

# Youth Partnership

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## The role of youth work in supporting young refugees and their political participation: education, social capital and agency

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Young refugees' participation is crucial for an inclusive and healthy democracy. Yet, in the process of political engagement, young refugees encounter significant barriers due to multiple social structures and political forces, which treat refugees as the "other". According to a recent report, there are 22 million migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, undocumented or exiled people currently living in the European Union who experience different barriers to political participation.<sup>1</sup> Young refugees in the UK, for example, can lack the freedom to engage politically for being a minority, lacking a political home and being unable to seek political representation in their country of origin or host country.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elsod, A. and Beddock, A. (2021) #partofeurope: A Consultation of Organisations Led By Young Refugees, Exiled, Migrants, Asylum Seekers, and Undocumented-Y.R.E.M.A.S.U.D Across Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Kleist, N. (2008) In the Name of Diaspora: Between Struggles for Recognition and Political Aspirations. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 34 (7). Pages 1127-1143; Baser, B. (2014) The Awakening of a Latent Diaspora: The Political Mobilization of First and Second Generation Turkish Migrants in Sweden. *Ethnopolitics*. 13 (4). Pages 355-276; Horst, C. (2008) The transnational political engagements of refugees: Remittance sending practices amongst Somalis in Norway Conflict, *Security & Development*. 8 (3). Pages 317-339; Ziegler, R. (2017) Voting rights of refugees Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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### **Who is a “young refugee”?<sup>3</sup>**

The term “refugee” is contested, influenced by the countries, cultures and ideologies that use it. International law defines refugees as:

Any person who[...] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.<sup>4</sup>

However, this definition can be interpreted by host countries differently. For example, the UK recognises someone as a refugee only if they have successfully applied for asylum.<sup>5</sup> The European Union definition is more in line with international law, with the additional provision that it also applies to stateless persons.<sup>6</sup> The definition of refugee has needed additional expansion to remain current; for example, to recognise people fleeing from non-state actors<sup>7</sup> and environmental conditions.<sup>8</sup> Under international law, refugees are guaranteed a variety of civil, economic and social rights (again, these are interpreted differently by host countries). Individuals can be labelled socially, bureaucratically, culturally, and ideologically as: refugees, migrants, asylum seekers or even non-citizens. These titles are problematic and are often deeply rooted in deficit approaches, focusing only on the problems young refugees experience, not their assets. This confusing understanding of the political position of young refugees can impact on their understanding of and engagement with political participation.

### **“Political participation” and young refugees**

Political participation is what makes democracy legitimate and builds a civil society that holds democracy accountable.<sup>9</sup> However, political participation actually is heterogeneous. Political

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<sup>3</sup> We recognise that the term “non-citizen” is used widely in academic literature, but this can imply a deficit approach and removes the agency of the individual to identify themselves nationally regardless of legal definitions. While we recognise that titles are deeply problematic and can stigmatise, the term “young refugee” in this article is applied to asylum seekers (whatever stage in the process), and those with settled status, unless otherwise specified. More information on the rights of non-citizens can be found here: United Nations (2006) The Rights of Non-citizens available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/noncitizensen.pdf> (Accessed 11 August 2021)

<sup>4</sup> United Nations (1951) 2. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees Geneva: United Nations

<sup>5</sup> Refugee Council (2018) ‘The truth about asylum’ available at [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy\\_research/the\\_truth\\_about\\_asylum/the\\_facts\\_about\\_asylum](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_research/the_truth_about_asylum/the_facts_about_asylum) (accessed 10 December 2018)

<sup>6</sup> European Commission (2021) ‘refugee’ available at [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/glossary/refugee\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/glossary/refugee_en) (Accessed 17/12/21)

<sup>7</sup> McFayden, G. (2012) ‘The Contemporary Refugee: Persecution, Semantics and Universality’ eSharp special issue Vol.5(1) pp.9-35

