

Threads of Opportunity: Good Work for Refugees in the Fashion Industry

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Introduction

This policy paper is an output of the advocacy work package of the AHRC-funded two-year-long participatory action research project ‘Decolonising Fashion and Textiles’ led by Dr Francesco Mazzarella (from Centre for Sustainable Fashion, UAL). The project team engaged London-based refugees and asylum seekers in a reciprocal process of making and learning with the aim of fostering cultural sustainability and community resilience, in and through fashion. The team engaged 41 participants with either refugee or asylum-seeking status and came from 19 different countries (including Afghanistan, Albania, Cameroon, China, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, El Salvador, Eritrea, India, Iran, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Sudan, Syria, Trinidad and Tobago, USA) for different reasons (fleeing from war, gender-based violence or discrimination due to racial, religious or political issues) and with aspirations or an interest in Fashion.

The UK fashion and textile industry has been vocal about the skills shortages and subsequent encouragement for people into a wide variety of jobs, including “fashion and footwear manufacturing, dyeing and weaving, leather work, pattern cutting, bespoke tailoring and design and development roles” (UKFT, 2023). This paper advocates for bridging the skills gap in the UK fashion industry with the skills owned by refugees in the country. It also acknowledges the critiqued practices of the fashion industry which outsources manufacturing to the Global South. It does not advocate to adopt the same exploitative practices locally with a diasporic population but rather encourages desirable and mutually beneficial placements and apprenticeships, in line with the UKFT’s stated aspirations.

Following initial desk research and ethnography, 24 semi structured interviews and a series of making workshops (38 in total) were held between 2022 to 2024 where the project team worked closely with the participants to listen to the systemic challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers (Appendix 1), and elicit their aspirations for a more equitable and sustainable future. The process also entailed three roundtable discussions engaging 38 stakeholders (Appendix 2) from across the fashion industry, policy makers, and charities working with refugees, with the purpose of advocating for policy change, in and through fashion.

Goal: Enabling access to good work in the fashion industry for all refugees in UK

In order to link the skills shortage in industry and the aspirations of skilled refugees and asylum seekers wanting to pursue a career in fashion in the UK, certain barriers were mapped. After considering various policy ideas emerging from the roundtable discussions (Appendix 3), the right to work was deemed a primary concern of the project participants, as it avoids trapping people in destitution, poverty and unemployability (APPG, 2024). In order to contribute to refugees’ wellbeing, financial independence, and also to social and economic integration, having good work in areas which are desirable and aspirational for refugees is also a way to feel dignified in their new home and place of resettlement. However, refugees transiting through the asylum-seeking route have an overhanging effect on being able to secure a stable job (Appendix 4). In the context of fashion and this research’s remit – conducted by a Higher Education Institution, London College of Fashion, UAL, and in line with UAL’s policy priorities (UAL, 2024) – the project team looked at general

and specific policy that can benefit both skilled refugees and the UK fashion industry where there is a skills shortage.

Barriers

The overarching barriers to achieving the above goal are:

- The systemic discrimination of people depending on where they come from and why they seek refuge in the UK;
- The intertwined nature of housing that provides the basis to seek a stable job, since the lack of a permanent address hinders the obtainment of a UK driving license, DBS checks for work, etc.

The barriers mapped in relation to fashion and the creative industries are:

- Refugees and asylum seekers are often not considered as a possible workforce for the UK fashion industry;
- Actions to ease this are fragmented in silos and happening at a smaller disconnected scale via Local Councils and charities;
- Education, training and apprenticeship schemes to recruit more people into the fashion and textiles industry are often not targeted at those with asylum or refugee status;
- Fashion and textile jobs are not listed on the UK's Immigration Salary List (which has replaced the former Shortage Occupation List, and comprises roles deemed in short supply within the UK labour market and therefore can be carried out by non-UK residents).

Policy Asks

For Central Government:

1. Grant asylum seekers the right to work within 6 months and connect them with relevant employment opportunities in the fashion industry.
2. Add relevant 'fashion and textiles jobs' to the Immigration Salary List that includes jobs which are in short supply within the UK resident labour market.
 - This is to enable skilled asylum seekers to fill in roles where there are skills shortages (e.g. those identified by UKFT, including fashion and footwear manufacturing, dyeing and weaving, leather work, pattern cutting, bespoke tailoring and design and development roles).

For the Greater London Authority (GLA), Local Authorities, and the UK Fashion and Textile Association (UKFT):

3. Build safe and welcoming spaces for asylum seekers and refugees to engage in fashion and creative activities.
 - Set up and support safe and inclusive spaces where asylum seekers and refugees can engage with fashion, textiles and creative practices.
4. Develop and deliver 'skills training while you wait' programmes for asylum seekers and recent refugees.
 - For asylum seekers and recent refugees, many of whom still reside in contingency accommodation, this will ensure that they are "job ready" once they are able to find paid work.
 - Work with local non-government organisations (NGOs) and refugee and migrant charities to promote such schemes.

