



Amira holds her 16-month granddaughter Jana.\* Amira fled her home in Deraa in Syria and was living in Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan at the time this photo was taken.

# SAFE BUT NOT SETTLED

## The impact of family separation on refugees in the UK

Refugees in the UK often find themselves separated from their families by their brutal experiences of conflict and persecution, just at the time when they need each other the most. This separation can drag on for years or sometimes indefinitely because of the UK's restrictive rules on refugee family reunion. This joint report by the Refugee Council and Oxfam is one of the first to look at how family reunion and ongoing forced separation from loved ones affect the ability of refugees to successfully integrate into UK society.



SUPPORTING AND  
EMPOWERING  
REFUGEES



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Families come in all shapes and sizes, but whether large or small, for most of us our family is the centre of our lives and gives us the necessary resilience and support to succeed in life. Yet refugees often find themselves separated from their families by their brutal experiences of conflict and persecution, just at the time when they need each other the most. For refugees in the UK, that separation can drag on for years or sometimes indefinitely because of the UK's restrictive rules on refugee family reunion.

This joint report by the Refugee Council and Oxfam is one of the first to look at how family reunion and ongoing forced separation from loved ones affect the ability of refugees to successfully integrate into UK society. Based on interviews conducted with Refugee Council staff over the summer of 2017, it highlights the experiences of 44 resettled refugee families from Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Eritrea and three other countries, living in Yorkshire and Humberside and in Hertfordshire.

Eleven of those refugee families have now been reunited in the UK with some of the loved ones they left behind. **For nine out of the 11, integration into British society was quicker and easier as a result.** Tesfay, a young man from the Horn of Africa who arrived in the UK in January 2016, was not working, was depressed and had been referred to mental health services, until his fiancée Aatifa was allowed to join him. Since then, he has returned to work, she has begun studying and, in the words of their Refugee Council worker, 'they engage with everything, they're enjoying the city to the best of their ability now'.

Their story and the stories of the other ten refugees who have been allowed to reunite with their families offer a message of hope, but few of the stories in this report have had happy endings. For the vast majority of families included in the research sample, the struggle to see their loved ones again dominates their lives.

## THE CURRENT UK APPROACH

The report highlights how refugees' gruelling experiences of conflict, persecution or abuse are exacerbated by the UK's restrictive approach to allowing refugees who have reached this country to apply for other family members to join them. The UK only allows adult refugees to apply for their partners (married or civil) and dependent children under 18, who were part of their nuclear family before they fled their homes. Grandparents, parents, siblings and children who have turned 18 are not, for this purpose, considered family, however strong their bonds of love and – in many cases – shared suffering are, and however dependent they are on their family members who have reached the UK. Altogether, in almost **three-quarters (32 out of 44) of the cases researched for this report, the separated family members were not eligible for refugee family reunion under the UK's existing immigration rules.**

The human cost of this is revealed in this report. It means, for example, that three children who escaped to the UK with their parents cannot bring their grandparents to join them, regardless of how close they were to them before they left, a separation that has left the children distressed to the extent of self-harm. It means that Sayid, whose teenage brother is fleeing both ISIS (also known as Daesh) and the Syrian army, cannot reunite with him in safety in the UK. And for many refugees, it also means an unaffordable cost, as they desperately try to navigate the UK's immigration rules without – since 2013 – any access to legal aid for advice and representation.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- At least 15 of the separated families were simply not ready to settle down in the UK while they did not know whether their family members would be allowed to join them.
- Thirty-three of the 44 families were unable to focus on activities essential to integration, such as learning English, because they were preoccupied with worries about family members, experiencing feelings of guilt or struggling with mental health problems.
- In 18 of the 44 cases, at least one family member had suffered from symptoms commonly associated with anxiety, depression or other mental health issues, which Refugee Council staff thought had been brought on or exacerbated by being separated from their family members.
- For at least 10 families, stress and anxiety were especially pronounced because either a separated family member was unable to properly care for themselves and had been left with no one to help, or separated family members were living in precarious circumstances with increased risk as a result of being apart.
- Ten families were simply unable to focus on taking the necessary steps to integrate into UK society because they were overwhelmed with the responsibility of caring for other resettled family members, responsibilities that had previously been shared with a separated family member.
- People went to extreme lengths to see their family again, sometimes to the extent of being pushed into poverty, or resorting to smugglers or other irregular means. Six of the cases from our interviews made substantial financial sacrifices, and in four of the cases family members made irregular and often dangerous journeys.
- In 32 of the cases collected, the separated family member outside the UK was not eligible for family reunion under the existing rules. The majority of separated family members were parents, adult siblings, adult children and minor children trying to reunite with family members who were not their parents.

*'He's told us now that he wants to go to Lebanon because he just feels like he has to do something and support her in some way, so he thinks that if he goes to visit her in Lebanon then that will show that he's supporting her because he feels really, really guilty.'*

– Hannah Picking, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

*'His mind is still in Syria thinking about his brother, and he can't stop thinking about that and worrying about his brother.'*

– Hannah Picking, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

*'[She] sent every bit of money she had to her family and lived in poverty, her children here had nothing, she literally sent all of her money, because she just couldn't cope with [the fact] that some of her children were here and fine and some of them were still back in the refugee camp and had nothing.'*

– Amilee Collins, Refugee Council Project Worker

- The research suggests that family reunion acts as a positive accelerator of integration for both the new arrivals and family members already in the UK. In nine of the 11 cases where separated family members were eventually able to come to the UK, the arrival of their family members accelerated their integration into British society.

*You can just see how well settled they are because they have some family [...]it's made them feel like they've got a real future here.*

– Sarah Rollin, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This is a fundamental issue for Parliament and the UK Government, which has a duty to consider not only the welfare of refugees but also the consequences for social cohesion in the UK. The Refugee Council and Oxfam are calling on the UK Government to:

1. Expand the criteria for who qualifies as a 'family member' for the purposes of refugee family reunion to include:
  - young relatives who are reliant on the family unit for their well-being at the time of application, including stepchildren and de-facto adopted children;
  - adult sons and daughters who had not formed their own family prior to the refugee fleeing their country of origin;
  - adult siblings who had not formed their own family prior to the refugee fleeing their country of origin;
  - parents;
  - post-flight spouses and their children who are part of the family unit;
  - any dependent relative, including where being separated presents risks to their safety and security;
  - any person of whom the person granted refugee leave or humanitarian protection is a dependent relative.
2. Reintroduce legal aid for refugee family reunion cases.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Refugees often end up separated from family members as a result of their brutal experiences of conflict, persecution and abuse. Separation from those that they love and depend on has a very real cost in terms of the ongoing impact on people's lives. As a UNHCR study conducted in 2013 demonstrates, when families are split up, refugees find it more difficult to integrate into their new societies in many different ways, including learning the local language, finding education and employment, and putting down roots among their new neighbours.<sup>1</sup> For many refugees in the UK, their plight is exacerbated by the UK's restrictive approach to allowing refugees who have reached this country to apply for other family members to join them.

These issues are increasingly important for the UK. As it prepares to leave the European Union, the government should develop ideas of what 'Global Britain' means in an age of record numbers of people around the world forced from their homes. At the same time in the UK, the threats of extremism, intolerance and polarized views mean that the need for all kinds of integration and social cohesion is more acute than ever.

This is the context in which the Refugee Council and Oxfam have conducted one of the first pieces of research in the UK on the links between refugee family reunion and integration into British society. After a short overview of the UK policy background on refugee family reunion and of the literature on its links to integration, the report sets out the research methodology and then the main analysis of its findings, followed by conclusions and concrete recommendations for policy makers.

