

Women asylum seekers and refugees: opportunities, constraints and the role of agency

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Author(s)

Hunt, Lisa

Aims

To explore the practical constraints and opportunities that women asylum seekers and refugees face in the host society with a focus on their actions and strategies.

Methodology

The research, carried out between 2002 and 2005 involved 42 semi-structured in depth interviews – 21 with women asylum seekers and refugees from 11 countries aged between 18 and 55; and 21 with key informants from statutory and voluntary organisations across Bradford, Halifax, Huddersfield, Leeds and Wakefield. Informal meetings and observation was also undertaken at two support groups for women.

Key issues

The article reviews studies of women in exile and describes the methodological approach and issues of sampling and access. Findings are presented on the women's experiences of loss of status, inappropriate dispersal, and the role of agency. The limitations of lack of access to employment are discussed. The research shows that women at different stages of the asylum process had different needs; and that they are united by a determination to overcome negative experiences [in their country of origin and in the UK], and by pragmatism and creativity in moving forward with their lives.

Conclusions

People seek out opportunities as 'creative' agents and their actions can change the context for future arrivals.

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