For Fashion companies and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs):

5. Develop traineeships for recent refugees paid at a real Living Wage.
 - Using funding from large corporations' Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or Environment Sustainability & Governance (ESG) budgets, develop 12–18-

month traineeship programmes for people who have recently acquired refugee status, which include practical fashion/making skills and opportunities for English language lessons.

- Ensure that participants are paid a real living wage as calculated by the Living Wage Foundation.

Conclusions

The project team and its stakeholders believe the above policy asks can support both asylum seekers and new refugees with accessing good work in the Fashion industry. This could fill gaps of unemployment whilst asylum is sought, and contribute to overcoming several challenges related to mental health, financial independence, and social integration. This would also contribute to circumventing the load on Local Councils to find accommodation for people who have just received refugee status; in fact, they should be better able to find privately rented accommodation by getting on the job ladder earlier and securing paid work. The above policy asks also strategically align with UAL's policy priorities (especially in relation to 'fashion and textiles' and the 'good work agenda'), contribute to realising UAL's social purpose and commitment to become a University of Sanctuary.

While it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this project in terms of timeframe of the research activities and number of people involved, the project team is open to receive feedback from other stakeholders to review and refine the policy asks. The team is committed to develop a creative campaign to disseminate the policy recommendations, with the view of raising public awareness and engaging MPs in moving from policy to actions. It is also committed to developing and delivering a pilot that could be rolled out and scaled up throughout the fashion sector with the necessary actors/parties.

References

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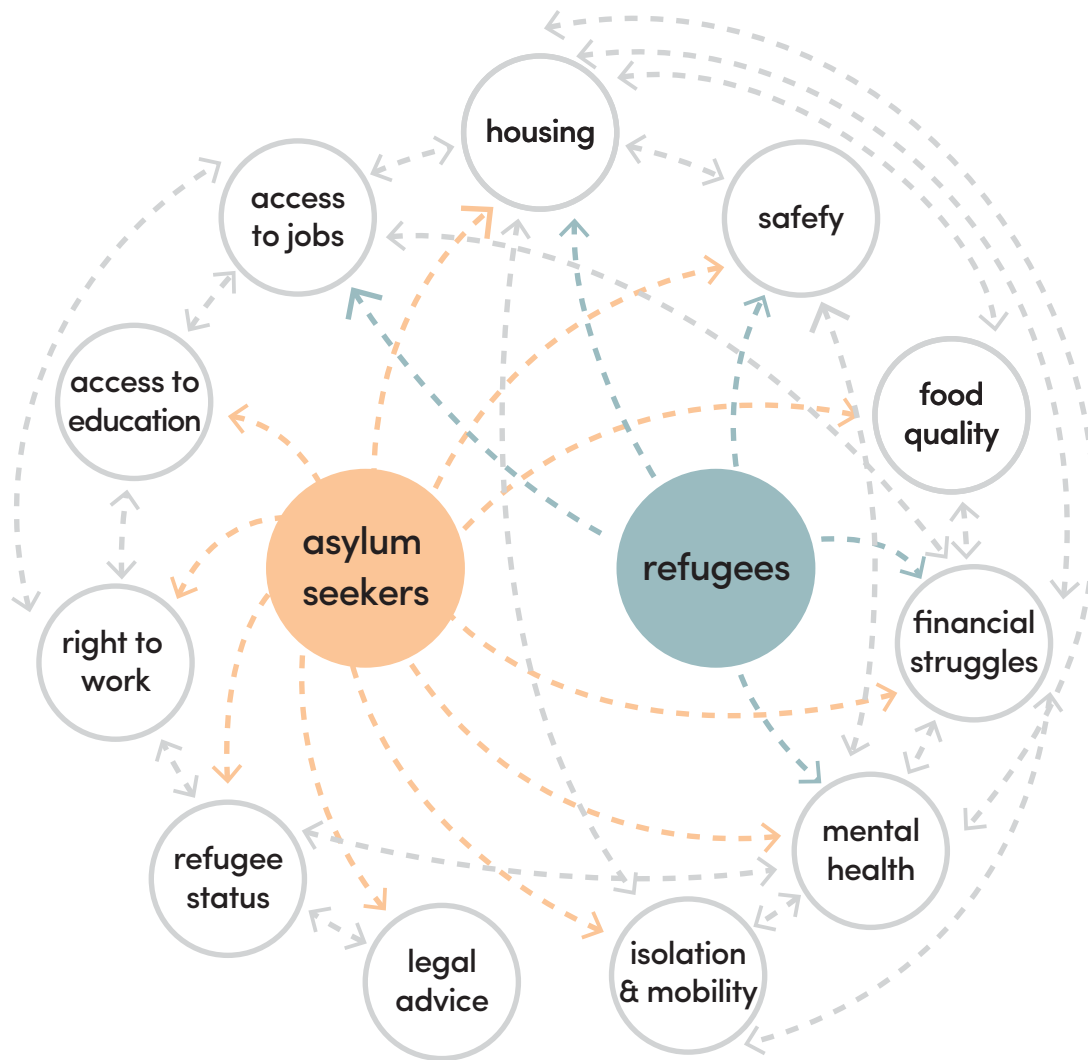
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Appendix 1

