to find support with housing, and then I started volunteering for seven to eight months. Then I got a job.*

Aziza's story reflects a pattern we heard repeatedly: women often end up working in a different field because their qualifications are not recognised. In her case, Aziza has a qualification in biomedical science, something of clear benefit to the UK. She learned English, volunteered while she was unable to work, and later used her skills in NHS work. However, she was unable to practise in her field despite the need for trained scientists in the NHS because her certificate was not recognised. Aziza then pivoted to a career supporting women like her, once again showing resilience and an ability to be flexible when one's agency is limited by circumstance.

A few of our collaborators in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and online were also working at WRC. This shows how refugee women often respond to exclusion by creating new opportunities for themselves and supporting others in similar situations. Far from being helpless, passive victims, the women we spoke to were agentive, responsive and determined, despite the manifold barriers they were facing.

We also spoke to women who had retrained or changed direction to gain qualifications in the UK. In our online focus group, Rose told us how she had used her experiences navigating the asylum system to develop new skills:

*I lived in the hotel for two years, and when I went there, I didn't know English, and it was so hard for me. So quick, I got my English, I start learn there, and **since I got my English better, I try to help people there because it is so hard to live in the hotel.** Then I volunteered with...the WRC. I did that for a year and a half, translating for like people from my country in English. I learned even Spanish.*

Rose, like Carla and Aziza, pivoted her goals in response to her circumstances, turning an incredibly hard situation in contingency accommodation into a learning opportunity, and then using her new language skills to support other people in similar situations. She now has an ambition to work as a translator. Rose's story is inspiring, but it also deeply unfair. To live for two years in hotel accommodation with strangers comes with many associated risks and stressors, especially for women (WRW, 2024b). What's more, Rose still has not found paid work for her skills, again showing how the skills and qualifications refugee women bring to or develop in their new country are undervalued and unappreciated, even when they are needed (Gheorghiev, 2025).

Nadia's experience shows that, even when refugee women adapt their ambitions and do find work, they still encounter exploitation and even discrimination:

I have teaching assistant Level Two. I finished Level One and Level Two [but] currently, I struggle to find a job... I registered with the agency, and they accepted me, but what they did, they called me in the morning: "can you go to [a remote location]?"

Nadia felt that the jobs she was being offered were often the hardest and least desirable ones, and that she was expected to take them without proper preparation. She explained that she was frequently asked to work with children who had complex behavioural needs, even though she did not have the necessary training or experience:

*[It was always] the work that white people were not doing. I don't have this experience. [But] if I say no, they will not call me again...**So I feel there's discrimination.***

Nadia's account suggests that, as a woman of colour and a refugee, she felt pushed towards the most difficult work in the harshest conditions. She said that she felt there was a "**stigma**" around refugees that meant that she is discriminated against in the workplace and that her situation means employers can take advantage of her. This is supported by evidence from other countries, where employers effectively hierarchise their staff, giving people born in the country the better, more senior roles, and taking advantage of refugee women's circumstances to give them the lowest-paid, most precarious and often most arduous roles (Gheoghiev, 2025: 453).

Online, Layla expressed her deep frustration at being unable to find work that matches her skillset. Layla is a trained lawyer and practiced as a solicitor for 17 years in her country of origin. She also has qualifications in public administration, human resources, public procurement, and auditing. Yet, she has been looking for work for six months without any luck. Layla stressed that she did not expect to be able to practice as a solicitor in the UK, understanding that legal systems are different. But she felt she had a range of skills that were being ignored:

***My kids can't wait because I need to work...**I'm [looking] for work. I'm asking, please, I want to talk with the manager to find me any job, even in the low level. That is very difficult.*

Even with her vast experience and high-level qualifications, Layla is forced to look for work far below her skillset and is still struggling. She, like Nadia, felt that discrimination was at play:

*I don't know, maybe [potential employers] see my country of origin, maybe because in the UK my country is very discriminated [against]. **The judgement exists.***

Layla shows determination, independence and a strong desire to use her skills. However, constant rejection would wear anybody down and research shows that, for refugee women, there are severe delays in labour market integration, even compared to refugee men. The same research also shows that highly educated refugee women like Layla are twice as likely than women born in the country to be in work that they are overqualified for. This can lead to anxiety, depression and chronic stress (Liebig and Tronstad, 2018: 10).

Chioma described a different way that refugee qualifications are unrecognised - when they are lost or destroyed through the process of displacement:

*I studied Mass Communication in my country. I have a degree. Luckily, I was given a similar course here somehow. **But then I was asked to bring my certificate. How can I bring my certificate from my country?** I finished university years and years ago.*

Chioma lost an opportunity to study in her field in Wales because she could not provide proof of her qualification from her country of origin. On the surface, this may seem like a standard requirement, but for refugees it can be unrealistic. Many have fled violence and persecution, often in a hurry and sometimes after losing access to personal documents. Similarly, women who have experienced domestic abuse or other forms of GBV may also have had to leave important papers behind or have had them taken from them (Liebig and Tronstad, 2018). This can mean they are unable to prove their qualifications and lose out on opportunities which would help them rebuild their lives.

Finally, Sonia, who joined our online focus group, noted how she, like many other migrant women, has been forced into low-paid, highly gendered work that does not match her qualifications:

Well, now working [cleaning] in a hotel...it doesn't have anything to do with my job in my country. I used to be a teacher over there, teacher of English, American English. Anyway, I have to do something to cope with payments and everything, you know. I also got the chance to have a job in a school as a midday supervisor. I am starting at 12.

Sonia was excited to go to her new job as a midday supervisor in a local school, and everyone in the group was excited for her. But her experience shows again the many complex steps that refugee women must take to even get a foot in the door of the career they really want. Sonia is a qualified teacher and speaks fluent English, but she has been forced to seek low-paid work to pay her bills. Nonetheless, she has continued to pursue opportunities in her field but, because her teaching qualification doesn't transfer to the UK, and there are no easily accessible conversion courses, she has to start from zero – working a couple of hours as a midday supervisor. Sonia hopes to be able to progress to teaching assistant work and then get her UK teaching qualification, but the cost of this can be prohibitive.

