

“I don’t have family, I’m not breathing and I’m not alive”: **The impact of refugee family reunion on the mental health of refugees**

October 2025

Summary

In the absence of any UK refugee visas, and with the numbers of refugees brought to safety through resettlement schemes dropping to its lowest since 2003,¹ refugee family reunion remains one of the few viable options for refugees, particularly women and children, to reach safety in the UK. Of the refugee family reunion visas granted in the year ending June 2025, 19,280 (93%) were given to women and children – more than half to children. Two-thirds went to people from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran and Sudan.²

Despite this, in September, Yvette Cooper, then the UK Home Secretary, announced a temporary suspension of refugee family reunion applications. The following month Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, announced that the automatic rights to family reunification for refugees would come to an end under forthcoming policy reform.³

While refugee family reunion is suspended, the family of people in the UK with refugee status will only be able to apply to join them if they meet requirements under existing family migration routes. These routes, however, have much more stringent criteria, including income and accommodation requirements and extremely high fees. They require legal advice which is largely outside the scope of legal aid and so requires extra applications to acquire. Additional hurdles and delays to family reunification applications are not just time-consuming in this context - they can be a matter of life and death. The Helen Bamber Foundation has supported at least three clients whose children died, in some cases mere days, before they were able to be reunited.

Cutting off this vital legal path for families will drive refugees toward dangerous routes, such as small-boat crossings. In addition, it will have a devastating impact on the mental health of refugees in the UK, who are already formally recognised by the government as people in need of protection. Many refugees rightly hope that, after a long and gruelling asylum process, they will finally be able to bring their family to safety. Instead, they face the traumatic prospect of not seeing their loved ones as they are torn apart by conflict and forced separation. By keeping families separated, the government will worsen trauma, increase isolation and further prevent the integration of refugees into British society.

¹ UNHCR, [2026 Projected Global Resettlement Needs \(PGRN\)](#), 24 June 2025

² Home Office Immigration Statistics, [How many people come to the UK via safe and legal humanitarian routes](#),

³ Prime Minister's Office, [UK to reform asylum offer to reduce the pull factor for small boat crossings](#), 1 October 2025

Introduction

Berhanu (name changed), a client of the Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF), was scared that his older son Dawit would be targeted by the same armed group in Ethiopia that had brutally tortured him for months. Berhanu was recognised as a refugee in the UK and sponsored a family reunion application, hoping that he could bring his son to safety. But while he was waiting for a decision, Dawit was kidnapped by the armed group, leaving Berhanu devastated.

Sadly, Berhanu is not the only client of HBF to have experienced this tragedy. We have supported at least three clients whose children died, in some cases mere days, before they were able to be reunited. Our clients' children and families continue to face significant risk while living in conflict zones around the world, with no parental or family support. Their relatives would likely be recognised as refugees under international law. However, there are no 'UK refugee visas' and with the numbers of refugees brought to safety through resettlement schemes – whereby refugees are transferred from a country in which they have sought protection to the UK and receive leave to remain on arrival – has dramatically dropping to its lowest since 2003.⁴ Refugee family reunion visas remain one of the few viable options for refugees, particularly women and children who are often left behind in dangerous settings and face heightened risks of violence and exploitation. Of the family reunion visas granted in the year ending June 2025, 92% were given to women and children – more than half to children. Two-thirds went to people from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran and Sudan.⁵

It was shocking, therefore, to hear the former UK Home Secretary Yvette Cooper announce in September the temporary suspension of refugee family reunion applications, the latest in a series of government measures denying refugees and people seeking asylum their basic rights. A month later, the Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, stated that under forthcoming asylum policy reform, the government would look to end automatic family reunification rights for those granted asylum in the UK.⁶ Earlier this year the Immigration White Paper included a number of proposed changes, including a waiting period before the family of a new refugee becomes eligible to apply for family reunion; the need for the 'sponsoring' refugee to have an annual income of at least £29,000; and English language requirements.⁷

This briefing looks at the impact of this suspension, and of the government's plans to make refugee family reunion harder to achieve, on recognised refugees in the UK. HBF's research and day to day work with survivors of torture, trafficking and other extremely human cruelty shows that it will have a devastating impact on the mental health of refugees in the UK, as many will be left in prolonged states of fear, grief and uncertainty about the safety of their loved ones.

