

The Researcher



Dr Dina Sidhva is an Associate of the University of Edinburgh's Global Health Academy and a freelance researcher. Originally a social work academic from India, she obtained her PhD from the University of Edinburgh and has continued to work and research with some of society's most vulnerable people in the area of HIV, human rights, gender-based violence, asylum seekers and refugees. Her recent book 'Social

Work in Global Context: Issues and Challenges' published by Routledge Publications, draws on research in some of these areas.

Her passion for giving a voice to those living on the margins of society led her to undertake this challenging research with asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland who also live with HIV. Using an innovative, participatory 'PhotoVoice' methodology enabled her to create this collage of photographs taken by the asylum seekers. These photographs vividly portray the lives of forced migrants in Scotland, as they await a decision from the Home Office.

These photographs are poignant as they seek to give a voice to a group of asylum seekers and refugees, whose numbers are relatively few, but whose suffering is great. With the use of a camera, they were able to record their own stories through images that they have taken of themselves and thus to advocate for themselves, in a small yet meaningful way.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study included 15 Black African asylum seekers and refugees (12 women and 3 men), who have come to Scotland from different countries in Africa: Zimbabwe, Malawi and Nigeria.

This exhibition is a fruit of their labour over a period of six months. Each photograph was taken individually by the participants. After which the titles, captions and themes were collectively worked on as a group along with the researcher. The words and the sentiments reflected in each photograph are entirely the participants own.

Often bound by their experience of an all-encompassing limbo, a wait for a place they can call home, a yearning to be accepted in the country they fled to for protection, under the weight of exclusion, deprivation and stigma, their 'visual voices' capture their bright and darker moments of existence.

Journey



These asylum seekers are engaged in a journey that seems to be never-ending. Beginning with a desperate flight from danger and oppression, they travelled to the UK, only to find themselves constantly on the move—occupying temporary transit homes, being evicted from homes they had thought to be permanent, and constantly seeking an end to the uncertainty of their lives. But the journey can be positive as well as negative, as some find hope, respite, and new optimism for the future.

Waiting



The asylum seekers and refugees who took these photographs often experience a sense of all-encompassing limbo, mental distress, post traumatic stress and depression. Waiting for them, is not a matter of choice. It lies beyond their control, shaped by the omnipresent hand of immigration policies and political ideologies. For some, the wait to be accepted in the country they fled to for protection has felt interminable, as long as 12 years. And the attrition is now telling on them. The UK's restrictive, often draconian policies on health care, employment, welfare and accommodation exclude and further marginalise a group of already stigmatised, vulnerable individuals.

Images from Limbo: A PhotoVoice Study of HIV-Positive Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Scotland



"I have no choices in my life. I have to struggle for my own life and my children's life. We need basic human rights, food, clothing and shelter. We want to start our lives. We are also human beings. We want to work, we want to be a part of Scotland, we want to be happy, we want to breath normally. Each of us has dreams, that tomorrow things will change for better"



Hope and Despair



Asylum seekers often find themselves caught in a cycle of hope and despair. The choice to leave one's homeland and seek asylum is one of some hope for safety and security, in the midst of despair over a lost home. But for many, arrival in the United Kingdom brings new persecution, discrimination, uncertainty, and a pervasive sense of being ill at ease. Without a recognized legal status, they are at the mercy of bureaucratic forces outside themselves, unable to work, often ineligible for welfare support, and living in fear of being sent back into danger. Hope becomes a lifeline to which they cling desperately.

Dignity and Freedom



To be denied the right to work is to be denied a fundamental source of human dignity. For many asylum seekers in this study, the experience of being forced to do nothing and rely on hand-outs has eaten away at their being, making their daily lives a constant struggle. Many face discrimination in their daily lives making it difficult for them to integrate in to Scottish society. Lack of choice in various spheres of their life is a denial of their freedom. Freedom is an aspiration that is uppermost in their consciousness.

Fear and Desperation



Without a legal status, asylum seekers live on the edge of society, often dependent on food banks and the kindness of friends for survival. The lack of food complicates the medical regimen required for those who are HIV positive, since many medications must be taken with food. Even those who have homes live in dread of being evicted, detained, or deported. Many have said they would choose to end their lives rather than be forced to return to Africa, where they face even worse threats and conditions.

Home-Homeless



To these asylum seekers, the word 'home' is fraught with meaning. Home is the familiar place they had to flee in terror and desperation. Home is what they seek—a place that is safe, secure, and permanent. A way to belong to a community. To have the sense of dignity that comes with having one's own place. To build a new life and to contribute to the community.