# 2 POLICY BACKGROUND: REFUGEE FAMILY REUNION IN THE UK

International law acknowledges that families are entitled to protection.<sup>2</sup> However, while there is a clear and accepted principle in international law to protect the family, it is left to individual states to define what is meant by 'family'. In the UK, the government's definition of family for the purposes of immigration is founded on an understanding of the 'nuclear family', which excludes grandparents, adult siblings and children aged 18 and over.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.1 THE IMMIGRATION RULES

The rules that govern which family members can be sponsored to join relatives living in the UK, including refugees, are set out in the Immigration Rules.<sup>4</sup> These state that people granted refugee status or humanitarian protection are entitled to sponsor their close family members to come and live with them in the UK.<sup>5</sup> However, there are a number of restrictions governing which family members qualify. For adult refugees in the UK, only partners (married or civil, and same-sex partners<sup>6</sup>) and dependent children under the age of 18, who were part of the family unit before the refugee fled, come under the definition of 'family'.<sup>7</sup> The relationship between the refugee in the UK (the sponsor) and their partner overseas must have begun before the refugee was forced to flee.<sup>8</sup> This means that refugees who form relationships after they have fled their home country, or on their journey in search of safety, will not be able to bring their partners to live with them unless they navigate the prohibitively expensive and similarly restrictive family migration route (described below). There are also additional restrictions in terms of the sponsor's children: they must not only be under 18 but also unmarried or without a civil partner, and dependent on their parents or specifically not 'leading an independent life'.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, while these rules may be restrictive, the situation facing unaccompanied refugee children arriving in the UK is harsher still. Unlike most other EU Member States, the UK does not allow children who are recognized as refugees to sponsor even their closest family members, condemning them to live apart from their families for the rest of their lives, as it has been recognized that the child should not return to the persecution from which they have fled. The situation facing unaccompanied refugee children has been described by the Home Affairs Select Committee as 'perverse'.<sup>10</sup> Not allowing the family to live together in the UK may flout international law.<sup>11</sup>

It is often stated by the government that this is to ensure that children are not sent on ahead alone to secure leave to remain for the family. However, in an inquiry in 2016, the House of Lords EU Select Committee found no evidence to support this. It said:

*'If this were so, we would expect to see evidence of this happening in Member States that participate in the Family Reunification Directive. Instead, the evidence shows that some children are reluctant to seek family reunification for fear that it may place family members in danger.'*<sup>12</sup>

The UK's responsibilities to child refugees should be no less than they would be to an adult refugee – and child refugees have as much right as an adult to live with their family, as recognized in international instruments, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which the UK is a State Party.<sup>13</sup> The impact of the government's failure to meet its responsibility to child refugees in this way is not within the remit of this research, but it must be addressed as a matter of urgency. The Refugee Council and Oxfam share the view of the Home Affairs Select Committee that the government should amend the Immigration Rules to allow refugee children to act as sponsors for their close family members.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.2 THE REFUGEE FAMILY REUNION POLICY

The Home Office's refugee family policy offers guidance to decision makers on the implementation of the Immigration Rules. While 'eligible' and 'ineligible' sponsors and family members are clearly defined, caseworkers are allowed to grant leave under this policy to family members categorized as 'ineligible' in cases that are deemed to be exceptional or compassionate; these are cases where to refuse leave would amount to a breach of the person's rights under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). In July 2016, the Home Office published a revised version of this policy, giving greater clarity on when compassionate circumstances may apply and highlighting, for example, situations in which children aged 18 and over may be granted leave outside of the rules.<sup>15</sup> However, this continues to depend on the discretion of the decision maker. From January to September 2017, only 49 visas were issued outside the immigration rules in refugee family reunion cases.<sup>16</sup> Home Office entry clearance officers may also decide to grant leave outside the rules, usually on the condition that the family member has no recourse to public funds, meaning that they will not have access to most benefits or to free hospital treatment in most of the UK.

## 2.3 FAMILY MIGRATION RULES IN THE UK

Refugees wanting to sponsor family members who fall outside the narrow definition of 'family' used in the refugee family reunion rules may also be able to apply through the regular family migration route under Part 8 and Appendix FM of the Immigration Rules.<sup>17</sup> However, they must meet stringent financial and other requirements that for most newly recognized refugees are likely to be prohibitive. In order to sponsor family members not covered by the refugee family reunion policy, including grandparents, parents, siblings and children

who have turned 18, they must also prove dependency and be able to demonstrate that their family member's care needs cannot be met where they are. Sponsors must be able to accommodate and maintain any relatives arriving via this route, who will have no recourse to public funds, including access to secondary healthcare. This route may also be the only way to bring to the UK a partner or spouse with whom they have become involved after fleeing their country of origin, even if that relationship began before their arrival.

These far more restrictive requirements, introduced in July 2012 – coincidentally around the time that global forced displacement began to grow dramatically – have reduced the opportunities for displaced families to find safety together in the UK.

## 2.4 THE IMPACT OF CHANGES TO LEGAL AID

Opportunities for refugees to bring family members to live with them in the UK were also further impeded by the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO), which made swingeing cuts to the availability of legal aid in England and Wales from April 2013. Advice and representation relating to refugee family reunion were taken out of the scope of legal aid, because the government considered it a 'straightforward immigration matter' that did not warrant the need for specialist legal advice.<sup>18</sup> However, the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC), which regulates immigration advisers, only allows 'Level 2' advisers to work on family reunion applications, precisely because they need a higher level of training, which seems to indicate a discrepancy in government policy.<sup>19</sup> The British Red Cross has reported that many refugee family reunion cases are complex and often require the expertise and experience of legal advisors. In a study of 91 refugee family reunion cases in 2015, it found that 33 percent of them relied on witness statements and statutory declarations that had to be provided by legal advisors.<sup>20</sup> Also, given that in the policy the sponsors and applicants (family members outside of the UK) are defined as 'ineligible', it may require legal advice to identify the possibility of making an application under the exceptional circumstances or compassionate factors element of the policy.

Refugees in the UK with family members who fall outside the narrow definition of family in the rules are clearly likely to require legal representation to successfully make a case that their relative should be granted leave outside of the rules. With no legal aid for family reunion, the cost of legal representation is likely to be prohibitive for many, if not most, refugee families. This was true for some of the families included in the research sample for this report. For instance, one case discussed in the interviews was able to pursue a family reunion application only because a local university had set up a Refugee Family Reunion Clinic which provides free advice in their area. Unfortunately, such facilities are not widely available.



## 2.5 RESETTLED REFUGEES

This report is based on interviews with Refugee Council staff supporting resettled refugees arriving through the Gateway Protection Programme<sup>21</sup> and the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS).<sup>22</sup> Refugee resettlement involves the selection and transfer of refugees from a country in which they have sought protection – usually somewhere with a large number of refugees who are living in camps or urban settings – to the UK. Unlike people who are found to be refugees after claiming asylum, they are granted leave to remain on arrival and given support to rebuild their lives in the UK.

Resettled refugees have the same entitlements to family reunion and face the same obstacles to realizing it as refugees arriving through the asylum system. However, some of the families included in this study had been joined by their relatives because they were also eligible for resettlement and were provided with a resettlement place in the UK, usually in the same location as relatives who arrived before them.

The possibility that relatives of resettled refugees may also be resettled here has a bearing on this research, with a higher proportion of families successfully reuniting than otherwise would have been the case. Of those families who were joined by loved ones, for four families this was a consequence of their relatives being registered with UNHCR, identified as being in need of resettlement<sup>23</sup> and then referred to and accepted by the Home Office for resettlement. In all four cases, the family members in question were outside of the refugee family reunion rules and so would have been ineligible via the usual route.

UNHCR has repeatedly highlighted the existence of an important connection between refugee family reunification and integration; for instance, a 2016 Proposal to better protect refugees in the EU and globally stated that ‘there is a direct link between family reunification, mental health and successful integration.’<sup>24</sup> While family reunification is rarely used as a primary criterion by UNHCR in determining resettlement needs, it is unsurprising that, once refugees are identified for resettlement by UNHCR, they take into account the presence of family members already living in resettlement countries in determining the most appropriate country for submission. However, the low number of resettlement places available in the UK – just a few thousand a year<sup>25</sup> and mainly for those fleeing the Syrian conflict – makes this an unlikely prospect for most refugees, even if their relatives are registered with UNHCR and qualify for resettlement.

# 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to conducting interviews with Refugee Council staff, a review was undertaken of existing literature on the link between refugee family reunion and integration. Across the literature it was emphasized that, for many refugees, family unity is an important concern upon being granted asylum. For instance, a 2013 UNHCR report found that for numerous refugees living in France, Sweden, Ireland and Austria, reuniting with their families was a top priority upon arrival in the receiving country.<sup>26</sup> This finding is supported by literature from Austria from 2009, which notes that reunification often becomes the life goal for refugees during times of separation, and that constant worry about family in the country of origin accompanies them in everyday life.<sup>27</sup> The authors of the 2013 UNHCR report also state that the priority of family reunion for refugees is widely accepted given the often traumatic conditions of separation experienced by people seeking asylum, combined with the fact that family members may be missing or may be living in dangerous conditions.<sup>28</sup>

