Enforced destitution is being used as an instrument of immigration control and, increasingly, of other government policies which primarily affect the most vulnerable. Quakers believe that there is that of God in every person and strive towards equality of respect. Refusing people any legal means of survival or dignity is denying the divine and humanity, which can never be justified. While we being mindful of settled residents struggling with poverty and destitution because of austerity pay rates and austerity benefit policies, we should neither ignore nor blame those who have sought sanctuary in the U.K.

People seeking asylum are not allowed to do paid work or claim any state benefits. Many are forced into destitution without food, clothing or shelter. Many also do not have friends or family in the UK they can turn to. The precedent of forcing people into destitution is spreading to other groups, including long-term unemployed people, people with mental health problems, children of low or unpaid, dis-benefitted and indebted families, and adults who are sick or disabled. Local authorities have duties towards the latter but do not get adequate central government funding. Legal representation is often needed to persuade Local Authorities to grant accommodation and support. Legal aid is no longer available to secure such legal representation in most cases.

What support is offered to asylum seekers?

Support Payments for people seeking asylum do not lift people out of poverty. The money allowance is around 52% of income support. In 2014 under Section 95, a single person gets £36.62 a week, a couple £72.52. The High Court has ruled that the Home Secretary must revise their support rates upwards. (5)

Asylum seekers whose claim has been refused lose their financial support and accommodation after 3 weeks unless they appeal. They are expected to leave the UK immediately. If they agree to return or if they submit a fresh claim they may qualify for even lower ‘hard case’ Section 4 support, provided only in around 3% of cases. If their fresh claim is recognised, they may receive the slightly higher Section 95 payment. The remainder are not allowed to work and receive nothing.

Why are refused asylum-seekers and other forced migrants still here?

- They are afraid to go back: Most destitute asylum seekers are from countries considered extremely turbulent like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Zimbabwe and Iran. Others have fled from environmental disaster. There is strong evidence that some countries plan to arrest and torture those who return after seeking asylum elsewhere.
- They cannot be returned: The Government cannot return people to countries at war, where there is continued persecution, with uncooperative governments or unreliable means of travel.
- They believe they have a case: Many people apply for asylum in good faith, unaware that their case does not meet the strict criteria of the 1951 Refugee Convention or the European Convention on Human Rights or their case is not recognised. (3)
- They cannot get legal representation to present their case. Legal aid has been drastically cut in the last decade. The number of solicitors doing legal funded asylum representation has shrunk.
• They face threats to life, health and liberty due to environmental or economic catastrophe not currently recognised as grounds for asylum or humanitarian protection by the UK Government.

If the Government stops supporting an asylum seeker it may lose track of their whereabouts, which makes their removal near to impossible. The policy of making people destitute is therefore ultimately self-defeating. Allowing those who have waited 6 months for a Home Office decision to work would be compassionate and save tax payers money. Regularising the immigration status of people who have survived for two years and begun to integrate in the UK, without committing serious crime would be compassionate and cheaper than trying to deport them all. The costs of destitution are greater than those of regularisation. People working and paying taxes and national insurance are net contributors.

Welcoming strangers and enabling them to become contributing members of UK society is in keeping with Quaker commitment to compassion, equality and peace. We recommend that people seeking asylum should be allowed legal means of survival, whether by paid work or by a system of support.

We invite you to look at the QARN website for further information: http://qarn.org.uk

Footnotes and additional information

2. In the past most people from these countries would usually have been given Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR) for four years if not full refugee status, and been allowed to work to support themselves. But in 2003 ELR was replaced by more restrictive categories of discretionary leave to remain.
3. They may have fled violently unstable countries, experienced violence, torture, or environmental catastrophe. Even if a person is legally refused asylum, it does not automatically follow that their claim is unjustified. Even if the government accepts you were persecuted, you may be refused asylum unless you can prove it will happen again.
4. Decision making in relation to some nationalities is especially poor. For example, in 2010, 50% of Somali nationals, 36% of Eritreans and 36% of Zimbabweans who appealed had their refusals overturned. This raises serious doubts about the quality of initial decision making. For every person who successfully overturns a poor decision, many more may be failing due to a lack of quality legal advice.
5. In 1999 the level of support was set at 70 per cent of Income Support, on the basis that it was for a short period of time, and that housing and utilities bills would be paid for separately. Support rates have been further reduced in recent years. Since 2012 – 13 there has been no increase in line with Income Support. Before these recent reductions Refugee Action found evidence of severe hardship, including parents who experienced hunger and were unable to feed their children. They took a case to the High Court and on 9/4/2014 got a ruling upholding their argument that the amount paid to destitute asylum seekers is unlawful because it is insufficient to meet their essential living needs.
6. For more detailed policy recommendations see “Still Human, Still Here” on which QARN and QPSW are represented. http://stillhumanstillhere.wordpress.com/

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