

WE ARE B'HAM BOOM

**Our learning about our lives and experiences as young refugees
and migrants living in Birmingham**

2010 – 2012

By:

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INTRODUCTION:

What is RefugeeYouth?

RefugeeYouth was founded in 2002 with the aim of combating alienation and despair amongst young refugees by supporting opportunities for their development, inclusion and integration. We aim to create an environment of friendship and belonging in which young refugees gain strength and power, collectively and as individuals, through creative learning.

Over the past 10 years RefugeeYouth has developed into a vibrant network of young people from around the world, taking initiatives to make positive change in their own lives and the wider community. Young people, aged 15 – 30, from around the world work together to:

- Find community, friendship and belonging; supportive and useful networks; a wide range of experience and activities; access to resources; and opportunities to develop their skills and aspirations.
- Develop their leadership skills to be advocates for, organisers and leaders amongst their young peers in and between refugee communities.
- Learn to advocate for change for young refugees amongst service providers, policy-makers and the wider public.

Background to the B’ham Boom project:

RefugeeYouth is a London based organisation, and most of our work had been focused in London. Two years ago through our annual evaluation review we identified some key questions about the future direction of RefugeeYouth.

Through working together we had learnt how powerful young people can be when they have the opportunity to build relationships and explore the issues that affect them. We were interested in exploring how we could share and disseminate our learning, and work with others to build relationships and dialogue around the issues affecting young refugees, and work together to make positive change. We were particularly interested to explore the replicability of RefugeeYouth’s model, and in order to do this we wanted to explore these issues with young people from other parts of the country.

After publishing our book, ‘Becoming a Londoner’ in 2009, we were also keen to engage with professionals whose work impacts on the lives of young refugees. Despite its London focus, we were aware that much of the learning, experiences and messages contained in the book were relevant across the UK.

We worked with the Barrow Cadbury Trust to develop a proposal for an Action Research Project which would bring together young people from refugee backgrounds living in London and the Midlands to explore the issues affecting us, and find ways of working together to make positive change for young refugees.

Our Methodology – Participatory Action Research

We wanted to carry out this project using the principles of Participatory Action Research. Participatory Action Research brings people together to explore their own realities and experiences,

identify the issues that affect their lives, and work together to identify and test out solutions. As such, the specific outputs and results are not identifiable before the process begins.

Over the course of 2 years 55 young people have been involved in this project. We have worked together to explore the issues that affect us. We have got to know one another, and in the process we have learnt more about ourselves.

We started the process by gathering a team of interested individuals. We used creative workshops and activities to get to know one another. We spent time visiting projects and organisations that work with young refugees. Throughout the project the team snowballed – new young people got involved as we met them. We went on regular research residencies, which gave us the opportunity to explore issues in depth. We used creative methods to disseminate our learning, such as drama, dance and film.

The information collected in this report has been gathered and produced by many different young people in many different workshops, events, residencies and discussion groups. We have also visited and worked with many refugee community organisations in Birmingham.

The Aims of our project (as identified together on our first research residency):

1. To build a strong team and to support youth leadership so that we can develop both new and existing projects in the Midlands.
2. To build bridges and create projects which bring different communities together in Birmingham.
3. To build and maintain strong relationships between young leaders in Birmingham and London.
4. To identify our issues and to gather and share our knowledge so we can act on it to bring about change.

Who we are:

Many different people have been involved at different stages, but through this project we have built a core team. We are young people living in Birmingham and in London aged between 16 and 30. We originate from Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Burundi, Lithuania, Nigeria, Somalia, Bangladesh, India, Guinea and Senegal.

Thanks!

We would like to thank the Barrow Cadbury Trust for funding this project over the last 2 years and for their guidance and support with the work. We would also like to thank all the organisations who allowed us to visit and talk with them during the course of our research, and share with us their valuable knowledge and experience, especially; Community Resource Information Service (CRIS), Communities Youth Vision, Bosnia & Herzegovina Network, The Discovery of The Talents, Windmill Super Youth Centre, Dance Lyf, St. Martins Youth and Community Centre, the Refugee Council and the Children's Society.

THE ISSUES FOR YOUNG REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS LIVING IN BIRMINGHAM:

Through our research we have learnt a great deal about the issues that affect our lives. Some of us came to Birmingham as young people seeking refuge, alone without family. Some of us came to London and were sent to live in Birmingham through the UK Border Agency dispersal scheme. Others came here very young with our families, and others were born here to refugee and migrant families. As a result we have a whole range of different experiences, and we have learnt so much from each other.