The Home Affairs Select Committee publication on migration states that family reunion not only satisfies the human rights requirement that families be allowed to be together, but also has benefits for migrants' integration and support networks.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, the general recognition of a link between family separation and delayed integration was also evident across the literature reviewed. As early as 1995, the Canadian Council for Refugees Task Force on Family Reunification noted that separation from family is a source of extreme anxiety for refugees, and can interfere with efforts to become self-sufficient in the country of asylum.<sup>30</sup> This was echoed by Hathaway and Neve in 1997, who noted that refugees are less productive in their country of asylum when compelled to abandon patterns of life rooted in family ties.<sup>31</sup> Similarly in 2013, Strik, de Hart and Nissen stated that family separation and worry for family members can hinder refugees' ability to recover from traumatic experiences of war, inhibiting their ability to integrate.<sup>32</sup> They note that this is especially true for children who have been separated from a parent or primary carer. Moreover, in the 2013 UNHCR report it is noted that family separation hinders integration in multiple dimensions, including education, employment, language learning and putting down roots and moving on, while also having a long-term impact on physical and emotional health.<sup>33</sup> Finally, a report by the Swedish Red Cross and Sociala Missionen in 2012 notes that long separation from family members can lead to deep feelings of injustice and powerlessness, in addition to having a detrimental impact on integration.<sup>34</sup>

The 2013 UNHCR study provided some explanation for why family separation has the effect of hindering integration. The authors note that literature in Ireland reports that lone parenting places an emotional burden on refugees who have been separated from their partners.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Strik et al. found that negative experiences with the authorities can adversely impact refugees' sense of belonging in their new country.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, research in both Sweden and France suggests that refugees find it hard to focus on education or language training when they are concerned about the safety of family members, as education in the host country can seem meaningless when loved

ones are in danger.<sup>37</sup> These findings are supported by the outcomes of the new research outlined in this report.

Finally, specialist agencies, human rights organizations and international humanitarian organizations including Refugee Council and Oxfam have all called for a broadening of the refugee family reunion rules,<sup>38</sup> and this has been echoed by parliamentary committees, including the House of Lords EU Select Committee and the Home Affairs Select Committee. The latter has also called for the provision of legal aid for refugee family reunion cases.<sup>39</sup> Costello et al. note that UNHCR has stated that 'a broad definition of a family unit – what may be termed extended family – is necessary to accommodate the peculiarities in any given refugee situation'.<sup>40</sup> However, as the same report notes, this recommendation is unfortunately at odds with current policy trends across the Western world, whereby governments adopt a narrow concept of a nuclear family, and then narrow it still further by specifying that the family must have been formed prior to flight from the country of origin to be eligible for reunification.<sup>41</sup> The authors note that this policy trend fails to appreciate the reality of refugees' lives, as many displaced people spend protracted periods in exile and in flight and many form families while in transit.

However, there are important gaps in the existing literature. For instance, the 2013 UNHCR report repeatedly emphasizes that there is a lack of focus specifically on the refugee experience, because research on refugees is often encompassed in research on migrants more generally.<sup>42</sup> The report also notes that there is a general lack of data on the integration of refugees in host countries, and the impact of family reunion on refugee integration in particular is not well studied.

There is also little UK-specific data on the link between family reunion and integration for refugees. Most pertinent findings on the connection in the 2013 UNHCR report were gleaned from studies conducted in other European countries. Although the European Commission and the Immigrant Council of Ireland published a UK-specific report on family reunion and integration in the same year, its focus was primarily on migrants – though the authors note that restrictions on family reunion rules for third-country nationals are also especially likely to affect refugees applying to be reunited with extended or post-flight families, due to the fact that refugees tend to have lower incomes and are usually non-English speakers from non-Western countries.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the explanations provided in the literature for why family separation hinders integration for refugees were limited. Although many reports identified a general connection between family separation and delayed integration, detailed, thorough explanations for why this is the case, supported by concrete examples, were not forthcoming.

Ultimately then, this research seeks to explore the link between family reunification and integration that is specific to refugees living in the UK and supported by concrete examples.

# 4 METHODOLOGY

## 4.1 DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This study began with a literature review looking at existing research on the impact of family separation and/or reunion on refugee integration. Based on the gaps identified, as described in the previous section, it was decided to explore how family reunion and forced separation from family member(s) affect the ability of refugees to successfully integrate into UK society.

Primary data was gathered in July/August 2017 through structured telephone interviews with Refugee Council staff supporting resettled refugees arriving through the Gateway Protection Programme and the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). This approach, of interviewing Refugee Council staff rather than clients themselves, was taken because of the sensitivities involved in asking refugees directly to talk about family members they have been separated from, a particularly distressing subject for many.

The decision to interview Refugee Council staff supporting resettled refugees was informed by the nature of the services offered to this group. The Refugee Council is a delivery partner for local authorities in Hertfordshire and in Yorkshire and Humberside, providing long-term integration support to resettled refugees arriving in these two regions. This work offers unique insights into the impact of family separation on the integration of resettled refugees, as Refugee Council staff are able to build close relationships based on trust and offer support and guidance over a protracted period of at least one year. There is no such package of integration support for those who arrive independently and are recognized as refugees after claiming asylum. In fact, the challenges facing this latter group of refugees, upon recognition by the Home Office as being in need of protection, include homelessness and destitution, which necessitates a service consisting of immediate short-term crisis interventions rather than longer-term integration support.<sup>44</sup>

## 4.2 QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS WITH REFUGEE COUNCIL STAFF

Resettlement team managers in each of the Refugee Council offices in Leeds, Sheffield, Hull and Hertfordshire were asked to identify one or two members of their teams to be interviewed. This ensured a geographic spread and the inclusion of cases from both the Gateway Protection Programme and the VPRS.

Interviews were undertaken with six staff members in total. Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to identify five to 10 clients, current or historical, who had raised family separation and/or subsequent reunion issues

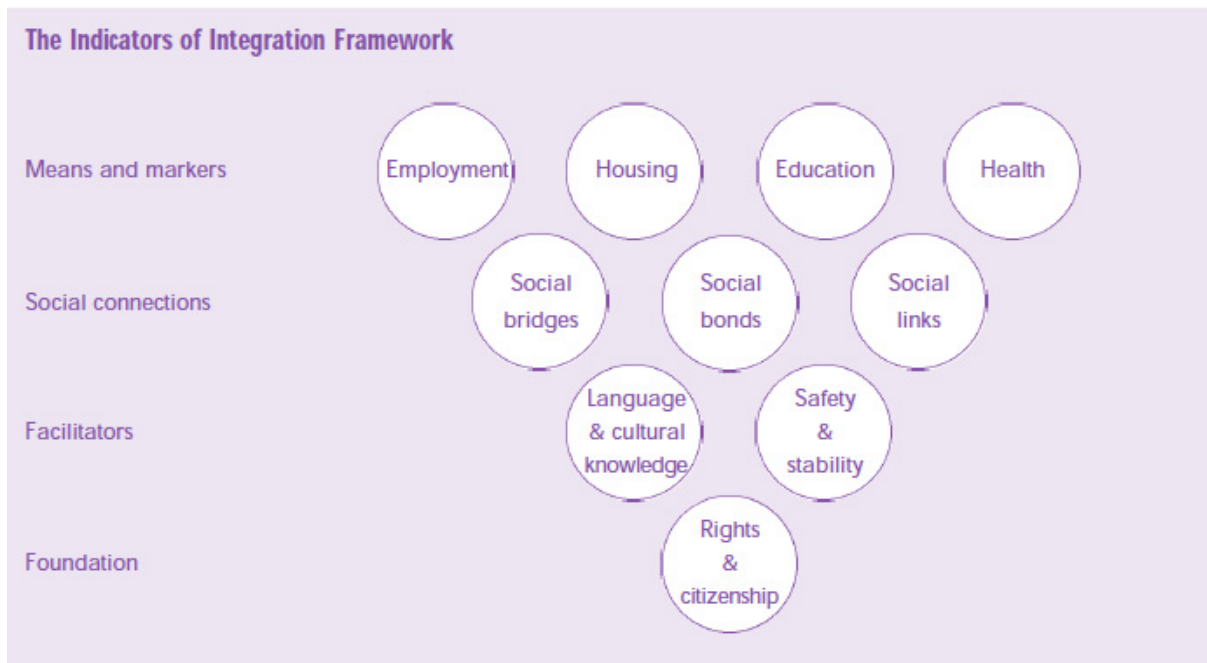
during their work with them to talk about in the interview. Forty-four case studies were discussed in total. Basic demographic information about these cases was sent to the researcher prior to the interview and was used to guide the discussion.

Interviews were conducted with four female and two male Refugee Council staff, three of whom were project workers and three of whom were resettlement team managers. All participants had extensive experience of working directly with refugees through the Refugee Council, all worked on refugee resettlement in particular, and three worked exclusively with cases from Syria, so the experiences of resettled Syrian refugees are over-represented in this research.

## 4.3 DESIGN OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The interviews aimed to explore the perceptions of Refugee Council staff of refugees' experiences of family separation and integration. The key indicators of integration developed by Ager and Strang below were used to inform the themes that were explored, as these were identified in a study commissioned by the UK Home Office and continue to be used by policy makers on refugee integration in the UK today.