⁴ UNHCR, [2026 Projected Global Resettlement Needs \(PGRN\)](#), 24 June 2025

⁵ Home Office Immigration Statistics, [How many people come to the UK via safe and legal humanitarian routes](#),

⁶ Prime Minister's Office, [UK to reform asylum offer to reduce the pull factor for small boat crossings](#), 1 October 2025

⁷ Home Office, [Restoring control over the immigration system: white paper](#), May 2025

Separation from family members is one of the most significant factors contributing to poor mental health among refugees, often exacerbating symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety. By restricting or delaying family reunion, the government's measures risk preventing refugees' recovery, ability to rebuild their lives, and their integration in the UK.

"I left one part of me behind": The harrowing impact of separation on mental health

Prolonged separation inflicts profound psychological trauma, particularly on children and vulnerable individuals. Despite that, many families feel compelled to separate during war, conflict and to flee human rights abuses, letting one or a few family members travel ahead of the others to seek asylum. If they are then recognised as refugees, the hope is that they might be able to then get their other relatives to safety.

In Europe, the 'first arrivals' are often fathers who begin their life in the receiving country waiting for their families. They do not know how long it will take to process their applications, first for asylum and then, as a sponsor for family reunion, creating a 'double uncertainty' that can increase the risk of development or exacerbation of mental health disorders. HBF's recent peer-reviewed research study demonstrated the profound psychological distress experienced by fathers and men separated from their families, highlighting the emotional toll of fearing for their loved ones' safety whilst feeling unable to protect them.⁸ The study highlighted the multi-faceted psychological impact such separation has on male refugees in the UK, not least the feeling of losing your family compounding the deep sense of loss of almost everything – "home, country, culture, memories, friends".⁹ The participants in the study spoke about the pain of not being able to celebrate their children's birthdays or being able to help make decisions about their lives; ongoing worry about their families who were in politically unstable places; and the guilt of having to leave them behind. Many of the participants also shared experiences of deteriorating mental health, sometimes leading to such hopelessness that they felt suicidal.

***"I was unable to do my duty as a husband, as a father. So, double, double failure. And I was so powerless, and my big regret is that it's my fault."*¹⁰ – research participant**

In the case of a family reunited this year, the father was separated from his wife and children on fleeing Sudan. He was then trafficked through Libya before eventually reaching the UK. Despite claiming asylum on the day he arrived, he wasn't granted refugee status until 2023, five years later. Earlier this year, he was finally able to see his now-teenage children again.

⁸ Helen Bamber Foundation, [Family Against the Odds: The Psychological Impact of Family Separation on Refugee Men Living in the United Kingdom](#), March 2025

⁹ *ibid*, p.15

¹⁰ *ibid*

In 2024 and 2025, HBF worked with 45 clients¹¹ who had been granted refugees status (or humanitarian protection) in the UK and wanted to reunite with family members still living in countries where conflict and oppression is rife, including Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia and Palestine. Over 85% of them sponsored their spouses and/or children aged under 18 to join them under the, now suspended, refugee family reunion route. Of those family members, ¾ were children under 18 applying to join their parents.

Often issues of family separation are first raised with an HBF therapist – on a number of occasions a client with an identified need for treatment has been unable to benefit from therapy because they cannot focus on anything other than separation or may even feel that they have no right to recovery whilst their families continue to be in unsafe circumstances. As their families are regularly in conflict zones or displaced, contact can be intermittent and sometimes clients have needed to rely on international tracing services to locate them. Clients whose children are in crisis are often extremely distressed by their powerlessness to help.