WAITING

“The Home Office stops your life”

Waiting for a decision from the Home Office can be daunting and very stressful. This can lead to all sorts of outcomes such as; the feeling of being in limbo, lack of choice and big mental health problems.

“When you don't know what is going to happen to you tomorrow or the day after, you can't make a plan for the future”

When you are trying to settle in Birmingham, the idea of being sent back either to your country or to another town and having to start all over again, becomes a total source of depression.

“You have to get in a really desperate state before they will help you”

Many young people have their age disputed by the Home Office - not only does this cause practical problems such as not being able to get a place in school or college, or not being supported by the Social Services, but being made to feel like a liar can have a devastating effect on us.

“I was 16 when I arrived in the UK. I got a visa to stay for 1 year. In that year I started college, found a home, got my life here. Then they refused me. I appealed then they refused me again, twice. Now I am homeless, living with friends. I have nothing to do and I don't know what I should do now. I am not allowed to work or go to college. For college you need a visa or a passport – they say bring a letter from your social worker or the job centre, but I don't have any. So, I have nothing to do now, no work, no college, I cannot learn anything. I have to do illegal jobs. I work from 8 in the morning until 12 at night, and they give me £25 or £30; how can I support myself? I came in 2008, now it's 2012, so all that time has gone”

DISPERSAL

Many young people end up in Birmingham because of the Home Office dispersal scheme. It can be very scary being sent to a new town when you don't have any networks there. You don't feel part of the community.

“I was living in Lewisham, London for 4 years. I was in college and then I applied for accommodation from NASS because I couldn't stay where I was living. I told them I was in college, provided all the letters, I had big connections there and I was very happy to live anywhere in London so I could still travel to college. They didn't accept it. They said it isn't strong enough for you to stay in London. They said we have to give you a house outside London. I asked them to do the process quickly so I could start college somewhere else, but they said you don't have no choice to push us, and I kept my options open and asked them for cities, and they said you cannot chose where you want to go”.

“I arrived in Birmingham when I was 18, and they put me in a house and the only empty room was a little box, the lights were not working, there were mouse holes everywhere. Sarah called them, and after 2 weeks they put me in a new place which was better, but still horrible. They kept moving me around, next time to West Bromwich – so now it took me 2 hours to travel to my college. I always took the long route because I didn’t know my way around Birmingham well. The new house was in a scary rough place, I was scared to stand at the bus stop.”

“I didn’t have any help to find a place in college – all the courses were full because it was the end of October already. I had to stay at home doing nothing. I was travelling to London as much as I could but most of the time I was at home doing nothing, sleeping, listening to music. I didn’t go to college for a whole year. I didn’t find any community places or anywhere to get support. I started college after 1 year. I couldn’t continue my studies like I wanted to do, they said I had to go back to do English again and have a new assessment because I had missed a year of college. By then I was 19 and so I couldn’t study full time any more without paying, so I couldn’t carry on studying media which is what I was doing in London. So, basically, being dispersed messed up my whole education.”

FEELING LONELY AND ISOLATED

When there is no support from friends, family, social networks and no support from the Home Office, people get into trouble. Spending too much time on your own leads to sadness and boredom.

“The time I was separated from my family, I was too young, I was 13. I wasn’t ready. I became so weak. I felt so scared, I couldn’t sleep, or eat and I used to cry a lot. I used to wait to go to sleep each night so I could dream about my Mum”.

HOUSING

Having stability and a safe, private space is so important. Many of us have been put into inappropriate housing, housed with drug users and alcoholics, with violent, difficult, scary people. When they put you in a place where you can’t sleep it affects your whole life, it leads to paranoia and anger, you are too tired to concentrate at college.

“I was moved to Birmingham from Oxford where I was at school. My social worker picked me up from school and said we were just visiting Birmingham, and then she left me in a hostel there. I couldn’t sleep. The hostel was full of people, I was scared, I put the chair up against the door. I was beginning to get ill and panic attacks. I was 14 years old then. I stayed in that hostel for one and a half years. I stopped going to school for all that time. No one helped me to find a school. I had to take tablets to make me sleep”

WORKING OR NOT WORKING

Those of us who are waiting for a decision from the Home Office often don’t have permission to work. This is very frustrating as we want to be independent.

If you don’t have papers, the jobs available are very unsafe, which can lead to exploitation. Even within the communities friends and family exploit people just because you are not part of the system and don’t know how it works.