**Graph 1: Indicators of integration (Ager and Strang)<sup>45</sup>**



The interview schedule contained 20 questions split into three sections. In the first section, interviewees were asked questions about their perception of their clients' experience of the family reunification process. In the second section, interviewees were presented with five scenarios of family separation, and were asked to provide details about specific cases for every scenario they had experienced. In the third section, interviewees were asked questions about the impact of separation from, and reunification with, family members. The

interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed to identify key themes and experiences.

## 4.4 THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

The 44 families discussed in the six interviews came from seven different countries. These are listed below in Table 1. The family members they are or were separated from are or were based in Lebanon, Kenya, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Morocco and Germany.

**Table 1: Countries of origin of the 44 cases**

Syria	22
DRC	8
Ethiopia	5
Iraq	3
Somalia	3
Eritrea	2
South Sudan	1

Fourteen of the cases were female-headed households or single women, seven were male-headed households or single men, and 23 were heterosexual couples, most of whom were with children. Thirty-three of the 44 cases were families with either children under 18 or elderly parents.

In 11 of the 44 cases, people achieved at least some partial success and were reunited with their relatives, although interviewees also described how separation affected these families prior to being reunited.

## 4.5 CONFIDENTIALITY

In order to protect the identities of Refugee Council clients, all names have been changed and the report mostly refers to the region the client is from rather than their home country. Similarly, in most instances, the specific location of separated family members is not revealed; instead, the region where they are currently living is given. Consent was obtained from all clients whose stories feature in this report.

### Box 1: Aster's story

Aster was resettled in the UK in January 2016 after fleeing to Egypt from her home country, Eritrea. She hasn't seen her three children for eight years.

According to Aster, after converting to Pentecostalism in Eritrea, she was persecuted on account of her religion and was arrested twice for her beliefs. When she fled in 2009, she had to leave her children behind – a daughter aged seven and two sons aged 15 and nine.

*'The hardest part for me was leaving my children, I found it very hard but because I don't want to be in prison, I decided to take the hardest decision to flee. Sorry I am emotional. I feel guilty as a mother, I left them behind. I'm supposed to give them warm hugs and be around, but I was forced because of circumstances, that's why I can't control my emotions.'*

She first sought refuge in Sudan but unable to find a safe place, she moved on to Egypt. The situation was not much better there and she was unable to bring her children to join her. Her mental health deteriorated. In desperation, she embarked on another dangerous journey involving travelling with false papers, this time to Europe, in the hope that there, she would be able to rebuild her life with her children. She was arrested before she had even left the country. The Egyptian authorities gave her a 'choice': deportation or prison. Deportation to Eritrea was effectively a death sentence, she says, as she had left Eritrea without permission, a grave offence in that country.

She suffered terribly in prison. She was often denied food and access to a toilet and was abused physically and sexually by other prisoners – she still has the scars. She could not speak to her children.

Two-and-a-half years later, in January 2016, Aster was resettled in the UK directly from detention, with the help of UNHCR. She badly hoped she would finally be able to reunite with her children, but two years later it hasn't happened. A major difficulty for her is the cost: she not only needed to find the money to pay for legal advice but also for an interpreter.

She is desperately worried about her children. Fearing indefinite military conscription, her boys have fled to Ethiopia where they are alone and very unwell, having both contracted malaria. It was too dangerous for Aster's daughter, now 16, to travel with them, so she is living alone in Eritrea. It is feared she has two options: marry for her own protection or be conscripted into the army.

Aster's despair and sadness make it hard for her to find the will or energy to go to English classes, get to know her neighbours or look for a job in the UK. She still desperately hopes her children will be able to join her, and has now submitted a refugee family reunion application. But it may not be possible for her daughter to leave Eritrea and its brutal regime, and her boys are now young adults and so outside the narrow Home Office definition of family.

*'When I think of my children, I am always sad and I cannot enjoy life or take any part in anything ... I'm doing my best but I can't fully concentrate on anything I do, all the time I am stressed thinking about the day when I will be reunited with my children. At this moment because of not enough money I cannot travel to Ethiopia to see them but I ... hope that they can join me, [that] will be a special day for me.'*

# 5 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

## 5.1 FAMILY REUNION REMAINS THE PRIORITY

*'It's very difficult to think long-term in the future when you haven't got family members here [...] there's always that slight hope that people will travel, and then I think it's so difficult to be able to see your life [here in the future], life is put on hold.'*

– Sarah Rollin, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

One key message from the interviews with Refugee Council staff was that many refugees who have been separated from family members find it hard to imagine a long-term future for themselves in the UK. In at least 15 of the cases in the study, people were affected in this way. As a result, even people who would otherwise be very motivated to settle down in British society may not feel prepared to dedicate time and effort to rebuilding their lives in the UK until they have heard the result of their family reunion application. As one interviewee explained further:

*'I think that's quite a typical response – being torn between settling here, learning English, getting on with your life, getting a job, finding somewhere to volunteer, and also being pulled back and reminded by your family member abroad that they're struggling, maybe trying to send them money or give them support over the phone.'*

– Hannah Picking, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

Because the family reunion process often takes a very long time, refugees can spend months or even years in a state of limbo, torn between settling in the UK and worrying about family members overseas. Interviewees described how 17 of the families who had been separated from their loved ones continued to attend activities that helped with integration, such as English classes and volunteering, but struggled to put their hearts into it because they did not feel ready to put down roots in a new community without their family, or they were distracted, worrying about their relatives. In one interview, a resettlement team manager spoke about a mother, father and adult son from Syria who had been separated from another adult son in Germany – one of the very few cases where the separated family member had made it to Europe. Although the family wanted to rebuild their lives in the UK, their immediate priority was to see their son and brother. This was clear from their meetings with Refugee Council staff:

*'We do want your help, but only after we sort everything with our travel documents. We don't want to do any kind of English now, we don't want to do volunteering now – we will do in the future, but all we want to have now is help with applying for a visa and getting to Germany to see our son.'*



– Hannah Picking, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager, paraphrasing

The interviews revealed, then, that it is hard for people to devote themselves to settling down in a new country when they do not know whether their family members will be able to join them. Successful integration requires work and mental energy that is often not available to refugees experiencing family separation. Just as many people who have not experienced displacement would not choose to migrate to a new country without their families, refugees feel hesitant about putting down roots in a new community when their loved ones are not with them.

#### **Box 2: Tarek's story**

Tarek, a Syrian man, was resettled in the UK with his family in July 2016. Tarek was happy to reach a place of safety when he arrived in the UK, and looked forward to being joined by his son Kawa and his grandchildren in the near future. When Tarek was told that Kawa was not eligible for family reunion because he had turned 18, he was devastated. Before they were forced to flee their homes, Kawa had been the family's main breadwinner and had helped Tarek with day-to-day tasks, so Tarek struggled to continue family life without his son's support. The whole family were so upset about Kawa's absence that they would talk about him in all their meetings with counsellors and Refugee Council staff, in the desperate hope that someone would be able to help them. But Kawa is not eligible for refugee family reunion, regardless of the fact that his family needs him. He is still in Turkey and the family continues to struggle without him.

## **5.2 NO MENTAL ENERGY: THE IMPACT OF WORRY, GUILT AND MENTAL ILLNESS ON INTEGRATION**

*'I think it's really difficult for [them] to understand because someone is in danger and they need to come here, so it's really hard to understand why [the UK Government] wouldn't let them come here.'*

– Hannah Picking, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

Throughout the interviews, Refugee Council staff repeatedly described how the psychological impact of separation limits people's ability to integrate. They explained that people dealing with worry about separated family members and with depression, guilt and anxiety often struggle to concentrate on learning English, volunteering or socializing with other people around them. Interviewees indicated that in 33 of the 44 cases, family members experienced worry, guilt or mental health issues while separated from their loved ones. In eight of the cases, people were so upset that they struggled to leave the house or take any steps towards integrating at all. For instance, one interviewee described the case of Tonia, a mother from East Africa who had come to the UK with one of her children but was separated from her other child and her sister, who had been kidnapped from their refugee camp in Kenya and were trying to make it back to the camp. He explained that Tonia was so upset and

concerned about her child and sister that she struggled to focus in important meetings:

*'She was really worried and anxious about her family members, crying in our drop-ins, crying in our sessions, in our visits and everything, and that has affected her integration.'*

– Tesfamhret Tsegazghi, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

Another interviewee spoke about Aster, a single mother from the Horn of Africa who had been separated from her three children for over 8 years and whose story is described on page 15. Although she had believed she would be able to reunite with them in the UK, upon arrival she learned that the procedures for family reunion were much stricter and more complicated than she expected; because two of her children were over 18, they were not eligible for reunion, and even reuniting with her youngest child would be very difficult. This pushed her into a condition of such deep despair that she would rarely leave the house, and this in turn affected her ability to form social bonds with neighbours and other people around her.