Across our focus groups, we spoke to women who had educational qualifications, work experience, and careers in their country of origin. Yet, assumptions about the type of work women of colour should do, as well as a lack of flexibility around qualification recognition and skills gaps, meant that they were being pushed into low-skilled, low-paid and, often, exploitative roles. This further entrenches feelings of isolation, distress and financial worries as women struggle to find secure, meaningful employment.

4.3 Language barriers: “The problem of language”

A common barrier refugee women face in accessing education, employment and community in Wales is language. Women in all four focus groups described how limited English makes it harder to study, find work and navigate everyday systems (Allwood and Wadia, 2010; Anjum et al., 2025; Bešić and Aigner, 2023; Groutsis et al., 2023). In Cardiff, Amina explained:

But here comes the language barrier. If we don't solve the problem of language, women will stay in the same position.

She also pointed to a shortage of ESOL places:

*Like even in college – you spoke about colleges – **the waiting lists are so long.** They need to add more ESOL classes.*

In Swansea, Wardah, speaking with the support of Aisha translating, described how the language barrier is not understood or appreciated by services, such as the job centre:

*The job centre is like pushing [Wardah] all the time to work. **But how can she work if she doesn't speak English?**...And she says that **she really wants to find a good job and she really wants to work, but she needs to improve her English and to study** so she can find a good job...She goes four days to the college...But the job centre told her, you have to do something on Friday. So, they signed her up for a computer course... But at the same time, they have to consider [that the language barrier makes this difficult].*

Systems such as employment support in the UK are not equipped to address the complex needs of refugee women. Immediate labour market integration is deemed to be the best policy for refugee settlement, but this ignores the structural barriers that refugee women face in accessing suitable opportunities and developing their English (Gheorghiev, 2023: 4533; Liebig and Tronstad, 2018: 26). Taking a 'one size fits all' approach to labour market integration means that refugee women are often overlooked, unsupported or marginalised within the system.

In Newport, Kadija and Dilnaz highlighted how digital systems, interviews and job applications become much harder when English is not your first language. Kadija, who has worked for four years for a big international company in a warehouse, said:

Everything is in video. *They have all the links. Step by step, you have to register, then you have to watch the video, and then they ask you questions. **But it's not easy, because if it's not your first language and you don't understand, it's hard. If someone helps you, it's easier.***

Kadija enjoys her job and feels she has opportunities to progress. She also noted that part of the training for her role involved having a supervisor working closely with her for the first two weeks, which meant they could support her understanding of the training materials, acting as a kind of mentor.

Yet, she acknowledges that not every workplace offers this and that the language proficiency needed for starting a new job and receiving training is "not easy" for refugee women. Digital literacy is one thing but before that many refugee women may not have access to a laptop or Wi-Fi to fill out applications. Once again, we see how barriers intersect for refugee women – enforced poverty in the asylum system through NRPF and the ban on the Right to Work means many may not have access to equipment needed to look for work and thus may lack the digital literacy skills to navigate opportunities when they do arise.

Dilnaz, who works for the WRC, was talking to us based on her own experience and what she has learned through her casework. She described language as the first major challenge for refugee women:

Yeah, there are a lot of challenges. From my experience, the first one for refugees, especially women, is language. *It's challenging because back*

*home English is not a formal language for us. For example, I never spoke English. I never spoke Arabic either. I learned here after finishing college. I know the alphabet, but I never spoke it. **This is a big challenge for women.***

Amazingly, Dilnaz now speaks English, Arabic and Kurdish and was translating for two other women. She is an active member of the refugee community in Newport and a valued and respected colleague in the WRC. This highlights how, given the appropriate support, refugee women are eager to learn, develop new skills and apply them in work. Dilnaz also explained how different UK recruitment systems can be:

The second challenge is interviews. *Interviews in the UK are extremely difficult. In our home countries, in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, it's not like this. You send your CV, they read it, and if they accept you, they accept you. **Here, it's very difficult to find a job.***

Dilnaz's account shows how much extra effort is required just to keep up and how much learning is involved in understanding new systems and ways of doing things, never mind learning a new language, looking after children, finding work and so on. Language is therefore not just a practical barrier, but one that shapes confidence, access and progress across work, education and everyday life (Bešić and Aigner 2023: 10).

4.4 Enforced poverty: "All our problems go back to finance"

So far in this chapter, we have discussed barriers that women shared across our focus groups in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and online. As may already be apparent, these barriers are intersectional and often compound one another. A lack of community can leave women feeling isolated and means that there is a lack of support with childcare. It also means that learning English can be difficult if women are spending most of their time at home and do not have opportunities to practise. Childcare responsibilities also make attending classes difficult as women do not have the time to commit.

Another barrier that compounds all these issues is money. Across all our focus groups, women noted that the costs of childcare and transport are prohibitive for them and can often prevent them from accessing ESOL classes and other courses. This, in turn, means that it can be hard to find work as, with their qualifications from their countries of origin not recognised, they need to develop new skills. Yet, being unable to find work because of these barriers then means that they struggle financially and the cycle continues.

Financial barriers for refugee women are not an issue of individual management, but are the result of the asylum system which, as discussed earlier, bars sanctuary seekers from working and accessing benefits. Hence, when their asylum claim is approved, refugees are often in poverty that can be incredibly hard to get out of. This can mean that they must make incredibly difficult decisions for themselves and their children, as Eshe expands on below:

*I have a [sporty] girl, a very good girl that wants to do swimming classes. She also wants to do netball. **How do I fund this all extra?** Feeling that we can do nothing, telling [the children] we'll see next month, we'll see next month. At the end of the day, the kids will come back and say: **"But Mum, if you cannot afford, just tell the truth."** Which really is upsetting, because sometimes you feel like if you're going to pay for something, instead of buying a lot of*

groceries you will buy less... and then the kids can [do their activities]...It's just too much that you have to compromise.

The refugee women we spoke to who are mothers often put their own needs aside to prioritise their children. They want their children to feel at home in the UK, to make friends and take up opportunities. As Eshe says, this often means making difficult compromises, such as compromising on food for herself so she can afford to send her daughter to activities where she can learn skills and lead a fulfilling life as a child in Wales.