System Map of Challenges Faced by Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK



Appendix 2

Participants in Roundtable Discussions

Name	Affiliation
Aisha Khan	UAL Sanctuary
Aleksandra Volkova	UA in UK
Amma Aburam	Style & Sustain magazine
Averil Pooten	Citizens UK
Blossom Young	Poplar HARCA
Ciara Barry	Fashion Revolution
Conni Karol Burks	V&A
Conni Rosewarne	National Centre for Creative Health
Farhan Jaisin	Hackney Foodbank
Frederik Timour	Fashion Innovation Centre
George Gaillet	Citizens UK
Haneet Sagoo	Hackney Migrant Centre
Helen Lax	Fashion District
Helen Taylor	Stories and Supper
Jaison Lau	Newham Council
Jeanette Walcott	UNHCR
Jenny Haigh	UAL (Head of Policy)
Joanna Pienkowska	Haringey Support Migrant Centre
Kate Pelen	Central Saint Martins, UAL
Katherine Duran	Project participant
Kim Chin	ESEA sisters
Laura Moreno Vela	Hackney Migrant Centre
Lisa Lang	Climate KIC
Marianne Tynan	Rosetta Arts
Michael Burgess	Creative Resilience International
Monica Moisin	Cultural Intellectual Property Rights Initiative
Neelam Raina	Middlesex University
Niamh Tuft	Waltham Forest Council
Paula O'Connor	Waltham Forest Council
Rahima Begum	Restless Beings
Sahira Khan	Project participant
Sheida Mokhtari Khojasteh	Project participant
Shoshanna Isaacson	V&A
Sol Escobar	Give Your Best
Sukhwinder Kaur Chandi	Project participant
Tamara Cincik	Fashion Roundtable
Tom Stockton	Waltham Forest Council
Yesenia San Juan	UAL Global Partnerships

Appendix 3

Other Policy Leads Emerging from the Roundtable Discussions

- A centralised information hub to promote available opportunities;
- A fashion / creative industries -specific employability network;
- A community mentoring scheme to help navigating the system;
- Non-language-based vocational tests to assess refugees' skills proficiency and work readiness instead of relying on English language proficiency tests;
- Mending services by refugees to upcycle donated second-hand clothes;
- Textile craft workshops as a form of social prescribing;
- Recognising University degrees obtained by refugees in their home countries;
- Offering scholarships and bursaries to refugees to attend Universities in the UK;
- Extending the work permit to all family members besides the main applicant;
- Developing a communication campaign to shift the prevailing narrative around refugees.

Appendix 4

Intertwined Challenges for those Granted Refugee Status after Being Asylum Seekers

The overall goal of this advocacy project was to enable good work for new refugees in the fashion industry, while addressing the skills shortage in the sector. Various bodies like the Greater London Authority (GLA) are campaigning to reduce the period to process the refugee status and right to work to 6 months on average, although in other parts of the UK this can be up to 3 years. However, multiple barriers were recorded in this regard.

For **asylum seekers**:

- Delays in processing documents and rejected claims mean that some people have been in multiple cycles of processing and rejection with lives put on hold for over 5 years or more;
- They may have to resort to undocumented work to sustain their lives;
- This affects their mental health as they are not able to progress their lives or make changes for the better.

For the **Home Office**:

- Multiple processes for the same person imply spending more resources and time;
- Providing housing during this time results in significant costs.

For **refugees**:

- Once granted the status, they must find accommodation in short periods of time, in as little as 7 days up to a maximum of 28 days (this includes days for post and correspondence);
- Accommodation is a cyclical issue intertwined with employment as lack of housing affects peoples' ability to find stable jobs. Challenges related to housing are:
 - Shortage of available houses;
 - Suitable accommodation is not always found;
 - Local councils may reassign a temporary address (such as a different hotel);
 - DBS checks for work cannot be carried out if the address is a hotel.
- Forms of ID (such as a UK driving license) cannot be obtained for paid work as they also require an address;
- Refugees who may have only attended some English classes but nothing to advance their chosen professional fields (if they have one) have significant gaps on their CVs which are looked unfavourably by potential employers;
- Deteriorated mental health, loss of confidence, and diminished sense of worth exacerbate the situation;
- Refugees have to resort to low paid and/or undocumented exploitative work and usually jobs unrelated to any previously acquired training or education;
- The Immigration Salary List provided by local authorities is very limited.