A project worker who was interviewed described how Mwanza, a lone father from Central Africa who had been separated from his wife and daughter and found it difficult to settle down in the UK, despite his best efforts:

*'He's going through the motions of doing the things that he needs to do to live here, but emotionally he's not feeling connected, or he doesn't feel like it's his home because his family aren't here.'*

– Jessica Ross, Refugee Council Project Worker

She also mentioned that Mwanza struggled to focus during his English classes because he was worried about his separated wife and daughter, who had been left behind in a refugee camp.

*'He says: "I sit in the class [...] but I'd walk out of there and not have learned anything [...] Other people seem able to remember things from one class to another, but I'm not really concentrating on what's being said, my mind's elsewhere, and I don't remember things from week to week, and then I feel like I'm behind and it affects my motivation.'"*

– Jessica Ross, Refugee Council Project Worker

The project worker explained that this delay in Mwanza's progress in English classes affected both his further integration and his ability to support his family. Because English language skills are usually required to obtain a job, a delay in language learning also delays employability, and Mwanza needed to earn money to bring his family to the UK. This delay in employability negatively affected his mental health, thus creating a vicious cycle.

Another, more surprising, insight from the research was that, for some refugees, seasonality may have an impact on integration. This was highlighted by one interviewee, who explained that Syrian families' anxieties about separated family members escalated during the winter months, when conditions in Lebanon and Jordan worsen.

## 5.2.1 Mental illness

*‘She said: “Yes, it [the money she had received] is plenty, but my belly is empty all the time because my kids are not eating, and this house is safe but I don’t feel safe because my children are not safe over there.”*

– Tesfamhret Tsegazghi, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

Refugee Council staff reported seeing family separation have a negative impact on the mental health of their clients. In 18 of the 44 cases discussed, they described symptoms commonly associated with anxiety, depression or other mental health problems for at least one family member which they believed had been brought on, or exacerbated, by being separated from their relatives. As explained above, this made it more difficult for refugees to take steps towards integrating. Moreover, separation puts additional pressure on service providers, as individuals with mental health problems often require additional counselling support to manage their illness.

Eight cases illustrated that family separation had significantly exacerbated severe mental health problems. For instance, two interviewees gave examples of cases where refugees experiencing family separation had had suicidal thoughts. One interviewee described how Refugee Council staff were concerned about Mario, a father from Syria who had been settled in the UK with his wife and son but had been separated from his adult son and his daughter-in-law, who remained in Lebanon. Mario expressed suicidal thoughts, but he refused mental health treatment because he did not think it would help: as he made clear to his Refugee Council project worker, he only wanted to be reunited with his son. In another case, Shivan was resettled in the UK with his elderly parents. When his application to bring his fiancée to join him was refused, he attempted suicide. When he was discharged from hospital, he went to Syria to join her, sacrificing his resettlement place in a safe country to be with her.

Another interviewee described how Munin, a single woman from the Middle East with severe trauma caused by torture she had experienced before arriving in the UK, was separated from her late brother’s two young sons, who had witnessed her and their father being tortured. The knowledge that she was unable to bring her nephews to safety in the UK, despite the fact that they were in danger, had a significant impact on her trauma. Munin’s mental health problems, as attested by her doctor, became so serious that she was unable to leave the house.

The mental health of children, as well as adults, was negatively affected as a result of separation from family members. One interviewee described the case of a family with young children who had been separated from their grandparents who had previously been very involved in their lives, helping to raise the children. The children found the separation very distressing; after telephone calls with their grandparents, they would become very upset, to the extent of deliberately harming themselves. Again, intervention was required to support the children and improve their psychological condition.

*'We had issues with children harming themselves and getting really distressed when they were [speaking with] their grandparents ... and when they came off the phone they were becoming very distressed, there were some self-harm concerns.'*

– Sarah Rollin, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

Although mental health support is sometimes available, Refugee Council staff explained that often this has only limited success in helping people who are experiencing family separation. For instance, when describing the case of a Syrian couple and their three children who had been separated from the father's elderly, unwell father who remained in Lebanon, the interviewee explained:

*'You can't stop that feeling. If your dad's in another country, he's frail, he could die at any moment – you can't get away from that fact. A lot of these cases actually do take up a referral for counselling, but the feelings are still there. There's no quick fix to it, is there?'*

– Richard Orton, Refugee Council Project Worker

Overall, the interviews clearly demonstrated that family separation has a serious impact on the mental well-being of refugees. Family separation can exacerbate the struggles of people who have already experienced a great deal of hardship. Moreover, because mental illness makes it harder to focus on navigating processes in a new country, its impact is another example of how family separation hinders integration.

### **Box 3: Sayid's story**

Sayid escaped from Syria and was resettled in the UK with his wife and children. But he is struggling to focus on his new life because of his anxiety about Nizar, his younger brother, who is just 17 and who is still stuck in Syria. His concern is entirely understandable: both the Syrian army and ISIS, also known as Daesh, threatened Nizar when he refused to join them and he narrowly escaped a kidnapping attempt.

Sayid encouraged him to try to irregularly cross the border into the neighbouring country in search of refuge. It wasn't an easy journey for Nizar. People were being shot at and he remained trapped in Syria for several months. He has now finally made it across, but he is still alone in a region convulsed by conflict. Sayid continues to worry about him, and what he really wants is to bring him to the UK to live with him in safety.

## **5.2.2 Guilt**

*'They're just not able to get past the fact that somebody they love is in danger and they can't help them, and they're here, safe, and there's a massive amount of guilt around that.'*

– Amilee Collins, Refugee Council Project Worker

Another key theme which came up across the interviews is that people who have found refuge in the UK often feel guilty about being in a safe country and

having signs of a good life, like accommodation and sufficient food, while their family members continue to struggle abroad. In over half of the cases described in the interviews, this was mentioned explicitly. These feelings of guilt affected people's mental health and their ability to focus on integration.

For instance, one interviewee described how Mwanza, the lone father from Central Africa (see page 18) who had been separated from his wife and daughter and has been unable to reunite with them so far because he does not have the necessary documentation, felt completely unable to enjoy himself because he was aware that his family were struggling back in a refugee camp.

*'He said to me, for example, "Every time that I eat I'm thinking about them and that they don't have enough food, and so I feel terrible eating or going shopping, or every time I go and enjoy myself I'm thinking about them and that they're not enjoying themselves and they're not here.'"*

– Jessica Ross, Refugee Council Project Worker

The interviewee explained that this guilt affected this father in particular because he felt that, coming from a country where men are expected to take on the responsibility of supporting the family, he should be doing more to support his. Although he was referred to his GP for help, he found it difficult to accept it because of the stigma associated with admitting vulnerability. In any case, this support could only go part of the way towards helping him because, ultimately, he was still separated from his family.

Refugee Council staff also explained that guilt affected families' ability to focus on rebuilding their lives because they often felt pressure to do everything they could to help their separated family members. This pressure was partly self-imposed – a result of their own knowledge of the conditions their loved ones were living in, the precariousness of their circumstances and the risks they were facing – and partly a result of the fact that separated family members abroad often did not understand how difficult the family reunion process is, and would ask the person in the UK to do more. In an effort to prove that they were doing everything they could, some refugees sought legal advice even when the chances of a successful application were low, or sent large sums of money to try to improve the lives of their family in the short term. For instance, one interviewee described how Samba, a mother from Central Africa who had been resettled in the UK with two of her children but separated from her daughter and grandchildren, sent a large proportion of her money to them to try to assuage her feelings of guilt:

*'Samba sent every bit of money she had to her family and lived in poverty, her children here had nothing, she literally sent all of her money, because she couldn't cope with [the fact] that some of her children were here and fine and some of them were still back in the refugee camp and had nothing.'*

– Amilee Collins, Refugee Council Project Worker

Interviewees often emphasized the fact that refugees feel disempowered because they have very little control over their situation – no matter how hard they try to help their family or prove that they are doing something to help, they

are unlikely to make any difference if their separated relatives are not eligible for refugee family reunion. Family separation, therefore, also hinders integration as refugees who have found safety in the UK are likely to struggle with intense feelings of guilt, which in turn makes it harder for them to concentrate on their own integration.