Other compromises included skipping out on attending ESOL and other classes to save on transport costs for their children. Noor explained just how expensive transport in Swansea can be when you have children, especially of different ages who attend schools in different areas:

Last year, just for transportation, I paid £3,800...for my kids from the house to school, from the school to the house each day, every day. And if they have activity like any class like swimming...because sometimes we cannot take four buses a day. I can't.

Noor reported feeling helpless to pursue her own educational goals (she was studying art at college), which require transportation, when she also must take her children to school and extracurricular activities. Again, some government policies directly exacerbate this, with women we spoke to typically being placed in accommodation in areas with poor public transport links and their children getting school places far away. If mothers had children in primary and secondary schools, they were typically far apart from each other. As Noor says, this can mean upwards of four buses a day where she is paying five full fares as she has four children and there are no child fares in Swansea.

As one of the women in Cardiff put it:

If you're suffering from financial problems, you cannot move, you cannot live, you cannot study, you cannot work.

The enforced destitution and poverty which shapes the asylum process has paralysing effects on women. As their skills and experience from their country of origin are not recognised in the UK, if they do find work it is often low-income work which, if they have children, does not cover the costs of childcare and transport (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 90; Bešić and Aigner, 2023: 2). This often means that refugee women may be forced to work multiple, low-paid, insecure jobs where exploitation is rife (Gheorghiev, 2025; Groutsis et al., 2023; Liebig and Tronstad, 2018).

We believe no mother should have to choose between food and transport for themselves and their children, nor should they have to sacrifice opportunities to support their children's hobbies and extracurricular activities or their own ambitions. As with all barriers discussed in this report, addressing financial barriers for refugee women – such as the cost of transport – will undoubtedly improve the quality of life for other mothers and their children in Wales.

4.5 Discrimination: “Racism is a big thing actually”

Finally, women in all our focus groups reported experiencing discrimination when trying to access work, education and services, including both racist and sexist discrimination.

We do not have the space to explore all the various issues refugee women reported here. However, we want to explore one area as a case study because in this area all women reported prevalent discrimination. **The following section therefore describes incidents of physical and psychological racist abuse that some readers may find distressing.**

In Swansea, our collaborators described Islamophobic and racist abuse affecting both themselves and their children. This was particularly concerning given the wider climate of Islamophobic hostility in the UK, which has reached an all-time high (Mohdin and Osuh, 2025; The Runnymede Trust, 2024).

For example, Noor reported that her daughter was kicked by another child's mother at school in an act of anti-refugee sentiment:

*My daughter's friend's mother...kicked my daughter, **his mother kicked my daughter...in the school.** I told the [head] teacher, [but] teacher does not have the police come... She says, "give me proof." How do I give you proof? Any school, how can I give you proof? This is the law.*

Noor felt let down by the school, who reportedly refused to check CCTV footage to provide Noor the "proof" she needed, and dismissed her concerns. Noor's daughter was left frightened and distressed:

*Every day my daughter...every morning...she's saying I hate the school. I don't like to go to school. **She's crying every day.** Why [is my friend's mother] kicking me? Why?*

Sadly, this was not an isolated incident. Hafsa described racist and threatening behaviour towards her son at school:

*These are all things happening inside the school. My son, [his classmates] threw a board [of] meat in his face during Ramadan, and they said to him, "You are Muslim, Muslim bamba." **And they said to him, "We will [find] you, we know where you live."** I took action and the police were involved in that. Because they crossed the line and they said to him, "We will kill you. We know where you live." And he stopped going to school for one week. **But he's just 11 years old. It was horrible.***

The Islamophobic intentions behind this incident are clear, with pupils purposely throwing non-halal meat at Hafsa's son during the holy month of Ramadan, one of the most important periods for Muslims worldwide in which fasting is observed. The action of throwing non-halal meat is thus an explicit attempt to break Hafsa's son's religious practices. Religious discrimination is illegal in the UK (Equality Act 2010) and that fact that an 11-year-old child has been subjected to it by his fellow pupils, including threats to his life, and on school premises, is incredibly alarming.

Aisha described a similar experience involving her daughter:

A student at my daughter's secondary [school] called her a filthy, filthy immigrant, a filthy illegal immigrant. And then said: "you should be careful because if you go to the street...the police are going to take you, and then they're going to deport you." **And she came from school, crying and shaking and...she was born here, actually, but my daughter said: "am I illegal?"**

...Racism is a big thing, actually.

The impact on children was severe. Aisha later explained that her daughter had self-harmed:

*The same daughter tried to cut her hand from here [pointing to wrist], like her veins, many times. And even the school called me because she said, "I don't want to be here." So, I had to watch her all the time...I **didn't think in the past that I would face this, especially with her, because she's a very happy child. She's happy, she likes to do things, she's smiling all the time, and suddenly she changed...**She's going through a really hard time.*

Aisha's daughter is twelve years old.

These accounts reveal alarming incidences of discrimination in schools, in the very places where children are supposed to be safe. This is not only a barrier to wellbeing, but also a barrier to safety, belonging and education. Children as young as eleven and twelve were experiencing serious racial abuse from fellow pupils and even other parents. This not only had severe negative impacts on their own mental health, but also on that of their mothers, who were left distressed and fearful for their own and their children's safety.

It is disturbing to hear reports of other pupils threatening the children of refugees on the presumption that they are "illegal" and that the police will "get" them. This suggests that the hostile discourse about sanctuary seekers as "illegal" coming from the highest levels of the government and politicians is potentially being received by the public as permission to engage in physical and psychological abuse of refugees and their families (Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, 2025; Montiel-McCann and Julios-Costa, 2025).

The message is clear – they do not expect to be held accountable for such actions by the school or the police and, in fact, perceive that the police are on their side. What is especially alarming is the dereliction of duty by schools and teachers to safeguard children in their care, prevent bullying and support parents.

