



Families Together Responds to the Second Reading of the Nationality and Borders Bill

On Monday the 19th and Tuesday the 20th of July, a parliamentary debate took place concerning the proposed changes to the UK asylum system laid out in the Nationality and Borders bill. At the close of yesterday's debate, 366 MPs voted in favour of the bill, with 265 MPs voting against. The proposed legislation outlined in the bill effectively creates a discriminatory two-tier asylum system, undermining how the UK fulfils its international obligations to those seeking asylum. The Bill will criminalise and punish refugees, depending on how they arrived in the UK, resulting in a significant reduction in the number of women, men and children who are able to access family reunion, one of the few existing safe and regular routes into the UK.

Opposition MP's raised the widespread concerns that this bill is in fact an anti-refugee bill, that it sets out to undermine the 1951 Refugee Convention and it will place refugees in further harm, pushing them into the hands of people smugglers and increasing the strain on their mental and physical well-being. A number of MP's raised concerns about refugee family reunion including the impact that restricted access to family reunion for group two refugees will have on women and children.

Stuart McDonald stated that *'Their refugee family reunion rights will be diminished, according to the plan, meaning that they cannot be joined by a spouse or perhaps a child. The detail is not in the Bill, but that is what the plan suggests and the Bill enables... that inevitably gives the Christian convert a choice: does the family stay apart or do other family members—often the women and children that the Home Secretary professes to be protecting—then have to follow and make their own dangerous journeys? Without the family, without state support and without stability, the Uyghur, the Syrian and the persecuted Christian convert have no hope of rebuilding their lives. That amounts not to a place of sanctuary, but to a place of punishment—and the Home Office has the audacity to claim that it is in their best interests.'*

Yvette Cooper highlighted that *'if there are not safe legal routes for family reunion, we end up with more people driven into the hands of dangerous criminal gangs'*. Family members are often left living in precarious and dangerous situations whilst they wait to be reunited with their sponsor. For the vast majority of those people, there is no viable alternative for them to be reunited with family members. Limiting this route therefore risks incentivising more dangerous journeys – made by people seeking to live with their family members – rather than reducing them.

As we have previously highlighted, Refugee Family Reunion is currently the most accessed safe route which allows family members to come safely to the UK to reunite with their sponsor. Over the last 5 years 29,834 family reunion applications were granted, compared with 23,665 resettlement applications granted. 90 percent of the family reunion visas granted in the last 5 years went to women and children. Restrictions to family reunion rights for those with Group 2 status will leave families who have been separated by war, violence and persecution facing dangerous journeys in order to be together again. Therefore, these vulnerable groups whom the Home Secretary vowed to protect will be left in an even more vulnerable, precarious and risky situation.

A number of Voices Network Ambassadors who have lived experience of family separation speak of the pain and heartache of being separated from loved ones for indefinite periods of time. When they speak of reuniting with family members, they mention finally feeling safe, feeling able to move on with their lives and integrate into their new communities.

The family reunion had a great impact. We felt a type of safety we haven't experienced before. My kids walked comfortably in the street; my son didn't squeeze on my hand the entire time when we're in public. You can see from their behaviour that they felt how safe their house and environment is now.

The UK government should do more to expand the family reunion policy and increase safe routes for people escaping persecution to seek sanctuary. The new Immigration plan, if implemented through its Temporary Protection visa, is going to separate refugee families for an indefinite time and will negatively affect children and their parents.

- Mada, Voices Network Ambassador

All refugees should have full and equal access to their rights regardless of how they enter the UK in accordance with the Refugee Convention which makes no allowance for such discrimination and in accordance with international human rights law which in principle prohibits such inequality. **This includes full and equal access to family reunion rights.**

If the government are serious in their ambition to expand 'Safe' routes they should change the existing family reunion rules, as per our recommendations below, so that more people can access this vital, existing safe route:

- Expand the criteria of who qualifies as a family member for the purposes of refugee family reunion allowing adult refugees in the UK to sponsor their adult children and siblings who are under the age of 25; and their parents;
- Give unaccompanied refugee children in the United Kingdom the right to sponsor their parents and siblings who are under the age of 25 to join them under the refugee family reunion rules;
- Reintroduce legal aid for all refugee family reunion cases.