## 5.3 INTERDEPENDENCY

### 5.3.1 Overwhelmed with caring responsibilities

Others also suffer because the practical implications of being separated from family affect their own ability to integrate. In the interviews, 10 examples were mentioned of families who were either permanently or temporarily separated from someone who had previously taken on substantial caring responsibilities. This caused the remaining family in the UK to become overwhelmed as a result of the extra workload. Families who are especially vulnerable – those with children and elderly or disabled relatives – are most likely to be affected by such circumstances.

#### Box 4: Joram's story

Joram is in his late twenties. He was resettled to the UK from Lebanon with his parents and his seven-year-old sister Haya. His parents have serious medical conditions that require long-term care: kidney failure has left his father needing dialysis three times a week and he also suffers from heart problems requiring more medical interventions; his mother has severe mental health needs and rarely leaves the house. Joram looks after all three of them.

Before they arrived in the UK, Joram shared the responsibility for caring for his parents and sister with his brother Zain. However, Zain was not resettled with his family and remains in Lebanon, effectively doubling Joram's already considerable care responsibilities.

Joram finds his new life very stressful and has no time to look after himself, let alone make new friends – he turned down the Refugee Council's suggestion that he attend a social group for Arabic speakers because he just didn't have the time. The situation is taking its toll on him and on his parents and little sister. He struggles to put on weight and frequently gets sick himself. If Joram is ill, without Zain around to help there is no one to take Haya to school or take his parents to their medical appointments.

The family has heard that Zain is not eligible for resettlement at this time. Neither is he eligible for refugee family reunion. Joram sees no end to his stressful circumstances, and no opportunity to focus on his new life in the UK.

One interviewee described how a Syrian family of two parents, three adult children and two grandchildren were separated from their adult son Aran, who had no prospect of reuniting under the existing family reunion rules because he was an adult. This had a large impact on the family because Sulayman, Aran's adult brother in the UK, has cerebral palsy, the other two siblings are sisters and not as physically strong and the parents are unwell, and so the separated son had played an important role in caring for his brother – for instance, by lifting him when he needed to be moved. In this case, separation made it much

more difficult for the family to live their day-to-day lives and this, in turn, meant that they had less time and energy to focus on integration.

Separation from a family member who had previously acted as a carer often affected the ability of adult family members to attend English classes and volunteering or job centre appointments. For instance, one project worker described how Katobu, a mother from Central Africa who had been separated from her husband, struggled to take care of her two children alone, without her husband or the social support network that she was used to. She had a complicated school run that required two buses to get the oldest child to school – which often left her running so late that it was not worth taking the younger child to her three-hour nursery class, limiting the child's chance to mix with other children in the community and costing her precious time when she could have focused on her own integration. It also made her late for her English class. This had a knock-on effect on other elements of her integration, as fluency in English is often necessary for employment. Thus, separation from the husband had a significant impact on the integration of the whole family.

*'She felt that as a lone parent she was unable to do anything, and if only her husband was here then her life would be much better, that then she'd be able to do stuff [...] She didn't really want to go to English classes, it's too hard, her two children were at different schools so she had a complicated school run, so actually she was right, it was difficult, she couldn't get to English classes on time, she was having to be late every day because she had to take her child on two buses to get to school and she felt like, "Oh if only my husband were here then everything will be fine".'*

– Jessica Ross, Refugee Council Project Worker

### **5.3.2 Separated family members with care needs**

In other cases, the separated family member was not in a position to look after themselves, and would have been dependent on their resettled family members if they were able to live in the same country together. This might be due to an existing relationship before flight or to dependency that developed due to a change in circumstances after the family had arrived in the UK – for instance, the death of other family members elsewhere who fulfilled a care function. For these families, anxiety about the vulnerable family member living without care or protection hindered their ability to integrate.

In one interview, a resettlement manager described how Rolan, a Syrian father in the UK with his wife and three children, felt very guilty about leaving his adult sister, Yana, behind in Lebanon, as she was suffering from severe mental health problems. Rolan's anxieties increased when he was sent videos of Yana in visibly extreme mental distress. The interviewee described how Rolan wanted to do everything he could to prove he was trying to help his sister – even if that meant going back to Lebanon.

*'He's now told us that he wants to go to Lebanon because he just feels like he has to do something to support her in some way, so he thinks that if he goes to visit her in Lebanon that will show that he's supporting her because he feels really, really guilty. But it's really difficult for him to*

*go to Lebanon, and he just said, "I just need to show that I am trying, at least trying to get there to help her or bring her over" – he's got to prove it to them and himself.'*

– Hannah Picking, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

Another interviewee described how a Syrian couple, Rafiq and Marla, became extremely anxious about Wael, their disabled nephew, who was alone and without care in Turkey during the winter months. Rafiq felt especially worried and guilty, and would send a large proportion of his money to his nephew because he felt that it was the only thing he could do to help. Of course, this left the family in the UK significantly poorer as a consequence. The interviewee also described how this separation had a major impact on Rafiq's mental health, and explained that an intervention had to be made to support him to feel more capable of building a life in the UK. She emphasized, however, that this intervention had only limited success, because it did not improve Wael's situation in Turkey and so did not solve the root cause of Rafiq's anxiety.

In both these cases, the resettled family were so preoccupied with worry about the condition of their separated vulnerable relatives that their ability to focus on their own integration was diminished. As explained in the rest of section 5.3, feelings of guilt and mental health problems were also found to hinder integration in other cases.

## 5.4 FAMILIES RESORT TO DESPERATE MEASURES

As section 5 has established, family separation has a huge practical and psychological impact on the lives of refugees, and family unity is a very high priority for most people. It is unsurprising, then, that the interviews showed that many families will go to great lengths to try to reunite with their loved ones.

In at least six of the cases from the interviews, people made large financial sacrifices to attempt to reunite, due to the prohibitive costs of legal aid. Although family reunion applications are free, they are completed in English and legal support is sometimes required in the absence of other evidence of a relationship, so solicitors and sometimes interpreters may be required to complete an application, both of which cost significant sums.<sup>46</sup> Costs can add up further if there are complications with an application – for instance, if a DNA test is needed, or the case is taken to court to be appealed after an initial refusal. Indeed, there can be very many costs hidden in the application process: in one case, a family reunion application was delayed because the family could not afford to fly a separated child to the nearest UK embassy to be interviewed for the application.



### Box 5: Gilmar's story

Gilmar, from Central Africa, was resettled to the UK with two of his daughters in 2016. He hoped that on arrival here he would be able to apply to bring his 15-year-old daughter and his granddaughter to join them. But he has faced obstacles at every turn, including having to pay for DNA tests to support his application. Gilmar is already stretched financially. So, worried for their safety, he has been sending money to a local pastor to look after the girls.

Although these costs are very substantial for refugees who are just beginning to rebuild their lives in the UK, people will often do everything they can to raise funds. Interviewees frequently mentioned that refugees would borrow large sums of money from family, friends or their broader community to support their application, even when it was obvious that they would be unable to repay the funds for a long period of time. One interviewee described a family who put aside £10 from their benefits every week to save the £500 they needed to support their family reunion application. Not only did this add pressure to their financial situation, but it delayed their application by 50 weeks. Therefore, the costs associated with making an application for refugee family reunion can considerably delay the process, prolonging the length of time families are apart and delaying their integration into British society.

In some interviews, Refugee Council staff described cases where families had taken drastic measures in desperation to be reunited with their family, with at least five families affected in this way. Aran's family became so desperate for him to be with them that, after several unsuccessful attempts to reunite, they paid a smuggler to bring him to the UK from Germany, where he had been living. Aran is now in the UK trying to resolve his immigration status. The interviewee described how the family continue to struggle to focus on taking steps to integrate due to this continued uncertainty about their son's future in the UK.

*'The mum especially says she can't settle, she doesn't know what the plan is [...] They're in limbo at the moment [...] She's saying to me, "I just really want to settle down, get a job, have a car, share things with him," and I think this [uncertainty] has put things on hold and prevented her from being able to do that.'*

– Hannah Picking, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

In another interview, a project worker described how Shivan returned to Syria to be with his fiancée after his family reunion application was unsuccessful.

*'He was so anxious that he's left, he's gone to Syria. Who on earth goes to Syria? But that's where he's gone because he needed to go protect her. He couldn't do it by any other means. His level of anxiety was so high that he was willing to get killed in the process.'*

– Amilee Collins, Refugee Council Project Worker

#### **Box 6: Mario's story**

Mario and his family were so desperate to see Faraz, their adult son in Lebanon, that they decided to try and get a visa to go there. Despite the fact that their application for a visa was turned down, Mario and his wife borrowed substantial sums of money and went anyway. When they arrived in Lebanon, they were held at the airport for 48 hours and, ultimately, deported.