4.6 Summary

The findings in this chapter closely reflect documented patterns across the UK and internationally: childcare costs, lack of family support, disrupted qualifications, language barriers, poverty, and discrimination all combine to limit refugee women's access to education, employment and participation in community life. The chapter also shows that these barriers are not separate but mutually reinforcing, with poverty making childcare and transport unaffordable, limited English reducing access to work and learning, and insecure or disrupted migration histories deepening isolation and underemployment.

At the same time, the evidence suggests some distinct issues in Wales, particularly the practical impact of dispersal and temporary accommodation on women's ability to build stable routines, access ESOL, and manage school and childcare logistics. We also found evidence of Islamophobia and hostility affecting both women and children, suggesting that local support systems, schools and public services are failing to enact their safeguarding duties and obligations under the Equality Act (2010).

5. Solutions: “I want a career”

In this chapter, we will be discussing the solutions proposed by our collaborators to address the barriers identified in the previous chapter. These solutions have come from our collaborators themselves, and it is our view that those with lived experience should be at the centre of decisions about local, regional and national solutions to the barriers that refugee women face in accessing education and employment.

In the next section, we will first discuss the ambitions of our collaborators. This is to emphasise that the refugee women we worked with, like other women, have goals that they are working towards, countering the myths that refugee women are passive, helpless or content to stay within the home (Groutsis et al., 2025). Next, we go on to discuss some of the solutions that were suggested to address barriers in education and employment, as well as suggestions for improved language provision and breaking patterns of isolation, which also consider childcare and financial barriers. We highlight positive developments in Newport and provide an example of best practice for supporting refugee women at college.

5.1 Realising ambitions: “I want to pursue that dream”

First, we want to reflect on some of the ambitions that our collaborators have for themselves and highlight once again their skills, experience, resilience and determination to study and work. Below are just some of the hopes and ambitions that were shared with us in our focus groups:

I want a career. *I did a job before we came here [to Wales] ... I was a care assistant, and I want to continue with that. This May my elder daughter is doing her A-levels, so after that, it's possible. (Saanvi, Newport)*

I would like to start my own business. *I love jewellery. (Dila, Newport)*

I wanted to be a doctor, maybe study Nursing at university. *But right now, when I registered at college, I registered for Health and Social Care, which is related to nursing, closest to nursing. So, if I graduate from college, then I will go to nursing. (Hadi, Newport)*

I love creative writing. I want to pursue that dream - to be a writer. (Amina, Cardiff)

In the future, I need to be a policewoman and help everybody [who] wants help. (Lela, online)

Not only do women come to the UK with education and work experience, qualifications and skills from their countries of origin, but they also come with their own dreams for a future – one in which they can build a life for themselves and their families in safety.

Dila was a young refugee in her early 20s who we met in our Newport focus group. Along with Hadi (19), also based in Newport, they were the youngest women we spoke to and did not have children. Their experiences highlighted how, with the right support, women refugees can be confident, ambitious and optimistic about their future.

Hadi, who had only come to the UK and Wales a couple of months prior to our meeting,

was based in Newport because she came to the UK under family reunification and her mother was already settled in Newport. Similarly, Dila had chosen to come to Newport and reunite with family. This is significant. When women can choose where they live and have the chance to reunite with their family, so many more possibilities open up to them.

Hadi had already enrolled in English classes and other services offered by the WRC and beyond, she had enrolled in college to study Health and Social Care and in the meantime was pushing for English and Maths qualifications. She was feeling positive about her future and was an energetic, highly motivated young woman. Dila had come to Newport to reunite with her aunt, and she is being supported by the WRC's Employment Programme to enrol in a jewellery-design course to pursue her dream of having her own business. Dila loved talking to us about her passion for jewellery and was determined to gain a qualification and some work experience so that she could begin to sell her own pieces online.

In the previous chapter, we explored in some depth the paralysing effect that childcare costs and isolation can have on refugee women, diminishing their confidence and creating barriers to their ability to engage in work and education. But it is not Hadi and Dila's youth or the fact that they don't have children that is the main factor in their impressive momentum in pursuing their ambitions. **They both have family connections and support in Wales.** This meant that, almost as soon as they arrived in Newport, they were able to access information from their settled family members on services and courses. It also meant they had an established community – trusted family members with whom to share concerns and ambitions, who were familiar with the area, and may even have developed their own communities. If the mothers we spoke to had had a community around them from the beginning to take some of the caring responsibilities from them and to help them build connections and confidence, there is no reason they could not share in the same goal-oriented momentum as Hadi and Dila.

5.2 Foundational Education support: “College treated me with respect”

It also helped that, in Newport, there appeared to be a strong sense of inter-cultural community among refugees and that services were easily accessible and appropriately resourced, including services such as foundational education and ESOL. Carla shared her positive experience at college in Newport that was echoed by the other women who had attended the same college:

For [redacted] college, at least here, it's quite good. If you are an asylum seeker, you get free meals and a bus pass. You can use the bus pass and not pay for transport at all, not only to go to college. From Monday to Friday, you can use it even if you're not going to college.

From my experience, college treated me with respect and gave me options. *They told me I could apply for a grant. You have to do the process, but they are willing to help. They also have an office. If you have questions, you can go there and they help you.*

Carla noted that her college had careers advisers who served all students but were sensitive to the unique barriers that refugee women faced and had not only knowledge

and understanding, but respect. They also offer practical financial relief, such as bus passes. Considering the barrier that the cost of transport can be (for example, for Noor in Swansea who paid nearly £4000 a year for bus travel), this is a simple solution for all students in financial distress that makes an immediate positive difference, making attending college and engaging in the local community possible.

Carla's experience in college led her to develop a positive connection to Newport, helping to build her confidence. Having college support staff trained on trauma-informed and intersectional practice for refugees is something that can be replicated elsewhere.

Best practice for Foundation Education: A case study of NPTC Group of Colleges

Since 2025, **NPTC Group of Colleges has worked in partnership with the WRC** to support its equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) ambitions through a programme of learning and engagement activities.

The partnership has included training for **Student Representatives**, multiple sessions at the college's **Staff Development Day** attended by colleagues from all four campuses, and participation in the WRC's **History of Migration** webinars. Together, these activities have helped strengthen understanding of forced displacement, challenge misconceptions and support a more inclusive culture across the college.

