



Women do their own thing!

Fran Jenkin writes: Women from Afghanistan, Iran and Africa who are part of the Exeter refugee community meet regularly to improve their English, share and learn skills and build their self confidence.

The new Outreach Project has been launched following the grant to RSG of £9,597 by Devon Community Foundation from the Exeter Positive Steps Fund.

As the RSG drop-in office is largely male oriented it can be daunting for these women newly arrived here, usually joining their husbands, so we wanted them to feel welcome and less isolated.

Using women's homes for meeting, to reflect the sort of social environment they are

used to meeting in, we get together in a friendly atmosphere to share food, experiences and skills.

So far the RSG volunteers have learnt how to Henna their hands for celebration, how to cook Afghan and Iranian rice and, a particular success, traditional embroidery: 'Ghoul Dozi' (flower sewing). The Afghan and Iranian women are so expert at this that we are starting a Ghoul Dozi business. There will be a Ghoul Dozi workshop on 18th June, at the beginning of Refugee Week, in the drama studio of the Phoenix Art Centre from 1.30 – 3.30. From then we will produce artefacts in readiness for selling for Christmas! We will also provide a few classes on setting up your own business, marketing and publicity.

On 19th March we went to Bristol to look at the work of the Silai (Hindu for sewing) Project and, besides having a fun day out, decided that our women's work was far superior!

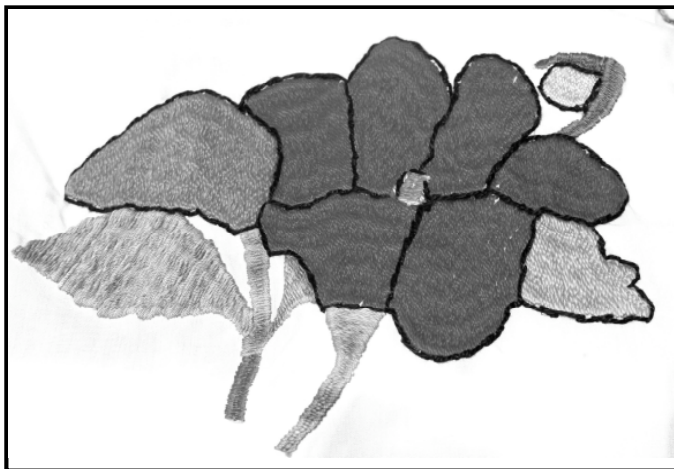
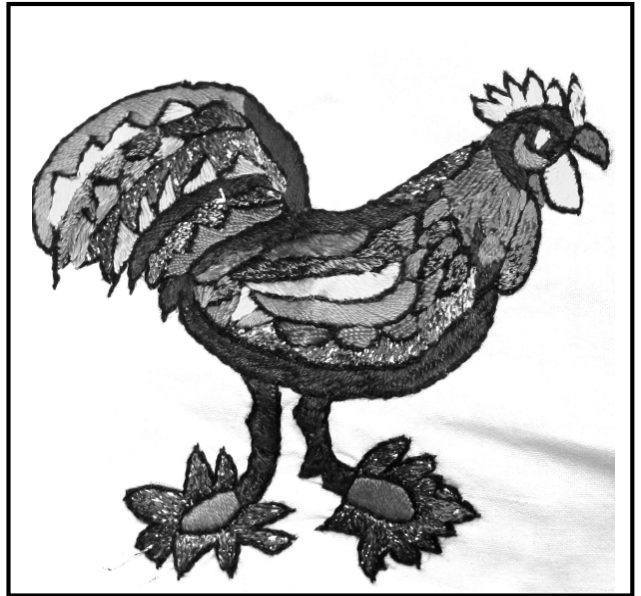
We have all also learnt mono printing, helped by a work-

shop run by Double Elephant, so that we can make our own Eid cards.

Learning and using English, of course, is a major hurdle so besides enabling the women to go to ESOL classes weekly, individual volunteers do one-to-one English in the homes of the women. Shopping trips also supplement the more formal ways of learning English as well as helping the women to find their way around Exeter, use money and understand the vagaries of our supermarkets!

The Positive Steps grant enables us to employ a part-time administrator, who will start work in the RSG office in April. The project will run until March next year. The project however has already a life of its own, is exciting, fun and full of potential, and we hope to continue it after that.