HBF has also supported many female clients to be reunited with their children and/or partners and seen the life-changing impact this has had on their mental health. This includes women who were trafficked when their children were very young and have had to wait years to be reunited with them.

In one case, a client, fleeing her community which was attempting to force her to practice female genital mutilation (FGM) on young girls, had to place her baby daughter in hiding with relatives, in order to safeguard her, as she could not have fled with such a young child. This year, after nearly six years of separation, she now lives again with her daughter, who happily started school in the spring.

Other research has shown that family separation is associated with increased risk of depression, anxiety, suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) - the risk of mental health disorders is more than twice as high when individuals were separated from their families and increased with longer periods of waiting for family reunification. Refugees waiting for their families feel powerless, distressed, and guilty for being safe while their family remain in potential danger.¹²

¹¹ This includes all clients within the HBF Model of Integrated Care who had raised a family reunion concern since HBF began recording this data in late 2024. The figure of HBF clients eligible for refugee family reunion and impacted by these changes may be higher.

¹² Hvidtfeldt C, Petersen JH, Norredam M. [Waiting for family reunification and the risk of mental disorders among refugee fathers: a 24-year longitudinal cohort study from Denmark](#). Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol. 2022 May;57(5)

As one of our Ambassadors for Change (survivors working together to campaign for better support for refugees) explained:

“The harm my family has suffered is both physical and psychological... I live in constant anguish knowing they face daily threats and extreme hardship. The emotional toll on me has been enormous: my mental health has deteriorated, I suffer from severe anxiety and depression, and I now have high blood pressure caused by ongoing stress and worry for my family’s safety.”

We witness this every day the anxiety and agony of our clients who are forced to separate from their family. Much more rarely, we also witness the inexpressible joy of families being granted the permission to join our clients in the UK. We frequently support clients who are acutely suicidal. Their only identified ‘protective factor’ (mitigating the risk that they will try to die by suicide) is the fact that they know their family are alive and that they may one day be able to hold them again. We see clients going hungry each week, spending the meagre payments they receive for food to instead call their families – the Home Office does not consider ‘communication’ to be an ‘essential living need’ and so there is no allowance within asylum support payments for such calls. It is particularly cruel to snatch this lifeline away from those who are holding on to the dream of seeing their families again.

“My children and my wife are the most precious things in my life. I cannot sleep or eat properly because I am consumed with worry for them. The deepest longing I have is to be reunited with them so that I can protect them, care for them, and restore some sense of stability and safety to their lives.” - Ambassador For Change

Case study

Solomon* is a political activist who claimed asylum in the UK after fleeing state torture in his home country because of his political engagement. His wife and child lived in hiding before fleeing to a neighbouring country. They were only able to stay in this country for a limited time and so the fear of their deportation back was ever present while Solomon was waiting for a decision on his asylum claim.

Solomon was accepted as a client of HBF in 2024. Throughout the initial assessment period, he attributed his anxiety and distress to his separation from his family, particularly the fact he could not care for his child. In appointments with HBF’s Housing and Welfare, Medical Advisory Service and Legal teams over the following weeks he raised family reunion as his major concern, and the reason for his mental health deteriorating, despite the immediate concerns of impending eviction following the cessation of his asylum support and his own health issues.

Despite the efforts being made on his case, the impact of the separation continued to have a negative impact on Solomon. Following a phone conversation with his child who cried and expressed confusion as to why he left them, Solomon’s PTSD symptoms increased. The distress was so severe that he attempted suicide three times in a short space of time. Solomon’s refugee family reunion application was successful in early 2025.