As part of its wider anti-racism programme, NPTC staff across departments also completed this training. The college's Anti-Racism Lead shared how refugee inclusion has been embedded within a broader anti-racist framework, helping ensure support for people seeking sanctuary and refugees is part of the organisation's wider commitment to equality and inclusion rather than a standalone initiative.

The impact of this sustained approach has since been recognised nationally. In **2026**, NPTC's **Chai and Chat** project received the **Nation of Sanctuary Award**, celebrating its outstanding contribution to creating welcoming spaces and supporting people seeking sanctuary.

"It's about more than having these conversations, it's about turning these conversations into action" – NPTC Anti-Racism Lead.

Plaid Cymru have pledged to build on the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan and to work closely "with people with lived experience of racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and anti-Gypsy, Roma and Traveller prejudice to strengthen delivery and impact" (Plaid Cymru, no date). The Labour Party also continues to state that it is an "anti-racist party" (Labour, no date). If these political parties in Wales are truly committed to addressing racism, they must include the lived experience of refugees in their approaches to tackle it.

Recommendation 1:

Support and student guidance teams at colleges in Wales would benefit from training on the complex needs of refugee women so that they are able to support their students with confidence.

Such training could include:

- Introduction to the asylum system and how policies like NRPF and the ban on the Right to Work impact both sanctuary seekers and refugees.
- Awareness raising online webinars, for example on why people are displaced.
- History of Migration webinars.
- In depth asylum system training and activities, for example on gender sensitivity.
- Bespoke training on navigating trauma and supporting people living with post-traumatic stress. Once again, this would likely benefit a wider cohort than just refugees.

5.3 Employment: “My coach helped me apply for certain jobs”

In terms of employment, in Newport both Dilnaz and Kadija shared their experiences and advice for other women in the group. Dilnaz shared her journey from volunteer at the WRC to employee, demonstrating her perseverance but also the value of meaningful, educated and practical support that organisations such as the WRC provide for refugee women:

*The good point is **there are opportunities, and you have to take them on.** For me, I was very lucky. Last year, I was volunteering with the Welsh Refugee Council. **I had a plan to find a job, and they encouraged me in many ways.** One of them was nominating me as a language learner, and I won that. After that, I went to a job interview and got an offer.*

Service providers like the WRC support refugees to get into work and offer volunteering opportunities through which refugees can build confidence, gain new skills, and make important connections. Increasingly, job opportunities are connected to networks, and this can be a barrier for refugee women, who typically find it harder than men to make social connections in their new country. For example, in Germany, 27 percent of refugee men reported that they met with a German within their circle of friends every day, compared to just 12 percent of refugee women (Liebig and Tronstad, 2018: 29). Hence, a potential solution could be to offer refugee women mentors who not only offer encouragement, but also practical support such as sharing networks and supporting with applications.

Lela told us in our online focus group how having a network supports her to pursue her ambition to be a police officer. She has a friend who works in the police service who can share important insight into the application process. For instance, there is an exam that you must take when you apply to be part of the service which Lela did not know about before – something as simple as having someone to tell her this means that she can be more prepared. Her friend has also been able to explain to her how the exam works, as exams in the UK operate differently to her home country. Lela plans to take the exam next year, when her daughter is old enough to go to nursery.

Earlier, we discussed how Kadija, in Newport, has been working in a warehouse for four years and found having a period when she first started where she was mentored by her supervisor very helpful. Though Kadija’s long-term ambition is to study law, she feels that her current job is “good for her” and that her employer rewards her efforts and skill development and she is hopeful that this will lead to progression in her role.

Kadija has never had a formal English lesson, but she speaks English confidently, reporting that she was able to learn through work.

Mentorship doesn't just offer networking opportunities and insider knowledge but can also be a pathway to learning English and building self-confidence. In Australia, some refugees have access to internship opportunities at a refugee-focussed social enterprise. The programme offers support in language-learning, accessing employment opportunities, and has a client list including some of Australia's largest companies, helping refugees to build connections with potential employers. The programme also provides orientation for navigating Australian workplace culture, helping refugees build cultural confidence in the workplace (Groutsis et al. 2023: 231).

Recommendation 2:

- a) Refugee women in Wales would benefit from **mentoring programmes** where they are matched with a mentor who can support them in looking for work that matches their skills, experience and ambitions. This will enable refugee women to find meaningful work, with the opportunity to develop skills and progress. This could be part of a probationary period once in work which would have added benefits for the employer, such as helping workers to improve their English, ensuring that safety procedures are understood and followed, and creating good rapport with workers that will have positive impacts on worker satisfaction and retention.
- b) Our **toolkits**, which have been developed based on the evidence presented in this report and survey responses from employers, should be used by both employers and refugee women to help them navigate labour market integration with confidence.

5.4 Language provision

ESOL provision varied from location to location and within areas. Women like Wardah often found that they were being pushed too quickly into applying for work or attending training in English when they had not developed their proficiency enough to gain material benefit from it. In Cardiff, there was a long waiting list for ESOL classes, causing delays in skill development and limiting access to employment and educational opportunities.

Our collaborators offered many creative solutions to this issue, such as in Swansea where women suggested having training integrated into ESOL, such as driving theory ESOL and computer literacy ESOL classes. This would enable women to gain practical skills at the same time as learning English.

Other suggestions included having translation tools on educator and employer websites. An example of this approach is the *Recite Me* accessibility toolbar implemented on the WRC website. The platform provides instant translation into more than 100 languages alongside text-to-speech, reading assistance and accessibility features, enabling users to navigate information more independently. Integrating similar functionality into education and employment platforms could reduce barriers to accessing information, applications and services for refugee women and other multilingual communities. As with many of our suggested solutions, such tools would have benefits that extend beyond refugees and would make applications to

college, university and work more accessible for migrants in general, who make up an important pool of both students and workers in the UK.