Some of the male refugees and husbands who have been here for years have expressed envy that the women, in such a short time, have made so many friends and are having such a good time! [FJ]



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Sir Paul Getty *and* Progress on Funding *and* Committee report (next page)

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RSG management committee

Next meeting is Wednesday 16th May in Wat Tyler House (see above), 6.45 p.m. Everyone welcome. For information contact the office.

Every meeting starts by considering any proposals or requests put forward by asylum seekers, who are particularly welcome. Agenda items to the office if possible two weeks before the meeting, please.

NB views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Refugee Support Group Devon

Sir Paul Getty

It may be a subject of some irritation for the J Paul Getty Jr Trust that people keep confusing it with the Getty Trust in the USA. As they point out in their website, 'the two trusts, one very large and one small by comparison, should not be confused by people who apply to us!' In fact the patron of the British trust, Sir Paul Getty, was the son of the well-known American tycoon. He was born in California in 1932 and died in London in 2003.

By British standards the Trust is one of our larger charities, with a capital of about £50m. The

success rate of applications to them is only about one in 7, so Annette did really well to get a grant from them.

Sir Paul Getty (pictured, with his wife Victoria) had lived in Britain for years and was passionately Anglophile. He was a British citizen from 1997. Over the years he gave away vast sums from his private fortune (recently he helped to stop his father's trust from taking Canopa's Three Graces out of Britain). He has mostly been interested in the arts and cricket,



and was also a donor to the Conservative Party. His knighthood was awarded for services to charity, in 1986.

The trust set up by him aims at relieving 'misery and poverty in the UK' and is proud to claim that it contributes to 'unpopular causes'.

Progress on funding

Obviously we have been very concerned with the ongoing funding. As things stand we can carry on to the end of July on more or less the present basis, relying on permission to extend the period (though not the amount) of the Community Fund grant and also the last £3000 of a grant from Allen Lane.

The new situation is however both more complex and a little more optimistic, with the grant of £15,000 for each of the next three years from the J Paul Getty Jr Charitable Trust (see

above).

This is not enough to fund our operation in total (which costs about £80,000 a year), but it's obviously a good start. We have also (as reported) obtained grants of £2900 from Sport Relief and £9000 from Positive Steps. Annette has made or is making applications to other charitable funds, notably the Henry Smith Charity, LankellyChase and Awards for All. A number of trustees are also involved in fundraising for individual projects, such as advocacy and Citizenship.

Positive Steps

This is a fund which is maintained by Devon Community Foundation and Exeter City Council. It aims at 'helping people of working age on the road to work by improving their skills and building their confidence and self-esteem'. They are especially interested in helping people 'who may have difficulty participating in the workforce' and have granted £9000 (near their maximum) to RSG for the women's project (see front page). This includes wages for a part-time administrator.

Committee report

The RSG management committee met on 21st February and 21st March.

Fundraising

Obviously this was an important focus of discussion and as reported above the situation is still causing anxiety though some good progress has been made. In the short term the most threatened aspect of our operation is still the Emer-

gency Fund, because the various charitable grants we receive do not allow us to spend money on relief of destitution. There is therefore a crucial ongoing need for donations – many of which will be small – which can go towards this purpose. Renewed efforts are being made to approach local charities and religious congregations, and we receive important contributions from some of our members.

The women's project

This continues to develop in very exciting ways, with a course in business startup planned.

Staffing

Jenny's salary came to an end but she has still been working in the office, much to everyone's relief. The Getty donation will pay for part of our wage costs in the future, but not all. The Posi-

tive Steps grant is a further contribution, but wages are always going to be our largest expense.

Interviews for the Positive Steps post have been held and we are hoping to make an appointment shortly. Applicants were of very high quality.

Refugee Week

Preparations are already well advanced for this year's Refugee Week, scheduled for Saturday 16th June to Sunday 24th. The working group is preparing for publicity. We are still awaiting responses to some of our appeals for funds.

THE BORDERS BILL

The Government's proposals to tighten up immigration are contained in the Borders Bill, the fifth on immigration in eight years, which is currently before Parliament.

In response to last year's crisis over the deportation of foreign criminals, the Bill will introduce mandatory deportation for past or current prisoners convicted of specified offences.

Apart from that the main effects of the Bill if passed will be to introduce further, wide-ranging powers to immigration officers as an alternative to creating a new borders police force, which the Tories have been demanding. Immigration officers will acquire new powers of arrest, detention and prosecution for a wider range of offences. Immigration will be able to impose reporting and place of residence conditions on those with limited leave to remain in the UK.

