



# Inclusion and resilience: **granting asylum seekers the right to work in the UK**

**Research from the British Red Cross and UNHCR found that denial of the right to work, combined with low levels of financial support led some asylum seekers to be forced into exploitative situations. This article explores why asylum seekers can't work, the case for policy change, and what business and government can do to build a more inclusive and resilient economy.**

## **Why can't asylum seekers work?**

As a rule, asylum seekers in the UK (people who have applied for protection and are awaiting a decision on their claim) are not given permission to work by the Home Office. This has been the case since 2002 and as such the policy has persisted through several governments.

While there are some limited exceptions e.g., where an applicant has an existing right to work, based on their current leave to remain in the UK, or after 12 months where they may work in one of the few roles on the shortage occupation list, most asylum seekers are unable to seek employment. Although the government recently overhauled the immigration and asylum system through the Nationality and Borders Act, an amendment that would have granted the right to work six months after submitting a claim was not accepted.

Proponents of the policy argue that granting the right to work would act as a 'pull factor' and encourage irregular migration to the UK. They also argue that it will blur the distinction between asylum and economic routes of entry. However, there is no evidence that asylum seekers are influenced by labour market conditions to come to the UK. Rather it is factors such as seeking safety, having family and friends in the UK or speaking the language, that are important determinants of asylum seekers' decisions to come to the UK. Indeed, the Home Office's own Migration Advisory Committee has recommended that the Government review the policy denying access to work and pointed to its negative impacts. These include difficulty for refugees in reentering the workforce after securing asylum and a detrimental effect on mental health.

## **The case for policy change**

There is a strong case for policy change that is based both on individual welfare, as well as wider benefits to the community and the economy. For individuals who often face lengthy wait times in the asylum system, being unable to work exacerbates other challenges. For instance, many asylum seekers experience poverty – the state allowance is only £5.84 per day, while an extended period of uncertainty, worry and boredom can contribute to mental health issues. It also limits opportunities for integration since having a job enables new arrivals to practice language skills and build social and professional networks. For more information, you can hear what Mahmoud has to say on the right to work here.

We also know from IRC's wider experience that supporting asylum seekers and refugees with integration services from arrival, including job readiness training, supports integration in the long run. Allowing the right to work is a crucial part of this and can enable individuals to maintain their professional skills and confidence throughout the asylum process.

Many organisations have also pointed to the economic case for reform. The Lift the Ban coalition estimates that preventing people seeking asylum from working costs the taxpayer more than £300 million a year. Meanwhile, the Center for Global Development has highlighted the effect on communities in countries of origin too. CGD estimated that in 2018 alone, the ban cost countries of origin at least £31 million in lost remittances. For families in Pakistan, this amounted to £5.4 million; for families in Nigeria, it was £11.1 million.

Allowing asylum seekers to work is a vital part of building a more inclusive and resilient economy. Doing so can support the UK in withstanding socio-economic challenges such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis. Here's what we think government and business can do:

## What can business do?

- Join the [Lift the Ban](#) coalition. Over 260 organisations – businesses, trade unions, think tanks, faith groups and charities – have come together to win the right to work for people seeking asylum. The International Rescue Committee is a proud member of this coalition.
- Stand up in support of refugees and asylum-seekers by emphasizing the benefits of diverse and inclusive workforces in the private sector.
- Offer [volunteering](#) placements to asylum-seekers to support professional development throughout the asylum process.

## What can the government do?

- Change the immigration rules so that people seeking asylum can work from six months after they have submitted their claim. Permission to work should extend to sectors beyond the shortage occupation list and allow for self-employment too.
- Deliver integration services from arrival, with a particular focus on increased English language support and job readiness training.
- Include refugees' and asylum seekers' perspectives in the design of the integration policy and programming committed to in the [New Plan for Immigration](#).

### **For more information on IRC's integration work both in the UK and overseas please see below:**

- [Strengthening employment opportunities for refugees in Greece](#)
- [One year of the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion: What can the EU learn from refugee and migrants' experiences during COVID-19?](#)
- [How the IRC is supporting refugees in the UK](#)