

Refugees in britain



Refugees are people who are forced to leave their own countries due to horrors faced there, such as war, torture, rape, starvation and separation from loved ones. By definition they have survived persecution in their own countries. They have been through what most of us cannot even begin to imagine, and so need our support and encouragement to get on with their lives. They need a fresh new start in a country free from abuse and persecution. But instead they are greeted with hostility, racial discrimination and unfairness from the government. In this essay I am going to discuss why people in this country feel the need to be cruel to those in less fortunate situations than themselves and why I think that Britain's attitude towards refugees has to be changed.

Refugees have been seeking sanctuary in Britain since the 1560's, but we haven't stopped being hostile to them. Why? What is it that made us hate refugees?

Some may say that the UK is being swamped by refugees who use up all of our much-needed resources. It could be claimed that refugees are a burden on our economy and should be sent back to where they came from. But it would be a very sad story if all refugees went home - and not just for them. Many refugees have professional qualifications or labour skills so can give a lot to our country. People born in other countries including refugees gave £2.5 billion more in taxes than they took out in benefits in the year 2000. This money could then be used to improve essential public services such as the NHS and schools. So instead of draining public resources as many commonly believe, refugees help them.

Refugees are treated terribly in the UK by many people. Only 26% of adults questioned in the Mori poll say that they would be welcoming to refugees in their communities. Abuse is a feature present in their lives again, just when they think they escaped it.

A thirteen-year-old refugee said

'Glasgow is nice, but... I can't go out. People... harass us. We used to live with dignity in our country, but circumstances forced us to come here. There is ease of mind, but no respect whatsoever.'

People probably dislike refugees because they don't understand them, as is often the case with discrimination. Although the UK holds just 1.98% of the world's refugees, the average guess in the Mori Poll was 23%. Another reason could be the terrible media coverage of refugees as written by ignorant tabloid reporters. For example, on the 7/3/01 an article in the Sun called refugees '.... scroungers, beggars and crooks who are prepared to cross every country in Europe to reach our generous benefits system.' But the truth is that Britain does not have the best benefits system in Europe. Several other European countries, such as Belgium, Ireland and Denmark, give more financial help to refugees than we do. Our media coverage about refugees is so bad that it has been criticised by the United Nations High Commissioner, Amnesty International and the police.

The British government has also been criticised by the United Nations for its policies on detention. Although people seeking asylum (and their children) can be detained at any stage of their asylum claim under the Immigration Act of 1971, detention is supposed to be for short times and in exceptional

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situations only. But 27% of asylum seekers in the UK have been detained for four months, and 5% for over a year. The government plans to have 4000 detention places by the spring of 2003. There are some designated detention centres already, but in areas without this asylum seekers are kept in prison with real criminals. This can seriously affect mental wellbeing by bringing back painful memories, because asylum seekers may have been in prison back home, some even in countries where torture is used. This can lead to depression and attempted suicide, which also happens in detention centres - they can feel like they are back in the situation they tried so hard to escape.

For the refugees who are granted asylum in the UK the ordeal is not nearly over. They may be shipped around the country before ending up in a spare council flat on one of Britain's most run-down estates. This is very unlucky for them as they are very likely places for racism and race-related violence, for example the recent murder of a 15-year-old Somali refugee was on a council estate in London. This may be because people on these estates see refugees move in and they think that they are getting a better deal than they are. But this is not the case. Refugees receive only 70% of the national income support. A report published by Oxfam and the refugee council shows that refugees are commonly suffering from hunger, poor health and poverty. They need to apply to charity for 'luxuries' such as warm clothing and nutritious food.

So why do refugees still come here? Because of the generous government? The friendly people? No, I didn't think so either. Refugees did not choose to come here, they searched for a way out and found here. They have been through so much already, what right do we have to make it worse? I think

that many people in this country, government included, need to change their attitudes toward refugees. They need to open their eyes and see what a great benefit it is to have refugees here, and to make it as easy a transition for asylum seekers to join this country as possible.