<sup>8</sup> Piguet, E., Kaenzig, R. and Guelat, J. (2018) ‘The uneven geography of research on environmental migration’ *Population and Environment* Vol.39(4) pp.357-383 doi 10.1007/s11111-018-0296-4

<sup>9</sup> Sairambay, Y. (2020) Reconceptualising Political Participation *Human Affairs*. 30:1 pp. 120-127

participation can be variously defined as “citizens’ activities affecting politics”<sup>10</sup> or as “a broad range of activities through which people express their opinions on the world and try to take part in and shape the decisions that affect their lives”<sup>11</sup>. These definitions can suggest that political participation relates to activities such as voting, but also posting on social media, protests, and union engagement.

Political participation for refugees is complex. The United Nations have identified that refugees have clear political rights, such as engaging in peaceful protest or being politically active in support groups.<sup>12</sup> However, “political activities among migrants cannot be seen in isolation”.<sup>13</sup> Factors such as ethnicity, wealth and language can mean that when migrants, including refugees, engage in political activities, it can be interpreted by the host state in a number of ways: a peaceful demonstration can be viewed as a riot,<sup>14</sup> or a socially approved group in one state might be considered a hate group in another.<sup>15</sup> This, linked with wider factors of disengagement such as weariness, cynicism and lack of trust in politicians<sup>16</sup> show how political participation can be a difficult arena for immigrants, especially refugees, to engage in.

### **What can youth work do for young refugees?**

Due to the barriers that young refugees may face for political participation, we focus on political participation as engagement with community, linked to building a social capital and individual autonomy. This type of participation can be developed through youth work. Additionally, youth work can provide spaces where young refugees can become aware of and develop their own agency – the capability of individuals to make their own independent, free choices.<sup>17</sup> By creating positive spaces to share their voices and concerns, youth work can support young refugees to express their “view on the world”<sup>18</sup>, which can develop into other forms of political engagement. This can involve a move away from a focus on trauma that young refugees often feel constrained in, and instead is future-focused and involves notions

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<sup>10</sup> Van Deth, J (2016) What is Political Participation? Available at <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-68> accessed on 12/7/2021

<sup>11</sup> Khasnabis, C. and Heinicke, K. (2010) Community-Based Rehabilitation CBR Guidelines. World Health Organization: Geneva

<sup>12</sup> Mandal (2003) Political Rights of Refugees. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: Switzerland

<sup>13</sup> Adamson, G. (2002) Immigrants and Political Participation – background, Theory and Empirical suggestions. Available at [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/221-Immigrants\\_and\\_political\\_participation\\_2006.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/221-Immigrants_and_political_participation_2006.pdf) (Accessed 11/08/2021)

<sup>14</sup> Murdie, A. and Purser, C. (2017) How protest affects opinions of peaceful demonstration and expression rights. *Journal of Human Rights*. 16 (3). Pages 351-369

<sup>15</sup> Perry, B. (1998) Defenders of the faith: Hate groups and ideologies of power in the United States. *Patterns of Prejudice*. 32 (3)

<sup>16</sup> Ekman, J and Amna, E (2012) Political Participation and Civic engagement towards a New Typology. *Human Affairs*. 22 pp. 283-300

<sup>17</sup> Sercombe, (2010) cited in Williamson, H. (2017) Finding Common Ground – Mapping and scanning the horizons for Youth Work in Europe. In: Schild, H. Connolly, N. Labadie, F. Vanhee, J. Williamson, H. (Eds) *Thinking seriously about Youth Work*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe

<sup>18</sup> Khasnabis et al 2010

of social engagement and settlement into local communities.<sup>19</sup> This can be true for all young refugees,<sup>20</sup> but particularly for those who are experiencing political participation for the first time.