Moreover, it was noted across all focus groups that some jobs do not require fluency in English and that learning by practice is very effective, as it was for Kadija. Employers could be more open to lowering their English proficiency requirements. Nadia in Cardiff pointed out that other countries offer similar opportunities:

*[I know a woman in Sweden], she's working even [though] she doesn't have [the Swiss] language [completely]. **So, the language improved, confidence improved, life improved...** They support them to learn Swedish and they help them to have training pathways.*

In Sweden, since 2010, labour market integration programmes have taken gender into account and have proactively included refugee women. This has included making early contact with refugee women and following up with them, especially those coming via reunification who can often fall through the gaps for service and support providers. It also includes mentoring and counselling on arrival and in follow-ups on eligibility for work and opportunities, alongside hands-on ways of learning the language (Liebig and Tronstad, 2018: 32). Evidence emerging from Sweden indicates that this has had a positive effect on the employment prospects of refugee women (Liebig and Tronstad, 2018: 10).

Recommendation 3:

- a) **Expand ESOL approaches** to include practical, skills-based language provision, such as ESOL cooking classes, ESOL driving theory, ESOL entrepreneurship training, allowing refugee women to gain skills at the same time as learning English.*
- b) Offer **childcare** facilities in ESOL classes or provide “mother and baby” classes to ensure that caring responsibilities are not a barrier to participation.*
- c) **Lower the language requirements** for certain jobs where medium-high proficiency in English is not necessary for effective work practice.*

5.5 Addressing isolation: Welsh Refugee Women's Network

One of the most rewarding aspects of working on this project has been meeting with our collaborators and seeing firsthand the positive impact that safe spaces for refugee women has. Having dedicated trauma-informed, women-only spaces for refugee women is a simple solution that would have far-reaching effects. Even in taking part in this project, there was a strong sense that a key motivation for our collaborators was solidarity, as Chioma in Cardiff says:

*I want to share my lived experience with other refugees and asylum seekers, to show that there may be barriers, but you can work [through] them. **If you only look at the barriers, you cannot move.***

All the women we spoke to wanted to use their experiences to improve not only their own situation but that of other women refugees. Chioma explained how she first met

Nadia when she came to the WRC as a service user in severe distress:

*I want to appreciate Nadia for this opportunity. **When I came [to the WRC] full of tears, I was granted help.***

Chioma went on to explain that Nadia had encouraged her to volunteer at the WRC:

*Since then, I have loved it. **It helped my mental health so much. It helped me build courage.** Sometimes you think going to school and getting all the knowledge and qualifications is enough. But working with people on your level teaches you.*

Building connections with other refugee women helps to build confidence and gives women a sense of purpose and identity which, as we have seen, can often get lost through the asylum process and under the burden of childcare responsibilities. It can also offer practical support. For example, a study of Ukrainian women refugees in the Czech Republic found that Ukrainian refugees used social media groups and other refugee networks to circulate information about job opportunities, work permits and training programmes (Gheorghiev, 2025). This means that there is a “one-stop-shop” for information and resources that both saves time and helps refugees build connections with people from similar backgrounds.

In Swansea, women felt that, though there were services available to them, finding them was not always easy when feeling so isolated and with the language barrier. They felt that having a community, or network, of refugee women which had local resources for education and employment support in a “one stop shop” would be incredibly useful. They also felt that this could be developed and managed by the women themselves, who would work together and, in doing so, form a community which would provide emotional support.

Such networks could then lead to other, practical solutions, such as shared childcare. Networks in different localities could be linked up via a lead organisation (such as the WRC) and other on-the-ground services could opt in to a “hub” system where they could advertise their services and share learning from across the region. This could also develop into an effective way of maintaining insight into the experiences of refugee women in Wales.

Recommendation 4:

Establish a Welsh Women's Refugee Network.

We propose that this begins with **a network in Cardiff**, with the WRC as the lead organisation. Women in this Cardiff group would have access to specialist resources already provided by the WRC but with a specific intersectional focus, providing a safe space for them to meet and access training. The content of such training would rotate based explicitly on the needs and desires of the women in the network, meaning that specialist gender-sensitive services are provided and that the women are able to apply their vast knowledge, experience and ingenuity to a practical end.

Based on the success of this Cardiff network, the programme could be rolled out – first to other areas where the WRC is located, and potentially later to reach more rural areas.

5.6 Summary

This chapter centres the voices of refugee women in Wales to propose practical, lived-experience-led solutions to barriers in education and employment, highlighting both the ambitions of our collaborators and the structural changes needed to realise them. It challenges stereotypes of passivity by foregrounding women's aspirations for careers, entrepreneurship and public service, and shows how progress is enabled by access to supportive networks, family reunification, and responsive local services. Drawing on examples of good practice, particularly in Newport, we identified key interventions: trauma-informed and well-resourced college support; mentoring pathways into employment; more flexible and integrated ESOL provision linked to practical skills; and targeted efforts to reduce isolation through community-building.

This chapter has shown that relatively simple, scalable changes, designed with and for refugee women, can unlock participation and potential, while also benefiting wider communities. Throughout, it underscores that when women are given the tools, respect and opportunities they need, they actively shape their own futures, evidencing resilience, solidarity and a clear determination not just to overcome barriers, but to remove them entirely.

Our other recommendations include:

Recommendation 5:

Wales is facing urgent skills shortages in the NHS, care services, green industries, the digital sector, and rural communities. *Refugees and sanctuary seekers are already here, ready, able, and willing to fill these roles*, but current UK-wide rules stop them from contributing. There is already a UK **Lift the Ban campaign**, calling for sanctuary seekers to have the legal right to work sooner, helping them achieve independence while boosting the economy.

However, as we wait for the British government to engage in serious discussions about the urgent need to Lift the Ban, we could tackle current staff shortages in Wales with a Wales-specific shortage occupation list. This would address:

- **Health and social care shortages** in the NHS in Wales.
- The need to develop **green industries** and construction delivering net-zero and infrastructure goals.
- Gaps in **digital and technical skills** needed to drive Welsh innovation and competitiveness.
- **Rural community revitalisation**, boosting population, local services, and economic growth in areas at risk of decline.

To read more about the multitude of benefits this would bring to Wales, see the Sanctuary That Works for Wales manifesto online at the WRC's website (Sanctuary Coalition Cymru and WRC, 2025).