In addition the Bill aims to make all immigrants obtain biometric Id cards (which will include such information as fingerprints and digital photographs). The Immigration Minister, Liam Byrne, pointed out that at present there are up to sixty different forms of identification which someone can show to prove they are entitled to be in the UK, and sorting this out is a necessary part of toughening enforcement of the law against people who employ immigrants illegally.

The Confederation of British Industry expressed approval of the proposed simplification of identity checks, but warned against letting the burden of checks fall on employers.

The Tories were predictably unimpressed by the Bill: what was needed was not more powers for immigration officers but more competent enforcement of existing rules. Damian Green (Liam Byrne's shadow) remarked that he doubted if the Bill would be much more effective than its seven predecessors. Much the same view was expressed by the Liberal Democrats, who said the main problem was 'administrative incompetence' (echoing the Home Secretary's recent remark that the Home Office was 'not fit for purpose').

Liberty warned that the law could be racially divisive if it led to spot checks on the streets.

Strangers into citizens

As noted last November, this is a campaign launched by a coalition of faith groups fronted by the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns. It is driven by the many local campaigns supporting people threatened with deportation under immigration controls. Campaigners hope to raise public awareness of the problem and persuade the government to introduce policies which will 'regularise' the position of people living in the UK without legal status. It is not solely concerned with refugees, as the problem extends to so-called 'economic migrants'.

This is a campaign about some of the poorest and most vulnerable groups in UK's society. It concerns 'irregular' migrants.

These are people who for a wide variety of reasons end up in Britain illegally. They include people who enter the country illegally, people who enter legally but overstay and failed asylum seekers who do not return home. Estimates of the overall numbers (see panel on next page) have gone as far as 1 million, which would be just over 1½ per cent of the UK population. It need hardly be said that compared with 'front-line' states this is not a high number.

Campaigners believe that the existence of a significant number of irregular migrants in the UK causes a number of problems.

Destitution

In extreme cases individuals can be actually destitute. This is the case for many *failed asylum seekers*. Once your application for asylum is refused you are given 21 days' notice, after which all your support is removed. This policy is based on the assumption that you will voluntarily go home (and there are Government grants to help pay for this). However many asylum seekers genuinely believe they will be in danger if they do. The Government accepts that in some cases this is true: for example the home country may refuse to accept them back, perhaps because they have lost their documents. In such cases the Government offers 'hard case' support. But in many cases this is not forthcoming; and many asylum seekers do not claim it, either because they don't know it exists or because accepting it involves agreeing to go home whenever conditions change, and they are afraid this means they may be deported. The government's criteria are harsh, and many have been deported when independent evidence suggests they will be in serious danger. So many asylum seekers go underground. It is illegal for them to work, but some may do so, in which case they suffer the same problems as illegal workers. Without any income, others survive with the help of friends (often other failed asylum seekers,

or ethnic communities) or charities. Many end up on the streets.

Health care

Many cannot access health care because the NHS has been told to refuse it, or charge for it; or because they are afraid going to the NHS will result in deportation.

Some destitute asylum seekers are members of families with children. Under Section 9 of Asylum and Immigration Act (Treatment of Claimants etc) 2004 they risk having their children removed, which gives them a strong additional incentive not to contact the authorities.

Exploitation

Illegal workers other than failed asylum seekers present other problems, which include illegal exploitation, poverty wages, unsafe working conditions (vividly illustrated by the Morecambe Bay tragedy) and difficulties in accessing health care similar to those faced by failed asylum seekers.

The effects

It is difficult not to feel uneasy about this situation. Morally – and the campaign is mainly backed by faith communities – it can be seen simply as a matter for national shame that we tolerate the conditions under which most of these people live. But even if you do not adopt this approach, it seems likely that allowing up to 1m people to live outside the law undermines social cohesion, encourages illegality, erodes respect for authority and generally weakens the structure of society.

Economically the arguments are more difficult. A common-sense view is that immigration, whether legal or illegal but especially the latter, is likely to damage wages and work conditions for the native workforce. The Government has denied that there is any evidence of this happening, but researchers in the USA take it for granted. On the other hand, immigrants improve the position of employers by offering what the Government likes to call 'flexibility' in the labour market. So you have two unquantified economic effects: a *loss* to the native

Strangers into citizens cont

workforce and a *gain* to native employers. US research suggests that both figures are fairly large, but also that there is not much difference between them: so the *total* effect on the UK might be either positive or negative but in any case will be small.