### **Youth work and political education**

Youth work has been a key provider of educational spaces to explore, develop and debate political issues. In these spaces, young people can debate, discuss, and develop responses to local issues that directly affect their world, which can be considered a form of political participation.<sup>21</sup>

Youth workers engage in “educative conversation”.<sup>22</sup> This is utilising conversation for the purpose of education and engaging in specific conversations at specific times with the intention of creating learning opportunities. In cases where young people may not wish to discuss politics, a skilled youth worker can still support young people in the exploration and establishment of new narratives and knowledge through group work processes,<sup>23</sup> essentially challenging the dominant and mainstream narratives.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Pontes, A., Henn, A. and Griffiths, M. (2017) ‘Youth political (dis)engagement and the need for citizenship education: Encouraging young people’s civic and political participation through the curriculum’ *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* Vol.14(1) pp.3-21 doi 10.1177%2F1746197917734542

<sup>20</sup> Pisani, M. (2017) ‘Illegalised young bodies- some reflections for youth work practice’ in Schild, H., Connolly, M., Labadie, F., Vanhee, J. and Williamson, H. (EDs) *Thinking seriously about youth work* Council of Europe: Strasbourg

<sup>21</sup> Jeffs T. and Smith M. (2005), *Informal education*, Educational Heretics Press, Nottingham

<sup>22</sup> Ord, J. (2016) *Youth Work Process, Product and Practice*. Routledge: Abingdon

<sup>23</sup> Williams, S. (2018) ‘Learning to hope and hoping to learn- a critical examination of young refugees and formal education in the UK’ in Pisani, M., Basarab, T., Bello, B. and Laine, S. *Between insecurity and hope* Strasbourg: Council of Europe pp.85-100

<sup>24</sup> Belton, B. (2010) *Radical Youth Work* Lyme Regis: Russell House

During the Refugee Week celebration, young refugees in a small city in the UK proposed to create a large Union Jack flag using a collage with pictures and photographs of what they thought it was to be “British”. They commented that they were generally unaware of negative press (as they did not engage with the news), but they were aware of both positive and negative attitudes from local residents (expressed on social media, as well as personal accounts). This activity provided an opportunity for young refugees to connect with the local community, move beyond the trauma and balance their belonging to British society with their own cultures and traditions. The project provided a stepping-stone to more political participation work, which eventually led them to meeting with local parliamentary representatives.

### **Youth work, social capital and agency**

Professional youth work can also provide spaces for young people to develop social capital and develop agency. Agency can be defined as the implicit socio-cultural permission to act.<sup>25</sup> However, due to the negative stereotypes around young refugees, it can seem like young refugees lack “permission to act”. This reduces the individual’s ability to voice their experiences and knowledge.

Young refugees are often viewed in deficit – within the lens of what they lack. This is particularly the case within formal education,<sup>26</sup> when they are often viewed only as victims of trauma,<sup>27</sup> or when they are cut out of communication due to language barriers.<sup>28</sup> These viewpoints homogenise young refugees and neglect the variety of strengths which they possess, such as their own experience,<sup>29</sup> cultural capital,<sup>30</sup> previous education<sup>31</sup> and resilience<sup>32</sup> – which are all factors that could be powerful contributors to political participation.

Professional youth work should provide an open space for young refugees and non-refugees to engage with each other in a neutral way and learn from each other. These spaces help in

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<sup>25</sup> Ahearn, L. (2001). ‘Language and Agency.’ *Annual Review of Anthropology* Vol.30 pp.109–137.

<sup>26</sup> Rutter, J. (2012) ‘Equity in education for migrant and refugee children’ in McCarthy, F. and Vickers, M. *Refugee and immigrant students* Charlotte: Information Age Publishing pp.167-188

<sup>27</sup> Lyamouri-Baija, N. (2018) ‘The role of youth work in working with trauma of young refugees’ in Pisani, M., Basarab, T., Bello, B. and Laine, S. (2018) *Between insecurity and Hope* Strasbourg: Council of Europe pp.45-52

<sup>28</sup> Oh, S. and Van Der Stouwe, M. (2008) ‘Education, Diversity and Inclusion in Burmese Refugee Camps in Thailand’ *Comparative Education Review* Vol.52(4) pp.589-617