Interviewees also explained that some refugees consider refusing offers of resettlement in other countries because they are holding on to the hope of being able to reunite with their family in the UK. Zenon, an adult brother in one Syrian family, was offered a resettlement place in Australia but considered refusing it because the rest of his family were in the UK, even though he was not eligible for family reunion under existing UK rules. The interviewee emphasized that refusing an offer of resettlement is extremely risky, because if a refugee turns down one offer it is possible that they will never be resettled.

## **5.5 REUNIFICATION AS A FACILITATOR OF INTEGRATION**

Refugee Council project workers were encouraged to share examples of both family separation and family reunion in their interviews. While the majority of the cases provided were unsurprisingly ones of ongoing family separation, project workers did share 11 positive examples of families who had been reunited after a period of separation. Almost all of these cases,<sup>47</sup> including the example below, indicated that family reunion acts as a positive accelerator of integration for both the new arrivals and for family members already in the UK. This is partly because reunited families share important practical information with one another about British culture and processes. Because the information comes from a family member, the new arrivals trust it immediately and are able to quickly take it on board in a way that expedites their integration.

### Box 7: Tesfay's story

Tesfay is a young man from the Horn of Africa who was resettled in the UK in early 2016 after being released from detention in Egypt. Although he was happy to finally be in a safe country, when he arrived he was very anxious about his fiancée Aatifa who was left alone in East Africa. Although Tesfay initially found employment upon arrival in the UK, he became so depressed and worried about her during the lengthy family reunion application process because she was a lone woman without protection in a country that was not her own that he had to stop working. He found it so difficult to engage with his life in the UK that the Refugee Council referred him to mental health services. Because of the impact on his mental health, Tesfay's integration was seriously compromised during the time he was separated from Aatifa.

Happily, Tesfay's application was eventually successful. When Aatifa arrived in the UK, Tesfay's situation completely turned around. His mental health improved rapidly and he was able to return to work. Aatifa took up studying to facilitate her own integration. Tesfay now feels ready to learn about his new city, and has been enjoying exploring it with Aatifa. The two of them are now taking steps to organize their wedding, and they have a baby on the way. As Tesfay's project worker explained:

*'Tesfay didn't [feel settled here] until [Aatifa] arrived and now quite clearly he does, the change in him is immense. They engage with everything, they're all over the place, they're enjoying the city to the best of their ability now. You see them at art galleries and it wouldn't even have occurred to him to go out and enjoy himself somewhere [before she arrived].'*

– Amilee Collins, Refugee Council Project Worker

One interviewee mentioned a case of a Syrian family with two young children whose relatives, including adult siblings and their children, had been resettled and housed nearby. She explained that when the first family arrived, they struggled with the fact that the walk to the children's school was very long, and so the Refugee Council provided them with donated second-hand bicycles to make the journey more manageable. She explained that when the other relatives arrived and faced the same situation, they adapted far more easily and readily, thanks to the advice from their family:

*'They've had the same problem where the school is really far away, they've found that really difficult, but when they spoke to their family and they said, "Oh no, it's fine with bikes", they said "Okay that's fine, if my brother can do that, that's what we'll do as well." [...] Things that we would have thought would be a problem haven't been because I think they've had that support before they've arrived and have a bit more of an understanding of what's normal here.'*

– Hannah Picking, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

Similarly, in another interview, a project worker mentioned that one Syrian family required less support with integration because they had heard a lot about life in the UK prior to arrival from relatives already resettled here. The project worker also mentioned that the arrival of other family members helped the mother of the first family in particular in terms of her mental health, and that generally the whole family seemed much happier about their lives in the UK after their relatives arrived.

Refugee Council staff also explained that when refugees are able to bring their loved ones to join them it can facilitate integration, in part because caring responsibilities can be shared by more people, giving them all more time to take steps towards integrating into UK society. One interviewee described how the sharing of care responsibilities enabled more family members to attend an intensive English language course during the summer, as the adults took turns to look after the children. In this situation, family reunion accelerated the integration of both the new arrivals and the family who had initially arrived in the UK.

Another project worker described the case of a Middle Eastern mother in the UK with her three children and an elderly aunt, who was separated from her husband. The project worker explained that, during the period of separation, the mother did not have time to focus on learning English or furthering her integration because she was so busy looking after her aunt and children, as previously her husband had provided a lot of hands-on help. The project worker also mentioned that the mother felt less safe in the UK without her husband. However, she emphasized that life improved significantly for the family once the husband joined them. When he arrived, he gained employment and was able to help his wife with the caring responsibilities. As a result, she became less stressed, and the whole family had more time to focus on their integration.

*'If he hadn't come I don't know what the impact would have been on them. Everything was waiting for him to come [...] Life changed when he got here [...] They're now building their lives, working, contributing, engaging, speaking English, all of the things they were not doing before the family member arrived.'*

– Amilee Collins, Refugee Council Project Worker

There were similar stories about other families. Another interviewee described a case of two parents and a child from East Africa who devoted all their efforts to reuniting with their daughter until their application was successful, but at the expense of their integration. However, when the daughter arrived they quickly began to settle down, and the father then had time to begin work as both an interpreter with the Refugee Council and a labourer in a bakery. In another interview, a resettlement team manager described how a Syrian family with four children found it much easier to settle down in the UK after the mother's parents arrived:

*'The difference to that family that we're working with is remarkable, you can just see how well settled they are because they have some family [...] It's made them feel like they've got a real future here, and I think when people have got close relatives who aren't here, it's really difficult for them to see a long-term future when they know that they might never join them.'*

– Sarah Rollin, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

In another interview, a project worker described how even families who cope very well with the difficult circumstances of separation benefit enormously from reunion. She told how one mother from the Horn of Africa coped quite well practically in the UK without her husband, in part because of the support of

other family members such as her brother, but continued to experience undercurrents of anxiety and ill health until she was reunited with him.

*'She's a lone parent, she was a fairly resilient person so she was quite a strong woman and she did cope on her own with her daughter and she accessed support from the community and from her brother, who was also here, but she did suffer from anxiety and she did have trouble sleeping. So practically she was coping, she was accessing services, she was getting support, she was taking her daughter to nursery, but she did struggle to sleep at night and she did suffer from anxiety, and she was reunited with her husband which was incredibly positive for her [...] [She] was so relieved and so excited that she almost felt like her troubles were over really.'*

– Jessica Ross, Refugee Council Project Worker

The project worker explained that, when the father arrived in the UK, the mother's mental health drastically improved. The reunion was beneficial too for the mother's brother, as he was relieved of his caring obligations and could focus again on his own family and his own life.

Many refugee families are likely to face difficult decisions, with only certain family members eligible to join them in the UK. This was true of some of the cases in the research sample, including that of John, who was able to bring his wife to join him, but not his children, as they had turned 18. His project worker described how, before the reunion, John was very depressed and lonely, but when his wife arrived he became much happier and began to volunteer with the Refugee Council.

*'[After John's wife arrived] I have seen a different person, a very happy person with having his wife here, and life was completely different. He is starting volunteering for us [...] there was a barrier there before but that barrier has been removed after the family reunion happened.'*

– Tesfamhret Tsegazghi, Refugee Council Resettlement Team Manager

However, the interviewee emphasized that John continued to feel guilty and upset about his ongoing separation from his children, and so his happiness at being joined by his wife was tinged with feelings of guilt and sadness. So, while a partial reunion can facilitate integration, refugees in the UK may continue to experience psychological distress due to continuing separation from other family members.

### Box 8: John's story

John fled Ethiopia in 2004 in fear of his life. He has not seen his children in more than 10 years, and he has two grandchildren whom he has never met. He has now been resettled in the UK, but devastatingly, has given up hope of ever being reunited with his children.

*'I do not know what they look like even. I don't know who they are. Even their voices I barely recognize.'*

Before leaving Ethiopia, John had already been imprisoned twice for opposing the government. When friends warned him that security agents were after him again, he left his home, wife and four children and fled. He ended up in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, and survived in appalling conditions there for more than a decade.

*'Life in the camp was terrible. What you drink, what you eat. Food was maize, no vegetables, no meat. Very dusty and hot. Living in a tent – not even a tent, a piece of wood and plastic. The wind tore it down, the rain would come inside. It was a very difficult life in the camp. When I remember, sometimes I don't sleep.'*

Scared that his family would be imprisoned if he tried to make contact, he was completely cut off from them for over a year. Two of his teenage children went in search of him, and travelled to the camp with the help of relatives. The camp conditions proved too tough, and eight months later they returned to their mother and John was alone again.

