

'Modern slavery' in England is a prevalent problem

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The first evidence of widespread 'modern slavery' in England for refugees and asylum seekers is revealed in a study published today.

The two-year study calls for an overhaul of government policy to restore [asylum seekers'](#) right to [work](#) and ensure all workers can access basic employment rights, such as National Minimum Wage, irrespective of [immigration status](#).

Dr Stuart Hodkinson from the University of Leeds, who co-authored of the study, said: "We found that in the majority of cases, if the asylum seeker had been able to work legally then the employer or agent would not have been able to exploit and abuse them to such an appalling extent."

Researchers interviewed 30 refugees and asylum seekers who had been coerced – either by unscrupulous individuals or by the grim reality of facing destitution – into exploitative jobs in a wide range of fields, including catering, domestic work, retail and construction. They found that all of the interviewees had experiences indicative of forced labour, as outlawed by the Forced Labour Convention of the United Nation's International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Indicators of forced labour experienced by refugees and asylum seekers in the study included the withholding of some or all of promised wages, being forced to work excessively long hours, and threats or other forms of intimidation.

"Many of the interviewees had remained in the country after their claim for asylum had been refused. Without any welfare support or the right to work, they had no alternative but to take severely exploitative jobs or enter highly [abusive relationships](#) to survive," said Dr Hodkinson.

Interviews with 23 practitioners and policy-makers – including employment inspectors, police officers and refugee service providers – also revealed a need to shift the focus of law enforcement from 'illegal' migrant workers to regulating workplace conditions.

"The asylum system favours employers and penalises workers – particularly those without permission to work – creating a situation in which labour exploitation and forced labour flourish," explained Dr Hannah Lewis from the University of Leeds, who co-authored the research.

The study also calls for a need to raise awareness that any form of forced labour is a criminal offence. "We heard from interviewees who had been in contact with the Home Office, but their signs of trafficking or forced labour were not recognised," said Dr Lewis. Furthermore, the only training on forced labour that is currently available to police officers, in most forces, is an optional online module, she added.

Provided by University of Leeds

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