<sup>29</sup> Williams, S. (2018) ‘Learning to hope and hoping to learn- a critical examination of young refugees and formal education in the UK’ in Pisani, M., Basarab, T., Bello, B. and Laine, S. *Between insecurity and hope* Strasbourg: Council of Europe pp.85-100

<sup>30</sup> Scardigno, F. (2018) ‘Recognition of the cultural capital of young refugees: the CAP (centre for lifelong learning) as an academic experience of inclusion in Italy’ in Pisani, M., Basarab, T., Bello, B. and Laine, S. *Between insecurity and hope* Strasbourg: Council of Europe pp.101-112

<sup>31</sup> Gateley, D. and refugee youth (2018) ‘Refugee and asylum-seeking young people in the UK: human agency as a central principle of youth work’ in Pisani, M., Basarab, T., Bello, B. and Laine, S. *Between insecurity and hope* Strasbourg: Council of Europe pp.137-156

<sup>32</sup> Jalonen, A. and Cilia La Corte, P. (2018) *a practical guide to therapeutic work with asylum seekers and refugees* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

developing their social capital, which can be understood as the resources that are integral to, and can be developed out of, networks and relationships people have.<sup>33</sup> Accessing this social capital can be a way of working around the barriers of political participation. This can be summed up as easily as saying “relationships matter”, where the connections individuals build and maintain allow them to achieve more than they would as individuals,<sup>34</sup> especially in the context of political participation. In contrast, a lack of social capital can lead to social exclusion,<sup>35</sup> the inhibition of agency,<sup>36</sup> as well as additional barriers to engaging with social structures,<sup>37</sup> such as lower prospects of employment<sup>38</sup> and lower educational attainment.<sup>39</sup>

A group of young refugees aged 8-13 participated in Roma Day Celebration. Members of the Roma and Travellers<sup>40</sup> community are often victims of a variety of stereotypes.<sup>41</sup> Using a range of informal activities and games (for example, small paper crafts, ice-breaker games, scavenger hunts and identity reflection exercises), the group were able to build their social network with each other. They were also able to assert themselves as individuals. They took part in conversations about identity, representation and how to engage with other people positively and developed a banner for the celebration. The event provided a space for building connections with the community, professionals, and other age groups, which in turn led to other spaces where the young people could develop a strong sense of individual agency, where they spoke to other individuals and professionals about their culture and experiences.

### **Recommendations: using the power of youth work and creating youth work power**

Youth work is well placed to provide space for political education and engagement, while developing agency and social capital. It has a long history of working with individuals and

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<sup>33</sup> Basarab, T. (2018) ‘Setting the context: some critical reflections and the contributions’ in Pisani, M., Basarab, T., Bello, B. and Laine, S. *Between insecurity and hope* Strasbourg: Council of Europe pp.9-24

<sup>34</sup> Field, J. (2008) *Social Capital* 2nd edn Oxon: Routledge

<sup>35</sup> Hynes, P. (2009) ‘Contemporary Compulsory Dispersal and the Absence of Space for the Restoration of Trust’ *Journal of Refugee Studies* Vol.22(1) pp.97-121 doi 10.1093/jrs/fen049

<sup>36</sup> O’Donovan, E. (2017) ‘“Missing link’ or missed opportunity? Bourdieu, agency and the political economy of the social capital initiative’ *Cogent Social Sciences* Vol.3(1) doi 10.1080/23311886.2017.1308993

<sup>37</sup> Giddens, A. (1984) *The constitution of society* Cambridge: Polity press

<sup>38</sup> Brook, K. (2005) ‘Labour market participation: the influence of social capital’ in Office for National Statistics (2005) *Labour market trends* London: Office for National Statistics pp.113-123

<sup>39</sup> Field 2008

<sup>40</sup> The term “Roma and Travellers” is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term “Gens du voyage”, as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.