*name changed

Alternative routes to family reunification

Previously, the spouses and children of adult refugees who had been granted asylum, or humanitarian protection (HP) in the UK were able to apply to join the refugee relative in the UK through a relatively straightforward, free, process, known as 'Appendix Family Reunion (Sponsors with Protection)'. Under Appendix Family Reunion there were no conditions, aside from needing to establish that the relationship existed prior to the individual leaving their country of origin, and for children that they remain dependent on their parent/s. In exceptional circumstances, adult dependent children could also apply to join their parents. On 1st September, the government announced that Appendix Family Reunion would be suspended (the suspension came into effect on 4th September¹³) and people with refugee status (or HP) would only be able to sponsor their family to join them if they meet requirements under existing family migration routes.¹⁴

These routes, however, have much more stringent requirements, including income and accommodation requirements, extremely high fees (which will not be refunded if the application is refused), and require legal advice which often falls outside the scope of legal aid. Additional hurdles and delays to family reunification applications are not just time-consuming - they can be a matter of life and death.

The main alternative route, under Appendix FM, allows sponsors in the UK to bring their spouse / partner or child to the UK and until now has applied to British citizens and individuals with 'Indefinite Leave to Remain'. In reality the additional conditions that need to be met will be insurmountable for many refugees. These include:

- A minimum income of the sponsor of £29,000 per year.
- Adequate accommodation without recourse to public funds for the family
- An English language requirement, subject to limited exceptions.
- High fees for the application.

The vast majority of refugees fleeing persecution face a range of barriers to integration and self-sufficiency when they seek protection in the UK. Some of those, including a ban on working while their asylum claim is being processed and reliance on extremely low rates of asylum support from the Home Office, are government policy. Many will already have been waiting a very long time to reunite with their families, due to delays in decision-making, and will only be able to apply for jobs at the same time as they can apply for family reunion. Data shows that of those refugees in employment the average annual earnings were £20,000 for men and £18,000 for women.¹⁵

Putting refugees into the general family migration rules compounds the already deep concerns about those rules and the impact of the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) on families since its introduction in 2012. In 2023, the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs

¹³ Statement of Changes in Immigration Rules, HC 1298

¹⁴ Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, [Changes to Refugee Family Reunion](#), September 2025

¹⁵ Migration Observatory, [Q&A: The UK's new approach to refugee family reunion](#), September 2025

Committee's inquiry into family migration found that family migration policies are "complex and inconsistent" and "fail both families and society".¹⁶ In June this year, the Migration Advisory Committee's report on the financial requirement of family was published, also highlighting that "separations due to the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) have the capacity to inflict severe and lasting damage on British and settled people's families" and recommending review of the MIR.¹⁷

To sponsor a partner/spouse under this route, the application fee is £1,938 per applicant in addition to the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) which is currently £1,035 per year and rounded up to the nearest six months. For those granted visas under Appendix FM, they are given leave for two years and nine months meaning that the IHS is £3,105. The total cost for a wife and two children to be reunited with their father would be a staggering £13, 575. While applicants can apply for fee waivers, they have to show that they cannot pay or meet the income requirements, and this results in further delays and separation; the main application cannot be submitted before the fee waiver is granted. Decision making on fee waiver applications can be inconsistent and delayed.¹⁸

Case study

Reyna is a Filipino survivor of trafficking who suffered abusive relationships throughout her life and was a victim of domestic violence in her marriage. On seeking work abroad she ended up in domestic servitude and was physically, psychologically and verbally abused by her employers. She was brought to the UK by her employers and after further exploitation and abuse she was able to escape. As well as being conclusively recognised as a victim of trafficking for domestic servitude by the National Referral Mechanism, she was also granted refugee status due to the risk of re-trafficking if she were returned to the Philippines.

Upon being granted refugee status, Reyna's main focus has been on whether her children might be able to join her in safely in the UK. She immediately started employment in a very concerning domestic work arrangement. She has been treated poorly with long work hours, no holiday and frequent verbal abuse from her employees. Her lack of time off has meant that she hasn't been able to attend HBF therapy sessions.

Reyna does not feel in a position to challenge her employer and the work has triggered flashbacks of her past treatment by her traffickers. We believe her experience with this employer has re-traumatized her and the situation has been compounded by her continuing separation from her children.