“If you don't have a passport they don't want to know. Going to job centres and searching for a job when you don't have a passport is just rubbish”

Immigrants have a bad reputation for scrounging benefits. But we want to be useful – we want to pay taxes, support our families here and back home. If we could work the whole country would benefit. We could pay for our own accommodation and not have to ask for anything.

“When the government doesn't let you work, after 4 or 5 years waiting you lose your passion, you get lazy...by the time you can work you lose all your hopes and ambitions. It breaks you down”

“You get damaged. You don't feel like a human, just a number in the system”

NOT FEELING SAFE

As young people these days it is very easy for us to go down the wrong path. Many young people get involved in making money on the street from criminal activities. These sorts of things are denied within the community, but it is reality and it happens. The level of anti-social behaviour is increasing fast and the number of ASBOs issued is high. Young people find it hard to do the right thing when there is not much support for them to get involved and engage within the community, and are therefore driven to crime and drug-related issues.

For those who are new in a country, there is a high expectation that the country is safe, but many of us found ourselves right in the middle of the violence. We do not feel safe on the streets, we feel fear and we don't feel we have the support of the police.

Many times we feel that we get incriminated because of our race. There are big feuds between communities, and everyone is vulnerable, regardless of whether you are involved or even connected.

“Back in school I had a slightly different accent. There was a gang at my school who would spark fights with others. There's time when I didn't feel safe – after school I'd come out and a gang were waiting from another school. They would come with knives. If one black person makes trouble, everyone who is the same race gets targeted..... it didn't matter if you weren't involved at all. They would go for every black guy in the school. You wouldn't know what was happening – just because I was black I would get targeted. I didn't know what was going on. I found myself in sticky situations, with knives, being threatened”

“During the riots some Asian guys got run over. They thought it was a black guy who did it, and during the next days every black guy was a target to get revenge on. At that time no one was feeling safe in my community”

FEELING DIVIDED, NOT UNITED

In Birmingham we feel that different communities are very divided. Sometimes it is very difficult for us to get involved in the community and engage, because there is so much tension which makes it difficult for everyone to work together. Many of the issues raised are race and religion orientated. Many young people are judged because of what they are wearing or the colour of their skin.

“When young people are labelled and judged we eventually end up being bad and taking up the role of being bad and others expectations”

Postcode wars have also been a long-term problem that is affecting our lives; it has caused fear and conflict amongst young people because of their different area codes.

“If someone is disrespectful and has a negative attitude whilst visiting my area we end up fighting them because it is not accepted”

“Some of us who do not want to get involved have to because of friends. If we don’t we fear getting hurt ourselves for not being supportive”

If you want to fit in you feel the pressure of living in a different postcode. If you come from another country you’re already an outsider and so you want to conform.

“When you come from another culture, you end up with two personalities – outside you have to behave a certain way; back in your house you have to behave a certain way”

If you stay with your own community you will never learn English. However, communities don’t mix. Most people hang out with their own communities.

“My house mate came from Kenya and we were always together. Everyone from Somalia used to ask me why I’m with her. They think you’re doing something bad by going outside your community”

“Africans stay together, Somalians stay together, British stay together, if you mix people look at you weird”

LANGUAGE BARRIER AND EDUCATION

Most of the young people who have just arrived in the country don’t speak English. We find it very difficult to express ourselves. Communication becomes a huge problem and becomes a barrier to our progress. Support is not always offered when visiting places such as hospitals and schools. Filling out application forms can take forever when nothing makes any sense and would lead to making the wrong choices.

“The language barrier leaves you behind in education”

The lack of funding in colleges is making young refugees pay for ESOL classes. Even when we learn English at college, it is hard to find somewhere to practice what we learnt. It is hard to find places to mix with people who are not from your own community.

“The best way to learn English is to go out and speak it, not to sit in a class room and be taught”

Many of us have no chance of being able to pay for tuition fees to study at university because we cannot get work or we are having to wait for our papers which can take years.

Teachers and other people have low expectations when you come from another country. It’s very hard to learn English if you stay within your own community. But on the other hand it can also be very scary to speak up if you are not confident with your English.

“When I started college I was the only one from another country. I was feeling lonely, no-one was talking to me. Sometimes I’m afraid to ask questions in class because of my accent”

“I don’t have a family here, so if my Social Worker doesn’t care or call me, there is no one to ask me am I doing my college work”

WHAT SUPPORT EXISTS FOR YOUNG REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN BIRMINGHAM:

Through the course of the research we met many different projects and organisations. On one of the residentials we went on we built a community map; we all explored our knowledge of Birmingham and the services available, and realised that between us we know a lot!