<sup>41</sup> Maučec, G. (2013) *Identifying and Changing Stereotypes Between Roma and Non-Roma: From Theory to Practice*. *Innovative Issues and Approaches in Social Sciences*. 6 (3). Pages 181-202

groups to make change and challenge oppressive structures.<sup>42</sup> Youth work practice promotes agency in young people to be transformational and bring positive change.<sup>43</sup>

Youth workers must think critically of power and policy and be politically active themselves in order to encourage the social integration and political participation of the young refugees they work with.<sup>44</sup> For example, while challenging the dominant narratives about refugees in media and political institutions is a daunting task for any professional, it is a necessary one for youth workers. Practitioners should seek to challenge the status quo while working alongside young people. They have the skill sets that help them to support young people in developing new narratives.<sup>45</sup>

While supporting young people in political development, youth workers must use their professional judgement, existing skill set and value base to find the best strategy for their local area. Some authors have expressed concern over the extent to which youth work practice itself is a part of the system, imposing existing social and cultural norms on young people.<sup>46</sup> In this view, youth workers can practice symbolic domination, imposing their vision of society, which would negatively affect the value and potential of youth work as a practice which supports young people's development and transformation.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, such imposition of one's own views must be avoided.

Youth workers should directly connect young refugees to other professionals to help young people develop their social capital and networks, giving them a better insight into available services.<sup>48</sup> Youth workers, however, also need to remain critical and work alongside young refugees to make sure that they are not assimilated into the dominant culture, which can result in a loss of identity.<sup>49</sup>

### **Moving forward**

As the Covid-19 pandemic has created additional pressure on the youth sector, the value of youth work and youth spaces in supporting the development of young refugees; agency, social capital and overcoming existing barriers to political participation has become even

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<sup>42</sup>. Senyuva, O. and Kilakoski, T. (2017) 'Keep calm and repeat- Youth Work is not (unfortunately) just fun and games' in Schild, H., Connolly, N., Labadie, F., Vanhee, J. and Williamson, H. Thinking seriously about youth work Strasbourg: Council of Europe pp.259-270

<sup>43</sup>. Nicholls, D. (2012) For youth workers and youth work University of Bristol: policy press; Cabinet Office (2018) Civil Society Strategy: building a future that works for everyone London: Cabinet Office

<sup>44</sup>. Williams 2018

<sup>45</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>. Cooper, C. (2012) 'Imagining 'radical' youth work possibilities – challenging the 'symbolic violence' within the mainstream tradition in contemporary state-led practice in England' Journal of Youth Studies Vol.15(1) pp.53-71 doi 10.1080/13676261.2011.618489; BELTON, B. (2017) 'Colonised youth' Available at <http://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/colonised-youth/> (Accessed 12/11/18); Belton 2010

<sup>47</sup>. De StT Croix, T. (2016) Grassroots youth work University of Bristol: policy press; TAYLOR, T. (2017) 'Treasuring, but not measuring: personal and social development' Available at <http://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/treasuring-not-measuring/> (accessed 18/12/18); Williams 2018

<sup>48</sup>. Walker, G. (2018) Working together for children 2nd edn London: Bloomsbury academic

<sup>49</sup>. Strang, A., Baillot, H. and Mignard, E. (2017) 'I want to participate.' Transition experiences of new refugees in Glasgow' Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies Vol.44(2) pp.197-214 doi 10.1080/1369183C.2017.1341717 PAGE 8 paragraph 4

more apparent. Bureaucratic demands on young refugees, closure of youth centres, lack of funding, or perception of refugees as people in trauma, rather than legitimate political actors, have all had a limiting effect on their potential for participation.

Young refugees are often framed and constrained by political labels and forces and youth work should play a crucial role in liberating them from these. In order to support young refugees in finding their place in the political arena of the host country, youth workers should also seek training, engage in effective research with refugee communities and encourage each other in this process.

Finally, supporting young refugees in learning and understanding the political landscape of their host countries does not only support their participation, but can also have a positive impact on the participation of their communities.



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