Recommendation 6:

Ensure that childcare is not a barrier to participation in education or the labour market by encouraging businesses and educational institutions to have childcare facilities and support flexible working arrangements.

Evidence from WEN Wales (2024) and WEN Wales and Oxfam Cymru (2022) shows that workplace childcare provisions will also have a clear benefit to mothers in Wales in general, helping to address persisting gender employment gaps such as underemployment for women and lack of access to senior roles.

Our **national** recommendations are:

Recommendation 7: Lift the Ban

The Lift the Ban campaign is a coalition of over 240 organisations in the UK asking the government to **reinstate the right to work for sanctuary seekers, and their adult dependants, unconstrained by the shortage occupation list after six months of having lodged an asylum claim** (Lift the Ban Coalition, no date).

As we have shown, the ban on the right to work from sanctuary seekers pushes refugees into poverty and destitution which is incredibly difficult to get out of, even when legal status is achieved. Lifting the ban would allow refugee women to avoid isolation, loneliness and mental ill health, it would help them to provide a better life for their children, and it would mean that meaningful education and employment become more accessible as skills and experience gaps will be reduced and confidence and language proficiency will improve.

Recommendation 8: Family reunification

Immediately re-open family reunification routes to asylum and settlement, enabling women and children to reunite with their family members in safety. As shown in the cases of Hadi and Dila in Newport, family reunification means that refugee women arrive with a sense of community, helping them to more easily navigate services and opportunities in safety.

Recommendation 9: Include refugee women in pledges to address violence against women and girls

Establish an immediate independent review into the **lack of systemic gender-sensitivity** in the UK's asylum process that looks to urgently address the documented failings by the Home Office to recognise patterns of gender-based violence that shape the displacement of refugee women.

The current Labour government was elected on a manifesto pledge to “halve violence against women and girls within a decade” (Labour Party Manifesto, 2024: 67). We discussed this pledge in our Cardiff focus group, where the resounding feeling was that refugee women were not included in this pledge. Aziza put it succinctly:

*They mean British women. **To be specific, often white British women. When it comes to intersectionality, refugee women are at the bottom of a barrel.***

For a government that claims to be both concerned about violence against women and girls and racism, this is a clear failing that requires an urgent response if the government is to meet its own targets.

6. Conclusion

This report has shown that refugee women in Wales are not facing isolated or temporary difficulties, but a set of overlapping barriers that are well documented in the UK and internationally: childcare pressures, language barriers, non-recognition of qualifications, poverty, isolation and discrimination. These barriers are not natural or inevitable but are the result of political choices which have created a hostile asylum system that leaves refugees, and particularly women refugees, isolated and vulnerable. These barriers are not separate from one another but in fact reinforce one another, and together they slow or even prevent women's access to education, work and a stable and fulfilling community life. In that sense, the experiences shared in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and online strongly reflect wider patterns identified in the literature, but they also show how those patterns are shaped by the Welsh context.

One of the clearest findings is that refugee women arrive with skills, ambition and determination, yet are often prevented from using them. Many of the women we spoke to had been professionals, students or skilled workers before displacement, but in Wales they were repeatedly pushed towards low-paid, part-time or "low-skilled" jobs, or left unable to work at all because of childcare, English language requirements, missing paperwork or lack of recognition of qualifications. This is not because refugee women are unwilling to work – on the contrary, our collaborators all spoke consistently about wanting to work, support their families and build a future. The problem lies in the systems around them, which often assume that women will not work, or that they should accept any work available regardless of its quality or fit.

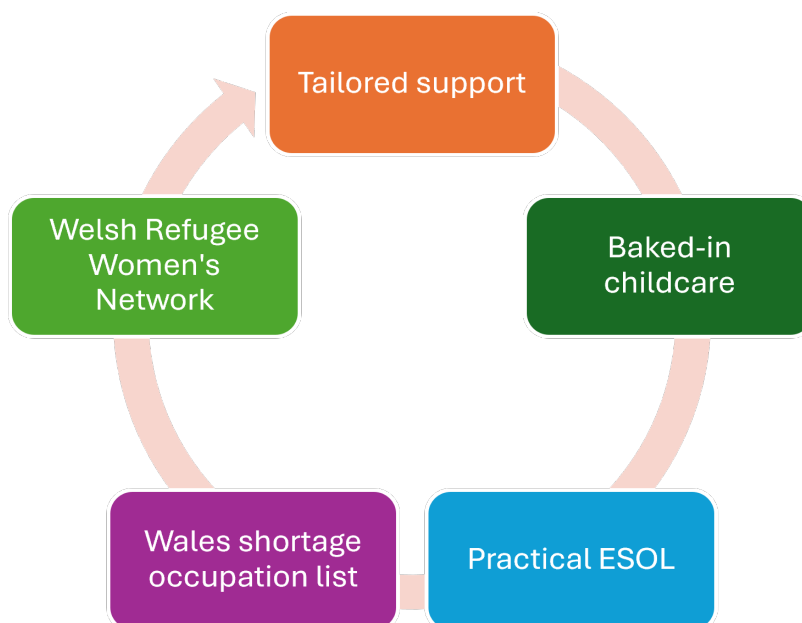


Figure 1: How our recommendations will create a cycle of tailored support that is led by refugee women. Tailored support by both colleges and employers, with baked in childcare, along with innovative approaches to ESOL will help women develop skills and confidence needed for meaningful work that can address skills gaps in Wales. A Welsh Refugee Women's Network can advise on support, feeding into the other areas in a cycle of constant improvement of services.

This report makes clear that refugee women's caring responsibilities are not a side issue but are central to understanding their experiences. Many of the women we collaborated with were mothers, and several were also caring for disabled partners, children with health needs, or both. As in the wider UK, the cost and availability of childcare shape whether women can study or work, but for refugee women this is intensified by poverty, lack of extended family support and the instability created by

the asylum system. In Wales, dispersal, temporary accommodation and transport difficulties were especially important because they made it harder for women to build routines, attend classes and manage school runs across different locations.