- Youth-led projects

RefugeeYouth being a youth-led organisation, knows how important it is to have a place where young people can take initiative, lead and take action to bring about positive change to better their lives and those of their peers. As always, it's very difficult to find such projects. Young people are usually made into 'mini adults' and put into adult settings and asked to behave accordingly with less freedom to act, often with a prescribed agenda that just needs to be executed.

During our research we met 'Dance Lyf' a project set up and run by a young woman in the Smethwick area:

"I realised that there was nothing happening in my local area for young people and I hated the fact that young people were labelled very badly by the media and to an extent dehumanised so I thought what can I do to change this. I took dance in college and therefore had a skill that I could share and I knew from experience that if my peers had something to do they wouldn't stand in the chicken shops or get in trouble on the streets.

My aim was to provide a place where young girls and boys from different communities and background could come and learn how to dance. I am using dance as a tool to motivate my friends and keep them off the street. It's very difficult to get young boys to dance but I am getting there.

So far we have created many dance routines and have performed at several shows in Birmingham. I can clearly see that whenever we perform, this boosts the confidence of my friends and shows them what they can achieve by being off the street. This is also used as a motivational tool to show other young people the power they have within and that they don't need to wait until they are "empowered" by the older lot to do something in their lives.

Now the group is growing, I feel like I need more support and training to meet the demands of for my project. I am lucky I have a place to dance but usually all the youth centres are closed and need to be paid to stay open. I am at stage of the project where I want Dance Lyf to take over Birmingham and all youth centres"

- Support Services for young refugees

During our research we found several support services for young refugees, the most active being the Refugee Council's SMILE project and the Children's Society.

The SMILE project provided valuable support to many young people through befriending, mentoring and a homework group. During the course of our research, funding for the Refugee Council's SMILE project ended, coinciding with big cuts to the overall service provided by the Refugee Council. This has left a big gap for many young people.

The Children's Society is a children's charity that aims to create an environment where children are valued, respected and happy. Their work with young refugees aims to ensure that laws and policies help to keep young refugees safe and helps to protect their rights as children regardless of their immigration status or nationality. We had the opportunity to visit them several times and quickly we became rather fond of them. We realised that most of the young people attending the social evenings at the Children's Society had something very important to say. They needed a platform to express their opinions and draw upon their own experiences to find solutions to issues they are facing, and they want to take action to bring change. We also realised to our sadness that however much the Children's Society was doing an amazing job they too need help and support. They have a very long waiting list and can't accommodate the vast needs of such a project in Birmingham.

- Community Organisations

We met many community organisations doing great work across Birmingham and the Midlands including Community Resource Information Service (CRIS), Communities Youth Vision, Bosnia & Herzegovina Network, and The Discovery of The Talents. All of these organisations are doing amazing work within different communities. Through some of these organisations is how we met some of the young leaders who have been central to this project.

Where are the gaps?

We found many committed and passionate people doing all sorts of different work. However, we did identify that there are some gaps:

- Many projects serve only one community/religion
- Most young people don't know about many of the projects and organisations that exist
- Often support stops when young refugees turn 18

"It's crucial to have a support service that is there for young people and does not discriminate depending on your age or refugee status. We realised that many support services stopped helping young people as soon as they turned 18. We all know that we don't suddenly control all our problems over night. If all support from social services stops when one turns 18 then it's very important to have these services giving us some guidance and help from there on"

- Youth-led projects are under-resourced and not well supported
- Many adult community organisations seem to have full agendas and not enough capacity and resources to focus on young people

"We visited community organisations and came across many that didn't want to work with young people. They had an aim, which was to serve one particular intrinsic community and young people were not on the agenda. We also came across a few other RCOs that were set up to support projects like B'ham Boom but eventually didn't stretch far enough to provide support and guidance to what the team needs"

- Lack of support, training and learning opportunities for young people who want to help and support other young people.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT THROUGH WORKING TOGETHER:

Through this project we have made friendship for life between Birmingham and London. We learnt to be in an environment with people from all over the world and to accept people's different opinions and share ideas. We have learnt about how to get involved in a research project and learnt new methods to conduct research, such as Participatory Action Research.

The process of researching Birmingham made us understand and be aware of what we have and don't have. We gained skills in how to make contact with other, different professional organisations and how to build strong and solid relationships with them. We realised that Birmingham is a city that has got a very long and interesting migration history, and therefore we learnt about the different areas of Birmingham and the different communities that exist there.