¹⁶ Justice and Home Affairs Committee, [All families matter: An inquiry into family migration](#), February 2023

¹⁷ Migration Advisory Committee, Family Route: Financial Requirements Review, June 2025

¹⁸ Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, [An inspection of the Home Office's management of fee waiver applications August 2024 – November 2024](#), p 77; Refugee and Migrant Centre, [Fee waiver requests and the ICIBI report](#)

A huge contributing factor to Reyna continuing with her employment has been supporting her children abroad. Additionally, because one of her children are now over eighteen (and fall outside the standard refugee family reunion application), Reyna's income currently goes towards showing she can support them when they arrive in the UK. She does not want to risk jeopardizing that stable income, however exploitative the arrangement is.

The proposed changes to family reunion and the prospect of higher financial requirements run the risk of placing great burdens on survivors like Reyna. Parents like Reyna will feel the additional pressure of high financial requirements which can push them towards exploitative labour arrangements and increase the risk of re-trafficking. It cannot be in the public interest for parents and children to be put in this position.

If the requirements under Appendix FM cannot be met, the government must consider whether there are 'exceptional circumstances' that would result in unjustifiably harsh consequences for the applicants, their partner or their child. The Home Office also has a duty to consider the best interests of children in making their decisions.¹⁹ NGO experience to date is that "the government almost never accepts that this threshold is met and refuses such applications",²⁰ necessitating appeals, causing further delay – when the government last shared data on appeals (2022) the success rate was 68%.²¹

Added complexity to the application process means that legal advice is even more vital. However, most family reunion applications are not covered by legal aid. Families therefore regularly need to apply for what is called "Exceptional Case Funding" (ECF) to fund the legal advice on their cases – a frustrating bureaucratic process which adds another barrier to work being started. For the majority of HBF clients, their existing asylum lawyer has said they will not help them with their family reunion cases and new lawyers often refuse to take on family reunion referrals unless ECF has been granted.

The period of leave granted also creates another problem for applicants. Unlike with refugee family reunion where the applicant's leave expires at the same time as their sponsor's, and they can apply for settlement at the same time, successful applicants under Appendix FM who receive 33 months and then have to apply to extend their leave, meaning they have to apply for another fee waiver or incur the fees again. The number of times an applicant has to extend their leave varies depending on whether they are on the five or ten-year route to settlement; for those on the ten-year route, they have to extend a further three times. This often presents families with a huge financial burden made worse by the fact that there is no fee waiver for settlement applications. For applicants on the ten-year route, they may have extended their leave three times but not be able to afford an application for settlement and be stuck in limbo, continually extending their leave and never managing to save enough.

¹⁹ Under section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 and article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

²⁰ RAMFEL, [Safe Routes to Nowhere: The UK's Broken Promises on Family Reunion](#), March 2024

²¹ *ibid*

There is also the possibility that immigration fees can be raised during the ten-year period, meaning that fees to extend their leave could increase throughout that time. This can make budgeting for extensions long-term incredibly difficult for families. It can also mean that families are left with various lengths of leave. For sponsors bringing a spouse and children over, the children are given the same amount of leave as their parent who is entering the UK at the same time, which differs to the sponsor. The instability of this can be incredibly detrimental to the family's mental health and wellbeing.

For sponsors in the UK wanting to bring other family members to the UK, there are limited other routes:

- Appendix Child Relative (Sponsors with Protection)²² allows non-parent relatives to bring a child to the UK if they can show that the child does not have any relatives in the country to care for them. However, applicants must meet a much higher evidentiary threshold, with both accommodation and financial requirements and demonstrating that there are exceptional circumstances meaning that reunification is required. There is a fee of £424 for these applications along with the Immigration Health Surcharge.
- Under paragraph 297 of the immigration rules, children under 18 can join sponsors in the UK who have Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) and either both parents must be in the UK (or be being admitted at the same time) or the sponsor (one of the parents) has to show they have sole responsibility for the applicant. Where the sponsor is a relative (e.g. refugee sibling with ILR) they must show serious and compelling family or other considerations which make exclusion of the children from the UK undesirable. The government charges £1,938 for this application.
- Appendix Adult Dependent Relative allows for a certain relatives over 18 to join a UK relative if they are “dependent” on that person and that relative is able to maintain, accommodate and care for the person applying. These applications are notoriously difficult to make and have one of the lowest grant rates amongst all immigration applications.²³ There is a fee for £424²⁴ for them in addition to an Immigration Health Surcharge.²⁵