Remedies

A few people (many of them backed by rich businessmen, for obvious reasons) suggest that all limits on immigration should be lifted, and point to the arguments often deployed in support of free trade and free movement of capital. If the third part of this triad, the free movement of labour, could be established world wide it would, it is suggested, add billions and possibly trillions to the world economy. However most people do not support this, since there is considerable evidence that the demand for entry to rich western countries is too large for us to cope with it. In 1997 there were 3.4m applications for the 50,000 places in the USA's 'diversity lottery'. In the long term this is probably the only solution which will work. But in the short term it probably wouldn't (and it is a political impossibility in any case).

More enforcement

Many people think that irregular migrants should simply be sent home. The government promises better enforcement of the existing rules (see 'The Borders Bill' in column 1 on the previous page). However the estimated cost of deporting even just failed asylum seekers is £4.7bn, and it would take at least ten years; so even if the government's proposals were smoothly implemented and unlimited funds were made available it would only be a medium-term solution (and would not tackle any of the root causes). In the mean time efforts to scale up deportations have led to scenes disturbingly reminiscent of police states – early morning raids, frightened children, people being bundled into vans and driven to unknown destinations and so on.

Amnesty

Meanwhile we have the existence of a significant minority of UK residents who are outside the law. Strangers Into Citizens suggest a one-off amnesty ('regularisation') to lift them into legality. This would not only be an effective short-term remedy, it would be profitable, since a large group of people would start paying taxes and National Insurance. (The IPPR put the possible profit to the Treasury at £1bn but many

people disagree; the Treasury itself claims that migrants contributed 15-20% of our economic growth between 2001 and 2005. However you certainly have to figure in a profit of £4.7b from *not* deporting them.)

The greatest gain, however (apart from purely ethical considerations), would not be economic but lie in the fact that up to 1m people would be enabled to live in a law-abiding way, and thousands of employers would be discouraged from systematic abuse, both of which would be a real boost for the rule of law.

Independent decision-making

A second thrust which both campaigners and the Government admit is necessary is to improve the process of dealing with applications for asylum. A study of 1000 destitute asylum seekers and refugees recently showed that 52% of cases of destitution had resulted from mistakes, *95% of them by the immigration authorities*. There is some reason to believe that initial decisions are often wrong. Sweden (for example) accepts 91% of asylum claims from Iraq; the UK accepts 12%. This is unlikely to be caused by coincidence. One in five asylum decisions is overturned on appeal (and few people are very happy with the appeal process). The Government has announced measures aimed at improvement; but many campaigners would prefer that the processing of asylum applications be taken entirely out of the hands of politicians. Like setting interest rates, admitting refugees is simply a too tempting political target.

Support for local communities

A third need is more support for native communities affected by immigration. It is widely recognised that immigrants tend to cluster, and common sense suggests that the greater the insecurity they experience the more they will do so. It is also recognised (as by Liam Byrne in a recent pamphlet) that native communities in 'cluster' areas can suffer from the resulting competition for resources. Recently UK local authorities complained that they faced a bill of £100m for the care of migrants left sick or destitute by national policies. A wider issue is that migrants have children who require places in schools; and British housing policy allocates scarce social housing not by length of residence but by need, which inevitably causes resentment among native-born families. All these issues

NUMBERS

Notoriously difficult to count since 90m people visit the UK every year and the numbers who stay illegally are a tiny minority, lost within this vast tide. The total could be anything up to a million (just over 1½% of the population).

Failed asylum seekers who haven't gone home: 239,000 according to Migrationwatch. Amnesty International last year estimated 150-283,000 were actually destitute.

Other people illegally in the UK: 310-570,000 according to the Home Office (2005: first time the government attempted an estimate).

Total: by adding these together and making a guess at the number of children, Migrationwatch get 515-870,000. They say the true figure is probably nearer the latter number.

need to be addressed by national policy. It seems very likely that the existence of large numbers of illegal residents makes them worse.

The political dimension

In a recent pamphlet for an immigration think-tank Liam Byrne argues that 'since the 1960s global migration has accelerated. Across western democracies, migration has dominated national and local elections – and the left has lost office when voters distrusted our response'. Unfortunately this may be true, though it could be argued that politicians also contribute to the problem by using words like 'abuse', 'free-riders', 'tough' and so on. Our politicians cannot go far beyond public opinion. However they also play a large part in forming it, and need to be constantly reminded of this.

They may also need to be helped. One of the main aims of Strangers into Citizens is to change the climate of public opinion so that our government is given more room to manoeuvre. [JC]

CONTACT

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