Working together and making change:

Through this project we met so many different people who are amazing and have a great energy, who support and understand each other and want to work together to make change.

We have really been inspired by meeting motivated people who are active within their communities, and we have spent time together thinking about how we can make a change within our community.

Working with the Refugee Council and performing our play at the SMILE conference was an amazing experience. We felt we had a big impact on the audience in the conference, and we had some really positive feedback from the service providers and policy makers who attended the conference:

“The play was enlightening and fantastically done. I work in schools and feel that this would be highly welcomed in a school environment. It was hard hitting and up to speed on current trends. For me the play has taught me new ways of working with young people”.

“As well as after watching the performance, speaking to the young people was really reinforcing to the importance of having beneficiaries of any service having real control and ownership over what is being delivered. I am currently working on a needs assessment and project proposal for working with young refugees in South Yorkshire and the performance and the group themselves were real inspiration driving force for some of the ideas”

“I found the play very informative but also a really accessible way to present the issues especially the culture of disbelief within the asylum system. The performance was hypnotic and lively, it made me feel engaged but reinforced inspiration to dedicate my time to raising awareness about this issue”

We realised how much we could achieve when we put our energy and diverse experience and knowledge together.

Experiencing the countryside:

Coming from London and Birmingham we met for a few hours each week once a week, and we sometimes found it very difficult to reach a certain level of focus. The excitement took over whenever we met, therefore we realised that a more productive and focused way of doing intensive work is to go on a residential, we also found that it gives us the opportunity to taste the countryside and be out in the natural world. We got to know how to have fun in the countryside and cook for big groups of people and actually feel like we all belong.

Relationships and the RefugeeYouth network:

We developed lifelong strong friendship between the two cities London and Birmingham. We found out that we have similar issues that we are all confronting as young people and we needed to find ways to combat them. Along the way to achieving these big ambitions, we came to learn and understand different cultures –for example the Refuge in Films festival that RefugeeYouth hosts each year at the BFI made us learn and be aware of the current issues in the UK but also other issues that migrant communities are facing around the world.

We realised the importance of young people working together and finding their own solutions to their problems rather than waiting for them to be solved by some sort of authorities. During this process we got know about each other on a more deeper level and felt comfortable to share our own life experiences and support each other by just being there and creating an environment where we all have a sense of belonging and ownership of the project.

The challenges:

We have learnt that is very difficult for RefugeeYouth to run a project in an area where the organisation is not based. In London we take for granted the fact that young people have the support of a physical space and the ongoing safety net of the organisational structure of RefugeeYouth to enable them to be proactive.

We also learnt that young people's lives change quickly. Many of the key people who got involved in this project moved away from Birmingham during the project. It took time and training to develop a strong leadership core. Two members of the core team received their refugee status during the project. They lost their NASS accommodation in Birmingham and so had to move to London where they had support networks. Other young leaders went away to University. The team involved are all in transitional stages of their lives, and so this had a huge impact on the project.

We learnt how hard it is for young people to develop their own projects and initiatives. Our team have a great deal of passion and enthusiasm, but we need guidance, support and access to existing local structures and resources in order to develop our own project.

We are trying to learn how to develop a fruitful and beneficial relationship between youth networks in London and in Birmingham, and to grow the project in a way that means that young people in the Midlands develop their own initiatives in such a way that they are not dependent on young leaders from London and the London-based structure of RefugeeYouth.

WHAT YOUNG REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN BIRMINGHAM WANT AND NEED:

Now that our research project has come to an end, we have been working together to identify what we want to do next and the support we need in order to do it.

We want to build a hub of young people in Birmingham from different communities who support each other to take action and create a better life

“A safe, happy, creative, joint-perspective place” where we can:

- Feel part of something and get inspired by each other
- Create a place where young people dispersed in Birmingham can find fun, food and friends
- Link young people from different communities and share knowledge of what is available
- Explore the issues that affect us and make change together
- Support each others’ projects
- Learn and develop skills to do things for ourselves.

But, we need support:

- A space to meet
- Support and training from local organisations
- Links with young people in London – but not to be dependent on RefugeeYouth in London
- Residential – to build relationships and to explore the countryside.

So, WHAT IS NEXT.....?

Over the past 2 years we have experienced and learnt about different places, spaces, organisations, networks, dynamics, communities and issues in Birmingham.

We have snowballed and gathered an amazing team of young people from many different backgrounds and communities and we have the passion to continue this project and make change!

Through this report we share our learning and our dreams. Now we are looking for people and organisations based locally who have the willingness and the resources to support us – so, please, get involved!!