Aside from the fees, these routes can prove difficult for refugees; the first as it assumes a western ideal of what a family unit is and it can be hard to meet the evidentiary threshold; the second because it requires at least another five years of separation before the sponsor can apply for ILR; and the third owing to the extremely low grant rates and high evidential standards.

²² Home Office, [Immigration Rules Appendix Child Relative \(Sponsors with Protection\)](#)

²³ House of Commons Westminster Hall debate, [Adult Dependent Relative Visas](#), 3 November 2021

²⁴ If the UK relative is settled in the UK, the application fee is as much as £3,413 but no Immigration Health Surcharge needs to be paid.

²⁵ If the person is granted temporary permission to stay.

Reform without reason

In justifying the need for reform and immediate action, the government stated that the way refugee family reunion is being used has changed because applications are being made more quickly, the number of applications has increased and therefore refugee families are more likely to seek homelessness assistance, placing pressure on local councils.²⁶

The government itself recognises that the rise was largely due to the clearing of the previous government's huge asylum backlog which resulted in more people becoming eligible in a shorter time period,²⁷ but can provide no meaningful analysis of costs and pressures placed on public services. The number of family reunion applications approved last year also reflects the significant wait many clients had previously experienced in the processing of both their asylum claims and then family reunion applications. For 'simple' family reunion applications, it has, in some cases, taken more than four years for their family to finally join them.

We recognise the pressure on local authorities to find suitable housing for people who are at risk of homeless or living in very overcrowded accommodation, including recently reunited refugee families. But the number of reunited refugee families needing accommodation is a drop in the ocean compared to the overall housing crisis, with over 130,000 households living in temporary accommodation,²⁸ and nearly 5,000 street homeless in England.²⁹ Part of this crisis has been created by the Home Office - for instance, the numbers in need of homelessness support skyrocketed from 2023 after the Home Office gave only seven days to newly recognised refugees to find accommodation or risk sleeping on the street.³⁰ Despite witnessing over and over again how its policies fuel homelessness among refugees, the Home Office has not learnt its lesson and homelessness amongst new refugees continues apace. In September, it halved the number of days many new refugees get to find alternative accommodation once their asylum application is successful, abandoning the desperately-needed pilot scheme of refugees getting 56 days to find somewhere safe to live after being evicted from hotels and other asylum support accommodation. Parents reuniting with their children cannot conscientiously be held responsible and scapegoated for the pressures on local authorities and housing.

Furthermore, for people who are reliant on Universal Credit or need support from the local authority to find housing, they are unable to access suitable accommodation before their family arrive. Universal Credit limits the amount of rent that is paid based on the individual and will not pre-emptively pay for larger accommodation, suitable to house a family unit, if only the sponsor is in the country. Similarly, local authorities will only provide suitably sized

²⁶ Home Office, [Economic note: Appendix Family Reunion, suspension of new applications](#), 4 September 2025

²⁷ Ibid, para 10

²⁸ Shelter, [Another record number of children homeless in temporary accommodation after 12% increase in a year](#), July 2025

²⁹ The Big Issue, [Homelessness facts and statistics: The numbers you need to know in 2025](#), September 2025

³⁰ Migration Observatory, [Q&A: The UK's new approach to refugee family reunion](#), September 2025

accommodation once the family have arrived, regardless of the warning and proof that is given pre-emptively.

Case study

Souhila* is a political refugee who became a client of HBF in 2018. She was granted refugee status in late 2023 and very quickly sponsored family reunion applications for her spouse and two children. Her family arrived in January 2024 and were added to her Universal Credit claim at the end of the month, well within the assessment period for the next payment.