Language barriers are another recurring issue, and here the Welsh context matters. Women described long waiting lists for ESOL, limited flexibility in provision, and pressure from services to move too quickly into work or training before they felt ready. This suggests a mismatch between what women need and what is currently available and suggests that dispersal is not being guided by appropriate provision. This points to the importance of services that are properly resourced, locally accessible and designed around women's lives rather than around administrative convenience. In some places, particularly Newport, women described more positive relationships with colleges and services, which suggests that supportive local practice can make a real difference.

The evidence also shows that racial discrimination remains a serious barrier to safety and participation. Women described incidents that were distressing, often frightening, and in some cases traumatic. These experiences do not only affect confidence or wellbeing, but they can also interrupt education, reduce trust in schools and services, and discourage women from taking up opportunities.

Taken together, our findings point to a clear conclusion: refugee women in Wales are not being held back by lack of ability or motivation, but by structural barriers that can and should be addressed. A fairer response would recognise their skills, reduce the practical obstacles to participation, and provide support that is trauma-informed, gender-sensitive and locally grounded. If Wales is serious about inclusion, then refugee women must be treated not as a problem to be managed, but as women with rights and ambitions who can contribute significantly to education, work and community life when the right conditions are in place.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Limitations

This research was designed to generate an in-depth understanding of the barriers refugee women face when accessing education and employment in Wales, rather than to produce statistically representative findings. The focus groups involved 43 refugee women, while the employer survey reached almost 50 organisations. Although collaborators represented a range of countries of origin and participated from several locations across Wales, these remain relatively small samples. The findings therefore cannot capture every experience or be generalised to all refugee women, employers or education providers in Wales. Women already connected to the Welsh Refugee Council or able to participate in a focus group may also have experiences that differ from those who are more isolated or face the greatest barriers to engagement. Similarly, the organisations responding to the survey may have had a greater pre-existing interest in refugee inclusion than employers more generally.

Qualitative research also involves interpretation. The themes presented in this report were identified through analysis of group discussions and may have been influenced by the focus-group setting, including the topics collaborators felt comfortable discussing and the dynamics between group members. Some women may have chosen not to disclose particularly sensitive experiences, while others may have participated more actively in discussions. The thematic analysis was conducted by one researcher, meaning that decisions about coding, interpretation and the relationships between themes necessarily involved researcher judgement.

Several steps were taken to mitigate these limitations. Focus groups were held in different locations and online, enabling participation from women with varied backgrounds and experiences. A trauma-informed and collaborative approach helped to create safe spaces in which collaborators could set boundaries, describe their experiences in their own terms and contribute to the development of solutions. Transcripts were analysed systematically, first within each focus group and then across groups, allowing both recurring themes and important local differences to be identified. The employer survey provided an additional organisational perspective, enabling comparison between the experiences reported by refugee women and the barriers recognised by employers and education providers.

Finally, the findings were interpreted alongside a substantial body of UK and international literature. The strong consistency between the issues identified by our collaborators and those documented in previous research increases confidence that the themes reflect wider structural barriers rather than isolated experiences. A qualitative approach was particularly appropriate because these barriers are interconnected and shaped by gender, race, immigration status, caring responsibilities, trauma and local circumstances. Capturing this complexity requires the analytical depth, context and lived-experience insight that qualitative research can provide.

Appendix 2: Ethics and Data Protection

This research was subject to formal ethical and data-management review by The Open University (OU). A detailed ethics application was submitted alongside the project's participant information and consent procedures. A comprehensive Data Management Plan was reviewed and approved by OU Research Support, and a

Data Protection Impact Assessment was also completed and submitted through the University's review process. The research protocol received ethical approval from the OU Human Research Ethics Committee on 3 November 2025 (reference: 2025-1113-2). The project was conducted in accordance with the approved protocol, relevant OU research ethics and data-protection requirements, and the Welsh Refugee Council's Data Protection Policy.

Informed consent and the right to withdraw

Potential collaborators were provided with information explaining the purpose of the research, what participation would involve, how their information would be used and the potentially sensitive nature of the discussion. Information was made available in a range of languages, with translated support and opportunities to ask questions available where required. Consent was obtained before participation and before any recording took place.

Participation was voluntary. Collaborators determined how much or how little they wished to share and were not required to discuss anything they found uncomfortable or distressing. They could decline to answer, pause the discussion or leave the focus group at any time. These arrangements were explained through participant information and consent materials and reiterated verbally before each focus group.

Anonymity, privacy and data management

The Welsh Refugee Council acted as Data Controller for this project and managed identifiable information. Consent forms, contact details and audio recordings were stored in an encrypted, password-protected SharePoint folder with access restricted to two authorised WRC staff members. Contact information was used only for agreed project-related communication.

Recordings were transcribed and anonymised by the WRC. Names and potentially identifying details, including specific locations, employers, services and named associates of our collaborators, were removed before transcripts were transferred securely to the Principal Investigator using an encrypted OU ZendTo service. Pseudonyms were then used in analysis and reporting. The Principal Investigator received only anonymised transcripts, and audio recordings were permanently deleted following transcription and anonymisation. Survey responses were collected anonymously, and neither individual respondents nor organisations are identified in project outputs.

Signed consent forms and other identifiable records were permanently deleted at the end of the project (31 August 2026). Anonymised transcripts and survey data will be retained for ten years in encrypted, access-restricted WRC and OU SharePoint folders. They may only be used for the purposes covered by the original consent and will not be made publicly available or reused for unrelated research. Only non-identifiable materials, such as blank consent-form templates, information sheets and focus-group prompts, may be deposited publicly.

Working with survivors of trauma

The project adopted a trauma-informed approach in recognition that discussions of displacement, the asylum system and barriers to employment or education could cause distress and re-traumatisation. Focus groups were trauma-informed and the

involvement of the WRC ensured that people experienced in working with refugees and other potentially vulnerable groups informed the research. Written and visual prompts were shared in advance, collaborators set the boundaries of discussion, and no one was asked to disclose traumatic experiences.

Collaborators could pause, leave the room or receive support from a facilitator at any point. Information about free local mental-health support was provided, and the WRC could facilitate access to appropriate support or emergency services where a disclosure indicated a risk of harm. These safeguards were built into the research design from the outset and were examined as part of the OU's formal ethical review.