In 2015, 11 years after arriving in Kakuma refugee camp, John was offered a resettlement place in the UK. He arrived full of hope that he could finally reunite with his family. His wife was eventually able to join him, but it was extremely challenging raising enough money to pay the legal fees and travel costs – every week John put a small amount aside, and he begged and borrowed from friends.

The news that his children could not join him in the UK was crushing: by then young adults, they were no longer eligible for refugee family reunion. His only option is to sponsor them via the general family migration route, which is prohibitively expensive.

*'An old man like me, I don't have the skills of this country. I can't get enough money to sponsor them to come... I feel really sorry. The government has helped me. I give thanks for Britain every time because it is helping me, not only me, but other refugees too. But we're not happy without having our children with us.'*

He worries about his children all the time. He says it is still not safe to speak on the phone: when he does talk to them he only makes small talk, scared that someone might be listening and that a more genuine conversation might endanger them. He has now given up hope that he will ever see them again.

*'Since she [his wife] joined me, I improved. My personality has improved. I can settle, somewhat I am happy. But due to the children's absence I feel pain.'*

# 6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the most important conclusions to be drawn from this research is that family reunion acts as a positive accelerator of integration for both the new arrivals and family members already in the UK. In nine of the 11 cases in the study where refugees *were* able to bring their family members to the UK, it supported their ability to integrate into British society. This is encouraging and suggests that efforts to address refugee family separation will not only have a positive impact on the welfare of refugees but also on their integration into UK society, and therefore on wider social cohesion.

Unfortunately, these were a relatively small fraction of the cases that the research highlighted. For 33 of the 44 refugee families included in this study, their struggle to bring family members to the UK to join them undermined their attempts to rebuild their lives and hindered their integration and that of their family members, due to the sheer stress and strain involved. The research found that many also faced a heavy burden in caring for family members without the support of others left behind, or made large financial sacrifices either because of the costs involved in making a refugee family reunion application and/or because they were sending money to separated relatives about whom they were anxious – costs they could ill afford as they endeavoured to find their feet in the UK.

A small minority of cases considered in this research were in fact eligible for refugee family reunion, and the ongoing family separation was caused by problems with the application process. These difficulties are not the focus of this research as they are well documented elsewhere, including in the British Red Cross report, *Not So Straightforward*, which calls for a simplified application form, improvements to guidance and efforts to make the process safer, given that some people are required to cross borders in conflict zones in order to submit their applications.<sup>48</sup> The inspection of family reunion by the Independent Chief Inspector for Borders and Immigration also called for improvements to the process and, in particular, for the provision of funding for DNA testing where needed.<sup>49</sup> This new research from Refugee Council and Oxfam supports these earlier calls – calls to which the government has yet to respond.

However, for most of the families included in the research sample, these changes would not go far enough, as the fundamental problem is that the UK Government does not consider their loved ones to be their family, regardless of their bonds of love and belonging. For this group, unless they are able to demonstrate compassionate and exceptional circumstances (which would undoubtedly require legal support), they have almost no possibility of having their loved ones rejoin them.

At a time of unprecedented global displacement, the Refugee Council and Oxfam are calling on the UK Government to lead by example, proactively helping more refugee families to rebuild their lives together in the UK by

changing the rules so that they better recognize the true nature of families, whatever their shape or size. Specifically, the UK Government should:

1. Expand the criteria for who qualifies as a 'family member' for the purposes of refugee family reunion to include:
  - young relatives who are reliant on the family unit for their well-being at the time of application, including stepchildren and de-facto adopted children;
  - adult sons and daughters who had not formed their own family prior to the refugee fleeing their country of origin;
  - adult siblings who had not formed their own family prior to the refugee fleeing their country of origin;
  - parents;
  - post-flight spouses and their children who are part of the family unit;
  - any dependent relative, including where being separated presents risks to their safety and security;
  - any person of whom the person granted refugee leave or humanitarian protection is a dependent relative.
2. Reintroduce legal aid for refugee family reunion cases.



# NOTES

- 1 UNHCR (2013). *A New Beginning: Refugee Integration in Europe*. Retrieved September 2017 from <http://www.unhcr.org/52403d389.pdf>
- 2 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights prescribes that the family is the fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) requires that the widest possible protection and assistance be granted to the family. International law also requires states to take action to reunite separated families, and privileges maintenance of the family unit over immigration control: Article 10 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child urges expeditious reunification of children with their parents and Articles 17, 23 and 24 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) have been interpreted by the Human Rights Committee to prohibit arbitrary or unlawful interference by states with the families of non-citizens. There are also references to the protection of the family in international refugee law. The Final Act of the United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries, at which the 1951 Refugee Convention was adopted, recommends that states 'take the necessary measures for the protection of the refugee's family' in particular. UNHCR Executive Committee Resolutions 22 and 24 call on governments to respect the principle of family unity.
- 3 UK Home Office. *Family Visas: Apply, Extend or Switch*. Retrieved September 2017 from <https://www.gov.uk/uk-family-visa>
- 4 UK Home Office. *Immigration Rules part 11: Asylum*, paragraphs 352A to 352FI. Retrieved September 2017 from <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-part-11-asylum>
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- 6 Unmarried or same-sex partner applications are eligible only where the sponsor was recognized as a refugee on or after 9 October 2006.
- 7 UK Home Office. *Settlement: Refugee or Humanitarian Protection*. Retrieved September 2017 from <https://www.gov.uk/settlement-refugee-or-humanitarian-protection/family-applying-as-dependants>
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- 12 House of Lords EU Select Committee. *Children in crisis: unaccompanied migrant children in the EU*. Retrieved November 2017 from <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldcom/34/3406.htm>
- 13 United Nations. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved September 2017 from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 UK Home Office (2016). *Family Reunion: for refugees and those with humanitarian protection*. Retrieved September 2017 from <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/58b014c94.pdf>
- 16 House of Lords (2017) Second Reading Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill. Retrieved December 2017 from [https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2017-12-15/debates/B90C7204-C90C-471D-830F-AB8B7BC45F67/Refugees\(FamilyReunion\)Bill\(HL\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2017-12-15/debates/B90C7204-C90C-471D-830F-AB8B7BC45F67/Refugees(FamilyReunion)Bill(HL))
- 17 UK Government. *Immigration Rules part 8: Family Members*. Retrieved September 2017 from <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-part-8-family-members>
- 18 UK Government Legislation (2012). *Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012*. Retrieved September 2017 from <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/10/contents/enacted>

- 19 Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (2012). *Guidance on Competence*, p.12. Retrieved September 2017 from [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/327534/guidance\\_on\\_competence\\_2012.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/327534/guidance_on_competence_2012.pdf)
- 20 British Red Cross (2015). *Not So Straightforward: the need for qualified legal support in refugee family reunion*. Retrieved September 2017 from [http://www.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/About us/Not so straightforward refugee family reunion report 2015.pdf](http://www.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/About%20us/Not%20so%20straightforward%20refugee%20family%20reunion%20report%202015.pdf)
- 21 The Gateway Protection Programme is the UK's contribution to the UNHCR global resettlement programme. Candidates for resettlement to the UK will have been classified by UNHCR field offices as refugees and selected on the basis that they have pressing humanitarian or security needs, are not able to return to their countries of origin and cannot integrate locally. The Home Office then makes the decision on who to accept under the UK programme, which has a limit currently set at 750 people per year. See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gateway-protection-programme-information-for-organisations/gateway-protection-programme>
- 22 The Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) was launched in 2014. In September 2015, the then Prime Minister David Cameron announced that the scheme would be expanded to resettle 20,000 Syrians by 2020. In July 2017, the scope of the scheme was expanded again to include other refugees who have fled the conflict in Syria but do not have Syrian nationality. See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/syrian-vulnerable-person-resettlement-programme-fact-sheet>
- 23 Refugees who are identified by UNHCR as in need of resettlement must meet requirements under one of the following categories: legal and/or physical protection needs; survivors of violence and/or torture; medical needs; women and girls at risk; family reunification; children and adolescents at risk; lack of foreseeable alternative durable solutions.
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- 25 The UK currently resettles 750 refugees per year through the Gateway Protection Programme. The last government also committed to resettling 20,000 refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict by 2020 through the VPRS and 3,000 refugees from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region through the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS).
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- 33 UNHCR (2013). *A New Beginning: Refugee Integration in Europe*, op. cit.

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- 37 UNHCR (2013). *A New Beginning: Refugee Integration in Europe*, op. cit.
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- 46 For more information on the costs associated with making a refugee family reunion application, see British Red Cross (2015). *Not So Straightforward*, op. cit.
- 47 Family reunion facilitated integration in at least nine of the 11 successful cases mentioned in interviews.
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