During the Department of Work and Pension (DWP) verification checks, Souhila's spouse was found not to be 'habitually resident' in the UK. A partner granted leave under family reunion rules has a right to reside and so meets that part of the habitual residence test but also needs to be 'habitually resident in fact'. Souhila and her partner had been married for a number of years before she came to the UK and there was clear evidence that the intent of the family was to settle and rebuild their life together in the UK. HBF submitted a mandatory reconsideration request of this decision, explaining the above and citing relevant case law. HBF also flagged the urgency of this as the family of four were living off single person standard allowance which was not enough for them to meet their basic needs as they were also living in temporary accommodation on the outskirts of London. HBF also contacted the family's MP due to the urgency of the issue and our experience of the length of time mandatory reconsiderations can take.

The decision came back in favour of the family and their Universal Credit was updated. However, further administrative errors were made by DWP meaning that their payment was delayed and they did not receive the correct payment for a number of weeks. This meant the family continued to struggle with meeting their basic needs.

**name changed*

Conclusion

While staff at the Helen Bamber Foundation worked tirelessly to ensure clients' relatives were able to submit family reunion applications before the suspension was implemented (just 36 hours after it was announced), this news has been devastating for the people we support who are still waiting for an asylum decision. Clients had rightly hoped that after the long and gruelling asylum process, they would have the right to apply to be with their family and bring them to safety. Instead, families now face the traumatic prospect of not seeing their loved ones as they are torn apart by conflict and forced separation.

The former Home Secretary justified the suspension of the refugee family reunion scheme by claiming that 'people smugglers were exploiting the family scheme to promote dangerous Channel boat crossings.' We fear that actually this suspension will drive dangerous crossings, not reduce them, and create additional risks for refugees in the UK. Every day, HBF sees torture and trafficking survivors desperate to be reunited with their children and families, which anyone

who has a child or a family member they love can relate to. That desperation can lead individuals to take out loans or enter exploitative situations in an attempt to raise the funds. Without safe and legal routes like refugee family reunion, we are deeply concerned that more survivors will face heightened risks of re-trafficking and exploitation, driven by the need to be with their children and families.

Refugees and those granted protection in the UK face insurmountable obstacles to being reunited with family members in their country of origin, given the risk of ill-treatment there. For these people family reunification is *only* possible in the UK. To make refugees use the same routes available to British citizens not only ignores the issues that already exist with those routes, but will result in further delays that can be devastating for the refugee and their family. For family members facing persecution and conflict, it can be a matter of life and death.

Separation from loved ones also makes it substantially harder for refugees in the UK to integrate because the chronic stress, anxiety and grief caused by being apart undermines concentration, motivation and mental health, leaving people less able to learn English, find and keep work, or build social networks. For these reasons family reunification is not only a key part of upholding the rights of refugees in the UK, but vital to any effective integration policy: restoring family unity improves protection, mental health and the prospects for successful settlement.³¹



Recommendations

The government should:

- Restore Appendix Family Reunion (Sponsors with Protection) and the ability for recognised refugees in the UK to sponsor their family members to join them
- Amend the Immigration Rules to remove the barriers to children joining refugee non-parent adult relatives in the UK.
- Restore legal aid for family reunion applications - all family reunion applications should be brought back within scope of legal aid. The system is far too complex to navigate without legal representation, but paying for private representation is simply not possible for most refugees.
- Recruit, resource and train decision-makers to ensure that quality decisions are made on family reunion applications within 12 weeks.

For more information, contact Kamena Dorling, Director of Policy at kamena.dorling@helenbamber.org

³¹ UNHCR, Summary Conclusions on the Right to Family Life and Family Unity in the Context of Family Reunification of Refugees and Other Persons In Need Of International Protection, 4 December 2017, that “when refugees [were] separated from family members as a consequence of their flight, a prolonged separation [could] have devastating consequences on the well-being of the refugees and their families”.